

# The Complete Crockett

## *The Galloway Raiders*

*digital edition*

Scottish works



STRONG MAC

S.R.CROCKETT

# Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

First published in book form by Ward, Lock & Co, 1904.

This Galloway Raiders digital edition published in 2021 is part of a decade long project (2012-2022) to bring the works of Samuel Rutherford Crockett (1859-1914) together in one place. The Complete Crockett comprises 66 published works, re-edited and re-formatted by volunteer labour to the highest standard.

Apart from the introduction, this work is in the public domain so please feel free to share it around. If you wish to quote from any material written by Cally Phillips please acknowledge and/or send a courtesy email to [gallowayraiders@unco.scot](mailto:gallowayraiders@unco.scot)

Other formats may be available from Galloway Raiders. As of 2021 you can find out more via the following web addresses:

[www.gallowayraiders.co.uk](http://www.gallowayraiders.co.uk)

[www.srcrockett.weebly.com](http://www.srcrockett.weebly.com)

## INTRODUCTION

*To those who know and love the moorland, there is no sameness in the descriptions which recall the varied impression of the seasons.*

Roy McCulloch, the ‘Strong Mac’ of the title is one of Crockett’s finest rural characters. Set in the 1810’s and rooted firmly in a rural environment, this is a story which melds social commentary with mystery, crime and adventure and does not let the reader down in any respect.

Crockett is often quite vague about the places and times he writes of, but in this novel he sets the ploughing match on a particular date – 29<sup>th</sup> November 1812. The novel then progresses over a somewhat improbably extended three year period; we are looking at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and Crockett has to cram all the action in before Waterloo.

The ploughing match is set on the day of the winter ‘feeing’ market, when farm workers were hired for their six month term. As such it is an important day in the local calendar and Strong Mac along with the other loons at the school, want to attend. In the summer these older boys worked for a living but in the winter term they attended school in an attempt to advance themselves. When school consisted largely of rote learning of the Catechism and Latin, it is easy to see why a ploughing match would seem more appealing.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

For Roy ‘Strong Mac’ McCulloch, the dilemma is more personal. His sympathy for Adora Gracie, the daughter of the dissolute master Donald Gracie, is at the heart of it. Having agreed to keep the boys in school, he ends up attending and then winning the ploughing match for the honour of the village, and has to return to face the music. This is the start of the relationship between Roy and ‘Dora’ which permeates the novel, responsible for many of the twists and turns. But *Strong Mac* is not just a love story.

The romance is put in context by the history of the McCulloch and Gracie families. The McCullochs are known historically as ‘The House of Muir’ but latterly they have been reduced to little better than poachers. This is in no part due to their own weakness, but rather shown to be the result of avarice on the part of landowners and the iniquity of the Law of Trespass, which is criticised roundly throughout the novel. The law has practical and fatal consequences. Roy’s mother is shot ‘for sport’ and the McCullochs are more or less corralled onto their own land as all access around them is closed off by the landowners.

Sandy Ewan, the laird of Boreland, and the aristocratic Latimer family are shown as variously responsible for the McCullochs fate. Faced with such iniquity it is little wonder that poaching is seen by the locals as a kind of ‘white free trade’ – smuggling in another context.

Donald Gracie himself comes from an honourable line – the Balgracies. But he has been cast off. He was formerly a minister but circumstances and his weakness for drink cause his fall from Grace. While Dora does what she can to

## STRONG MAC

cover for him, Sandy Ewan is determined to ruin the family and through his bad offices, Donald turns up drunk on the day the examiners come to the school. This gives Crockett a good opportunity to explore the Scottish educational system of the early nineteenth century.

Parish schools were funded and run by the Kirk session, and on the very day twelve ministers come to make sure that their money is being well spent, Donald has taken to the bottle and his riotous invective ensures that he and his daughter are once more disgraced.

*Strong Mac* is a novel of social class, shown most clearly through the range of characters it portrays. It is Dora's misfortune to be loved by men of all classes. Both Sandy Ewan and Sidney Latimer are Strong Mac's love rivals. When Sandy realises he will not get his own way, he sets upon a path to ruin any and everyone who thwarts him. Sidney Latimer is seen as a man with little real backbone, but fundamentally decent. The cottar's son Daid McRobb is a particularly poor creature, whose worship of Strong Mac gets him into serious trouble. He is shot as a poacher and later when trying to find out who is responsible for putting Strong Mac in jail, he gets his tongue ripped out. Behind the romance, brutality is never far away.

*Strong Mac* also contains many intriguing and sometimes unexpected snippets of rural life. The Smiddy Parliament is shown as the place where the working men debate issues of the day. As such it is like a secular version of the Kirk Session. Both institutions are lampooned by Crockett, but one feels the Smiddy Parliament is treated with a more gentle humour. It is more satire than humour which

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

is meted out on the Kirk Sessionl. The men at the Smiddy Parliament ruminate on what being Moderator of the General Assembly actually means, as do the servant lasses. The conclusion is that the moderator is *'just one of themselves they put in a chair for the rest to rage at.'* Behind the humour there is a point to be made about the structure of Scottish rural society.

The judicial system is also put under the spotlight in *Strong Mac*. The law, particularly with regard to rights of property and trespass, is seen as biased and brutal. And the court system is shown as shambolic. The judges and jury are described with some candour and while there is talk of using someone proficient in the 'new' skill of sign language during the trial in general it seems to work according to outmoded and unfair principles.

Lawyers, unlike ministers and teachers, are out of the jurisdiction of the Kirk and when the likes of Sandy Ewan are justices of the peace (he is suspected of being a Free Mason too) we are called to consider quite how just the legal system is.

Social manners are also touched upon. Strong Mac and Dora visit Aline McQuhirr (a relative of the redoubtable Saunders McQuhirr so familiar to Crockett's 'Drumquhat' readers), for a tea party. She offers them Lapsang Souchong and green tea. While aware that tea was becoming a vital part of the economy and social life of the Scot in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I had personally never stopped to consider which blends they might be drinking. Crockett's work is full of such snippets of interest, which of course for him were just descriptions of everyday reality. Whatever your feelings about reading adventure romance, reading a Crockett novel always

## STRONG MAC

gives you an insight into the practical reality of the time he writes about.

Of course, there is also plenty of adventure in the novel. Adventure stories need action and there is plenty of action. Adora leaves Galloway for Spain in her attempt to clear Strong Mac's name. She travels to San Sebastian and meets the Duke of Wellington before she persuades Sidney Latimer to come back and refute the charges that he has been murdered. The graphic description of the stabbing of a horse is every bit as gut wrenching as the mutilation of Daid McRobb. We are left in no doubt that this is far from a rural idyll. There are people in this society who will stop at nothing to get what they want. And the mystery surrounding the identity of the murderer is played out right till the end.

*Strong Mac* offers a picture of rural agriculture during the Napoleonic period and an insight into society of the time. It is a fast paced murder mystery combined with adventure and romance; a story with twists, turns and plenty to keep the reader both engaged and guessing throughout. It also gives us pause to reflect on the legal, religious and educational systems of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Callie Phillips*

2021

CHAPTER ONE

DECLARATION OF WAR

A great noise had been proceeding all the morning from the schoolhouse of Lowran, a noise which would without doubt have attracted the notice of the passers-by, had there been any. But as there were none (except a stray cat supposed to belong to Jake Allerdyce, the village ne'er-do-weel, and her friend Cruncher, a mongrel terrier of many picturesque attainments), the noise in Lowran school passed without notice.

The schoolhouse was situated in a wood, with only a square, grassless space, called the playground, before it. A hundred yards away was the highroad to the village of Lowran, a quarter of a mile down the hill.

It consisted of a single chamber with a porch, where girls left their hats, and some of the country pupils their dinner-baskets, and on whose steep roof the favourite boy of the day clambered to ring the cracked school bell. The dimensions of Lowran schoolroom were these: Eleven strides of Donald Gracie, the schoolmaster, took him from the writing benches at the upper end to the door of the porch. With two more he could put himself into an excellent strategic position, from which he could at once command the outer door of entrance with one hand, and with the other grope under the coats for hidden

## STRONG MAC

stragglers. Donald Gracie's faith in human nature, never strong, had suffered a sad shock on the day when, casually shutting the school door behind him for a moment, he had found Daid McRobb, the 'deil' of the school, suspended by his hands from the peg under his own overcoat. Daid had answered to his name at the calling of the roll a moment before, and there was a mark in the register to show that he was within his duty. But here, within twenty seconds of the closing of the roll-book, lo! Daid was found suspended by the clasped hands, his feet lifted from the ground and his angelic face upturned, when the schoolmaster drew aside the tails of his overcoat.

Daid was soundly thrashed. That was a matter of course. But Donald Gracie sat no whit the more comfortable on his chair of state for having settled Daid's account. His faith in human nature had suffered. He felt that he was being spied upon.

And the reason why he cared was simply this. There was a certain bottle in the breast pocket of that overcoat— not a large, vulgar black bottle, but a slim, pocketable, round-bottomed bottle, with a cork which could be drawn without any noise. It was after Donald Gracie had drawn the cork, but before he had set the bottle to his lips, that he discovered Daid McRobb.

But upon this warm, misty morning of late autumn or early winter (which you will) affairs in the schoolhouse had become more serious. About the school, all down the wheel tracks on either side of

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

the guttery road, the dead leaves lay dank and sodden. The thaw had come after the first nip of frost, and with it the day of the great ploughing match, in which Lowran met its neighbouring parish of Kirkanders.

Now in Lowran the summer conditions of tuition are as follows: The school consists of twenty to twenty-five village bairns, mostly under the age of ten; one or two lassies somewhat older, the children of a few well-to-do farmers who prefer a continuous education to receiving manual assistance in the fields—from their daughters. Their sons take the matter in their own hands and refuse to attend school on any terms. Besides these, only the bees and the wood-birds, with—a godsend alike to teacher and scholars—the advent of Chattera, the pet squirrel of the village and the property of Crob McRobb, the father of the aforesaid Daid the Deil.

In winter, however, all was changed at the Lowran. Dominie Gracie was allowed by all to 'hae the knowledge and eke the airt of imparting it' (here the country folk looked at each other and nodded ever so slightly). 'That is, if only,' one of them would add.

'Aye, man, ye're speakin'!'

'Aye!'

The schoolroom of Lowran was crowded in winter—especially so this 29th day of November of the year of grace 1810, the day of the great inter-parochial ploughing. There were young men of

## STRONG MAC

twenty present— Jock Fairies of the Holm, James McCulloch of House of Muir, and Roy, his brother, both of whom travelled ten miles down from the hills each morning. Besides these, thirteen able-bodied youths of all ages from sixteen to twenty crowded one entire side of the school, sitting at desks with their faces to the windows, while at the opposite end were an equal number of mature young women, taking their winter's schooling after a summer spent in the hayfield, the barn, the byre and the harvest rig.

The noise in the Lowran school came from the young men's bench. It had been understood that the ploughing match day was to be a holiday. It had been a holiday, indeed, since the beginning of time. But for some reason Donald Gracie, ordinarily so amenable to suggestion, had on this occasion stiffened his back and denied the request of his scholars—denied it, too, with those bitter, sarcastic words of which he had the secret. The girls, to whom ploughing matches were naught, had laughed specially at the discomfiture of Sandy Ewan, the son of the big farmer of the Boreland of Kirkanders, who rode over every morning on his own pony to be taught surveying and mensuration by the accomplished Dominie of Lowran.

So it was small wonder that these strong-thewed Lords of the Congregation on the male side were in a state of open revolt. Their ostensible leader was Muckle Sandy Ewan, a great, raw-boned, horse-

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

faced youth, with pale eyes that seemed 'dibbled' into his face, so deeply were they set between his high cheek-bones and the hairless ridges of his eyebrows.

'If I have any authority in this school,' Donald Gracie had said, 'ye shall not go— no, not one of you— to these worse than Roman Saturnalia. For if you disobey, I will not only report you to your parents, but I will call the roll every hour, and the loss of these six marks shall be held to disqualify for the competition in which most of the seniors are interested.'

This was the annual 'Laird of Lowran Prize,' a local foundation of the value of ten pounds a year, sufficient with ordinary personal endeavour to see the winner through a session at college even in these dear times.

The tumult began in low murmurings, which rumbled from end to end of the senior boys' benches. The girls opposite bent their heads diligently over their copy-books. But the young men knew that these had eyes in the back of their heads, and that many pairs of pretty ears ached with listening.

Only in the cross-benches of the school, where the small fry were huddled, did the work of the school go on undisturbed. Donald Gracie stalked hither and thither as usual, his taws under his arm. A stout ash-plant, emblem of authority, hung on a couple of pins above his desk, as a court of final

appeal.

The Dominie of Lowran was a tall man, with weakish, watery eyes perpetually blinking, well-formed features, a broad white brow, hair wearing a little thin on top and falling grey and soft on the rolling collar of his blue coat. He took snuff constantly with a shaking hand and a certain air of the fallen angel, mingled with a sweet and pathetic dignity that told of a spirit within which, though it might sin, delighted not in iniquity nor walked willingly in the way of sinners. In short, Donald Gracie was that particularly hopeless thing, a secret drinker. Once on a time, long ago, he had been a minister. He was one no longer. The past had shut down upon that, but ten years ago certain old friends of his, moving influentially in high places, had obtained for him the dominieship of the parish of Lowran. And as year by year he sent bursars and college prizemen from little hill-girt Lowran to the universities, his fame waxed greater in the land. And this though the shadow also grew upon his face—‘tavert’ was what the people called his aspect of Fallen Seraph—and though every scholar in the school had watched through the keyhole in turn, and could imitate the exact crook of the elbow with which the master conveyed the little round-bottomed bottle from his pocket to his mouth when he thought himself alone in the porch.

The noise grew and grew, echoing from end to end of the bench which looked toward the wood.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Iron-shod clogs stuffed with straw in many barns and great hobnailed boots began to clack and beat a sort of rhythmic march— tramp, tramp — tramp-a-tramp. Thus, with a halt between, and all over again.

The Dominie's weak face grew slowly purple, and then paled again so white that the weak, reddish eyes seemed injected, and the nails of the shaking fingers were driven into the palm. Thrice he mounted the desk and strove to quell the turmoil.

'Tramp, tramp — tramp-a-tramp.'

Then the sudden, quick-flaming anger of a weak man came upon the Dominie. He reached up his hand and lifted the ash-plant off the wooden pegs where it lay above his head. The watching school hushed itself with a sobbing intake of breath. There was a great silence. The bench of girls lifted itself with one movement, and where had been only ribbands, snoods of blue and black, long plaited braids, plaits and knots of hair, or loose-flowing tresses, row upon row of eager white faces watched the Dominie's movements.

Donald Gracie took three strides to the top of the school and, lifting his hand high above his head, struck the biggest youth in the school, Muckle Sandy Ewan, heavily across the shoulders.

The tramp-a-tramp had instinctively stilled itself at his approach. A certain respect for constituted authority held those who had grown up under his hand in Lowran. But there were three in

## STRONG MAC

that row of broad-shouldered lads who were not of the parish, and of these the leader, both by position and personal prowess, was undoubtedly Sandy Ewan.

As the blow fell the school gasped. The next moment Muckle Sandy had risen, his great horse face distorted with anger. He caught the master by the throat, wrenched the ash-plant out of his hand and threw him backwards.

Donald Gracie fell heavily over a form and lay motionless and stunned, his flash of weak energy gone from him. Biting his thick under lip till the flat protruding teeth of his upper jaw showed wolfishly, Muckle Sandy stood over the motionless black figure with the ash-plant in his hand.

No one knows whether or not he intended to strike the Dominie. That question will never be settled. For just then a tall, slender girl, dusky of face as a gipsy, with dark, flashing eyes and hair flying over her back, leaped, rather than rose, from her seat at the head of the seniors' bench and was upon the victor in a moment. She was fifteen (or, it might be, sixteen) years of age, but gave the observer that impression of maturity which comes so early in Galloway to dark girls of the aboriginal Pictish breed.

Then, lo! in a moment all was changed. Before the school could breathe, before the Dominie could quaver a feeble protesting hand, before Muckle Sandy Ewan had time to lift his weapon, the ash-

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

plant was wrenched out of his hand and he received a couple of stinging cuts with the supple end of it, one across either side of the horse face, on the doughy cheeks of which presently appeared two welts, red and angry, neatly paired like carriage horses, or rather like the winning team at the ploughing match, and extending from the temple to the angle of the jaw, where the ridge faded into the bull neck.

Muckle Sandy Ewan vented his feelings, after the first intolerable smart of surprise, in a 'gowl' of inarticulate wrath. He sprang toward the girl, his hand clutching to seize her. His fingers caught her light, poor gown. It ripped under his grasp. The lace collar came away in his hand. It had been pinned on, and now, the point of one of these cutting downward in that rude clutch, a thin line of red appeared upon the dusky tan of the girl's neck.

Muckle Sandy, stepping over the Dominie, pulled the girl toward him and made another snatch at the ash-plant— missed it, and for the third time it stung him vehemently across one ear.

'Ye besom!' he shouted, 'I'll fell ye dead for that.'

Muckle Sandy lifted up his great fist and undoubtedly the next moment the girl would have been lying beside the unconscious Dominie, had not something happened.

From the lower end of the bench a figure had detached itself, lazily at first, certainly good-

## STRONG MAC

humouredly.

'Strong Mac!' chorused the school, breathless with expectation.

'Haste ye, Strong Mac!' cried a voice shrill and high, that of 'Deil' McRobb. 'He will kill the lassie! He's awfu' when he's angry, I ken!'

But Strong Mac did nothing hastily—only everything always at the right time. Muckle Sandy's hand was already descending, when Strong Mac caught it from behind and swung the assailant round, as a big dog swings a little one when they are chained together. Muckle Sandy had the girl's white collar still in his hand as Strong Mac propelled him to the door, punted him down the playground in standing leaps, and at last flung him out on the road down the steps, where he lay looking up at the road he had come in a dazed way.

Strong Mac stood over his enemy threateningly.

'D'ye want to fecht?' he demanded.

'Na, I dinna!' said Muckle Sandy Ewan.

'Gie me that collar, then.'

The collar was delivered up.

'Noo ye can gang to your plooin' match,' said Strong Mac, with contempt, and betook himself back to the school. He had never held any part of a girl's dress in his hand before. There was a speck of red upon the inside—very tiny. Strong Mac started and flushed, though he had seen blood often enough. But—never that. Then he remembered that he had not kicked Muckle Sandy Ewan enough. He turned

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

to repair the omission. But for the time being the resolve came too late. He received a stone as big as a goose egg between the shoulder-blades, hurled with excellent aim, and a mocking shout fell on his ear:

‘Poacher—deer-poacher—sheep-stealer! I’ll see ye i’ the jail yet ! My faither said sae!’

Strong Mac smiled. He had heard such threats often and they moved him not. Roy McCulloch had a brother and a father. More, he had the side of the Black Muir, which none knew like himself—caves, morasses, forest, moss-hags. He would like to see any one who could catch him there.

The school was buzzing like a hive when he entered. It stilled instinctively as his broad shoulders blocked up the doorway.

The girl was standing with her face a ghastly white. She had tried to lift the Dominie but could not manage it alone.

‘Help me with my father,’ she said to Strong Mac.

‘Shall I send them awa’?’ he queried, indicating the assembled school with a jerk of his head.

The expression of the girl's face firmed under his eye.

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’ll teach the school, instead of my father. And I’ll call the roll every hour as he said he would.’

‘Faith, then I’ll help ye, Dora Gracie!’ said Strong Mac, setting his back to the closed door which led into the porch. ‘Here, you, Jamie’ (he

## STRONG MAC

indicated his brother), an' you, Jock Fairies, carry the maister ben to his bed. Ye ken where to gang. Bring him to and leave him. Dora, call the roll. I'll see fair play.'

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LOWRAM DOMINIE

Adora or Dora, Gracie was 'a manse bairn.' That is, she had been born not in the purple, but in the true blue of Presbytery, the house of the pastor of a flock of human souls.

And so measuring the descent, we begin to see whence Donald Gracie got his bearing of Fallen Seraph. Nevertheless, no man of that name had during the fifty years before this year of grace 1812 been a placed minister in the Kirk of Scotland. Yet this the Dominie of Lowran had been— and also in his day the citizen of no mean city.

Time was when, with the highest hopes, a certain younger son of the Laird of Balgracie (Balgracie of that ilk) had been licensed to preach the Word. It seemed throughout all the Lothians nothing less than a condescension, and religion itself rose in general estimation when young Donald Balgracie preached his first sermon. So handsome he was, too, so certain of the highest preferment, that his words came home with tenfold force to mothers of marriageable daughters. These on their own account found him 'interesting,' though how he could want to be a minister, when he might have arrayed himself in scarlet and gone to the wars, was a mystery to them.

Balgracie of Balgracie was of an ancient family,

## STRONG MAC

somewhat sunk for a generation or two, but again restored to more than its former glories by that notable Virginia tobacco lord, Archibald Balgracie, who in 1789 succeeded his childless elder brother in the family estates, and who had used his great fortune (brought from the plantations) buying back and adding to the former possessions of the Balgracies. He built himself a new mansion-house, and entertained in a manner which was the admiration or he envy, the heart-breaking or the pride, of the three Lothians, according as the inhabitants went abroad to boast or remained at home to sneer.

The eldest son of the 'tobacco lord' had succeeded to the business in Glasgow, as he was in time to succeed to the family estates. Donald the younger was, however, the general favourite, and owing to the frequent absences of his father and elder brother, it was his ill-fortune to be reared at home by a triumvirate of aunts. These were the sisters of his father—women who remembered the former things, the poverty, the scanting and scrimping, the one lean serving-man in the tightly buttoned coat, his lands grimed with the clods of the garden, smelling of the stable, who had waited at table and lectured them upon their extravagant ways till the day when their brother Archibald came home from the plantations a widower, with a boy of fifteen, a babe of seven months, and a great fortune.

Girzie, Isbel and Adora Balgracie were

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

variously known in the neighbourhood as the Three Graces, the Three Muses, the Three Fates, or the Three Furies, according to the humour of the speaker. In their youths the Balgracies had been tall, slender girls, and, not without reason, had thought well of themselves. That was the hour when, without bitterness and with no back-spang of sarcasm, they had been called in easy assonance the Three Graces of Balgracie. A little later they took to writing verses. Tender they were and very sentimental, received in the stiff rhyme royal of the period. You nay stumble across some of them still in the later numbers of the Scots Magazine when you are searching that lelectable chronicle for Gretna Green marriages, wonderful providences, parish gossip, and early tidings of the death of kings.

They are signed 'Griselda,' 'Isabella,' or 'Adora,' in turns. For the work of the Muses of Balgracie was a strict collaboration. Adora, the youngest, wrote the Slyvian verses, humming the lines to herself as she went about her daily work, crooning them over to the whirl of the spinning-wheel and the twirl of the distaff. Then precise Isabella corrected and pruned the expressions—sucked out the sap, as it were—while last of all, practical Griselda copied them in a clear running hand and did the correspondence with the editor in Edinburgh.

As for their other two nicknames, both those who called them the Three Fates of Balgracie (because they were nobody's fate) and those who in

## STRONG MAC

their days of the sere leaf spoke of them as the Furies knew as little of their kind hearts and unselfish lives as they did of the classics.

Yet had they been the most fateful of Furies, they could hardly have done worse by Donald Balgracie. There can be no doubt that the neglect of his father, the years which divided him from his elder brother, and above all, the ceaseless spoiling Donald Balgracie received from his three maiden aunts, were responsible, in part at least, for his downfall. After having been educated at home by an indulgent tutor, then sent to college with much money at his disposal, returning to Balgracie each summer to lord it over the heritage of his brother (already up to his ears in business in Glasgow), Donald found himself suddenly minister of a rich but lonely parish lying at the back of the Pentlands.

With great promptness he provided against the loneliness by marrying his late landlady's daughter, a sweet and simple girl, with the Edinburgh roses a-bloom on her cheeks.

But his father was mortally offended, with the offence of a man who has taken it for granted that all will go as he wishes it without his needing to stir one of his little fingers. From that time forth all Archibald Balgracie's pride and hope was centred in his elder son, whom he loved to see acting his part on the crowded mart, countering with inherited shrewdness the changing wants and devices of customers.

But Donald—had he not given him a good education and all his own way? Had he not piloted him by influence into a respectable and lucrative position? And now, to please himself, he must needs marry a beggar? Well, let him please himself and see what would come of it.

So Donald, that is to say, the Reverend Donald Balgracie of the parish of Maxtone Easter, went his way apart from his father. The triumvirate of aunts, Griselda, Isabella and Adora, were forbidden to hold communication with him—even to think of him. And as for his brother William in Glasgow, he had no desire to do either.

All might have gone well, however, with the household in the Manse of Maxtone Easter if the life of the young wife had been spared. In his dreams Donald Balgracie often found himself sitting in the twilight with Lucy, his wife, holding her hand and speaking low of that which God was sending to them.

But when, a few months later, Donald Balgracie sat alone in a wide house with a week-old infant wailing overhead in the arms of the hired nurse, what wonder is it that the man's heart sank within him? His was no strong nature. He had never been taught self-control. And so— and so—as the long winter passed draggingly, endlessly, there came a change, noted of the people, over their young minister. At first, with unusual charity, it had been set down to grief for his wife, but after, the matter

## STRONG MAC

became all too plain, then clamant, then scandalous. The Presbytery, always a little hostile, took the matter in hand. Sons of the people themselves, they resented the scions of rich families entering into the best heritages of the Kirk. On the other hand, the people of Maxtone, all but one or two, stood by their minister.

‘He is young—he will mend,’ they said. ‘Grief hath made him mad! And moreover,’ they added, ‘what better are you his judges—you, moderator, with your roisterous Market Mondays? you, clerk of the Presbytery, with your unhallowed card parties? Answer us that.’

But moderator and clerk answered not. They took action instead. And at the age of twenty-nine Donald Balgracie found himself a man outcast, degraded, unfrocked, without means and with a little daughter to support. His father's sole anxiety was that his son should vanish forever out of his ken. He offered to send him to the plantations, where he still had important interests, telling him frankly that if he lived, he might consider himself leniently dealt with, and if he died in the tobacco fields—why, so much the better for all concerned.

As for his three aunts, they only grieved and prayed in secret, and at last gained a reluctant consent from their brother that if Donald would give up the babe, they might have the bringing of her up.

‘And see that ye make a better job of the lass than ye made of the lad!’ Archibald Balgracie had

added grimly as he went out.

But Donald would in nowise consent to be parted from his little Adora. As to that, at least, he was adamant. And so, with influence made through one of his old college professors, the unfrocked minister became a parish schoolmaster in far-off Galloway. Donald Balgracie became Donald Gracie, and Adora his daughter grew up to be the sweetest and winsomest little maid that ever trod down the daisies in the Lowran fields.

Sole of all the parish the Dominie's story was known to Dr. Cyrus Meiklewham, the minister. For so the professor judged right.

‘At least it shall not leap out upon him like a lion from a bush!’ he had said. And Dr. Cyrus Meiklewham, though not clever, proved a dungeon of silent discretion.

For long after this downfall Donald Gracie walked before men irreproachable. True, the shadow did not wholly depart from his face. The ‘fallen seraph’ look remained—nay, perhaps grew more pathetic. The folk whispered and smiled, but it was tolerantly. For much is forgiven in Galloway to one with the name of a great scholar. The Dominie's Latin was without equal. ‘And what the worse is he of a human failing or twa—like yours and mine? And maybe, gin a' were kenned’ (so ran the shrewd comment), ‘there may be others in the parish quite unfit to cast the first stane at the Dominie.

So there was no open scandal, nothing indeed

## STRONG MAC

at all like it, for many years. Nevertheless, Donald Gracie was already an old man at forty-three, and his daughter Dora had the shadow of a shadow upon her young face. The moist eye, the slack lip, the flushed face, the trembling hand, all told the same tale. The demon who had put out his head at Maxtone Easter was not exorcised. Nor, perhaps, could be by any power of man.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW ADORA GRACIE KEPT SCHOOL

'Gang ye ben and attend to your faither,' said Strong Mac to Adora, when his brother James and his companion came back from laying the master on his bed. 'I'll see to it that the schule is in fine fettle for the learnin' when ye come back.'

Adora sped upon her errand through the door which connected the schoolroom with the master's house. Then, with his back still against the porch entrance, Roy McCulloch lazily propounded his scholastic philosophy.

'Ye see,' said he confidentially to the assembled scholars, 'there's you and here's me— and in yonder's the lassie! There's the lassie to gie ye your lessons. (And she can do it as weel as her faither!) There's you that's gaun to learn them, and there's me to see that they are learnt. Hae ye a' gotten haud o' that?'

He turned to the bench of the young men, the sometime haughty Lords of the Lowran Congregation. Few of them were looking at him. Most regarded their copybooks with an absolute attention. Some figured diligently.

'It's to you I'm speakin' maistly!' he went on. 'Lads, listen to me. If there's ony three o' ye that are o' opinion that I canna break their backs at yae time, stand oot here and hae it ower afore the lassie

## STRONG MAC

comes back. For if there's as muckle as a word or a black look frae ye after that—weel, ye ken me. Somebody will maybe get hurt!'

No one moved. The attention to work was absolute. Nothing like it had been in Donald Gracie's time.

Still more lazily Strong Mac stretched himself in his ruddy homespun clothes, and the blue rig-and-fur stockings banded with strips of brown leather at the knee. His brother Jamie looked across at him and winked.

'To your books!' said Roy McCulloch to his brother, with a threatening gesture. And the whole bench of the girls regarded him with admiration.

'And a' that for the sake of a dominie's lass!' whispered Charlotte Webster, who was eighteen, and had had two lads come wanting to carry her books on the same night, which was considered a great honour in the school.

'Oh, he just does it to show aff,' said little Kate Hannay, 'because he's strong. Lads are like that. I daresay he wad do as muckle for you.'

Charlotte Webster, a peach-blossom blonde, sniffed contemptuously.

'Huh,' she said, wrinkling her nose, 'it will be a lang day and a short yin afore either Roy McCulloch or the like o' him gets the chance. I wad like to see him dare to speak to me. His faither is nae better than—'

'Less talking there!' said Strong Mac calmly,

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

looking directly at the place on the girls' bench where sat the disdainful blonde. Charlotte Webster bridled and tossed her head.

'Aye, Chairlie, it's to you I'm speakin' noo.'

The girl turned upon him.

'Keep yoursel' to yoursel', she said. 'I'm no 'feared o' ye. Ye canna lift your hand to a lassie—you wi' your talk o' breakin' backs and showin' aff.'

Strong Mac was not in the least put out by this direct defiance. He did not take his back from the school door. He only lazily crossed one foot over the other and regarded the square points of his huge boots.

'Na,' he answered slowly, 'I canna. That's true. But maybe ye wad want me to tell the schule wha carried the last luggie into the milk-house for ye on Saturday nicht—and wha—?'

But with a quick rising flush and a single swift appealing look, the blonde turned away and dropped her head upon her copy-book.

The school tittered. It knew Charlotte Webster. In a far crner somebody gasped and choked with suppressed laughter.

'Deil McRobb, that's you,' said Strong Mac, 'that's you. I ken yer sniffle! Come here, Deil!'

The Deil approached, trembling in spite of his formidable cognomen.

'It wasna me,' he declared. 'Look—I'm laughin' nanel!'

The dictator of Lowran school lifted an ink

## STRONG MAC

bottle from the master's desk.

'Drink the ink!' he commanded.

The Deil did so without the least compunction.

Then from his own class there arose first a whispering, then a laugh.

'If ye please. Strong Mac,' said a piping voice, 'he likes it. He aye drinks a' the ink, and we get pawmies for it frae the Dominie!'

The Deil, licking his lips, turned toward his peers with an expression which said clearly, 'Wait, my bonnies, till I get ye oot!'

'Weel, than,' said Strong Mac, 'gang an' learn your lesson standing on your head. That will keep ye quaite, surely, Deil?'

He erected the Deil with the soles of his feet against a convenient wall, arranged his spelling-book to suit these unusual conditions of study, and left him to his meditations.

At this moment Adora Grade came in. She found the school hushed in studious calm. Strong Mac stood on guard at the door as she had left him. She nodded, as much as to say that her father was in the fair way of recovery.

'Have they been a trouble to you?' she asked in a low tone of Roy McCulloch.

He shook his head almost sadly.

'Never a whush oot o' the head o' ony craitur amang them!' he said. 'What class will ye lik' first? The Muckle Laitin?'

'I think so,' said Adora, quietly. She went to her

father's desk, opened it and got out the version books and a Vergil, well thumbed and with many notes scribbled on the margin.

Strong Mac announced in a stentorian voice which made the sparrows and robins picking up the crumbs from the dinner-pokes outside fly off in a flurry:

'Muckle Laitin, stand to the chalk line.'

This announcement disarranged the bench occupied by the Lords of the Congregation. For a long moment they hesitated. Then slowly and reluctantly, one after another, disengaged themselves, as if weighing alternatives. Groups of two or three whispered together in clusters.

'Keep your heads sindry a wee farther,' cried the watchful Mac, 'or maybe I'll bring them thegither raither sharper than ye bargain for!'

Automatically the class formed itself, complete save for one place at the bottom, which ought to have been filled by Sandy Ewan, expelled for cause. Before Strong Mac himself took this vacant place he solemnly reached down the ash-plant, which had been replaced on the pegs above the desk.

'Noo, lads, fair homie,' he cried, 'ye ken the rules. Yae palmie for a 'minie,' twa for a 'majie' an' three for a 'maxie'! And the Lord help me,' he added, 'for I ken no a word o' the lesson this day. I declare, it's gane clear oot o' my thick heid!'

At this announcement of pains and penalties an ominous muttering made itself apparent, in the

## STRONG MAC

midst of which Strong Mac heard the words, 'We will no tak' our licks frae a lassie!'

'Weel,' said Strong Mac, 'that's reasonable. But hear ye me, Ec McKimmon—gin ye willna tak' your palmies frae a lassie, ye shall tak' them frae me. Ye can hae your choice, my man. Drive on, Dora!'

Adora Gracie was by far the best scholar in the school. That went without saying. Two years ago, when she was no more than thirteen, she had been at the head in every subject at the annual examination by the Presbytery. Now, she had been for two more years her father's companion in his reading. He talked to her in all their walks together. In the winter evenings they studied together. Moreover, there was not within the Lowran school young man or maid who would have dreamed of disputing that preeminence.

But to 'tak' it frae a lassie!' That was strong meat, indeed.

However, it was Dora's arm executive (as it were), even Strong Mac himself who first stumbled—perhaps intentionally and to encourage the others. At any rate, it was an undoubted 'maxie,' the largest kind of error possible, and good, upon the face of it, or rather upon the palm of it, for three stripes.

He stepped forward, ostentatiously drawing down his cuff.

'Noo, Dora,' he said, encouragingly, 'lay on as if ye were beating carpets! Gar the stour flee!'

And Adora Gracie, who quite understood the

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

importance of the occasion, put some pith into the operation.

'Harder!' whispered Strong Mac under his breath.

Whereupon Adora put a little of her agitation into the last two strokes of the 'maxie,' so that the yelp which Strong Mac emitted had at least so convincing a naturalness that the junior benches squeaked in sympathy.

After that it was easier. Jock Fairies misquoted a Latin rule in his parsing and received a 'majie,' which, as he said proudly, 'left him wi' something to think about.' Daid the Deil giggled audibly thereat, and was pounced upon for disturbing the school. He came forward smiling at what he was about to receive. What he did carry away with him changed the fashion of his countenance. He returned to his place with his mouth the shape of an O, softly rubbing his palm upon the part of his body, used by schoolboys as an emollient.

Only Ec McKimmon, a sturdy youth from the borders of the parish, and supposed to be a partisan of the expelled Muckle Sandy, looked for a moment like refusing chastisement. But Adora was firm. Never had the senior Latinists seen so strict a master.

'Stand out, Ec McKimmon,' she said. 'That was a 'maxie'.'

He hesitated, growling low. Adora stamped her foot.

## STRONG MAC

'Here, Dora,' cried Strong Mac, 'gie me haud o' the ash-plant!'

Thus was rebellion stamped out in Lowran school and the faces of the law-abiding exalted. At the close of the lesson the class returned to its several places and relations upon the benches on the 'wood' side of the school.

Adora had, in more senses than one, made her mark. The classes which followed were child's play to the 'Muckle Laitin.'

But now the noon recess approached and the faces of the scholars brightened with expectation. What would happen then? A low whispering began to pass from bench to bench, which Strong Mac felt must be repressed. He rose presently and went up to the desk where Adora Gracie was looking over copy-books in a business-like way, marking them according to her father's system, with the degree of credit attaching to the neatness and blotlessness of each. As Roy McCulloch approached and saluted, Adora flashed a swift blue 'M' across his own page. It meant 'Moderate,' and involved staying in at night for half an hour to write another. Strong Mac chuckled.

'She's comin' on fine,' he said to himself. 'By my faith, this schule will find itsel' teached afore we hae dune wi' it—her an' me!'

Adora looked up from her work with a cold and educational eye.

'Well, McCulloch?' she said, severely.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'If ye please, maister,' he replied, 'it's time for the schule to be lettin' oot.'

But under his breath he added, covered by the whispered storm which his remark created, "Make me a monitor, quick, and gang oot to see your faither, I want to speak to them.'

'Very well, McCulloch,' she said, following his lead. 'Go to your seat!'

The murmur hushed as Adora tapped the desk. She rose, gathered up her papers, read out the marks, and delivered the copy-books with comments complimentary or the reverse. Then she locked the master's desk with her father's snap of the lid.

'I am going out for a moment. See that there is good behaviour. Roy McCulloch, I name you monitor' (she hesitated a moment before achieving her phrase between 'without prejudice' and 'with powers,' deciding on the latter)— 'monitor with powers!' she added, emphatically.

Strong Mac rose lazily as the girl passed out by the private door.

'With powers,' he said. 'Ye ken what that means. Noo, I hae a word. It's this: Ye are to come back in the afternoon. For ony boy that gangs to the plooin' match, six — frae me! For ony lassie that collogues wi' that brute Muckle Sandy Ewan— we'll no' let her in, no' though she greets! And hark ye, cronies,' he continued, suddenly dropping his monitorial manner, 'the less said aboot this at hame the better. If we canna gar Lowran schule gang on

## STRONG MAC

as it should without the help o' Kirkanders and Sandy Ewan, it's a peety!

With this final appeal to the fears of the boys, to the curiosity of Eve's sex and to the patriotism of both, the temporary 'monitor' dismissed the school.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE PLOUGHING MATCH

The ploughing match between the parish of Lowran and that of Kirkanders was a most important fixture. It was looked forward to with the greatest anxiety on the part of both antagonists. The judges were selected from the surrounding parishes, mainly from the Dullarg, Minnibole and Stonybyres.

On this occasion two of these were burly tenant farmers. Joined with them was a sporting laird on his promotion as Deputy Lieutenant, with the probable reversion of the county seat in Parliament when the present (aged) occupant retired. The three judges walked about through the soft, droppy mist circled with visible haloes. Pride was in their port, a flush on their cheeks:

‘The half of whilk was pride o’ place. The ither half was malt.’

Which last was in no way surprising. For at the great ploughing match (which was held alternately upon the farm of Holm, as the nearest to the village, and upon the Kirkanders farm of Boreland, tenanted by the father of Muckle Sandy) it was expected of the tenant whose field was ploughed that he should provide the most copious refreshments. It was partly to keep his son out of the way of this that Fairies

## STRONG MAC

Senior had insisted upon Jock going to school as usual. And it was certainly a most self-denying respect for the fifth commandment which, after considerable debate with himself, led Jock on this occasion to obey his father.

To go was one thing, however; to return at the hour of noon another. On his way home he had to pass the field. He was yet a quarter of a mile off when an odour of whiskey came to him down wind. Jock halted and sniffed knowingly.

'Umm!' he said, meditatively. 'I'se wager that there's some gye queer plooin' on the Benty Rigs this day. That's Lucky Greentree's barley broo, as I'm a leevin' sinner! I wad ken the smell o't in— heeven!'

As Jock Fairies drew near the field, his heart began to beat. He counted himself no mean ploughman, though being his father's son and the heir to one of the largest 'nest-eggs' in the parish, it did not become him to show his powers in an open competition. Yet since scenes of excitement are rare in a country district, it was all the harder upon the heir of Fairies of Holm to be obliged to view the scene from the other side of the dyke.

The Benty Rigs was a field which had been chosen for the varying, yet equable, conditions which it offered to the competitors. It was generally level, but rose into a whale-back in the middle, with a steep descent which necessitated the use of guide posts along the ridge as the teams went and came.

The 'opening' of the furrow was in a light,

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

sandy soil near the dykeside, where the Holm Burn comes down to join Lowran Water. The 'turning' had to be accomplished more critically in soft, boggy soil, half clay, half black peat—on the edge of the rush-covered morass which had given to the original field its name of the Benty Rigs.

Small wonder, then, that it was a sigh long and deep which Jock Fairies sighed when he came in full sight of the labouring teams, twenty of them, some taking the slope of the ridge, some slowly dipping behind it, others turning into a new furrow with smacking undulations of the reins and cries of encouragement to the horses.

The steam rose in clouds from the work-warmed animals into the moist air. The teams took the shoulder of the ridge enveloped in a cloud of it. Pillars of cloud rose visibly from beyond the crest of the hill, marking the positions of those which were out of sight. Wherever you could get away from the pervasive odour of Lucky Greentrees whiskey, the dank, pointless, 'back-end' air smelt like washing day.

But the keenness of men and horses alike. No haste, however; matters were far too serious for that. The eyes of all their world were upon each. They behooved to be wary, ready, resourceful, dashing, cautious all at once, these pilots of the dry land, these dauntless navigators of the red-streaming furrow.

There they go— and, indeed, you would have

## STRONG MAC

sympathised with our stalwart Peter at Paradise Gate had you seen the show as Jock Fairies did from the far side of the dyke, barriered off by the tables on which were set out the oat-cake in farles and the black bottles of Lucky Greentrees malten brew. That man in the grey clothes and leathern leggings was the gauger, or excise man—the successor in office of a certain ill-starred customs officer of the name of Robert Burns. And he did not need to make any professional examination to know that Lucky Greentrees had satisfied His Majesty's dues on account of the beverage at present supplied. No self-respecting smuggler or illicit distiller would have disgraced himself by touching it.

The judges walked to and fro importantly, lords of all—the sporting squire high-stocked, slim and jaunty in the wasp-waisted London fashions of a year ago, the two farmers in weather-beaten blue and bottle-green, with silver buttons as large as florins on their waistcoats and starring the huge pocket-flaps of their surtouts.

The whole of the field was not taken up by the teams. A large piece was marked off for the personal competition to be decided in the afternoon. The order of the general match was this: A Lowran man and one from Kirkanders were placed time about beginning from the right of the field. Each man had his portion which he must finish within a given period. And the Laird of Rusco, his stop watch in his hand, checked the times.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Jock Fairies stood watching, with a great desire to participate. The personal competitions were just about to begin, as one after another of the twenty teams finished their piece and with a great heave upon the plough-stilts and a shout to the horses slid the share clear of the field of combat.

It would, however, be some time before the judges finished their work. They cast up the number of 'points,' and the total achieved by Lowran or Kirkanders decided the fate of the day. That is, the 'day general.' The 'day particular,' or, as it was importantly called, the 'Allcomers Single-handed Cup,' was the blue ribbon of the county, and the dandiest ploughmen from far and near came to try their luck. Some of these borrowed a neighbour's team. Others approached a former master with whom they had parted amicably, and obtained for the occasion the use of a well-kenned and trusty 'pair.' For to know one's horses is many points in favour of a ploughman.

What was the anger of Jock Fairies to see with his own eyes Muckle Sandy Ewan conducting a team from his father's farm toward the rigs appointed for the Single-hand competition. Sandy also saw Jock, as was abundantly obvious from his greeting.

'Oh, Jock, lassie-boy Jock,' he shouted, 'gang and get your pawmies frae a lassie. I'm gaun to win the Cup. Rab Telfer says there's nane can beat me—an' yin o' the judges owes siller to my faither!'

## STRONG MAC

Even 'dancing-mad,' as he acknowledged himself to have been, Jock Fairies knew that this last was a vain aspersion, and he only wished that the particular judge referred to had been near enough to hear. But all three were at the upper end of the field, watching the competitors turning into the last home stretch.

Jock Fairies could bear the tantalising scene no longer. He hurried home, rushed across the farmyard, in at the back door, and without stopping for explanation helped himself to a plate of broth from the pot which stood at the side of the fire simmering gently. Then he cut himself a slice or two of cold mutton-ham and devoured it between two scones, using the 'comfortable family broth' as a beverage, bite and sup about with his impromptu sandwich.

In five minutes he was back again at the field. He stopped half-heartedly at the open gate. He hesitated. He was lost. Entering hurriedly, he hastened to the part of the Benty Rigs where the portions for the 'Single-hand' were marked off. More than half of the competitors had already commenced. Sandy Ewan had turned once and was coming back. A little crowd of ploughmen who did not intend to try the double event, as well as not a few ordinary spectators, clustered about the rig-end, waiting for him to come in.

Sandy was a sturdy fellow, and had a natural eye for ploughing. The Kirkanders folk were inclined

to put their money on him, not only because his father was their richest man but because of the interest attaching to his youth. It would be a feather in their cap if a Kirkanders laddie fresh from school should win the Cup.

The hope of Lowran was a grey-headed old cotman from the Upper Crae, whose eye was like that of the captain of a ship, and who always carried off the prizes for working his horses the most quietly, as well as that for the longest period of service under one master. Robin Kirk was the name of him.

But though he was probably the most scientific ploughman on the field, Robin was already tired with his work in the general competition, while the furrows in the new portion of the Benty Rigs were considerably more difficult, owing to a stiffish compost of clay in the hollow to the left of the ridge.

‘Oh, burn my stockin’ feet!’ cried Jock Fairies, ‘he’s beatin’ Robin. The auld man hasna the weight to haud her nose to the dour land! We’ll be disgraced—fair disgraced—and by that great nowt o’ a Sandy Ewan.’

There was a slight cheer from the Kirkanders men as Muckle Sandy came in.

‘Perfect—richt to a hair!’ ‘The exact deepness,’ ‘What a turn.’

These were some of the exclamations, half-smothered, but most encouraging—meant to be so, too. With a pleased look on his face Muckle Sandy

## STRONG MAC

bent himself away again, like a clever boat on a new tack.

‘Oh, wha will we get—wha will we get?’ moaned Jock Fairies. ‘Oh, if Strong Mac wad only come. But he willna, the waster. He could ploo that great nowt Sandy oot o’ creation! But he—willna— he willna! He’s just fair daft aboot that Dominie’s lassie! I wish a’ lassies were deid!’

CHAPTER FIVE

A WOMAN SCORNED

After the furious excitements of the morning the quiet of the school playground began to prey a little upon the nerves of Strong Mac. It was not often that he so roused himself to action, and when he did it was generally on behalf of another. He fell to wondering listlessly where the others were, what they were doing. Presently he thought of his brother.

'That Jamie will be at the plooin' match!' he murmured, smiling at his own thought. 'Wait till the afternoon. I'll warm him.'

This naturally took him to the master's ash-plant, in which, when in exercise upon himself, he had remarked a certain lack of the true convincing suppleness. He went into the school again and took down the emblem of authority. 'Na, na,' he said, shaking his head, 'that's no' as it should be! It ought to loup like an eel new ta'en frae a stank!'

He tried it upon his palm.

'It's sair,' he said, 'but it hasna the richt convincin' bite. I ken whaur to get a better.'

He turned to go out again, and in the very doorway encountered the great languishing blue eyes, the tall, well-rounded form and infantile curves of Miss Charlotte Webster.

'Oh, Roy, ye are no' gangin' oot because I am comin' in?' she said, with a confiding glance and a

## STRONG MAC

coquettish toss of her head.

‘I am that!’ said Strong Mac, ungallantly.

The girl sighed a little, looked down at her toe making patterns in the dust of the porch, and then glancing up at him, said: ‘Bide—I hae something to tell ye.’

‘What is't?’ said Strong Mac, hanging upon one foot. ‘I hae an ash-plant to cut up the Holm Road.’

‘Oh,’ said Charlotte Webster, meaningly, ‘of course. Ye wad do onything for her. Ye wadna bide a minute to hear—’

‘To hear what? I haena time!’ interrupted Strong Mac. ‘Lasses are that silly.’

‘Adora is no' silly?’

‘No, she's no’,’ said Strong Mac, dauntlessly. ‘There's no' a lass in a thoosand could hae keepit the schule the day and teached the Muckle Laitin like yon!’

‘That's no' a' what lasses are guid for,’ said Charlotte. ‘There's some wad do mair than that to pleasure a bonny lad.’

‘Aye?’ said Strong Mac, impersonally.

Charlotte Webster impatiently snatched a handkerchief out of a side pocket under her little white apron, and dabbed hard at her eyes as she turned away.

‘Your heart's as hard—’ she paused for a comparison, and none presenting itself, she concluded lamely, ‘as hard.’

Now in that age of frank admirations, Strong

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Mac had been made advances to in this way before. He was a bonny lad. There was no doubt of it. He wished the girls wouldn't, and liked Adora Gracie because she never did such things. Still, he was sorry if he had hurt any one's feelings—even Charlotte Webster's.

'I didna mean onything, Chairlie,' he said, though something told him that he might live to repent the weakness.

Charlotte Webster turned sharply at the word, the white kerchief in her hand. She came and laid her fingers gently on his arm, and seeing that he stood still, she looked up and murmured, 'Ye are a bonny lad.'

But this was too much for the fine mountain-bred young Spartan.

'Oh, don't maul,' he cried, dropping her hand off his cuff. 'I hate maulers.'

The wide blue eyes flashed fire this time. The tears stopped welling.

'Oh, and I hate you,' she cried. 'I will never speak to you again as long as I live.'

But Mac knew the counter for that. He had needed to use it before.

'Yes, you will,' he said, ungraciously, 'worse luck!'

And he went out, leaving Miss Webster ready to dissolve into angry tears.

'I wonder how she does it,' she thought to herself. 'I wish I knew. He likes her best, though

she's two years younger than me, and no' half as bonny.'

She pulled a little mirror out of her pocket and looked long and carefully at herself. She had saved up to buy it from Packman Geordie on his last journey, and had had vast trouble in hiding it from her mother, who was a religious woman of a severe type, and did not approve of the pomps and vanities of this wicked world as exemplified in girls of sixteen carrying pocket-mirrors about with them.

Likewise Charlotte had to retie her hair at Miss Keck's, where she left her dinner-bag on the way to school. Miss Keck—Louisa Keck was the village dressmaker and milliner, a withered old maid with a penchant for beauty in others, whose praises had had the effect of making Charlotte Webster inordinately vain.

A moment's perusal of her face satisfied Charlotte that her failure was not owing to anything in herself. Everything was right. Her ribbons were neatly tied, and went beautifully with her hair, which (in her mother's absence) she wore massed low in the nape of the neck, after a picture she had seen of the Empress of the French.

Charlotte smiled. It was the identical smile which Miss Keck had declared to be irresistible. Charlotte languished, and the pitifulness of the expression melted even herself. And after all, she was despised—for whom? For a girl of fifteen, lean as a rake, black as a crow, just because she could

do sums and knew Latin. What was Latin? Did any girl ever get a sweetheart by knowing Latin? She had never heard of one. Neither had Miss Keck. Well, she could wait. After all, Roy McCulloch was but one—a boy—nothing more—not so old as herself. He might be strong. He was—yes, what was the word Miss Keck had used—‘handsome’—that was it. But it would all come right. She would show him. Perhaps she had been too open—thrown herself at him—made herself cheap. At any rate, he was not like the others. And Miss Webster felt piqued. The attractiveness of that which we thought we were sure of is suddenly more than doubled when we find that we are not likely to get it.

In the meantime it struck her that Roy McCulloch ought to be punished for the shameful way in which he had spoken to her. Perhaps at that moment he was away in the woods cutting a horrid stick to strike her with. He would not think twice about that, she told herself. Perhaps he would tell right out in the school what she had said to him. He was capable of such treachery. Had he not threatened about the carrying of the milk—no, that was not Roy, that was James; but Roy must have seen, and then threatened her in public.

She rose and went on tiptoe to his school-bag. It lay in the covered desk which Roy shared with his brother and Jock Fairies. There was a puzzle lock of string on it. But Jamie McCulloch, in an hour of expansion, had shown her the secret of it. So she

## STRONG MAC

opened it now, after a little puckering of her smooth brows.

There was a gleam of something ruddy under the flap of the brown leather bag. She poked cautiously to see if it would prove to be alive. Then she slid the strap round, and lo! a beautiful pheasant lay before her. He had been shot under the wing, and a red drop came off on her finger as she turned him over.

'Ugh, nasty!' said Charlotte, shuddering at the sight of blood. She looked further. In another compartment lay a little flask of something that rattled. Oh, she knew. These were pellets of lead with which men killed birds. Then she unrolled several bullets wrapped in a place by themselves. Here was wadding, and here, in an old dun-coloured leathern flask, powder. Oh, if only she could make it go off at the right time and frighten him—that is, without hurting him very much! That would pay him out for his insolence. But she did not know the way to do it safely.

Ah, she had it. She knew what would make him sorrier. So she carefully carried the powder-horn to the water-spout where the children drank, round the corner of the school. She took the chained iron cup and, prizing up the little measuring lever of the cut-off, she poured half a cupful into the flask and gave it a shake.

'There,' she said, with malicious glee, 'that will learn Roy McCulloch no' to think himsel' sae clever

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

another time. And he will find out by and by that he may learn other things frae lasses forbye Laitin!

Which certainly, in due course. Strong Mac did discover.

Then, having made these thoughtful arrangements. Miss Charlotte Webster shut the school door behind her and went up the village street to pour her troubles into the sympathetic ear of Miss Louisa Keck.

She had hardly reached the main road when she saw two men advancing from the direction of the village. One of them she knew as Jonathan Grier, the head keeper of the Kell's Range estates and forest. The other, a youngish, bearded man, was unknown to her.

Jonathan, the keeper, stopped and hailed her. He was in some distant way related to her mother, and on more than one occasion had shown himself not unanxious to call himself her cousin. And as he was a well-looking unmarried man, Charlotte had not been too particular as to genealogies.

'My faith, ye are bonnier than ever,' he cried with the rough, country-bred geniality which in such cases passes for wit.

Charlotte tossed her head and asked him how that might concern him.

He replied that it concerned him a great deal, if the thought of her kept him from getting his natural sleep in the shooting season.

'And a' thae poachers to watch, too,' he added.

## STRONG MAC

I can tell ye. Cousin Chairlie, that a puir gamewatcher canna afford to hae his head filled wi' thochts o' bonnie lasses at this time o' the year— wi' the pheasants to keep an e'e on, and the deer comin' doon aff the hills in droves.'

A sudden temptation to astonish the head keeper took hold on Charlotte Webster, mingled with an indignant sense of the difference between his treatment of her and that of— the Other. She looked back at the schoolhouse. There was Adora Gracie hanging out something on a clothes-line. The girl stood clear and graceful against the sky on the top of the knoll above the trees. As Charlotte looked she waved her hand to some one whom the watcher could not see across the fields. Of course, Charlotte knew who that must be. Suddenly her mind was made up.

'If I tell ye something,' she said to Keeper Jonathan, 'ye'll say sure as daith that ye will never tell I telled ye!'

The keeper, rather astonished, gave the promise, glancing after his companion anxiously as he did so. The bearded man had walked on a little way.

'And him?' continued Charlotte, pointing also to the grey-eyed man.

'Oh, I will answer for him,' said the keeper, laughing.

'Weel,' said Woman Scorned, 'if ye want to ken whaur some o' your pheasants wander to, ask Roy

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

McCulloch o' the Back Hoose o' the Muir to show ye his bag the nicht as he gangs hame frae the schule.'

The men looked quickly at each other.

'Roy McCulloch, who's he?' said the bearded man, speaking for the first time as he walked toward them, switching his leg with a Malacca cane.

'A son of that infernal poacher up on the Out Muir,' exclaimed Jonathan. 'I would gie a pound note oot o' my wage if I could grip him—aye, or ony o' the clan o' them.'

The men went on, intent upon their talk, without so much as thanking Charlotte.

The young woman stood sulking, and then instead of going in to see Miss Keck, turned up the Holm Road in the direction of the ploughing match.

Perhaps it began to dawn upon her that she had better have ignited the powder at once than set such a fuse alight, and timed it to explode as Roy McCulloch took his way homewards to the solitary cot of the House of Muir.

CHAPTER SIX

GREAT WAS THE FALL THEREOF

To seek a fit and proper ash-plant Roy McCulloch had gone over the dyke at the old smithy, and held up the burn-side into the Holm plantations. Here he soon made choice of half-a-dozen shoots, supple, tough, resilient, mightily convincing to the natural palm.

With one of these in his hands to trim as he walked along, and the rest in a bundle underneath his arm. Strong Mac sauntered whistling toward the main road. Instinctively he took a short cut at right angles to his former path, and presently, as fate would have it, he came out upon the woody ridge which faces the battleground of the Benty Rigs.

The shouts and encouragements of the rival ploughmen, the clinking of accoutrements, the stir and movement of the people looking on, took all the boy in Roy McCulloch by the throat. He stood mechanically paring and polishing his scholastic tools, but his eyes were upon the scene before him. To a lad from the wild moor solitudes, it seemed as if the whole world were present at his feet.

Hardly could he restrain himself. His fingers itched for the firm grip of the plough-stilts, for the tug and strain of the horses, to feel the nervous twitch of the far-controlling reins. It was in his heart that he could plough as well or better than any man

there. He had spent the previous winter and spring as 'orra,' or odd man, on the large farm of Craig Ronald, at the foot of the mountain rise on which his father's cot was placed. The regular practitioner had been taken ill, and Roy McCulloch had not only undertaken his work, but had so improved upon it, both in speed and quality, that his furrows had become a source of satisfaction and pride to his master, and of envying and grieving to his professional peers.

As Roy stood there watching, his blood stirring oddly within him, keen for conflict, emulous of fame, he grew conscious of the cries of 'Strong Mac! Strong Mac!' with which the sight of his figure was greeted from the field of battle.

But it was not till Jock Fairies came charging upon him so hastily that in scrambling over he brought down half-a-dozen stones from the road dyke, that he paid any attention to them. Roy McCulloch thought they were uttered mockingly because he had forbidden the school to go near the ploughing match.

'Oh, Mac,' panted Jock, tremulous with excitement, 'come quick! For the Lord's sake haste ye, or Muckle Sandy Ewan will carry awa' the Single-handed frae Lowran that has been oors for twenty years. They hae your auld 'turn-oot' frae Craig Ronald waitin' for ye. Oh, haste ye—haste ye fast! Oh, the disgrace—onybody but Sandy Ewan! Cast your coat and to it, Strong Mac! For the honour

## STRONG MAC

o' Lowran and to stop Muckle Sandy frae crawin' a' the days o' his life!

'But—but,' said Roy, a little dazed by the pour of words, 'I hae promised to be at the schule when the bell rings. It's me that helpit the lass to keep it this mornin', sae that they wadna tak' it frae her faither as they threepit they wad do the last time.'

'I ken—I ken,' said Jock, 'but oh, man, hearken! There's only yae rig o' bonny grund to ploo—the last but twa, and ye'll hae it feenished lang afore the afternoon. Come on!'

The eagerness of contest latent in every man took Strong Mac unawares. He was so easily victor in wrestling, putting the stone and other diversions that this seemed suddenly something well worth trying for. He moved irresolutely down the slope, strode over Jock Fairies's gap and stood in the road. By this time his old master, Mr. Charteris of Craig Ronald, was waving an arm to him to hasten. He could see the arched backs and shining flanks of Adam and Eve, his old working team, and that fired him more than anything else.

'Haste ye, Roy,' cried the farmer of Craig Ronald, 'they're waitin'. Cast your coat!'

The tempter triumphed. Roy cast his rods, trimmed and untrimmed, under the dyke and ran hastily to the plough. The man in charge yielded it with a grin. 'I'm no man for't— try you! Ye're welcome,' he said. 'Haud her, man, haud her straight—for the honour o' auld Lowran!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Adam and Eve turned to look over their shoulders at the sound of Roy's step. He went about them once carefully to get the harness buckles to his mind, patted both of them on their moist noses, was snuffed and blown all over with evident satisfaction, and went back to the plough tail with a bounding heart.

'Roy McCulloch! Next!' cried the starter in a stentorian voice.

'Strong Mac! Strong Mac for Lowran!' shouted half-a-dozen, led by the now almost frantic Jock Fairies, who danced about in his eagerness like a hen on a hot griddle.

And the next moment Strong Mac felt the riss-ssp of the entering blade, the halt and heave as the iron took the full deep furrow, and then—he was half way up the field before he knew it. The shouting sank behind him. He felt the fresh potent smell of the newly turned earth in his nostrils.

It went to his head likewise. His heart had been thundering in his ears, but now there fell upon him a strange calm. Adam and Eve were working with tempered steadiness. The rich brown soil fell away as easily as blue water before the prow of a boat. Strong Mac felt the power within him. His very soul went into the steel of his wrist muscles.

He was breasting the little undulation of the ridge when Muckle Sandy passed him, bending to his task with plentiful energy. As he caught sight of Roy McCulloch he seemed to lose grip for a moment

in his astonishment. The plough bounded as from a hidden stone, and the grey sheen of the polished iron showed a moment above the Indian red of the soil.

But neither spoke. Both were far too intent on their work. It chanced, however, that at that moment the three judges were quite near. They had completed their task of judging the first portion of the match, though their decision was as yet kept a profound secret, locked beneath their hat brims. One of the two farmers noticed the leap of Sandy Ewan's ploughshare. He walked to the spot down one of the narrow causeways of green still left, fast diminishing, among the long red parallels of the ploughed land.

'What was the maiter wi' young Ewan ?' he said to the other two. 'There's nae stane there!'

But the truth was that all unexpectedly Muckle Sandy had come upon an obstacle worse than any stone in the way of his progress cup-wards.

After the second turn at the starting place there was no more shouting among the crowd, only a three-quarter circle of intent faces, all bent upon the performance of work in which every man present was an expert.

Wise heads were cocked to the side, as it were, to taste the completed furrow. Eyes shrewd and grey followed the next grip and take of the share as the teams drew steadily away. Surely, Britannia never ruled the waves so straightly as these grey-shining

keels the undulating acres of the Benty Rigs.

It was over. Strong Mac took his team out at the appointed place, drew up at the dykeside, patted Adam and Eve, gave them a first rub with a borrowed cloth—and— came to himself.

The school — Adora Gracie — his promise!

He was shamed, disgraced. Never could he look her in the face again. Not at all in the way of love-making or love-feeling. He never thought of that, but as one to be trusted, a man of his word.

Already the judges were walking up and down, pacing, measuring, consulting. The two farmers stood meditatively scratching their chins. The smart young laird was voluble of whispers, alternately sprightly and dramatic in attitude.

But all suddenly Roy McCulloch had no pleasure in aught that he had done. He started abruptly toward the corner of the field where he had left his ash-plants. He tucked them methanically under his arm, vaulted lightly into the road and marched gloomily off in the direction of the schoolhouse of Lowran.

He heard, but heeded not, the shouting behind him.

‘Come back — hey, there! Mac! Strong Mac! Roy McCulloch! Come back!’

But Strong Mac, deep in the shame of his soul, never even turned his head.

He heard the patter of feet behind him, and presently Jock Fairies dashed up with something in

his hand.

'Come back,' he said; 'man, ye hae won the Cup. I heard them gie it oot! Ye are to come back for the judges to do something—I forget— 'congregation' ye, I think they said.'

'I'm no' gaun back nanel!' said Roy, strengthening his negative in the French manner—which is also good Scots.

'Faith, then,' said Jock, 'I was thinkin' that. Ye are a dour hound. Sae I jest fetched it. It was my faither had the buyin' o't. Hae—tak' it! It's stampit silver!'

'Throw it over the dyke!' growled Strong Mac. 'I'm shamed for ever!'

Jock Fairies gaped at him, with growing doubts of his sanity.

'Glory!' he cried. 'I wad gie a' my ain siller an' half o' my faither's to be shamed in the same way. Man, do ye ken that ye are the only man that has keepit Lowran frae being het-faced in disgrace this day? For the match has been gi'en against us. And if Sandy Ewan had won the Single-handed, no' a man o' us wad ever hae been able to haud up his head again.'

'But I promised—I was to keep the schule! Me that garred them a' promise. Me to gang to the plooin' match!'

The son and heir of the farmer of Holm gasped.

'The schule?' he cried. 'What's about the schule? Ye can gang to the schule ony day. But the

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Single-handed! To beat a' Lowran and Kirkanders.'

'It's no' the schule— it's my passed word!' said Strong Mac, hopelessly.

'Hoots,' said Jock Fairies, 'it's only to a lassie. Juist flairdie (coax) her a wee and it will be a' richt!'

'No it winna,' said Strong Mac, grimly. Then after a pause he added, 'I'm gaun back. Sae are you.'

Jock Fairies turned, as if to flee at the word.

'Deil a step!' he cried, dourly. 'What do you tak' me for, Roy McCulloch? The wale o' the fun is to come!'

'I'll tak' ye back to the schule— we'll hae some fun there, you an' mel!' said Strong Mac, darkly.

Jock Fairies, with the vision of the cold collation waiting on the judges and selected friends in his father's dining-room, tried a bolt and rush. But Strong Mac had him by the collar in a moment.

'Nane o' that,' he murmured between his teeth as he shook him. 'It was you that made me forget, and it's you that's gaun to gar me mind.'

'Weel,' answered Jock Fairies, 'ye needna joggle the heid aff my body, at ony rate. I declare, I'm like a red thistle wi' its neck broken!'

To this Strong Mac made no reply, and the two marched silently abreast to the schoolhouse door. Jock was carrying the 'Single-handed' Cup carefully, as became the bearer of a trophy. Also, he had news to tell. On the whole, he was a happy boy. Ah! if he had but known, neither pride nor minted gold would have tempted him to cross the threshold of the

## STRONG MAC

Lowran school.

'Open the door!' Strong Mac ordered his companion.

'Gang in!'

Jock Fairies entered, holding the Cup in his hands proudly, as if it had been the day of the annual 'presentation' when the bairns requited their master with gifts for his attentions of the year.

The close school scent of many breathings and damp clothes met them full, as well as a curious waiting hush. Adora Gracie was at the desk with a book in her hand. She did not look at the pair as they came in. But the school made up for this by gazing open-mouthed.

Deil McRobb emitted a little whinny of apprehension as his eye fell on the supple ash-plants under Strong Mac's arm. He had a presentiment, which in his own mind amounted to certainty, that he was destined to make closer acquaintance with some of these.

With an inflexible, determinate hand upon his collar. Strong Mac shoved his companion up in front of the master's desk, in which stood Adora, the book still in her hand.

'Stan' there! An' dinna ye budge!' he ordered.

'The Cup— the 'Single-handed'! Oh, lads, he's won it! Strong Mac's won it!'

As these words left his lips Jock Fairies received a buffet on the side of his head which almost made him drop the trophy.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Maister,' said Strong Mac clearly, so that all the school could hear, 'I hae dune wrang—I forgot mysel'— me that promised to help ye— to stan' at your richt hand. I was temptit. I gaed to the plooin' match—me an' Jock Fairies. But we hae comed back, me and him— and thae!'

He held out the new ash-plants in both hands, and as Adora did not take them, he piled them on the front of the desk above the covered inkwell.

'But I hae thocht what to do,' he went on. 'There's Jock that first did wrang, for he was there and he temptit me. And there is me, that should hae kenned the better, for it was me that forbade the schule to gang to the Benty Rigs. Noo, ye are the maister. It should be you that should thresh us. But we are muckle and ayont your strength to gar mind. This is what we will do. I'll undertak' to mak' Jock here be vexed for his misdeeds, and he'll do the same for me. Time about.'

He handed Jock Fairies one of the supple ash-plants, giving it a preliminary swish through the air to test its capacities. Then he selected one himself more at random. Jock Fairies look astonished and laughed inanely.

'It'll be juist fun,' he whispered, a little uncertainly.

'Aye, juist fun! Haud oot yer hand!' said Strong Mac, in an even voice.

'No— you first!' said Jock Fairies, as a guarantee of good faith.

## STRONG MAC

Jock raised the rod and with a sort of giggle brought it down on his companion's hand, saving the stroke at the end in a way known to boys.

Roy McCulloch received no more than the tap of a rat's tail.

'Your time!' he said, with a grimness which might have warned his comrade.

Jock Fairies held out his own hand and received a stinger that drew an involuntary yell from him.

'That's no fair!' he cried. 'I only hit you in fun.'

'Did ye?' said Strong Mac. 'Then the mair fule you. This is to gar you an' me mind the Lowran plooin' match a' the days of oor lives!'

There was no doubt about the sincerity of Jock's intentions when next he smote. Vengeance whistled in his ash-plant.

'That's some better!' said Strong Mac, with a short in-drawing of the breath.

Twenty apiece was the count and tale of their mutual penance. Everyone was satisfied—the school especially so. Those who chanced to be absent said they would rather have missed a hundred ploughing matches than this historic holocaust.

'Lord, what a lickin'!' was the general verdict, given with a delightful shiver.

Afterward Jock Fairies was called upon to give his experiences.

'It was like this,' he said. 'At the very first I didna think Strong Mac was in earnest. But after I

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

warmed him. He owned himsel' that my sixth and fourteenth were fine an' searchin' for the conscience. An' mind ye, that was a heap for Strong Mac to allow!'

'An' what ye gat—was it awfu' sair?' they asked. Jock Fairies silently exhibited his palms.

'I'll no' be able to lift a preen aff the floor for a day or two, I'm thinkin'!' he said, not without some reasonable pride.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BOUND HAND AND FOOT WITH GRAVECLOTHES

'Father,' Adora Gracie said, coming gently to the old man's bedside—an old man who was yet not old in years— 'are you asleep?'

The Dominie turned his head toward her slowly. His eyes were wet, but he did not answer.

'What is wrang, father?' she cried, kneeling by the bedside. 'Tell your Dora what it is!'

It was not the maudlin repentance of the 'day after,' but rather the deeper remorse of the physically weak, which made the schoolmaster reply, 'I have been but an ill father to you, my bairn. Pray God that ye may ere long find a home of your own, where my sins will be powerless to follow you!'

The girl took Donald Gracie about the neck.

'You must not— indeed, you must not,' she said. 'It is wicked of you to speak like that. I will never leave you, father. I want no home but where you are.'

The Dominie waved his hand toward the window.

'Sit ye there, Dora,' he said, gently. 'Let the light fall on your face. I would speak with you. I am weak — very weak and ill. But in my weakness I have been made to see things that formerly were hid from me.'

The Dominie sat up in bed and looked long at

his daughter with an eager, inquiring gaze.

‘Aye,’ he said at last, ‘surely you are of my father’s folk, even as I, to my sorrow, took after my mother’s kind. No, keep still a little longer. You have the brow low and broad, the determined mouth, the head thrown back, which all the—all my father’s kin possess!’

‘And my own mother?’ inquired his daughter. ‘You never speak to me of her.’

‘She is as the angels in heaven,’ said Donald Grade. ‘Praise God that she was taken away from the things that have come to pass.’

‘Am I like her?’ said Adora, with a hopeful accent.

‘Whiles—whiles,’ said the Dominie, softly. ‘When ye are sleeping, or when ye sit on the stoup and hearken to the mavis, it comes to me that ye hae a gliff of her. But it passes. It passes. No, I cannot say you are like your mother. Ye are a Balgracie from snood to shoe-sole, if ever there was one!’

‘A what, father?’

The accent of astonishment in the girl’s voice recalled the Dominie to himself.

A Gracie—I said Grade!’ he answered, quickly. But you said—Balgracie, father.’

‘Did I? I was not thinking,’ said her father, wearily. The name is used both ways where I come from!’

Where was it that you married my mother?’ the

## STRONG MAC

girl went on, resolved once for all to be at the heart of the secret.

‘In the north—far to the northward,’ he answered her; ‘and when she was lost to me, I came hither to leave the past behind me!’

Adora thought it over and then said, ‘Was it after my mother that I was called Adora? There is no such name hereaway!’

‘No,’ answered the Dominie, ‘not after your mother, but after a great-aunt—the sister of my father. It is an old family name.’

‘And are your people all dead?’

The Dominie lifted his hand, like one who is about to beat time to a slow tune.

‘Dead—dead— all dead,’ he murmured. And then lower he added, ‘Dead to me!’ But the girl took only the letter of his words. She left the window and, coming near, seated herself beside him on the little stool.

‘Dear,’ she said, patting him on the thin hair above his temples, ‘what does it matter? You have me to look after you. Why, I kept the school today. Would you like to hear how?’

And without giving him time to deny her, she began to tell him the wonderful history of the day of the ploughing match, from which all after events in the history of Lowran school were dated.

The Dominie listened, then presently he smiled. After a while he laughed outright.

‘What was the ‘maxie’ Roy McCulloch made?’

he asked.

The girl told him.

'Umm,' growled the Dominie, 'he's no great scholar to make a speaking about, but he kens better than that!'

As the tale went on, the schoolmaster steadily regarded his daughter. New ideas were rising in his heart. He had thought her but a child, and lo! he realised that in a little while others would be looking under the brim of her sunbonnet.

'How old are you, Dora?' he asked presently, interrupting the tale of the repentance of Roy McCulloch.

'Nearly sixteen,' she answered, with the cheerful previousness of youth as it looks forward across the years.

'Ah,' sighed the Dominie, 'it will come all too soon.'

'What will come, father?' said the girl. 'What has come to you?'

'My death-warrant.'

The girl rose hastily.

'Are you ill, father?' she said hurriedly. 'Have you had the pain again?'

Donald Gracie took his daughter by the hand and made her sit down again.

'No,' he said, softly. 'I would not be selfish. But the day you leave me, that day shall be as a death-warrant to me.'

'But I will never leave you, father,' said Adora

Gracie, anxiously. 'All I want is just to bide and make you happy.'

Then she tried cajolery.

'What a 'grumpus' of a Pater Aenaes it is!' she cried, slapping his palm with her finger tips. 'Always making troubles for itself. Stay, I will bring it a dish of tea and —some of the scones it likes! Then we will see if it can still be ungrateful and 'grumpus' to its only daughter.'

As she scudded out of the room the Dominie lay watching her. The ache of a wasted life, the unavailing sorrow of a past not to be recalled, was eating into his soul. Yet even in the throes of remorse he looked several times at a chest of drawers which filled up the space between the window and the door. Once he half rose from his bed, and immediately fell back again, with a bitter expression of anger and disgust upon his face.

'No— no,' he said to himself, 'surely I cannot be such a hound. Better far that I should take a pistol and shoot myself. There is no strength or manhood in me. If I cannot keep the door of my heart, why should I live to bring disgrace on her?'

Presently like a sunbeam Adora Gracie came dancing in, teacup in hand.

'Here it is,' she cried, 'just as you love it! This will teach you to be thankful that you have a wise woman to look after you. Drink it hot, 'grumpus,' and watch me dust!'

So saying, she began to go over the whole room

systematically, the backs and bottoms of chairs included. Then came tops of pictures, the little ledges of drawer mouldings, then crevices and corners which no human eye could reach—for she was one who dusts for conscience' sake, not to have praise of women. While at her work, the tongue of Adora Gracie ran all the time on this topic and on that. She told again with fresh details the story of the ploughing match, speaking of the victory of Strong Mac with something like prideful exultation, then humorously of his repentance and concerning the unexampled duet of vengeance played by him and Jock Fairies, till Donald Gracie shook with laughter in his bed.

Thus his daughter wiled him out of himself with the witchery of her tongue and the imitations with which she interspersed her narrative. Finally she went into the dark schoolhouse and brought out Roy's new stock of ash-plants, of which two already showed signs of wear and tear. The old man laughed aloud.

'Ye are a witch, Dora,' he said, shaking his head. 'I fear me these lightsome ways of yours will cause heartache to many.'

The girl held up her hands in real dismay.

'Deed, then, faither,' she said, dropping into the vernacular, 'but ye are dreadsome hard to please. Hand-ache and back-ache have I caused in plenty this day, but heart-ache is not on my conscience!'

## STRONG MAC

The Dominie shook his finger at her with an air that said, 'Bide a weel!'

'And now,' she cried, 'I will leave you. You are to go straight to sleep, and you will be all well in the morning. The doctor said so. I will come in to bid my old 'grumpus' good-night!'

She ran out again, and the dusk settled down upon the chamber of Donald Gracie. The solitary candle made a point of illumination so bright that all the rest of the room was sunk in blackness of darkness.

The Dominie moved uneasily. He seemed to be repeating something to himself, which might have been a prayer or some resolve put into words to give it greater binding force upon the man's will.

It was a much more sedate maiden who returned in her night garments to say good-night, a shawl round her shoulders which the Dominie recognised as having been about her mother's when she died. To the child's simplicity it was but a wrap in which to slip upon occasion into her father's room. To Donald Gracie it became a symbol of the black robe with which Fate had enfolded and destroyed his life.

Without any prelude, according to her invariable custom since she was a child, Adora Gracie knelt at her father's side to say her prayers. Often in years past she had said them at the knee of a man rocking helplessly in his chair, or dropping maudlin tears upon her hair. But the Angel of the

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Presence, that one who doth always behold the face of God, had been quick to draw a veil of merciful darkness between, so that the innocent had not been offended.

Tonight Donald Gracie, the unfrocked clergyman, the secret, drunkard, laid his hand on his daughter's head as she prayed. He fixed his eyes on the window through which the night looked in on the white-robed figure kneeling by the bedside, and on the grey old man lying open-eyed, rigid, with doom written on his countenance.

Then Adora rose up, kissed her father on the forehead, said 'Good-night, 'grumpus'—call me if you need me!'

And so went her way to her narrow cot in the closet overlooking the garden.

In five minutes she was sleeping the sleep of the tired and the conscience-free, but Donald Gracie lay long listening to the drip-drip of the tall pines on the leaden roof of the porch, as the moisture collected on the needles and fell slowly— plop-plop, regular and heavy as the ticking of a minster clock.

A bird came and nestled against the sill. The ivy on the wall tapped the pane. Over the fields the Gatehouse dog explained to all the hills that he was alone and very sorrowful. There was not yet a moon to bay at, so he bayed because of that.

Plop-plop! It was dreary, indeed, thought the Dominie. Besides, it was chill outside. On such a night one might easily take one's death from cold.

## STRONG MAC

And if so, what would come of that girl? Moreover, his head ached and he could not go to sleep. Yet sleep he must. What to do? Yes, there was one thing. There in the bottom drawer, at the near corner. He knew he could find it in the dark without troubling any one!

Donald Gracie was half out of bed, when through his soul darted the rending illumination of sudden self-knowledge. It was a voice from heaven, like the flashing of the lightning of the Lord's anger from the east to the west, 'Oh, thou lost to shame, complete in sin,' it seemed to say. 'What? So soon after the oath sworn, with the sound of the child's prayer yet upon thine ear! And yet thou would bind thyself more hopelessly in the Bondage.'

Donald Balgracie—once more beware— lest God forget to be gracious!' And with a shuddering sigh, the Dominie sank back on his bed and lay still.

Long he abode motionless. Whether or not he prayed, no human being save himself can know. If he did, the devil had his hook in every petition. They could not rise upon the wings of insincerity. The heart denied what the lips craved.

There was silence in the darkened chamber. The bed creaked. There was silence again. Then a bird of the night flew heavily against the window, and a man at business with a drawer in the corner uttered a sharp, startled cry.

A white figure, tall and slim, stood in the open door, holding aloft a lighted candle. Beneath knelt

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

the man who had prayed, in his hand the Enemy of his Soul.

‘Oh, father,’ cried the girl, ‘and you promised.’

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE SOUR MANNA OF REVENGE

There is no hero worship like that of a small boy for a great. It passes the love of woman in this that there is no expectation of return in it. Toleration is all that is expected. Personal chastisement only increases the fervour of the worshipper. Neglect, ill words, blows, are so many love tokens, fuel to feed the flames of adoration.

In the Lowran school there were at least twenty boys who were willing to be slaves and foot runners to Strong Mac. But only one of these had the necessary freedom of action to enable him to follow the god of his idolatry from point to point, ready to appear or to vanish, to fetch or to carry, to speak or to be silent, according to the will of the master.

This boy was Daid the Deil, son of Crob McRobb, the good-for-nothing scapegrace and poacher-in-ordinary to the village of Lowran.

Daid had remarkable advantages. He was not required to be present at certain hours for meals. Indeed, that would have been often a work of supererogation. For in Crob McRobb's house the meals had a way of not being there either.

Daid therefore dined, as he lived, lightly and at large. A puddock-stool (so that it did not grow in a wood or on a rotten tree) would serve to fill a vacancy. Daid had a rule with regard to all

mushrooms and toadstools—which he communicated to his companions as follows:

‘Lathies, it's like this—I comes to a muckle yin. I look him ower. Gin he's spotty abune or greeny aneath, I hae nae mair trokin' wi' him. But if he's an ordinary, sappy, hainnless-lookin' animal, I juist eats a lump o' him, an' lets a wee bit gang doon my throat, an' gin it begins to burn as if I had swallied a red pepper—faith, I mak' straight for the nearest burn, and there I drink as muckle water as I can haud. There's maybe learnt folk that kens a better way, but that's guid eneuch for Daid! Ye needna often gang hungry if ye ken that!’

But this day of the Lowran ploughing-match Daid McRobb had known that, soon or late, he would fare more royally than upon puddock-stools. He would go up to the Holm and Jock Fairies would give him broken meats. Or if Jock would not—if (as Daid the Deil expressed it) Jock took the sturdy — he, Daid the Deil, would provide the broken meats for himself. If they were still whole meats he would break them. The boy had all the keen shiftfulness of a village outcast, the son of a petty poacher, an annexer of other people's property in a small way, a crafty encroacher upon other people's poultry yards—always in a small way.

Daid had been all these things in his time, but (bar the poaching, which he pursued in the spirit of an academical exercise) he had decided long ago that (comparative) honesty was the best policy.

## STRONG MAC

Blackmail was his particular line. He could not influence the conduct of his father, but he could find out where he had been. Sometimes Daid could even assort the plunder of the day as his father lay asleep, overcome with the fatigues of an arduous profession, together with too much Lucky Greentree, and restore the property of protected persons to them—whether plough-culters, articles of harness, corn-measures, sieves, or game chickens and 'kain hens' kept in mew for the next instalment of the Laird's dues.

Daid's terms were not out of the way. He was no Rob Roy from yont the Lennox line. A bite and a sup at your back door, a warm corner by the kitchen fire, an occasional bed in the barn among the sacks when his father had barred him out of the tumble-down outhouse he called home—these made the modest sum of Daid's requirements, But withal he was acquiring the rudiments of a character. He did not now find himself chased out of a farmyard upon sight, as had been the way when he was no better than 'that loon o' Crob McCrob's.' He became 'that limb, wee Daid'—which is a very different thing, the diminutive being as good as a bowl of porridge to him in most places.

On this day of the ploughing match Daid had hovered in the offing of his divinity's favour all day, watching him, thinking how great, how noble, how incomparable, was Strong Mac. His eyes were full of adoration. His very soul was longing to be taken

notice of, even if only to the extent of having the attached body apostrophised and kicked out of the way. It chanced, however, that Strong Mac, had, vulgarly speaking, other fish to fry. It was, for instance, nearly three of the clock on this November day before Strong Mac had made his peace with Adora Gracie, and with many promises to be 'on hand' in the morning, had swung the full satchel across his back and taken the road up the glen toward the House of Muir, where he lived with his father and his brother James. He was alone, as he expected to be, Jamie McCulloch having gone 'wi' the lasses,' as was his custom. To be particular, the elder had accompanied Miss Charlie Webster home, for the classical purpose of carrying her bag of books.

It was ten miles to the House of Muir by such road as there was, a road that a deer-stalking pony would have shied at. But Strong Mac did not propose to trouble the road. He knew better than that. By taking the face of the fell, striking into Pluckamin Cleuch and following the left bank of the burn, he would come to a certain inconspicuous outcrop of rock, and under that rock, wrapped in an old blanket and touched with grease against the damp, he would find a gun. It had been hidden by himself, and even if there was nothing to waste powder on in the dusk, he had a hare or two snugly concealed which he had shot in the morning.

The pheasant he had brought to school with

## STRONG MAC

intent to give it to Adora Gracie, but the events of the day had tried that young lady's temper. So when it was offered after the escapade of the ploughing match, she had replied, 'Keep your poached pheasants for them that want them! I dinna!'

'It will make something nice for the—for Mr. Gracie!' Strong Mac suggested.

But with a woman, as Roy had yet to learn, repentance and punishment do not clear scores as they do with a man. These remain to be brought forward again upon occasion, as in French criminal practice, 'by way of prejudice.' So again Adora refused.

'I am obleeged to you, Roy McCulloch,' she said, 'but my father does very well with what I have provided for him—and I have the writing copies to set!'

And this being of the nature of a hint tangible, caused Strong Mac to set his bonnet on his head and stride away, with a muttered 'Good-e'en to ye, then!'

Now if Adora had known to what dangers she was exposing her brave and unselfish ally she would not, even for the sake of discipline, have made her declinature so positive. But this, of course, was out of her power.

There was, however, one who did know. And she—was also of the sex which will 'cast up' to itself rather than not at all.

The vengeance of Charlotte Webster had

soured upon her early. Well may the Scriptures declare, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.' For to most of the breed of men revenge is, like the Israelites' desert manna, meat that will not keep. To the more northerly nations, at least, a blow stricken on the spot is more natural than the slow going-down of sun after sun upon the wrath of man.

Charlotte Webster had spoken to her cousin, the head game-watcher, solely from the instinct of a moment of bitterness. When she came back to school in the afternoon she had fully intended to tell Roy what she had done, both as to his powder flask and also how it had 'slipped out' about the pheasant. But Strong Mac's absence, and then the exciting scene of mutual punishment, had unsettled her ideas again. She swerved from her purpose.

'He wad do a' that for her,' she repeated over and over to herself, 'and he wad shake my hand aff his arm, as if it were an adder or a puddock! I'll let him see!'

This mood held till letting-out time, when, as Roy had called kindly, 'Good nicht t'ye, Chairlie!' she was again shaken by doubts and decided to wait for him at the gate. But Roy being (as we know) busy fleeching with Adora to accept his pheasant, did not come out so sharply as usual—and his brother James did.

James was a year older than Roy, and of a different nature. Less strong physically than Roy, he had more quiet cunning—'a good lad,' his father

called him, 'but speeritless, and a naitural wheedler after weemen!'

The judgment was severe, coming from the old cottier of the House of Muir, but this night the trend of affairs seemed to point to his father's discernment of his elder son's character.

'Come on, Chairlie,' said James McCulloch. 'What are ye waitin' for—to see Roy? He'll no' be oot this while, I'll warrant. He'll be flairdyin' up the Dominie's lassie. It's weel he's satisfiet. I wadna be. Come on, Chairlie, unless ye want to spoil sport! And I ken a better than that—a bonny lass like you, the bonniest i' the pairish! Or if ye do want to speak to Roy, tell me, an' I'll cairry your message—unless it be that—'

Here he whispered in her ear.

'It's a lee—I dinna!' cried the girl, flushing. 'Neither him nor you, Jamie McCulloch, nor ony McCulloch that ever trod grass aneath their muckle feet.'

'Aweel!' said Jamie, philosophically, 'sae muckle the better. For oor Roy's bespoken, and forbye, he cares mair for a sawmon i' the weil, or a troot oot o' the burn, than for a' the lasses in ten pairishes!'

'To say naething o' the Laird o' Lowran's pheasants,' interjected Charlotte, with a curl of the lip.

Now Jamie McCulloch had grave faults, but lack of fidelity to his family and traditions was not

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

one of them. He kept his flairdyin' (as his father called it) and his business relations in separate and water-tight compartments.

'What ken ye about the Laird's pheasants?' he said quickly, with a slight change in his voice apparent to the ear feminine of Charlotte Webster.

'Me?' she answered at once. 'I ken naething. I was juist thinkin' what a bonny bird a pheasant was. My faither minds when there was naething in the countryside but the grouse an' the pairicks an' the muir hens an' the—'

'But tell me, Chairlie,' interrupted James, 'what ken ye aboot oor Roy an' the pheasants?'

'I heard,' said Charlotte softly, choosing her words, 'that whiles— that it is weel kenned—I mean—'

'What is it?' demanded Roy's brother, with some of the family asperity. 'What are ye keepin' back?'

Charlotte Webster, who found herself bogged among things which she dared not confess, had recourse to weapons general.

'I'll greet in a meenite,' she said, with eyes already showery, 'gin ye speak to me like that, Jamie McCulloch. Now, then!'

'I'm no' speaking to ye like onything, Chairlie,' said Jamie, recalling himself to his own proper methods, and slipping his arm round the girl's plump shoulder. 'I am ower fond o' ye. But tell me what ye ken— a' ye ken.'

## STRONG MAC

Now the first of these things Charlotte would attempt—the other was altogether beyond her.

‘Weel, ye see, Jamie,’ she said, reassured by her position, ‘the way o’t is ‘this. My cousin Jonathan is the head keeper at Lowran, an’ he whiles comes to oor hoose to see—my mither.’

‘And you, Charlotte, ye besom?’ inquired James, with tender chiding.

‘Oh, juist daffin!’ said Charlotte, with conscientious carelessness.

‘I ken cousin’s daffin!’ said Jamie, cunningly. ‘But drive on!’

By this time they were well down the road which passes the entrance of Pluckamin Cleuch. There was a double turn in the highway, well known to Miss Webster and her various escorts, just beyond this place. Once round it you could see Miss Webster’s family mansion, and as a consequence (for Mistress Webster, that efficient mother in Israel, needed no spectacles) you also in great danger of observation. All things have a purpose. The purpose of the S-shape on the road will now be apparant to all.

Charlotte always held out her hand for her bag at this place.

‘I’ll no’ trouble ye to come ony farther,’ was her formula. ‘Ye maun be tired carryin’ a’ thae books.

It was as she was saying this that a gunshot went off in the wood. Charlotte dropped the bag and caught at her own breast with one hand.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Oh, they hae gotten him!' she cried. 'They hae shot Roy— an' it's my faut!'

'Hoot-toot!' said Jamie. 'It will be a drive at a rabbit, mair like! But if it's Roy he is brave an' weel able to look after himsel! Forby he may hae pickit up a hare. I ken he took his gun wi' him this mornin'.'

But Charlotte had some reasons for thinking otherwise.

'Oh, no, he's deid— and it's me that killed him!' she cried passionately. 'I poured water intil his pooder flask and oh – oh – oh!'

The confession ended in a sobbing remorse, equally sincere and inarticulate.

'Faith, it's true,' said Jamie McCulloch. 'That canna be Roy's shootin' for he would never bring the gun sae far doon the hill.'

And so without even waiting to say good-bye, he left Charlotte standing forlornly in the loop of the road, her school-bag abandoned among the muddy leaves in front of her, and her eyes strained upon the dark woods of the Cleuch of Pluckamin, which in the purple gloaming kept their secret impenetrable.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CLEUCH OF PLUCKAMIN

Now this was what had happened:

Roy McCulloch, Daid's Master and Lord, strode carelessly on, his bag with the rejected pheasant and the wet ammunition flask as a feather on his broad shoulders. He cried 'Good e'en' to one or two men in the act of plunging head-first into low doorways, stragglers mostly from the ploughing match in search of something comfortable.

'Hae ye gotten the 'Single-handed' in your pooch?' cried one as Roy passed the hedge change-house tenanted by Lucky Greentree. 'Come in here, man, an\* we'll fill it for ye wi' something stronger than moss-water!'

But Roy had forgotten all about the Cup and the ploughing match, and strode on his way with no more than an acknowledging wave of the hand.

Behind him, unseen in the dusk, dodged and ducked from woodshed to pigstye, from middenstead to cart-shed, one Daid the Deil, Servant and Slave.

Daid never raised his eyes from the ground as he made these swallow-like dashes. He was elaborately amusing himself, that was all, if any one chanced to notice him. He gave Joe Maxwell's pig what he called a 'pork' in the ribs with a stick just to hear it squeal, and was half way down to Harvy

Mason's stables before the pig's owner could hirple to the door and shake a futile fist after him. Arrived at the stable, he went to the exact spar to which he knew 'Tear-'em,' Harvy Mason's big white mongrel, would be chained. Harvy was the Cairn Edward carrier, and Tear-'em walked beneath the cart and lived upon the calves of the public. Daid rattled on the spars and bood through at Tear-'em till he raged himself into a blind fury, which could only be expressed by suffocating and blood-curdling grunts deep in his throat. This pleased Daid. He imitated a cat-fight, and histed Tear-'em upon the combatants.

At this moment Strong Mac turned round. For anything connected with the feelings of an animal touched him. He recognised the 'baited' tones of Tear-'em, and looked back to discover the cause.

Daid the Deil was balancing a hay-rake on his nose with elaborate precautions. Apparently he had been doing nothing else for the past hour. Innocence exuded obviously from him. Love for all innocent and manly sports was in the lines of his back. But Strong Mac was not deceived. He knew Daid and—he had heard the dog's statement of the case.

'You, Deil,' he cried, 'let the dog alane, or I'll fair skin ye alive the morn!' And so went his way, sure that he would be obeyed.

'There, noo,' said Daid to himself admiringly, 'he kenned juist as weel as if he had seen me. And he'll mind to lick me for it, too, the morn. He never forgets onything— na, no' him!'

## STRONG MAC

Thus are reputations made and the willing worshipper built up in his faith. At the foot of the village Strong Mac struck up the braeface, vaulting over a dry-stone dyke and making straight for the corner of the Cleuch of Pluckamin. This was (and is) a narrow gorge, through which roars the drainage of the Loch of Pluckamin, a large and sombre sheet of water on the flat of the moorland. The Cleuch was filled from end to end with great pines that stretched their green spreading crowns into the upper air. They hid their root in crevices of the rock, gripping and clutching desperately till they had made good their footing above still pool and roaring waterfall. At the bottom there was a perilous scramble of a footpath along the edge of the burn, while the sides of the gully were covered with a tangle of alder and hazel, birch and bramble. The Cleuch of Pluckamin was no lady's bowling-green. The wild goat and the hill fox found shelter there, and under its water-worn hoops of rock, smooth and glistening, were pools and weirs unvisited by the sun from January to December.

Without a touch of fear or thought of danger, Strong Mac dipped into the covert. He did it naturally, as a frog drops back into a pond. Roy usually varied his route homeward, but on this occasion he had to secure his gun, which (as we know) lay hidden at the upper end of the Cleuch, just where it opens out upon the bare brown face of the heather, and where the bushes stop suddenly,

as if cut by the scythe.

In silence Roy moved along the bottom of the glen. He was a hunter by nature and a lifetime's practice, so he could advance without disturbing the droopy birds chittering out their discontent with the damp November drizzle on the crotches of the pines. Blackbirds and thrushes they were mostly, yammering and squabbling like school children when the master's back is turned. On the opposite bank an outcast starling, a rare bird in Galloway in those times, scolded venomously, while a storm-cock mocked him brutally from a tree-top, cat-calling and sneering after his kind as became the bully of the woods.

Strong Mac, walking on feet that made no noise and easing the branches back like a wild animal, they minded not at all. Yet they were angry about something. Some enemy or intruder had put them into that frame of mind. Roy McCulloch stopped and listened. He saw nothing. He heard nothing, but borne on the light breeze which blew down the Cleuch, like the down-draught of a chimney, there came—the smell of burning tobacco.

That, through all wild places, meant but one thing—a game-watcher! Instantly Mac became acutely conscious of the pheasant in his bag. True, he had not shot it on the lands of the Laird of Lowran, but upon those of Bennanbrack, farther up the water-side. But who was there to prove that? Instead of returning to school and Adora, he, Roy

## STRONG MAC

McCulloch, would go to gaol for a mere bird. Had it been a couple of deer, now, that would have been different— but a silly lump of poultry.

He stood considering. The smell of tobacco came more clearly. He could distinctly hear footsteps beneath him down the Cleuch. If he took the side of the glen, he would be trapped at the top without doubt. They would have watchers posted there.

Then upon the moorland lad there fell the intense hatred of the hillman for the wooded glens, which to him are so many traps.

‘They wad never hae gotten me on the side o’ Bennanbrack, nor yet amang the clints o’ the Grennoch.’

Sticks were breaking under clumsy treading down in the deeps of the Cleuch. There came a whistling rush of blackbirds, angry at being disturbed, the storm-cock among them in a royal fluster, but still leading the bad language.

Suddenly something dropped from a tree right in front monkey to the eye, thus a-swing among the branches boy presently, even Daid McRobb, still semi-arboreal in his habits.

‘Wheesht!’ he whispered, taking Strong Mac by the arm, all in a tremble of fear and importance. ‘They’re doon yonder, three o’ them, followin’ ye! And Jonathan Grier is waitin’ wi’ some mair at the Cleuch head. Gie me the bag—quick!’

Roy hesitated. He could not bring this boy into his stupidities, nor let him bear the consequences of

his misdemeanours against the law.

‘Haste ye, Strong Mac!’ hissed Daid in his ear. ‘I ken this wood— ye dinna. Gie me the bag!’

The instant the strap was slipped Daid gave it a double turn about his thin shoulders, and began to draw himself up into the tree from which he had descended. Where he went after that no man knoweth. He had often before crossed the Cleuch from side to side on the tree-tops, without any more motive than to find out whether he could do it or not. And tonight he had the strongest of all earthly (or other) motives for making the attempt— that he might please Strong Mac.

Relieved of his burden, Roy McCulloch went his way up the glen, whistling easily, the noise behind him growing louder.

A hundred yards from the ‘muir-face,’ as Roy called it, there was a narrow cut where a fallen boulder had parted in two. The path went between the fragments. That’s whaur they’ll grip me,’ thought Strong Mac. I’ll hae to tak’ care an’ keep my temper. I dinna want to be pitten in the gaol for mishandlin’ a game-watcher in the dischairge o’ his duty!’

As he predicted, even so the event fell out.

Roy had passed, whistling ‘The Wind that Shakes the Barley,’ when between the stones three or four men fell upon him, some catching him about the neck, some hauling the legs from underneath him, while yet others came crashing through the trees to the assistance of his captors, shouting, ‘Hae

## STRONG MAC

ye gotten him?’

‘Gotten him? Aye,’ growled Jonathan Grier, the head keeper, ‘an’ deil’s hait else. That lassie, Chairlie Webster, maun hae been leein’ to us, the besom. Wait till I get my tongue on her!’

By this time Roy had been allowed to sit up, his captors standing about him in various attitudes of disappointment.

‘What are ye doin’ here?’ demanded the keeper, with an oath.

‘On my way hame frae the schule,’ Roy answered, pleasantly. ‘It’s mair sheltered on a nicht like this!’

‘Nane o’ your lip,’ retorted the keeper. ‘Turn oot your pouches, and if ye hae as muckle as a hare grin or a bit o’ brass wire on ye, by my faith ye shall sleep i’ the lock-up this nicht. Ye are here after the pheasants— we hae had information.’

‘Ow aye,’ said Roy, calmly, ‘it’s easy to kill pheasants wi’ a Laitin grammar— an’ this!’

He held out the inscribed Cup, which he had put in the large inner pocket of his coat to keep dry.

‘What’s that?’ demanded another voice suddenly, that of the young man with the brown face and short tawny beard who had been the keeper’s companion, but who had taken no part in the struggle.

‘A silver cup, sir! He’s been stealin’ frae the Big Hoose, I’ll warrant!’ cried the keeper.

‘Let me see it,’ said the bearded man in a tone

of authority.

The Cup was handed to him. He scrutinised it in the fading twilight, holding it to the level of his eyes.

'Why, it's the Cup I gave to be competed for at the ploughing match!' he said. 'Where did you get this, sirrah?'

'I won it at the ploughin' match,' said Roy, easily. 'It's the Single-handed! You win the Single-handed! That's a guid yin!' cried Keeper Jonathan.

'Aye, but it's true! I saw him do it,' interrupted one of the men. 'I didna ken it was this lad ye war after, Jonathan Grier, or I wad never hae steered step to catch him— no' though he had ta'en twenty back-loads of pheasants aff your grund—nesty belly-fillin' beasts (savin' your presence. Laird)— that do naething but fatten themsel's at the expense o' puir tenants!'

'Heartily said, Mains,' replied the man with the beard, good-humouredly. 'I'm glad to hear that the Cup stays in Lowran, especially since Kirkanders won the match! But all the same, I'm glad also that the lad is carryin' home a silver trophy honestly come by, rather than even one back-load of my pheasants.'

'Is there nocht we can haud him for, sir,' groaned the keeper, 'after a' this gather up? It will be a' ower the pairish by this time the morn. Oh, that misleart lassie! I thocht she had a pick at him, and that we were sure to catch him She lookit that mad

when she was speakin' aboot him!'

'That ye never can tell wi' the weemen,' said Mains, filling his pipe philosophically.

It was curious that as they went back down the Cleuch, searching for a safe point at which to emerge upon the open country, several of Roy's captors were struck by large branches, fir cones, and stones which rattled down from the tree-tops or detached themselves from the precipitous ledges of the Cleuch. At last Keeper Jonathan Grier, who had been cocking his eye aloft ever since a fircone ('the size of a pitatae-beetle,' as he expressed it) had taken him convincingly on the bridge of the nose, lifted his gun and fired.

Some affirmed that they heard a faint scream, but nothing fell, and the party stood wonderingly silent. The top of the pine tree was black and dense against the sky.

'What did ye fire at, Jonathan— a, bogle or a wildcat?' 'Something that had nae richt to be there, I wot,' said Jonathan, 'wildcat or no wildcat.'

'Come your ways,' said the new Laird of Lowran. 'Ye just saw nothing at all! But there will be a drop of something warm for ye in the servants' hall. I'll step round and order it to be sent in. Good-night!'

'Guid-e'en to ye, sir, an' your verra guid health!'

CHAPTER TEN

OH, THAT IT WERE YESTERDAY!

Thus it was that, for the time being, Strong Mac escaped from the fowler's snare. He extricated himself out of the wood at the Cleuch head, and then lay long with his breast on the heather, and his ears, as he said, 'laid back on his neck with listening,' before he ventured to return for his gun. Having secured that, he crept quietly to the edge of the Cleuch, peering down into its dark depths, and giving the whistle by which he knew Daid would recognise him if he had not already gone home. An owl hooted, but presently the bird itself passed close to him with a soft woof of feathers and a glint of a face like a white mask. Other answer there was none.

Then over the broad surface of the moorland Strong Mac set out for home with the long equable lope of the wolf, easy, elastic, untiring. So perfect was now his local knowledge that sometimes in the utter darkness he would swerve a few yards to the right or the left, so as to take the leap over a moss-hag at an easier place. Yet all he had to guide him in such a case was the feel of the ground beneath his feet!

As he neared the march dyke of the tiny freehold of House of Muir, Roy saw the bright light streaming from the kitchen door out over the scrap

of 'park.' A lantern was flitting this way and that among the outhouses. Roy McCulloch whistled three times. The lantern stopped suddenly, as if the bearer listened, then it was waved three times in reply. All was well. That was Jamie's signal. His father would be indoors preparing the supper.

'Where in the creation hae ye been?' cried Jamie in a burst. 'I heard a shot let aff an' ran up the Cleuch, but I cam' on the keepers rowtin' through the bushes like sae many elephants, an' was obligated to keep the upper side so as to hae the muir ahint me in case o' need!'

After a brief explanation Roy helped his brother to finish the foddering of the cattle, and of the two shaggy ponies which represented all the horseflesh of the House of Muir. Folk asserted privately that these last were used for bringing in the 'winter provend,' meaning thereby roe deer killed on other people's property. But Sharon McCulloch (who certainly ought to have known) stated that 'the shelties were the means, under providence and a guid hazel rung, o' bringing in the fuel frae the flowe—the peats that the lairds hereabouts wad deny to a puir man that didna ken his richts. Whilk man is no' Sharon McCulloch o' the Hoose o' Muir!'

Then the young men went within doors. A bright fire was burning in a wide fireplace. Pots and kettles were round the walls in burnished rows. A pan was frizzling cheerfully from a swing-bar. There was an odour of 'champit' potatoes in the land,

which revealed to Roy for the first time that he was hungry. He had not had time to think of the matter before.

A strong-faced man with a bony frame, his great head covered with a wildly tossed mane of grey hair, wheeled sharply from the fire over which he had been bending. A wooden skewer was in his hand, wherewith he had been turning half-a-dozen large loch trout, which chattered and buzzed in the pan as if, after long silence, they had suddenly become voluble with a lifetime of cheerful sound. The man was not old— to judge, that is, by the quick alertness of his movements, by the effortless way in which he hung the pan a few links higher or reached up to the rafters to hand down a white pudding, and especially by the penetrating eye of light blue which he turned upon his son as he entered.

Yet the lines under the lower lids, the strong, bony throat and sinewy wrist, revealed the man who has passed the three score and verges toward the additional ten. Nevertheless there were not three men in the county who would have ventured to come to grips with Sharon McCulloch, called 'the Auld Man o' the Muir.'

He held his little handbreadth of land on peculiar terms. During the time of the Leveller troubles, about the year 1723, his grandfather, one Jeremiah McCulloch, had rendered a great service to the Laird of Bennanbrack—no less than the saving

of his life and that of his son. Jeremiah McCulloch was then a young man and stood high in repute with all the neighbouring gentry as a clever lad, a kennin' unscrupulous, maybe, but all the better of that in these troublous times—so long, that is, as he showed himself unscrupulous only on the right side.

Accordingly when he married and settled, the grateful Laird of Bennanbrack (without consulting his man of business) devised to Jeremiah McCulloch, 'in recognition of kindnesses received and as a reward of faithful service, the lands of the House of Muir, extending from the march of the Laird of Buttonbotham to where my land touches the ground of the Laird of Lowran at the corner of the march-dyke, thence in a straight line across to the Pluckamin Water, with all the—and so forth—the whole amounting to rather more than three hundred acres, of which ten are arable, on condition that on the 31st of December of each year he shall deliver one cartload of peats at the mansion house of Bennanbrack, such as may be fitly used for the Yule fire in the hall.'

Now the grant of this oasis on the face of the muir to a perpetual tenant sufficiently irritated the surrounding lairds, the Laird of Lowran and him of Buttonbotham. And it is shrewdly suspected that Chesney Barwinnock, Esquire of Bennanbrack, being at perpetual loggerheads with his fellows, had been motived to dispone his lands of House of Muir for this laudable and neighbourly purpose. But in

the deed he gave another reason besides gratitude toward the preserver of his life and lineage. He averred that 'the bit grund does not lie weel to the rest of my property.'

However, it was not long after that Chesney Barwinnock, Esquire, D. L., gave up the ghost, and before he had been able to carry out his declared intention of building a new house for Jeremiah McCulloch, suitable to the residence of a man who was now a landed proprietor and a legal heritor in the parish of Lowran.

So it came about that to the original little two-roomed cottage ('but-and-ben') occupied by the shepherd, Jeremiah and his successor had added with their own hands, and building with the rough, undressed stones from the muir, bound together with lime brought up in creels on pony back, the strangest ramble of chambers opening one out of the other, all, however, being one story in height. The farm buildings were set, roughly speaking, in the form of a square, but the dwelling house itself crawled over the brown bent like a game of dominoes.

So long, however, as Jeremiah, the first founder and hero, lived, there was no open rupture. But in due time to him there was born a son who, taking the road to Belfast, carried on a traffic in Irish cattle by way of Loch Ryan. A strong, rash, fightful man was this Ebenezer McCulloch, biblically militant, that is, and weightily dialectic with the

most convincing reasons for the faith that was in him.

Sharon, now the master of House of Muir, was the son of this Ebenezer. In his youth he had been loaned every summer-half of the year to his grandfather to help him with the handful of hill acres and the sheep and nowt that grazed upon them. While there he had picked up what learning he could out of books—on the hillside watching the yowes, or snugged in the bielderly comer of some 'bucht' with the clear light of early summer breaking overhead.

Then in the winter young Sharon McCulloch had sailed on every sea, trading, smuggling, lifting cargoes of rum at the Isle of Man, French brandy off Bayonne, tobacco in the great salt loch which runs inland to Vigo, or riding in the milky smother outside Bilbao. Harsh Catalan, red-capped and ready with knife-blade, swart, voluble Valencian, with the rings in his ears, half Moorish Murcian—this Ismaelite of a Sharon had met and communed with all in their own tongue before he was fifteen years old.

But now for many years, even before his father's death, he had given up his roving sea life. As elsewhere, the smuggling trade led to no great fortune. Danger and excitement made up its chief rewards. So Ebenezer, the first trader, being gathered to his fathers and the adventure beginning to pall, Sharon McCulloch looked one day through

the deserted rooms of House of Muir, which his father had added and plenished, shook his head, and set off next day to Kelton Hill Fair. There he looked round for the sonsiest lass he could see—not the bonniest, mark you, but the healthiest and heartsomest. He picked out a certain Mary Pringle, daughter of a cottier in Buittle. Her he followed with quiet observance for the space of an hour, and, having assured himself that her walk and conversation were sedate, and that she was physically fit (she knocked down with one free, open-handed cuff a neighbour lad who attempted to salute her in public), Sharon announced to himself that this was the girl for him.

And so it turned out. He presented the case to the lady in as many words, whereupon Mary and he went in search of her father and mother, who were 'howffed' at the house of a gossip over a 'dish o' tea wi' a cinder in't!'

'I hae fand a place, mither,' said Mary Pringle.

'Ye hae?' said her mother. 'And is this your maister?'

Na—he's my guidman!' answered Mary.

'And your maister, too!' corrected Sharon, promptly. He felt that it was better to have a clear understanding from the beginning.

Nevertheless Sharon McCulloch used Mary Pringle well, keeping her, as she affirmed, 'baith couthy and caigy' in these upland solitudes where his home was. In the days while she had a pair of

## STRONG MAC

sturdy urchins to look after, Mary McCulloch had had no great call to go far from home. Her husband had made enough to keep them comfortably. There was work enough to do with the bit of corn in the hollow, the two or three cows in the parks and the sheep on the hill. The man's wild tendencies seemed to have died out.

Every market Monday he would saunter down to the town and bring home his purchases on pony-back, walking himself with long loping strides by its side. They called him the Whaup Laird in those days, and Mary McCulloch watched for him from the door that she might spy when he came down the far brae face. Then she put the kettle on to boil. When he was at the march-dyke you might have heard the ham skirling in the pan, and by the time the stable door was shut on the shaggy pony all was set in array upon the table.

But there fell a strange judgment upon Sharon and his house, which changed all his life. The little property of House of Muir was roughly the shape of an isosceles triangle, with its apex pointing up the hill. There, also, was the point where the three lairds' grounds met, and on a heathery hillock high over the crofts and the homestead Mary McCulloch loved to sit and knit, the children playing about, while she watched for her husband's return from the hills and lochs, from a visit to his feudal chief at Bennanbrack, or yet further afield, from the market town of Drumfern.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

One day there had been a great hither-and-thithering on the hills. The Lord Lieutenant of the County, on a visit to my Lord Glenkells, was being shown the best sport the countryside afforded. Deer were driven and hunted and shot at with noise and tumult, while in the high corner of their father's little property two children clapped their hands to see the fine ruddy brown beasts go flying over the dykes like birds, and to hear the blithe crack-cracking of the guns.

Sharon McCulloch was late in coming home that day.

He had been detained by the need to call at a smithy and have a shoe put on the pony.

So when he came to the House of Muir, lo! the door was open and the house vacant. At which he laughed to himself.

'Puir thing,' he said, well pleased, 'it will hae been a treat to her. She doesna often see a stir of folk in this wild place!'

And so he took his way up to the look-out knowe whereon (to pleasure her) he had built a cairn, with a rude bench of stone all about it.

Yes, she was there. He could see her white mutch tied with a ribbon, and the black lace shawl he had brought her all the way from Malaga.

And yonder, toddling toward him, came the children hand in hand. They were both weeping bitterly, but it was Roy who spoke.

'Minnie's sleepin'!' he said. 'She winna wauken

## STRONG MAC

and speak to us!

His face suddenly ice, Sharon made one wild rush up the slope. Mary had been shot as she sat—dead without having moved. She was leaning against the cairn and looking down, as if at her knitting. The wool was still on the wires. Not a stitch was dropped. A break in the dyke revealed where a stag had passed in front of where she sat.

For the rest, all were gone from the hill, hunters and hunted, pursuers and pursued. The glen was empty of beaters, gamewatchers, carrying ponies, all the rout. It might have been yesterday, thought Sharon McCulloch.

He awoke to find himself alone upon the hill with a dead woman and two little children that cried.

From that day forth the man was changed. He went no more regularly to market. Only when he had sheep to sell he might be seen upon the drove road very early in the morning, though already in the low country and clear of the hills. And no man knew the paths by which he had driven his beasts so far unseen.

For the rest he declared war against those landlords who had taken part in the careless, cruel sport by which he had lost his wife. He bought and sold little, for his larder was never empty of fresh venison. Some he would entice upon his ground and shoot. Others he would bring long distances after a night of stalking. He was watched, pursued, lain in

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

wait for— all in vain. He could bring a dead buck into the House of Muir through a cordon of gamekeepers, and then as the morning broke they would see him busy skinning it in the cart-shed.

As the lads grew up he trained them carefully, finding in Roy an ally after his heart. All the smuggler's inherited skill, all the strength and vigour of the master mariner who had kept the wildest crew of mixed Latin races in check without bloodshed, seemed to have descended to this boy. James was more like his mother, and, though he could be trusted to watch, to follow and to report, he was (as his father said) 'no great things at the fechtin'!

This was the strange household of House of Muir to which Strong Mac returned, bringing the 'Single-handed' trophy with him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WITHOUT ARE DOGS

Sharon McCulloch and his two sons sat about the table eating their supper. The former listened grimly to the tale his sons told him, but he said nothing—not even when the Cup was placed before him. He only took it in his hands and looked at it curiously.

‘Where learned ye to plough?’ he said, turning the Single-handed about in his long, supple fingers.

‘Last winter—doon yont there!’ said Roy, with his mouth full of alternate bacon and fried potato scone. He indicated the farm at the foot of the hill, where he had passed the previous winter, with a jerk of his thumb.

‘Ye maun hae a straight e’e in your head,’ he said, adding grimly: ‘I wush ye wad put some mair o’ it into your shootin’! Ye missed that last roe at thirty yards, and if I hadna been ahint ye the beast wad hae gotten awa’!’

‘It’s that auld besom,’ said Roy imeasily, looking at his gun. ‘She winna throw where ye haud her— na, no’ within three feet at thirty yards. Ye should try her yoursel’, faither.’

‘Ill workmen—ill tools!’ said his father, sententiously. ‘Roy, Roy, to make excuse is no’ what I expected o’ the son o’ Sharon McCulloch.’

The words stung the boy.

‘See here,’ he said, ‘you gie me the lend o’ your

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

rifle and you tak' auld Bess there, and I'll gie ye three bulls' eyes oot o' six at a mark the morn's mornin'!

Sharon McCulloch chuckled.

'Marks,' he cried, 'marks! Nane o' your barn-ends for me! The marks I like best are the bonny broon marks that come loupin' ower oor mairch-dyke wi' horns on their heads. Get doon the muckle Bible, James, and let us worship God!'

So these three, like David and his outlaw folk in their cave at Engedi, set themselves, in a lull of the campaign against the great ones of the earth, to sing the warrior psalms and read the chronicles of warlike deeds out of the Scriptures of the Old Testament. This night it was the story of how Jonathan climbed the rock over against Michmash, how he put the Philistines to rout, and the story held them all fast. When Sharon McCulloch finished he made but one comment.

'Twenty men in half an acre o' grund— that was a Single-handed worth bringin' hame!' he said. 'Let us pray!' Then the stern-faced, gaunt old man prayed to the God of battles, strong in the faith that he and his two sons stood on their proper defences with the blessing of Joshua's God, and Samson's God, and the God of all the warring Judges and Kings.

And this was the substance of his prayer:

'Hold us in the hollow of thy hand, O Lord. Keep us safe in this strait place, even as thou didst

## STRONG MAC

thy servant Jonah in the belly of the whale. Give us good out-gate as thou didst him, when the waters compass about our souls, when the deeps close round, when the weeds are wrapt about our heads.

‘We are compassed by the hosts of ungodly that take thy name in vain, and do wickedly all day long. Blood is on their hands. Evil in their hearts. Like Abraham, may we smite the four kings that are confederate against us, Chedarlaomar, and Tidal, and Amraphel, and Arioch— whilk is to say my Lord Glenkells, that tarrieth long at the wine-cup, and Barwhinnock o’ Bennanbrack, that hath done us much evil and intendeth more, and Bodden o’ Buttonbotham, that eggeth him on, and eke this new Laird o’ Lowran, Sidney Latimer, that hath this night raised up his heel against us. Tumble them all into the slime pits of Siddim, good Lord. Gie them paiks in the Vale of Mamre. Pursue them unto Hoba and take a great prey, even within sight of the accursed pinnacles of Damascus.’

So far had the worthy handler of the weapons of war advanced in his supplications, when through the gusty rise and fall of his voice a thin piping noise made itself heard. It might have been only the wind moaning through the keyhole, thought Roy. Winds whistled and moaned and sobbed and whinnied at House of Muir all the year round. It might also have been a dog whining for admission. For all such were unanimously extruded before worship, except his father’s ancient deerhound Clownie, so called from a

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

little Balmaghie farm whence he had come long ago.

But this was not the wind, nor yet a dog anxious to lie at the fire unkicked, but a low human cry, fitful, appealing. Roy was rising hastily to his feet as his father brought his prayer to a close with a final comprehensive anathema, 'Even as said the son of Jesse in the Shiggaion which he made against the works of Cush the Benjaminite, so do Thou confound their work. Put them to naught that have prepared for us the instruments of death. Let them fall into the pit they themselves have digged! Yea, as David sang to the chief-musician upon Muthlabben, 'In the net which they have laid, let their own foot be taken. Let the wicked be snared in the work of his own hands! Higgaion. Selah. Amen!'

The last word was scarce out of his mouth when Sharon McCulloch moved to the door, anticipating his sons. But Roy looked over his shoulder, his old 'besom' of a gun in his hand. She could not well throw wide at that distance. It might be some new dodge of Jonathan Grier's. And Roy smiled grimly and pityingly as he thought of half a dozen keepers daring to beard the lion in his den.

But when the door was opened, nothing was to be seen save the black night and the gaunt outline of the farm buildings, still more velvety black across the yard. Nor was anything to be heard save the sough of the wet wind, soft, clammy and spiritless, dank with the smell of rotting leaves, that came up through the woods of Lowran and the Cleuch of

## STRONG MAC

Pluckamin.

Sharon took a step outward so that he might shut the door behind him and get his eyes more tuned to the obscurity of the night. As he did so his foot touched something curiously soft. He stooped. His fingers recoiled with a thrill of apprehension. What was it the enemy had laid at his door now?

He lifted the small soft thing and carried it indoors. It was a boy, scratched as to face and hands, wet to the skin, and, as Sharon McCulloch swiftly discovered, bleeding from a gun-shot wound in the shoulder.

'It's Daid the Deil!' cried Roy in astonishment. 'What has brocht him here?'

The two eyes, black as sloes, twinkled for a moment in the wet chill whiteness of the pinched face.

'If ye please. Strong Mac,' said a piping voice, 'they shot at me when I was in the tree, an' I fell in the burn. But I hae fetched hame your bag. No' yin o' them could get that frae Daid!'

And the lids shut down again on the black twinkling sloes.

Thus it was that Daid the Deil won his spurs. It was his patent of knighthood when he came to himself that he found Strong Mac's arm about his neck, and he heard the voice of his king saying, 'I dinna ken how he did it. There's mair spirit in his wee finger than in a' Lowran schule!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE TALE OF DAID THE DEIL

They sat with him all through the night. Daid the Deil was laid where he had never been before, on a clean bed, among warm blankets, and as he remarked, 'between napkins a' steekit thegither'—which was his first impression of sheets. For Sharon McCulloch had fetched some strange notions home with him from foreign parts, and would as soon have thought of sleeping on the floor as of lying between blankets.

With no unskilful surgery Sharon extracted the pellets of lead with which Daid's shoulder was torn. Luckily for him, the main trunk of the fir against which the boy had been leaning had received most of these. Still there were enough left to burn red-hot into Daid's poor, ill-nourished flesh.

Not that Daid cared. He, the son of the village poacher, the common butt of Lowran, respected only for his iniquities, lay entranced in Paradise. He was thinking what a small price an aching shoulder was to pay for bliss like this. Then they encouraged him to tell his tale. He felt like a weak mortal suddenly called upon to speak in the full council of the gods. But the mortal had a tongue and was equal to the occasion.

'Weel, ye see,' Daid began, turning his beady eyes on the three faces about his bed, all bent

## STRONG MAC

eagerly not to miss a word ('Lie doon, ye beast!'), 'I had been watchin' them a' day. I had nae place to gang for onything to eat when the schule let oot at denner-time. An' sae I waitit in the hoose-end where the Dominie keeps his peats when he fetches them aff the stack. What was it I was waitin' for? It was for you, Strong Mac. Ye ken ye whiles gied me a bite—that is, when ye mindit.'

Here Strong Mac groaned that he had forgotten so often.

'I didna ken!' he said. 'I never jaloosed that ye needit it!'

'It didna maitter,' said Daid the Deil, soothingly. 'I was brawly weel used to doin' without. But at ony rate, ye bode in the schule—talkin' to a lassie—'

At this Sharon McCulloch looked very stern, but said nothing. Roy very perceptibly lost his easy confidence. As for James, he gurgled, and docketed the phrase for reference. It was a missile of price.

Such a silence fell that Daid hurried on, instantly conscious that the wheels of his narrative were driving heavily.

'Then ye cam' oot, and I was for followin' ye; but I saw ye hadna ta'en your deener, sae I kenned ye wad be comin' back. Sae I bode whaur I was. Then I heard the lassie talkin' to the gamekeepie, but ower far aff to catch what they said yin to anither. But as a' that gameys says is bad, I gaed through the plantation and hid ahint the hedge, and

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

there I heard them miscaain' ye, and swearin' they wad catch ye an' that—the misleart hounds.'

'Sae when the schule was oot, I thocht that they wad bear watchin'. The man in the grey claes wi' the beard was up at the minister's—I saw the twa o' them through the window drinkin' red whuskey oot o' glasses as lang as that!' (Daid shaped the palms of his hands into a V.) Sae I kenned that he couldna be a gamekeepie! Na, if he had been that, he wad hae comed ower the dyke at the back and slinkit to the door—a' for to sorn on the minister's Janet! That's what gameys do! They are aye for the cupboard. I ken!'

For the first time Sharon looked an inquiry at his sons, But they shook their heads. Daid felt the interrogative.

'Oh, I sune fand oot wha he was,' he said, triumphantly. 'I slippit roond to Janet mysel'. She's nane siccan a bad sort, though naturally saft wi' onything in knee-breeks, is Janet Aitkin. I says to her, 'Janet,' I says, 'ye are bonny—will ye gie me a cauld tawtie, or onything?' Sae of coorse she bade me be aff wi' my flairdie, or she wad set the dowg on me—as if I didna ken that the dowg was at that moment lyin' on the parlour rug (besides bein' a freend o' mine, onyway). But I juist waited on, and when she gied me the tawtie I says to Janet, 'Ye hae company up the stair?' Wi' a beck o' my heid, like that, I said it.'

Daid illustrated, and then, with a wry face,

suddenly recollected his shoulder.

'Aye,' says Janet, 'sic company as there is no' like to be in ony ither hoose in Lowran this month o' Stmdays. Yon's the Laird!'

'Whatna Laird?'

'Hear till him!' she cried. 'Has the lift opened an' the heaven been rainin' lairds for seven days an' seven nights? Yon's the new Laird o' Lowran—Sidney Latimer, Esquire—and wi' letters after his name. He has been i' the wars, they tell me.'

Old Sharon looked at his two sons with a very grim face.

'Aye,' he said, 'he is only the seed o' Belial in the second degree.'

Daid went on unmoved.

'I watched Jonathan bywhiles, but there was naething to find oot about him. He gaed to the change-hoose and stayed there. Sae I followed and did some messages for auld Lucky. She's no' half a bad body. Lucky, if ye keep the richt side o' her. An' when I could I slippit into the bar. And then I heard that Jonathan was gatherin' up a cleckin' o' keepers an' sic like trash—to gang and look for a fox, he said. But I soon kenned whatna fox he was after.

'Then I gaed back to the schule to warn you, and cam' on you (as I thocht) gaun hame wi' a lassie. The mist was thick. I didna ken the yin o' ye frae the ither, shame be to me! It wasna you, Roy, this time that was wi' the lassie. Jamie there kens wha it was.'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

(At this point the missile which Jamie had been saving up in his armoury lost its value. He discarded it hastily.)

‘An’ by the time I fand my mistak’ and got back, Roy was up the Cleuch o’ Pluckamin an’ awa’.’

‘But I followed the vermin. Aye, Daid kenned the road to win yont them, and that was among the taps o’ the trees. Sae he fand ye and gat your bag, Roy. An’ it was a’ his ain faut that ony o’ them ever saw him. For as the brutes were gaun girnin’ hame wi’ their finger in their mooth, he peltit them wi’ branches an’ sic like. Then Jonathan Grier let aff his gun at him, and Daid could juist haud on till they were doon the glen. Then he fell into the pool aneath!’

‘Was the new Laird there when there was shootin’?’ asked Sharon, very softly. It seemed a simple question, but many things depended upon it.

‘Aye,’ said Daid, with equal simplicity, ‘but I heard him flytin’ on Jonathan for drawin’ the trigger. He wad haud him responsible for ony mischief, he said. Jonathan was to mind that.’

‘And then?’ queried Roy, eager for the end.

‘Oh, the cauld water garred me to come to mysel’,’ continued Daid. ‘I warsled oot an’ up the bank. I lay there a lang time, and syne I took the face o’ the muir. It was a weary lang road an’ the nicht was bitter mirk. But when yince I saw the licht afore me that I kenned was your hoose, Strong Mac, it cam’ easier. I juist says to mysel’, ‘He’s yonder,

Daid .'

'An' sae I warsled through!

The tale of Daid's travel sat heavy on the hearts of the three Ismaels that night. It was not so much a desire for revenge as a fixed determination to set things on another footing which moved them.

At last, after long thought, Sharon beckoned his two sons into the kitchen. Daid had fallen into a light doze, perhaps cunningly assisted thereto by the pharmacy of Sharon. The head of the house desired to speak with his own.

'Roy and James,' he said, 'this canna be left as it is. We maun win a richt to a road oot an' in to the Hoose o' Muir—without question, without deforcement, either frae person, pailing, dyke, yett, barricade, ditch, or ither obstacle. There's nae hoose in Scotland that hasna a richt to a road to kirk an' market. Yet we hae to gang this way and that under cloud o' nicht to win to the King's Highway. No' that I deny it's pairtly oor ain faut—gangin' at one time by the Cleuch and at anither by Bennanbrack, an' then aiblins the neist time doon the burnside. It becomes us to choose yin o' thae roads an' stick to it. Let it be the Bennanbrack road, an' for these reasons— first, though it's the langest, it's the road that gangs properly wi' the farm o' Hoose o' Muir. For ill as he likes to think o't, we are a pendicle o' that estate wi' a condition o' service to fulfil, and ony richts we hae we get frae the grant o' the Laird o' Bennanbrack's grand-faither!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Lord, what wad he gie noo to hae chockit his grandad quietly the nicht afore he subscrivit that!' said James, who had in him some of the spirit of the lawyer and saw with a discerning eye the agonies of the present proprietor over the too generous folly of his ancestor in devising House of Muir to the first McCulloch.

'Second,' continued his father, 'there's what we will hae to begin and think aboot for anither year—the delivery o' that cairt o' peats at the muckle hoose o' Bennanbrack. If they could see a single Yule past without us layin' them doon, they could tak' awa' the Hoose o' Muir frae us for ever an' a day.'

'It's a guid thing, faither,' said Roy, smiling, 'that it's no' the last day o' June instead o' December. They could herd us better in the short nichts.'

'They will herd us close aneuch this year, ye may depend,' said Sharon, knitting his bushy grey eyebrows and letting his hands wander in the direction of a gun that lay on the rack. He took it down and regarded closely the mechanism of the lock.

'Sae frae this forward we will stick to the Bennanbrack road on every occasion, except, as it were, in the dark, an' when we hae larder business on foot.'

It was thus that Sharon spoke of the chase of other people's deer, in which he held that there could be no property—these being (as he expressed

it) 'the wild things that God gied unto oor first forefather Adam, that nae man can tame nor bind, neither the King nor the Prince nor the great one o' the earth, nor the laws they mak' to grind the face o' the poor. They shallna be bindin' on Sharon McCulloch nor on his children. If a man wants to mak' a property o' a deer as he does o' a sheep or a coo, let him shut it up wi' fences, mark it wi' keel, order its ootgoings and incomings. So be it. Then Sharon McCulloch will neither mix nor mell wi' ony man's deer park nor stirk park, his pheasant yard nor his poultry yard. But as lang as the bonny broon deer flee lichtfit ower the muir, takin' the dykes like partricks and the moss-hags like birds o' the air, sae lang will I, Sharon, Laird o' Hoose o' Muir, in virtue o' the pooer God gied to Adam the first man, haud mysel' lord o' the wild deer that rins, an' o' the wild bird that flees, o' the fish that sooms and the serpent that crawls on his belly upon the face of the yird!'

'The lairds micht hae the ethers for me and welcome,' murmured Roy to himself, but aloud he said, 'Hae ye thought on how to get the peats to Bennanbrack this year?'

Sharon McCulloch shook his head slowly.

'Yae thing at a time, Roy,' he answered, gently. 'There's the road to be opened and keepit open in spite o' their teeth. But I doot na that mony a thing will rise in oor minds afore the Yule peats maun be laid doon at the door o' Chesney Barwhinnock o'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Bennanbrack.'

'And the schulin'?' said James, who had his reasons for asking. Roy also looked a little anxious.

'That's as may be,' answered Sharon, gravely. 'There's the road free to ye. It will do no harm to mak' sure that it is clear nicht and mornin'. Tomorrow at daybreak we will lay the axe to the root o' the tree, and break a road for our feet to walk upon to the King's Highway.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE CAMPAIGN

On the day that the House of Muir Right-of-Way was to be vindicated Adora Grade woke early. Or rather, she had slept but little. In the dead heart of the night she had lain long awake, awake with a mind unnaturally clear, acute, lucid with an almost infernal lucidity. She saw the life of her father—her own life, both past and to come. She knew like the demonstration of a proposition in Euclid that if he went on as he was doing, Donald Gracie would kill himself—and that before long.

And then?

At first she did not think of herself, so full was she of commending her father to the Eternal Mercy. But after the second question arose. What of herself? She knew the amount of worldly gear in the possession of Donald Gracie—the furniture and about three pounds in the tea caddy. The minister and session would appoint a new schoolmaster—and—she would be thrust out on the wet road, homeless as one of the ash-leaves that had fallen at sunrise on the morning of the last frost, and now lay dank and trampled among the mire.

Yet though Adora had lain sleepless for hours, with the happy inconsequence of youth, at six of the morning she fell asleep, and it was at eight that Donald Gracie himself stood at her bedside with a

cup of tea in his hand. It was his peace offering, simply given, as simply accepted. He had come to himself with a taste in his mouth, bitter like wormwood, and a thirst which told him in the first waking moment what had happened.

He had sought the floor with his naked foot, risen, swayed a moment uncertainly with an aching head and a sinking heart, thought of and resisted with passionate disgust a certain temptation, and—stolen away to light the kitchen fire, though yet the trees were no darker than the skies, and the morning breeze was only beginning to shake the great drops of distilled moisture aslant upon the window of the kitchen and plumply upon the leaden roof of the porch.

Then when the Dominie had washed and dressed himself, when he had pumped water on the back of his neck and drank two cups of scalding tea rapidly, he was ready to take the third and choicest to the bedside of his daughter.

‘Oh, you shouldn’t, father!’ she cried, when she saw what he had done. ‘It is wicked to let me lie sleeping when you—’

His face altered. He feared Adora was about to break their unspoken convention and refer in the morning to the events of the night before.

‘I am very well this morning,’ he interrupted a little stiffly.

‘But have you forgotten,’ she cried, sitting up with the cup of tea untouched in her hand, ‘have

you forgotten that— you had an accident in school yesterday? You fell and hurt your head on a bench!’

‘So I did—so I did,’ he said. ‘It is true. I had forgotten.’

Adora thought wisely that there was no use saying anything about Muckle Sandy Ewan to her father. If anyone had to fight that battle, she would.

‘And you kept the school, Adora,’ he said, tenderly. ‘There is no one like you!’

‘Nonsense, Pater Aenaes!’ she cried. ‘And if I did, I had to get Roy McCulloch to help me. That was no great thing to boast of—when you got the tea all alone. But are you sure that your head is better? Let me look at it.’

The swelling was certainly reduced, but there was still considerable contusion.

‘I will take the school again today,’ Adora announced, and then, a sudden thought striking her, she added, ‘But you will come in and help me with the versions.’

‘Ah!’ said her father, ‘yes, with the versions—though I could very well correct those here.’

‘The minister might come in,’ said Adora, craftily, who wished to keep her father under her eye. ‘You would not want the Doctor to find only me in the desk. It is not that you need do anything!’

As she spoke certain visions began to vanish from the mind of Donald. Then a bright thought struck him.

‘Friday,’ he said. ‘Why, this is not version day!’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'No,' answered the girl promptly, 'but I shall want you to set those for next week!'

'Ah!' said Donald Grade, sighing softly.

'Now,' said Sharon McCulloch, as he drew on his boots at six o'clock that same morning in the flagged kitchen of the House o' Muir, 'let a' things be done decently and in order. James, hae ye the notices ready? Roy, the axes? I will tak' the heavy gelleck' (crowbar). 'Your school-bags? Gin ye like, lads—though I see not the great use of that.'

They had breakfasted very early, their father, as before, doing the cooking, while the lads attended to the cattle and ponies, lighted each by an iron lantern as he moved to and fro.

These three did all things during the morning hours in perfect silence. It was not usual for them to speak a word to each other till after their father had 'ta'en the Buik.' This morning Sharon, with unconscious pomp and a certain gloomy grandeur, read the song of Deborah, the prophetess. His prayer bore upon the same stem paean.

'Let no more the highroads lie desolate' (so he prayed), 'nor the travellers walk through byways! Make a broad way and an open before our feet! Give us out-gate, Lord. Smite even as thou didst in the camp of Sennacherib, the King of Assyria, as thou didst before the city of Samaria, so that those that hate us may bite the dust!'

There was no doubt in the mind of Sharon

McCulloch as to his unique position. He and his were the favoured of Providence, even as were those Old Testament saints who spoiled the Egyptians, or those others who, seeing a good land and a pleasant beyond Jordan, crossed over to take possession.

If there were Canaanites and Hittites and Hivites and Jebusites there— why, so much the worse for them. To the Chosen alone pertained the fruits of the land—oil and honey and running milk and bursting grape— yea, from the snows of Lebanon on the north to where the vineyards of Engedi overlook the salt acreages of the Dead Sea.

So the roe-deer of Barwhinnock and the pheasants of Lowran, the grouse on the muirs of my Lord Glenkells and the partridges on the fat furrows of Bodden of Buttonbotham— these could be no property of Canaanite and Philistine so long as there was an Israelite to lay his eye along a gun-barrel, or one of the seed of Jacob with a finger to pull trigger.

And indeed, admitting the applicability of Old Testament principles, it would have been a bold controversialist who would have proved to Sharon McCulloch that he was in error.

It was the earliest streak of a winter's day, grey, mournful, mist-wrapped, when the axe was laid to the root of the tree— that is, of the gate post.

Laboriously had the Laird of Bennanbrack and his men built up the dykes, cross-barred the ancient roadways, and broken down the rude country bridges which spanned the Pluckamin Burn and the

infant Lowran.

But Sharon McCulloch and his sons cut a swathe across the country, clean and broad, laying out a highway passable for man and for beast.

Where there were only locked gates, they contented themselves with breaking the padlock and laying it upon the lintel post. They then nailed up a notice to it, setting that this was the legal road from the farm of House of Muir to Kirk and Market.

Where the obstructions were more serious, as where a seven-foot dyke had been built across the path, they made a gap wide enough for a horse and cart to pass, and with the same law-abiding formality, they piled the stones at the side and stuck their notice on the top. A recently planted hedge was uprooted. A strong barricade of young pine trees crossed with wattles was shattered by axe-stroke and the remains extracted by Sharon's crowbar.

It was while this last operation was being completed that the Laird of Bennanbrack arrived. He was a red-faced man of fifty-five, raucous of voice as a crow, and convinced of the Divine Right of landlords, but with limited means of expressing it.

'What's this? What's this? Infernal scoundrels! What are ye doing here? Condemn your souls! Get off my land. I'll have ye all in Kirkcudbright Gaol before the day is over! Here, Lambie, Robertson, take these fellows! Seize them, I say!'

Several game-watchers ran hastily up at their master's call, but fell back at the sight of the three

## STRONG MAC

McCullochs, Roy and James with sweeping broadaxes, and their father standing erect leaning upon a crowbar, which in his hands could easily have dashed the brains out of a horse. It was a daunting spectacle, and made for peace.

‘Go on, cowardly sweeps that ye are!’ cried Chesney Barwhinnock, Esquire. ‘What are ye feared of?’

‘The verra same thing ye are feared o' yoursel!’ cried Tyd Lambie, who was a wit. ‘Aye, the deil's selfsame!’ The law will protect you,’ said the landed proprietor.

‘Aye, when we are deid,’ answered Tyd. ‘That'll be a great coamfort!’

Sharon McCulloch leaned with his arms folded on the crowbar, watching his foes.

‘Gang on, lads,’ he commanded in his turn. ‘Cut a road through to the King's Highway!’

So in spite of the execrations of Chesney Barwhinnock, the work progressed rapidly. Down went the barricades one after the other, none daring to hinder. The chips flew every way. Strong Mac's axe whirled about his head, a circle of gleaming steel on which the morning sun, rising red, shone with the colour of blood. Opposite him James smote with fine conscientiousness and attention to legality.

There! It was done. The three stood victorious and calm amid a pile of splintered chips, fragments of chain, padlocks, pointed sticks—in fact, a complete chevaux de frise.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

The clatter ceased suddenly as Roy with his foot swept the larger fragments on to the Glenkells road. The forces of the enemy were now much augmented, but the desire for attack was not a whit keener. The three stood in the gap which they had made, black against the rising sun, and from the midst of his sons, exceedingly unafraid, Sharon McCulloch of House of Muir spoke with his enemies in the gate.

‘Chesney Barwhinnock,’ he began, lifting himself erect, ‘the Lord that is on high answer ye according to your blasphemies. With them I hae naething to do. But hear ye a word or twa.’

‘Robertson, you swinging rascal, you pitiful coward,’ cried the angry man, ‘go for the military! Run for your life! We will have the rascals before they can escape! We will keep them here—bring the peace officers, the excise—Captain Brabant! Confound your shivering soul, what are ye standing there glowering for?’

‘Ye will hold us, Chesney Barwhinnock,’ quoth Sharon, grimly, ‘you and your men? Better send them all on your errands. Laird o’ Bennanbrack! I warrant they will move the readier in that direction than if ye order them to fall upon the McCullochs of the Hoose o’ Muir! As for me, I stand within my rights. Yonder is my property, deeded to me by your ancestor, Chesney! You and your lawyers have reason to ken how firmly. Neither you nor they can break that. There was a road to Kirk and market

## STRONG MAC

frae yonder hoose generations and centuries afore ye were born. We that dwell in the Hoose o' Muir are neither birds o' the air to fly nor fish o' the sea to swim. We maun walk on God's earth—we, our children, our cattle and the stranger within our gates! Ye have locked the door upon us, as if we had been condemned prisoners—barred the gate against us as against thieves. We be free men seeking our own, an' when we find it we take it. Here we have made a road broad and plain. We have broken access to our rights. Let any dare to molest us at their peril. If ye think otherwise, the courts are open. Interdict us afore the Fifteen. There is enough in the stockin' foot at the Hoose o' Muir to face ye there, even as I face ye here. But ye canna. Ye daurna. Put up your gates—we will break them doon. Lock your yetts—we will shiver them in pieces as we have done this day. And if ye withstand us, it is at your own proper risks. Ye have been warned in the presence of witnesses. Moreover, Chesney Barwhinnock, ye are cursed with the curse of the covetous, of the remover of landmarks, of the oppressor of the poor. But for us, as the Lord hath commanded, we will stand in the ways and see. We ask but for the old paths, saying, 'Where is the good way, that we may walk therein and find rest for our souls?' Lads, to the schule wi' ye, your axes upon your shooters. For me, I return hame by the way that I have made for myself. Woe to the man that cometh foment me. Out o' the way, Chesney

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Barwhinnock! Vanish from before me, Tyd Lambie—and you, Pate Robertson. For the trumpet is blown in Tekoa (which is Hoose o' Muir), and I have seen a ball of fire fall in Bethhacerem—the which I take to be the load o' Yule peats I will deliver at your door, Maister Chesney Barwhinnock, Laird o' Bennanbrack, but not lord o' the hale earth, as ye wad fain hae us believe!'

And with these words Sharon McCulloch went through the ranks of his enemies, scattering them before the wind of his coming, his crowbar in his hand, and the mighty anathemas and excommunications rolling from his lips.

They stood open-mouthed, gazing after him as he went forward, never looking behind. It was long before their feelings found vent, and then it came rounded and complete from the lips of the Laird himself.

'Damn!' said Chesney Barwhinnock of Bennanbrack, Esquire.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE NEW WORLD OF LOWRAN

The campaign which opened by the historic clearance of the Bennanbrack road raged with various fortunes for three years. Not always were the McCullochs so successful, yet on the whole the victory lay with them. And for this reason. Among their numerous enemies was no cohesion, while the McCullochs stood shoulder to shoulder year in and year out.

Moreover, they had sympathisers. Herds on the hills both near and far, and especially herds' wives, favoured them with information, counsel, shelter, food. Even the ordinary game-watcher, paid his week's wage (but strictly an hireling), found it to his profit to turn his back and saunter over a knowe if he saw the House of Muir lads at work about an animal, which might, of course, be a braxy sheep, but again might be one of his master's deer. Often the merest glint of Sharon's tall, gaunt figure defined against the skyline has decided one of Jonathan Grier's underlings to remember a sudden call of duty in an opposite direction.

Then in the black and arid winter, perhaps on the verge of some storm which would prevent the ill-affected and talebearing from circulating much among the mountains, Sharon or Roy would say (casually enough) to a herd who had showed himself

complaisant—aye, it is whispered, even to some of the game-watchers themselves on lonely station—‘Gae up the glen till ye see twa sticks stelled in a V—then haud ower the knowe to the richt a maitter o’ thretty yards—turn ower some pulled heather — n’ if ye dinna see something that ye never saw afore, come back an’ tell me.’

And that night the beef-tub in the little cot on the hills would hold venison, and that cottier’s tow-headed children might be seen running about for several days with a trickle of gravy browning the wicks of their mouths.

At House of Muir, Sharon and Roy were alone most of the time now, for Jamie had gone to Drumfern to serve his time in a lawyer’s office, and though he came back every Saturday and spent the Sabbath (between the two ‘takkin’s o’ the Buik’) in ways not particularly law-abiding, he could not be said to belong to the house.

It was by his own will that James had thus departed, and the agreement drawn up as to his expenses in Drumfern showed that he had not mistaken his profession. This document provided that, until James repaid the advances which his father had made to him during his apprenticeship to Writer Greg, his brother Roy should be considered sole heir to the property of House of Muir. Furthermore, if his father advanced his elder son money to establish him in business, Roy’s ownership was to become absolute. Besides which,

## STRONG MAC

it was provided that James McCulloch was at all times to give his legal services free of charge ('expenses only') to his father and brother.

On Sharon himself little change had passed. His tussock of grey hair might be a thought more heron-plumed, his shoulder blades more like ploughshares, but the muscles on his lean wrists stood out more like whipcords than ever. Years had not dimmed the blue glint of his eyes, straight as steel, cold as ice, and he fronted the world as defiantly, and perhaps a trifle more humorously than before.

Roy McCulloch at twenty-one had filled out to the measure of his early promise. He was not tall, but his figure was so beautifully proportioned that only the great muscles swelling under the smooth white skin and the easy inevitableness of his every action revealed the latent force which lay beneath. 'Strong Mac' he had been even as a boy, but now they said (and were believed) that there were no five men in the county who would care to tackle Roy McCulloch in open combat.

There was about him still the old air of languid good nature, that lazy challenge of eye which at once charmed and irritated women, and upon occasion a quiet, resistless ease of action wholly different from his father's fierce volcanic energy.

In love (much talked of in these parts) Roy was still unattached, though ever and anon the talk of his friendship with the Dominie's Dora would take to

itself fresh wings after he had been seen swinging down the village street of Lowran, turning sharply to the left, and so up the little schoolhouse loaning.

But, then, Roy McCulloch always chose the time when most folk could see him. The loungers on the bridge, elbows on the parapet smoking their evening pipe, joked him sedately as he passed. The quoits were ringing keenly on the village green. The good gossips were out on their doorsteps with stockings and white seams, and they, too, greeted him with passing pleasantries, as tongues feminine ran well oiled to the click of the needles and the biting of threads.

So no one believed very much in the report which they themselves passed on. Roy McCulloch went to see his old master. The two were held great cronies. As to other possibilities—well, Adora Gracie was a winsome lass. There was no saying but behaviour less like that of Lowran lovers could not well be.

And Adora herself? Ah, come into the little school-house and you will see what three years have done for her. Sixteen to nineteen—from the Old World to the New! And over this dividing ocean each daughter of Eve must be her own Columbus.

Adora Gracie had not grown up according to pattern. She was gipsy-dark in a world of girls lily-white, flour-white, freckled white. Never a freckle was there on Adora's clean even tan. Yet healthy colour throbbed upon occasion on her dusk cheek.

Perennial geranium glowed upon her lips. Her eyes were dark and fiery at once— the pupils large and mysterious, with a sense of tears unshed behind them, alternately mirthfully defiant and provokingly scornful, eyes that could prick the bladder of conceit like bayonets and yet draw as with cart-ropes the prisoners of Adora's sword and bow.

Yet she had no such general reputation for surpassing beauty such as had Charlotte Webster. Three men out of four would have preferred Charlotte, but the fourth would have flown at the throats of the others for a word breathed against Adora. There was a certain reserve, rare in such generous and gracious natures, a ready wit, a mellow afternoon charm about the Dominie's lass that made her older than her years, and drew after her, not the usual herd of young night-runners, but rather men somewhat tried and experienced, grave and gay after their kind. They came to see the Dominie. Of course! They were all interested in the Dominie. And so the best talk of the neighbourhood was to be heard in the kitchen place of the little schoolhouse in the wood.

Yet, for a certain reason Adora Grade had few declared suitors. Charlotte Webster had them in strings and shoals, and took credit therefor. But Adora Gracie possessed the art to see into a man's feelings some way ahead of himself, and (as Jock Fairies said) 'she keepit a bucket-fu' o' cauld water on the shelf—in case!' And Jock had some cause to

know. He generally proposed to her, or at least made up his mind to do so, every Friday night.

By far the richest and most determined of all Adora's lovers, and the one whom, in popular estimation, she must end by taking, was Sandy Ewan, the Muckle Sandy of the Lowran Ploughing Match. He was now his father's successor. He had several farms of his own, a house which rumour affirmed was being furnished to Adora's taste, while as horse-dealer and cattle-factor he had few equals and no scruples. With such advantages a man would go far, and it was the opinion of Lowran that, 'gin Sandy Ewan wanted a woman, he wad get her at the hinder-end.'

Lowran had watched many generations of stand-offish and head-tossing parish belles who ended thus—marrying not the men they liked best, but the most persistent, the men who wearied them the longest with their much asking. The knowledge that there is an alternative constantly open to her, a place at a table-head which may be her own at any moment, money to spend, a recognised position ready to be claimed, has its effect upon the mind of any woman—in time; that is—ah! in time. Such was the philosophy of Lowran, and the experience of the past had given it some reason for so thinking.

Had not Tib Lonnen, that tearing beauty of the Directory days, ended by throwing over all the bucks of the time and marrying old Kissock of Birkenshaw, over fifty, snuffy and badger-grey? Did not Effie Hill

## STRONG MAC

sit in Girderwood pew in Lowran kirk, having migrated from that of Hunterston just across the aisle? Her two husbands, Girderwood and Hunterston (both deceased), had been old men, with heavy 'stocking-feet' And so now the parish looks on a little cynically till Effie Hill, late of Hunterston, later still of Girderwood, throws her handkerchief of the third essay. The general opinion is that this time she will take a young man who will considerably lighten the stocking-feet of the deceased.

But the schoolhouse and its mistress are waiting, and must wait no longer.

Donald Gracie, also three years older, sat by the window, a book on his knee. He was thinner than of old. His hair was scantier, and there was a fine, gentle pallor about him which was very becoming. His hand, white and delicate, held the book listlessly, a finger in the place.

But there was a carefully tended look about the Dominie, very different from what the older folk of the village remembered of him in the days before Adora had established her authority. Most people said that the Dominie had wholly cast aside his ancient failings. But a few, who knew the symptoms, shook their heads in private, or wound their watches in meditative silence when their wives questioned them about the matter as they were going to bed.

All the same, he was undeniably 'weel-put-on,' and Adora was greatly thought of as a manager. For the Dominie's income was known to a shilling, and

yet Adora could oftener change a pound than any other woman in the village.

'Have you heard how they divide the young men of Lowran, Dora?' said the Dominie, as with a certain quizzical expression in his eyes he watched the girl, with arms bared to the shoulder, scouring a 'berry-pan' of shining brass in readiness for the yet distant preserving season. In the meanwhile it served as a point of light on the kitchen wall of the schoolhouse, a halo to which suitors lifted their eyes after gazing long at Adora.

'No, father,' said the girl, without any great interest. 'I thought the young men of Lowran were all alike!'

'I heard it from Robin Gilchrist,' he said; 'the Deil's Buckies gang to Lucky Greentrees, the Daft Lads to Charlotte Webster's, but the Wise-like to see the Dominie!'

He chuckled audibly.

'The Wise-like to see the Dominie!' he repeated, smilingly. 'Observe the prolepsis!'

'I observe,' said his daughter, with spirit, 'that we are in good company—Lucky Greentrees, Charlotte Webster—and the schoolhouse!'

Donald Gracie shrugged his shoulders. He was the only man in Lowran who did this, till Sidney Latimer came home from the wars.

'My dear,' he said, 'the schoolhouse is a health resort. Why should we complain? Are we not the club—the parliament—the only alternative to the

other two? You must not complain. They are all my old pupils.'

'The Laird?' she queried, breathing hard on the obstinate brass and polishing vigorously.

'The Laird?' said Donald Grade, meditatively. 'He comes, doubtless, for similar reasons. A great old empty house, a deaf mother with a temper, and the society of servants. Here—the pleasure of my society, books, some wit if scant wisdom—'

'And the pleasure of being set to polish jelly pans!' said Adora. 'Here, Laird! You are just in time to be of some use in the world.'

She held out the brass boiling-pan to a tall bearded youngish man who came in at the moment. He took it from her hands and stood waiting directions. A slightly uncertain smile was on his lips. No salutation passed between any of them. Indeed, it was not their first meeting. Sidney Latimer had already 'cried in' as he went down to the village to meet the mail coach which passed through Lowran every day on its journey from Newtown Galloway to St. Cuthbertstown.

'And the cloth!' she said, pushing it towards him. 'Nothing is wanting now but elbow-grease!'

She herself drew the great wheel out of the corner of the room and laid a soft pile of 'rowns' (or wool for spinning rounded like macaroni) on a chair ready to her hand. In a moment more began the soft sough and whoo of the spinning-wheel, in those days the greatest incentive to conversation of the

quieter sort, because it filled up the gaps and gave every one time to speak unhurriedly or to be silent without awkwardness.

Shy men got time to think. Exuberant men could be repressed. For the spinner moving to and fro gracefully, easing and 'raving' her thread, could come in very effectively as accompaniment, sometimes whooping so loud as to drown an awkward remark, or again stopping altogether to pick a knot off the thread, till the sudden silence brought out a sentence as if it had been printed in the largest capitals. Tricksome Penelopes often did this of malice prepense.

It was some considerable time since the Laird of Lowran had begun to drop in regularly at the schoolhouse. As principal heritor of the parish it was manifestly his duty, and after a while it became his pleasure also. Yet he explained himself manfully enough to Adora when, as tonight, she took him to task about the matter.

'Why do I come?' he repeated after her. 'Well, perhaps the best answer is, that I shall continue to come so long as you permit me. I am not leaving my own class and consorting with village folk. Your father, Mistress Dora, is a gentleman, if ever I met one. I have abundantly tried my 'equals,' as you call them, since my return. They are not my equals—nor yours. Is Chesney Barwhinnock my equal, who cannot make himself intelligible without a string of oaths? Or my lord up yonder at Cairnsmore, who

## STRONG MAC

tells me thirty times in an hour, 'The people must be kept down, sir! The country is going to the dogs, sir!' Or old Bodden, who is never happy till he has made every man at his table as drunk as himself? No, madam, these are not my equals!'

'But,' said Adora, 'have you thought at all of me in the matter?'

The young man with the brown beard looked quickly up at her. Adora's eyes were on her twirling spindle.

'I never think of anything—!'

'Who-oo oo-ooooo!' said the spinning-wheel, opportunely.

The noise stopped as soon as his lips ceased moving. With a glance she assured herself that her father was deep in his book, which he had lifted from his knee as soon as the Laird began to polish the brass berry-pan.

It was his usual way of entertaining a solitary guest to leave him wholly to his daughter.

'But,' said Adora, 'you forget. You do not hear what the people say. I do!'

'And what do they say?' said the young Laird hastily, the flush maintaining itself on his cheek.

'A little thought will tell you that,' she said, 'or you can ask Jonathan Grier. He will inform you!'

'I do not care,' he began, and then stopped of his own accord.

'No,' said the girl, 'you do not— because there is no reason why you should. But I—I have to think

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

of myself, to speak for myself. My father—'

She lifted her eyes and indicated the Dominie to the Laird. He was deep in his Virgil, his thin forefinger beating out the time as the familiar lines flowed rhythmically in his head.

'You see,' she went on, 'I am in a manner alone. You are not of our degree, whatever you may say. And—' she added, this more softly under cover of the gentlest sighing of the spinning-wheel, 'the Lowran people draw no fine distinctions!'

'Gross boors—' said the young man, his brow darkening angrily, 'evil-tongued liars! If aught comes to my ear I will clean the ground of them and theirs, and leave not a reeking chimney from one end of it to the other.'

There was a curious smile on the girl's face as she answered him.

'Aye,' she said, 'that were indeed a fine way to stop folk talking. To make my name a byword from bound to bound of the parish—could the art of man devise any surer means than that? Oh, men— men!'

'Doubtless they are indeed a continual torment to you,' said Sidney Latimer, with sudden aggressive bitterness, 'yet I never saw any one colder—or better able to look after herself!'

For the first time Adora Gracie's face flushed. There was a soft, dangerous light in her dark eyes.

'I have learned that lesson,' she said, quietly. 'All my life I have had to think of and care for another before myself. Good for you if it had been

your case!’

‘And do I not think for someone else?’ he said, almost too loudly. ‘Pray tell me, of whom am I thinking now?’

‘Of yourself!’ retorted Adora, with perfect composure. ‘Of no one but yourself!’

The young man half rose from his seat as if to go, but changing his mind, sat down again.

‘What would you have me do?’ he said, with a sigh.

For the space of two ‘rowns’ Adora span on without answering. The moaning of the wide, slim wheel filled the house with a sighing sadness.

‘I would have you come less to the schoolhouse. My father, if you wish for society, will step over to the Great House of an evening to talk with you. The walk will do him good. You can have your Greek readings there instead of here. Then that dog of yours will not sit barking on my doorstep, as an advertisement of where his master spends his forenights. Then, perhaps, your mother will not scowl when she meets me or twitch her dress to the side lest it should be defiled by my touch.’

‘My mother—’ cried the young man, so vehemently that Donald Gracie, who had fallen asleep over Virgil—dropped his book with a crash and sat up, suddenly awakened by the noise.

‘Ah, Mr. Latimer,’ he said, ‘I hope you will pardon an old man— but I think I am a little fatigued this evening. The school was close today.’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Sidney Latimer picked up the book and gave it courteously back to his host. His mouth was grim under his moustache. The Dominie resumed his reading, turning away his shoulder to catch a more favourable light through the trees.

The Laird waited till the musical throb of the great wheel again filled the air.

‘My mother,’ he said in a low, angry tone— ‘if my mother has—’

‘I am sorry I spoke of that. It slipped out. It was nothing,’ said the girl, hastily. ‘Your mother has every right to behave as she likes to me. But as far as in me lies, I will give her no cause. Nor, if I can prevent it, will I permit you to do so, either. If you say anything of this to your mother, remember I wish never to see you or to speak with you again.’

‘Dora—Dora, you make it hard— hard,’ groaned the young Laird. ‘What have I done to be shut out from that which is free to my farmers, to my servants, to the son of an outlaw poacher? Ah,’ he continued, noting the glow rise on her neck at the word, ‘that is it! There is someone whom you welcome as you never welcome me — someone who has other than hard words from you.’

Adora Grade broke off her ‘rown’ with a sharp snap, removed the half-filled spindle, swept all the fat coils of wool into a bag, and passed very erect to the door which led to the staircase.

‘I bid you good-night!’ she said, and going out, she left him sitting.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A CONFIDENTIAL CONVERSATION

As Sidney Latimer took his gloomy angers off through the red boles of the little schoolhouse plantation, he met a young man just entering by the gate. He was a tall and broad-shouldered young man, with a strongly moulded, clean-shaven, boyish face, remarkably clear forth-looking eyes, and the easy, unhurried carriage of one who lives habitually in the open air.

He was dressed like any well-to-do young farmer, and wore a blue bonnet, a grey homespun coat, cut away in the prevailing fashion, a long-flapped waistcoat of a dark blue colour besprent with small yellow flowers, close-fitting knee-breeches, grey hose deeply lined down the leg in the fashion known as 'rig-and-furrow,' while upon his feet were strong moorland shoes with buckles of shining steel. He had silver ones at home, but he thought that to wear them would look conceited, so he left them at home.

This, as Sidney Latimer was aware, was the son of the squireen of the Bennanbrack moors, Roy McCulloch of the House of Muir. As a landlord the name was more than ever anathema to him. Had not Sharon repeatedly defied the powers that be? Had he not set up cornstooks after harvest to tempt their birds to the slaughter? Who but he shot their roe

deer and made light of their gamekeepers? Yet he held to his poor three hundred acres, in spite of most advantageous offers to buy him out, with a tenacity which, being a fair-minded man in the main, the Laird of Lowran could not help admiring.

But on this occasion the eyes of Sidney Latimer were sicklied over with jealousy. And he scowled at Roy McCulloch going up to the schoolhouse with a savage humour which sat ill upon his handsome and open face. Roy passed him rapidly with a slight but courteous salutation, his muscular legs carrying him out of sight among the trees before the angry expression had faded off Latimer's face.

'Hang him,' muttered the young Laird. 'So that is her choice, is it? A poacher and the son of a poacher!'

He stood on the white road, switching his leg and meditating.

'I wonder,' he muttered between his teeth, 'whether things cannot be so managed as to relieve the parish of both you and your father?'

Then a flush of shame rose to the Laird's brow, for he had been thinking of the Press-gang.

'No, hang it,' he said, in the tone usual to him, 'if I cannot win fairly I am not going to play with loaded dice.'

But, then, when a man plays in company he cannot always prevent the loading of the dice even with the best intentions in the world. So that night Jonathan Grier, who had been waiting in the lodge

for the return of his master from the schoolhouse, observed with interest the unusual gloom of his countenance, and the air of angry preoccupation with which he dwelt on the misdeeds of the McCullochs. The poacher Sharon and his son were becoming a pest to the neighbourhood. They were carrying their lawlessness with a high hand. Something must be done. Thus fulminated the Laird of Lowran, stamping his way along his own avenue to his ancient mansion-house.

Whereupon Jonathan Grier, a wily man, put two and two together, bethinking him if there was nothing to his advantage in all this.

He had seen Roy McCulloch pass by on his way to the Dominie's. He had even cried him a neighbourly greeting.

For, save in the matter of business, there was in Lowran usually no animosity between law-breaker and law-preserver. Now, it is well to repeat the fact that Jonathan Grier was a wily man. He had come from the north of Ireland in the time of the late Laird, and had been continued in his position by Sidney Latimer, less from personal liking than because he had made himself necessary to the young Laird's peace of mind by a certain influence which the chief gamekeeper possessed over his mother.

Mrs. Latimer had never yet been able to understand that her son was grown up or that he had attained an age to think on any subject for

himself. To her he was still the boy who had been sent to school to learn the Latin grammar, to be birched into unwilling rectitude, and who at set intervals returned home to be cosseted and posseted for ailments more or less imaginary. Still, upon going out he must be laid wait for in the hall to see that he encased himself in his proper muffler and overshoes. Still, he must be ambushed upon his return, that he might give an account of himself and his pursuits during every hour of absence.

‘My Sidney,’ the Lady of Lowran used to say to Mrs. Rebecca Purslane, her confidential maid, ‘must never get out of the habit of confiding entirely in his mother. He must continue to tell me everything, and the habit shall be at once his safeguard and mine. No evil companionships. No designing young women! I would see through them at once. I would warn him. Nay, I would go direct to the huzzies and tell them what I thought of them.’

‘But,’ said Mrs. Rebecca, shaking the black bugles on her many-bastioned headdress, ‘there's that schoolmaster's daughter on the hill. What was the awesome thing I heard the last time I took a quarter of a pound o' the spoilt green tea ye couldna drink to Betty Howdie in the village? Betty, a godly woman and well informed, telled me that the young Laird was up at the schoolhouse five nights out of the lawfu' six every week in the year.’

At this the Lady of Lowran shook her head all the more vehemently.

## STRONG MAC

'Betty Howdie is one fool and you another, Purslane,' she cried. 'As soon as you came in I asked Sidney to tell me the truth, and he assured me that there was nothing in the report. He goes there to read Greek with the schoolmaster, a very learned man. Besides, Jonathan Grier has seen him through the window, with a book in his hand, listening enraptured to the schoolmaster expounding the quirky passages. And I myself from the road have heard the girl's spinning-wheel buzzing like a bees' byke a' the time Sidney was in at his lesson!'

As she listened Mrs. Rebecca laid the points of her long, bony fingers together and cast her eyes upwards, a graven image of a virgin martyr. She had her sufferings with her mistress, and for the last fifteen years had resolved to change her place at least three times a week. But the carelessness of her superior and the perquisites of her office more than made up for the many names which the Lady of Lowran called her when, as Purslane put it, she was 'sore left to herself and forsaken by grace!'

On the present occasion the waiting-maid knew that Mrs. Latimer was not nearly so comfortable in her mind as she would have herself believe. But Purslane was far too experienced a maid to say so. She had not striven with her own 'poor defunct' so long without knowing that, in love as in war, a flank attack succeeds much oftener than a frontal one. So she let the lady satisfy herself as to the harmlessness of Adora Grade before suggesting

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

that the next time they went to the village together they should both of them call upon such a desirable neighbour.

'If she's a' that ye say, she deserves to be encouraged,' pursued Purslane, diplomatically, 'and I am sure the young woman wad be mightily complimented by a visit from your Ledyship.'

But 'her Ledyship' declined to be mollified so simply.

'Ye are a silly auld body, Purslane,' she cried imperiously. 'What would I be doing, encouraging any young person to think herself above her position?'

At which Purslane sighed and maintained that peculiarly elevated silence which always aggravated her mistress.

'Why can you not speak when you have anything to say, Rebecca Purslane?' she said. 'There—dinna pretend to greet! Woman, ye ought to be ashamed— at your time of life to be a perfect waterworks. Yes, of course you are a lonely widow, and a deil's sicht better off than when Purslane was alive, if the tenth part o' what ye hae telled me be true! Speak out, woman, if ony word you have to say is worth a sensible woman's listening to.'

'Ah,' said Purslane, mournfully, 'I will speak that which is sore upon my heart. It is that though by the blessing of a kind Providence, still able for my work, the day will come when I shall desire to take a little rest from my labours.'

## STRONG MAC

'Your labours,' cried her mistress, growing more hotly indignant, and also in speech more colloquial. 'Do ye think that bringing me my cap twice a day, and girning like a sheepshead in the tongs the rest of your time, is 'labour'? If that is your idea of labour, ye have passed brave and easy through the world— that's a' I hae to say to you? But what are ye driving at Purslane? Let us hae it!'

'Weel,' said Purslane primly, as though suffering in silence those scorns which patient merit from the unworthy takes, 'what thinks your Leddyship of asking the young woman at the schoolhouse to come and bide here— to learn under me, as it were, that in time when I am laid aside she might be able in some measure to fill my place?'

As if propelled by a spring the Lady of Lowran rose from her chair, and taking Purslane by the shoulders, gave her a shake that made the bugles dash on her cap.

'O' all the unconscionable idiots,' she cried, 'Becky Purslane, ye are the crown. To think that ye hae spent as muckle time on the Footstool, and yet hae acquired nae mair gumption than an unspeaned calf! Providence has, indeed, weared a deal mair hard wark on you than it will ever get back its ain siller for! To speak o' bringin' a young woman into the quiet house of Lowran— and an innocent laddie like Sidney in it. What for do ye think I keep the like o' you— an auld done body that there is neither sense nor wark in— no to speak o' Isabel Byres

there, wha is but a gizzened tub and canna even see when she washes a neckerchief clean, and bleared cook Ailie in the kitchen, wha's face wad fricht auld Nickieben himself frae laying a hand on her in ony wrangous way— what for are the like o' you about the Lowran but that the bairn that has been gi'en to me may be delivered frae the temptations o' the flesh—at least in his ain mither's house?'

'Aye,' said Purslane, moving her head this way and that gingerly to make sure that it had not been shaken off her shoulders, 'that's as may be. I am a poor widow woman and think naething o' the gauds o' the flesh or o' the beauty o' adornment, being content in my humble sphere with the ornamentation o' a meek and contented spirit. But yet, maybe if there was somewhat mair attraction in the House of Lowran, the young maister might be inclined to bide a kennin' nearer hame! I mind aye what said godly Mr. Whittaker, of Cauldslaps Meeting Hoose in his fast-day Exercise and Addition, that between the young and the auld there was a great gulf fixed!'

'Daft havers,' cried the old lady. 'I ken ye, Purslane. Ye will hae some lang-leggit limmer o' a niece o' your ain to propose! But I'll never let a young hempie within my doors in the way o' service. And as for visitors—faith, they will wait lang for an invite frae me.'

'But the Laird will doubtless marry someday,' suggested Purslane, with artful meekness, 'and life

is an uncertain thing at the best. Like mysel', your Leddyship is getting well stricken in years. Were it not wiser to look for a wife to him yoursel', rather than leave him to be trappit by the first that whistles 'Come hither' ower the wa'?'

'Ye forget yoursel', Purslane,' cried the mistress of Lowran. 'In the first place, I am mony and mony a year younger than you (here Purslane smiled discreetly behind her seam), and, secondly, Sidney is but a laddie. There will be time enough to think o' his marrying ony time these ten years to come. I could never be doing with a fine lady to sit in the parlour and turn her thumbs about ilk ither. But I'll no deny that, if I could find a biddable lass o' decent family wi' a reasonable pickle siller, she might be handy for dusting the cheena ornaments on the upstairs mantelpiece. What wi' age and laziness, ye are gettin' that handless and useless whiles, that I declare there will soon be never a thing left breakable in Lowran Hoose except the chimney cans. And, faith, ye wad break them, too, if ye could win at them!'

'There's Catherine Bodden of Buttonbotham—she's a fine lass, they tell me,' pursued Purslane, who by long practice kept to the matter in hand with steadfast persistence through all the storms of insult with which her mistress assailed every expression of opinion.

'A heedless haverell!' cried Mrs. Latimer, jerking her work in the air so vigorously that she lost her

needle, and wasted much time seeking for it. This being found. Purslane had to be assisted up from her knees, which always stiffened in the act of kneeling and refused to do their duty in raising her from the ground.

'Weel, mem, what's your thocht o' the Lady Elspeth, or the Lady Bidy Lennox?' was the next suggestion of the maid when they were again seated at their tasks.

'Proud madams baith the twa o' them—they shall never come within this house with my will!'

'It wad be a great phrase in the country if the Laird mairriet the dochter o' a Viscount!'

'A Latimer o' Lowran is as guid as ony Lennox that ever wore hippens!' cried the emphatic lady of that ilk.

'Maybe— maybe,' said Purslane, soothingly. 'Far be it frae me to say aught other—or to think it. But they tell me this Lady Bidy is a bonny biddable lass!'

'I would never agree with their mither!' cried Mrs. Latimer. 'They shall not come here into my house— no, though I hae to bar the door in the faces of the hale Hoose o' Peers, an' a' the bink o' Bishops at their tail!'

'Then, there's Doctor Meiklewham's daughter, Hope,' pursued the mentor. 'They tell me there's no the like o' her for a sober, solid, wise-like lass— the pick o' the pairish, and the apple o' her faither's eye!'

'Let her bide wi' her faither, then, gin he's sae

fond o' her. Nae lass wi' sic a covenanting fore-end name shall ever get my son. 'Hope,' indeed. It might as weel hae been Faith' or 'Charity!'

"Deed, then, mistress, but ye are ill to please wi' a wife for your son," said Purslane, who had much liberty of speech with her mistress. 'Tis my puir opinion that ye dinna want him to be wed ava'—'

'Let be,' said the Lady of Lowran. 'Tis little ye ken about the needs o' ancient families, Rebecca Purslane. Think ye that it would not be a sore day for me to think that my son was to be the last Latimer of Lowran?'

'Whilk he is mair nor likely to be, mistress,' said Purslane, some little nettled, 'gin ye forbid every honest lass the door o' your hoose, as if she carried the plague about wi' her in the faulds o' her kerchief.'

'Forbid here, forbid there!' cried the irascible old lady. 'I forbid nane. The Hoose o' Lowran is my son's—no mine. And if it is his guid will to bring the wife he fancies hame to this dwelling, I hope that I'll be strengthened to do my duty by his choice!'

'Guid pity her, then!' ejaculated Purslane under her breath, but not low enough to escape the sharp ears of her mistress.

'Ye are an insolent, ungrateful woman, Rebecca Purslane,' she broke out, 'and I wad hae ye ken that what I have to put up with frae you and the ither twa wizened fairlies about the Hoose o' Lowran

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

mak's a' other troubles o' little account. I ken well I hae the repute o' being snell-tongued, but that is because my heart within me is chastened by you and the like o' you. And whiles ye try me that sair, that (Heaven is my witness!) either death or my son's marriage wad be a welcome relief!'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

INFLUENCE BY RICOCHET

Now Rebecca Purslane was a wise woman and knew her mistress' temper. She influenced by ricochet.

No words could, to all appearance, have been more utterly thrown away, no seed sown on poorer soil with less prospect of harvest, than the suggestions concerning the entrance of some young person of her own sex into the dragon-guarded House of Lowran. But the aged Purslane was wily. She had lived long with Mrs. Latimer, and knew that the surest way to have her opinions adopted was to keep ding-donging at them, allowing the Lady of Lowran no rest day nor night. For Purslane slept in the same room as her employer.

'Hush,' said Mrs. Latimer at the close of this first round of the engagement, 'there is the hall door. Sidney has come home!'

'I hae little need to 'hush,' said the attendant, tartly. 'It wasna me that was speakin!'

The Lady of Lowran lifted her finger so threateningly that Rebecca contented herself with shaking her head till the black bugles rang a perfect fire alarm on her head. Then her mistress quietly laid down her seam and went out. So soon as she was gone Purslane threw herself back on the cushions of her chair and laughed silently, laughed till the tears traced out furrows on her wrinkled

cheeks.

‘The fule!’ she murmured. ‘Oh, the auld fule!’

Mrs. Latimer went into the hall expecting to see her son. It was his custom to take off his boots in a little side room devoted to guns, dog-whips and the smell of varnish.

But on this occasion Sidney Latimer went directly to the library. His mother followed him thither, her face, as was its custom, growing mellow and more kindly at every step. By the time she stood on the mat outside the door which he had hastily closed no trace remained of the sharp-tongued, acerb old lady who had so recently been sparring with her long-suffering companion.

She opened the door gently. Her son was seated at his desk, scribbling furiously. Presently he thrust the sheet of paper from him, and sat biting the feather of a pen as if meditating upon what more he was to write on the white surface.

Very boyish and ardent he seemed, in spite of his beard and the self-contained look he owed to his English education. He started up in some confusion upon Mrs. Latimer's entrance.

‘Ah, mother,’ he said, rising to salute her, ‘I did not hear you come downstairs!’

‘I came to see if you were at all fatigued,’ she said. ‘Perhaps you ought to take something before dinner!’

‘I thank you, mother,’ said the young man, restive under the attention, ‘but I am not tired.’

## STRONG MAC

'You have been on the hills again? You have been at the fishing?'

It was the lady who was fishing.

'No, mother,' said Sidney Latimer, elaborately careless, 'I only walked over to meet the coach in the village. I had some letters to post.'

His mother looked at him softly for a moment. He stood by the mantelpiece, still chafing at the interruption to his writing. She divined the feeling instantly. The discussion she had had with Purslane began to make itself felt. She walked over to him and laid a hand gently on his coat-sleeve. (Though she did not know it, the views she now held were Purslane's, not her own.)

'Sidney,' she said, 'you are lonely here, with no other companions than a couple of old women—one of them a fool.'

'No, mother,' he smiled down at her with the wistful detachment of only sons, 'I am not lonely at Lowran. I have you.'

In fact, he might have added that at that moment he desired to be somewhat more lonely than he was. He almost prayed for his mother's departure. Yet, as sons go he was a good son, and as for Mrs. Latimer, she never looked at him without seeing a little boy in his first knee-breeches. She saw even the silver buckles on his shoes. It would save much trouble if sons could always remain as their mothers keep them pictured in their hearts.

'You need some bright young person in the

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

house,' pursued Mrs. Latimer, to Sidney's astonishment. 'What say you to your cousin Matilda from Parton? Think, dear Sidney—she would also be a companion for me, your mother. Purslane is old and a fool. A young girl in the house would brighten us all!'

'Well, mother,' said Sidney, smiling, 'do as you like. Ask Matilda Gregory from Parton, or all the six Gregorys, if it please you. Only pray don't expect me to dance attendance on them!'

His mother hastened on, in order to keep him from further speech.

'Then, if we had a young girl in the house to be companion for them, I daresay some o' the Boddens of Buttonbotham or the Lennox sisters would come on a visit! Or what say you to that nice lass o' the minister's? She is well-reported of?'

'Mother,' said Sidney Latimer seriously, 'what has come to you? You are troubled and not like yourself. Tell me!'

And most strangely at these words the erstwhile fierce old lady burst into tears.

'It is about you I am troubled, Sidney,' she said. Her hands were shaking and her lips quivered with that tremulousness of age which she will cannot stop.

'Anxious about me?' repeated Sidney Latimer, vaguely. 'In what way am I giving you anxiety, mother?'

'Oh, I dare not tell you,' she sighed, 'I dare

not—you would be sore angered. And that I could not bear!’

Sidney Latimer blushed with a secret forecasting that if she meant to speak to him of Adora Gracie, he would be very angry indeed. He called this conscious innocence. So there was constrained silence between them for something like a brace of minutes. Then the old lady let her hand drop from his arm.

‘Ah yes,’ she murmured, ‘I see you would be angry. You love her!’

Sidney Latimer flushed dark and his eyes looked as a son's eye ought never to look at his mother.

‘Oh, do not be angry, Sidney,’ she cried, catching him, ‘how can I help it? You are all I have—all I ever had!’

But a whiteness was creeping over her son's face, a kind of icy chill which was unspeakably terrible to her. Her boy seemed to vanish before her eyes, and only a stranger remained.

‘Oh, Sidney!’ was all she could say, breaking into the folk speech that lay near the heart, ‘dinna look at me like— like your faither!’

‘Someone has been telling lies to you, mother,’ said the young man, commanding his voice (he could not command his face). ‘I request to be told who?’

‘Oh,’ quavered the old lady, ‘do not 'request' of your own mother, Sidney. That also is like your

father, and I want to forget it. Be my boy and I will tell you— word for word!’

‘Tell me!’ he said, inflexibly stern. ‘Sit down, Sidney—oh, sit down—I think I could speak to you better that gate. I think— ye wadna be— sae far— frae your auld mither!’

Oh, the pitiful ones who, having set up idols, and worshipped them, go all their lives in fear of their gods' angers!

‘No, I will not sit down, mother,’ reiterated Sidney Latimer, ‘tell me what you have heard. Then after I have answered, I will sit down.’

He did not mean to be hard, but there comes a time in the life of a young man when the voice of every woman but one falls dull upon the ear. At such times let mothers see to it that their words are few and well ordered—and the fewer the better.

If otherwise, they may come to cry bitterly, ‘Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bare, the breasts whereon never child lay.’

Yet in a little age and pitifulness did their work on Sidney Latimer's heart. True, he would not soften till he had heard the worst, but— he was no son to bring grey hairs down to any sorrow, if he could help it. They told me,’ she began falteringly. ‘Who?’ interjected Sidney Latimer, determinedly.

‘Oh, this one and that about the village,’ said his mother, hastening over the point, ‘they say that you pass every house in the street to spend your time at one—with the schoolmaster's daughter.’

## STRONG MAC

‘And if so,’ said he, stiffly, ‘what harm?’

‘What harm?’ repeated his mother. ‘Are you not Sidney Latimer of Lowran, your father's son? Are you not laird of the best estate in the parish, and you ask what harm?’

‘Let that alone for the moment,’ he said. ‘Has anyone aught to say against Adora Gracie?’

‘Not a word,’ said Mrs. Latimer, truthfully, ‘except that, being what she is, the daughter of a drunken father, herself a village schoolmistress, she does very wrong to encourage a man in my son's position!’

Sidney Latimer laughed suddenly and harshly, and at the sound of his voice the mother's face blanched. She knew that strange clanging discord which rings in a man's laughter when he mocks bitterly at himself.

‘Help me, my God,’ was the prayer of her heart, ‘is it even now too late.’

But as if in answer to her thought Sidney Latimer stepped slowly from the mantelpiece against which he had been leaning, to the open desk. He lifted the sheet of paper he had instinctively pushed aside on his mother's entering.

‘Read that!’ he said.

Flustered by his precipitancy the old lady felt in her hanging pocket of black satin for her silver spectacles. Her hands were trembling so that she could hardly find the case.

Read it to me!’ she said, gently.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

No,' said Sidney Latimer, 'read with your own eyes and tell me if, after that, you think that the drunken man's daughter has encouraged your son!'

His mother went slowly to the window to get the warm light from the west upon the sheet. Only a few lines had been written, and those with the extremity of haste.

*To Miss Adora Gracie, At the School House of Lowran. Madam: Since your rejection of my proffered friendship this evening and your commands not to return to your house, I have resolved to place my feelings for you and my admiration of your character beyond the reach of misconstruction, by immediately quitting the country, my friend General Barnard, presently with my Lord Wellington's forces in Spain, has offered me...'*

The paper fluttered to the floor. The old lady took two or three uncertain steps towards where her son stood.

'Sidney,' she cried, 'you will not—oh, you will not. Would you kill your mother?'

She stretched out her arms towards him wildly.

He caught her and sat her on a couch. Then he sat down beside her and took her hand with more than usual tenderness.

'Listen, mother,' he said; 'you say (and she says) that I compromise her by remaining. She would not listen to me tonight when I would have told her that I loved her.'

'Then you have not yet told her?' cried his

mother, a sharp joy in her heart which she tried in vain to keep out of her voice.

‘No matter—she knows!’ said her son, ‘and she will not listen to me. Her reasons are yours— her father— my position. But the expression of them does her more honour than they do my mother, when she insults me by repeating the tattle of the village.’

‘It was not I—,’ said Mrs. Latimer feebly, ‘Jonathan Grier—’

‘Ah,’ cried the young man, ‘Jonathan Grier! Are we coming to it now? And what had he to do with the matter?’

‘Nothing— nothing,’ said his mother with eagerness. ‘I mistook— I promised!’

Sidney Latimer did not persist. He only made a mental note with regard to his chief gamekeeper. His mother took him by both hands.

‘You will not leave me?’ she said, adding slowly, the words forcing themselves out, ‘I will forgive even that— I will do all that you wish, if you really love this girl!’

It was a terrible strain, but the desire to keep her son by her side and in safety conquered all else.

Sidney Latimer shook his head sadly.

‘It cannot be, mother,’ he said. ‘As you used to sing, I have gotten my fee and my leave. Less than any common village wooer can I trespass again upon an absolute prohibition, or cross the threshold which has been forbidden to me!’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'You, the Laird—who could send Dominie and Dominie's lass about their business with a word to the Kirk Sessions.'

'All the more because of that,' he said, with a steadfast determination, 'what would you think of me if I were to use my position to revenge myself upon an innocent girl who has every right to her own opinion of me?'

The Lady of Lowran suddenly and unexpectedly flamed into anger.

'That she should make light of my son— that the huzzy should dare to scorn—!'

'Stop, mother,' he smiled upon her, 'do not be angry. Think how much more angry you would have been if Adora Grade had seen fit to take me at my word!'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LOVE BY RESOLUTION

When Roy McCulloch tapped at the door of the school-house of Lowran, the spinning-wheel had been pushed into its corner, and Adora Gracie, her temper somewhat restored by her victory over Sidney Latimer, was settling herself to the pleasantest part of the day's employment—the hour's quiet reading which preceded her ten-o'clock bedtime.

If the girl were indeed glad to see Strong Mac the feeling certainly did not show on her face in the way of shyness or maidenly coyness.

'Roy McCulloch,' she said, sternly, as she looked at him, 'had you nothing to keep you from raking the roads, that you must come here to spoil my one good hour?'

Roy smiled, but had too much judgment to say anything till he found himself being greeted by his old schoolmaster with Donald Gracie's invariable, 'Ah, lad, but I was thinking you had forgotten your old Dominie!'

'Little fear of that, sir,' said Strong Mac, cheerfully, 'you gave us too good cause to remember you each time we take a book into our hands.'

'Well, here's a Virgil,' cried Donald Gracie, 'open it and let us see if by any chance you can still construe a page.'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

This also was a request (having the force of a command) repeated upon the occasion of every visit, and in anticipation of it Roy always prepared himself carefully for the ordeal.

Tonight, however, he was not to be permitted to escape so easily as usual. Adora, who suspected his device, reached her hand across for the book.

'There is a passage in the Second Book I could not make out,' she said, 'perhaps we might look at it and Roy can tell us what he thinks is the proper rendering!'

'Yes— yes, that is wise!' cried the old man, rubbing his hands gleefully, 'many men, many minds. Construe, Roy, construe!'

Strong Mac cast a reproachful glance at his tormentor, well knowing the reason of her sudden interest in Virgil. But he recovered himself in time to demand of Adora the details of her difficulty, which, when she had discovered and declared, he found to be also a stumbling block of old standing to himself, and forthwith with great gravity referred the whole matter to the Dominie.

Donald Gracie took the book with a glow of pleasure in his eyes, and at once launched into a learned prelection with much turning of leaves, quotation of parallel passages, and discussion of the niceties of language.

Adora sat by the window, her small head a little to the side, listening mischievously. She was perfectly conscious that Roy McCulloch was

watching her. The young men who came to the schoolhouse seldom failed to do that.

The translation having been made out, and Adora's difficulty solved without seeming to interest that young lady very markedly, the Dominie continued to finish the book for his own pleasure, but by-and-by his voice subsided into inarticulate murmurs of satisfaction.

Then Roy McCulloch shyly crossed over and stood by the window in which Adora Gracie was seated. He would have drawn a chair near her, but with a gesture of careless frankness the girl made room for him on the window seat.

'Well,' she said, 'and what have you come to tell me tonight—that you and your father have been committing manslaughter upon more of his Majesty's excisemen?'

'We had Lieutenant Trant here the night before last, and he says he is bound to have you before long.'

'Let him try. Lieutenant Trant is welcome!' said Roy, quietly. 'There will be sticks a-breaking first—aye, and crowns too. They are growing overly forward, these preventive fellows. They will get over the fingers one of these days!'

'Roy McCulloch,' said the girl, dropping her voice, 'when will you give up this foolishness? It will bring you into sore trouble one of these days.'

'There is my father,' Roy answered; 'I must stand by him.'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'But not in that,' said Adora. 'Surely there are other ways. Why not stick to the farm?'

'Because a man might just as well hang as starve,' said Strong Mac, gravely. 'Our two or three poor hundred moorland acres could never keep my father and me in one meal a day. And a little Freetrading quietly gone about gets us far less ill-will than over-much meddling with the landlords' deer and muir-fowl!'

'But I hear you are in the black books for that as well,' retorted the girl; 'there was a man here the other night who was as sore against you for that as was Trant, the coastguardsman, for the smuggling.'

'The Laird of Lowran?' queried Roy sharply with a sudden bend of his eyes upon the girl. But Adora met him with all her usual careless frankness of gaze.

It is a secret of the confessional,' she said.

'You will tell me,' said Roy, 'that is, if you wish me well. I will make no ill use of the information! You can trust me for that!'

'Well, it was not Mr. Latimer—he always speaks well of you.'

'His gamekeeper, then?'

Adora nodded very slightly.

'This is between us,' she said. 'I advise you to keep well within your own march-dykes for the next ten days. The hunt is afoot.'

Roy McCulloch sat looking at the girl's busy fingers moving athwart her seam as if the danger lay

there.

'Thank you, Dora!' he said, 'I shall not forget.'

'Take good heed then,' she went on, 'keep away from the Lowran and Bennanbrack forests and give the enemy no handle against you.'

'Is—the Laird in it?' said Roy measuredly.

'No, he knows nothing.'

'You are sure?'

'If he had been, I should have known it,' said Adora, simply stating a fact.

'I would rather have taken a year in gaol than have heard you say that,' said Roy McCulloch in a low voice.

Adora laid her work carefully by her side and looked the youth straight in the face. She was angry—far more angry than she had been with Sidney Latimer.

'Are all men fools?' she said in her clear, decided tones. 'Already tonight I have had to ask one of them to bide from my father's house! Must I do the same for you? No—' she added after a pause, 'we have been friends over long for that, you and I, Roy. Come, take your cap. I will walk to the gate with you. I have something to say that had better be said out of doors. Bid my father good-night.'

Roy rose obediently. The Dominie extended a limp, perfunctory hand. He was still deep in his Virgil.

'Good-night'— he said, 'come back soon and we will have another grand page. Listen to this. I have

just come upon it.'

'No, no, not tonight,' put in his daughter hastily, 'you must not keep Roy. I am turning him out. Do not move till I come back. I am going to the gate to see that he really closes it. It makes a noise if it is not properly shut'

They went out together into the cool summer gloaming. It was already dusk under the schoolhouse pines. The village lay beneath them, smokeless and clear, its whitewashed houses and green-slatted roofs following the irregular line of the road on either side. There was a far away cheerful crying of children late at their play— silence otherwise complete and cool, like the first wash of a still sea. 'And now,' said Adora Gracie, laying her hand upon the young man's arm with the easy accommodation of fearless country nineteen, 'Listen. I will tell you what I would not trouble to explain to anyone else. I would be as ready to be Sidney Latimer's friend as yours— that is, if he were not Laird of Lowran. But I will not be talked about— at least, not if I can help it. I care no more for you than for him, except that I have known you longer. He has as little right to find fault with me for being your friend as you have to quarrel with me because he comes to the house. And that is—understand clearly, no right at all! If you are to be my friend, keep a guard on that tongue of yours, Roy, my lad. Whenever I am unable to manage my own affairs, I will tell you! And now, good-night! Shut the school-

## STRONG MAC

gate behind you, and, if you wish to please me, keep off the hill of Bennanbrack for the next fortnight!’

As Roy McCulloch went homeward in the grey purple dusk of the moorland night, he had matter for meditation. He was so perfectly familiar with the way that as he went he could think without interruption. Every tuft of orange-coloured bent, every springy bush of dark heather came up under his foot exactly in the place where his foot expected it. He avoided the dangerous places, the green-scummed ‘well-eyes,’ the bottomless bogs, the precipitous ‘screes’ with a perfection of knowledge which equalled the instinct of an animal.

There are occasions in the life of every young man when he seems to himself to see and resolve with extraordinary clearness. The world of circumstances, compelling and impelling, has not yet closed about him. Instead of many purposes, he has but one. And generally that one is connected with a woman. If not, according to his weird, he becomes a great commander of armies, or dies on the scaffold.

Strong Mac reflected— and the reflection appeared to him original and unprecedented in the history of the world— that without Adora to share it with him life would be but a vain dream. At Strong Mac's age youth is prematurely apt to renounce the world because it cannot have the Sole Adorable of the moment, but the mood seldom lasts out the year.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

But Roy had really something to say for himself—or so at least he thought.

‘Who has half so much right to her as I?’ he meditated. ‘Ever since I can remember I have thought of her first in the morning, last at night. At school I did not learn my lessons because I wanted to learn, but to please Adora Gracie!’

And these things actually seemed to him as having something to do with the case.

Then it struck Strong Mac that he lacked some of the signs of passion as depicted in the rare romances he had read. For there were some old novels of the eighteenth century at House of Muir beside his father's fly-books and his intricate accountings with the Isle-of-Man traders. But, then, Adora Gracie was in no way a heroine according to rule. He smiled to himself at the idea.

A young man who ventured to address her in the language of foolish compliment might, according to his status and Adora's humour, receive a stinging reproof or a box on the ear, but love— Roy smiled again.

The girls in the books blushed, trembled, quavered. They could not say ‘Boo’ to a goose, lest the monosyllable should be thought unmaidenly. But Adora Gracie was in nowise thus sicklied over with sentiment. Clear-eyed, plain of speech, definite in action, chalk was not more easily distinguishable from cheese than Adora Gracie from all other daughters of man. Witness—Roy McCulloch.

‘What, then, can I do to please Adora Gracie?’

That was the question he proposed to himself as he went homeward over the moor. He had offended her that night, he knew, but the like should not occur again.

In the future he would leave his own feelings altogether out of account. He would study solely how to deserve her friendship.

True, he excelled in all the sports of the countryside. He was so incontestably first at quoits, at throwing the hammer, at wrestling, leaping and running, that no one could be found to enter the lists against him. Well, all that must have an end. Adora scorned mere triumphs of bodily strength and skill. Roy was sure she did. On the other hand, she loved books. He was not clever, he said to himself, but he would learn. His brother James, in Drumfern, would send him as many books as he could induce his father to buy. These he would read and discuss with Adora Gracie. Mind would first speak to mind, and afterwards (he knew no better) heart would respond to heart.

In the second place and furthermore, he would watch for opportunities of being useful to her.

Roy was compelled to think this second point over carefully. Adora was such a difficult person to help— not at all like the girls of the story books. These were always so conveniently ready to faint at the sight of a cow in a lane or a bull in a pasture. Adora would have lifted the nearest cudgel or

snatched up a stone from the dyke. Still more probably, she would simply have flapped her white apron and said, 'Shoo!' She never needed to be helped over stiles or delivered from perilous straits. Crags and morasses had been her playgrounds, and she could spring from tuft to tuft across the most treacherous 'quakkin'-qua' as well as Strong Mac himself. It was certainly discouraging.

Still he had a glimpse of one or two things—possibilities far off and vague indeed, yet not quite hopeless.

For one thing, the Dominie's demon was not dead. At any moment it might awake from slumber. Well, Donald Gracie liked him. He was sure of that. He would go and talk to his old schoolmaster in the evenings. They would read Latin together and— he would see Adora.

Then he remembered that among the pines at the back of the schoolhouse, in a very approachable situation for a benevolent brownie, stood the Dominie's little official woodpile and peatstack. The bairns brought the peats as part payment of their fees. Roy promised himself that Adora should find these, like the widow's cruise, continually plenished and inexhaustible. But he did not think what he would say when a certain very clear-headed person asked him to explain the belated miracle.

One other last resolution, for Roy was nearing home.

As to what she had asked of him that night, he

## STRONG MAC

would do her wish to the letter. So far as he could he would stop the smuggling, and for a time confine himself to the work of the little croft. It was a sacrifice, certainly, for in his heart the young man did not believe that any one could possibly entrap him or do him serious injury. He had that confidence in himself which a man has who has never yet felt himself helpless in the grip of fate.

Reasoning thus on what is entirely outside of reason, Roy reached these remarkable conclusions:

Resolved, That the way to produce love in a woman's heart is to avoid all mention of the subject when talking to her, to compass her about with unseen anonymous services, and, above all — to cultivate the mind!

Roy McCulloch.

It was a remarkable advance. Love, thus arranged for, would be no longer blind. He would become a reasonable, cultivated, intelligible divinity, who with other childish things had laid aside his bow, his quiver, and his habit of playfully transfixing people's hearts with toy arrows. But Strong Mac, thus making a wager with Fate, did not know that if this were indeed the case, the whole world (including Adora Grade) would at once go into mourning for their old, impish, tricky, improvident, spiteful, blissfully teasing boy-god, the son of Venus, who, dying a thousand deaths, reborn a thousand times, never once grows old or abdicates his right to reign.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE BATTLE ENGAGES

But the tale of the suitors of Penelope is far from ended.

Not only did Jock Fairies of the Holm attend at the schoolhouse every Saturday night for the pleasure of sitting on the extremest edge of a chair and looking at the fireplace, but as he went out at the gate he put a certain question in form to his young hostess. For Adora generally accompanied him to point out the way ever since the night when, mistaking the back door for the front, he had walked over the block upon which the kindling-wood was chopped and barely escaped braining himself on the broadaxe.

Jock Fairies the young man was very much what might have been expected from Jock Fairies the boy after three years' growth. That is, he was big, kindly, a little stupid, easily led for good or ill, and— and as of old, completely subordinate to the stronger nature in presence of which he found himself, whether that happened to be Adora Gracie, Strong Mac, or—Sandy Ewan.

Ah, Sandy Ewan—that was the name of the last and most dangerous of Adora's suitors. Entering into his heritage upon the death of his father at the age when most youths are yet wholly in leading-strings, Alexander Ewan's hard, vehement and

passionate nature, naturally arrogant and impatient of obstacles, had so carried him away that his wild exploits, his amorous adventures, his reputed dealing with the Kirk Session of his own parish had made his name a byword over half Galloway. And this feeling was deepened by a certain dark vein of cruelty of which strange tales came to be whispered.

Young Ewan's father had died rich—that is, for the time and place. And so at twenty-one, those were his own acres that Sandy Ewan strode out upon. His own sheep trampled the many paths of his muirs. His own cattle studded a thousand hillsides, and above all, they were his own stallions, that snorted and whinnied and pranced along the roads of Galloway and the Upper Ward. For with all his forceful brutality, Sandy Ewan carried on his shoulders no empty head. Lavishly generous where his pleasures or desires were concerned, in matters of business he proved to the full as hard-headed as his father. He had early seen the riches which would accrue to him who should improve the poor-blooded, inbred, 'fashion-less' work-horses of the south of Scotland. And to this end he imported Flanders mares and English stallions, and so in a brief space blossomed out as the dictator of market-places and a chief arbiter of horse-shows.

On a keen, snell-blowing February morning Sandy Ewan, Laird of the Boreland of Kirkanders, as well as of several surrounding farms, strode out across the short, spongy turf of the 'ley' fields near

the House of Boreland to visit his sheep. He had shepherds whose duty it was to do this for him, but Sandy Ewan believed in personal supervision; and besides, he had rested ill in his bed that night.

His strong, bleak, unkindly horse face had the protruding underlip more than usually thrust out, and was full of the dour angers of the man seldom thwarted. His dull eyes were injected, but though it was above all things a time of hard drinking, on this occasion Sandy Ewan had not tarried long at the wine cup. He dug his iron-shod heel deep into the sod as he walked. Malice fierce and bitter had him by the throat. He muttered to himself as he went.

‘She denies me, and I know the cause. The reason, indeed, is plain. It is the poacher's son—Roy McCulloch, who smuggles his drink and lives on the deer killed on other folks' lands. And for such a beggar and a thief she gives me the back of her hand. I did not mean to—no, what is she better than the others? But her light scorns drove me as with a whip. And I offered her all this—’

He looked behind him at the spick-and-span new mansion house of Boreland, which it had been the last act of his father's life to build, at the far-extending rectangle of barns and byres, his own addition, at the scarcely finished stables and at the parks where his breeding stud was exercising.

With a gesture indicating the hopelessness of understanding any woman born of woman, he repeated incredulously, ‘She refused all this— the

## STRONG MAC

first living woman that ever had the chance of it!

Then he glanced down his full height of six foot and two inches, took in his well-leggined calves, his well-shod feet, stroked his long, clean-shaven upper lip, and added in a yet more disgusted tone, 'And she refused me!'

It was inconceivable, knowing what he knew of women. Muckle Sandy smiled a little self-satisfied smile as he thought of his record.

'Ah,' he murmured, nodding his head, 'some hae meat an' canna eat, an' some wad eat that want it! Bonny lady ower yonder, have a care— ye will maybe see your pride get an unco downcome. And as for your poacher's son—'

As he thought of Roy McCulloch words failed him, and he fell back on the brute silence of sullen wrath. He frowned so that the heavy, hairless folds of skin which represented eyebrows accentuated the cruelty of his small, stubborn eyes. Then his mind reverted to his repulse of the previous night

'Mony is the lass,' he said aloud in the country speech which at that time all used upon need, 'that wad hae been weel content wi' the man without the doonsittin'. Aye, Elspeth Gibb up at the Cowanriggs an' Bonny Betty o' the Ferry, to gang nae farther! I hae seen them baith greetin'—and for what? Juist fleechin' and prayin' o'er me that I wadna leave them a' thegither! But what yin o' them a' ever had the chance to be mistress o' the Boreland o' Kirkanders—a laird's wife sittin' by my side in the

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

kirk, and ridin' to the market on her ain Kelso naigie? But I'll wager I'll be evens wi' the besom some day yet, or my name is no' Sandy Ewan!'

From this it will be easily understood that it was no good day for Sandy Ewan and Roy McCulloch to encounter each the other. Yet it was their fate to meet. It came to pass at the smithy of Ebie Cargen, the village antiquary and political dictator of the parish. Ebie could tell every old wife's tale that had been handed down concerning house, tree, cave or lonely mountain. He knew on what night the mystic Grey Lady of Glenlee perambulated the avenue. He knew the dread secret she was seeking vainly to communicate. On crowded evenings, when he had cooled his thirst a little more frequently than usual, the smith would relate the famous tale of his meeting with the spectre in the Holm wood—and how her hand when it touched his was ;as bonny an' weel-rounded as that o' Charlotte Webster hersel'!

'Quaite—quaite, smith,' muttered Robin Shell of the Newlands on this occasion. 'Here's Strong Mac doon frae the muirs wi' a job for ye! An' ye had better no' even Chairlie Webster wi' the Dominie's lass in his hearin'.'

And, indeed, as he spoke Strong Mac appeared at the turn of the road by the sawmill, leading the well-known old white pony. He walked silently and very lightly upon his feet, as is the wont of strong men. The assembled company in the 'smiddy' (some

## STRONG MAC

six or eight of the choicest spirits in the village) regarded the young smuggler and stalker of other folks' deer with more than the usual admiration due to successful law-breakers.

'He's a bauld, upstandin' lad, and a credit to the pairish,' said Paton of Egarton, sententiously.

'That's mair nor the lairds wad allow, I'm thinkin',' retorted the smith, drily.

The habitual frequenters of the smithy looked towards the smith to see if he had a reason personal to Strong Mac for his unusual consideration for those in high places. But the man of iron only passed his hand across his brow, and threw the drops of professional sweat from him with a flip of the fingers. Then he wiped his damp hand on his leathern apron and greeted Roy pleasantly enough.

'Aye, lad, and hoo's a' wi' ye up at the Hoose o' Muir.'

Roy responded with cordiality, nodded about the smithy, and whistling the while, proceeded to fasten his white pony to a ring in the shoeing-shed attached to the smithy.

Then he sat down on a convenient ledge at some distance behind the fire, in a place where the wrinkled mass of the bellows, dimly seen suspended above the red glow, loomed like a huge animal a-swing in some magician's chamber. In the parliament of 'lallan,' ploughmen waiting for their 'culters' to be set, their 'swingle-trees' to be 'clepped' or 'banded,' the young hillman sat modestly apart

like a stranger. He was, indeed, thinking of Adora Gracie and the partial embargo she had laid upon him. Still she was without doubt interested in him, or she would never have been so anxious for his safety. So much at least was good.

Roy was aroused from his reverie by the sound of an entrance into the little courtyard of the smithy. A loud voice hailed the smith by name, and Ebie Cargen went to the door to answer.

It was dark by this time, and the smith, in a voice as rough and loud, demanded who called his name.

'Come out here, smith!' cried the voice again.

'Come ye ben here gin ye want ocht wi' Ebie Cargen!' said the smith, and forthwith betook him back to his anvil.

'Ebie,' whispered one of the village hangers-on, 'do as he bids ye. It's the young laird frae Kirkanders!'

'Guid be wi' us, and wha micht he be?'

'Maister Ewan—ye surely ken—young Maister Alexander o' the Boreland,' said the sycophant, hoping that the person named might hear.

'D'ye mean Muckle Sandy—Sly Tod Ewan's lang loon?' cried the smith in a loud voice. 'If he wants Ebie Cargen, he can come and seek him. He kens the smiddy door!'

It was with a curious undercurrent of silent dislike, mingled with the inevitable half-respect, half-fear inspired by a man with the reputation for

## STRONG MAC

money or 'regairdlessness,' that the little 'smiddy parliament' moved to receive Sandy Ewan. Every one present, with two exceptions, made some slight alteration of position, indicating uneasiness or a desire to get away unobserved. The two exceptions were the smith at his forge and Strong Mac seated deep in the dusk, hidden or almost hidden from any incomer by the red glow of the hearth fire and the black mass of the bellows.

With his hand masterfully upon the pole, Ebie the smith sent forth at times a gentle moaning and anon a sonorous roar, according to the exigencies of Vulcan or the condition, disturbed or peaceful, of the smithy parliament.

'Well, lads,' cried Sandy Ewan, with a certain condescension in his voice befitting his new condition of laird (instantly detected and resented by every man within hearing), 'hoo is a' wi' ye the nicht? A full meetin', I see, eh, lads? The plough irons have surely been knockin' their brains oot against a heap o' stanes this day!'

No man answered, because no man had been directly addressed. There was an uneasy, fretting silence, broken only by the leathery wheeze of the bellows and the smith's 'Noo, Jock!' as he signalled his assistant and striker.

Then, comfortable to all, there arose the merry alternate dong'ding, dong-a'ding of the forehammer and its mate. A score of eyes watched the sparks fly, first white, anon red. Then the ruddy sunset colour

died out of the smitten iron; a dullish purple invaded it till the mass grew too cold to be handled, when with an 'Ouff!' of satisfaction the smith replunged the metal into the fire, bent upon the handle, and with the first hissing breath of the bellows turned to the newcomer with a grim humour on his face, dried by thirty years of fire-stoking and bellows-blowing.

'And what micht be your Honour's will wi' Ebie Cargen the nicht?' he said.

The irony of the title was lost on Sandy Ewan, who at the time was so conscious of his own dignity as a laird and officer of militia that if one had saluted him as 'General' or 'My Lord' he might have been a little surprised, but assuredly he would never have thought of correcting him.

Now Sandy Ewan desired to be popular, and did his best to be friendly and hearty, thereby as a natural consequence depressing the spirits of his listeners to the lowest pitch. Only a solitary voice answered his sallies, that of the sycophant who had urged the smith to go out to meet him. This was one Jeems Easton by name, a longhaired, sleek-faced man, who was of no consideration in Lowran because he was suspected of buying oil for his hair instead of using the domestic candle for the purposes of the Sunday toilet. Jeems obsequiously nodded his sleek head and sedulously responded in the best English fashion, judged proper in speaking to a man of note.

## STRONG MAC

‘Aye, Laird, I was juist thinkin’—’ he had begun, when the smith imperiously cut him short.

‘If I mistak’ not, Maister Ewan hasna yet informed us in what way I can be o’ service to him!’

For the smith, when very angry or very contemptuous, could be elaborately polite. In the smithy it was counted one of the surest of danger signals.

Sandy Ewan, however, never doubting the cordiality of his reception, stamped his way up to the hearth, pulling off his great riding-gloves as he went and holding up his fingers to the blaze.

‘There are some padlock chains badly wanted up at the Nether Airie,’ he said at last. ‘We have been losing overly many sheep to please my grieve. There are some folks up near the headend o’ Lowran parish that hae a difficulty in kennin’ their ain sheep frae ither folk’s!’

This pointed straight at the McCullochs of House of Muir, whose ground ‘marched’ with that of the Nether Airie, a large ‘led’ farm which, among his other ventures, Sandy Ewan had recently leased from the Laird of Bennanbrack. Sandy Ewan expected a laugh, or at least a chuckle of appreciation, but on this occasion none came, even from sycophant Easton. An unquiet silence oppressed the smiddy, whispers and nudgings passed here and there, in the midst of which the smith grunted audibly and blew up the fire with more than his usual vehemence.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Strong Mac sat motionless, his eyes seemingly intent on a dull ruddy patch on the black floor of trodden forge-ashes, on which the red snout of a ploughshare was slowly cooling. No one had courage to inform Sandy Ewan of his presence.

'Jock,' said the smith, 'will ye attend to your business. There's a score o' padlock-cheens ahint the dass (dais), that were ordered when the lairds were set on stoppin' the road to the Hoose o' Muir! No yin o' them was ever needed. They micht serve Maister Ewan for his Nether Airie yetts.'

Jeems Easton the Sycophant interposed to break the force of the smith's irony.

'Lord—Lord,' he cried, 'an' ye hae been losin' your sheep!— the country's surely in an awesome state when vaigabonds are allowed to gang about the country robbin' honest folk!'

'To my thinkin' the worst ill-doers are not those who gang the country, Easton, but those that are permitted to stop in it There's them no that far away, that will maybes swing in a lang tow the next time the Red Judges come to Dumfries!'

The sycophant, conscious of the lazy figure sitting so darkly behind the bellows-sweep, tried to convey a warning to his principal.

'There's them that it's maybe no canny to name. Laird Boreland,' he said, striving by turn of head and inclination of elbow to draw attention to the locality of the danger.

But Sandy Ewan, conscious of his strength and

## STRONG MAC

proud of his position, a little elevated too by the refreshments he had partaken of at the various public houses on his way, raised his voice, and would have none of his warnings or reproofs.

'Name,' he cried, 'name! What care I for the names o' a' the blackguards in Scotland? I come here direct from the Sheriff at St. Cuthbertstown and I can tell ye that the names of the sheep-stealers will ring in a day or twa through a' Gallaway! The fiscal himsel' is hard on their tail, and listen to this, lads, there's a gye gleg lad that will soon find something else to do wi' his fore-nichts than to make a fool o' the light-headed dochter o' a drucken schoolmaster!'

There was a gasp of horror-stricken awe throughout the smithy. A short pregnant silence, then out of the gloom Strong Mac detached himself. Marching straight up to Sandy Ewan, he stood the space of two breaths looking into his eyes to give him time to defend himself. Then with the single word 'Liar!' at one blow he sent the evil speaker flying through the open door of the smithy into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE SUB-SOIL OF CRIME

Thus in Lowran war was declared— swift, sudden, to the death. On Strong Mac's side there was not only natural resentment for false accusations, not only the anger because of the woman (like to which there is none other on the earth), but also a slow accumulation of mis-likings and grievances, the natural animosity of years, born in schooldays, continued in youth, and now to be fought to a finish with all the strength of manhood.

On Sandy Ewan's part jealousy and rivalry had grown to acute hatred. He was of those who cannot bear to lose. Strong Mac had thrashed him at school. Ewan had carried through life the consciousness that but for this boy he might have been without a rival. The expulsion from the schoolhouse, the ploughing-match, the ill-divided favours of Adora Gracie, above all a deep, dour, dogged determination to stamp out an adversary, so that he might never again lift up his head, formed in Sandy Ewan's bosom the very soil from which great crimes spring full grown in a night.

Yes, it was to be fought to a finish. Both of the young men recognised that. And they knew in their hearts (or thought they knew) that whatever the ostensible cause of their quarrel, the victor's prize was to be Adora Gracie. Still it might have been as

well to consult the lady, who in any case was exceedingly likely to have a mind of her own on the matter.

After the scene of the Lowran smiddy, Sandy Ewan was assisted, bruised of countenance and much confused in understanding, upon his beast, and rode home, compassed by the ill-rewarded attentions of the sycophant, at whom he swore continuously.

As he went his hatred returned doubly upon him. A sense of disgrace gnawed at his heart, and not all the consoling reflections of Jeems Easton, timidly faithful, could draw a word of acknowledgment from him. He would be revenged on his adversary and that speedily. Fierce thoughts flitted through his mind. Oh, if he only had him down and helpless—what pleasure there would be in trampling out his life with his boot heels! There were, even in Scotland and in the year of grace 1812, ruffians to be hired, escapes from the gaols, deserters from the army. Crob McRobb—the outcast, rose up before him. He would help him, the dark man with the face like a weasel, who for a guinea would — so at least they said— and Sandy Ewan had many guineas.

Then through the blind savagery which pain and shame bring to the surface in better men than Muckle Sandy, the dour staunch brain of his race began to work. After all, were there not other and safer ways? To stamp a man's life out may upon

occasion entail unpleasant consequences. There was the unfinished business of the sheep-stealing. He regretted that he had boasted of it. The enemy would now be on his guard. But again there was the weasel-faced man, a dark, lithe, light-running, elusive, underground weasel who would be at his disposition, for a price. Crob McRobb was his man.

So by the time that Sandy Ewan had reached the Boreland of Kirkanders a plan had begun to take shape in his mind. After all, he would make good his boast. If Roy McCulloch and his father did not hang by the neck till they were dead (as he hoped), at least he would see to it that they were compelled to quit the country for good and all.

With these thoughts in his head, Sandy Ewan brewed himself a bumper of brandy and water hot and strong.

Then he tumbled into bed, resolved to send a message to the Man of the Weasel Face in the morning. But on waking, the extra brandy he had swallowed, together with the consequences of Strong Mac's blow, had made him unpresentable. A violent headache, and nausea mingled of bitter shame and physical pain, kept his thoughts at home, and it was evening before he had sufficiently recovered to begin definitely to plan his revenge.

Then he sent for Crob McRobb. It was his foreman, Grieve Cormack, who carried the message, carried it, too, with many inward questionings as to what his master could have to say to such a world's

reprobate as Crob. He wished it had been written in a letter. He would willingly have read it for illiterate Crob.

‘Some deevilry about a woman, I’ll wager!’ was his guess, with, after all, a far-away rightness about it. For Adora Gracie was at least one of the causes of Muckle Sandy’s present evil case.

Meantime in a little den off the business room of the new house of Boreland Sandy Ewan lay couched, gambling low to himself in the semi-dark—like a tiger with a broken head, ill to approach, worse to disobey.

When the silent-footed old woman with the face like oiled ivory, who had been his nurse in childhood, brought him some light refreshment, she did so quite prepared to have it thrown at her head, plate and all. Devilled bones were what Sandy’s stomach craved after. These and vengeance—also bedevilled by all the brood of the pit.

Thus had the man lain for nearly twenty-four hours, the sickness of physical pain slowly submerging itself beneath the rising tide of hatred and resolve. From where he lay he could in his turnings see into the wide barely furnished room which he called his library. The back of a book on the Criminal Law of Scotland, which, very superfluously, he had bought upon his elevation to the bench of justices of the peace for the county, looked at him with a warning air. It seemed to swing suggestively to and fro upon the table when he

thought of the pleasure of slaying his enemy slowly. They said that sometimes it took half an hour for a man to die on the gallows. That was a long time, and with a curse Sandy Ewan turned over that he might not see the big three volumes of Stairs' Institutes which flanked the official inkstand.

It was in the deep heart of the night when Crob McRobb arrived at the Boreland. He had been hard to find, being, as usual, absent on business of his own. But his son Daid had succeeded after Grieve Cormack had signally failed. The Weasel-faced Man entered the great house warily, treading lightly, as if he suspected traps on the floor, perhaps lurking open-jawed under the soft unaccustomed carpets, or, as it might be, a spring gun looking out at him from under the hanging corners of a table-cover.

But when Crob stepped into the wide bare spaces of the 'library' and heard Muckle Sandy swear at him, he became at once much more at ease. That at least was something he understood and had been prepared for. It assured him of a welcome. Crob had set his feet on carpets before, and knew the way up some great folks' staircases as well as themselves, but that was in the silence and blackness of night, when no friendly oaths cheered his larcenous way.

At the door he inquired in a husky voice after the patient's health, and in reply received the information that it was evil to a degree inexpressible on any printed page, furthermore that it was nothing

the better for seeing him, and that in especial Grieve Cormack was a useless good-for-nothing numbskull, of no character and worse than no parentage—inasmuch as he had been so long in doing his bidding. And what did he, Crob, mean by coming to his house when all decent folk were in their beds?

'Doubtless that is the reason Crob isna in his!' commented the Grieve, humorously.

Whereupon his amiable master cursed him anew, but Crob, who understood the injury only vaguely, bore no malice.

'And get out of my sight,' cried the patient, ungratefully to his Grieve, 'Leave the lamp burnin' in the library, and tell that auld besom Jess Laybroad that if she dares so much as to set her head within the door—I'll gie her an ounce o' lead draps about her lugs! I'll hae nae spyin' and keyhole-hearkenin' in my house!'

What passed between these two so different men long remained a secret. Even now some part of their converse has never had the light cast upon it. But events occurring, some of them long afterwards, help us to judge of the probable purport of the interview.

The two men were types of the different races which share Galloway unequally between them. Sandy Ewan was as clearly of the conquering caste as Crob McRobb was of the conquered. Muckle Sandy Ewan was Anglo-Saxon—or what word soever better expresses that colonising, steadily annexing

strain which came forth out of the North German marshes, poured northward through England, and in Dumfries and Galloway became crossed with Scandinavian dourness. Gone awry as in Sandy's case, the product of all this is apt to become aggressive, incurious of the rights of others, holding for all moral law and gospel a certain fear of consequences and cautious respect for a whole skin. This blonde horse-faced Galloway type makes, when aroused, a very dangerous and highly unscrupulous enemy.

Altogether different was Crob McRobb. Dark, slight, sharp-featured, eyebrows meeting in a thick bar over small quick-twinkling eyes, the eyes of an animal— adroit with finger and brain, by nature perfectly lazy, perfectly imscrupulous, perfectly a liar, ever suspicious and on the defensive, grateful for favours, indeed, like a stray dog, but with a much longer memory for injuries, in nowise restrained by any fear of consequences whatsoever, flashing out into sudden angers, and striking through a red mist—Crobb was in essence the old Pict— the displaced, the down-trodden, the despoiled who for all defence has conserved the serpent's tooth, and poison-bag, together with the readiness to fasten on the throat of a victorious enemy.

Almost till morning, endured this pregnant conference of Scot and Pict. Indeed, the February dawn was already breaking chill and grey over the

## STRONG MAC

Solway strip when the glittering-eyed Pict glided out, silent as a shadow, stepping carefully over the slumbering form of Grieve Cormack—who had stretched himself outside the library wrapped in his plaid, but who, fatigued with listening, had fallen asleep with his head against the jamb of the door.

Within, his master lay long awake, plotting and replotting as is the manner of his kind. He had found his instrument. Out on the face of the fields towards Lowran, a certain light-footed stooping shadow laid a hand on dykes and five-barred gates, going over them like a bird or diving into plantations noiseless and unsubstantial as a drift of peat-reek. At last, having arrived at one of his many caches, Crob McRobb stopped to rub his palms together. His head was sunk to the ears between his shoulders out of the way of the February frost The Pict smiled. He had found a job to his liking.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AN OLD MAID'S TEA-PARTY

Sinister rumours ran like sheet lightning athwart the countryside, but there were two persons whose ears they did not reach. Bound by his promise, Roy McCulloch kept within the bounds of his little muircroft, while to and fro about the school in the fir plantation Adora Grade did her own work and her father's, recking nothing of dark fell Pict or blond plotting Saxon.

Now in spite of the war (or because of it), things went very well with most Galloway farmers in the Dear Years. All manner of produce fetched double the ordinary prices, and there was yet no thought of the terrible reckoning which was to come when the ports should open, and when, autumn after autunui, worse harvest followed bad over all Scotland. Meantime there was much entertaining and infinite heartsome congress in the villages and among the farm-towns. The poor help the poor in their poverty, but there is no doubt that the ingle lowes the brighter, the pot bubbles more gratefully, the board is spread more kindly when the peat-shed is piled high with purple-brown peats, when the hams hang from the ceiling, and the meal ark spills over on the floor each time the guid-wife thrusts her wooden scaup therein.

During the winter there had been many

gatherings (they were not yet called 'parties') in Lowran and the neighbouring valleys. To these Roy McCulloch went when invited—at least when there was a reasonable probability of Adora being there.

Now at the end of the little loan which led to the Gairie farm, a mile and a half from Lowran dwelt a certain Aline McQuhirr. Her younger brother held the lease of the excellent arable acres of Gairie, and also of the Gairie hill, a sudden-rising purple-black ridge of heather and bent (locally known as the Four Nines, because it was believed to contain 9999 acres)—the finest of all possible pasture for black-faced sheep. Aline McQuhirr was the gentlest old maid ever seen. For many years she had been housekeeper to her brother Adam, till one day he had taken it into his head that he would get married. It was felt on all hands to be a somewhat precipitate affair, in so far as the engagement was of no more than twenty-four years' standing. But something must be forgiven to the impetuosity of lovers. So they were married—this leisurely Adam and his not impatient Eve.

But in their Paradise they did not forget the gentle Aline. In time Adam installed her in the quaint little cot-house by the white loaning-yett of the Gairie, which presently she converted into a place of blanched window curtains and sweet-scented flowers. The earliest potatoes (always ready for the middle Thursday in July, being the Fast Day preceding the parish communion) made a

patchwork, dusky purple and green, in her back yard. The cunningest jams and jellies dwelt of habit and repute in her corner cupboard. None could confect a 'lippie' of shortbread with Aline McQuhirr. And really unless she asked you to one of her evening parties—well, you did not know what a party was.

And indeed there were not so many in the parish who did know. For with all that gentle face (in which, though her hair was silver, youth and love and sweetness abode never a whit the worse for wear) Aline McQuhirr was 'verra particular.' Not every one pleased her. No red-faced jovial farmers cried in on market nights as they did at her brother's house up the loaning. No toddy reeked in Aline's ben room, but for the favoured there was a dish of tea—of which she never told the cost per pound. That was, without irreverence, between her and her Maker. Aline knew it was far more than she ought to have afforded. But she could not deny herself the pleasure of having the best tea and the repute of the daintiest tea-table in Lowran. It was her sole extravagance and—with such gentle ways and a heart that counted the price of half a pound of Souchong a sin to be prayed over and repented of, how was it that Aline McQuhirr had never been married?

That also she kept to herself. But Adora knew. There were not many who could long keep anything from Adora Gracie. So it came about that of all the

parties of the year, there was none to which invitations were more eagerly desired than to that given by the old-maid sister of the farmer of Gairie.

Poor? Of a verity, no. Those who think that Aline-of-the-Silver-Hair was so poor that she ought not to have given parties, know neither Aline nor yet what it means to be poor. To have more than enough—that is to be rich. To have the grasping, getting, insatiable, grudging heart—that is, spite of treasured millions, to be poor.

And you could not enter Aline's parlour, or sit in her speckless kitchen (which was a far better thing), without understanding that this woman, who never had owned two five pound notes at one time since she was born, was rich in love and faith and good works. Her very smile was far above rubies. If she liked you, you could see the pleasure with which, out of her treasury, she brought for your delectation things new and old. If she saw you glance that way, she would set in a better light the bust of Buonaparte on her mantel-shelf, where it stood opposite to that of the Empress Josephine. And in the year 1812 that was a sure sign our gentle old lady could think for herself. There was also a map of Europe with the Kingdom of Prussia left out and that of Poland larger than all the Russias. It had been drawn (with the outlines done in water-colour) by Aline herself when she went to the 'finishing school' in Edinburgh—I am not going to tell you how many years ago, lest you should laugh at the dear

old lady. And Aline is not to be laughed at, though one is not forbidden to smile, and if there is a little moisture in the eyes, so much the better.

The night of Aline McQuhirr's party arrived. By two o'clock her best black cap was on. The broad lace strings were tied under her chin, and over her shoulders a napkin of lawn was becomingly folded, the snowy whiteness of which threw up a kind of halo about Aline's soft face. This was to deceive anyone who happened to pass the window into thinking she was doing nothing. By four o'clock behold her sitting at the window as composed and ladylike as if she had done nothing else all day. Whereas you had only to look at the spread table winking and glittering, to know that she had been hasting to and fro ever since the February sun glinted in at the windows over the snowy blinds and cast the shadow of the potted geranium on the sill suddenly black upon the opposite wall.

As she sat thus there came a rapping, light, quick, decided at the door. The light kindled in Aline's tired eyes. Her heart beat almost like a lover's.

'Adoral!' she murmured, half aloud, as, from being much alone, she had a habit of doing.

'I am so glad,' (she said 'gled,' but leaden types cannot follow all these tender inflections any more than mere words can describe the little shy touches of caressing with which she made Adora understand that of all people in the world she was the most

welcome in that house— which, indeed, the spoilt young woman knew very well).

'I came sooner, that we might have a talk together before the others arrive. I hope you do not mind!' said Adora as she took off her shawl.

Then she settled herself down upon a stool by Aline's side—'to be mothered,' as she said. Which was strange, seeing that Aline never had a child and Adora remembered no mother. But the good mother and the true daughter were there, side by side, though Fate had robbed them of the relationship by blood.

'Was there no other reason?' said the old-maid mother with a quaint intonation, pinching gently the girl's cheek.

'Not what you think,' replied Adora, swiftly; 'I declare there is more thought of love-making in that nice old silver-grey head of yours than in my whole body, soul and spirit.'

'Ah,' sighed Aline, 'maybe that is true. And if so, the worse for both of us!'

'Nonsense—nonsense, Aline,' cried our emphatic Dora, 'never yet have I seen the man I would not make singularly unhappy if I married him. The lads never know when they are well off. If they did they would let me alone!'

'And Roy McCulloch?' said the old lady almost in a whisper. She laid her thin hand very lightly on the girl's shoulder. Adora caught up at it laughingly, drew down the finger-tips and kissed them.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Roy, Roy—Roy—' she chanted the name with a light trill that was half contempt and half a drolling affection, 'Roy McCulloch! Will I never hear the beginning and end of Roy McCulloch? But I thought you would have known better!'

'Indeed, I wish you no worse fate, Dora,' said her friend. 'Roy McCulloch is one of the—'

'Yes, yes, I know,' cried the girl, stopping her ears with the tips of her fingers, 'I have heard all his perfections till I am as sick of them as a mill-horse of his rounds. I know them like the A B C at the end of the Catechism. He is strong— but not so strong as your brother Adam's plough-horse! He is wholesome, but so is a bowl of porridge, Good and innocent, but so is a quartern loaf of English flour at one-and-fivepence out of Robin Affleck's!'

'No—no, you shall not, Dora!' said the old lady. 'listen.'

'And I hear them!' cried the girl, rising to her feet, 'I was just in time. That is your non-such Roy, who has doubtless been waiting at the road-end to convoy me here. It is bad enough to have to go home with him, but Roy McCulloch down Lowran street at four of the clock in the afternoon— no, Aline, I thank you!'

Upon this arrived in quick succession Miss McQuhirr's guests, and very delicately the old lady welcomed them, according to each his standing and desert. Jock Fairies was among the first. His thatch of brown hair left long at the back, had been pulled

and plaited into the strangest queue and tied up with a piece of black ribbon much like a horse's tail on a fair-day. But though Adora smiled at the appearance he presented, the good humour and real friendliness of Jock's chubby face soon made her forget the uncouthness of his guise. There was one intruder. Sandy Ewan had ridden over from the new house of Boreland, stabling his horse in the village, where, finding that Adora had already taken wing, he had solaced himself by walking over with Charlotte Webster, who showed herself delighted to have the escort of so distinguished a cavalier. But to the party itself Sandy Ewan had not been invited. So, though he could have bought up little old-maid Aline a score of times and never missed the price, yet there was no admittance for him into that poor self-respecting cot at the foot of the Gairie road-end. After lingering a little in full view of the windows, bidding repeated good-byes to Charlotte, Sandy took himself away up to the farmhouse, declaring with a loud laugh, that 'a man needed something more stieve than a wash of tea for his inside.'

Nevertheless, he looked back often as he went. For the shapely head of Adora Gracie had passed and repassed the window as he stood looking over Charlotte Webster's shoulder while pretending to talk to her— a proceeding which that young woman resented exceedingly, and stored up against him for future repayment.

Very sagely Adora assisted her hostess to do

the honours, and though she pretended to care nothing about such matters, she was secretly piqued that Roy McCulloch, after having shaken hands with her, appeared to devote his attention entirely to Charlotte Webster. That damsel, unaccustomed to homage from the handsome Roy, surrounded him with palpable airs of monopoly, even venturing to patronise Adora, to that lady's particular amusement and to the great indignation of her silver-haired hostess, whose mental note ran thus: 'Memorandum: Charlotte Webster — Not to be asked next year.'

Then Aline, in the proverbial expression, 'set her brains to steep.' That is, being resolved that no mere feather-head like Charlotte should put her Adora in the background, she summoned Roy to sit at her right hand, which gave him the maid of her heart upon his other side, while poor Charlotte was banished far down the table and forced to console herself with the coltish whispered jocularities of Jock Fairies.

There is little to describe in an evening party at old-maid Aline's save the impression of gentle refinement, which was not without its effect on the rudest natures. Hope Meiklewham, the minister's daughter, would have given a bit of one of her pretty ears to be present, but that by her position in society and her father's strictness was denied to her. She proclaimed, far and wide, however, that Aline herself was a better sermon on the Christian virtues

than had ever been preached in Lowran since the day when the great outcast minister John McMillan went down the kirk-brae for the last time.

People did not argue at Aline's. They never quarrelled. There was not too much love-making, but enough. What there was was conducted quietly, discreetly, mostly with the eyelashes. There was also some singing, and Aline told the famous story of her Uncle David and the widow's dun cow—when, as usual, she forgot the point. Which was the point.

In short, these folk, far from the life of towns, enjoyed quietly and sedately the good things which were within their reach. Their talk was sensible—on the whole. And whatsoever failed of that was cheerful, sane fooling, which hindered no man nor hurt any woman. There was nothing either said or done that little old-maid Aline need have shut her ears to.

But in the background of the idyll, up in the parlour of the farmhouse of Gairie, sat the foul Fiend—such a fiend as in these times is permitted to go visibly abroad in the face of day—drinking whisky toddy with Adam McQuhirr. Though fond of his glass, the farmer of Gairie wanted sadly to get down to his sister's party. But he was a man who found a difficulty in saying 'No,' and besides, he did not know when he might need what is technically called 'an oblegement' from such an important person as Sandy Ewan.

So he sat there in his dusky parlour making

friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, and entertaining the devil in all innocence of heart. For a man who is given to hospitality may at times entertain both kinds of angels, equally at taware.

The evening wore all too rapidly to the butt. The voices in the cot at the loaning end sounded more and more cheerfully through the darkness. A consciousness of the black night all about made the lights burn ever dearer within. The lilted songs, the slow turn of Scots humour, the quick running saucy jest—this last mostly from Adora Gracie, the ease of speech and unbound heart, made the hours speed too fast to the parting. The guests made their adieus, Roy lingering on the doorstep for Adora while Aline whispered in her ear as she lovingly settled her own shawl about the young girl's head and over her shoulders— a, beautiful white cashmere—the old maid's chiefest treasure.

And meantime, expectant, upon the short grass of the knowes without, Fate, smelling of whisky toddy, crouched waiting.

Without words spoken Roy had settled the question that he was to see Adora home. She would not, he knew, refuse him that. It was provided for in their contract of brother and sister. He had been reading Smollett's continuation of Hume's History and was prepared for discussion. He ran over certain points in his mind. No, he had not forgotten anything. He was perfect even in his dates.

He stood silently admiring, as with a motion of

## STRONG MAC

her head, shapely even when half-hidden in the folds of a shawl, Adora turned sideways to grasp her skirts, swinging them upward with a little petulant shake. Then her other hand was ready to be laid upon Strong Mac's arm. When he felt the pressure, light as a feather, it seemed to him that he became weak as a child.

Once they were started Roy searched for a conversational opening in order to take away the character of Queen Elizabeth, but Adora's first words made this somewhat difficult.

'Why did you not go home with Charlotte Webster?' she asked in wondering tones, 'it was very ill done of Aline to call you away from Charlotte's society.'

In another girl and with another suitor, this would have been the invitation of the country coquette— nothing more or less. But each knew the other and Roy declined his opportunity. He did not even pretend to misunderstand.

'You were busy,' said Strong Mac, 'and I could wait.'

'You need not have waited with Charlotte Webster,' said Adora, with something like a pout of human disapproval. 'Tell me, what did you talk to her about?'

'About—' Strong Mac hesitated— then with a burst of confidence, 'we talked about the Reformation and Queen Mary.'

Clear and merry rang Adora's laugh of scorn.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

The Reformation— and Charlotte Webster!’ she cried, that were a Reformation indeed to talk about. Well, how far did you get? Did you fall out about Queen Mary? It is easy to come to loggerheads about the Reformation!’

‘No,’ said Strong Mac, smiling, ‘we did not quarrel.’

‘Ah,’ said Adora, simmering with mischief, ‘tell me all you talked about—every word— and especially what Charlotte had to say about the Reformation.’

‘Oh, she did not say very much,’ continued the traitor Roy, as the manner of men is, purchasing favour by maligning the other woman, ‘we did not get very far. For the fact is, Charlotte thought that John Knox was the man they killed because he played the fiddle to the Queen.’

Adora clutched at Roy's arm and on the hard road her feet danced a little joyous jig.

‘Oh, you dears — both of you!’ she cried. And spite of entreaty, she refused to explain this mysterious eulogium. Strong Mac felt that he could extract but little comfort from an expression of affection which he shared with Charlotte Webster. But then, again, the little clutch on the arm had not been divided. That was his own and he thankfully stored it away to be a comfort to him through lonely days and nights sleepless.

Then instead of advancing from post to pillar like the true encroaching lover whose motto is (or

ought to be) *Toujours Vaudace!* Strong Mac now proved somewhat unenterprising. He listened happily to Adora's fast-flowing talk, his slow faithful heart thrilling like an instrument of strings to the lightest ripple of her laughter. She spoke of her father with good-humoured insight into his lesser weaknesses, sometimes softening her voice to a kind of pride which was not without its tragic aspect.

Unconsciously they had lingered a little. The other pairs and groups had scattered this way and that. To Roy there was something wonderfully moving in the sense he had of the nearness of the girl he loved. Little dainty touches of lace, the pleasant rustle of silk, an atmosphere of maiden freshness all strange to his woman-less home, fretted his heart with desirings acute as they were indefinite. Nevertheless he was happy, thus walking, listening, putting in a word here and there, his heart beating all the while almost audibly. No talk of histories now or the great deeds of great men, but simple homely gossip, the nothings of personality that please boys and girls when the years are yet few, when 'I' and 'she' make all the world, when the blood tingles quick in the veins, and when life tastes fresh and strong as the first blatter of brine blown in the face of one who travels seaward.

They were ascending the long brae at the top of which is situated the Lowran kirk. Down in the hollow there had been only a sougning stillness, but as they mounted the kirk-hill the breeze came

suddenly out of the west, moaning and creaking among the glimmering cross-hatching of the bare branches above. At which with the quick causeless resolution of the bashful, Roy put his hand upon Adora's as it lay across his sleeve.

'I have kept my word to you,' he said, 'I have neither gone to the smuggling nor yet sought fur or feather off our own land since I gave you my promise.'

For reward Adora let her hand remain where it was, sure that the limit of his encroachment was reached. Indeed, too sure.

'I thank you, Roy!' she answered, softly for her. But her heart desired more— nay required it from the man she was to love.

At that moment half a dozen dark shapes, suddenly rising out of the deep blackness of a wayside copse, threw themselves upon Roy McCulloch. There was a waving of lanterns. From every side men came running.

'We have him!' cried two or three voices. 'Hold him! Hold him!' cried others.

One man caught Adora roughly by the arm and dragged her away from her escort.

With a sudden roar of anger like a lion roused, Strong Mac sent the four who held him reeling this way and that, and sprang upon the man who had touched Adora.

But the girl, though bewildered by the suddenness of the onslaught, knew well where lay

## STRONG MAC

the greatest danger. Had Strong Mac smitten once in that fierce wrath of his, the assailant might never have spoken again. The fellow let go his hold and stood coweringly on his defence.

‘He has not hurt me, Roy,’ she cried, ‘do not strike!’

But Roy, disregarding a feeble blow, aimed at him, already had the man by the throat, while a fresh cloud of assailants was flinging itself on his shoulders, and striving to pull him to the ground. At the sound of Adora's voice the young man slackened his grip and caught up a heavy dub of blackthorn which had fallen to the ground. With one mighty effort he rid himself of his foes, and putting Adora behind him, stood clear with his back to the steep bank, swinging the cudgel over his head.

‘Now what does this mean?’ he shouted, ‘quick, out with it, you scoundrels—or I will break every bone in your bodies!’

‘In the King's name!’ gasped the man who had caught Adora by the arm. ‘Roy McCulloch, I arrest you by warrant of the sheriff.’

‘And on what charge?’ said Roy calmly.

‘Sheep-stealing!’ answered the officer.

At this point a horseman rode up hastily from the direction of the Gairie farmhouse.

‘What have you here?’ he cried. ‘By what right do you dare to lay hands on this gentleman?’

The new comer was Sandy Ewan, who had sat thus long with Adam McQuhirr over their whisky

toddy. Adora sprang towards him.

‘Save him,’ she said eagerly; ‘tell them he is innocent. You know he is innocent!’

‘Officer, I demand to be told the meaning of this!’ cried Sandy Ewan sternly; ‘I warn you that if there is anything wrong, you shall suffer for it. I am a justice of the peace. Who accuses Roy McCulloch of sheep-stealing?’

‘Here is the sheriff’s warrant, sir,’ said the man, sullenly. ‘Ye can read it for yourself. And if I mistake not the offence charged is the stealing of your ain sheep, Maister Ewan!’

‘But who is the informant?’ demanded the gentleman-farmer, truculently; ‘answer me that. It is true that I may have lost a sheep or two at odd times, but I would as soon have thought of accusing myself as my old—(he searched for words) friend and companion, Roy McCulloch!’

‘I have no claim to be either,’ said Strong Mac, standing calmly at bay, ‘I decline your assistance, Alexander Ewan. Officer, let me see your warrant, and if it be in order and you are doing your duty, I will go with you peaceably to answer this or any other charge!’

The paper was handed over. A subordinate held a lantern to enable Strong Mac to read the warrant for his apprehension ‘upon information laid before the sheriff substitute of Kirkcudbright.’

‘I will accompany you,’ said Roy quietly, ‘but first let us go a few yards out of our way to convoy

## STRONG MAC

this lady to her home. We can follow the cross-road through the policies, and thus avoid the village.'

Among the men there was some demur. It was far about, a dark inconvenient road, liable to accident of sudden assault or rescue.

'Tut,' said Sandy Ewan, 'do as you are bid. If Roy McCulloch had wanted to be rescued, he and I together could have thrown the whole of you into the Lowran Burn in five minutes. But I will tell you what to do. First put the young lady in security, and do you all accompany me to my house of Boreland, where it will be a great pleasure to me to entertain you till the morning. I will then provide a conveyance in which to take your prisoner to Kirkcudbright!'

The men looked at each other. It seemed an easy way out of a difficulty. There was indeed no great desire among them to undertake the long night's travel to Kirkcudbright with Roy McCulloch on their hands. The chief officer was inclined to yield, but the prisoner stood stiffly upon his rights to prison and an immediate confrontation with the sheriff.

'Go with Sandy Ewan, Roy,' whispered Adora, 'perhaps you may find out what is the meaning of all this.'

'It is only a plot to get rid of me!' was Roy's indignant answer.

'No matter,' the girl answered eagerly; 'do as I bid you. I myself will tell your father all that has

happened in the morning. Go with Sandy Ewan—I think he means to be kind.’

Roy said no more and the party turned sharply to the right through the policies of Lowran Great House—the lanterns making a waving patch of illumination about them as they proceeded. In the ditch of the sunk fences little wreaths of unmelted snow, sodden and grey in the daytime, flashed up into startling whiteness, the ragged hoops and tangles of the dripping brambles standing black against them.

Adora stopped at the little school loaning. Roy held out his hand. There was no word in their hearts which either of them could speak to the other before so many. But as Roy stood dumb before her with the eyes of a faithful animal, strong yet pitiful, all suddenly Adora set her hands on his neck, pulled down his face towards her and kissed him.

That was at once her defiance and the symbol of her faith.

And as he tramped away in the darkness, the men marching sullenly and apathetically about him, and Sandy Ewan chewing some bitter cud upon his horse's back as he followed, Roy thought with pride and joy that Adora had kissed him because she loved him. It was natural he should think so.

You see, he was a man.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

THE SHERRIF'S ROOM

It was in the sheriff's room at Kirkcudbright, at his private examination, that Roy first learned the nature of the charges brought against him. The apartment was sparsely furnished. In the centre was a table bearing evidence in carefully graded ink stains of the scrivening labours of former sheriffs' clerks, and in more recent circles (taken in connection with a pervading flavour of tobacco) of the jovial habits of the present occupant.

There were also some volumes of law books in faded yellow calf, bundles of letters marked with tags of pink tape, and a pile of novels in a corner, half hidden by a huge frieze riding-coat.

The sheriff's substitute, Martin Dalmahoy, a jovial red-faced man, sat at the head of the table. During the first part of the examination he pouted his lips, hummed, whistled, and consulted his watch about once in every three minutes, evidently wishing the whole affair at Jericho. The fiscal, Dicky Henderson by name, was a tall sallow man with a long lean nose bent a little to the side, as if, after much endeavour, he had at last succeeded in seeing his opponent round it.

It was he who put the questions, with the air of a judge assuming the black cap. The sheriff confined himself to cautioning Roy officially. In emitting his

declaration, it appeared, anything that he might say might be used against him. But Mr. Dalmahoy dropped into the kindlier folk-speech with his last sentence.

Ye may say naething if ye are so pleased,' he said, but I advise ye to speak up for your own sake, my lad— and a decent lad ye look. Fegs, I would raiter have expected to see ye afore me on account o' some wee bit affair wi' his Majesty's revenue, or because ye were ower weel acquaint wi' the lasses. But as I was saying, ye had far better tell us a' that ye ken aboot this job. For if ye say naething, ye ken, it has been my experience that that gangs waur doon wi' the jury than the maist un-faceable tale ye can put your tongue till! Caa' awa', fiscal!'

Roy, standing quietly at the end of the table, only bowed, awaiting definite question.

'You are the son of one Sharon McCulloch, in House of Muir?' said the fiscal.

'Of House of Muir!' answered Roy with the precision of fact.

The fiscal bit his lip at his false start. The preposition marked the owner, not the tenant. The sheriff forgot to consult his watch and smiled. This might prove more interesting than he had anticipated.

'Ah, yes,' Fiscal Henderson tried again, not raising his eyes from the table, on which he was pretending to be occupied with his papers, 'I believe I have observed in the valuation roll the name of

## STRONG MAC

Sharon McCulloch as owner and occupier of some few moorland acres— an enclose, if I mistake not, between the estates of Barwhinnock and Lowran.'

Three hundred acres,' corrected Roy. Your family has often been in difficulty with the authorities as to excise and revenue,' he continued. 'Your grandfather— your father—you yourself—have all been little better than habit and repute smugglers!'

'Is that the offence with which I am charged?' said Roy.

'You are here not to question me,' said the fiscal sharply, 'but to answer my questions.'

Strong Mac bowed.

'As soon as you ask me any questions, I will do my best to answer them,' said the young man.

'I warn you that you are not doing yourself any good by bandying words,' said the fiscal. 'Do you or do you not admit that your family has been connected with smuggling?'

'I have never been in a court of law in my life,' said Strong Mac, 'I have never been apprehended or charged with any offence against the law whatsoever. As to my father and my grandfather, well— you can ask them!'

The sheriff, who had his reasons for not assisting the fiscal, glanced shrewdly at his clerk, who, as a sign of appreciation, bit at the feather of the pen with which he was noting down question and answer, for the declaration which must be

signed by the prisoner.

'You are also a noted poacher and deer-stealer,' continued the fiscal. 'The surrounding landlords have often had reason to complain of you. But this is a matter infinitely more serious. From the farm of Upper Airie, tenanted by Mr. Alexander Ewan of Boreland, three sheep have been missed. From the same gentleman's farm of Lower or Nether Airie, which marches directly with your father's lands, no fewer than ten sheep have been missing during the last three months. Now, mark me well, the skins of all the thirteen have been found concealed behind a haymow in a barn upon your father's property. You have also often been seen trespassing without excuse upon the lands of Airie, both by day and night. What have you to say to these accusations?'

'Before I answer I would like to know who laid the information on which the sheriff granted the warrant of arrest!'

'You have no right to ask that at this stage,' said the sheriff.

'Can I have my father or a lawyer to assist me in repelling so serious and unfounded a charge?'

Roy was determined to say no more than was necessary. He had not the usual instinct of the innocent that the mere telling of his story would be sufficient to clear him. He could see that there was a deep-laid plot against him. No doubt, therefore, there were other traps set for him into which he might fall by replying too hastily.

## STRONG MAC

The sheriff explained, not unkindly.

‘At a later stage you will have every access to your friends and to a lawyer, if you decide to employ one, but at the present stage you must answer dearly all the questions which are put to you by the fiscal. And as I advised ye before, the cleaner breast ye make of it, the mair chance there will be for your craig to miss findin' the wecht o' your tail in a tow-rape!’

This was the sheriff's proverbial way of reminding his prisoner that sheep-stealing was a capital offence, also that it behoved him to be wary and not fall out in advance with those in whose hands his fate might lie.

‘Have you been upon the lands of Nether Airie during the last three months, and, if so, for what purpose?’ demanded the fiscal.

‘Never to meddle with any man's sheep, and not at all during the last few weeks,’ said Roy, quietly.

‘You admit, then, that you have been upon the lands of Nether Airie during, let us say, the last month?’

‘It is possible,’ said Roy, guardedly, ‘that I might have crossed the Nether Airie moors once or twice in the weeks immediately after the New Year.’

‘And for what purpose?’

‘I was returning from visiting some of my friends— usually in the evening.’

‘At what hour in the evening were you in the

habit of passing across the Nether Airie moors?' pursued the fiscal.

'My friends live some considerable distance away,' said Strong Mac, 'and it might be somewhere between nine and ten o'clock, or even later, before I crossed the Pluckamin Glen into the Nether Airie moors.'

'And who, it would be interesting to know, were the friends whom it was your custom to visit so late at night?'

Strong Mac did not hesitate a moment. He had been expecting the question and had his answer ready.

'I cannot on any account bring my friends into the question. They had nothing to do with my actions, good or bad, and I—'

Here the sheriff interrupted. He had altogether ceased to look at his watch. Something in the attitude of the young fellow convinced him that on this occasion he had no affair with a mere vulgar sheep-stealer. The man before him was either one of the highest class of criminals, or he was an innocent man falsely accused. The sheriff proposed to himself to find out which.

'Let me caution you again,' he said, 'this is a private inquiry. The information we obtain from you may or may not be used in court. If, however, you satisfy me of your innocence, you walk out of this room a free man. But I warn you that, by refusing to give up the name of the friends to visit whom you

## STRONG MAC

went and came across the Nether Airie moors, you go far to justify a prima facie case against you.'

Roy McCulloch shook his head. He foresaw the local papers with the evidence printed in full, and names that were dearer to him than life bandied from mouth to mouth, staled by all ignoble use. The alehouse and the stable should not make their jests upon those whom he loved.

'I am sorry that I can do no more,' he said, 'whatever may be the consequences.'

'Then you refuse to clear yourself?' said the fiscal. 'You will not answer my question.'

'I will answer anything which has reference directly to the charge brought against me,' said Strong Mac.

'But,' said the fiscal, 'we and not you must be the judges of that, and indeed that is just what you refuse to do. According to the information before me, thefts of sheep have been going on from the moor of Nether Airie during the last three or four months. The fleeces found in your barn are of various ages, corresponding generally to the times at which the thefts were committed. The ear on which the Mr. Ewan's earmark was impressed has in every case been cut away, obviously for the purpose of preventing identification. If therefore you confess to having been in the habit of frequenting the Nether Airie moors at night, and refuse to supply us with the means of verifying your statements and checking your alleged friendly visits, we are shut in to the

conclusion that you were upon Nether Airie for purposes other than innocent.'

The fiscal achieved his phrase with a certain feeling of triumph and sat looking at his prisoner for the first time round the corner of his nose. The sheriff moved uncomfortably in his chair.

'I warn you again that it is better for you to answer,' he said; 'I declare I'm loath to send to jail a fine lad that might be better employed servin' his Majesty—but if ye dinna speak plain, by my faith, I will juist hae to commit ye! I see not what else I can do!'

And so accordingly, and without further debate, Roy McCulloch stood committed to take his trial for the crime of sheep-stealing from the farms of Upper and Nether Airie, and in the meantime he was appointed to lie in the county jail, awaiting the advent of the commission of Justiciary at the nearest circuit town.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

THE DARK COMPANION

Strange and manifold are the ways of the heart of women. Deeply as Adora Gracie felt for Roy McCulloch, and glad as she was to have kissed him before them all, she could not conceal from herself that he had been somewhat ungenerous in the matter of Sandy Ewan. That young man had, she thought, meant well, and she had the conviction, latent in the mind of all women that in affairs touching justice and the law, the beginning and the end of the matter is to have some one to 'speak for' the person accused.

Now Adora knew that Sandy was a justice of the peace, and, though she was intelligent far beyond the average of her class and time, yet she believed (and the fallacy has never been stamped out of the heart feminine) that all officers of justice, from the sheriff's officer to the Red Judge who rode in state into Drumfern every year, to the terror of the evil doer and the praise of them that do well, were linked together in the bonds of the closest Freemasonry. So that, if the favour of one could once be obtained, he had only to wink at the rest, his accomplices, as it were. Upon which, all was well.

So it came about that Sandy Ewan, bringing information of all that (he alleged) was being done to

obtain the release of Strong Mac from his prison-house, became a not infrequent visitor at the schoolhouse among the pines.

Adora tolerated him, and as for Mr. Gracie, he would shorten the school hours in order to hasten into the parlour to talk with Sandy Ewan. At that Adora marvelled greatly. For there was in the new-made laird neither reading nor even the smallest tincture of the love for letters. Yet there was no manner of doubt that he was acquiring some curious power over the Dominie. Even when Donald Gracie spoke of his ex-pupil his hand would tremble, and a tremor come into his voice.

For the second time Sandy Ewan underlay the spell of Adora. Her very scorns attracted him, sated as he was with too facile triumphs. She had refused his best offers, when he had thought that he had only to throw the handkerchief. But, he told himself, at that time Strong Mac was in his way. Therefore, Strong Mac must be put out of the way, and for this end blond Scot and dark aboriginal Pict made a plan together and hid it deep.

Sandy Ewan even told himself that Adora's late born forbearance was the beginning of something more hopeful. It had only wanted the poacher's son laid by the heels. And then the girl's father—Sandy Ewan laughed to himself. He had found a way with the dotard—such an easy way, and every one knew that Adora Gracie would sell her soul to pleasure the Dominie.

## STRONG MAC

Once again Sandy Ewan deceived himself. He was of the temperament called 'sanguine' which, when it turns to do evil, becomes sanguine also as to the rewards of iniquity. He believed that Adora Gracie, separated from Roy McCulloch, would ere long become conscious of the advantages of being the wife of Alexander Ewan, Esquire of Boreland and Ardinlass, Justice of the Peace on his Majesty's commission for the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright. That, he told himself, was surely promotion high enough for a dominie's daughter. But Sandy Ewan, regarding himself as a most desirable type of the successful man, forgot to take his account with that in the heart of a woman which follows with wistful yearning the ill-used and unfortunate, until, all unawares, she may find her own heart taken in the hands of a man. Not that Strong Mac's misfortunes had had this effect upon Adora, but this at least is certain, that Sandy Ewan's greatness, his blatant desirability, were rather against him than otherwise, so far as Adora was concerned.

The girl had not yet found her own heart, and so scarce believed that she possessed one. She was like a person who has never suffered from seasickness. The evidence was too strong for complete disbelief in the existence of the disease— but—she was of opinion that the sufferers could help it if they liked!

The secret of Sandy Ewan's hold over the Dominie was simple. It consisted of a little brandy

flask which arrived at the schoolhouse full and left it empty. For, with increasing infirmity of body, the schoolmaster could no longer find his way to Lucky Greentree's for his weekly supply, and till now no one had dared to run the strict blockade which Adora established and maintained.

But Sandy Ewan, at first under the guise of a jest at Adora's expense, conveyed to the Dominie almost daily a supply of the raw spirit which he craved. And the old man, with infinite shame in his heart, acquiesced after a struggle, and then, the old appetite coming back fourfold, he gave himself to thinking all day, from his earliest waking moment, of the farmer's visit in the afternoon. At the hour when Adora was setting the copies— the first taste would most conveniently transact itself then! She did not come in often, and especially not if she heard Sandy Ewan with her father in the parlour.

There was little strength of purpose left in the Dominie now. Never robust, his trials and excesses had worn him to a shadow. His clothes hung flapping about him, like a flag about a pole on a windless day. Yet as his face grew more worn it also grew more childlike. His mind, too, was wistfully clear, for, as much as anything, it was the torment of his conscience, that had worn him down. Yet frail as he was, possessed of this secret devil, there was something unconquered and perhaps unconquerable about Donald Gracie. The ship drifted on the rocks. The breakers leaped white

## STRONG MAC

ahead, but somehow, even in spite of his pitiful physical weakness the spirit of the man was not wholly given over to the devil.

But a day of trial was at hand. The great and solemn ordeal of the Presbyterian Examination was approaching. In 1812 there was little of that machinery of education made universal in later times, which was not in every Scottish parish already a thing of use and wont, familiar for generations. In the rudest northern wild education was practically compulsory—made so by public opinion and the Kirk Session, rooted in John Knox and the centuries. Only a few such waifs and strays as Daid the Deil were able to escape, and they only partially. Indeed they usually attended school of their own accord, because it was the most amusing place to be in. Their fees, such as they were, were paid by the Session out of the parish poor-box. Thus equipped, with a long start over his untaught neighbours, the Scot went forth to possess the earth.

No government inspector, in the chill far-removed pomp of an Oxford degree, came to damn with faint praise the work of a year. But instead, far more awful, vaguely connected indeed with the terrors of Sinai and more immediately with the word-for-word repetition of the Shorter Catechism, the Presbytery, ministers from all the surrounding parishes to the number of a dozen, duly constituted for the purpose, came together to examine each

school within the bounds.

The notice of the coming visitation had reached Lowran, and Adora, conscious that there might arise some objection to her father as old or infirm, or perhaps fearing also the whispers as to his failings, laboured all day and far indeed into the gloom of the winter afternoons to bring on the backward children.

It was to her that most of the labour of the school now fell. Her father indeed cared for little but his few 'Latiners,' or 'humaners,' as they were popularly called. He would keep the class on its legs for hours at a time, reading his favourite authors or correcting their stumbling translations with gentle patience. It was with the utmost difficulty that his daughter could get him to take another class, and then he was only persuaded to lay aside his favourites because some of the elder 'humaners' insisted upon the necessity of learning something else besides Livy and Virgil, in order to measure fields and hoe turnips.

But after the middle of the afternoon it became quite impossible to retain the Dominie's wandering attention. So Adora was in the habit of sending him to the 'ben' or parlour room of the schoolhouse, there installing him on the sofa with a checked plaid over his feet, and so returning to her classes. When at last she came in fagged with the long dull wrestle of the school, the close atmosphere, and that steady grit of discipline which, in the long run, is more wearing than any kind of labour in the world, she

## STRONG MAC

would find him with Sandy Ewan, a little flushed but calmly talking— and munching peppermint balls.

‘Ah,’ she thought as she went out, ‘that is one more proof how changed my father is. He takes up again the habits of a child.’

And for the first time Adora Gracie felt the need of some one to speak to—no, not Aline—some one—she did not know who—some one better and stronger than she herself. For, with a father little better than a babe, the girl of the schoolhouse was indeed alone in the world. Her lovers? Marriage? Yes, of course, Adora thought of such things. But somehow that was not what she wanted at present. One steadfast, plain-sailing friend who would not begin to talk about her eyes so soon as they were left alone together—was there any such on the earth? She had not found him, at all events. Even Strong Mac left much to be desired— though certainly latterly— and here she smiled. Then she wondered what had come over the boy. And all suddenly her heart smote her, that she had even for a moment forgotten the thing which had befallen him.

As for Sandy Ewan, Adora was more than ever convinced that he had been, partially at least, misjudged. With herself he never presumed upon his favour with her father. The utmost deference, the most perfect consideration, characterised his relations with the schoolhouse. He brought the latest and most hopeful news of Roy, together with

little presents of books and recent magazines for her father—and once, at least, the latest number of the Edinburgh Review, but never anything for Adora. All those things assured the girl that Muckle Sandy Ewan was none so black as he had been painted.

So passed the days till that one which preceded the Presbyterial Examination. In the afternoon Adora, restless under the long strain of preparing the unruly boys and careless girls of Lowran to meet the coming ordeal, took advantage of the lengthening days to walk out along the lanes to Aline McQuhirr's cottage. She was the more inclined to this that Mr. Latimer had sent Jonathan Grier to say that he would call and see her father that evening, if it were convenient. Adora had no present desire to meet the young Laird of Lowran. But she recognised that he was honourably keeping to the letter of his engagement.

At the cot of the old maid with the silver-grey hair she found, as usual, rest, comprehension and low-toned drifts of converse. Aline was a haven of peace to a young girl. She understood without questions and sympathised without words. The time sped all too fast. It was six o'clock and still light when Adora stood at the door of the Gairie cottage bidding the old maid goodnight. Aline walked a hundred yards up the road with her, Adora's arm about her waist, both of them, as women do on these occasions, regarding the road at their feet.

'Good-night, Aline!' cried Adora, waving her

## STRONG MAC

hand with the quaint upward ripple of her fingers which was natural to her in saying adieu, 'I will look over to the back bench for you. Tomorrow, and it will be a comfort you wee you there. You will know that I am thinking of you.'

She kept looking back, to see the gentle old maid smiled, pensively Madonna-wise at her from the turn of the road. Then with a certain throb of self-reproach that she had been so long without thinking of Roy in his prison, she remembered that Sidney Latimer would at that time be taking leave of her father. At this smiled, not without a certain malice at the disappointment which she knew would sadden the brown eyes.

She was grieved for Strong Mac. Nothing (save one thing) in all her life had ever given her such pain, but – it is too much to ask of nineteen that it should be consciously sorry for long together. That is reserved for old.

Then, without a warning, without a moment to bethink herself, Adora found herself face to face with Sandy Ewan. He saluted her courteously, as he stepped of a thicket by the wayside. There was a brightness about his eyes that lighted up his heavy face. But the underlip protruded more than ever with the obstinacy of baulking horse, and his eyes had a hardness in them which would have put a less suspicious person than Adora Grade on her guard.

He held out his hand. Adora gave him hers, mechanically. She had not yet recovered from the

suddenness of his appearance. He held it longer than he had ever used to do before, and Adora, waiting for an explanation of his presence, for a moment forgot to reclaim it.

For which omission she afterwards blamed herself. Sandy Ewan turned to walk back with her towards the village.

'I called at the schoolhouse on my way,' he began hurriedly, for Adora had drawn away her hand, 'but I found that— that insolent hound Latimer there, who would scarcely look at me. So to keep from breaking his neck , and because your father told me where you had gone, I came to see you home.'

'I am obliged,' said Adora, coldly, 'but you made two mistakes. I did not need any one to meet me, and Mr. Latimer is not an insolent hound. He is a gentleman, both in deed— and in word!'

Adora felt the stiffness of this speech, but she thought the feathered arrow at the end might hit its mark. However, she did not know Sandy Ewan. He was far too much wrapt in his own self-conceit to feel the girl's irony. He only laughed a little in a self-satisfied way.

'Ah,' he said, 'then you have changed your mind about him also!'

'I am far from understanding what you mean,' said Adora.

'The folk are saying in the parish that once upon a time you forbade him your father's house!'

## STRONG MAC

‘I did not—’ began the girl. At the sound of the words of denial she stopped. Then hastily regaining her composure, she added, ‘or if I did, it was no more than I have said to others who have not his excuse!’

‘And what might his excuse be?’ said Sandy Ewan, scornfully.

‘That he lives all alone in a great house with two old women!’

One of them his mother,’ said Sandy, laughing. You forget—I also am an orphan, yet you have no pity for me.’

‘It were better that you would take pity on yourself— and on others, Alexander Ewan, if all tales be true!’ said Adora, sharply.

For in 1812 it was permitted to young persons to know more than they are supposed to be familiar with in these later decades. Sandy Ewan and his deeds were not of an odour fragrant in the nostrils of his countrywomen. He did not come into Aline's door, and it was only Adora's consideration for her father, together with her own careless confidence and self-reliance, that permitted him the entry of the schoolhouse.

‘Ah,’ said Muckle Sandy, mournfully, ‘I am not the only innocent person who has been maligned. Evil tongues are many. And so far as you are concerned, Mistress Adora, I cannot call to mind that I have acted or spoken otherwise than as every man has a right to do who truly loves a woman.’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

A little thrill of compunction came over the girl. It was true—she knew it by experience— there were many evil speakers. Perhaps she had believed too hastily. She reached out her hand.

‘I am sorry,’ she said.

Sandy Ewan, being crass after his kind, took this for encouragement, and at once plunged blindly forward.

‘Adora,’ he said, ‘I cannot live without you. I tell you again I have tried and I cannot. I never thought to crave on any woman,’ he added, ‘or to offer twice what many would be proud to have one chance of—.’

‘Sandy Ewan,’ interrupted Adora, ‘I have already answered you once. What is the use of giving us both all the pain over again. You asked me to marry you. I told you plainly that I never could.’

‘But you told me, too, that you did not love any other man!’

‘You asked the question which always deserves an honest answer from every woman. I told you as kindly as I was able, that it could never be.’

‘But you would not tell me why,’ urged Sandy Ewan, endeavouring to take the girl's hand. ‘What is your objection to me? What is the fault? Speak out. I can amend as well as any—’

‘It is better not to call names,’ said Adora, quite gently, ‘else perhaps this time I might have to answer you unkindly— which, since you have been so patient with my father, I should be very loath to do!’

'Is not that in itself a reason,' he persisted, with a sudden access of confidence, 'a reason why you should marry me, Dora? I have your father's goodwill— perhaps more than that. He wishes what I wish. I cannot then be so bad— so unworthy. He needs someone to look after him— someone not a girl. I could give both of you a good home and many comforts. I could insure your father's happiness, and give my life to satisfy your every wish. Will you not think of it, Dora?'

The girl shook her head sadly. For once it appeared to her that Sandy Ewan was sincere. He loved Adora Gracie, and he pled his cause according to his nature with what of eloquence was in him. He had these things to give, and what he said was true. Many a woman of far higher rank than a village dominie's daughter would have been glad to share her lot with the young Laird of Boreland.

'I am more than sorry,' she said, gently, laying her hand on his arm, 'but I cannot love you. Perhaps I am not made for love. You spoke of Roy McCulloch, but he is not the obstacle to what you wish— the obstacle is that I would rather work in your fields for a day's wage than marry a man I do not love. And I can never love you, Sandy.'

It was well and gently said, but the spirit of it was lost upon the man before her. In an instant the tiger nature flared up within him. He flung off the appeal of her hand with brutal impatience.

'That—and worse than that is what you will

come to!’ he cried. ‘I shall live to see it. Aye, perhaps sooner than you think—I shall see you flung to the door, as the dirt beneath my feet. I have no more to say to you, now or ever. But look to yourself, Mistress Gracie—you have spurned me, slighted me for a poacher and a sheep-stealer that shall yet hang on the scaffold. Say what you like, Roy McCulloch is the reason. So look to yourself, madam. Alexander Ewan has a long arm. And let me tell you, he will strike you in the place where you will feel it most, and make you so that you will never wish to lift up your head in the world more.’

And leaving these words behind him as a farewell, he leaped over the dyke and disappeared with swift strides into the Lowran woods.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

## AN HIGH DAY IN LOWRAN

The morn of the great day dawned calm and clear. The mothers of all Lowran hurried over their own matutinal use-and-wont, that they might wash and brush and deck the children whom Providence and their experience of the married state had provided them with. By eight o'clock the entire population under the age of twelve presented to the casual eye a red and scurfy appearance, the effect of vigorous maternal handling of the coarse roller-towel which hung behind every kitchen door. On all other days of the year the forth-going scholars of Dominie Gracie were permitted to do their own washing, only in very particular cases having to undergo a maternal inspection, more or less cursory, according to the work in hand. But this one morning the axe was laid to the root of the tree. Nothing was left to the imagination. Male and female after its kind the youth of Lowran was not only washed— it was scoured.

Nevertheless, in the bosoms of the scholars abode abounding bliss. The booby was as happy as the dux. The gay ribbons of the girls, the tight breeches of the boys, proclaimed holiday even more than the week's cessation of school, which (by some law of the Mede and the Persian) was the reward of a well-sustained examination. The feeling of Sunday

clothes upon a day not Sunday turned the most blase heart topsy-turvy. In shy potato patches at the back of dykes, round the back of the schoolhouse, where one could not be seen from the windows of Lowran, little groups of boys were busy practising jumping. It is a doubtful pleasure and unthankful to jump in tight boots. You cannot jump nearly as far as on ordinary occasions. But— it felt so exactly like Sabbath-breaking and blasphemy as to send thrills of delight through every boyish bosom.

Still further afield the seniors of the school, early attired without domestic interference, made their peculiar arrangements. For them it was the Day-Without-Prejudice. If on any other day in the year a boy of Lowran school was known to go for a walk with a girl thereof, he had, ipso facto, committed the unpardonable sin. He was hooted at, jeered at, made fair and unfair game of as a patent disgrace to the community. Such was the boy's fate. As for the girl, it was understood (Adora Gracie being excepted) that she was a poor thing, ever ready to pick up whatever orts might fall from any table masculine.

Of course, as above noted, Adora was different; so much was admitted on all sides. In fact, she could hardly be called a mere girl. Why, she would give the biggest boy in the school a 'ring' on the side of the head as soon as look at him. For thus did she uphold the dignity of her sex, and all womankind was in a way accounted blessed because of her. At

least, a certain possible utility came to be admitted on their account.

The 'examination walk' was arranged to take place during certain hours when the assembled presbytery was employed in torturing the junior classes. At this time the seniors of both sexes were left to the freedom of their own wills. And their will it was to take a walk. Half a mile out of the village the boys made up on the girls, all strolling and endeavouring vainly to look unconscious. Every Jack went straight to the Jill of his previous arrangement, took her hand, and set off with her through lanes and byepaths till there was presented to them a spot sufficiently retired for the joint consumption of the statutory stick of yellow toffy. The swain extracted it out of his trouser pocket for the purpose. This idyll was held to constitute a solemn bond for the same day next year, but the validity of the vow was broken by the least intermediate reference to it on either side. If Jack encountered Jill in the playground next day, he must of necessity put out his tongue at her, or even fling a stone at her. Etiquette so compelled him, and none was strong enough to break it. Sometimes, though not often, these days of irregular Valentine-choosing overcarried the years and ended in a but-and-ben together, from which in due time other bairns went forth to suck 'grundy' at dyke-backs with the Chosen of the Heart. At any rate, the function was a high mystery, strictly confined to the

senior classes, not to be spoken of on the morrow even to the temporary Nearest-and-Dearest, not to be made a subject of ridicule, and, in fact, to be emerged from without prejudice on either side.

Consequently the excitement of being chosen caused all the senior girls to look forward to examination time from afar, and as each Presbytery Day drew near Charlotte Webster regretted that she was no more a scholar at Lowran school. She even began to question within herself whether a knowledge of Latin and algebra were not necessary to complete the education of every well-bred young woman of twenty.

And the presbytery? A great mystery abides in the word as well as in the thing. Why the mere fact of sitting in a chamber apart and calling one man 'Moderator' and another 'Clerk' should transform a score or so of honest friendly gentlemen into a set of carping, jealously-inclined fault-finders, the joy of the scoffer and a terror to every peaceable lay Christian, has never yet been made out. And, mark you, this demoniac possession only lasts so long as the actual official 'sederunt' continues.

As the ministerial gigs arrived in Lowran, they disgorged, as a general rule, two worthy gentlemen, growing a little portly indeed (for teinds were teinds in those years) who stood in the yard of Lucky Greentree's change-house talking amiably with their fellows. To appearance wrath and war were not in all their thoughts. The jest clerical, a rare vintage which

does not bear transportation, circulated freely till every countenance broadened and shone.

Yet no sooner were these same men 'constituted' for the transaction of private business in Dr. Meiklewham's study, than lo! they were at each others' throats. It could not be the influence of this place of meeting. Anything more peaceable than Cyrus Meiklewham's library could not well be imagined. The fathers of the church stood all about in the original Greek. Somnolence was in their vellum backs. Their sides were embossed like targes. Their leaves dwelt unstirred for generations. Even more recent controversialists slumbered peaceably together. The same dust covered Calvin and Turretin, Law and Hoadly, Bluidy Mackenzie and the pamphlets of Shields and McWard.

Yet not even at Geneva in the high days was 'priest' ever writ more large than in the minister of Lowran's study, and upon the assembled presbyters of the ecclesiastical tribunal of St. Cuthbertstown. Nor was the particular subject of their deliberations to blame for the sotmds of war that arose. The presbytery of St. Cuthbertstown could disagree about anything—the time of a pastoral 'veesitation,' the wording of a phrase in the minutes, the date of a 'Thanksgiving Day' for the purpose of calling the attention of the Almighty to the merits of H. R. H. the Prince Regent and 'the recent marvellous successes which has attended our arms both by land and sea.' The mere raw material of a battle did

not matter. The fight was the thing.

For instance, no quieter man ever droned a sermon than Mr. Gilbert Leng, minister of the metropresbyterial charge of St. Cuthbertstown. His own congregation had slept under him for twenty years with comfort and profit. But in the presbytery, as soon as the last words of the Moderator's opening prayer were out of his mouth, the hair on the head of the minister of St. Cuthbertstown began to stand erect upon his head. His eyes sparkled as he recalled a grievance and lo! in a moment he had launched himself at his brethren.

Sober, kindly, unimaginative, undiligent, easily influenced, Dr. Cyrus Meiklewham (who had been made a D.D. long ago by an ancient university because his father, an eminent townsman, kept pestering the Professor of Divinity about the matter, spoiling his driving upon the golf links) had a difficult team to control that high day in early summer when chairs were brought from all over the house, even from the confines of the back kitchen, to seat the brethren of the court. Meanwhile Hope Meiklewham took her afternoon meal as she sat dangling her legs over the edge of the kitchen table and, somewhat imaginatively, enlightened Bet Conchar, the manse lass, as to the peculiarities of ministers.

'Save us. Mistress Howp,' cried Bet with her hands held up in horror, 'and do ye really mean to tell me that Maister Kidston o' Da'beattie went sae

## STRONG MAC

far as to raise his wife oot o' her warm bed at three in the momin' to hear him deliver a' ower again his speech at the Assembly?'

'Yes, that he did,' asseverated the young romancer, watching the firelight glittering on her silver shoe buckles, 'and nothing would content him but that Mrs. Kidston must put on her best black silk and her bead cap, and sit on the sofa with her hands reverently folded — at three on a frosty morning!'

'For me, I wad hae seen him— weel, in a warmer bit first!' said Bet, with unction.

Thus emboldened, Hope Meiklewham took a bolder flight.

'And he stamped on the floor with his umbrella, just as he had done in Edinburgh. And whiles he even called her 'Moderator!'

'By my faith as an innocent woman, but I wad hae moderated him,' said Bess, fingering the rolling pin affectionately as she spoke.

She inclined her ear to the noise upstairs from the doctor's study. It came in fitful gusts like a Hogmanay wind blowing up out of the pit of Solway.

'They're at it!' said Hope, solemnly, 'I am none so sure but what they will brain my father! He's clerk, ye ken, and if anything goes wrong, they blame him for it. He gets twenty pounds in the year for that.'

'What?' cried Bet Conchar, to whom Doctor Meiklewham was as a god— 'but ye are jokin'.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Mistress Howp. Gin I thocht they wad lay finger on the maister—fegs I wad gang up amang them wi' this (indicating the rolling pin) and gar their hams splatter on the wa'!

Presently the tumult stilled itself for a moment and Bet drew a long breath. She was preparing the dinner — the great Presbyterial dinner to be partaken of in the manse after the examination was completed at the school-house. Hope was busy peeling potatoes and encouraging Bet Conchar with tales of how much each minister could eat.

'There's Blayme of Crooked Yetts,' she said, veraciously, 'he has eighteen of a family, and the poor man hardly ever gets a bite for himself. For, of course, he has to carve for the lot—cut up the meat, that is— and long before he has Number Eighteen's plate filled. Numbers One, Two and Three up to Ten are backing in their carts for more. They say it's a good dozen years since he tasted fresh meat in his own house. And that makes him fearful hungersome when he takes his dinner from home.'

'Miss Howp,' cried Bet, 'd'ye think I hae eneuch in the hoose to serve them? If there shouldna be, what a shame an' disgrace to the manse o' Lowran—and the Laird himsel' comin' as weel!'

'Oh, him!' said Hope Meiklewham, 'that signifies little. He's in love, and folk in love never have big appetites.'

'Fegs, an' that's as true a word as ever ye spak'. Miss Howp! For I mind me when my ain brither

## STRONG MAC

Bauldy was in love wi' Babbie Mulfeather up at the Tippenny, he had hardly care to pick a bite. And, faith, after he had been marriet a year or twa, what wi' weans an' sic' like truck, deil a bite was there for him to pick!'

The girl threw a potato peeling over her head and laughed at Bauldy.

'And what's a Moderator, Miss Howp?' the manse lass went on, after a pause to hang a broth pot one link higher over the fire.

'Oh,' said the truthful Hope, 'it's just one of themselves that they put in a chair for the rest to rage at.'

'And what for does he let them?'

'Because,' replied the ready Hope, 'it's his turn, ye see— like Blind Man's Buff or Cross Tig!'

'And wha's Moderator the day?' asked Bet, who was always interested about ministers. It was the first time the presbytery had visited Lowran in her reign.

'It's wee Amos Peerie from Beeswing,' said Hope, 'and that's the reason they are raging like young bulls in cleg-time! If it had been Baillie of Hardhills, they would have been as quiet as mice when pussy is at the hole mouth.'

'What,' cried Bet, 'yon muckle reid-faced man, wi' the voice that wad cry, 'Hurley' to a coo on the tap o' Criffel—him that askit for a glass o' brandy afore he preached at the Nifferton Communion?'

'The same,' said Hope; 'it was his wife that

pulled all the leaves off her gooseberry bushes to keep the caterpillars from eating the berries. But after her trouble she got none, for they all withered in the sun and fell off.'

'Heard ye ever the like o' that?' cried the maid. 'It surely doesna tak' a heap o' sense to be a minister's wife. I ken better nor that mysel', an' I dinna set up for bein' ocht oot o' the common, either!'

Hope Meiklewham continued her delusive catalogue.

'And there's Colvin of Sprose that preaches in black gloves and used aye to put them on in the pulpit to show how daintily he could fit on the finger tips, till one day his son Chairlie half-drowned some wasps in treacle-ale and left them to come to themselves in his father's preaching gloves—'

'Oh, the misleart vaigabond!' cried Bet Conchar, 'I howp his faither warmed him for that.'

'And then there's Peter Grewlie of Rerwick that preaches other folks' sermons for his own—'

'Hoo do they ken that?' demanded Bet, who had a weakness for the cloth, and did not like to hear it evil spoken of.

'Because the sermons are that dreadful deep, and on Monday he can't even remember the heads and particulars—whiles not even the text!'

'Losh,' said Bet, 'I wad never have thought on that! There maun be awsome clever folk in his parish.'

## STRONG MAC

‘And there’s Cumunion Taggart, that gangs to so many Sacraments that he has not been seen in his own pairish except at pig-killing time for twenty years!’

‘That’ll do, Miss Howp! and dinna eat a’ the bakin’ apples!’ said Bet Conchar, the limit of whose credulity had at last been reached.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

COUNTER-STROKE TREACHEROUS

In the school of Lowran there was a waiting hush—a perfect ache of well-dressed silence. The only sound was the uneasy scuffling among the boys produced by the effort of sitting still in unaccustomed Sunday clothes. The girls on the other hand fairly beamed and bloomed. So much so that Daid the Deil, now grown one of the seniors of the school and clad in a cast-off coat of Strong Mac's, which fitted him like a blanket, confided to a neighbour, 'Lord, Jock, look at Ag Grier an' May Brydson, ye wad never think to look at them, that we threw them baith i' the mill-lade yestreen for stealin' oor bools (marbles). I declare they are like paycocks an' cherry-feems!'

'Cherybims, ye stookie,' said Dan Sorby, his better-informed neighbour. 'Ag Grier's precious little like a cherybim— na, nor a seryphim either. She's ower fat! Gin she had wings the size o' a barn door, they wad never flap her up to the rig in' o' oor byre— let alane to heeven!'

But the awful moment came at last when the Presbytery were to enter. They shook hands—oh, how condescendingly, with the Dominie, who welcomed them at the door. Some of the younger presently glanced across at Adora, of whose reputation for beauty and wit they had heard and resolved to be present at the examination of the

junior classes.

To most of the children the Presbyterian Examination Day was one of mingled fear and elation. They must read and cypher and repeat the Catechism in the presence of those twelve august black-coated men, of whom they only saw a single one all the rest of the year—and he even, apparent to them mostly on Sundays, speaking incomprehensible things and giving out recondite passages of Scripture, which they had to find in haste lest the lightnings of Sinai should blast the laggard.

To Adora the occasion was one of fear only, not lest the fire should try her own work of what sort it was, but—for a reason which we know very well.

As for the Presbytery, the members thereof doubtless felt within them the pride of place, as they sat and listened to loud ‘gollering’ Baillie of Hardhills putting the questions—which he did till it came to the classics, when, feeling a little husky, he surrendered his part to the quiet little Moderator, who was a classical scholar, and cooed over the ‘humaners’ as if he loved them—which indeed he did. It was Strong Mac who in his time had found out the ‘way to work Wee Peerie,’ which had since become a tradition in the school. This was the way of an examinee with Peerie the Small:—Whenever a question was asked beyond the comprehension of the class, it was the duty of the boy who had been last under fire to interrupt with a request for

explanation based upon the portion just traversed. As thus— 'If ye please, sir, what did ye say was the richt meanin' o' that last word?'

All then made ready to take notes with their pencils of the wisdom about to fall from Wee Peerie's lips. And before the postponed 'puzzler' was reached it had been solved by reference to the class lexicon, or, more simply, by telegraph through the girls benches at the end of which sat Adora. Or, most probably, Wee Peerie had forgotten all about it, and once more the country was saved.

Still on the whole, though many of the ministers were almost entirely silent, leaving the actual examination to a few of the old practised hands, the Presbytery greatly enjoyed these days. There was the appetising wrangle at the 'private meeting,' the long sunning in their own grandeur before the eyes of the assembled parentage of Lowran, the quiet refreshful jest between times, above all, the jovial dinner at the close, after the Dominie had been complimented and sped upon his way for another year.

As for Donald Gracie, he had doubtless strange thoughts in his soul. None knew better than the Dominie that he was growing past his work—that of a truth, he did not do it. His daughter alone kept him from being found out. Save in the 'humaner' classes, there was indeed no work of his to be examined that day. Baillie of Hardhills even hinted to him that it was time to be setting his staff in the

chimney corner and bethinking him of his latter end. Donald Gracie knew well what that meant. Had not Baillie a nephew, a certain 'stickit minister,' who would be glad to succeed to the comfortable parochial emoluments of Lowran ? Furthermore, it was well known that Baillie of Hardhills could do anything with good easy Dr. Meiklewham, the parish minister of Lowran. Was it this reflection which made the old man sit so silent and distrait in his little desk while the Presbytery (an appalling circle of black silk stockings and silver-buckled shoes, as seen by the infant classes) listened with such apparent intentness to the recitations of the seniors?

Something of the kind was certainly present in Donald Gracie's mind, but more persistent still was the thought that he might be unable to see Sandy Ewan that day—in private, that is. For the visit of his formerly despised scholar had, sadly enough, grown necessary to him. Why was Adora so hard? Had he ever transgressed or broken his word—since, that is, the time when he had made that solemn promise on his knees? There was surely a medium between that which had been and depriving an old frail man of what was as necessary to him as his life! How much better a man could understand these things! Ah, yes, there were many who spoke against the young farmer of Boreland. Adora herself did not wish to hear his name—but what a friend had not Alexander Ewan been to him during these last

months!'

Ah, what a friend indeed.

The crowded hours of the great day passed in a sort of palpitating but suppressed excitement. The Presbytery withdrew for a few minutes into the schoolhouse, which they filled almost to the door. Here they partook of Adora's dish of tea (Aline's gift), of her own beautiful wheaten scones, of oat cakes, crisp and clean-tasting, of jams and jellies, cool and fragrant, while the Dominie closely watched by Baillie of Hardhills, alternately eyed a certain locked cupboard of black oak, of which his daughter kept the key, and moved uneasily about in the vicinity of the window, looking out for Sandy Ewan.

Slightly weary, but in more amiable mood, the Presbytery returned to its duties. The Mothers in Israel sat in rows, stiff and indefatigable, waiting to see how a particular son of promise would acquit himself before his judges. The junior classes, Adora's special care, now passed in review. Baillie of Hardhills was always peculiarly terrible at this stage. His loud voice was so intimidating that their very knees knocked together. And Mary Adamson, Adora's pet pupil, who trampled Effectual Calling under her feet and knew all the labyrinthine turnings of the Commandments, even to the 'Reasons Annexed,' grew so frightened when the inquisitor suddenly demanded of her 'What is the Chief End of Man ?' that the well-known words departed from her, and she stood dumb and

trembling. But Adora, taking advantage of the teacher's ultimate privilege, put the question over again, adding, 'And can you give the scriptural proofs as well?' Upon which the fountains of Mary's deep were broken up, and even Baillie of Hardhills had no more terrors for her.

To the New Testament class succeeded in descending order the 'Tenpenny'—to the 'Tenpenny' the 'Sixpenny.' The final 'Tippenny' was in sight, when Adora, suddenly looking up from her preoccupation, found that her father was not in the school. For a while she did not become uneasy. He had gone out, she thought, overcome by the natural fatigues of the day, to rest himself a little on his bed. She remembered with thankfulness that she had expressly bidden him to do so if he should feel tired.

But three o'clock, the hour of golden speech, was at hand. The seniors came back, braving in unashamed pairs the village street after their 'Without Prejudice' walk. Parents and guardians dropping in belated, crowded more densely the wall spaces allotted to them. Mr. Sidney Latimer himself occupied, as principal heritor of the parish, a place among the brethren of the Presbytery.

The reverend court grew visibly more expansive. Dinner was now well within sight. Dr. Meiklewham had been seen to send off a message to his daughter, and every one knew that at the manse they were getting ready to serve the broth. Hardhills had it on good authority that there were two chunky

hens in it. All was ready. The Presbytery, sharp-set by a long day of question and answer, was ready also.

But still there was no Dominie.

For years too numerous to be recalled exactly, it had been the custom of Lowran school that the Dominie, with bent head and a modest demeanour, should stand up in his official desk and listen to the compliments, more or less sincere, which were heaped upon him for his skill. The Presbyterial Chrysostoms recalled the successes of the boys who had already gone to college, the hopes of magnificent careers immediately in prospect which had impressed the learned court as they listened to David Mc-Robb's remarkable statement (expressed in Latin) that 'All Gaul was divided into three parts,' or Peter Adair's assertion that he sang concerning 'Arms and the Man.'

It was five minutes to three—almost time for the complimenting to commerce. Thanks to Adora, all had gone well. Even Baillie of Hardhills, somewhat hostile and inclined to be critical, had noted no greater failing than a slight weakness in the most junior classes as to the exact order of the later kings of Judah and Israel. All the Presbyters were busy composing their perorations, looking at the buckles of their shoes meantime with that condemned-cell expression which such an operation performed on a public platform invariably calls up on the most seasoned countenances.

## STRONG MAC

But still no Dominie.

The last classes had been sent back, and were settling into their places with little doubtful murmurs of sound, like the clucks and clutterings you may hear from sparrows nesting under the leaves, or from blackbirds going to roost in the crotch of some fir-tree along the wood edges.

The afternoon sun shown out golden behind the fathers and brethren, giving each of them an aureole about his head. As a Presbytery they glowed. They also murmured and chuckled. Dr. Meiklewham had sent off a second message. Mr. Peerie, the Moderator, fancying that the time had come, raised himself once to begin his speech: 'Mr. Gracie, parents and friends, on this auspicious occasion, when I see around me so many smiling faces, so many youthful pledges of domestic love and affection—'

Then it was suddenly discovered that the Dominie was absent, and the Moderator was abruptly pulled down by the coat-tails. He felt it, because he would have to think of another opening. Then ensued a vague, uneasy pause. A girl of six, in the second row, oppressed by the strain, giggled hysterically, and was choked into silence by means mysterious to any but her most immediate companions.

Adora, anxious lest some accident should have happened to her father, rose to seek him within the house. But before she had time to go into the

connecting passage, the outer school entrance was unbarred, a noise was heard in the passage where hung the hats and cloaks of the pupils, the latch of the inner door lifted slowly, and the Dominie stumbled rather than walked into the hushed silence of Lowran school. The door shut behind him without visible assistance.

Thus fell the stroke.

Adora felt a tingling chill run through her body. She thought she was about to faint. All power departed from her. She could only sit still gazing at her father with vague, fascinated eyes.

He swayed visibly on his legs, seeming to wonder at the hush. Then he laughed idiotically.

'Time for the Latin lesson,' he cried, 'eh, where's your Virgil, Peter Adair?'

Then he caught sight of the reverend Presbytery, seated in order—twelve in all. He laughed again.

'Latin—Greek—,' he cried, passing his finger along the line, 'there's not enough of the classics among the lot of you to fill a good-sized nut-shell. There sits Baillie of Hardhills— he kens none and never did. He kens about whiskey jars, though. And the doctor, he learned some once, but he has forgotten it—soft as porridge that head of his—a fozy turnip— a fozy, fozy turnip! None of the crew but Wee Peerie could read a page of Virgil without a dozen 'maxies'—no, not to save their lives!'

By this time he had reached his desk. Adora

recovered herself and bounded to his side. Taking him by the sleeve, she urged him to come away out. Sidney Latimer was on the other side. The members of the Presbytery, at first stunned, then deeply insulted, were mostly on their feet. Baillie of Hardhills raised his voice to rebuke the insolence of the Dominie. Kind Dr. Meiklewham had suddenly a grey look on his face. But the voice of the Dominie from the desk rose high above every other sound.

‘An ignorant drunken crew,’ he cried, ‘hand and glove with the lairds— not a man among ye except the doctor—a kind heart the doctor—good and sound, all but the head. Preach! Ye can prate, but never preach. Ye should hear me preach. Never a sleeping e’e in my kirk. There’s a box of sermons up the stair, that no man among the lot of ye could ever have laid pen to. And ye will come here condescending to me— me that could teach not only the Presbytery but the Synod. It’s Mr. Gracie has done well— his method of imparting the classics does him credit. The Greek prose was truly remarkable. Devil the syllable ye ken about it— except maybe Wee Peerie. Get ye out of my school and never let me see your black backs again— carrion crows, birds of ill omen that ye are.’

The insulted Presbytery met over a very silent dinner in the manse, but before a blessing was asked, the case of Donald Gracie, recalcitrant, had been called up and judged. Even the good will of the doctor had not been able to save the habit and

repute drimkard. And as for Sidney Latimer, he had no standing in the court. Once again Donald Gracie was suspended Presbyterially— this time from all his offices, parish schoolmastership, registrarship, session-clerkship, eldership. A notice was sent to him ere the meeting broke up that he must quit the school and schoolhouse 'so forth and immediately,' rendering back to Caesar that which Caesar had given.

And from the door of Lucky Greentree's public house, Sandy Ewan, suddenly protruding his horse face, hailed and halted Ebenezer Latimer, the minister's man, who had a letter in his hand addressed to 'Donald Gracie, late Schoolmaster in the Parish of Lowran, at the school-house there.'

Ebenezer, who had profited aforetime by the hospitalities of the young farmer, and hoped to do again, permitted him to see the letter and to read its superscription.

'Notice to quit, eh?' he said, smiling malignantly.

But as to that, it was not Ebenezer's province to confess himself informed. He only shook his head, took the letter out of his patron's hand, and trudged stolidly on up the street towards the schoolhouse.

Sandy went within to finish his brandy and water. The Dominie's empty glass was still on the table. The spider had been waiting for the taking of the fly. But the dour brain that lay behind the horse face was still cool and clear, though he had been

## STRONG MAC

drinking more or less steadily since 10 o'clock in the morning. Sandy Ewan glanced at the old man's empty glass and grinned evilly.

'Ah, little Dora,' he said, 'did not I tell you that I should strike where your pride would feel it most.'

And with a shout down the passage he called to Lucky Greentree that he was ready to pay the score.

'And I will settle the Dominie's too!' he added, generously, slapping his purse on the table.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

WHAT DICKIE DICK FOUND ON THE GLEBE ROAD

Now the course of St. Cuthbertstown justice was this. The sheriff, good easy man, had committed Roy McCulloch to the gaol of the county town, and to the common eye that seemed the end of the matter. There Strong Mac must lie till upon the day of solemn assize, he should be transferred to Drumfern, to stand before a jury of his peers, and meet the frown of the terrible Red Judge from Edinburgh.

But Strong Mac's case was a more than usually serious one. All the papers must go to Edinburgh for the consideration of the Crown Council there. Neither the fiscal nor yet the sheriff was capable of deciding to proceed with the charge against Strong Mac. First the lord advocate's deputy and then as a court of final appeal the great man himself, must state whether on the evidence before them Roy should be sent to the assizes on the capital charge.

The advocate depute, to whom the document was transferred, found nothing directly against Strong Mac, except the fact, in itself sufficiently damnatory, that the sheep skins had been discovered in his father's barn. But then, though there was presumption, no evidence existed as to who had placed them there. Roy had made no apparent profit out of the killings, could have made

## STRONG MAC

none, except possibly in the consumption of the flesh, in which case his guilt must have been shared with his father. Nor had the mutton been dried or salted. No inordinate number of mutton hams were found swinging to the baulks of the House of Muir. The McCullochs were in no want of fresh meat, as could easily be shown. There was abundance of smoked venison in their chimney, and a few casks of brandy, probably undutied, lay in their cellar. A sufficient sum stood to Sharon McCulloch's credit in the Bank of Scotland at Drumfern.

Evidence of motive, therefore, was wanting—evidence of fact, weak! No, said the advocate, there was not enough of general suspicion or circumstantial evidence to send the young man before the assizes. It was of no use remitting him back to St. Cuthbertstown. The substitute was one fool—the sheriff principal another! Send them word to let the lad go!

Thus rapidly and picturesquely the lord advocate did justice, when, at his beautiful hillside residence, his depute laid the case before him.

Which word travelling down to St Cuthbertstown, Strong Mac with a sudden dazing of his faculties, found himself free. His cell in the old jail had been both dusky and dirty, and it seemed as if he had been forgotten—as if he must lie there for ever.

Roy stepped out into the clear light of early afternoon. The young summer was already

sprinkling the twigs of the ashes with dainty green butterflies. Rosettes were beginning to dangle from the larches along the plantation edges. Outside the gaol door Strong Mac stood blinking like an owl turned out into the daylight. He did not know any one in St. Cuthbertstown, and had no desire to stay there. So after a few minutes of hesitation he struck through the narrow bye-streets, not because of the quiet (for all streets are quiet in St. Cuthbertstown) but from an instinct of shame. He seemed unclean to himself. There was a vague offence, as of gaol fever, or worse, about his clothing. He took his way up the riverside till, arrived at a sheltered pool, he stripped, and plunged into the cool brown water. Then after submitting it to careful and prolonged consideration, he resumed his apparel. His self-respect was thereby somewhat recovered. At least he knew that he was clean.

Strong Mac looked down at his clothes. They were worn, shabby, tainted with the disgrace of the place where he had lain. No, he was not fit to appear before her. He knew that. Nevertheless, since she had seen his shame— that night when they took him, she also should be the first in Lowran to hear of his rehabilitation. He would go to the schoolhouse.

It was wonderful how the thought altered him. Disgrace seemed to fall away from him instantly. His heart exulted that he would see her— her, of whom he had had such long thoughts in the prison. He

## STRONG MAC

was no more the boy he had been, so he told himself. The new Strong Mac laughed when he remembered that he had once tossed the bar and putted the stone, rejoicing in his own prowess. All that seemed a thing so inconceivably little and useless to him now. But a gate had fallen from its hinges. Strong Mac lifted it with one hand and replaced it. Then he laid his fingers lightly upon the topmost bar and sprang backwards and forwards over it with the ease of a bird. He caught the branch of a tree with his left hand as high as he could reach, and drew himself up till his chin was over the rough bark. This he did several times, raising and lowering himself. Then he dropped lightly back upon the ground. No, so far as bodily strength went he was still able for anything that might come to him.

It was already growing dark as he approached Lowran. The very air smelt different to his nostrils as he came over Barstobrick moor. The famous heather of his native parish was not yet in bloom, but the wind across the open sweep of brown moorland, splotched with black where the spring burnings had been allowed to wander, brought the light into his eyes, the colour into his blanched cheeks.

Yonder in the hollow, nestled behind its dark green plantations, lay Lowran. Its 'lums' had almost ceased smoking when Roy came in sight of it. Ebie Cargen had put out his smiddy fire, and was sitting in the kitchen over his supper when the young man paused on the green brow of the knoll above. It was

his instinct to go down and present himself to Ebie, demanding news of him, as, at least, a man who spoke no lie. But another thought came to dominate him— rather the return of his first thought. First of all before any one else saw him, he would go to Adora.

Woodman and hillman as he was, accustomed to the chase of wild things, Strong Mac carried out his intent as silently as the shadow of a cloud passes over a hill. There dark among its tall black pines was the schoolhouse. His heart beat, as it had never done during his oft-repeated examinations before the sheriff.

He stood for a moment by the wall of the little private garden, separated from it only by the dyke over which he had so often cunningly conveyed cut fire-wood and back-loads of peat. Now both piles seemed particularly low. Roy smiled to himself as he thought that he would not be long in altering that.

He laid his plaid on the dyke and leaped over. Everything was quiet. As usual they would be at the other side of the house, that which fronted towards the high road to Lowran.

He turned the corner, smiling, expecting to see the light burning in the window of the little parlour, and the shadows of the potted plants making a black pattern on the blinds. It was dark. He looked up to Adora's bedroom. Dark also. He went quickly to the door and knocked. All was silent. He could hear a noise within—something like the scuttling of a

rat among papers.

He tried the latch. It lifted, but the door did not yield. It was locked.

Strong Mac stood back. For a long moment he could not think what had happened. Was Adora lost to him? Married? He would have heard of it. Was her father dead? Some one would surely have sent him word. He went to the window. The white Ayrshire rose had been pulled down by rude hands and trailed along the ground. Torn paper, empty boxes, and bare walls were all that the deepening twilight revealed to him.

Roy McCulloch stood a long while under the sough of the trees. He shivered a little after the closeness of the cell. For the wind struck chill out of the north, sharp as the front of the Scottish spring and mournful as its autumn.

Then there came to him resolve, quick and sudden.

It was Sidney Latimer who had done this. Either his pleading had been successful and Adora had gone away with him. Or unsuccessful, and this was his revenge. It is curious that, in spite of the quarrel at the smithy, Roy never once thought of Sandy Ewan. The idea that such a man could be anything to Adora Grade found no lodgment in his heart. But Sidney Latimer was another matter. There was frank republicanism in this young hill-poacher's heart. All men were not born equal, but all good men became so. Latimer was the son of one

landowner, he of another. That the Laird of Lowran could count a hundred acres for each of his father's was nothing to Roy McCulloch.

He would go to the Great House of Lowran—now, as he was. He would speak with Sidney Latimer. As he turned down the little path along which he had so often walked with beating heart, Adora by his side, he saw a figure disengage itself from the gate. Something familiar in the attitude took Strong Mac's eye. He sprang over the dyke, and laid a sufficient retaining hand on the man's shoulder. In another moment Roy found himself face to face with Sidney Latimer. The meeting was unexpected on both sides, and Roy's hand rested a second on the rough tweed collar of the Laird's coat. Then Sidney Latimer with a fierce gesture and a backward spring shook himself free.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded, 'I thought you had been—elsewhere.'

'I was coming to seek you. Laird Lowran,' said Strong Mac, slowly. His mind was altogether on the thing that held his heart—the fear that Adora was lost to him. He had no care for politenesses.

'Indeed,' said Sidney Latimer, somewhat frigidly, 'in what can I assist you?'

'I have an interest,' Strong Mac spoke steadily and with rigid plainness, 'an interest in Mr. Gracie—and his daughter. I was about to seek you in order to ask of you what had become of them.'

'And by what right did you suppose that I had

## STRONG MAC

anything to do with their presence or absence?' demanded Sidney Latimer, fiercely. For the man was before him of whom he had been jealous. Nay, even now his heart retained something of its former feeling. It was this man who had brought about his quarrel with Adora.

But Strong Mac's simple straightforwardness vanquished him.

'I have indeed no right to suppose anything—nor do I,' he said, 'but I have been . . . where I have heard nothing concerning those dear to me. And I thought— that if I could find you, I should hear the truth. It seemed strange to me— to come home and find— this!'

'Come with me,' said the Laird of Lowran, melting suddenly; 'to you it is no stranger than it is to me.'

And passing the porter lodge and walking together through the dark arches of the trees, Roy listened to the story of that which had befallen Adora. Poacher and landowner took counsel together.

'And the man who did it?' Roy demanded fiercely, the nails of his fingers crising into his palms.

Sidney Latimer laid a restraining hand upon the young man's arm. 'Wait,' he said, 'the thing will come right. I felt as you do— at first. But to do as you propose in your heart will not advantage— her!'

Tacitly the two men avoided mentioning the

girl's name. But Strong Mac would not be satisfied.

'No,' he said, with a smothered forcefulness, 'I will not be content. Tell me—was it Sandy Ewan?'

The Laird was silent.

'Then if you will not answer, I take it that Sandy Ewan made the old man drunk and pushed him into the school in order to disgrace his daughter before all the people?'

'I have only heard such things said,' repeated Sidney Latimer, with sorrowful acquiescence, 'I do not know!'

'Ah,' said Roy McCulloch, deep in thought. 'Then will I go and speak with Sandy Ewan.'

Before he left the gaol he had satisfied himself as to who had laid the information in his own case. He knew or thought he knew by whose orders the sheepskins had been placed in the barn of the House of Muir. There was another question which he had to ask of the young laird, yet more important.

'Where have they gone?' he demanded of his companion, abruptly.

It was with an equal brusqueness that Sidney Latimer answered, 'If I knew that I would not be here! Have you anything more to ask me? If not, I bid you good-night.'

Thus with Sidney Latimer's curt salutation ended the evening of Tuesday, the 30th day of April.

About eleven minutes past six on the morning of Wednesday, the first day of May, or rather less

## STRONG MAC

than nine hours after Strong Mac had parted with Sidney Latimer under the trees of the avenue which led to Lowran House, one Richard Dickie, known as Dickie Dick, ploughman on the estate of Boreland, going out to his labour, ditching-shovel and pick over his shoulder, came upon sundry curious spots upon the road, irregular in shape. If it had been autumn he would have thought little about the matter. They looked exactly like trampled blackberries, the purple colour fading into black.

As it was, the intellect of Dickie Dick, never acute at any time, did not attach any particular importance to the marks. Some one had gone that way early carrying a pot of paint. How carelessly he had handled it! Dickie thought it was a strange colour to paint carts or barndoors. But Dickie Dick's day's work was on his mind, he would have let the matter of the spots slip but for circumstance.

A little further along the road, lying on his back, with lands gripped full of grass and leaves, the signs of a fierce struggle all about, Richard Dickie found the dead body of his master, Alexander Ewan, with six inches of a steel knife sticking between his shoulder blades. As the lightning flashes from the east to the west the news ran across the parish, that between 10 o'clock on Tuesday night and six of Wednesday morning Sandy Ewan had been murdered within a hundred yards of his new house of Boreland.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

SANDY EWAN'S UNSEEN VISITOR

What follows is Dickie Dick's account of the matter—not that which he gave to the fiscal, but that which he repeated times without number to a very large proportion of the inhabitants of Lowran and the neighbourhood, exactly in the same words.

'Ye see, this is what I ken about it— and Lord be thankit that I ken nae mair. For the pesterfication I hae gotten frae thae lawyer bodies is juist past tellin' and wad hae driven mony a wiser man oot o' his wits!'

One of the auditors having made an obvious suggestion why this had not taken place, Dickie Dick threatened strong measures.

'Gin ye gie me ony o' your impidence, Ged Blyth, ye can e'en tell the story yoursel'. Ye may think yoursel' a clever lad, you and them that ken nae better than to laugh at ye. But nane of you fand him but me, and nane o' ye can tell the story but me—that is, no as it ought to be telled.'

'It was this way,' he continued after a pause for apology on one side and pacification on the other, 'to begin at the beginnin'—and that was the nicht before, the master had been unco dour and girnin' a' day, till, maybes a wee while after nine o'clock when I was helpin' Davie Kirklands, the unmarriet ploughman, to supper the horse, there

## STRONG MAC

cam' a cry to us baith to gang into the hoose to Maister Ewan that meenute.'

'It'll be to tak' the Buik!' (to be present at family worship), says Davie Kirklands, lauchin' like.

'Aye, a gye queer Buik it'll be, then!' says I. 'Muckle Sandy doesna trouble the Throne o' Grace verra often.'

'The mair's the peety,' says Davie (wha is a wee bit o' a professor— that is, atween his ploys wi' this lass and that). 'The mair's the peety,' says he. 'For it brings a blessing on a hoose to hae a bit prayer pitten up at e'en and morn. Forbye, it's a rest frae wark!'

'And when we gaed up to the big hoose, faith, there were the tumblers laid oot and the packs o' cairds, and the toddy ladles, and certes, Davie Kirklands forgat a' about the takkin' o' the Buik, and smacks his lips like ony ither man! For he thocht that no yin o' us wad gang sober to bed. And that's a treat that doesna come often in the wey o' puir ploomen and ditcher folk like me an' Davie.

'Ow aye, the maister may hae had his fauts— some o' them leeve after him, and some are even auld eneuch to gang to the schule— but at hame he was aye couthy and bien wi' the bit dram. It gied a man a fine regairdless cock to his Sunday bonnet to spend a winter about the Boreland. Wae's me—it's a' gane! It's a' by and dune wi'.'

'Gang on wi' the story? Weel, what else am I doin'? Think ye a man's tongue gangs aye to yae lilt

the day by the length, like a mill-happer? And when we were standin' i' the parlour wi' our hats in oor hand, gye sheepish, Sandy orders us to throw them in the corner and sit oor ways doon. And then he opens up his wull wi' us.

'It seems there was a man comin' to see him that Sandy Ewan was some dootfu' o'. There was nocht by ordinar or curious in that! He had a' sorts and kinds o' ill-dealin's, the maister. Up to the elbows half his time in jukery-packery wark wi' weemen an' horses an' gemlin' (gambling)! That was the airt o' Sandy Ewan ever since his faither did him the warst service he could— by giein' up the ghost and leaving him heir to a' that he possessed.

'Wha' was the man that was comin' to the Boreland. Aye, ye may weel ask. Dootless, him wha's handiwork lies up in the chaumer yonder. We were no to set e'en on the veesitor though, but to bide in a bedroom brave and handy, if sae be we were cried on. But Sandy Ewan maun hae been feared by ordinar when he sent for twa men frae the stable to help him to pay a man siller. But Davie Kirklands threepit wi' me, 'It will be somebody wha's weemen-folk he has been meddlin' wi.' He will be payin' the cradle stent to keep oot o' the dutches o' the law. He's an awesome man this maister o' oors. The deil will hae a bonny bargain o' him when he gets him.'

'This Davie said lichtsomely, as ony o' you micht say it, never thinkin' that the black deil himsel' was oot there on the Glebe Road— waitin' —

## STRONG MAC

at that verra meenit. Had he kenned, Davie nichtna hae crawled sae croose. The deil has nippit up better Christians than him mony a time, and aff wi' them in his plaid-neuk to Muckle Hell.

'Weel, at ony rate, the maister gied us a candle to see by and the feck o' three or fower drams apiece. Then he pitches a pack o' auld worn cairds at us and tells us to be ready when he cried on us—the whilk he was only to do gin he had the need. As we were shuttin' the door he promised to thraw oor necks if we stirred or as muckle as looked through the keyhole. We were to bide there, that was a'. He expectit a man that nicht, a man that nicht be friendly and nicht no. That was as muckle as was guid for the like o' us to ken. And then he dooble-cursed us richt brisk and sharp—but that we were weel used to and minded nocht ava'.

'Guess ye hoo we swat there in the inner chaumer, wi' no' a soond in the great muckle hoose forbye the sclaff o' the cairds and whiles the settin' doon o' a glass or the clinkin' it made on the neck o' a bottle when oor hands shook. But for a' oor game, ye may believe that oor lugs were bane-stiff wi' hearkenin' what was gaun on in the room Sandy Ewan caa'd the 'leebrary.' It had a lang new fangled wundow at yae end that opened out like a door— a daft-like contrivance that onybody might hae kenned was for nicht-hawk tricks and wad lead to nae guid.

'After a while we heard twa men speakin' gye an' lood —Sandy's voice the loodest. The man maun

hae comed through the lang window. For deil a fit did he either come or gang by the door into the passage. I'll swear that Davie's e'e never left the keyhole frae first to last.

'But we could hear them speakin'— an' it was a voice I should hae kenned too, though I couldna juist pit a name to the man that aught it! They werena 'greein' ower weel either, sae Davie an' me keepit a firm haud o' oor dickies, and, lads, for mysel' I wished that there had been a lang French window in the chaumer that we were in. Davie was mair prepared (wi' his ain tale o't) to meet his Maker, sae I wad e'en hae been for lettin' him gang ben and help the maister by himsel' .

'But by guid luck we werena askit, either of us. There cam' nae cry oot o' the leebrary. And by and bye the maister comes ben, and orders us baith to oor beds, threepin' that we will be cheatin' him oot o' the wark he was payin' us for, by lyin' snorin' i' the mornin'.'

'And see that ye sneck the stable door,' he says as we gaed oot, 'for I'm gaun to gie a bit look roond the hoose mysel', and if I find onything oot o' its place, I'll break your lazy backs i' the mornin' as sure as my name's Sandy Ewan!'

'And that was the last I heard o' him or saw— till steppin' cannily along the Glebe Road I fand him lyin', half i' the ditch an' half oot, his great braid face turned to the heevens and a knife stickin' to the haft in his bull neck!'

## STRONG MAC

Such was Dickie Dick's tale, as it became stereotyped for general use. And even the trained acumen of the fiscal, who had at last a job to his mind, could make little more of it than this.

It was evident that the murdered man expected a visitor, whom he had reason to distrust. As a precaution he had brought two of his able-bodied servants to remain within call. But he did not wish them to see the visitor, except in case of an attack. The man came. The meeting passed off without overt hostilities. Indeed, the suspicions of the young farmer had by some means been allayed. For he proposed to go out and lock up the premises, without asking the presence or assistance of the two serving-men.

Now the fact of Roy McCulloch's release on the afternoon of the same day did not escape the attention of the fiscal. But the young man had been seen bathing in a pool of the river and afterwards crossing the hills in the direction of his father's farm. It could not be supposed that he had had time to go so far out of his way as to the farm of Boreland by ten o'clock the same night. No one had recognised him in the neighbourhood of Lowran, much less in the vicinity of the spot where the murder had been committed. So the sheriff and fiscal, still smarting from the 'back-set' administered to them from official headquarters, were rather inclined, while keeping their minds open, to let the young man alone. Besides, in this case, as in the

other, an apparent motive was lacking. For Sandy Ewan had not appeared in the informations which had been lodged against Roy McCulloch. It was recalled that he had given evidence with apparent reluctance, and as far as possible in favour of the accused. Furthermore he had constantly come and gone to see McCulloch while a prisoner in the gaol of St. Cuthbertstown.

Nor in the countryside, generally so much better informed than officialdom upon such matters, was there any more suspicion. Roy McCulloch had come home. The affair of the sheep-stealing had ended, exactly as every one knew it would. Even the spite of the lairds could not prove guilt where there was none. Whatever the McCullochs were (and the parish knew very well all that could be said against them throughout their generations), they were no sheep-stealers. Smugglers, deer-poachers, private distillers, ready for a rough give-and-take with the gaugers or preventive men—yes, any or all of these. But slayers of an honest man's sheep—no! Such a charge must surely break down. All Lowran knew it would. So Roy McCulloch went about undisturbed. He was seen on the hill with his gun, as usual. He was at the market buying and selling as if nothing had happened— a market where nobody did anything but talk about the murder of Sandy Ewan, and how the murderer was still at large and likely to be.

It was to be noticed that on this occasion the

fanners did not wait till dusk before ordering their horses at the Commercial and the Cross Keys. Also on an average they drank more by a couple of gills. They were earlier in reaching home. If any one asked about the matter, he was told very shortly that 'their wives were feared to bide their lane!' For the thought of a secret murderer, lurking red-hand behind a dyke or ready to spring out of a thicket upon the passerby, has a strange effect upon all the people of a district where such a crime has been committed.

It was a fine time for love-making. The Lowran lasses would not go to the well without escort, even in broad daylight. The lads had to accompany them in the summer twilight to the ewe-milking at the buchts—even across the yard as far as the byre. Old pistols were furbished up that had not been fired since Drumclog. Kate Brydson, putting her fingers out to fasten a window shutter, felt her hand shaken by a mischievous brother, and forthwith sank down on the floor in a faint. Brydson Senior, tailor in Lowran, was still correcting his son when Kate came to herself, and Brydson Junior's objections to castigation, as stated by him in a loud voice, caused his sister to shriek out, 'The murderer! The murderer!' Whereupon her mother, a broad-beamed lady of mature nerves, fainted dead away also.

Nobody was sorry for Sandy Ewan, except a woman or two whom he had ill treated and a dog that he had frequently beaten almost to death. Nevertheless, after the medical examination, his

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

funeral was celebrated with great pomp, people coming from great distances merely to see the place where the tragedy had taken place.

Crowds of them stood all day long, gaping stupidly at the trampled earth of the Glebe Road as if they expected the blood of the slain to cry out from the ground, fulfilling to the very letter the word of Scripture.

But there was one man who knew more than the others, and whose heart was exceedingly troubled within him. That man was Sidney Latimer. When he returned from the funeral of the murdered man, where he had seen Roy McCulloch walking calm and collected by his father's side, and standing hat in hand by the open grave, he went directly into his study and threw himself down on a sofa to think. He had need. For he alone of all the world knew that Strong Mac had not returned to House of Muir by way of the St. Cuthbertstown road and the Bennanbrack hills. He alone had heard the words that had been spoken in the Great House avenue under the moaning sough of the beeches. But having heard, he could not forget the grim bitterness of anger expressed in the simple phrase: 'Then will I go and speak with Sandy Ewan!'

What if Roy McCulloch were the visitor for whom Sandy Ewan had made his preparations, whose voice was heard in angry converse in the library of the gentleman-farmer, whose entrance and exit had alike been unseen! It seemed probable

## STRONG MAC

enough to Sidney Latimer that Ewan had received notice of his enemy's approaching release from prison! It was Ewan's sheep the prisoner had been suspected of stealing. It was natural that he should suspect Ewan of laying the information against him. Even apart from Adora Gracie the ill-feeling between them was obvious. Moreover, Roy McCulloch had been in Lowran late on the evening of the murder, instead of at home with his father at the House of Muir, as every one else believed. His last spoken words had been a threat against the dead man, and he had gone off in the direction of the spot where the body was found.

Now Sidney Latimer was a gentleman. Before serving as a soldier, he had studied law and had been admitted to the Scottish Bar. He was also a justice of the peace. But he could not be a tale-bearer. He had, it is true, little doubt of Roy McCulloch's guilt. In fact, he could easily reconstitute the scene at the Boreland to himself. There had been no premeditation. Of that he felt certain. But there had been reproach and counter-reproach, till, most likely, Sandy Ewan's dour temper had given way suddenly. He had struck the blow which had proved his own death-warrant. The dead man's very fear was evidence to Sidney Latimer's mind that the expected visitant could be no other than Strong Mac. For Ewan was a man of powerful physique—reputed the strongest and most dangerous fighting man in the parish, leaving Roy

McCulloch out of the question. Who, then, was there for such a man to go in fear of—save the man who had set out to visit him on that last night of April, with anger in his heart and a grim threat on his lips.

Then all suddenly there came a thought across the young laird's mind which caused the hot blood to flush his cheek. With Sandy Ewan dead, and Strong Mac— well, out of the road—would not his path stand clear to Adora Gracie—if not in one way, why then in another. Conscious of her disgrace, penniless, outcast, saddled with a drunken incubus of a father, she would not refuse— no, surely she could not refuse—all that he had to offer her. Sidney Latimer rose hastily, and picking up his hat, went out into the stable to saddle his horse. It is always in haste that a good man does a thing which in his heart he is ashamed of.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

## THE SECOND KNIFE THRUST

But while the two men, Sidney Latimer and Roy McCulloch, stood before the empty schoolhouse of Lowran, while Sandy Ewan made his preparations of fear, while in the gaunt library, bare of books, but smelling of freshest varnish, the last named stood face to face with Doom, while he lay motionless, his clenched hands crisped to his side with the tension of that last struggle out on the Glebe Road, where was Adora Gracie?

To the other mysterious events which had thrown the two parishes of Lowran and Kirkanders into a ferment there was added this other— what had become of the Dominie and his daughter? Not that many people thought of that. To have an unexplained murder and an unsuspected murderer at large in one's parish, is enough to preoccupy most people of quiet country habits.

But Sidney Latimer thought of it—also his mother.

She had heard her son let himself in by the hall door, and was on the way down to make an inquiry—decided upon as she descended the stairs—as to whether he preferred goose-and-apple-sauce or cold-chicken-and-tongue for his dinner on the morrow. Anything would do. But it was necessary to have an excuse for intruding upon Sidney in the

strange humour which had lately come over him.

But she was saved any further strain upon her imagination. While she was still on the first landing the outer door clanged, and all that remained of her son was the impression on the pillow of the sofa on which he had hastily thrown himself down, and as hastily quitted. The flowered silk was slowly returning to its rounded shape, and as the lady of the Great House of Lowran stood in the doorway, even that token of her son's presence faded away from before her eyes. She opened the window and listened to the clatter of horse's hoofs, harsh on the gravel, soft over the grass. Then came the click of a latch lifted with a riding crop, an impatient word—the hasty anger of a man rebuking in his beast the restlessness which agitates himself. To these followed the full gathering spring with which a good horse takes its head over soft ground.

Mrs. Latimer listened till the sound of hoofs was lost in the distance.

'He has taken the moor road,' she murmured fearfully, as she dosed the window; 'in that direction there is not a house or a cottage within three miles. If the murderer is in hiding anywhere in the parish, it will be there!'

The few minutes which Sidney Latimer had spent in putting the graith on his beast had given him time to alter his first intention. He had been resolved to go to St. Cuthbertstown, and there to divulge all that he knew to the authorities with

## STRONG MAC

regard to the murder of Alexander Ewan. He believed that they would listen to him. He could substantiate fact, motive, threat. Indeed, as he told himself over and over again, he held Roy McCulloch's death-warrant in his hand.

But something—not a belief in his rival's innocence—held him back. He would first of all see Strong Mac face to face. He would charge him with his crime, and—yes, he would, perhaps, give him a chance to leave the country, if he found that the crime had been committed without premeditation or in a fit of sudden anger.

So Sidney Latimer rode towards House of Muir by the road which, years before, had been opened by the broad-axes of Sharon McCulloch and his sons. His thoughts were gloomy within him as he urged his beast along. Darkness fell while he was still out on the wild breadths of Bennanbrack moor. A brief red twilight flaring in the west had soon been overcast by the cloud of night which shut down upon it like a gigantic eyelid. The road, winding through league upon league of heather, shone grey-white under his horse's feet. The boulders on either side took on mysterious shapes, looming up indistinct and uncanny, each fitted to shelter a crouching murderer.

But Sidney Latimer had that on his mind which was sufficient to banish imaginary fears. He was going to confront and accuse a real murderer—secret, strong, unsuspected by any but himself.

What if Strong Mac were to repeat the blow that had stretched his other rival dead at his feet, and so suppress the only possible witness against him. The thought passed across Sidney Latimer's brain, but it was at once set aside.

‘So be it,’ he said, ‘he can kill me if he likes! But—I will have a few words with him first.’

Sidney Latimer was no strong man. In many things he was no better than the average of his class and of his time, but at least the soul within him was neither little nor weak.

At the corner of the great Barnbarroch March (where a former Chesney Barwhinnock had been killed by a discharge of his own gun) Sidney Latimer heard something move among the stones with a squeaking noise like a weasel in a dyke. His horse shied, and Sidney, whose temper was not then of the best, gave him the spur fiercely. The spirited beast bounded forward, and as they passed at full speed through the gap in the high march-dyke, something little and dark sped across the white thread of the moorland track, almost immediately under the horse's feet.

At the same moment Sidney Latimer heard again the same strange sound, but stronger this time—indeed almost birdlike in its keenness, half snarl, half cry, which mingled with the snort of his frightened animal. The horse, also, instead of gradually calming down to a steady gait, made a series of wild leaps across the moor at right angles

to the path, and, turning round, presently stood still, facing the danger and trembling in every limb.

Sidney dismounted, patted and reassured the grey, which blew on him with full trembling nostrils. As he stood in front of its face, he felt something warm and wet drip upon his knee. He put down his hand—and lo! his fingers encountered the unmistakable gluey touch of warm blood. His horse had been wounded. Though it was too dark to see clearly, Latimer felt that there was a considerable wound in the loose skin between the chest and the gullet. For the moment the grey's excitement would permit of no very particular examination, but it was clear to Sidney that some one or some thing lurked on the moor over which he had passed, at once dangerous and deadly.

The Barnbarroch dyke was the boundary of the property of the McCullochs. It was evident that the danger, whether for him or for any intruder, began there. Sidney Latimer was in quandary. To go on was to beard a murderer in his chosen place of defence—to return was to risk a stab from the same weapon which had already wounded his horse.

There were few things which touched Sidney Latimer more than that an animal should suffer. He therefore took off his coat, turned it inside out, and by means of the reins, succeeded in extemporising a rough dressing for the wound which, so far as he could judge of it in the darkness, staunched the flow of blood. He and his horse were now out on the moor

away from the path which led to the dwelling house of the McCullochs. Sidney was not the less but the more determined to visit House of Muir that night, because of the foul attempt that had been made upon him. He did not doubt for a moment that it was with intent upon the life of the rider that the steel had been darted upwards in such dastardly fashion.

For some time he searched about for a tree or stone to which he might with safety attach his horse, while he continued his journey on foot. Chance glided him to one of the common 'scroggy' thorns—low, twisted, misbegotten bushes, their branches spread abroad like the daw's of crabs and apparently as ancient as the peat-hags they spring from, which are to be met with on most Galloway moors. Having found one then he fastened his horse to it, and after an affectionate pat or two, set out over the heather in the direction of the House of Muir.

Sidney Latimer had not proceeded far when he heard a noise behind him, a cry of fear and distress almost human. He turned, feeling instinctively for a weapon to defend himself against the unknown dangers with which he seemed to be surrounded. He found nothing except his father's riding whip with the heavily loaded handle, which he always carried at night. Sidney hastily twisted the lash about his wrist, and grasped the butt by its thinner extremity.

But it was only the grey, which, desperate at

being left at the mercy of the unseen enemy that had already wounded it, had broken the fastening and now sought his master, quivering and panting as if after a long race.

For a moment Sidney Latimer did not know how to proceed. His beast was wounded, and yet would not be left behind. His coat, imperfectly fastened in the darkness, had been dropped when the animal reared in order to snatch itself free from the 'scroggy thorn.' Nevertheless, something drove him on, perhaps the same fatefulness which, a few months ago, had carried Sandy Ewan to his doom. The young laird put out his hand and gently felt his horse's wound. He decided that it was either extremely superficial or that the cold of the night had stopped the bleeding. At all events, little was now escaping from the cut.

The windows of the House of Muir were now before him, bright upon the long level horizon. He could count them. Two were illuminated, one slightly so, while a door opened and shut, now completely obscured, now sending a sudden flood of light over the surface of the moor.

It was strange how as Sidney Latimer approached the dwellings of men, both his own excitement and that of his steed died down. The smell of habitation and the vicinity of creatures, human and domesticated, calmed his nerves as well as those of the frightened animal. Instead of requiring constant attention and handling, the grey

now dropped behind with patient docility, as if ashamed of his previous behaviour. Nor did he make any objections when his master fastened him to the ring-bolt of the 'louping-on stone' at the gable-end of the onstead of House of Muir. As was almost universal in Galloway, this was a large boulder, to which generations of horses had been tied, and where for ages the women of the family had mounted behind their lords ere they took their douce and legal way to kirk and market. Sidney Latimer clearly understood the risks of what he was about to do. But now he could not go back without qualifying as a coward in his own eyes. He was determined to speak with Roy McCulloch—if possible, alone and without giving him time to consult his father. As he came nearer, it seemed as if there was company at the House of Muir. He could hear the sound of several voices. Some irresistible impulse took him past the door in the direction of the window, through which the light reamed most brightly.

Now at House of Muir few sacrifices to external adornment had been made, and save where the dyke of the potato garden cut a hard rectangle out of the home parks, the grass and heather ran right up to the whitewashed sills of the long low dwelling house. Upon these Sidney Latimer's feet made no noise, and presently he stood on the soft green turf under the drip of the eaves. He looked within, feeling all the while like a criminal himself—and not at all like a man who had come out to denounce a man-slayer. The

young man could hardly believe his eyes when he looked through the imperfect green whirlpools which served for glass. Yet what he saw was plain enough. What he had expected to see as he rode across the moor was a couple of haggard men, conscious of their crime, bandying mutual recriminations, or at least the younger and less hardened pacing to and fro, or sitting with his head in his hands, in the grip of an accusing conscience. But whatever was the secret Terror that lurked about the house of Sharon McCulloch, whatever the Thing of Evil which had struck up at him so treacherously at the Dykes of Barnbarroch, it was clear in a moment that its influence did not reach to the kitchen into which the Laird of Lowran was now looking as an Israelitish spy might have looked into the Promised Land.

Sidney Latimer saw before him a lighted kitchen, smiling contentment, a girl moving easily about performing the little duties of domestic work with the facility of long practice. An old man sat at the fireside with a book in his hand. A younger arranged a lamp that the light might fall better upon the printed page. Such a scene of cheerful domesticity he had not seen for many a day, yet the very reason of Sidney Latimer seemed to totter on its throne as he stood there. If he had not leaned against the wall, he would assuredly have fallen. For the girl who moved about so lightly and with so well-accustomed a step was none other than Adora Gracie!

Hastily, as if taken in a meanness, Sidney shrank away into the darkness. He had seen enough, and more. Murderer or not, Roy McCulloch was now for ever free from any word of his. He could not speak now. If he did, he would feel himself worse than Sandy Ewan when he decoyed the old Dominie to his fate on the day of the examination.

Sidney Latimer knew the facility of the law of Scotland with regard to marriage, and he did not doubt for a moment that Adora Gracie, situated as she was, burdened with the care of her father, had gone straight to House of Muir, where at least she was sure of welcome and an open door. Then, when Roy came back, with whatever of guilt upon his hands, there was no doubt that Adora had married him, were it only out of gratitude. So Latimer reasoned with himself.

The young man stood by his wounded horse in the darkness, stricken also. From the house there came to his ears the sound of laughter. Sidney loosened the rope from the iron ring and moved away quietly, as if ashamed of his mission.

No, there could be no doubt—none! Adora's whole carriage, her assured step, was that of a house mistress. The Dominie, her father, was seated by the fire reading his book. Roy, by his side, arranged the lamp with filial solicitude. Adora and Roy had exchanged glances over his head—ah, the inwardness of these glances took Sidney Latimer by the throat.

A sudden wild access of rage took hold of him. The murderer—the man with the guilt of blood on his hands— to have that for his reward! He too would go back and end it or himself be ended. Fool! What good would that do? He had seen the girl's smile—the first perfectly happy smile he had ever seen on her lips! That she loved the man there was no doubt! Well? Well—?

Yes, he knew. He had it in his power to shatter this happiness, as an earthen pitcher is shattered with an iron bar. Between them and that new-found love of theirs he would dangle the hangman's rope.

So out on the ghastly solitary moor, scaring the wildfowl and the black-faced sheep, Sidney Latimer raved, his beast, whose own trouble had abated, pushing against him at times with moist, anxious nose, warning him to begone from a neighbourhood so dangerous to honest horses. But gradually the meanness of causing a woman to suffer because of his private disappointment worked upon his spirit.

'Who am I,' he asked himself, 'that I should lay an information against Roy McCulloch? I, who at this very moment, feel my hands a-tremble with desire to kill! I know my own, but do I know Roy McCulloch's provocation? Let me get away— away— never to return!'

So forgetting everything but the desire to put a great distance between himself and this fatal house, he leaped upon his beast, and the frightened animal, partaking of the feelings of his master, struck

through the moor at speed. Soon they were at the Dykes of Barnbarroch. This time there was nothing to be seen. Indeed, there was little chance for they passed like a flash, Sidney pulling the reins away from the turn of the road which led towards Lowran and home. He felt that he could not face his mother's anxious assiduities that night. She would be waiting for him. Of that he had no doubt. She would have a thousand questions to ask. He would ride down towards the sea— find a little coaching inn on the Stranraer road and there abide the night— nay, perhaps longer, till he had thought things over and decided what it was best for him to do.

He struck into the sea road. His beast moved easily, seemingly less tired than before. It was the dark time just before the birth of the dawn. He threw the reins down on the grey's neck, and master and horse plunged blindly into the unknown.

How long they wandered thus, lost to direction, straying anywhither, cannot now be known. The world had come sharply to an end for Sidney Latimer. His mouth was shut. The girl he loved was bound body and soul to a man whom he knew to be a murderer! What mattered anything any more?

The air grew fresher— more salt upon the lips and in the nostrils. They were descending from the moorlands towards the little ports which dot the shore line of Galloway here and there— the Lake, the Scaur, Balearic, Port Mary, Portowarren. But

## STRONG MAC

Sidney Latimer paid no heed to his going. His heart was too exceeding bitter within him, and as for his beast, he only hung a weary head and weakly kept four grey feet moving.

Suddenly out of the ground, as in a dream, armed shapes rose all about the young man. He was pulled from his saddle to find himself in the thick of a fierce combat. A blow was stricken which stunned him, and he was thrown hastily along with several others into the bottom of a boat.

'That does the night's work!' cried a voice, 'give way there!'

The next morning what a crying of men there was athwart all the country. The young Laird of Lowran had been assassinated by the McCullochs, the poachers of House of Muir. His coat, all bloody and turned inside out, had been found on their property. His footsteps had been found and measured, at their very gable-end. His riding whip was lying at their 'louping-on stone.' There were signs of a struggle at the Barnbarroch marches. His horse, wounded and (some said dying) had been found straying on the cliffs near the Gate House of Cally. Happily both of the murderers were in custody, after a desperate resistance on the part of the younger, a dangerous character who had been recently released from gaol.

The motive, of course, was jealousy. Young men will be young men. The disgraced Dominie's daughter of Lowran was actually at the time in the

house of the culprits, and the Laird had gone to see her. Hence the quarrel, and the murder to follow. All was rounded, clear, complete. And upon the killing of Sandy Ewan, also, light, lurid and sudden, seemed to break. Dickie Dick and his friend recalled to themselves with curious unanimity and were read to swear (did, in fact, so take oath) that the voice which they had heard in their master's room on the night of the murder of Sandy Ewan upon the Glebe Road, was none other than that of Roy McCulloch!

Bands of men (so ran the report) were out everywhere searching for the body of the murdered laird—which, strangely enough, had not yet been found. On the other hand, the McCullochs were safe in the gaol of St. Cuthbertstown, under lock and key—and well for them that it was so! For the countryside was up and they would have had an excellent chance of being torn to pieces. Among other things, the girl—the first cause of all—had gotten her deserts. Ah, she had long been known to sundry good Christian people for what she was! They had always said so! Perhaps some one would listen to them next time!

She and her drunken father had been turned to the door of House of Muir by the officers of the law. It had been asked of her if she could show any proof of a legal right to remain where she was and when she could not or would not answer, she and her father had found themselves upon the heather. 'And serve them right,' cried these same apocalyptic

## STRONG MAC

Christian folk, who are for ever pouring out vials and blowing trumpets over their neighbours' misfortunes. 'If all such were put in prison, the country would be the better!' And at this point large quotations were made from the early chapters of the Proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king in Israel—who certainly ought to have known what he was talking about.

Thus the House of Muir, which but yesternight had been so bright, filled from end to end with light and life and the joy of seemingly settled happiness, was in a moment left desolate. And down in the Great House of Lowran there were two women who mourned also, both one and also the other of them, as for an only son.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

OUT OF GOOD— EVIL

When Sidney Latimer left the lighted window of the House of Muir he gave up all thought of denouncing Roy McCulloch. This seemed a true and worthy thing to do, yet had he contrived the worst possible against Roy and Adora, the young laird could not have played the devil's game better than by doing as he did. So mysterious is the train of consequences which follows every action, however trivial, that we suffer (and make others suffer) as often and as severely for our well-intentioned as for our evil deeds. Doubtless there are compensations, but the fact remains. The philosophy of 'Be good and you will get a lump of sugar, be bad, and you will get nasty medicine' is untrue to the facts of life.

So many-tongued rumour, flying from door to door, lifting the latch, and shouting an amended and re-edited tale into every house, spoke more truly than usual when it represented Adora and her father as having been turned out upon the waste after the capture of the McCullochs by the crowd of several hundred men from all parts which suddenly invaded the solitudes of House of Muir.

How Adora came to be there at all may be told in a few words. It chanced that Sharon McCulloch, stern, sober-faced old ex-smuggler, whom no Examination Presbyterial could for a moment have

drawn a yard from his door, had business in the village of Lowran on the day when Sandy Ewan's trick was being spoken of, and even laughed over at the bar of Lucky Greentree's public house.

Sharon was making ready for his homeward ride, and as a last precaution he always tossed over his throat a tass of brandy to the good of the house. He stood tall and erect, fingering the pewter in which his half mutchkin had been served to him. Silently he listened to the tale— how in this very room the Dominie had been made to drink till he could not see, Sandy Ewan plying him with liquor skilfully all the while. Then the hanger-on aforesaid, who related the instructive apologue with some humour, told how he had 'oxtered' Donald Gracie to his own school-door, and there listened till at the proper moment, carefully waited for, Sandy Ewan had pushed him 'in amang a' the ministers!'

Sterner and greyer each moment stood Sharon McCulloch, gripping his whip tighter in his hand, till, at the climax, he astonished the company by reaching over a huge hand for the narrator. Without a word of explanation or apology he dragged him over the table into the open, where he lashed him fierce and long, at last flinging the tale-bearer on the ground, whimpering like the hound he was.

Then the master of House of Muir made a little speech to the company and departed—to look for Sandy Ewan. Happily instead, he found Adora Gracie. And then, at the sight of the girl's desolation,

the stern-faced old lawbreaker had melted completely.

'For my boy's sake—for my loneliness' sake—come!' he had bidden her. 'There is an empty hoose, but a warm, warm welcome up on the muirs.'

Thus it was that, while Roy lay fretting in the gaol at St. Cuthbertstown, there had come into his father's house, in all good liking and free will, the one thing he had most despaired of seeing there.

Upon his return, Adora had met his triumphant surprise and rejoicing with quiet thankfulness and gratitude. She had never doubted such an ending to his imprisonment. But she found so much that needed doing in the House of Muir, that even Roy's advent made no great change in her mode of life. Sharon McCulloch, grave and reserved as ever, walked by her side every evening—he or his son, but on the whole, most frequently Sharon. Their path always led them towards the high angle of the property—the apex of the triangle near which was a cairn on a little heathery knoll. Sharon did not look that way, but instead gazed absent-mindedly into the sunset. He never spoke of the wife whom he had found there dead upon his return from market. But the mere companionship of the young girl by his side somehow softened and warmed Sharon McCulloch, so that on coming in, Roy would often notice a difference in his father—something about his face that he had never remarked there before, which was doubtless the resurrection of the young

man who in a certain old summer walked these hills of heather with another girl as beautiful and as young.

Indeed it seemed as if at times Sharon himself forgot. For on one occasion, after a long period of silence, he turned upon Adora with the question, 'But where have you left the boys so long?'

Then, instantly recollecting himself, he added, sharply for him in these days, 'I think we had better go in!'

Upon which all suddenly, breaking into this life of peace and happiness, there had arrived a howling furious mob, led by Jonathan Grier. Then Adora had seen Roy, an angered Roy, a Roy whom she had never seen, fighting for his life, striking down one after the other till at last he was mastered by numbers. Then the house which she had begun to beautify and care for was put to sack—the furniture flung out of the window, the panelled walls of the chambers torn down under guise of search for evidence. After that, the officers of the law came, taking a kind of possession, who posed her with hateful questions.

'Would she bear witness to this? Had she been present at that? What was her position in the household? By what right was she there?'

And so, as it was succinctly enough stated in the popular report, she and her drunken father had been turned out upon the heather.

The Lowland Scots—the Scots of Galloway in

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

especial, are a kind-hearted folk. So it has been said and sung of them, and it is true. But students of national manners know that upon occasion such a kind-hearted folk can be more cruel than many a people whom the world holds habit-and-repute for savagery.

The Laird of Lowran was popular. His family had been 'weel-likit' for generations before him. Much was expected of the young man, when once he had wedded 'a suitable person,' and emancipated himself thoroughly from the yoke of his mother, who, in spite of her forty years' residence in Lowran, was still looked upon as an incomer and 'nae real Latimer.'

On the other hand, Adora Gracie, save with a limited number of the younger men (and Aline), could hardly be said to be popular. She was too pretty and her tongue was somewhat oversharpe. Moreover, she was supposed to hold her head too high for her position. Which is, in Galloway, one of the cardinal sins. Then the sheep-stealing, the killing of Sandy Ewan, and the disappearance of the young laird were all, in the 'giff-gaff' of old wives clatter, clearly traceable to the inexplicable attraction which foolish young men feel for such 'creatures.'

As Mistress Gimwood said very judiciously to her gossip Mistress Tod Lowrie, the senior baillie's wife of Cairn Edward, as she put an extra 'cinder' in her tea, 'If I had my way, it's her that should hang

for it!'

When Adora took her departure from the door of the House of Muir it was a typical September day, clear and dry— not warm, but with that grip in the air that wins the corn on the rigs, sets the stooks a-rustling, and rejoices the heart of the farmer. Beneath her eye lay the little hard-won gussets of plough-land which Roy had laid into furrows for Sharon to sow, his tall, gaunt figure looking Biblical in its girding of sackcloth, from the cross folds of which he swung the grain abroad in alternate handfuls. Farther yont, Adora's eye fell on the knoll where Sharon had seen a woman sit as if asleep, being dead.

So taking her worse-than-dead father in her hand, Adora went slowly about the corner of the barn. Certain of the baser sort, the slack-water of the ruffian tide of the morning, jeered at them through the open doorway. And there was no strong Roy now to fell the insulter with a blow, nor a stern Sharon fitly to lay whip-lash where it ought to lie. But Adora, taking her father by the hand, led him a little about so that he might not hear. She herself was not much cast down, for she hugged closer to her heart that eternal right of the down-trodden—the appeal from earthly injustice to the high universal Caesar who sits in the heavens, who cannot do other than judge justly.

To the eye of sense it was a sad little procession enough — the girl leading the broken-

down old man by the hand. For Donald Gracie, suddenly divorced from his life's work, fretted like a child that he was once more compelled to remove from surroundings that suited him so well.

'Adora, I have over and over endeavoured to impress upon you,' he reiterated complainingly as they took their way down the hill, 'that I refuse to return to the school of Lowran parish, where I was treated with such disrespect. At least Dr. Meiklewham shall apologise to me in the presence of the scholars, before I will consent to give a single lesson there. The Presbytery shall apologise! And I cannot help thinking, Adora, that it argues a certain lack of consideration for your father's feelings, that you insist upon taking him back to a place of so many painful memories!'

'We are not going to the schoolhouse, father,' the girl answered, with some of the apathy which accompanies great sorrow.

'Then may I ask why,' cried the Dominie shrilly, 'have we left yonder most comfortable domicile, pertaining to my excellent friend and late pupil? His father seems a very superior man—though he had finished his schooling before I came to the district. And, though never cordial, Mr. McCulloch, Senior, appeared to desire our company. Also, though I cannot expect it to weigh with you, I must point out that the mountain air agreed with me. I would not for the world say anything hurtful to your feelings but I think you will admit that these frequent

changes of plan are not dictated by those thoughtful and unselfish considerations which I have the right to expect from an only daughter.'

To this the girl answered nothing. Her heart was too sore within her. She merely adjusted her arm so that the old man might lean more heavily upon it, guiding him over the rough places of the way with a tenderness surprising in one so quick and brusque. It was not long before the wandering wits of the Dominie took up a new aspect of the subject.

'I fear much that I have been over-lenient with you, Adora,' he began again, tapping with his stick on the hard roadway. 'It has been borne in upon me lately that I ought to have been more strict. I have given you your own way too long—as God forgive me, in my youth I took mine—I mean in matters of the heart! But I am persuaded that I have gone too far in submitting to your girl's whimsies. There was, for instance, that excellent young man, Alexander Ewan. Had you taken your father's advice, a world of trouble would have been spared. Even you cannot deny that. And now again, after some time in this well-plenished and most comfortable house—not that it is a mansion, but a very respectable and yeomanly dwelling, where my comforts have been attended to and my wishes studied—we find ourselves turned out because you would not, in time, make up your mind to wed the young man of the house, my old pupil and good friend, Rov

McCulloch.

Adora held her peace, steadily pursuing her way.

This is the more surprising that you yourself held constantly by his innocence. You would hear no other word, even from your own father. And that being so, and your feelings evidently engaged, it would have regularised our presence in the house if you had been married to him, even according to the irregular Scots method, which (though good in law and binding upon parties) as Clerk of the Kirk Session of Lowran parish I have always thought it my duty to discountenance. Still, there are cases—and this is one of them. As Roy McCulloch's wife we could not have been dispossessed of our honourable position and downsitting at House of Muir. We would have remained to take care of the young man's property, and whatever happened we should have been provided for—.'

'Oh, father,' cried the girl, at last losing patience, 'you do not understand what you say. I am not married to Roy McCulloch. I have no intention of marrying Roy McCulloch. Roy McCulloch respected my position too much while I was under his father's roof ever to ask me to marry him.'

The old man stood still and shook a tremulous staff at the girl. 'Ah,' he quavered, 'you must not try to deceive an old dog— yes, an old dog. There has been love-making going on. I have watched. You thought me deep in Virgil— and Virgil, young lady,

is the finest of all poets —that I will ever uphold. But, because of the Mantuan, the father's eyes were not blind nor his ears deaf. There was lovemaking going on—with young Laird Lowran, with that softish lout Jock Fairies, and in especial with Roy McCulloch. Moreover, did he not always come the latest, bide the longest, and did you not always see him to the gate? Ah, Adora, the old man has not been so shortsighted as you gave him credit for.'

Thus the Dominie went maundering on, Adora holding him by the hand, drowned in the bitterness of her own thoughts, yet ever and anon rebuking herself for her irritation at her father's folly, till the forlorn pair came to the march-dyke of Barnbarroch. It was, even in daylight, a strange wild place—a dip between two boulder-strewn moors, the heather growing breast-high among the stones, one jagged pinnacle of rocks looking down like a watchman over a conventicle, and beneath, the white thread of the mountain road wimpling from verge to verge like a flicked whiplash.

The gate, dragged from its hinges, probably by some of the mischievous spirits among the rout which that morning had poured up towards the House of Muir, lay broadside across a heap of stones, the debris of some rough road-making operation, long ago interrupted and never again proceeded with.

Cross-legged upon this a boy sat sobbing bitterly—a boy in a man's coat three or four inches

too big for him every way. He wore a ragged pair of breeches, but his legs and feet were bare. A recent tear or wound showed an irregular red edge across one brown and freckled calf. As the two pilgrims approached, the boy alternately stanchied the bleeding and wiped his wet eyes with a large blue Kilmarnock bonnet, the result of the double operation fairly passing the power of pen to describe. At first Adora did not notice him. She was immersed in her own heart bitterness. It was the old school-master, with the instinct of a lifetime where youth was concerned, who observed the boy. He was certainly in trouble, probably, therefore, a culprit.

He turned about stiffly so that he might face the seated figure, pointing with his stick to the wound.

'Here, boy,' he said, authoritatively, 'stop crying. And tell me who did that?'

The boy lifted his tear-stained face, and then, even through the streaking and the swelling about the eyes, his identity could not be hid.

'What, Daid McRobb!' cried Adora, for the moment forgetting that for her there were no more roll-calls while the world should last, 'what are you doing here at this hour—and like that?'

And sure enough Daid McRobb it was who presently stood up shamefacedly, trying to conceal the hurt on his calf with his broad bonnet. Finding himself before the Dominie, the boy endeavored to stop sobbing, with this of success that he gave

himself hiccough instead. But curiously, the result was in no way comic.

'Why are you not at school?' began the old Dominie in his flogging voice.

'Father!' said Adora, touching him with her elbow. 'Ah, I forgot,' said the old man, 'I mean what are you doing there with that—that wound on your leg?'

Oh, that! It's nocht,' said Daid, with a gasp, nocht ava'. I never noticed it. I think I fell—on the edge of my tin can.' (His eye, having lighted upon this last, perhaps suggested the explanation.)

But the old Dominie had his method.

'Answer my question, boy!' he said, sternly, with his stick in the air, 'this minute—who did it?'

'D'ye think I was greetin' for that—?' cried Daid, indignantly; 'man, I wad tak' that three times i' the day and never whinge. It's for what they hae dune to him.'

'To your father?' said Adora, instantly forgetting her own sorrow in sympathy with another; 'why, what has happened to your father?'

'My faither?'

Voice of human creature never expressed more of contempt and bitterness than did that of Daid McRobb in these three syllables.

'Greet for my faither—' he repeated; 'he micht cut me into bittocks and throw me into the water for ged-bait, but he couldna gar me greet.'

'But you have been with his dinner,' said

Adora, pointing to the can.

'Ow aye—he's my faither!' said Daid, simply for all explanation, 'I'm no denyin' that.'

He looked about him as he spoke and rubbed the wounded calf surreptitiously on the ragged fringes of moleskin which dangled about his other knee.

'Then why are you crying?' said Adora, more gently, 'tell me.'

At the word, as if a spring had been touched, Daid the Deil raised himself from his lair of stones, his streaked face stained with blood, his bonnet in his hand, his rags flying in the moderate wind of September, and stretching out a hand towards St. Cuthbertstown with a gesture which no tragedian in the world could copy, he exclaimed, 'Greetin', is it? I'll tell ye. It's for him I am greetin'! For him—for Roy McCulloch, the best lad that ever drew breath in this war!—the best freend—the only freend that puir Daid McRobb ever had. And they hae jailed him for what he never did. They hae ta'en him awa'. And it's my faut! Oh, it's a' my faut!'

And standing there before them, Daid the Deil broke into a wild irregular wail, ancient, autochthonal, not to be heard among honest folk, the keening of the cave-women, the rude aboriginal chaunt which saluted the sun-god when the blood of the sacrifice dripped redder under his first ray, falling from the tribal altar.

The boy at the very apex of his passion stopped

## STRONG MAC

dead. Some sound unheard by the others had startled him. He paused, suddenly stricken stiff in the attitude of listening.

‘Coming!’ he cried, and seizing his can, made off at a run in the direction of the high sentinel stone which overlooked the dell.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

THE DEEPEST DEPTH

From the marches of Barnbarroch the road lay across a plain stretch of moorland, now spreading clear and crisp beneath the September sun. The heather was growing a little rusty everywhere, but the bracken, chance stricken by an untimely frost, had turned and now withered in patches many-coloured in the sunshine—orange and russet and cardinal red.

After losing sight of Daid, Adora and her father essayed this long open crossing, the old man growing more soddently weary at each step, and as he rested on this stone and on that by the wayside, continuing to dilate on his daughter's ingratitude and lack of consideration for him. At last they reached, greatly to Adora's relief, the head of the long Glen of Pluckamin, the uncommon name of which started her father on a learned disquisition, thus for the moment taking his thoughts off herself and her shortcomings.

'Pluckamin—Pluckamin!' he began, 'ah, there's marrow in that—aye, marrow and fatness. Those who care for nought but how to put the most spoonfuls of porridge into them, may indeed see nothing in Pluckamin but matter for laughter. The thorns crackle bravely under the pot. But to the learned and serious eye the whole of the Covenant,

count and tale, is unveiled. 'Clachan Pluck'— the Heart of the Faithful Country, the heart of Galloway. Even as the hub is the centre of the wheel, so was it about Clachanpluck that the assemblages of all the faithful folk gathered. Griersons in Bargatton, Kerrs in Cullenoch, Dicksons in Crocketford, but the best of all— the Heart of the Heart, were the McMinns of Pluckamin. All scattered now. The New World across the water holds them and their name. The ploughshare is passed over their pleasant sites. Scarce a trace remains of the walls. Only a greener line here and there, seen when the sun lies low in the west, is left to mark the rigs that were turned when the hands of the martyrs held the plough. But such is our life—we pass and are not. The Jacob—the Sup-planter, cometh in our place. He sits in the shade of our pleasant bowers. He eateth of the vines which our hands have planted, and crieth, 'Aha! Aha!'

Grateful for the momentary respite, Adora let her father ramble on thus. The rugged fell of the moorland, shaggy as an undipped garron, yet in spite of infinite diversity of heather and rocks presenting no considerable elevation to the eye, broke down suddenly. The bare hill track, crossed with slaty edges every half-dozen yards, washed clean as scraped bone by the thunder rains, changed all at once into a woodland glade, with birches gracefully light all about.

Down this track, where it began to skirt the

policies of Lowran, Adora was guiding her father, who was still meditating on the past greatness of Clachanpluck and Pluckamin, when at a turn of the path she came suddenly upon a pair of women, stern of aspect as accusing spirits. Both were wrapped in black, and the head of the elder was bare, while the shorter and younger of the two had a shawl drawn about her.

Adora knew them for Sidney Latimer's mother, and her unfailing companion, Purslane. The women had been ascending slowly, as if the steep slope which led out upon the face of the moor had somewhat tried their powers. But at the sight of Adora and her father they halted, astonished.

Then Mrs. Latimer advanced a few steps, and leaning forward, as if she was about to spring upon Adora, cried in a loud voice, 'Where is he? Tell me—and I will forgive all.'

Adora stood aghast, not knowing what to answer. She comprehended that the Lady of Lowran had come out to seek her son—the son for causing whose death Roy McCulloch had been seized with rude shoutings by the ignorant rabble. But Adora did not understand that she herself could be accused of having had anything to do with the matter. However, she had to deal hourly with one whom God had touched, and whatever the woman said she was resolved to be patient with the grief-stricken. She answered gently.

'Madam,' she said, 'I do not know where your

son is. It is many days since my father and I saw him. I am sorry—I would give my life if all were happily ended.'

'Your life— your life—!' shrieked the old woman, gaunt of cheek and wild of aspect, lifting up her clenched hand frantically above her head as if in act to strike, 'his life say rather! Give him back to me—I beseech you. Ah, I never did harm to you or yours all my life— why should you come into mine to blight it? Give him back to me, I say. Why are you so cruel?'

'My Lady of Lowran'—began Adora, going a little nearer, as if to calm her.

'I am not 'my Lady of Lowran,' she cried, thrusting her hand from her as if to push away something abominable, 'I am merely a poor old woman seeking her only son— her only son. Ah, how I loved him. And you have taken him— you have bewitched him. Ever since he saw you he has never been the same boy to me. Yes, I noticed the difference that first night when he came home to me— home from— from— from your den. Did I not say so, even then, Purslane? In my despite he would seek after the Strange Woman. She held him in spite of my prayers. She holds him still. Look how she gloats over the ruin she has made. But God will judge! He is a just God, madam. He will judge 'twixt the right and the wrong— between you and me—my lady. Give me my son, for the last time I bid you. I order you to give me up my only son!'

Less agitated, though no less bitter at heart, Purslane had been endeavouring to moderate the fierceness of her mistress's vehemence. Now she succeeded to this extent that Adora, who stood trembling before them, not with guilt or fear, but with a new pitifulness, managed to get in the first words of her answer.

'Listen,' she said, briefly, 'I have a right to be heard. I am a young girl, as you were before you were married. I am a human being. I have a right to defend myself. I have never sought your son. I have never seen him since the day, many months ago, when I told him that he must not come to my father's house while I was there. He has kept his word, and I mine also. It is true that through no fault of mine I found myself cast out of the only home I had ever known. Shelter was offered to us by a good friend. We accepted it. It was the choice of the destitute. We had nowhere else to go. That again by no fault of ours is at an end. We go forth, my father and I, with no more than we carry, but at least with our hearts clean of any shame towards you or your son.'

But Mrs. Latimer was not to be appeased. While Adora was speaking, Purslane had been able to restrain her. But now she broke out afresh.

'No,' she cried, 'you cannot cozen me, madam, with your lies. I am a woman and know you. You tricked my boy. You drew him on till you had him in your toils, then you pretended to cast him off— as

you cast off that young booby whom your paramour murdered at his own door-step. And now you have been the death of my son. I say not with your own hands— but— he has come to his death among you. Ah, that ever a Latimer of Lowran should have evened himself to a beggar wench! I said from the first that ill would come of it. I warned him of going to seek the company of a girl without family, without name.'

So far the old Dominie had listened in a kind of daze. He was physically wearied to exhaustion. The excitements of the day had set his brain wandering. The road-fatigue, in spite of his staff and his daughter's arm to lean upon, had left him in a semi-comatose state. But at the last words of the Lady of Lowran he seemed suddenly to wake.

The cowered decrepit ex-drunkard seemed to become a new man. He actually erected himself, so that in the plain sight of all a cubit was added to his stature.

'No,' he cried, with a gesture of real dignity, 'this my daughter is no beggar wench. There is no disgrace in her family tree, save her connection with me. Mrs. Latimer of Lowran, I have the honour to inform you that this young lady comes of as good and unstained a lineage as the best of your husband's house. And if I may be allowed the discourtesy in the course of a genealogical discussion, she is of better stock than your own. You have known my daughter only as Adora Gracie,

the daughter of the schoolmaster of Lowran. I have to inform you that my name is Donald Balgracie, younger son of the late Archibald Balgracie, of Balgracie, in the county of Midlothian, as you can ascertain by writing to my brother, the present laird. I have the honour, madam, of bidding you a very good day.'

And taking his hand from his daughter's arm, the old gentleman—gentleman once more and for ever, lifted his hat and swept the two women a ceremonious salutation of leave-taking.

The Lady of Lowran instinctively bowed, overcome and amazed. She remained with her hand pressed to her breast, her mouth a little open, looking after the pair as they took their way down the long sunlit Glen of Pluckamin, with the afternoon glow lying bright and warm and even upon everything.

When they had vanished the Lady of Lowran turned to Purslane, and the first words she uttered, stammering and amazed, were these; 'If that be true—Balgracie of Balgracie is dead without heirs. I saw the advertisement in yesterday's Observer — and— these two do not know.'

The two women looked long at each other, reading even to the dividing asunder of soul and marrow. Then with one accord they turned and followed Adora Gracie with their eyes as she went down the leafy glade, supporting the painful steps of Donald Balgracie, drunken outcast— and proximate

## STRONG MAC

landowner. But if there was any thought common to both their hearts, they gave it no expression in words.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ADORA FINDS HER SOUL

There are few hearts sadder than that of a brave woman who after a long struggle finds that she is reaching the limits of her courage. And it was thus that Adora Gracie felt as she led her father away from the interview with the Lady of Lowran. She had given little attention and no concern to what her father had said to Mrs. Latimer about his birth and position. From her childhood she had been accustomed to such outbursts— though never, it is true, delivered with such assurance and detail. But at a certain stage of his failing, high birth and noble connections formed a maudlin topic of her father's, particularly distasteful to his daughter.

Indeed the prospect before her was one to daunt the boldest woman. What to do she knew not. To beg she was ashamed, and with her father to keep watch and ward over, even honest 'digging' of any kind seemed out of the question. She dared not leave him a moment alone. Adora felt that she could not go through Lowran. She dreaded the faces at the windows, ugly, curious, sneering, hateful faces. She could not bear to pass the schoolhouse where Hardhill's 'stickit' nephew had already been installed. The sight of the bairns at marbles in the school playground would have been agony to her. A skipping-rope (she thought) would have broken her

heart. She turned into the Loop Road—the by-way through the policies of Lowran, along which on the night of his first apprehension, Roy McCulloch had conducted her home. As she passed between the bushes, strange thoughts darted like lightning through her soul.

Ah, the by-ways of life! Ill and good alike lurk in them. Who amongst us, straying down some solitary lane, idle of thought, empty of intention, has not come suddenly upon that which has changed all his life? For good, sometimes. For evil, perhaps oftener, teaching the wisdom of the double-barrelled maxim: 'Be not idle when alone; nor alone when idle.'

Yet sometimes in the uncharted by-ways good sprites lurk. For even now, when Adora's way was most desolate, her future to the eye of sense most hopeless, such an one appeared, as unexpected to the sight as the Queen of the Fairies a-swing upon the topmost petal of a rose-bush.

Only this fairy queen had silvery hair with blond lights in it, and for a magic wand carried knitting needles of clicking steel, from which not even the most poignant emotion caused her to drop a stitch. It was Aline McQuhirr, waiting for them to pass that way. She had heard of the terrible events at House of Muir. Indeed her brother had just come in, furious with anger at the treatment which the mob had dealt out to Roy and his father 'bound like brute beasts and thrown into a cart bottom,' had

been his report.

So Aline the gentle, knowing in her heart that House of Muir would be no abiding place for Adora and her father, came to compel what had been formerly refused, both on account of the smallness of her accommodation and because of the jealousy of her brother Adam's wife at the farm.

This time, however, Aline would take no refusal. She was armed in advance against every objection.

'There are two rooms and a garret for three folk,' she said, 'and ye can sleep bravely in my broad bed, lassie! Ye are jimp and sma'! And as for Flora up at the farm— nineteen months o' clarty byres and a rousing bairn to suckle, hae learn her that she didna mairry Adam McQuhirr only to sit in a ben room, arrayed like Solomon in a' his glory, surrounded wi' cheena ornaments!'

So it befell that, as with the children of the righteous, so with the child of the drunken schoolmaster, Adora found herself once more not forsaken, and without necessity to beg her bread. Yet neither here nor elsewhere would she eat the bread of the idle. In the cot house of Gairie there was a spinning wheel at Aline's, and Adora was a past mistress of the art. So the two women made a compact.

As much as anything else, what Adora needed was time to bethink herself. Her father's boast of ancestry had indeed passed over her as the wind.

## STRONG MAC

That was less than nothing. But there was Roy McCulloch lying in St. Cuthbertstown jail under the dark suspicion of having committed two murders for her sake.

For her sake— yes, for her sake. True or untrue, she was smitten because of that. Why else was she an outcast, scarce daring to set foot beyond the door, lest the same wild insensate mob she had seen at House of Muir should gather and sack the humble cottage of her gentlest hostess.

Roy McCulloch was innocent, of that she had no doubt — but what of Sharon? The question had often troubled her, and amongst other things she must think it out. During her evening walks with Roy's father, she had seen deeper than perhaps any had ever done before into the stern, silent, determined nature of the ex-smuggler. The dark stain which the death of his wife had made across the man's life had not been washed away by the tide of events, nor yet had it faded out with the lapse of time.

As she walked Aline's beautifully clean floor, back and forth, to the booming rhythm of her wheel, Adora went over every circumstance in her mind, and the more she thought, the greater was her perplexity. She saw that in helping Roy, she might very well send his father to the gallows. Carefully and dispassionately, as a judge sums up, she laid the evidence piece by piece before her own mind. First, there was the calmness with which, having a

son familiar with the law, Sharon McCulloch had awaited Roy's release. He had said nothing, done nothing, sought no advocate—simply waited. Was it unnatural calmness born of mere callousness, or did it spring from superior knowledge? Often in their wanderings Sharon McCulloch had fulminated against the lairds—Lowran, Barwhinnock, Glenkells. Their very names were anathema to him. She had seen the muscles working on the grim old face as he spoke of them. As to Sandy Ewan, had he not said of him: 'The spilling of any man's blood is doubtless a crime, and satisfaction for it is rightly demanded of the slayer. But yet if the Lord of Justice hath an Angel of Death abroad on the earth, it is surely his duty to strike down such a man as Alexander Ewan.'

But from these speculations Adora's mind constantly returned to this—Roy McCulloch, at least, was certainly innocent, and if his father had indeed shed blood, Sharon was not the man to let the innocent suffer in his place or even along with him—still less if that man were his own son.

Yet the more she thought, the more tangled became the skein. When she had turned matters over in her mind Adora could not even arrive at any certainty that the Laird of Lowran had been murdered. A blood-stained coat, footsteps, a straying road-weary horse, a man mysteriously gone from his place—these circumstances, though demanding explanation, were no proof that actual

murder had been done. Doubtless Sandy Ewan was another matter. His huge body, suddenly stricken inert—the devil that was in him for ever exorcised (so far as this world was concerned), had been found making a blot upon the fair God's morning, cumbering the Glebe Road. Only his iniquities remained after him—his plottings, his contrivings, his evil doings, which were still the talk of the country and the scandal of the soberly inclined. No, it was small wonder to a thoughtful observer that Sandy Ewan had been found with that knife-haft right-angled above his breast-bone. The only wonder was that it had not happened years before.

Aline left her guest much to herself. The Dominie, abundantly supplied with books from Aline's wall-press, needed to be cared for chiefly at morn and even. For at her flitting the old maid had brought with her to the cot house of Gairie the entire family library.

'Gin I want them I'll come and borrow them, Ailie,' her brother had said, 'and that's no doom's likely. The Drumfern Observer is as muckle as I can manage—and even that is maistly twa-three weeks auld afore I get it through-hands.'

So the clear wise head of Adora Gracie, by circumstances and training far too old for such young shoulders, was filled with thoughts which came in thronging troops. Sidney Latimer had spoken of her as a girl who ought to have been a lawyer. In the commonest argument she was never

satisfied till she had disentangled a fact, and brought it into relation with every other which she held duly established.

As to her present inquiry, material in plenty was at her disposal. For one thing Adam McQuhirr was a most determined gossip— his hospitable house a perennial centre of talk and toddy. Every morning he would ‘cry in’ as he called it, to give Adora and his sister the benefit of the ‘news’ of the previous night.

‘And ye may haud to that!’ he would say of some fresh fact, naming the source of his information, ‘I threepit doon the man's throat it was a lee, but fegs, he proved it!’

For, as was natural, the whole valley of the Dee and all the region between the three Cairnsimuirs were thick with rumours of every sort. Each day a new ‘clue’ was discovered. There were men from Edinburgh. There were all the peace officers in the Stewartry. There were amateurs also, not a few. And there was a rumour, given for what it was worth, of a certain awful Bow Street Runner, more to be dreaded than the murderer himself, who had been set upon the trail by the Lady of Lowran herself.

Outwardly it was a peaceful life which the two women led at the Gairie cottage in the time of the falling leaf. Kind Adam gave them their potatoes and peatleading. In the idle summer weeks, ‘twixt hay and harvest,’ he set his men to chop wood and ‘clean up about the place.’ He sent them down his own

household yarn to spin which, in days when an entire family wore cloth woven from the produce of its own flocks, was something considerable. His wife, he said, when explaining the matter, was 'juist for a' the world a woman abandoned to curds-and-why and the settin' o' a' mainer o' hens' eggs!'

Adora had plenty of time on her hand for her task. She had been trained for this, and with the quiet and the assured peace of her new abode there came the need to do something to clear up the terrible double mystery which had overshadowed all the lives connected in any way with hers. The girl felt her intellect sharpened for the duty. She knew, without ever actually thinking it, that she was cleverer than any one in the neighbourhood. Her mind followed a clue instinctively, coldly, for itself—even as she had read mathematics for pleasure in the old days at the schoolhouse, while her father was dissertating lengthily upon the beauties of ancient literature.

So, like a machine, Adora set herself to the task of the solution of the problem, dispassionately, impersonally, with regulated speed and trained precision. What impelled her? For no machine, however perfect, can do its work without a motive power. Certainly no mere abstract love of justice, which is a passion with some.

It might have been love—though if so, Adora herself would probably be the last to know it. Love? Well, perhaps. But for whom?

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Her position, in the complete retirement half concealment of the little house in the Gairie loaning, prevented her from following up any clues on the spot. She could not go to the Boreland or be seen on the Glebe Road, she could not examine the spot where as the spring night drew to morning Sandy Ewan had gripped his last handful of earth and weeds. Nor yet to the Great House of Lowran, guarded by Jonathan Grier, and inhabited by two women who hated her. Least of all could she venture near House of Muir, which remained in the hands of the lowest of the law's myrmidons, deputy substitutes of the sheriff's officer at St. Cuthbertstown.

No, it was clear to Adora Gracie that with no more than her own unaided individual judgment, she must clear and disentangle the true from the false, and find the way of deliverance for those who had been staunchly her friends in the day of her tribulation.

So day after day she set herself, during the long hours of work, while Aline glided about like a noiseless fairy, never interrupting, never leaving her wholly alone, to trace out the course of events, line upon line, with the aids of the calendar, the district newspapers and the local road maps which Adam McQuhirr loaned her. She made few written notes, and those chiefly at the close of the day, when, as was her custom, she walked up into the fields behind the cottage to a little look-out knoll, where

was a standing stone much used by cattle as a rubbing-post. This was her study.

Here, her thoughts of the day became clarified, as the cool of evening struck inward upon her bared head. All that she had considered during the working hours drew to a point. She knew not that she was beautiful as she stood there in the rich glow of evening. She would have taken it as an insult if any one had told her so—or at least, almost any one.

She was the thinker, the resolver, the only person in Lowran capable of setting apart once for all Truth and the lie. That she had been born a girl seemed to Adora a pity. She could have done so much more as a man. Still since that could not be helped, she must do the best she could, in spite of the drawbacks with which an unkind Nature had handicapped her.

In those days of rule-of-thumb she reconstituted the crime according to the latest and most approved methods. She ruled nobody out. She rose with a mind perfectly open to conviction every morning. She imagined Roy, furious with anger against the author, actual or supposed, of his long imprisonment, hastening to face Sandy Ewan. She saw the quarrel, the slow provocation growing in the horse face, the quick outbreak, the blow, the fatal return. She even imagined the cooler, more deliberate carrying out of Sharon's crusade against the lairds. All was possible to Adora, that is, as a working hypothesis—till she found a better.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Strange were the places her soul passed through, bound to a body quietly going to and fro before a spinning wheel, during these weeks. But each day lessened the circle, and made her action clearer. And that action must be—she saw it every day more clearly, to find Sidney Latimer. Dead or alive, she must find him.

The problem of what had become of the young laird was sufficiently difficult. The wise folk of the law, both those of home produce and the imported, had failed utterly. His own friends were at a loss. The most active researches that had been carried on had proved ineffectual, and were gradually being dropped.

How then could a girl, practically confined to a two-roomed house and a scanty round of fields, succeed in that which so many had attempted in vain? Well, for one thing they had not Adora's equipment or Adora's knowledge, nor was it possible that they could possess these.

It may seem a strange, almost an inhuman thing to say, yet it is true that not in the years when she could scarce count her lovers upon her ten fingers, but in the course of this anxious solitary quest did the girl find her soul.

And the first resolve which solidified in her was a strange one. It was this. Upon a night after dark, when there was a moon— but not too brilliant a moon, she would go alone to the Marches of Barnbarroch.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

## THE WOLF'S CUB

Aline knew that there was that on the mind of her little maid which preyed sorely upon its peace. But with the reticent wisdom of age she said little, proffering only the fine sympathy of silence in which she was an adept. So when Adora, without explanation, informed her that she meant to be absent a part of the evening upon business of importance, Aline the gentle sighed, knowing it to be no affair of sweethearts' trysting, and—offered her a pistol which had certainly not been loaded for a hundred years. Adora declined smilingly the doubtful advantage of this weapon. But she exhibited to the shuddering gaze of Aline the ornamented clasp-knife which Sharon, the ex-smuggler, had brought from Spain, and the very sight of which—open—as Aline said, 'made you think of murder.'

Since, however, at that time little else was thought about over twenty parishes, the aspect of the weapon was less bloodthirsty than the old maid's exclamation might lead one to suppose.

Still Adora was armed. She knew how to defend herself. For Sharon had been at pains to teach her the Spanish art of the knife-play, as he himself had practised it for the favours of a certain Magarato girl of Astorga in the open ground behind the huge

gaunt cathedral of Leon.

Adora's purpose was clear. She felt that the key of the whole mystery lay in or about the Marches of Barnbarroch. Very well, she would go there then, and at the time she had chosen.

At last the suitable night arrived. It was just at the time when the moon emerges from the crescent, a misty night with the mild haze of autumn suspended about the height of the tree-tops. There is no use in saying that Adora's heart did not beat, or that she was perfectly without fear. Being young and a woman she was afraid, deadly afraid. But none the less she went—because it was a necessary part of her plan.

As Adora approached the Marches of Barnbarroch, the moon was already low and the night serene, but the pearly haze rendered all outlines indistinct and the whole landscape full of soft mystery. But Adora's mind was bent upon one purpose, even as a steel trap is set. She saw only what she had gone forth to look for, and she marched on with eager and unfaltering determination. She passed up the long Glen of Pluckamin, the moon struggling to sift through the tall trees, and dappling sparsely the path with curdled light. She paused for a moment at the top, in order to gaze abroad across the heathery moorland which ran ten miles to the west and north in long undulations, unbroken save for a few such bowl-like 'cleuchs' as the Marches of Barnbarroch.

## STRONG MAC

Adora laid herself down on a flat rock overlooking the deep gully. She could see through the faintly frosted moonshine the shapes of the stones and the white wimple of the track as it descended and again ascended. But nothing moved. Every sprig of heath, leaf of alder, and frond of bracken seemed carved in ebony, and a mystic peace brooded over all.

Yet it was here, in this quiet dell, that Sidney Latimer's bloody coat had been found. Here the footmarks had been the thickest and the most deeply indented— here (and the thought came to her with a kind of thrill) she and her father had met Daid McRobb with a flesh wound on his leg. Adora was near her purpose now. So drawing a long breath, and with her hand on Sharon's Leonese knife, she rose to her feet and sent forth a far-reaching musical cry.

'Daid! Daid! Oh-h-h, Daid!'

It was the call with which she had often witched the truants back to school, when her father's severity had frightened them to the rocks and caves of the earth. As interpreted by the youth of Lowran it meant at once forgiveness and protection.

Quite unconsciously Adora stood beside the 'standing stane' which had been a Druid monument. She leaned her elbow on the grooved altar-top and waited.

'Daid! Daid! Oh-h-h Daid!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

As girls that call the kine to the milking bars in the quiet of eventide, so at the gate of the unknown Adora called. Thrice the cry went forth without an answer, but at the fourth, hardly were the words out of her mouth, when apparently descending from heaven, Daid the Deil stood by the girl's side. He pressed his fingers to her lips, at the same time pulling her down among the loose boulders, where she had stood, smothered to the waist in heather.

'Hush,' he said, 'he's yonder!'

The two lay on the lip of the cup, which was cut through the centre from verge to verge by the six-foot dyke that gave the place its name of the Marches of Barnbarroch. They could see the gap in the dry stone wall— its shadow pale blue in the misty moonlight and lengthening as the moon westered. Parts of the wrecked gate had been used for firewood, and what remained now lay in the gap—a mere heap of posts and bars broken and splintered.

But all was strangely still and peaceful under the moon. Nevertheless, Daid took the girl's hand to pull her away. But a vague expectation held her. Down by the heap of splinters in the darkest of the gap it seemed to Adora that something had moved. She shook off Daid's hand and looked long and eagerly. Perhaps— perhaps after all she had not come there for nothing.

And as she looked, a small black thing, toad-like and squat, moved to the pile of wood as if to

## STRONG MAC

collect some of the debris. So slow and deliberate were its movements that several times Adora thought she must have been mistaken.

But no—the creature was nearer now than it had been when first she caught sight of it. She could hear Daid breathing supplications in her ear to come away.

‘For the love o’ God, come!’ he said, invoking that which, most certainly, the poor outcast knew nothing about.

Then, sudden as two hands clapped together, something happened which might well have daunted the stoutest heart. Perhaps some flutter of woman’s apparel, or some bright glinting of button or metal clasp advertised the presence of spies to the unknown thing crouched in the hollow beneath. At any rate, in a moment the creature’s painful deliberation of movement was changed into a rapid crab-like rush straight up the rough hillside, the slaty stones clinking and spinning from under its feet.

With a hoarse cry Daid thrust Adora behind him, snatching her Spanish knife as he did so.

‘Quick!’ Doon wi’ ye! Doon the brae! Rin! For God’s sake, rin!’ he cried.

But he himself stood still, with Sharon’s knife in his hand.

And be it said that for once in her life Adora obeyed the male without question.

It was not that she was simply afraid.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Something horrid, deformed, troglodyte, about the creature raised a whirlwind of terror, wild and vague, in Adora's bosom. But Daid, to whom apparently the mystery was no mystery, remained behind, standing upon his defence.

At the foot of the hill, when Adora glanced round, she saw the boy, immovable, with Sharon's knife still in his hand. He was wiping it on his sleeve, but of his demon assailant nothing whatever was to be seen.

Daid descended the hill tranquilly and with circumspection. Then he rendered Adora back her knife in silence.

'And noo,' he said, 'what is't that ye are wantin' wi' Daid?'

'David,' began the girl softly, 'in the gaol of St Cuthbertstown there lie two innocent men. I want you to help me to get them out!'

The boy stood a moment uncertain, as if balancing something in his mind.

'If I do help ye,' he said, 'ye will sweer never to tell what ye hae seen the nicht! Nor say ocht about this?'

He touched the wound in his leg, still bare and unhealed.

Adora promised, and the boy, reassured on that point, gradually unbending, gave the girl more of his confidence.

'Aweel,' he said, with a more friendly accent, 'tell me what it is ye want!'

## STRONG MAC

There was nothing absolutely hostile in the boy's attitude. But it was evident that he was there in a posture of defence— Daid contra mundum. And it behoved him to be wary even with an ancient friend like Adora. The girl resolved to give him her full confidence.

'I want you to help me,' she said, 'to find out if Sidney Latimer is murdered or not, and who it was that killed Sandy Ewan.'

'Let the second bide,' said Daid the Deil, 'they will never hang ony man for that. But I'll help ye wi' the findin' o' the Laird o' Lowran, gin he is to be fand aboon the earth or oot o' the water.'

The girl gazed at the strange ragged outcast who had once been her pupil in the law-abiding Presbyterially examined school of Lowran.

'What do you know about it?' she said, breathlessly; do you think he is dead?'

'Them that are oot a' nicht on the face o' the muir, wi' nae bed but the heather, ken a heap o' things that folk in hooses o' biggit stane hear nocht about!' replied the boy, enigmatically.

'But what do you know?' demanded Adora. 'If you have any care or love for Roy McCulloch or his father, tell me at once.'

'I hae nane o' either for his faither,' said the boy sulkily; 'as for him, he may hang by the neck for ocht that Daid cares!'

'Then you care as little for Roy McCulloch?' she said, diplomatically; 'I thought you loved him!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Loved him—aye, maybe as well as you, for a your talk,' cried the boy, suddenly stung into hot anger. 'Do you love him, as ye caa' it— you that's sae glib wi' siccan awesome words? 'Love' indeed! Wha speaks about lovin' fowk till they're deid?'

This was coming somewhat near home, and Adora wished to change the venue.

'You wish to save him, don't you,' she said—'to help me to save him—that is?'

But Daid had seen too many of the hithers and thithers of life to be put off with mere verbal counters.

'I'll tell you,' he said, turning and facing her in the deep darks of Pluckamin Cleuch, into which the last struggling slants of the moonlight could hardly enter, 'I'll tell ye, Adora Gracie, what ye aiblins dinna ken yoursel', aye, and what maybe will no thank me for tellin' ye. It's this— lasses dinna gang at mirk midnight to the Mairches o' Barnbarroch, an' it be na for the sake o' them they love (as ye caa' it) wi' a' their hearts! Noo what yin is it? Is it for the sake o' Laird Latimer, that's maybe deid an' buried, an' maybe no—or is it for Roy McCulloch, that rins a sair chance o' being hanged for murderin' a man he never laid hand upon?'

The boy, who had spoken with extraordinary vehemence, unexpectedly seized Adora by the wrists, as if to compel her to answer. The girl, taken by surprise, temporised after the manner of women.

'Why do you ask such foolish questions?' she

said, trying to shake herself loose from his grasp.

‘Aye, but are they foolish?’ demanded the boy, keeping his grip and thrusting his face nearer to hers; ‘they are juist this foolish, that if it be for the sake of Laird Latimer that ye cam’ to Barnbarroch at this time o’ nicht— then Roy McCulloch had better be hanged in peace in St Cuthbert’s gaol.’

‘Why would it be better?’ said Adora, as the boy paused.

‘Aye, better for him than to gang on wi’ a broken heart— to see you ridin’ to the kirk as my Leddy o’ Lowran!’ cried the boy, his teeth gleaming in the moonlight like those of a wolf cub—which indeed he was.

And Adora Gracie, who feared not the face of man, quailed before him.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

DEVIL'S WORK

The pair went down the Cleuch of Pluckamin together. At intervals, as if to guard their rear from attack, the boy turned and listened keenly and with the most anxious suspicion. Adora listened too, but she heard nothing save the hooting of the cue owl, the chatter of discontented blackbirds squabbling on their perches in the pine thickets, together with that faint under-rustle of mystery which may be heard at night in every wood—the coming and going of beast and bird and creeping thing upon their errands, private and personal, under the friendly cover of the dark.

But the particular creeping thing which had taken the brae at the March of Barnbarroch like a charging tiger, seemed to have relinquished the chase, for the boy turned away satisfied.

‘Mind, ye are no to come hereawa’ again, or I’ll no answer for ‘t!’ he adjured his companion. ‘It michtna be canny.’

‘But how about yourself, Daid?’ the girl said, kindly, ‘are you in no danger?’

‘Danger? Me?’ answered Daid, with marked surprise. ‘Aye, maybe— but no mair than ordinary!’

‘Then you will find out about Sidney Latimer, as you promised,’ she continued; ‘you will come to Aline McQuhirr’s cottage and bring me news of what

you find out down by the Gate House of Cally!’

I hae said I will, and I will,’ the boy answered steadily, on the day after the morn. It will be in the gloamin’ likely—gye and late. Ailie will be in her bed when I come. Ye can tell her what lee ye like, but ye maun come doon to the White Yetts to meet me!’

‘She trusts me,’ said Adora, simply. ‘I can come and go when I will.’

‘She has need!’ returned Daid; ‘it’s no every lass that wad venture as far, wi’ nae ither convoy than Daid the Deil.’

It was true, Aline of the Silver Hair had indeed great confidence in her guest. But then the gracious silent perception of the old gentlewoman made it clear to her that anything of the nature of a common intrigue was wholly foreign to the character of Adora Gracie. So, from the cottage at the loaning-end, Adora went and came unquestioned and unreprieved, at hours when even a roving ploughman, in the first rush of young blood, would scarce have ventured to be abroad.

It was long past the set time for his return, and yet Daid the Deil had not appeared. Adora, knowing in what a secret hell of dangers and uncertainties it was the boy’s lot to dwell, grew seriously alarmed for his safety. She had slipped out by the door of the little cot house, and now stood at the gable-end near the peat stack, under the full glow of the moon, now increased in light and favour, sailing high in the serene heavens.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

The night was large and gracious. The deep tranquillity of a still autumn night held everything breathless. It was chillish, evidently making for frost towards the morning, and occasionally a broad ash leaf, nipped at its base, came noiselessly balancing down.

Never had girl expected lover as Adora did Daid's coming. What if she had sent him to his death? It was possible—nay, remembering the Marches of Barnbarroch even something more than that.

At last, about four in the morning, he came. But how? Beaten and torn and stamped almost out of all image of humanity, Daid the Deil it was who crept out of some secret wild-beast lair into the clear moonlight and the homely smell of the fire-warmed hearths of men.

And seeing him thus, come from doing her message, Adora touched to the heart, suddenly wailed aloud. Then Aline, who, faithful to her word, had neither watched nor spied upon her guest, but only lain sleepless, threw a garment about her and sped out to her assistance.

Between them they lifted the boy within, and laid him on the bed from which Aline had just risen. There was, as always in the cottage, water hot by the 'keeping coal' upon the fire. So, carefully and with suppressed sobs of pitifulness, the two women removed the saturated rags from about Daid's poor body, washed the wounds and bruises which they

found there in abundance, softened the matted masses of his hair, and wrapped the boy in such luxury of white lavender-scented linen as he had never imagined to be anywhere in the world.

All the time he was conscious. His eyes followed them about as they went and came, but with a kind of desire, dumb and wistful, which Adora could not explain. Still they found upon him no deadly wound, nothing to account for the terrible exhaustion of the patient.

Yet he seemed somehow dazed— lying and gazing at them, dumb, helpless, pathetic. It was evident that, for the moment at least, he was beyond speech. For during all their tendance of him no sound had escaped his lips, except once or twice a low inarticulate moan, as if forced from the depths of his being.

On the other hand his desire to drink was insatiable. Adora had already brought him two full jugs of water cold from the well. It was Aline, however, Aline the gentle, who, lifting up his head to administer some cooling draught, made a gruesome discovery.

The boy's tongue was gone — in its place a terrible wound!

Then, both together, the two women broke down, crying bitterly and rocking to and fro, while Daid gazed mournfully at them without tears. Then Aline, recognising that this was more responsibility than they could undertake alone, resolved to go for

assistance— much as they wished to keep secret the presence of Daid McRobb in the cot house of the Gairie.

The farmer came down instantly at the sound of his sister's voice underneath his window. And just as ready was he to saddle a horse from the stable that he might ride to Cairn Edward for the doctor. But before this was done, Daid had been removed to the garret of the little cot house. Good-hearted Adam offered the hospitality of the Gairie, but as half the parish made the farm parlour a place of call, Aline declined, much to Adora's relief. Not only must the boy be nursed, but here was a third mystery to be solved.

'Then if ye willna bring the laddie up to the Gairie, I will gie ye a hand to carry him up to your ain baulks!' said Adam McQuhirr, to whose strong arms the transport of a boy like Daid, even up a crazy ladder, was a light and easy task.

It was six of the morning when Dr. Erasmus Steven arrived at the Gairie— a, wise, silent man, whose eyes had seen curious sights in their time, but whose tongue had never mentioned one of them— not even to his wife. Which is saying no little for a country practitioner in a district where, next to an overruling Providence, the distributor of news is the greatest bearer of blessings.

The tall doctor could hardly stand upright in the garret of Aline's cottage, but he went about his duties with that air of efficient gentleness which not

palatial halls would have enhanced.

Finally he motioned for the two women to go out— Aline, who had stood trembling, and Adora, who had been his helper, holding herself as sedate and composed as if she had done nothing but assist a surgeon all her life. Then, seeing Daid a little recovered, he got out his sheaf of paper slips on which he was accustomed to write down his notes and prescriptions.

‘Do you hear me and understand what I say?’ he asked, looking the boy in the eyes, as the grey light of the forenoon fell upon him on the little bed beneath the skylight in Aline's garret room.

Daid nodded. The dazed look left momentarily his eyes.

‘Then,’ said the doctor, ‘write me the name of the man who did this, on the sheet of paper I put before you. I am a magistrate. It is a dastardly affair, and, as soon as may be, we must get to the bottom of it!’

The expression on the face of the boy never changed as he listened. He took the pencil and wrote. With a glow of satisfaction on his impassive face the doctor watched him. But this faded as he read the three words in Daid's laborious boyish script.

‘I dinna mind.’

Dr. Erasmus paused and frowned as when he had an awkward case to diagnose. He pushed the paper back again into Daid's hands, saying, ‘Tut,

tut, this will never do—such a thing could never have taken place without your being aware of the personality of the perpetrator. And consider the importance of the information. It may have been the murderer of the late Mr. Ewan and of Mr. Sidney Latimer, into whose hands you have fallen. Try and recollect yourself. I ask it in the interests of justice.’

Again certain words were painfully traced out.

‘I dinna mind.’

The doctor, thinking that perhaps he had been over-hasty, or that he had made his appeal in a manner too official, tried again.

‘But, my boy, you do not realise what this means to all of us. It may be your good fortune to put the law on the track of a dangerous murderer. Nay, my poor lad, there is not the slightest doubt that a very serious attempt to murder has been committed on your own person. I have seen many a one succumb to injuries far less serious than yours!’

The boy lay looking up at Dr. Erasmus Steven as if dazed by the flow of words. He made no endeavour to take the pencil and paper again.

The doctor decided on a last attempt, though he saw that his patient's strength was failing.

‘You are prevented from speaking indeed,’ he said, ‘but your eyesight is mercifully preserved to you. You have the hearing of your ears. Tell me how this terrible mutilation happened. Add, if possible, a brief description of your assailant. It may help us to the arrest of the culprit, and even lead to

consequences more important still! You will certainly be rewarded!’

As if driven to it against his will the boy seized the pencil and wrote long. The doctor watched him eagerly. At last he fell back exhausted. The pencil rolled on the floor. His eyes closed. Dr. Erasmus Steven almost shook with excitement. What if he, a plain country practitioner, should have within his grasp the heart of the mystery which had so long perplexed his ablest legal friends.

He read the words which the boy had written, clearly enough expressed with his own official pencil.

‘I heard nocht — I saw nocht — I ken nocht — mind your ain business.’

With unabated good humour Dr. Erasmus Steven retired defeated. He could not break down the boy's reserve, but he had sufficient contempt for the methods of the fiscal not to report the case at St. Cuthbertstown. If there was anything to be learned, he would learn it first— he and not another. The women, who had so strangely taken it into their heads to nurse the boy might perhaps succeed where he had failed. But they did not know what they were undertaking. Injuries of that kind were slow and difficult to heal. There would be time enough to find out by whom, and for what cause, so cruel a mutilation had been inflicted upon a boy. Dr. Steven knew that time is the best detective in the world, and that woman is an excellent second.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

So in the 'upstairs' of the little but-an'-ben at the Gairie loan end abode Adora's messenger, the secret of his disaster grimly shut up within his own heart. His eyes, indeed, followed every motion wistfully, especially when he and Adora were alone together. Sometimes when he heard the voice of the Dominie below he would shrink, and for the moment appear uneasy. Perhaps he was remembering the nights when Adora used to let him sleep about the peat house at the back of the school in Lowran and when the Dominie, less tender-hearted, came looking for him with an ash plant.

One day, of his own accord, Daid signified a desire for a pencil and paper. By this time he was getting a little stronger and could even be left occasionally to himself for an hour or two. These were the words which he wrote upon the paper.

'When is he to be tried?'

'In Drumfern—at the Spring Circuit,' answered Adora, instantly.

Daid fell back on his pillow, and though he only lifted his eyes to the green bubble on Aline's skylight, there was a prayer in them that reached infinitely higher.

Then he wrote:

'Leave me the pencil, if ye please!'

So, his request granted, all that morning, at intervals, Daid wrote painfully, word by word, with long rests between the sentences. Adora would come on him again and again with his eyes closed, either

deep in thought or recovering after exhaustion.

At last, about noon, Daid the Deil with a weak hand delivered his completed message to Adora.

'Laird Latimer is no deid — they pressed him for a man to fecht on the King's ships, thinking he was some ither body. But he got aft, and has gane to fecht Bony, because ye wadna hae him — the truth as sure as daith — David Mc-Robb.

It was an important—an all-important communication, even though it revealed nothing as to the cause of Daid's own misfortune. In an instant much that had been dark was clear to Adora Gracie, though not all. Sidney Latimer's escape from death she had been in a manner prepared for, though why he continued silent when innocent men were in danger of their lives had not previously been explained.

'They pressed him,' Daid had said. That in itself was likely enough. Pressing parties made the tour of the coast of Solway, and one likely young fellow was as liable as another to be knocked on the head and hurried aboard ship, in these times when recruits were so hard to get for his Majesty's marine, presently at war, both with the Old World and the New.

The truth of the second part of the message was more difficult for Adora to accept. If a young man could not have all that he wanted, it was surely weak to run away. And—at any rate he ought to have let his mother know where he was. Still, Sidney

Latimer had never been like other young men of his class or station. He was a spoilt child. Even as a man Adora recalled his sulks in the matter of Strong Mac, and her final rebuke to him.

It was quite possible, she thought, that such a man might take himself off to the wars without a word said to any one. It was possible he might even think himself in some way quits with Adora by so doing. Young men were apt to take curious things into their heads—of which she was not without her experiences.

How serious might not such childishness turn out to be in its consequences! Yet it was quite possible that, pressed for his Majesty's marines, and escaping by chance, or by some revelation of his quality, Sidney Latimer had taken service with the land forces either in Spain or America.

Nay, was there not a certain friend of his of whom he had spoken, an officer in the army of my Lord Wellington, presently under arms in the Peninsula? Doubtless he would make his way thither. As to this there was no certainty. Yet if Adora could not get word to Sidney Latimer in time, Roy McCulloch (and his father) would almost certainly be hanged for the murder of a living man.

This, then, was the problem which Adora Gracie had to solve. Sidney Latimer was alive. But if he did not appear at the trial of the McCullochs at the Drumfern sessions, innocent blood would be spilt. Though she tried more than once, Daid could

give her no information as to the whereabouts of the missing man. She did not know the name of his friend in the army, nor yet with any certainty whether he was still with my Lord Wellington. A letter—a messenger? But how could she depend on that letter or messenger being in time, or discovering Sidney Latimer in the constantly changing camps of the British army, then fighting a succession of the most hardly contested battles of the Spanish campaign?

Then as to a messenger, whom could she trust to go?

Swift as a flash, the solution came to Adora, as all great thoughts come.

She must go herself— to Spain— to the armies. At whatever risk, at whatever cost, go she must. It was the sole means of preserving the McCullochs and—of preventing Sidney Latimer from being the cause, through his own sullen temper of the death of two innocent men.

In sum, there seemed to Adora nothing for it but this —she herself must go to Spain and bring back Sidney Latimer to the Drumfern sessions. No matter what people said, she must seek him—she must find him.

No matter (and this was the most serious reflection of all to Adora Gracie), no matter what Sidney Latimer himself might think, she must bring him back to do his duty.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

THE CAPTAIN OF THE 'FORTUNE'S QUEEN'

That long serrated line of indigo blue, flecked with touches of remote white, was the coast of Spain. Adora looked at it with a heart that struggled to be brave. She had done this for what—for whom? The little household gods of the schoolhouse, hitherto stored in Cairn Edward, had passed into the possession of others that she might come hither. She had left her father a burden on Aline. An additional loan (Adora thought of it with shame) had been obtained from the farmer of Gairie through Aline's mediation. All these things weighed on the heart of the young girl beyond even the thought of the strange country and the warring, unknown peoples among whom she was soon to find herself.

On Adam McQuhirr's part there had been great willingness to lend, even to give, with the sole stipulation that his wife should not be told of his generosity.

'It wasna her that brocht the siller into the hoose, and it winna hurt her no to ken how it gangs oot,' was Adam's view of the matter.

But his kindness had gone further. Most opportunely he remembered that when a laddie he had 'shorn on the next rig' along with a callant who had afterwards taken to the sea. 'And they tell me,' he added, 'that he's up to the neck in the Portugal

traffic. It's maistly the Oporto wine, ye ken, that the Government are sae keen to hae fowk drink nooadays, and, fegs, if there's a drappie gaun Ebie Sinclair is fell sure to be in the thick o't!

So after many backs and forths of letter-writing unkindly to the farmer's stiff fingers, Adam McQuhirr had set Adora on board Captain Ebenezer Sinclair's ship at Port Glasgow. As it happened, he had business, at Falkirk—a debt to collect (as he asserted), for 'some twal' score o' as guid hoggets as ever gaed to tryst or market. And gin the man bena at Falkirk on the Monday, he is sure to be i' the Grassmarket o' Edinburgh i' the Wednesday!

At any rate it was obviously an easy thing for Adam to see Adora on board the Fortune's Queen as she lay off Port Glasgow, ready to spread her wings for flight, along with other twenty sails, escorted by three of his Majesty's war frigates as a convoy, and their destination, as at present announced, the mouth of the Tagus.

Ebenezer Sinclair proved to be a gruff, bearded man whose vocabulary of Galloway Scots had taken on no other sea-change except a slight flavour of the Tail of the Bank. He received Adora without enthusiasm, indeed with a certain daunting severity.

'Ye are a daft lassie,' he said, glowering at her under his eyebrows, 'to gang sae far for ony man, and into siccan a country. But—I kenned your faither afore ye, and onything that Captain Ebenezer Sinclair can do for ye shall no be found wantin'!

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Once on deck he called Adora to him as he stood conning the ship down the narrow muddy river, and in the intervals of proclaiming Anathema Maranatha upon all sailor-men, he gave her sundry counsels of utility.

'I'm a rough man, lassie,' he said, 'ye will often hae to excuse my ill-scrapit tongue, but, ye see, thae waistrils gathered aff the seeven seas wadna understand ony ither kind o' talk. But it will be as weel for ye to say, gin ony body speers, that Ebenezer Sinclair o' Port Glasgow is your uncle, and that, as ye are on his business, he will answer ony questions that folk hae to ask. And when ye win to the army, haud nae talk wi' this yin or that, neither wi' sargeant's cane nor cockit hat, but gang straight to my Lord Wellington himsel'! An' when ye meet on wi' him, says you to him, 'My Lord, I am a decent Scots lass, the niece o' Captain Ebenezer Sinclair o' Port Glasgow, that has dune an obleegement or twa for your Lordship in his time, and naething said about it!' Dinna be feared o' his crooked neb an' his grand ways. Haud till him, and aye keep mindin' him o' your Uncle Ebenezer. Then oot wi' your askin', lassie— an' the Lord be mercifu' to ye! For me, I wuss I had been a younger man to hae a lass come that far for the sake o' me. No but what I hae seen the day—aye, and let it slip awa' frae me like a slack-handed villain! And noo I am ower auld for ony young thing to gang to the doorstep for the sake o' my auld cankered veesage, wrinkled and wizened up

like a year-auld tawtie!’

So, as Adora stood on the deck of the Fortune's Queen of Port Glasgow, it was as niece of the captain and owner of that stout brig that she made her passage. She had a Spanish grammar and dictionary constantly in her hand, and she laboured hard at the language, enlarging the scanty vocabulary which Sharon McCulloch had taught her during those summer evenings, in the intervals of his tales of the old-time free-trade and his explanation of the nicks on the handle of the Leonese knife.

Besides the master there were two young officers on board, the first and second mates, both hailing ‘oot o’ the Clyde.’ John White, the first mate, was a tall, blonde son of Anak, with a sort of gentle perspiration always breaking over him, which, as a matter of course, caused the crew to dub him Sweatin’ Jock. The other, Edgar Hillowton, was a stoutish thick-set little man with a tremendous voice, and a fist like the Day of Judgment. So that if the crew had any nickname for him, they confined it strictly to the forecastle.

A well-found ship was the Fortune's Queen. There was no lack of sound viand or excellent water on board, nor was the ‘auld man’ at all stingy with a drop of grog upon occasion. But it was a working ship. If any A. B. did not do the whole duty of man aboard, he heard about it unto demonstration, and the next time was apt to do it on the run.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Adora thought it was beautiful to see the fine swift war frigates working the convoy like shepherd's dogs, bringing up the laggards, restraining the clean-heeled, and, as often as a clump of sails showed suspect above the horizon, forming up for defence, the black muzzles of the guns at the portholes, ready to fight to the death for the commerce committed by them. Verily, as our great enemy said, in 1813, we were a nation of shopkeepers—only the shopkeepers could fight and did fight for their shops, and above all for the right of the highway of the sea upon which to bring home their wares.

The coast of Spain was steel-grey and ragged in the distance, when there shot out towards the convoy a swift Basque schooner, crusted to the masthead with the salt Biscay spray. The three British frigates instantly closed in. There ensued a going and coming of messages, hot consultations, and in an hour the direction of the whole convoy was changed. San Sebastian had been taken with infinite fury and shame. The Port of Bilbao was in British hands, and my Lord Wellington was calling up every soldier and every pound of provend and ounce of ammunition for his dash across the Pyrenees into France.

Among others, the Fortune's Queen received orders to cross the bar of the Nervion and disload her cargo at the quays of the port of Bilbao.

Through the white breaking surf the ship of

Captain Ebenezer Sinclair took her way to her new destination. The narrow Nervion with the straight quays of Bilbao on either side, seemed, after the leaping surges of Biscay, no more than an ugly ditch.

But on the other hand, and rising tier above tier up the hillside, Adora saw the white houses of the town of many sieges, and the wooded heights that stand about it. She heard the speech of the chill disdainful Basque folk, proud of their fueros, and their unknown ancient descent. Mixed with these were the soldiers of a dozen nationalities, British, Spanish, Portuguese, Brazilians, Hanoverians, Swiss. A clamour of voices, a swarm of men, not a woman to be seen anywhere—such was Adora's first impression of Spain from the ship's deck.

The captain of the *Fortune's Queen* was abundantly fitted to hold his own in such a scene. Never had the virtues of Gallwegian vocabulary, added to the powers of vituperation acquired along the water-front of fifty ports, stood the stout mariner in better stead. He sent Adora down to his cabin and saw to the closing of the portholes. Then he went on deck and expressed his opinions with a sober joyous freedom.

'It's as weel Mr. McPhail o' St. Cuthbert's disna hear me, or I wad hae sma' chance o' the next eldership when I get hame,' he confided to Jock White, his first mate, who stood by his side with a pistol in each pocket. 'But faith, this is nae place to

be askin' a blessin' afore meat in! The strong hand, the primed pistol, and the braid aith— them's the jockies that will bring ye safe hame to your wife an' sma' family! An' after that, ye can gang to the kirk three times ilka Sabbath to square the accoont, gin it happens that your conscience checks ye.'

And it is to be feared that in 1813 these were largely the moral principles of the Scot abroad. They have altered since, of course.

Now, Captain Ebenezer was a stout and valiant sailor, and he had kept the type of his farming-stock intact through years of sea-spray and wind-tan. Also his heart, unknown to himself, had grown warm for his girl passenger. He knew the peril of her journey, the wild places into which she must venture, and in especial he heard with terror and shame the unspeakable details of the sack of San Sebastian, the deepest disgrace with which the British army have ever been attainted. Small wonder, then, that he feared for Adora, and he resolved that he, a countryman and a bachelor, without a soul to mourn for him or the bond of tie domestic, should undertake the girl's task while she remained by the vessel, or if that would not content her, he would accompany Adora on her quest.

The next evening after supper he opened out his plan.

'Lassie,' he said, 'I am an auld carle, but like an aik tree in the plantin—gye an' sturdy about the girth. I will never tak' ony maiden's e'e for my

beauty, though some that I ken o' micht do waur than draw up wi' the auld sailor-man into a snug bit anchorage wi' white stanes about the door, and gravelled walks, and maybe a painted figurehead or twa set up aneath the flagstaff. But, lassie, that's neither here nor there—an' we'll e'en let that flee stick to the waa'.'

The captain of the Fortune's Queen rested his eyes a moment or two a little sadly on Adora, who sat with her slender pocket-book open before her. He had been changing ten of her slender store of English guineas into Spanish dollars, which now sat squatly before her in a canvas bag. Certainly Ebenezer Sinclair of the good ship Fortune's Queen had not made money by the exchange.

'Aweel, lassie,' he continued, seeing she did not answer, 'we'll say nae mair aboot that. Auld Captain Ebenezer made his bed lang syne, and noo them that he wad tak' winna hae him, and them that wad tak' him he wadna hae at a bargain. But, lassie, ye can look in the glass, and if ever on your travels ye come across onybody that micht pass for your born sister, you juist send word to the auld captain, and fegs, Ebenezer Sinclair will brush himsel' up, and pit on his Sunday coat, an' syne aff to try his luck!'

Adora smiled, but still said nothing. There was a little pile of dollars laid in a place by themselves which seemed to belong to nobody. These were the covenanted pieces for Adora's passage money, presently in dispute between them.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Na, na,' said the captain, 'na, na, lass. Your bite and your sup are neither here nor there! And faith, if ye count a' the repairs ye hae made in my wardrobe—no to gie the thing a mair intimate name—faith, I'm thinkin' the balance micht weel be on the ither side! When I cam' frae the Tail o' the Bank, I declare I had never a hale clout to sit me doon on—and now I micht dance the Heelant Fling afore the Queen hersel', God bless her, and never be shamed! Siller, na, faith! If there's ony siller gangin', it's Captain Ebenezer Sinclair that will hae to pay the piper.'

'But, captain,' said Adora, with genuine distress in her voice, 'it was agreed between us. Mr. McQuhirr of the Gairie told me himself that the charge for my passage was exceedingly reasonable, and, indeed, take it you must!'

And she pushed the little pile of pieces towards the old sailor, who looked at the dollars as if each might be expected to bite. Then he shook his head still more emphatically.

'Na, na, lassockie,' he said, 'Captain Ebenezer has no come to that o't yet, that he wad tak' the hard-won siller o' a Lowran lass wha has comed to a foreign land to save a lad frae the wuddy (gallows). And mair nor that, hearken you to me, mistress, ye are gangin' to nae misleard airmy by yoursel'—Captain Ebenezer Sinclair couldna sleep soond in his bunk for thinkin' ot! The ship is braw and safe wi' Sweatin' Jock White there and Lang-armed

## STRONG MAC

Hillowton to look after her, no to speak o' thae deevils o' artillerymen up there on the hillside wi' their pieces loaded to the muzzle. Na, na, Gallowa' is Gallowa', and it shall never be said that a Gallowa' man let a Gallowa' lass gang her lane into sic a deil's byke o' wickedness as the camp o' the allied armies. Guid's truth, no!'

And though Adora strove valiantly to carry out alone what she had imagined alone, the sturdy sober determination of the veteran was too much for her.

And when she left the gate of Bilbao with a pass from the governor, the stout sailorlike figure of Captain Ebenezer Sinclair marched at the right hand of her mule.

In vain in that land of cavaliers had she besought him to ride also.

'It's no for me at my time o' life to be temptin' Providence on ony beast's riggin',' was all his answer. And so he trudged along stoutly, with a complete pirate's armament at his belt, careless of the amusement the convoy caused to the entire garrison of Bilbao.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

ENEMY'S COUNTRY

Luckily for the little cavalcade which went forth from the gate of Bilbao, on the side which looks along the hill-foreheads towards San Sebastian, they came across many parties taking their way northeastward, with stores for the troops, arms and ammunition for headquarters. Among these were several transport officers who had been long in Spain and who knew Captain Ebenezer well. To them the master of ships frankly explained himself.

'Noo, hearken,' he said, 'ye ken Eben Sinclair frae Gallowa! Or if ye dinna, it's time ye did. His word is as guid as his aith, though whiles no juist sae convincin' amang sailor-folk. Weel, here is Eben, cut adrift frae his ship and wi' a bonny bit craft in tow. Noo, it's nae use speakin' to thae haerthen fowk. Them I'll shoot at the first word, gin yin o' them meddles the lass. But as for you, ye are bauld birkies and understand a guid Scots tongue. Noo the lass is no for you, nor for your like. She's my ain sister's dochter, gin it behoves ye to ken— and she is gaun to find a certain Captain Sidney Latimer that was last heard o' here in the King's airmies. So her and me are gangin' to my Lord Wellington to get news o' the lad. And if ony man, be he French or English, Scot, Irisher or black Don Dumbolino, sets a finger on the lass that's kin to Ebenezer Sinclair,

he will find himsel' shot oot o' hand, and then if he's no deid, my friend wi' the crookit nose will forthwith order him to be hanged for a wamin' to a blackguards. That's a'!

The headquarters of Lord Wellington's armies was presently at the village of Estella, a tumble of white houses with rickety green sun shutters, streets of alternate mud and ankle-deep dust, white as flour, a village that scrambled and struggled up a grey hillside in the heart of the Pyrenees. By its position Estella forms a natural stronghold, and all war commanders have striven for its possession, from the earliest guerillas who withstood the Roman arms to the last Carlists, who tried hard to put life into the bleaching bones of a dead cause.

But Estella was many long leagues across the mountains, the way thither perilous with desperate unfed men who cared not in what way, or from whose military train, their bellies were filled.

The last months of Wellington's sojourn in Spain were marked by the growing brigandage of the country populations, and by the stern methods of repression which in turn caused the Spaniards of the northwest to hate the British troops more bitterly than the French themselves.

Nor was this wholly the fault of the Spaniards. From the first they had lacked generals, and indeed officers of any rank, in whom they could have confidence. Their large armies never had any commissariat worthy of the name. Their troops in

the field were never fed save when partaking with British soldiers, never paid except out of the British army chests— above all, if they were caught plundering while near the provost-marshals of 'El Gran Lor' they were promptly and remorselessly hung.

Therefore, it was no wonder if the sack of San Sebastian rankled in the hearts of such men, and if, hungry and desperate, with winter closing in upon them, these starving bands flung themselves fiercely upon Wellington's rear, and cut off his details and provision trains as if he had been in an enemy's country.

Towards evening on the third day, after leaving Bilbao the small convoy of fourteen mules, with an equal number of muleteers, the four British transport officers, and our two voyagers arrived at the little hill village of Hemani. Indeed it was hardly a village— a 'farm town' rather, as they would say in Scotland—which denotes a large farm house with offices. Yet Hemani was almost like a fortress, its walls loopholed and ready for defence, the cluster of huts for herdsmen and labourers well away from the main buildings, while at the end of the little street was a venta, or public house, of the commonest kind, the immemorial haunt of brigands and broken men of all sorts.

No caution was used by the four British officers—all of them sergeants of commissariat, except one, a warrant officer on loan from a frigate.

They cared nothing for the muleteers, speaking to them as to so many dogs, and treating their silent resentment as sulkiness to be exorcised with blows and curses.

The chamber of their first lodging at Hemani was the common room of the venta. But the British sergeants, loudly swearing that the place was not good enough for an English dog-kennel (which was true enough), made bold to demand quarters of the owner of the farm, Don Juan Hemani, recently returned to his patrimony after a prolonged expulsion during the French occupation.

The night was already falling rapidly, and at these altitudes the cold begins to bite keenly. The sergeants hammered on the door with the butts of their guns and shouted impatiently for the inmates to open. At last with infinite creaking of bolts and jingling of chains the great door was opened, and a tall, stoop-shouldered old man stood before them, a lantern in his hand.

‘What might it happen to your Honours to require at the door of this poor house?’ said the man with the utmost formal politeness.

The four officers were about to brush past him with a rough word, after the manner of their kind. But Adora, who had not forgotten certain lessons in Spanish character which the ex-smuggler, Sharon McCulloch, had given her along with the Leonese knife, went forward and, taking the old man's hand, kissed it, saying in her pretty broken child's

Spanish, 'We ask only your hospitality for the night.'

The old man instantly took his lantern in the other hand and offered his arm to Adora.

Your Ladyship's house is at your service,' he said. Permit an old man to attend you to your chamber!'

So it came about that for that night Adora was lodged as a grandee of the first class, while in the wide kitchen or house-place, the three sergeants, the warrant officer, and Captain Ebenezer waited upon themselves.

Don Juan Hernani occupied two or three rooms of his large house. The rest had been completely gutted by the attentions of its last occupants, the soldiers of the Duke of Dalmatia. But, nevertheless, the old Spaniard proved himself an epicure after his kind. His herdsmen had brought him game from the hills in celebration of his return, and he prepared and cooked it in little casseroles in a tiny kitchen, attached to the larger sitting-room by a short passage. As he finished the preparation of each dish, he would transfer all the choicest portions to Adora's plate, putting up himself with a crust of bread soaked in gravy, and sending all the rest down to his guests in the kitchen. Adora and her friend. Captain Ebenezer, did their best to mediate between the sensitive exigencies of Spanish politesse and the rough-and-tumble of soldiers, whom the years of campaigning had accustomed to take the gifts of the gods without either 'Prithee' or

'By-your-leave!'

Meanwhile there were the fourteen muleteers. All day long they had been taking words and blows with a dangerous quietude. It now occurred to one of the Englishmen that they had better see how the Spaniards were spending their time.

'The brutes will get drunk, ten to one!' said Sergeant Taddy, who hailed from the leafy lanes and brambly hedges of Essex, where such methods of spending the evening are not uncommon. 'Anyway they will never be ready for the morning work unless we stir them up a bit! A little kicking never does a Don any harm!'

It was by such methods that the British soldier in Spain has left a name and fame most unsavoury in the country he delivered. So that today the general sympathy is more with the Frenchman who oppressed and enslaved than with the Briton who shed his blood to deliver. Which thing shows the advantage of personal good manners even in warfare.

Now, Ebenezer Sinclair, like a cautious old ship's captain, had insisted upon arrival, that the ammunition and valuable lading of the mules should be placed within the farm buildings of Hernani, and therefore out of reach of the muleteers and their allies—without, that is, their passing through the house of Don Juan, or breaking down the strongly barred gate of the alqueria. It was to this thoughtful naval prevision that the party now

owed its safety. For hardly had Sergeant Taddy and his friend, Warrant Officer Oswald, passed outside the door than a bullet whistled from the direction of the venta and flattened itself on the carved work of the lintel close to his

‘Back into cover!’ cried the sergeant. ‘To your muskets, boys! There’s fun forward!’

For though they were ready enough to plunder when they had the chance, as well as prone to abuse the Spaniards for ‘bally-banded scattermouches,’ these soldiers of the great Peninsular commander were never so well pleased as when there was prospect of a tight.

‘Can you load muskets?’ they asked Adora when they were back again in the kitchen.

‘No, but I can teach her!’ answered Captain Ebenezer promptly, before the girl had time to speak.

‘Well, go ahead then, captain, there are plenty in that rack over the mantelpiece. And keep an eye on the old Don,’ said Sergeant Taddy. ‘Blow out his brains if he tries any of his Dago tricks on true-born Britons.’

But Don Juan Hemani went calmly about the washing up of his dishes, doing it finically, rubbing the plates, breathing on and polishing the glasses, even examining them critically with one eye closed, and so on till he was satisfied.

Stray shots went off without. There were loud cries and shrill screams. The Englishmen looked at

## STRONG MAC

one another a little grimly, and sniffed the burnt powder.

'I think if these are only our muleteers,' said Taddy to Warrant Officer Oswald, 'the business will not be a long one.'

'If by the grace of God my particular rascal has come to try and steal my saddle bags, which are the property of his Majesty,' cried Sergeant Taddy, 'I shall have great pleasure in putting a bullet through him. I never saw a face and figure better fitted for being set up between a wall and a firing party.'

The cries took on more distinctness. The shouters seemed to be quite near the doors of the alqueria,

'San Sebastian! Come out, and die, robbers and murderers! Dogs of English! Remember San Sebastian and come out!'

'That we will!' said Sergeant Taddy, priming his musket. His pair of pistols lay ready on the table before him. 'If you refuse a Spaniard's invitation, he knifes you, so they say. If you accept, you die of the grub he gives you.'

'See here,' said Oswald, the warrant officer, to Captain Ebenezer, 'none of us can speak their beastly lingo. Just you ask the old fellow over there which is the way to a window or a balcony that will overlook his front door, will you?' Tell him he is to come himself— to go in front, too! And by the Lord, if he gives us away— well, there will be a good government pistol within two inches of his ear!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

All this while Don Juan was calmly proceeding with his after-dinner work of washing up. Adora and the captain went to him together, and then, by pooling their scanty store of Spanish, finally made him understand the request of the four English soldiers.

'These outside there are but sons of dogs,' he said, jerking his elbow towards the door, 'they will not venture here! They know Don Juan Hemani!'

'That may be,' said Captain Ebenezer in English, 'but these four gentlemen in the kitchen are somewhat hasty in their manner. You see, Senor Don, they are in charge of a considerable amount of military stores, and if they lose so much as a musket or a pound of powder it will be the worse for them.'

'The worse for some other folk first!' growled Warrant Officer Oswald, who had come to the door; 'do tell the old cockatoo to hurry up. We can't keep these noisy donkey prickers waiting all night!'

Adora managed to convey the substance though not the form of these observations to their host, who, hanging his towel over his arm to give it the benefit of the drying night air, led the way up a stone staircase in the angle of the wall.

Adora ascended along with the five men, chiefly that she might not be left alone in the great empty salon. In a few minutes they came out on a parapet, roughly made by joining two parallel walls together with broad flagstones. The space was about four feet

wide, and ran along the whole length of the front of the square of buildings constituting the alqueria of Hemani.

‘Don't let the rascals glimpse us!’ whispered the warrant officer. ‘I claim first pot shot.’

But the old Don was already some way along the battlements, his white hair flying in the wind. In the dim light of the pine knots and pitch torches that had been lighted below, they could see twenty or thirty men trying to force the great door which led into the arcaded courtyard, where the mule loads had been placed.

The old Spaniard ran towards them along the parapet waving his towel as if he had been chasing flies out of a room.

‘Go away!’ he cried in the country speech, ‘go away quickly. I am Don Juan Hemani, and I desire that my guests' property should be respected.’

‘Come down and help us, Don Juan,’ they answered him, ‘your father would have helped us! Aye, or your son Don Pedro either, who is with his partida in the mountains. These four English are of the men who sacked San Sebastian. We will do the same and worse to them. Open the doors to us, or we will bum your farmhouse about your ears, for a traitor and a spy!’

‘Burn and welcome,’ cried Don Juan, with unexpected spirit, ‘but while I live you shall not steal so much as an ounce of salt from the guests of my house of Hemani!’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

A volley of musketry from the Englishmen put a sharp end to the colloquy. They had stolen along under cover of the battlements, and now fired directly down on the group who, with a battering-ram made of the trunk of a fir-tree, were endeavouring to burst in the great door.

'That shook the rascals!' cried the warrant officer; 'give them another while they are on the quake. Quick, the pistols! They are near enough for that!'

And leaning over the walls, the four shot their pistols point blank into the cluster of struggling men beneath them. Adora could see many wounded, who limped away into shelter, while others lay on the ground motionless. Fierce yells and shouts filled the air. This time the noise seemed to come from all around the square of the alqueria. Also from the farther end, which was sheltered from sight, a red, unsteady light began to rise, pulsing against the volumes of rolling smoke which the breeze carried towards them over the dark quadrangle of buildings.

'They have fired the cattle fodder!' cried Don Juan, clasping his hands; 'it is all that the Frenchmen left. Between English thieves, French thieves, and one's own countrymen, the sooner a poor old man is quiet in the grave, the happier for him! And I have not had time to hide my glass and silver either!'

And with that he was hurrying away towards the ground floor.

'Stop him!' cried Sergeant Taddy, 'old Graciosa-Dios is going to open the gates to that howling crew. Stop him, or by heaven, sir, I'll stop him myself as quick as wink, with a bullet in the back! Stop there, I say, Senor Don.'

Something in the soldier's tone, even more than Adora's warning cry, caused Don Juan to turn back in time to prevent Sergeant Taddy from carrying out his threat.

'Captain Sinclair,' said the warrant officer, 'here are a pair of good navy pistols. They are all we can spare you, but you have plenty of muskets and ammunition of your own. We leave you here in charge of the main door. We must go and examine the other side, where the villains are trying to fire the buildings. Do not fail to shoot any one who tries to enter there. You see the door. If they bother you there, wait till they are within a yard of it and then even a sailor can't miss. If you lean far enough over, you can put the muzzle to the rascal's ear, and have the papist in Purgatory in two shakes of a cat o' nine tails!'

In a few moments the long parapeted southern wall of the alquerie was deserted, save for Adora and Captain Ebenezer, who, with his own armoury and the pair of pistols which he had confided to Adora, stood watching the great gate which the partida of muleteers and brigands had vainly tried to force.

Beneath, faintly visible, could be seen the pine trunk which had been used as a battering ram. A

man was lying behind it as if wounded. It was very dark, but along the ground there lay a mild phosphorescent mist which rendered objects faintly visible. In a little while it seemed to Captain Sinclair that the man behind the tree trunk had moved. He had been quite at the lower end. Now he was half way up and nearer to the door by at least a couple of yards.

‘Adora,’ said the old man softly, ‘is that man lying still?’

Adora looked intently. Her younger eyes could make out details more clearly.

‘He is moving,’ she answered at last, ‘and he is holding something dark in his hand as well.’

‘Keep away from the door,’ shouted Captain Ebenezer suddenly, ‘or I fire!’

The man hastily threw something in the direction of the great door, and at the same moment the captain's piece cracked. The man broke into a run towards the woods, but presently stumbled and fell on his face. The projectile which he had launched at the door struck it heavily, rebounded a little, and lay between the bottom of the door and the tree trunk. From this last a spark of light crawled slowly towards it.

‘That is a slow match,’ said the old man, ‘and I am nothing of a shot or I could cut the line!’

‘Give me the musket,’ said Adora, ‘I will try. I can see better than you, and the distance is not great.’

She aimed in the centre between the dark mass of the bomb and the creeping wink of light.

She fired once, apparently without result. Then she leaned as far over as she dared and fired a second musket. The spark crawled on for some time, but in the midst, with a little bluish jet of flame, suddenly went out. Adora had cut the train of the slow match, and, for the time being, saved the door from being blown in.

Meantime the light from the distant northern front of Hemani loomed up brighter, the lurid smoke bellied out more lurid than before, while shoutings and cries of pain came to their ears from that direction. Ever and anon they could see, cut against the glare, the figures of the four defenders of Hemani as they leaned over and fired in defence of their commissariat loads.

'This is poor work!' said Captain Ebenezer, setting his musket against the wall; 'if I had not got my orders I would be over yonder, where at least there's something doing!'

But the fire died down. There was less and less crackling of musketry. The shouting seemed further off. Captain Ebenezer lit his pipe with a flint and steel, crouching meanwhile behind the parapet of the roof. Not even Adora's sharp young eyes could see a sign of an enemy on their side of the alqueria.

Suddenly from the darkness of the wood in front came an astonishing burst of flame, against which the entire quadrangle of building stood out

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

bright as day. A roar deafened their ears, and part of the wall by the gate crumbled and fell forward on the abandoned battering ram and the dead men, with a crash of shattered stone and lime.

‘God in His heaven!’ cried the captain, ‘all our throats are as good as cut! They have got a cannon somewhere. That is an eight pounder at the least!’

Once more the cannon spoke, and then with a rush up came the four valiant defenders—the warrant officer touched in the arm by a chance bullet, but having tied a handkerchief about the place, making nothing of it.

‘All up,’ they said, ‘unless we can find some underground place in which to hold out in till morning. Some of our fellows may hear us and turn up! The fools are making enough row to be heard twenty miles off!’

The gun went off again, the ball striking the gate full this time, crashing and splintering it into small fragments of wood and twisted iron. Still, the fear of the growing light and of these five inevitable British muskets, which they knew were waiting for them, held back the partida from making a final charge.

But at the longest it could not last long. Men were to be seen creeping nearer under cover of trees and bushes, waiting at all the angles of the alqueria, and lying thick in the ditches below the cattle sheds.

‘Crash! The last fragments of the gate were down this time. The brigands renewed their loud

shouts.

‘San Sebastian! San Sebastian! Death to the English!’ they cried.

But at the very moment when they were clear of the wood a storm of bullets from behind lashed their rear. They fled this way and that, the swift horses of four companies of British cavalry, fiercely riding them down. Swords flashed and were dulled in the fast-coming dawn. The little cannon was captured, and just as the morning broke, a young officer rode up to the gateway of Hemani. He leaped his horse over the debris of the planking, and so made his way fearlessly into the courtyard of Hemani.

‘What’s up here?’ he cried, for the moment seeing no one.

At the first glance Adora had precipitated herself towards him. She ran down the stairs and, without knowing how, found herself clasping Sidney Latimer round the neck, with the tears streaming from her eyes.

‘Oh, thank God,’ she cried, ‘thank God—I have found you—in time!’

And she was not even conscious that the young man, struck to the heart by this greatest marvel of earth, had stooped and kissed her with the kiss of possession.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

THE LATIMER TEMPER

Adora awoke from a brief period of unconsciousness to find herself the centre of a deeply interested group. She was still in Sidney Latimer's arms, and that young man seemed to have no intention of letting her go. The troopers of 'El Gran Lor' tried to look uninterested, or grinned broadly—according to their upbringing. There was even a serene smile of content in the eyes of the stout sea-captain. His part was played. He had brought this dainty craft to port. Responsibility was lifted from his shoulders. The true pilot had come on board.

Instantly, with one quick nervous motion, Adora removed herself out of Sidney Latimer's arms, but she was not comfortable. Slowly and surely out of the lifting mists there came to her the hot consciousness that she had been kissed! Yes, in sight of all these men; this other consciousness also—that she had not resented it. Indeed, how could she? And it was too late now, at any rate!

She put out her hand against Sidney Latimer's breast as if to push him from her.

'No, no—you must not—you do not understand,' she stammered, the words coming pell-mell; 'I have much to say to you. I have come all this way to find you—to tell you—'

The young man's arms went about her again.

'You make me happy—' he said, 'ah, if only I had known!'

'That is it— that is it!' she moaned— 'you do not know! You will not understand, and—I cannot speak to you before all these.'

'No, of course you cannot,' cried Sidney Latimer, with joyous alacrity; 'how stupid I am. Let us go in. I understand that there is a convoy belonging to Lord Wellington's army here. General Barnard sent me out to seek it— to bring it in. Little did I think when I started— ah, how little—what was waiting for me—seeking me— how precious a thing I should bring back!'

And he gazed tenderly at Adora, with such a face of radiance that the girl was for the moment borne away. She let him press her hand, saying all the while to herself, 'This is not the time to speak! This is not the time!'

So guess ye how fast the bruit ran about the companies, busily unsaddling their horses, or gingerly watering them after their long ride, how that their captain's sweetheart had come all the way to find him—out of Scotland, they said. And they were all glad, for the young friend of General Barnard had not shared the fate of most military favourites—he was liked by his comrades and adored by his men. He was rich, too, they said, and a girl's hard heart had driven him to the wars. Well, most of them could say something like that, but this at least was new.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

With the breaking of the day and the arrival of the detachment sent to bring in the ammunition convoy, the partidas had vanished like blown smoke among the mountains. The sun had risen, and only the patient mules, the empty venta, and the dead brigands about the quadrangle of the farm buildings gave evidence of the struggle of the night.

Don Juan Hemani was as calmly courteous as if an attack upon his alqueria with cannon, and the arrival of a cavalry relief in the dawn, had been everyday events.

He had already given directions for the transport of the dead men to their homes. They were laid out temporarily in the orchard, and as Don Juan looked at each he took his cigarette out of his mouth and crossed himself, muttering the while, 'God be merciful to him! He belonged to an excellent family!'

Or, as the case might be, and without any religious sign, he said aloud, 'The devil hath gotten a sore bargain this day—for no ranker raterillo ever chewed slug behind a stone wall than thou, oh unblest one!'

Meantime Adora and Sidney Latimer have been waiting.

Down in the court was Don Juan, going from group to group, deploring that he had so little to offer the cavaliers of my Lord Wellington's army. But these accursed French—Sout's men! His friends, the English, would understand. The thieves had

hardly left as much as would fodder a mouse over the winter in all his barns. Nevertheless, the camp fires were lighted, and with fresh-killed lambs from the hills, and old pressed wine from some secret vats, untapped by the French troopers, the gentlemen cavaliers and their companions did none so ill. Indeed they thought themselves in clover after the half rations of the bleak hilltops around Estella, where, as the saying went, the Portuguese dug for pig nuts and the Irish ate them, all the while cursing their benefactors for dagos because they could not find them potatoes.

Adora knew that a difficult task awaited her in the great upper room, where she had dined in solitary state the night before, with the Don fluttering to and fro with his dainty cakes and made dishes, while his Britannic Majesty's commissariat sergeants fumed below over their snail patties and sparrows' legs. The good captain kept careful watch that the first meeting of the lovers should not be overlooked, nor their privacy broken in upon.

Strange as it may seem, Adora's eyes dropped before the smiling gladness she saw in those of Sidney Latimer. Of course he thought what any man would think in the circumstances. It seemed a hard thing to begin to undeceive him. Yet she must. He had kissed her once, and that must be done with for ever. Yet what if he were to refuse her request—refuse to return to Scotland with her? She might indeed return thither, and, with good Captain

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Ebenezer to back her, swear that with the eyes of flesh, she had seen Sidney Latimer. But from a person as suspect as she, that might advantage Roy McCulloch but little. For Adora knew that she was looked upon by the legal authorities as being the cause of the quarrel.

They stood awhile, gazing at one another uncertainly. Then it was Sidney Latimer who spoke first.

'You love me?' he began, in a low questioning voice, looking at her with sudden shyness.

Adora shook her head sadly.

'You mistake!' she said.

'Then why are you here?' he asked, the colour fading from his face; 'have you not come to find me? I thought—'

'Yes,' she said, looking away to avoid his eyes, 'I came to meet you. I came to find you, but not for the reason you think! I have much to tell you. Sit down and listen. I ask you to grant me a hearing, if you have any feeling for the old time!'

Sidney Latimer sat down. He unhooked his sword because it fretted him, and threw it with a jangle upon the table. Adora's eyes followed it. 'Well,' she thought, 'at least if I hurt him, he will have something else to turn to. A soldier easily consoles himself, so they say.'

She reached out her hand towards him. He did not take it.

'I must know first,' he said, 'to whom that hand

belongs! Is it mine?’

‘It is my own!’ said Adora quietly; ‘it belongs to no man!’

‘Then you are not married?’

‘No!’

‘Nor yet engaged to marry any man?’

‘No!’

His eyes looked the further question his lips did not utter. The girl apprehended and answered it.

‘I am here to ask you to come back with me—to save a man's life— two men's lives! They are accused of your murder!’

‘Of my murder?’ The look on Sidney Latimer's face was one of genuine astonishment. ‘How can that be? I have written repeatedly to my mother. All that she had to do was to produce my letters dated from the camp of General Wellington!’

The marvel was now as swiftly transferred to Adora's face.

Had Sidney Latimer's mother kept back the letters? At the first blush it seemed like it. But no— she remembered the countenance of the woman who had cursed her on the road through the Cleuch of Pluckamin. That was not the face of a woman who knew that her son was in safety.

‘Then,’ said Adora, ‘this much is certain. Your mother has not received those letters, for two men are to be tried at Drumfern spring sessions for your murder.’

‘And who are these men?’ asked Sidney

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Latimer, looking steadily upon the ground. For indeed he knew already.

‘Sharon McCulloch and his son Roy!’ said the girl. And she supported his gaze almost defiantly, knowing that it was fixed upon her with meaning.

After this ensued a long time of silence before either of them spoke.

Adora knew what the young man was thinking. He knew that Adora knew. But he gave his thought words all the same.

‘And you have come to Spain for this,’ he said, with slow, strong emphasis; ‘you ask me to leave my profession, to return home with you, only to save Roy McCulloch's life!’

It was Adora Gracie who this time looked straight at the young soldier.

‘That is why I have come!’ she said, ‘for that—and for no other reason!’

The face of Sidney Latimer glowed hotly. Then the fire faded till it grew grey and pallid. He compressed his lips sternly. The Latimer temper was showing.

‘And suppose I refuse!’ He shot the words out brusquely.

‘You will not refuse!’ said Adora, with that same look as before, firm and straight and confident, which always found its way to his heart; ‘I know you better!’

He jumped up, went hastily to the window, then two or three times paced the whole length of

the chamber.

‘Yes!’ he cried, ‘yes—that is just it! You know that I will not refuse. I have to play up to what you think of me! And you make me better than I am—better than I want to be! Adora Gracie, I could kill the man—the man who took you from me— yes, kill him with my own hands! Yet you would make me—you ask me to go home to save this very man from the gallows he has twice merited! I will not go!’

He flung out his hands with a sudden fierce gesture of defiance.

‘I tell you I would not go a mile to save Roy McCulloch, that you might marry him! He can swing for me— that is all I have to say!’

Adora's glance never shifted or weakened. She looked him squarely in the eye.

‘Yes,’ she said tranquilly, ‘you will come back—not because I am going to marry Roy McCulloch, or because I am not going to marry Roy McCulloch, but because it is your duty as a man to save two innocent men from the gallows. I expect it of you. I have come here to ask you!’

Adora smiled at him, for the first time since they had begun to talk together.

‘Ah,’ cried Sidney Latimer, bitterly restive, ‘you think that a smile pays for all! I will not go!’

But Adora still held him with her eyes. The right that was in the girl's heart mastered the selfishness in his. A certain fearless elan of manner made it difficult for a man to refuse Adora anything.

Sidney Latimer knew that he was conquered and at length he yielded.

'Well, I will go,' he said, 'and if I ask you nothing in return, it is only because I know you have nothing to give me that I would care to accept.'

Even then the bright directness of the girl's gaze answered neither yea nor nay.

'When I have anything to say of love to you or to another man, I will say it,' she said. 'Now I only ask you to do justly for your own sake, that the guilt of innocent blood be not upon your hands.'

The fierce Latimer blood swung loose as a gate on crazy hinges.

'I tell you if all the McCullochs from Dan to Beersheba were hanged as high as ever Haman was, it would not lose me one night's sleep,' he cried. 'Nevertheless, I will go, because you ask me! That is how I take it! So pray understand that any nobility of sentiment is entirely on your side!'

Adora laughed, and at the ripple of sound something heavy and threatening seemed to pass away from their colloquy. The old captain bustled in as at a signal.

'Well now,' he said, 'have you young folk no arranged your affairs yet?'

Whereupon, with one breath, they reassured him. And he shook his head with mock severity as he pointed out Sidney Latimer's blushes.

'It's aye the woman that has the brazen face at sic times and seasons!' he declared. For Captain

## STRONG MAC

Ebenezer had seen the kiss, when for a long moment Adora lay unconscious in the young officer's arms. And after that, had an angel from heaven come down to declare that these two were not lovers, the sea-captain would have told him that he lied in his throat. Nay, more sacred still, he would have put the fact of their plighted troth in the ship's log, so prone are people to see what they expect to see.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

THE PROPHETIC UTTERANCES OF CAPTAIN  
EBENEZER SINCLAIR

It was some time before even the good will of General Barnard and the necessities of the case, duly reported in the highest quarters, smoothed Sidney Latimer's way out of the victorious allied army, now watching at the threshold of France. But it was done, and when the good ship Fortune's Queen sailed from Bilbao, she carried with her Adora Gracie, and—the captive of her bow and spear, the excommander of horse, Sidney Latimer.

The old captain was more pleased with himself than ever. The pair had kept their secret. And the unflagging zeal with which the ship master removed Sweatin' Jock White and Hillowton of the Long Arm out of the way of possible lovers' conferences, was worthy of more success than the manoeuvre obtained.

Indeed, even in the snug cabin of the Fortune's Queen, with the lamp swinging aloft and throwing strange bars of light and shadow athwart the wall and roof as the brig turned and swayed in the Biscay surges, the pair found strangely little to say to each other. Sidney Latimer held himself bitterly wronged in that, without hope of any reward to himself, he must go back to set free a successful rival, who, if he were indeed innocent of one murder,

was as certainly guilty of another. Not only so, but he must not speak of what he knew to Adora. Honour forbade him. He could not tell her what he had seen and heard on the evening when Roy McCulloch had been released from prison—or how his rival had started for the house of the murdered man only an hour or two before the deed, with threats of vengeance on his lips.

No, his mouth was closed by the girl's very confidence in him. He must go back to save the life of a guilty man! And for what? In order that that man might rob him of all that had become most precious to him. Sidney Latimer brooded upon the thought. He was not of the Adora stamp, to whom the doing of one noble action for its own sake would afford satisfaction for years. His selfishness was of the more blatant, masculine kind— though perhaps not more really selfish. It was no satisfaction, so Sidney told himself, to go back all the way to Scotland to do this thing. Any pleasure he got out of it was of the dour national sort.

'I said I would do it, and I will!'

Nor can it be said that Sidney Latimer showed to better advantage when the Fortune's Queen began to near home. A worse man would have managed to give a better impression of himself to a woman he loved. Yet no man could have treated Adora with more courtesy and reserve in the difficult position in which the girl had placed herself. And this was all the more to Latimer's credit because he

was of the class set apart—in the land of Scots a Brahman twice born, the thread upon his forehead, lord of lands and heritages, patron of parochial cures of souls. Adora was the outcast daughter of an outcast father. Yet Sidney Latimer treated her as though she had been the descendant of a hundred earls. A young girl, she had gone to a far land to seek him, to ask a great service of him—for the sake of another. Yet, after the first outbreak of temper, he acted as if the sacrifice of his prospects had been the merest matter-of-course courtesy.

When they talked at all, it was chiefly concerning how his letters, of which he had written a good many, had not reached his mother. Difficulties of service, the accident of camp and transport, were urged. But, truth to tell, neither of them believed much in their own arguments, though the suspicions which underlay them were wide as the poles asunder.

Like a man, and knowing his mother's jealous nature, Sidney suspected Mrs. Latimer. As to Adora—but the time was not yet ripe to state plainly what Adora suspected.

The winds in the bay were contrary, as their manner is, and as each ship, however fast, had to wait for the slowest of her convoy, it was the time of long passages. Thus it came about that it wanted but three days to the date of the opening of the Drumfern Sessions, when the Fortune's Queen made her way up to the quay of Port Glasgow, and

set the captain and his two passengers safe ashore.

Captain Ebenezer's eyes were still tight shut as to the relations which existed between Adora and Sidney Latimer. These had received a rude shock when first he knew of Sidney's quality, and he had promptly subjected that young man to the strictest of cross-examinations as to his position and intentions with regard to Adora—a catechism which, considering the circumstances, was submitted to with very creditable outward good humour, but with much internal restlessness.

The result, however, was satisfactory so far as Captain Ebenezer was concerned.

'The laddie's a guid laddie an' means weel by the lass,' he confided to Sweatin' Jock White, who, being taciturn, was his confidant, 'maist-ways he's no like a laird ava'— no ava!' For the lairds o' Scotland are either wild asses o' the desert, roarin' bulls o' Bashan, wi' a' their strength in their tails, or else fushionless as frosted turnips in a thaw, pokin' their noses here after auld Druid stanes and there after Roman camps! But this yin's amaist as sensible as if he had been a' his life a decent grocer, or even 'prenticed in his youth to the sea-farin' like you an' me, Sweatin' Jock.'

The captain was pleased with his success as a diplomatist. In his own view, he, and he alone, had assured Adora's position as Lady of Lowran. He said as much to Jock White. 'You wi' your heid half doon the companion-way listenin' an' me for a face-to-face

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

witness— certes, gin we canna haud him til't, my name's no Ebenezer Sinclair! Young birkies wi' landed estates o' their ain are no to lippen to wi' a guid-looking lass!'

'It's my opinion that this particular lass will no be the waur o' the braw landed gentleman, or ony ither gentleman,' said Sweatin' Jock, drily; 'na, she'll send them aff wi' a flee in their lug, estate or no estate!'

And it is quite possible that Jock had his own reasons for knowing.

'Noo,' said the captain, when at last the three stood together on the solid stones of the Port Glasgow quay, 'understand, I'm gaun to see ye hame— baith the twa o' ye! It's no befittin' for a young pair to be gallivantin' the country, as if they were on the road to Gretna. Na, na, when ye gang into Lowran it maun be wi' the minister's blessing on your heads, and sax horses in front o' ye, wi' a postillion on ilka yin! And, faith, auld daft Ebenezer Sinclair wad scatter half the profits o' a cruise to the Lowran bairns gin he could see the sicht.'

So they posted down to Drumfern, with the captain in jubilant spirits. He had organised the festival games at Lowran, and even settled where the bonfires were to blaze, by the time the party had reached Sanquhar. And as they passed Thomhill, he was deep in the architecture of the new house which Sidney Latimer was to build on his estate.

'It maun be on the Fairy Knowe, there's nae

doot about that!' he said with immense earnestness of manner, marking the site and ground-plan on the back of a receipt for dock dues with the remains of a stubby pencil, the light twinkling all the time in his small grey eyes, sunk deep in the puckers of forty years among the salt sea winds.

'The way o't is this,' he cried; 'the Muckle Hoose o' Lowran is a' weel an' weel eneuch. But it will simply no do for twa young folk! 'Deed, and it's me that should ken, for mony's the time I hae carried the letters to your ain grandfather, Master Latimer— and a deevil o' a man he was, asking your grace for lettin' oot the word about yin that's blood-kin to ye. But it was for that verra reason it was laid on me to speer at ye sae carefully— ye ken what you an' me had the bit palaver about! But at ony rate on the Fairy Knowe the new hoose o' Lowran is to stand. Dod, sir, but I'm pleased ye agjee wi' me. The auld yin did weel eneuch for a bachelor man wi' twa auld wives to mix his grog and see that he gaed to his bed in time o' nicht. But to be plain wi' ye, the auld hoose is no in the proper situation for a man wi' a young family! An' your honour kens it will tak' some while for them to grow up— wi' a pond afore the door for the laddies to be for ever faa'in' into an' frichtin' their mither oot o' her reason, thinkin' them droonin'. Whilk is, of coorse, a moral impossibeelity. For to my kennin', Lowran Big Hoose pond is no mair than three feet deep, if that. But a' the same, same muckle water afore the door is nane healthy.

For grown folk it is little maitter, but for bairns, be they never sae sturdy on their legs—.'

At this point, Sidney Latimer, after vehement attempts to change the current of the captain's meditations, took the extreme measure of pleading a sudden faintness and asking leave to go outside in order to sit with the driver.

Whereupon Adora, thus basely deserted, was willy-nilly instructed upon the conduct of married life and the upbringing of a young family, and listened to wisdom from lips of a bachelor sailor-man who had left home at fourteen, and never seen a boy since, except when springing responsive to a rope's end.

This year the spring had come early over all the Scottish southland. The leaves on the hedgerows, the buds on the ash-trees, were ushering themselves calmly and temperately into a snell, dry, airy world of abundant but not intemperate sunshine. They were, indeed, in no particular haste to be born. On the whole, they were more comfortable where they were, with their overcoats lapped about their ears, but business was business, and must be attended to by all things Scottish.

So it was the first gay push of this lowland spring—the yellow time which brings a certain untranslatable gladness into young hearts was upon the land—whin spikes surging along the bank sides and the lemon yellow of the broom laughing up from every cleuch like the provocation of a spoilt beauty.

## STRONG MAC

There are perhaps times more beautiful in Scotland—the rich summer abundance of green woods and full-fed waters, the autumn ling spreading league on purple league, but nothing touches the heart of the country-bred boy like the first yellow of the primrose and the daffodil, of the prickly gorse and the tall lady broom, and, above all, like that first thrilling rush barefoot over the grass of the meadow lands. Something tricksome and flaunting doubtless there is about this garish gold, but nevertheless the contrast with the rich dark breadths of ploughland and the chill unsmiling grey of the mountain sides makes the Yellow Time of broom-flourish and whin-blossom the gladdest in all the year. After passing through miles of this brave canary-coloured wood, it was at Thomhill that the first whisper of what was before them reached the trio in the post-chaise. There was a halt of a few minutes at the change house near to Morton Kirk, and Sidney Latimer, strolling somewhat apart, heard two men call to each other across the road, both of them weary with the do-nothing of a village afternoon.

'They'll hae gotten their sentence by noo, eh, Robin?' said one.

To which in due course Robin replied, equally glad to have a topic upon which something new might be said, 'Aye, Gib, ye're speakin'! They'll ken the day an' hour o' their latter end by this time, and that's mair nor ony o' us can tell!'

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

In an instant Sidney Latimer was upon them.

‘Of what do you speak, men?’ he cried, ‘not of the Drumfern Assizes, surely? They do not open till Monday!’

‘Maybes no,’ answered the man who had been called Robin, ‘since your Honour seems to ken sae weel aboot them. But ony way, the judges’ procession was yesterday morning, for my ain e’en saw it. And the twa Galloway men were to be tried for their lives this verra day— McQuilliams or McCullochs or McCardles—some o’ thae auld cut-throat, covenantin’, west-country names!’

The young laird ran back quickly to the inn, and told Adora what he had heard.

‘I am going to get a horse,’ he said, ‘and ride to Drumfern as hard as I can!’

‘I will come with you!’ she said, taking his arm.

‘No,’ said Sidney Latimer. ‘I have a work to do—I will do it alone!’

She looked long at him, but this time his eye did not falter or shrink. It was as steady as her own.

‘You may trust me!’ he said.

And five minutes afterwards Sidney Latimer was galloping down the valley of the Nith as fast as whip-leather and spur-prick could send his hired hack towards the court where Sharon and Roy McCulloch were being tried for his own murder.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENCE

With splendour of Town Council robes and militia drummings, with banners that waved in the morning and torches that flared at night, the sessions of the Southern Circuit Court of criminal jurisdiction had been opened in Drumfern.

There were two judges, Lord Barmack and Lord Pitfairly. The first of these was of the old type of the previous century, haranguing every jury with threats, even to oaths and cursings, if in aught it failed to do his will.

On the occasion of this Drumfern riding the lords of assize had come from Jedburgh, each on his own proper beast. It was not yet the day of carriages and four. In addition, each judge had with him his own unfortunate 'wig-of-all-work'—a young advocate who was assured by his friends that the path of glory consisted in riding circuit as the judge's companion of voyage.

But to some, at least, the path to glory was certainly through suffering. For my Lord Barmack, whose temper was perennially bad, vented any that accumulated on young Cosmo Taylor, whose only crime was that he wrote for the reviews, while Lord Pitfairly, a man of militant piety, persisted in discussing with his attache, one Kenneth Maitland, the immortality of the soul— at a time when Mr.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Maitland was thinking of the deuced pretty girl he had danced with four times at the Jedburgh circuit ball the night before.

On the way from Jedburgh to Drumfern the two judges, wearied of the 'Yes' and 'No' of their subordinates, and momentarily soothed by dialectic victories over them, had, as a last resort sought each other's society as they jogged along.

'I am sacredly glad to be quit of that sordid hole,' said Barmack, with an expletive which caused his companion to shiver. 'I can always tell a Royal Borough by the stench— yes, sir, by the stench! I wish to heaven something would come between me and the wind of Jedburgh's regality!

'Ah, my Lord,' said Pitfairly, mildly, 'for me I have not found it so. I have always been well treated in Jedburgh. There is a soft sweetness, even a sanctity about the place—'

'Sanctity be hanged, Pitfairly,' shouted Barmack; 'it's the stink, man—I tell you it's nothing but the want of drains!'

'The minister of the parish who preached to us on Sabbath morning appeared to be a most meritorious person,' piped Pitfairly, eager to change the subject; 'I have just been remarking as much to my young friend, Kenneth Maitland.'

'Oh, damnable. Simply boss-timber, yon head o' his!' cried my Lord, judicially; 'there's eneuch planking and cuddy's skin about the man's skull to mak' a new drum for the Crailing Guard. If it hadna

been that I fell asleep within the first quarter of an hour, by my faith, Pitfairly, I declare I wad hae thrown my wig and cocked hat at his pate! But speakin' o' cocked hats, Pitfairly, I'm thinking from what I hear that ye'll need to smuggle yours into the court at Drumfern. And mind ye, Pitfairly, it'll be your ain. For the last time ye sentenced a man to the mercy o' the Almichty and the hangman, ye blubbered into the crown o' mine so that it was never fit to put on my head again!'

'I had not heard of the case particularly!' said Pitfairly, still mildly; 'what is it?'

'No, ye wadna, tied up wi' sic a sumph as Kenneth Maitland, that has nocht in the noddle o' him but haverel lasses and houses-o'-call. It may do for you, Pitfairly, to be acquaint wi' the pattern o' every prick-me-denty petticoat between Carlisle and the Grassmarket, but I'm tellin' you it's no beseeming in a decent married man like me.'

'I know not to what you are pleased to refer,' said Pitfairly stiffly; 'I presume you jest. That is not a practice in which I strive to compete with some of my colleagues. But I have heard nothing of this capital indictment of which you speak. It is, if I mistake not, a Galloway case!'

'A Galloway case, hear to him,' cried Barmack, bringing down his whip-lash on his friend's horse with a slap which caused it to curvet, to the rider's exceeding discomfiture, 'have ye never heard—hath it not been told you even at the kirk door—hath it

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

not been revealed to you in a vision of the night, that a couple of poaching bonnet lairds— aye, bonnet lairds, no less, stand accused of two murders with malice aforethought, and that it is your excellent good fortune first to try and then to sentence them? Lord, I wish it had been me! But I have to take that abominable appeal about a man that buried a horse in another man's yaird, and the gardener took the chicken-pox or maybe the cholera! Maybe you will be willing to change with me! It were a truly Christian act.'

'Are you sure of this?' said Pitfairly, obviously beginning to roll his summing up like a sweet morsel under his tongue.

'Aye, ower doom's sure!' groaned Barmack, 'I wad hae gi'en a guinea to gar thae poachin' deils shake in their shoon! But you, Pitfairly, will talk to them as if ye had a detachment o' angels at the door to tak' them richt up to heeven! Almichty, but it's me that wad be croose, if I were as sure o' gettin' quit o' the wee deils wi' the reed-hot pincers, and sittin' snug among the harps, as thae twa will be afore ye hae dune wi' them. Oh, I ken your style, Pitfairly— 'It's never ower late for repentance' says you; 'your very crimes, as you look back on them, will seem sae mony steppin' stanes to Abraham's bosom —!''

'My Lord, it pleases you to be irreverent!' said Pitfairly; 'I have need of solitude, if it be that my duty calls me to be the means of ushering any two of my poor sinful fellow-creatures into eternity! You

will pardon me if I ride on a little way by myself!’

‘Aye, do that!’ growled Barmack as he looked at the bowed shoulders and nodding mandarin head of his circuit companion, ‘and faith, if it werena that a hempen cord’s nae friendly comforter to hae pitten about your craig on a frosty mornin’— by my sang, I wad e’en be temptit to commit— weel, it couldna be ‘homicide’—ha, ha, no— but ‘auld-wifie-cide.’ Lord, Lord, I maun tell that to yon eediot Cosmo Taylor. Not that he’ll understand the length an’ breadth o’ it like Hermand, but I am bound to tell it to somebody!’

The Court of Assize of the Southern Circuit was in full session—in the old court-house of Drumfern, a reeky and ‘sleechy’ place, looking as if there had been rubbed off on the very walls and ceilings the mean contemptible rascality of a hundred gaol deliveries. On the bench sat my Lord Pitfairly, a decanter of wine and a platter of biscuits before him, to enhance with a note of deeper colour the scarlet-and-white of his judicial robes.

The Advocate Depute Melville Dundas, a cold, limited, just man, stated the case for the prosecution. The two McCullochs were at the bar. They looked pale and quiet in the cobweb filtered light of the narrow court-house windows. No man could say which was the taller as they stood close together. For though Sharon was more grim and gaunt than usual, facing the bench with a kind of stern and silent determination, Roy seemed to have

grown in prison, and his face, always firm and manly, had taken on a new fineness of line and quiet dignity of expression.

As the afternoon wore on, there seemed to be less and less doubt as to the result of the trial. Indeed, the case for the Crown was so strong, that the young advocate engaged for the defence seemed cowed, and hardly made more than a formal defence. James McCulloch had obtained such legal assistance as the firm he was engaged with could supply. But the evidence as to the making away with Sidney Latimer was so crushing, that as the judge said privately to his companion of voyage, Kenneth Maitland, it was strong enough to hang every one connected with the case, and his wonder was that the fiscal had allowed the girl Gracie, who seemed to be the cause of all this unchristian feeling among neighbours, to escape furth of the country. He himself would speak to the Lord Advocate about it immediately upon his return to Edinburgh.

‘Yes, that would doubtless have made it more interesting,’ said the young man, without taking thought; ‘if all tales be true she was a lass worth fighting about.’

‘No daughter of Eve is worth fighting for!’ said the judge, sententiously. ‘Not if the woman were more beautiful than the sun, and above the order of the stars. Only last Sabbath, did not the excellent Dr. Maitland in his circuit sermon say of that light-headed queen we had before us at Jedburgh, that

her favour was deceitful and her beauty vain?’

To this Mr. Kenneth Maitland wisely answered nothing, but as his patron turned away for a moment (it was during the stated pause for refreshments) he smacked his lips and winked at the nearest young advocate, who made an answering gesture of commiseration.

The speech of the advocate depute was over. It had been not only severe but overwhelming. The clear motive, jealousy—the fact of the presence of the unfortunate Laird of Lowran at the house of the accused had been made plain beyond dispute. What drew him there was without doubt to see the girl Gracie, who had been installed for some time, but had now fled the country. Young men would be young men in spite of the sagest advice, and it could be proved that the deceased had often been warned of his danger by the aged lady whom they all honoured, and who had given her evidence there that day with such distinguished dignity and reticence.

Secondly, was it not on the verge of the property of the accused that the blood-stained coat had been found, the very coat in which Mr. Sidney Latimer had left his own house of Lowran a few hours before? The horse, too, had been recovered, wounded by a foul blow from some sharp weapon, evidently given from beneath, thus showing intention of concealment. The footsteps of the unfortunate victim had been traced right up to the

door of the house of the paniels. There were evident traces of a struggle in the vicinity. Though the body of the young gentleman whose end had been so tragic had not been discovered, the jury must decide whether that hiatus in the evidence was enough to shield the criminals from the penalty of their crimes. As to the other accusation, charged chiefly, though not exclusively, against the younger prisoner at the bar, there was every reason to hold that in that case also his guilt was patent. The same motive was present in it as in the other—jealousy.

It could be shown that there was also revenge. For let the gentlemen of the jury remember (and they were most of them closely connected with the sheep-farming interest) that the accused Roy McCulloch had spent some weeks in gaol upon the accusation that he had stolen a considerable number of sheep, the fleeces of which were found in a barn at House of Muir! Now these animals were the property of the deceased Mr. Alexander Ewan. The evidence, however, had not been strong enough to ensure condemnation. The Crown officials at a distance had exercised, rightly or wrongly—wrongly, as it now appeared, an undue clemency to the man before them. And in all human probability the first use which Roy McCulloch made of his liberation was to proceed to the farm of Boreland and there provoke the quarrel that ended in the dastard blow which had proved fatal to that singularly eminent agriculturalist, whose scientific treatment of all the

problems connected with the breeding of domestic animals, especially horses, had brought so great honour upon the parish and district. But though the name of Mr. Alexander Ewan was known far and wide, the proofs of the connection of the accused with his death were less firmly established, and less overwhelming than those which had been proved in their hearing with regard to the tragic disappearance of Mr. Sidney Latimer. For these reasons his Majesty's advocate depute was content, finding himself in the presence of so intelligent and able a jury, perfectly conversant with the gravest affairs and capable of judging upon them, to leave them to say whether this state of things was to continue. Were they to have murderers—yes—he would use the word—murderers abroad among them, dwelling upon their own borders, not only defying the law of the land, but a continued menace to the lives of all honest and well-doing people? Manifestly the unfortunate gentleman to whom he had so often referred had met his death upon the lands of the McCullochs—nay, in the immediate vicinity of their house. He would leave it with confidence to the jury to say whether these two men, the sole persons in the neighbourhood capable of such a crime, the only ones with any motive, the only ones inculpated by evidence, were the guilty persons or not. So strong did he consider his position upon the matter, concluded Mr. Melville Dundas, that he had purposely left the other charge, the murder of Mr.

Alexander Ewan, somewhat in the background, feeling that he was able to depend upon the evidence that the sagacity of the Crown officials had been able to put before the jury in order to secure the conviction which, he felt strongly, was necessary to the security of his Majesty's lieges throughout all these well-doing and most respectable southern counties of Scotland!

This, with infinite reduplications and returnings upon the same arguments, was, in brief, the speech of his Majesty's advocate depute.

Now, Messrs. Gleg and Gleg, writers in Drumfern (whose managing clerk was a brother of one panel and the son of the other), did a large, but not particularly distinguished business. They were reputed (perhaps libellously) to take by preference the cases which lay on the purlieus of the law, rather than wait for the more serious and distinguished landed-estate business, upon which most country lawyers' offices starve throughout the year. In the case of the McCullochs, with the eye to the main chance which distinguished them as a firm, they had employed a certain young advocate, who had just passed his examinations and been received at the Scottish Bar (a nephew of the senior partner's), Mr. Apollos Dunn. This gentleman was widely known to the circuit as 'Polly'— for the reason that it was believed that no original thought had ever passed that mouth of gold, which nevertheless could imitate with all a parrot's irritating exactitude

the peculiarities of every man on the circuit, from Pitfairly's pious platitudes and Barmack's humour-spiced brutalities, to the halting and hiatused oratory of Mr. Kenneth Maitland, who, to do him justice, practised much more frequently at Fencible dinners than 'before the Fifteen.'

Mr. Apollos Dunn, very undesirous of making the plunge, was hitching his gown and arranging his papers. The jury was already shaking sapient heads and conferring together. The judge took yet another sip from his decanter in an absent-minded sort of way, nibbled a bit of biscuit, and sat back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. There was just time to make notes for his summing up. He even began, as it were casually, to think over the moving words in which he would address the condemned. There was now so little doubt in his mind about the issue, that he felt under the desk to make sure that the cocked hat (the 'black cap' which is always noted with a kind of awe as being 'assumed' by the judges on such occasions) lay snugly on the shelf where he had placed it alongside his sacred judicial snuffbox. Just as little doubt as to the fate of the McCullochs existed in any mind throughout the court. Only the junior bar nudged each other and made bets as to who 'Polly' would ape on this occasion.

Mr. Apollos Dunn cleared his throat for the twentieth time. His papers were at last to his mind, and he was sorry for it. His handkerchief was ready. He had resolved to make a thrilling appeal to the

jury on the score of the age of his senior client and the youth of his junior. The style was to be that of the judge himself in child-murder cases, when Lord Pitfairly was noted for the exhibition of true pathos (but always hanged).

‘My Lord, and gentlemen of the jury,’ said Polly, getting the range of the court, ‘it is with the utmost humility and with the sense of my awful responsibility that I rise to make an appeal to you on behalf of the unfortunate men before you. While admitting the serious character of a portion of the evidence brought before you—I propose to show that nothing but a collocation of circumstantial evidence connects either of them with the much-to-be-lamented death of the late Mr. Sidney Latimer of Lowran—’

‘Sidney Latimer is not dead!’ cried a clear resonant voice from the back of the court.

‘Silence there!’ called out the usher, while the sheriff’s men hustled the audience to this side and that on their way to the zone of disturbance. All heads were turned in that direction. Even Lord Pitfairly half rose from his chair. His principles of charity did not allow of an interruption in his court, even for the purpose of saving two men’s lives. Besides he had just thought of something particularly moving for his ‘black cap’ address. If the McCullochs were acquitted, he might forget it before he had a chance of using it.

A young man of military bearing and dress was

seen forcing his way through the crowd. The peace officers met him half way, but the strength of his purpose, and perhaps also the uniform which he wore, restrained them from actually laying hands upon him.

By this time most of the Bar were on their feet. Polly Dunn and his speech were lost in the throng. He stood open-mouthed, his head thrown forward, his gown rucked up about his neck and his whole appearance ridiculously suggesting the bird to which the more frivolous of his contemporaries compared him.

'Who are you, sir?' cried Lord Pitfairly, when he had a little regained his composure. Then he took another sip of his decanter, as mechanically as if he had been replenishing a fire with wood—in fact, as if his hand had found the wine-glass in the way, and had not known what else to do with it but carry it to the judicial mouth.

'I am Sidney Latimer,' said the young man, simply. 'Sidney Latimer—' repeated the judge, this time like a parrot himself, 'impossible! We have just heard it proved to demonstration that Sidney Latimer was murdered and by the prisoners before us! What have you to advance as an excuse for this scandalous and unseemly assertion?'

The young man, who had by this time arrived at the little flight of steps, which in the old court-house of Drumfern conducted to the witness box, now turned towards the Bar.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'You know me, Kenneth?' he said to the judge's travelling companion, 'and you, Melville, and you, and you! Besides, every Lowran person here present knows me!'

But a better witness than any of these he named had arisen from the seats set apart for the witnesses. Gaunt, worn, haggard, the Lady of Lowran stood up, hanging at first for a moment uncertain, her hands tremulous, her body swaying. Suddenly with a piercing cry of 'My son! my son!' she threw herself into Sidney Latimer's arms.

And behind the young man's mother was seen another woman, aged like the other and also trembling.

'Mine too,' she muttered, setting her hand on his shoulder almost jealously. Then with a glance at the court, 'It's no fittin' here!' she murmured. And so sat down, content to caress with her eyes the dead-come-to-life-again, the man whom she had nursed as a boy and for whom her arms still yearned.

## CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

‘BY A MAJORITY!’

‘Order! Order!’ cried the judge, ‘all this is most unseemly. If your statement be exact, sir, be true, why have you not appeared in this court sooner?’

‘My Lord,’ answered Sidney Latimer, ‘I have come directly from Spain on board the ship Fortune’s Queen, presently at Port Glasgow. When the news reached me I was serving with his Majesty’s troops in the Peninsula. I posted from Port Glasgow to Thornhill, believing that the assizes were not to be opened till Monday. From that point, having learned my mistake, I have ridden the horse which is at this moment at the door of the court!’

The advocate depute, zealous in his office, raised himself with a jerk. ‘I will recall to your Lordship,’ he said, ‘that the witnesses have all been heard. Saving the speech for the defence, the case is closed. I submit that this gentleman has no standing here!’

Instantly the quick Latimer temper kindled.

‘Indeed,’ he cried, ‘no standing here? We will see. Kenneth, Cosmo, Dickson— who of you will lend me a gown?’

The nearest advocate, a tall, good-looking fair-haired young lawyer of the name of Dickson, perhaps more interested in literature than in pleas, quickly divested himself of his gown. Sidney threw it

about his shoulders.

'I appear,' he said, 'as counsel for the prisoners—in addition, that is, to any other who may have been acting for them. I trust he will accept of my assistance, and you, Mr. Advocate Depute, will now inform me if I have no standing here!'

The judge, whom repeated casual encounters with the decanter had made a little muzzy as to his head, said with a little stutter, 'But have you been admitted to the Bar—the Scottish Bar, I mean?'

'Certainly, my Lord,' said Sidney; 'as to that, several of the gentlemen present can bear me witness. It is true I have never practised, nor even appeared, except formally, before any court. Nevertheless, I am an advocate, and as such have a right to plead in any court in the realm! May I ask who is the gentleman I am to assist?'

A sharp turn of all eyes directed Latimer's gaze towards Mr. Apollos Dunn. 'Polly' stood looking about him in dumb surprise. His faculty of imitation had deserted him in the unusual circumstances. His carefully prepared pathos lost its point; words departed from him. He gobbled in his throat and sat down abruptly.

Sidney Latimer, all uninstructed, was left to make the speech for the defence.

Even this was not to be permitted to him uninterrupted. It was a day of surprises in the Drumfern Circuit Court. A tall, rough-looking, but jovially-faced man upreared himself in the well of

the court.

'Heavens and earth,' whispered the younger members of the Bar, 'what if it be the other murdered man! Ten to one it's Ewan!'

'And the sea gave up the dead that were in it!' quoted Kenneth Maitland, irreverently, under his breath to Cosmo Taylor.

But it was not Ewan. It was far indeed from being Ewan. Instead, it was none other than our ancient friend, Adam McQuhirr of the Gairie.

'There's a Dumbie here that canna speak,' he said, 'but nocht will serve him but he maun hae a twa-three words wi' your Lordship! It's about the killin' o' Muckle Sandy Ewan, I'm thinkin'!'

'And why,' said his Lordship, angrily, 'if the deaf-and-dumb person has anything of value to relate, was not his evidence brought forward by the counsel for the defence at the proper season? All this is extremely inconvenient!'

'Beggin' your pardon, my Lord,' said the honest farmer, 'but the coonsel-man kenned nocht about it, puir falla! I hae had to watch Dumbie for three nights up at the Gairie— me and Ailie, my sister, that is. For he was neither to haud nor to bind. And sair wark I had to get him here, your Lordship. I wad rayther hae pitten a scythe through the hale Lowran meadow twenty times ower, I can tell ye that!'

'It is no matter,' said his Lordship, 'what you would or would not have done. The whole business is most irregular. I never yet have known a defence

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

conducted in such a way, Mr. Dunn; I cannot but think you are seriously to blame. If all cases were dragged out in this fashion, the circuit courts might never adjourn at all.'

'Better that than the hangin' o' twa men for what they ken nocht about!' asserted honest Gairie in the same tone in which he proposed a health at a Wednesday's farmers' ordinary.

'Sit down, sir,' said the judge, severely; 'it is very unseemly for you to instruct me— unworthy instrument of human justice as I have always acknowledged myself to be. I do not even know your name!'

'My name, sir, is welcome to you to ken, and to every ither honest falla!' returned the farmer. 'I am juist plain Aidam McQuhirr o' the Gairie! And, by my certes, if ever ye are passin' that way, dinna be blate—caa' in, and ye shall get a gless or twa o' the best whusky in Galloway! And atween you and me and the post, my Lord, never a penny o' duty—'

'Silence!' cried the judge, rising in majesty; 'if you say a word more, or address me in that familiar fashion again, I will instantly order your removal from the court in custody!'

'Weel, it was a fair offer and kindly meant!' said the burly farmer, standing to his guns; 'onybody that kens Aidam McQuhirr will tell ye as muckle. There's the shirra himsel', at your ain elbow. He's fell fond o' the Gairie un-ta'-en-doon! 'Deed I'm no sae sure that he wad refuse a gless o' what ye hae

under your ain nose, though gin ye gat it at the 'Queen's Head' it's maistly logwud, I'll haud to that!'

There was a peal of laughter all over the court. For the tendencies of the excellent sheriff were well known in the profession. Even the judge himself was pleased to smile.

'Well, well,' he said, tolerantly, 'doubtless you mean no harm. Let us see this dumb man. I am somewhat acquainted with the system, having taken a great interest in the establishment and hospital of the excellent Mr. Braidwood previous to his removal to London, often visiting him at Dumbiedykes. I have therefore some considerable skill in his new manual of signs alphabetically expressed upon the fingers. Perhaps your deaf-and-dumb witness has been at some period of his life a pupil of his.'

The chance to cross-examine a difficult subject, a task at which he had been specially successful as an advocate, quite restored the temper of my Lord Pitfairly. But Adam McQuhirr had not got over the rejection of his offer of hospitality, to which, indeed, he was but ill accustomed.

'The laddie is nae mair deaf than you, my Lord—'deed, to tell the truth, no sae muckle! And as for dumb, he hasna been dumb verra lang, and hasna learned a great deal since syne, forbye what the whaups hae cried to him up on the muirs!'

'Ah, then his dumbness has been the result of an accident,' said the judge; 'let him come and be sworn. I permit it—if he has anything to put before

the court.'

The advocate depute interposed a merely pro forma objection, for even he was curious to know to what all this might tend.

Presently Adam McQuhirr's tall and rugged form was seen forcing a way through the densely packed masses of people in the direction of the witness box. He appeared to be carrying a swathed bundle in his arms.

'Ye see,' he explained generally to the court, as he advanced, 'it's no that he needs to be carried! He's no that ill. Na, na. I'll wager that oot on the muirs, deevil a yin o' ye could catch him—no even you young birkies o' lawyers. He can rin like a hare and hide like a whutterick in a stane dyke. But here, amang sae mony feet, the puir thing micht get trampit on.'

And with these words Adam deposited on the seat of the witness box Daid the Deil!

The judge, who had affected not to hear the later remarks of the incorrigible Aidam now began some excessively complicated manoeuvres with his fingers, while at the same time his lips formed the letters he was endeavouring to express upon his hands. Sometimes he would get tangled in a combination, whereupon he would shake his fingers pettishly, as if wiping them of soap-suds.

'Tut-tut,' he muttered, 'I am out of practice. It is so long since I studied the system.'

Then glancing up, for the first time my Lord

looked at Daid. His jaw instantly dropped. Never, in all his experience of courts, as member of the Bar, advocate depute, or judge, had such an object faced him in the witness box. He half started up from his chair, as if to make a more careful observation, then as abruptly dropped back again.

‘What—what is this?’ he stammered; ‘is it human? Who has done this?’

He was forgetting the old examining practice of getting an answer to one question before asking another.

‘Perhaps,’ he added with sudden compunction, ‘it would be better if he were first of all examined in my private room—!’

A murmur of dissatisfaction went up from the crowded court.

‘It’s my opinion,’ said Adam McQuhirr, deliberately, that if your Lordship wad hand him a killyvine (lead-pencil), Daid could answer your questions as weel as if he had been bred to the law!’

‘He can write, then?’ said Lord Pitfairly.

‘Write?’ cried Adam, indignantly, ‘aye, as weel as ony clerk amang them a! Faith, I’m tellin’ ye no lee—it was Adora Gracie that learned him!’

Pencil and paper were handed up to the dumb boy, whose terribly scarred face sent a shuddering awe through the packed ranks of the spectators. His Lordship proceeded to ask the questions, after having given Adam Mc-Quhirr permission to remain near the box in case his strength or influence was

required.

'What is your name?' said the judge in a loud voice.

'Ye needna billy like a goat, my Lord,' said Adam McQuhirr; 'Daid's nane deaf, I'm tellin' ye!'

And indeed hardly had the words left the mouth of Lord Pitfairly than the answer was ready upon the sheet of paper.

'I wish my clerk, young lazy whelp, could do his work one half as quickly,' said Kenneth Maitland in an undertone to Sidney Latimer; 'not that I ever need him except to clean my pipes! Is this your first case?'

Sidney nodded, his eyes on the boy in the witness box.

'You beat me— I never had one!' murmured his friend; 'my first will be a case of justifiable homicide— that is, if old Pitfairly continues to bore me with the fulfilment of prophecy and Jacob's ten horns! Was it Jacob who had the ten horns or the coat of many colours?'

'Hush.'

The judge was reading the paper.

'David McRobb is my name, aged fourteen, but small for my age, born at Lowran, and I ken wha killed Sandy Ewan!'

This was indeed conclusive evidence of his right to be heard as a witness in the case. The judge looked up and nodded.

'Ah,' he said, his suavity returning to him at

the hope of success, 'you have information about the murder of Sandy Ewan? Well, be good enough to tell us what you know!'

'It wasna a murder, it was a fecht!'

'So!' said the judge, pleased that his own preconceived opinions were likely to be substantiated; 'then I take it that the younger prisoner, Roy McCulloch, had a quarrel with Alexander Ewan, and in the course of the fight, accidentally killed him?'

The twisted crow's-foot hand wrote rapidly. The paper was passed over by an officer of the court. The gold spectacles were found shoved up into the wig, and Lord Pitfairly took a deliberate pinch of snuff as he adjusted them before reading—whereby a whispered malediction was made to arise from the eager and expectant auditory.

'It wasna Roy McCulloch that killed Sandy Ewan.' the judge read, slowly. 'Roy was never near the Boreland that nicht, Dickie Dick is a LIAR, and the other man, too.'

The judge looked stern for the first time since the strange witness appeared in the box.

'Then you must instantly reveal the name of the murderer of Sandy Ewan!' he said. And again with no hesitation the pencil flew over the paper. During the months in the garret of Aline's cottage, Daid had had plenty of practice.

'I will not tell a soul wha killed Sandy Ewan, I will kill the man mysel'.'

The judge read these words twice over, as if doubtful whether his gold-rimmed glasses were doing their duty. Then he turned his eyes to the misshapen atomy in the box, with honest Adam McQuhirr on guard beside him.

‘What?’ he cried; ‘what have you to do with the man that you should make such a dreadful threat?’

For all answer the boy slowly opened his mouth and pointed with his finger at something black within.

‘He did that!’ The fingers wrote rapidly and threw the pencil on the floor.

Daid the Deil's examination was oven

After a time the advocate depute collected himself sufficiently to point out that in the altered circumstances, and owing to the extraordinary course the judicial proceedings had taken, he had a right to return again upon his requisitory speech. To this the judge assented, and that impassive man, Mr. Melville Dundas, began by assuring his Lordship that a very few words would serve him. There was, he admitted, no use in proceeding with the first charge, when the man whom the panels were accused of murdering was acting as their junior council. At the same time, he could not help thinking that there was something exceedingly improper, not to say illegitimate, in the way in which justice had been trifled with! And the proceedings of Mr. Sidney Latimer, both on the night of his disappearance and afterwards, in refusing to

communicate his whereabouts, seemed to him to call for judicial investigation, if not in a court of law—at least by the Society of Advocates.

As to the second charge, and with regard to the extraordinary evidence, if he might call it evidence, which had been given by a boy who declared himself a second victim of the murderer of Alexander Ewan, he would point out to the jury that it left the case against the younger panel much as before. There was only the unsupported assertion of the dumb boy that not Roy McCulloch, but another unnamed (against whom, very improperly, he meditated personal vengeance), was the guilty person. He (the advocate depute) need not remind the intelligent jury he saw before him that this was neither evidence, nor anything even remotely approaching the nature of evidence. There was, for instance, the affair of the sheepskins, yet unexplained and extremely suspicious—'

At this point of the advocate depute's speech a strange eldricht laugh was heard, the laugh of the maimed boy. Without rising from his friend's knee the Dumbie scattered a handful of something resembling white furry willow leaves in the direction of the Bar and jury box. Then snatching up a sheet of paper, he again wrote rapidly. Adam McQuirr looked at his protege with modest pride. Daid was beating the lawyers—the first duty of every country-bred Scot, as often as he approaches the doors of a court.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

‘I do not know—I put it to your Lordship whether at this stage further interruptions of this sort—’ Thus Mr. Melville Dundas appealed against fate.

But the curiosity of Lord Pitfairly was strong, so while the officers of the assizes, together (sad it is to relate) with the members of the junior Bar, were scrambling for the curious leaf-shaped things, the judge read: ‘There — match thae wi’ the fleeces ye hae at the fiscal’s. They hae a’ the McCullochs’ ain mark! What think ye o’ that!’

This was doubtless something of the nature of an anticlimax, but to the men who sat on the seats of the jury box, a little weary of speeches and witnesses, it was also the most telling piece of evidence of the day, and did more for Roy McCulloch than all the rest put together— hardly even excepting the dramatic appearance of Sidney Latimer.

For the furry things, thus informally produced, were the ears of the very sheep which Roy had been accused of stealing, and (as Daid had said) each of them bore not only the McCulloch ear-mark, but remains of the blue McCulloch keel.

Upon demand of Sidney Latimer certain of the fleeces were brought in and the ears fitted on by the jury themselves, amid expressions of delight. These honest men did not understand legal technicalities, but— they knew that the farmer who was accused of stealing his own sheep must be an innocent and

deeply wronged man. The effect was so strong that Sidney Latimer, coached by an old circuit lawyer, waived his right to reply, and (what was of infinitely more service) induced Mr. Apollos Dunn to do the same. Lord Pitfairly summed up in a gush of admiration for the wonderful providences of the Almighty, under which the whole house, except the accused persons, sat visibly uneasy. It all seemed to have come about owing to Lord Pitfairly's influence with Things Above.

'I wonder if I had a shot at him with my snuff-box what I would get! But I doubt if even that would make him stop,' groaned Kenneth Maitland, nudging Sidney under the latter's borrowed gown.

The jury retired, and instantly there arose a terrible chatter of talk. The judge withdrew into a certain gloomy cubby-hole which in the old court-house of Drumfern was called 'his Lordship's chamber.' One hour, two hours passed slowly away.

'Are they going to convict after all—it's juist no possible!' whispered the crowd.

'Guid peety them, then,' said a strong-handed Drumfern mason, spitting on his palms to allay his nervousness, 'they'll never get past Nith Brig wi' the breath o' life in them, if they do!'

'Na, I wadna gie a penny-worth o' alicreesh for their twal necks, if they bring it in for that bonny lad to be hanged!' said a sturdy dame of the wash-tub. 'Faith, though, yonder's the provost, that's their kind o' headman. I hae a craw to pick wi' him

onyway. He was gye impident to my guidman at the last borough coort! And only for being fand drunk on the Sands and burstin' the toon drum ower the drummer's ain heid!

The jury trooped back, smiles on every face, save one. The provost had done his duty and saved his neck.

Lord Pitfairly came in, dusting ruddy drops off his ermine, also shaking the crumbs out of the folds of his robe judicial.

The provost, who had been chosen foreman by general consent, stood forward in answer to his Lordship's formal question.

'We find unanimously,' he spoke slowly, in imitation of the advocate depute (whose style he admired, in spite of having traversed his conclusions), 'that the accused are not guilty of causing the death of Mr. Sidney Latimer' (a murmur of laughter, instantly suppressed, here) 'and, by a majority, that Roy McCulloch is not guilty of the murder of Alexander Ewan'

'By a majority!'

The court buzzed with excitement at the unexpected qualification of the verdict. His Lordship, after the formal liberation of the prisoners, could hardly wait till he was in the decent retirement of his chamber in order to summon Kenneth Maitland to find out what was the majority, and who it could be that, in spite of his charge, still thought the McCullochs guilty.

## STRONG MAC

Maitland, who could read the signs of the times as well as any man, and who knew that he would have no peace till he had reported everything, waited for the provost's exit.

'What was the majority?' he said in the hearing of Adam McQuhirr, who held his tongueless burden in his arms.

'Eleven to one!' said the provost, somewhat reluctantly, it must be said.

'And who was the one—? It's his Lordship himself who has sent to ask,' said Kenneth, hardily.

'Jonathan Grier—the Laird of Lowran's game-keeper!' answered the provost.

And in the strong arms of the man Adam, the eyes of a little maimed boy glowed like coals of fire.

'Hush thee!' murmured the good man, soothing Daid the Deil like an infant, 'we will soon be hame noo. And, bless me, yonder's Adora!'

But the quick eyes of fire were fixed on something else than the face of Adora Gracie. They saw Jonathan Grier slinking away through the crowd, fearful that he would be recognised.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

TWO MEN AND THE WOMAN

With a quick gasp of apprehension, Sidney Latimer understood that his time was come. Truly he had laboured for naught. The good he had wrought was turned to evil, even as he knew it would. Apples of Sodom were to be the only fruit of his toil and travail.

Adora had come with the post-chaise the fourteen miles from Thomhill, and had arrived just in time to meet Roy McCulloch as he stepped into God's blowing airs upon the streets of Drumfern, once more a free man. His bold, strong face showed pale and more sharply cut than of yore. He was indeed 'sair shilpit,' as Aline put it when she saw him. Yet he looked not the worse for that, at least so thought Adora, as she saw him coming towards her.

The two silently shook hands, the eyes of Sidney Latimer watching them jealously from afar, almost disappointed that he could find no fault with their behaviour in presence of each other.

Sharon it was who overpassed his son with his prompter word, speaking gravely and steadily, as if he had only come to Drumfern upon a short and ordinary journey to a Wednesday's market.

'Ye will come back wi' us to House o' Muir and set the place in order a wee!' he said.

Sadly Adora shook her head. It could not be,

she saw well —not with Sidney Latimer there to think the thought she knew was in his heart.

‘I thank you,’ she answered gently. ‘House of Muir was a good home and a pleasant till that befell which befell. But since then Aline McQuhirr has given my father shelter, and I cannot be quit of her like an old shoe. She took us in when none else would, the door of House of Muir being shut! I must return and do what I can to repay her.’

Then for the first time Roy spoke. Never till now had he lifted his eyes to the face of Adora Gracie.

‘Do not let any thought of me keep you back,’ he said. ‘My father needs that some woman should fend for him. I shall not be there. I swear before you all that I shall not sleep in my own bed nor be sheltered by my own roof-tree till I hunt down the true murderer of Sandy Ewan! Though but one believed me guilty, I count not myself to be cleared of suspicion while the matter is dark!’

His father turned to him gently. Prison had drawn them more closely together than ever before, they who had spoken but little to each other while the meal-ark was full in the kitchen of House of Muir. But they had become friends in the drear dusks and mouldy cells of the ‘Thieves’ Hole’ of St. Cuthbertstown.

‘Roy,’ he said, ‘take an old man’s word for it—even your father’s! Let not the thing trouble you! Come your ways back to House of Muir! Bravely do ye ken who it was that would not find ye innocent of

the thing they laid to your charge. But of that I shall bear my part, and you yours!’

‘No, faither,’ said the young man, with a certain grave tenderness in the Scottish word, ‘I will never enter the door of House of Muir till I have made it all plain to the world—the crime and the criminal alike!’

‘Little ye ken what ye undertake,’ said his father; ‘mony are the cauld, blashy days and wet, cauldrie nights ye maun bide oot on the hills, to find out a deed done in secret like that. Moreover, it concerns not you. Come hame, lad. Ye are cleared in the sight o’ men. Hearken to that. And as to God, He kens a’ thing!’

The clamours of the cheering had not yet wholly died away. Mixed with it came a wild hoot of execration, a noise as of the howling of dogs on a trail. It was, they said, Jonathan Grier running in fear of his life for the Maxwelltown bridge-end. Had the good wives caught the Lowran gamekeeper that night, it had not gone well with him on the plain-stones of Drumfern. The McCullochs had never been so popular in their lives. And had their manners, or rather those of Sharon, been a little more approachable, they would have been chaired round the town like a successful candidate for parliament. But Sharon was too grim and Roy had other things to think about. So the popularity of a moment spent itself vaguely in invitations to drink at the Queen’s Head, the King’s Arms, and other well-known hostelries.

## STRONG MAC

First of all, however, there was Sidney Latimer to thank, and to Roy McCulloch the task was no pleasant one. The gulf fixed between what a rich man may do for a poor one, and the return a poor man can make to one richer than himself, yawned before Roy's feet.

Added to which, Adora had travelled far alone in the company of this man. She had gone, so they said, to a foreign land to find him. They had returned together. There remained therefore nothing for the young man to do save to render his thanks to both, and to betake him into the wilderness till he had accomplished his vow.

As for Adam McQuhirr, he had long ago disappeared with Daid the Deil, and his heavy 'conveyance' was by this time lumbering westwards in the direction of the Four Mile House upon the Springholm road. As the old long-tailed plough-horse jogged slowly along, Adam was already thinking of his welcome home, and of all that he would have to tell. None could possibly forestall him. He would have the whole tale of how he bearded the Red Judge to himself. And none knew better than he how to make the best use of his monopoly. He foresaw many a brewing of the undutied 'un-ta'en-doon,' which he had offered to my Lord Pitfairly, ere the grey hairs of age should show upon his narrative or upon his listeners' appreciation of it.

With her usual determination Adora was resolved that Roy McCulloch should remain in no

misapprehension of the relations which existed between herself and Sidney Latimer. She had read novels and romances in her day, especially since Sidney had been accustomed to bring the more recently published books to her father. Accordingly she had noted that 'misunderstanding' is the writer's most frequent device for prolonging a tale, and her strong common sense had marked it with growing resentment as by much the most foolish. Whatever the course of her life was to be, there would be no misunderstanding as to her intentions and resolves. Sidney Latimer should understand. Roy McCulloch should understand. If either took offense— well, as the proverb says, that would be to Adora 'but one stone the less in my garden!'

Adora knew that Sidney Latimer was watching her jealously, even when his mother was hanging on his arm, urging him to go with her to the King's Arms that he might eat and rest. Nevertheless, she was resolved that Roy should not leave home on her account. So on the High Street of Drumfern she asked him plainly to come to a little hostelry called the Cross Keys, situated in a bystreet, away from the throng of the market-place and the hubbub of the great day of the assizes.

'A friend of mine is waiting for us there, whose acquaintance I desire that you should make,' she said.

It was characteristic of both of them that there should be no thanks expected or proffered between

these two. The bonds of ancientest amity held them silent. Of course if Adora had been at the point of death or in any mortal strait Roy would have done his best to save her. It seemed natural to him, therefore, that Adora should try in his case, and equally natural that she should succeed.

Adora had always been the cleverer. That Roy would die for Adora was but a little thing to say. As air was made to breathe, water to drink, so he, Roy McCulloch, was for Adora Gracie to use as it might seem good to her.

Soberly enough, therefore, the McCullochs walked to the inn, and followed Adora upstairs to the parlour she had hired.

'My friend, Captain Ebenezer Sinclair!' she said, smiling at the three tall men who waited awkwardly enough, so close together that they seemed to fill the whole space of the little room.

Roy shook hands, somewhat shyly, but Sharon, who followed, stood with a certain grim humour playing about the corners of his mouth. He did not hold out his hand for several seconds. He only gazed at the bronzed and wrinkled sea-captain in front of him.

'You have forgotten me, I see, Ebenezer!' he said at last. In his turn the captain gazed uncertain, his arm at first stretched out, then half withdrawn.

'So it was you who helped this young lass to find the only man that could save my auld neck!' he said, grimly. 'Well, that is maybe tit for tat. Ebenezer

Sinclair, do you remember Valencia? A white day of driving stour, everybody as floury as a miller, the long road to the Grao where a certain ship lay—and—?’

‘God help us, lad,’ cried the captain, all at once heaving himself forward, ‘you are never the smuggler that saved me from yon mob o’ yelly-hooin’ deevils? Man, I thocht ye were a Spaniard. I mind—will I ever forget? Their knives glittered like fork lightning on the water—’

‘Aye, there were a wheen as wild lads amang them as ye could forgather wi’ between Tarifa and the Pyrenees! But yin Sharon McCulloch was a wilder in thae days! Guid forgie him! What was your trouble—I forget? Ye were some deal tewed up wi’ a lass, were ye no?’

But at the word the sea-captain made a sign with his hand, signifying that Adora’s presence must not be forgotten in such speech between men.

‘Abide—abide,’ said Sharon, laughing, ‘ye will be telling her the tale yoursel’ some day or lang as she sits knitting by the fireside.’

‘And now, captain,’ said Adora, who among other gifts had that of stopping any conversation of the drift of which she did not approve, ‘will you tell these two gentlemen all that has happened since Adam McQuhirr put me on board the Fortune’s Queen at Port Glasgow? It was your kindness that saved their lives!’

‘My kindness!’ said the captain, with a look of

admiration at the girl before him, 'richt willin' wad I be to tak' the credit, but the solemn fact is I had nae mair to do wi' bringin' the young Laird o' Lowran hame to—

'To save our necks!' said Sharon, nodding grimly.

'Weel, to keep the hangman and you frae being better acquaint,' amended the sea-captain; 'it's an unkindly death, hangin'—and for the sake o' byeganes, Ebenezer Sinclair wad be sair vexed to see ony that belonged to ye gangin' that road. But it was a' the lass! Hers is the credit frae first to last!'

'I did not bring them here only to listen to you telling them that,' said Adora, a little tartly.

The captain looked up astonished.

'I hope then,' he said, 'that ye werena expectin' me to tell them a pack o' lees!'

Then a flash of understanding—of what the captain of the Fortune's Queen took for consummate knowledge of womankind, shot through his mind.

'Davert!' he said to himself, 'but I'll wager the lassie is makin' a fool o' auld Ebie Sinclair. Twa strings to her bow, has she, the besom? Weel, Ebenezer, think on the days o' your vanity and that lass at Valencia, no to mention ony mair names!—syne ask yourself if it's for you to pit your hand to the dykeside and up wi' the first stane! Your job, my lad, is juist to back the lass up! I wadna hae thocht she had it in her, the cunning wee blastiel But, fegs, Ebenezer, lad, it's juist yae lesson the mair to ye,

even at your time o' life! Oh, thae weemen, thae weemen!'

And with this idea firmly rooted in his head, it will be understood that the worthy captain skilfully played his part. That is, according to his conception of it.

So, Ebenezer Sinclair being witness, never in the history of the world had there been anything more single-eyed and matter-of-fact than the search for Sidney Latimer. To Adora alone the honour! She had sought for this man as for hid treasure, but it was to save the life of another. Roy McCulloch was that other. The waves of Biscay, the landing at Bilbao, the adventures of Hemani, the rescue and the return, lost nothing when the captain of the Fortune's Queen set out 'to do the puir lass a guid turn!' Only he took care to say nothing about the moment when she had rested unconscious in Sidney Latimer's arms, or the kiss which had been laid upon her lips while her eyes were closed. Consenting or not consenting, conscious or unconscious— that was no business of faithful Captain Ebenezer's.

'If it's the ither yin, after a,' he meditated, 'she can tell him whatever she likes about ony bits o' trifles like that! Trust a woman for a story!'

He might have spared his pains. Roy McCulloch had had it fixed in his mind during his second sojourn in prison that Adora Gracie was not for him. So he listened to the captain's recital with dulled ears, only firming his lips a little at the

## STRONG MAC

thought of the peril Adora had escaped in the house of Hemani. He loved her— yes, more than ever. That needed not to be said. But to his eyes, long deprived of light and air and beauty, there was a new nobility and wonder in Adora's look. The barrier between them had grown noticeably higher. This, then, was Strong Mac's thought. Deep in his slow, faithful, delving mind, he made this resolve, that so long as there was the least stain upon his character, he would never be fit to look any good woman in the face.

He had been liberated by the judge. Eleven out of twelve of a jury of his countrymen had found him innocent of the foulness of midnight slaughter. Still to his own mind there remained a doubt. The words 'by a majority' stuck in his throat. Not until the truth was fully made known would he walk in the ways of ordinary men.

As to Adora, she must marry the man who was worthy of her, the man without stain, the man who for her sake had done a noble and worthy act, who could give her at once a great position. Yes, there was not a doubt of it. Adora would marry Sidney Latimer. And Roy tried to make believe that he would be glad.

But in the meantime Roy McCulloch would clear his character, and so be able to stand once more as a man among men, reproach-free and unafraid.

CHAPTER FORTY

THE SHEIL OF THE BLACK WATER

It was to the Sheil of the Upper Airie, above the sullen muirland courses of the Black Water of Dee that Roy McCulloch had withdrawn himself. To others his purpose might have seemed Quixotic and irrational. It was definite and clear to himself.

Said his father— who took, though quietly, the former view, 'Lad, the jury of your countrymen and the guid word of a judge o' the land should be enough for you, as it was for me! But— let every man be fully persuaded in his ain mind!'

It was his favourite scriptural maxim, and further than that he made no attempt to influence his son. He silently accepted Roy's help at critical seasons of lambing or winter-feeding. For to a vigorous moorsman like Roy the distance was not great between Sharon McCulloch's property and the Sheil of the Black Water. So from that time forth Roy was constantly on the great wide-open world of the hills, lying out there so still with its face to the skies. Never had Adam McQuhirr, that excellent farmer, had such a herd as Roy was in these days. And indeed he often stated in company his admiration for the young man.

But Aline did not at all agree with his praises. She was silent under them. For to her Roy's fault was that he came no more to the cottage by the

## STRONG MAC

loaning-end, where he well knew that a welcome was waiting for him. Adora seemed to be fretting, or went about with a face proud or haughtily cold.

Was it not for the sake of Roy McCulloch?

At all events, Aline of the Silver Braids did not believe in any young man, who had 'made a practise o't,' ceasing all at once to make visits of faith and loyalty and performing no more his due feudal service to her beloved.

But up among the rocks and far yont the sinister gash of the Marches of Barnbarroch, Roy kept to his steadfast purpose. He had not ceased to love Adora Gracie. Having once begun, men like Strong Mac do not cease so long as the chest lifts with the breath-heave.

Roy McCulloch stood often at his door and looked in one direction. The Shell was a little wooden house with a ridiculous chimney of granite and clay, weathered and imperfect, but the only built part of the rude shelter hut. However, Roy had banked the walls up with stones, and led a trench all around to draw off the surface water. There was no window in the Sheil, save a little pane of glass by the side of the fireplace, which at night could be secured in the inside by a stone that the present inmate had brought in from the moors and chipped square. Few were the men who could have lifted that stone into position every gloaming, as Roy did with one hand before he lit his lamp.

Not that he spent much time in his bothy, or

lay down to rest. When he did it was usually after day had broken chill and grey over the long backs of the hills.

His two collies and his deerhound had followed him from the House of Muir, and now regularly patrolled the front of the Sheiling during the time their master was asleep. Ailsa, the senior collie, a short-haired beast with quick intelligent eyes, cocked ears and a head turned habitually to the side, could be trusted to take a letter down to Sharon at House of Muir. Roy folded and secured the missive about the dog's leathern collar, and then, pointing in the direction of House of Muir, he gave the talismanic word, 'Hame, Ailsa!'

Whereupon Ailsa, who had followed every movement of her master with her eyes, would trot off across the yard with a sniff of contempt for her companions (useless four-legged things all unfit to be trusted with a letter)! Then, once over the first dyke with some dignity she made a bee-line for the heights— long whale-backed ridges, over which the boulders poked their noses like Polar bears seen among the ice-floes—beyond which lay House of Muir and Sharon McCulloch waiting for his son's message.

Thus in the Sheiling of the Black Water, Roy McCulloch fronted his problem, as once on a day far down by the liliated waters of Lowran Adora had wrestled with hers.

Morning after morning Roy McCulloch looked

out upon that vast plain face of the moors, which yet for its lovers has as many and as great changes as the most beautiful lowland country. This that he looked upon was scarred with cleuchs, down which the water ran rustily red. It was rifted with black viscous cracks that would swallow a man or a horse as fast as any quicksand, if either had the misfortune to fall within. Farther away Roy could see the moss-hags pitted like the scars of small-pox here and there along the margin. But these were less lonely, for they told where men long dead and gone to dust had cut fuel to warm them and theirs through the frosts of forgotten winters. All around him, far and near, this world of the uplands was sown with gigantic boulders, grey and waterworn, as if scattered from the pepperpot of some careless Titan.

Young and lusty, though a trifle less self-confident than he had been, Roy went about among his sheep with no other defence than his strong arms and the fists which no one in his world would dare to encounter. Only sometimes at night, he would take with him a stout blackthorn cudgel, with which, once in time of need, he had felled a young bull to the ground with one blow.

Adam McQuhirr's sheep were his first care. But then he had been brought up among them, and he could do what work there was to do, and yet have most of the day and all the night for his own affairs. His eye, skilled as only that of the shepherd is, saw

things naturally in 'scores.' If you had asked Roy how many peas were in a dish, or kirk-folk in a congregation, he would instantly have replied, 'Oh, about six score!' So not a sheep could absent itself from his colonies without leave, yet as he went his ways along the marvellous labyrinth of hill tracks, only a few inches wide, worn by the constant trafficking of the little pattering 'cloots' of the black-faced people, Roy's mind was on one thing alone.

And that one, to his shame be it said, was not Adora, but that he might put a name and an end to the dangerous and mysterious Thing which had twice brought terror upon the land, and had changed all his life— Adora was Adora, but she was not for him— now, or perhaps ever. At any rate, Roy had fixed in his heart — that, while a single doubt remained in any mind as to his guilt in the matter of the death of Alexander Ewan, he would not soil any woman's good name by bringing it into connection with his own.

'Folly—!' said his father. 'Guilt—!' cried his enemies. 'Those strange unaccountable sulks that afflict all men—!' thought, but did not say, Adora Gracie. But no one of these was even near the truth, least of all she who should have known him best. Less swift than Adora, but far more enduring and patient, Roy set himself to watch, and, if need should be, to act on his own responsibility.

There was one spot well out on the ridges, from which, perilously balancing himself on a 'logan' or

rocking stone, Roy could catch a glimpse beyond the wild Glen of Pluckamin, of the fair lowland breadths and sleeping waters of Lowran. And also—what indeed brought him daily to that spot—he could discern a certain speck of white upon a field of green, which was the cottage at the loan-end of Gairie, where Adora dwelt. He liked to come there and look, though there was a barrier between them— not of wide air spaces, rifted glens and still waters, white with anchored lilies, but that dread, inexplicable something that had wrecked his life and made him, while yet a young man, an outcast from the world.

Somewhere it was lurking there— the Thing. Roy was more and more sure of it. It had murdered Alexander Ewan—or at least slain him. Beast, was it, or man become even as the beasts? Something, at least, of dangerous and deadly there was, which had well-nigh also been the death of Sidney Latimer, which had done the deed of horror upon the boy Daid, and left Roy McCulloch without self-respect in his own eyes or honour untarnished in the eyes of others.

It was small wonder, then, that with so much at stake Roy's keen eyes perused that world of bog and bent and heather, under all changes, by sun or moon, and at all hours of the night and day. But for long he did so without any result.

The seasons passed in their order over the uplands. The winter grey and brown were invaded

by the keen pale emerald of the water-plants along the 'flowes' or dangerous shaking bogs. The heather tipped itself with viridian, and by the edges of the paths and in all sheltered places the hand of Spring set the small sweet grass-blades thick, ready for the ewes to convert into milk for their lambs.

But upon the face of the upland world, the young man's keen and wary eyes could pick up no speck his brain could not account for. That black streak was where a rush of slaty shale had fallen during the night from the heights of Bennanbrack and scarred the sappy pastures beneath, always apple-green with the drip from the rocks. Yonder touch of fresh orange on the hillside was where a dog-fox in quest of dead lambs, had begun to dig himself a shelter. Roy had heard him barking in the night, his passage sending Ailsa and her peers into a short-lived clamorous madness.

But one morning, in the time of the shortest nights, when the sun rising by half-past three found oftentimes hoar-frost on the heather and on the croziers of the uncoiling ferns (and seared them on the spot with his rays for sprouting untimely), Roy was returning to the Shell of the Black Water after a long night of fruitless watching. He had lain with unshut eye on the lip of the cup which looks upon the Marches of Barnbarroch. All through the hours of darkness he had remained there. It was his favourite watch-tower on the moor. Yet not a hare-bell had moved, till the young grouse began to peep

and chunner about him in the thick heather, and the peewits awoke to the fact that there was a stranger in the vicinage of their eggs, and forthwith chased him off their policies with clamorous cries and much delusive flapping of broken wings.

A little sick with hope deferred, Roy was walking homeward somewhat carelessly—more so than was his wont, when all at once the sound of voices in anger caused him to drop to the earth with the swift instinct of hiding, which in these days had become second nature to him.

Who could be in that wild place, at that early hour, speaking loudly and in anger. Roy was still well up on the ridges, but the sound certainly came from above him. The plain side of the fell spread away right and left, bare even of sheep. Only at one particular place a boiling cloud of the same irrepressible peewits, which had expressed their disapproval of his presence, circled and swept over a dip in the long whale-back of the ridges.

‘That is at the Dhu Loch,’ said Roy to himself, but speaking half aloud, as is the wont of men who hear few voices. And without stopping to think of danger or to argue with himself as to who might possibly be in that place at three in the morning, the young man took his way uphill with all the speed and caution he was master of.

Now in the southern uplands of Galloway, which still lie bare, desolate, and remote as when Bruce hid in them, and will lie so till the Day of

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Judgment, there are many 'Dhu Lochs.' High among the summits and out on the niggled sides of the hills you will come upon them unexpectedly. They are generally oblong in shape, and guard the reputation of being unfathomably deep. The water is a clear peaty brown in the palm of the hand, but looked at from above, it is black as ink.

It was to one of these that Roy made his way as he climbed. He had mounted the heights of the ridge, so keeping cautiously to the left, he circled about so that the loch would lie beneath him when he came in sight of it. Thus he would 'have the hill' of what persons soever were holding altercation in that secluded spot at so un-timeous an hour.

Cautiously he drew himself up till his chin, and then his breast rested on the verge. The water was still hidden by a screen of heather thick and strong. He continued, however, to hear the angry voices, but they seemed, perhaps owing to the elevation at which he now lay, to be farther away. Roy put aside the heather with his hand, and looked forth.

Beneath him, near enough, as it seemed, to flip a penny into, gleamed the Dhu Loch, a sheet of ink, motionless under the heavy sky of the morning. Pale grey rocks of coarse-grained granite fended it about, and at the farther end two men stood facing one another with angry threatening gestures. One of them, the one with his face turned in Roy's direction, held a gun in his hand, which apparently the other had been trying to wrest from him. The

man with the face still hidden from Roy was of a strange aspect, more like some beast risen on its hind legs to engage in a death-grapple than a man made in the image of God.

'I will not—I tell you I will not,' cried the voice which Roy had heard before; 'you shall not have the gun! We have had enough of blood!'

Then ensued a hoarse growling snarl of anger, a quick leap—and lo! the man with the gun was pushed down, falling on his back with the misshapen, inhuman creature on the top of him. Instantly Roy McCulloch rose to his feet.

'Hold there,' he cried. And in a moment he had precipitated himself down the steep towards the farther end of the Dhu Loch, where, on a little green V-shaped pad of land the struggle was fast reaching its climax. At the moment when Roy shouted, a shot went off, the white smoke from the muzzle of the piece curling lazily up in the morning air. The creature took one swift, frightened look over its shoulder, showing a mass of tangled hair with scarcely any sign of definite features, and then with inconceivable rapidity rushed headlong down the slope. Roy hastened to aid the fallen man, and so rapid were the young man's movements, trained as he had been by weeks of exercise on the hills, that the reek of the gunpowder had not died away when he arrived upon the scene. The man's face was a little turned to the side into a bush of heather, but he was apparently uninjured. Indeed, as Roy raised

him in his arms, he opened his eyes, and presently staggered to his feet, holding his hand uncertainly to his head. The man was Jonathan Grier, the head-keeper on the Lowran properties. His first question was a curious one.

'Did you see him?' he asked.

See him,' said Roy, 'the man who attempted to murder you—yes, I saw him!' 'Did you see his face?'

'Unfortunately not with any clearness—it did not look like a face,' answered Roy, 'but if you are better I may catch him yet.'

The man gave a sigh mingled of relief and pain, and sat down again.

'No, stay with me,' he said; 'it would be useless. He runs like a deer.'

But without waiting his words, Roy had hastened to the top of the little gully down which the gamekeeper's assailant had precipitated himself with such incredible violence. There were marks of shod feet on the rocks and gravelly shale. Roy's trained eyes followed the line of flight. Already the man had put an almost unbelievable distance between himself and his pursuers. Roy made him out crossing with painful care the pale green scum of a flowe. Then, apparently on all fours like a beast, or rather squat like a crab or noxious creeping insect, he saw him clambering up the grey rumble of slaty dibris which cumbered the mountain side. The fugitive kept a definite direction probably towards some secret hiding-place.

## STRONG MAC

Roy descended again to the edge of the Dhu Loch. The gamekeeper had to some extent recovered from his rough handling, but with his recovery his natural evil temper had also revived.

‘It is as I told you,’ he snarled, ‘next time you will perhaps mind your own business! The man is gone, and there is an end of it.’

‘If I had minded my own business a few minutes ago,’ said Roy, somewhat nettled, ‘in all likelihood there would have been an end of you, Jonathan Grier. You would have been a dead man, and buried in a moss-hole!’

‘You mean you wish I had been!’ sneered the head-keeper. ‘Well, I am glad it is not so, for that would have prevented me from having the pleasure of being present at your hanging!’

‘You did your best to hang me once,’ returned Roy, quietly! ‘it is not likely that you will have another chance.’

‘Oh, as to that, I would not be too sure,’ retorted the keeper. ‘You run some remarkable risks, you McCullochs. This is your land, I believe, and even now it would be a pretty near thing for you, if I were to report I had been attacked and well-nigh murdered under your very eyes!’

‘Yes,’ said Roy quickly, ‘at three o’clock in the morning.’

The keeper looked up with a sudden frown. He understood the allusion.

‘I have a right to be upon the moors at any

hour,' he said, sullenly enough. 'I do not need to ask your leave. And more than that, my friend, it has been told to me that you have been manifesting a great interest in our Lowran properties. I will thank you to keep away from the Cleuch of Pluckamin—!'

'And also from the Marches of Barnbarroch, where your master was almost murdered?' queried Roy, meeting him eye to eye.

The gamekeeper muttered something like an oath, but for a moment found nothing articulate to reply. When he spoke again, it was in a more reasonable tone.

'It would be as well if we could both agree to say nothing of this,' he said; 'it would only bring up old controversies, which you of all men have most cause to wish forgotten.'

'Who was the man?' demanded Roy, suddenly.

The gamekeeper shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'Oh, some gipsy tramp, doubtless, or Irish rascal,' he said; 'there are too many of them about. It is the time of year when they hide away on the muirs in order to plunder the lowlands, and live on the whaup's eggs between whiles! You know that as well as I!'

'At least I have seen none of them!' said Roy, calmly, 'and I would ask one more question, if you will give me permission.'

'Ask away.'

'What did you mean when you cried out, 'I will

not, I tell you. You shall not have the gun! We have had enough of blood?’

Turning a shade paler and setting his mouth, the gamekeeper regarded Roy fixedly, as strong men do when they lie.

‘I never said that!’ he said. ‘I never heard any one else say it either!’

‘I heard you and knew your voice!’ Roy persisted. ‘It is easy to hear what you want to hear,’ said the gamekeeper; ‘we are not all so bloody-minded as you McCullochs, who think of nothing else!’

And without a ‘Thank you’ for Roy’s timely intervention or even so much as a ‘Good day,’ Jonathan Grier took his gun and strode away to the south, keeping carefully to the open crown of the moorland, so that none could approach him unseen. He had loaded and primed his gun before he went.

And Roy McCulloch went back to the Sheil of the Black Water, his mind filled with a new and surprising turmoil of thoughts. What had he learned? What did it mean? Was the mystery now more or less mysterious after what he had been witness of upon the hills by the Dhu Loch?

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

THE HEART OF ADORA

Things had on the whole turned out much as people had expected. In spite of the warning he had received, in spite of the narrow shave he had had of it at the assizes, Roy McCulloch had not taken to reputable courses. He lived (so they said) in a lonely sheiling among the hills, a mere shelter for fodder, that had been run up many years ago on a 'led' farm which marched with his father's property.

A dreadful thing, surely, said the clash of the country thus to leave 'an aged parent' alone in that solitary place! But at House of Muir, needless to say, there was no such thought.

The McCullochs lived within themselves, self-contained, self-content, asking no man's opinion upon their actions, and sharing theirs with none. And the elder McCulloch, whatever his thoughts may have been as to the wisdom of his son's proceedings, was too old a campaigner to care whether he went or stayed. He granted that full liberty to others which through life he had so consistently claimed for himself.

The haunting terror, which for months had brooded over the hills and valleys of middle Galloway, little by little died away. Already Sandy Ewan's slaying had become almost like a tale of long ago. Confidence was gradually re-established. Lovers

again met in tryst at stiles into cornfields or ran the risk of taking cold under the alder-trees on the meadow edges. It was no longer considered a dangerous thing to go alone to the byre for the cow-milking. The farm lads were not so particular to have company when they entered the stables to 'supper the horse.'

Yet there were some who remained alert—Roy McCulloch being the chief of these, in his lonely Sheil of Loch Dee, where he was left in charge of Adam McQuhirr's sheep on the Upper Airie—the farm which, after the death of Sandy Ewan, Aline's brother had taken up.

Also a certain deformed boy, now recovered from his 'accident' and beginning to run about, among the brackeney knowes and round the craggy hummocks at the back of the cot house of Airie, had not forgotten— much less forgiven. Few in these days saw Daid McRobb face to face. Since he had been taken to the Circuit Court of Drumfern something seemed to have weakened in his head. Even to Adam and Aline he was never quite the same again— as clever certainly, but now shy as a wild wood-thing, ever ready to take to a tree or dart among the bushes, where he would lie, effaced and lost to any human sight just as it pleased him.

Daid had long ago abandoned the garret chamber at Aline's, where he had lain for months. But, whereas since the assizes he could no more be depended upon at mealtime in Aline's dainty

parlour, food was conveyed to him three times a day in the barn of the Gairie farm. At first Adam's wife had been frightened, and had forbidden him admittance within the stack-yard at all. But when she observed that this made little difference to Daid, who would just as lief climb in at a wicket, or lie hid among the piled straw or under the machinery of the thrashing mill—especially when her son, Roderick, began to play with curious wooden guns and cross-bows which had been made for him by Daid, her opinions changed, and now she would even take out to the Dumbie, with her own hands, his morning platter of porridge or set apart for him in the milkhouse one of the great bowls of curds which he loved.

It was sometimes eerie work enough, however, to take such things to the barn—especially in the gloaming, when the sheaves had turned a deep brownish orange, when the shadowy beams overhead were purple black, and the door which opened out into the orchard gave upon a sea of blue swimming haze.

‘Daid!’ you would cry, with the bowl in one hand and the fresh supply of oat-cakes in the other, warm and crisp from the fire. He to whom you spoke could not answer you in words.

‘Daid—come out, good Daid.’

Then if the maimed boy were in good humour and nothing fretted, soft as a bat's wing fluttering against your cheek in the twilight, a dark form

would appear by your side without a sound or a rustle. A hand would press your arm in unspoken thankfulness and, silent as a shadow shifting, the boy would disappear as he had come.

But it was otherwise if anything had ruffled him during the day, and any work done about his hiding-place tended to drive him crazy. At the sound of your calling, there would ensue, first silence, and then, if you persisted, a rustling as of rats among the straw of the great shadowy mow. If you called a third time, there would arise from you knew not where the strangest, faintest, unearthliest whinny of mingled protest and discontent, which, though you were brave as Wallace and of stature like unto Samson, sufficed to make you set down the bowl as quickly as possible upon the earthen floor and take yourself off to the friendly ingle-side of the farm house, brisk with the hither-and-thither of kitchen traffic, and human with the hum of gossip.

To this rule, however, there were two exceptions. In his worst moods Daid would run like a dog to Adora's most distant call, and when none could find him about the outhouses of the Gairie, his sturdy protector, Adam McQuhirr, by whose grace he remained where he was, would go out, and with a lusty hail of 'Daid, lad, come this meenite to your parritch, or by my faith I'll be aff wi' ye the morn's mornin' to the Red Judge.'

Whereat, though he had lain safe in cache all day long, Daid would instantly appear, sitting

astride on some outhouse rigging or coming up through the shadowy orchard trees like a gigantic crab.

'Daft? Weel, maybe,' the farmer of Gairie would say in answer to some protestation against harbouring such 'vermin' about his place, 'daft—but no that verra daft! There's mony i' this pairish wi' their names on the kirk-roll wha micht learn a lesson frae puir mishandled Daid! An' sae lang as the craitur does nae ill, and as lang as the breath o' life bides in Aidam McQuhirr, the hairmless bit thing will no want either bit or sup, an auld coat to cover his nakedness, and twa-three corn sacks to keep him warm amang the strae o' the barn. And as for the farm-lasses bein' feared to gang their gaits for Daid—if nane o' the hizzies gang ony waur gate than Daid will lead them, there will be fewer mistrystin' jobs afore the Lowran Kirk Session, I wot. Harken ye to that, ye hempies, it's your maister that's speakin'.'

Thus there was for a time great quietness over the parish. The troubles of the past eighteen months had well-nigh been forgotten, except perhaps when the herds forgathered on the hill, and passed the news smoking their pipes at some dyke-back.

But as has been said, there were two who knew that this peace was only on the surface. Roy McCulloch continued to dwell in the lone sheiling by the lochside. Every night he took his way across the heather, and always in one direction— towards the

Marches of Barnbarroch. And the reason why Daid slept so much in the barn during the day was that he too kept silent and sleepless watch all night, and every night, about the dwelling of Adam McQuhirr, and especially about the cottage at the end of the Gairie loaning.

These two knew, what most had forgotten, that the Terror still walked in darkness upon the moors of Lowran and Bennanbrack. They kept watch and ward, apart from each other and unknown to each other. Some might be troubled with a passing suspicion, which was as easily explained. For instance, when Sharon McCulloch lost an occasional sheep, he loaded his shot-gun and set it behind the door, or he took a walk with it under his arm up the waterside and among the heathery knolls where his flock was grazing on the short succulent hill grasses, or, lower, with their heads down and only their rumps showing among the pretty waterside meadows.

But Sharon saw nothing, save on one occasion his son Roy, who came over the dyke like a deer whom the hunters pursue, and whose sharp signal whistle caused his father to throw up his gun just in time to turn away a charge of shot that might have spoilt Roy's dyke-jumping for ever.

Sometimes, also, Adam McQuhirr grumbled that he had lost a sheep or two, but these were at his lower farm, and not among the flocks which were committed to Roy McCulloch's care. Nevertheless,

there were 'Egypt folk' about to bear the blame, besides ex-soldiers returning from the wars, and harvesters from Ireland, the straggling advance guard of the great August stream of scythe-men going towards the English harvests.

'There is no saying!' Adam truly remarked, 'what is at the bottom o't. Ye see, there's a natural kindness atween a gaun body's hungry belly and an orra sheep aff the hill! We'll be findin' the skin an' ribs o' the puir beasts in some moss-hole, I'se warrant. But bless me, in my day I hae seen a man's neck in danger afore my Lord Justiciary, and it shallna be for the sake o' a bit wether or twa that Aidam McQuhirr will be the means o' bringin' ony mither's son to yon awesome place!'

Meantime, while these things, covert and overt, drew to a head in different parts of the parish of Lowran, Strong Mac lived alone with the wild birds and the sheep, nourishing his soul upon the Bible, the poems of Burns, the works of Shakespeare, and a curious book called 'The Life of Samuel Johnson,' by an author of whom Roy had never heard, but whom on one page he took for a genius and on the next for an idiot.

And Adora Gracie abode in the cottage with her father and Aline. The girl was in a strange frame of mind— fretful with others, sometimes even with Aline, inclined to snap her father into silence when he began his interminable moralisings. Adora was sick, that was clear, and there was none to diagnose

the trouble that was upon her.

Certainly she could not do it herself. Aline, with all a gentle woman's penetration, lacked experience, and was equally at fault. Adora tried a book—several books. But with her clearness of vision and analytical power, she had not Roy's stolid masculine endurance of the dead drift of days, the useless reduplication of hours without object or solace, save the slow boom of the spinning wheel. She had no use for these things now. Her soul took no pleasure in them.

Even the prospect outside offended her— the same dull humps and hillocks to be seen from the door— the gleam of silvery water, the lilies white and golden in the little cove into which the Pluckamin Water brought down the granite sand, the blue barrow of Ben Gairn asleep on the horizon. It might be a fair place, yet to the heart of the sick girl, its very beauty was an offence. Surely after all her labour, she had not deserved to be left thus. She had broken prison bands. Roy McCulloch was free. Sidney Latimer had done her will. Her calculations had met to a hairsbreadth. All had gone as she had hoped, and yet she was not content. Had she not argued the matter out? Had she not seen the end from the beginning? Did she not resolve that she would keep Sidney Latimer at a distance during the voyage, and set Roy McCulloch in his own place upon her return? She had set out to prove to these two that there was something better, something

higher than what was called love— the friendship between men and women which is able to say, 'Thus far shalt thou come and no farther, and here shall thy proud swelling waves be stayed!'

Though she did not know it, Adora was working out an old, old sum, and it was pride that had made her go wrong from the start. For love is humility. It is not heralded by drums or the sound of a trumpet. Seldom, does it come with observation. Love in the heart of man or woman is not magnificent, imperial, all-conquerant. Neither, on the other hand, can it be logically apportioned beforehand, resolved upon with exactitude, fenced about with clipped hedges and formal pales. Least of all (as Did Francis Roos, in his 'version of the Psalms in metre,' hath it), is love to be treated: *'like the horse or mule, Which do not understand, Whose mouth, lest they come near to thee, A bridle must command.'*

The door of love's palace is low. And those who enter there must go upon their knees.

## CHAPTER FORTY TWO

'HOLD YOUR TONGUE, WOMAN!'

Aline saw the girl's trouble, and her nature, softly persistent and clinging like her native mists, reached out to find a remedy.

Comfort more than comparative had come to the little house at the loaning-end. Captain Ebenezer's steadfast resolution to receive no farthing of passage money had kept intact the proceeds of the schoolhouse sale. As of yore, Adora's industry as a spinner was the pride of the village. Work flowed in, and it was one of Adam McQuhirr's crosses that she would take from him no more than the statutory price. But, in a hundred ways, laboriously kept secret, the good man saw that the difference was more than made up to Aline, and through her to Adora.

Nevertheless, Aline's mind, anxiously on the track of her friend's unhappiness, traversed the whole field of (un-wedded) human experience in search of a cause. But how should she succeed when Adora herself had failed?

The truth was, that of a long season Adora had attempted the impossible. A man, when love is on probation, may for a time remain in a pleasing state of uncertainty as to which of two girls he is in love with. But from the start a woman must make no mistake, or there will be trouble. For her there are

no provisional allotments, no first offender's act, no essays without prejudice.

That is, for a good woman, to whom love is not all self-love, and whose idea of sacrifice is not that others must be sacrificed to herself.

But Adora had frankly attempted the impossible. Without the least coquetry she had tried to treat Roy and Sidney with an absolute equality. Nay, more and worse, she had attempted to keep them equal in her own thought — a thing which no woman can do for a day when two men are in the balance-scales of her favour.

Nevertheless, the girl had a heart, and the time was coming when that heart would take the reins from her head, and carry her whither it would. But, though near, the time was not yet.

It was the centre of many things, that cot by the wayside, white and quiet, Aline's innate delicacy showing even in the creepers upon the wall. In the 'ben' room an old man was reading—in the 'but' a girl spinning and spinning on with a far-a-way look in her eyes. She was thinking as she spun. Aline of the Silver Hair went to and fro, thinking also. The floors, 'but' and 'ben,' were scoured like a dining-table. The very flat-irons and 'gauf-fres' for Aline's sweet box-plaited 'mutches' shone like jewellery on the walls. Through the windows came in the peace of valley and the spread of hill. There was calm in the sunshine about the cottage of Gairie, a Sabbath rest in the air.

Yet the universe of Lowran, its strange histories and tragedies centred and circled about that little home at the end of the Gairie loaning, where, to all outward appearing. Peace thus dwelt as of vested right.

It was the deepest drowse of the summer afternoon— July from verge to verge. The little house sat as sweetly sunning itself among its flower plots and clamberingwhite Ayrshire roses, as if it too were wont to be visited as only a larger honey-bloom by the wandering bee-folk on their quests. Two women came round the turn of the Great House avenue, and so down the brae in the direction of Lowran. But they had not the intention of entering the village. Their path led through the rustling green silences of the policies, and so ultimately in the direction of the Gairie.

As they came they talked one to the other.

‘It is a hard thing for a lad’s mither to do,’ said the Lady of Lowran to her companion, ‘hard indeed. Purslane. You that have neither kith nor kin—neither ancient name nor—’

Purslane stirred uneasily, sighed vaguely, and laid this away with all the other spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes. She did not even answer— a rare virtue with Purslane.

‘But they tell me—I have it from the best authority, that Balgracie is a fine place, and a brave stocking-foot of siller the auld laird had. They say, too, that the young laird made mony a pickle—no

that he was sae muckle younger than yoursel'. Purslane.' But this was the way o't—the way that sic a wealth o' siller cam' into the Hoose o' Balgracie, and the way too that the Balgracies are some far off kin to oursel's, the Latimers o' Lowran!'

Whereat Purslane sighed, a little wearily. She had heard the 'way o't' so often during these last days, with all the pros and cons discussed and digressed upon a dozen times over. But her mistress was accustomed to deal faithfully with all the world, except only her son, and now, she noticed at once her companion's unwillingness to listen.

'Of course,' she added with a certain tartness, 'it couldna be expectit! It's only a woman o' family that cares to keep mind o' sic things. But ye are paid to listen, and hearken ye shall. In the auld days there was a Balgracie o' Balgracie that married wi' a Latimer o' Lowran — weel, maybe no exactly the Lowran stock, but the Threep-ma-thrapple branch—whilk, ye ken, are nearly as guid. For it was Latimer o' Threep-ma-thrapple that gied the second Chairles a leg up the tree after Worcester Day, and wha has the preevilege o' haudin' the king's stirrup to this day ilka time his Majesty gangs by Three-ma-thrapple liggate. And the last wha gat the leg up was that blessed and high-michty potentate, the present Prince Regent. He was gaun by Threep-ma-thrapple on his errands (some o' them gye queer yins), and there was oor cousin Threep at his yett. Sae he asked the prince to come in and taste a drappie.

And his Highness, seeing Threep's dochter, a bonny bit thing, juikin' ahint his shoulder, thought that maybe he micht do waur. And when he was ready to gang on again, there was Threep to haud his royal stirrup, according to the auld tenure o' his ancestors' lands. But when Threep, wha, ye ken, is roond-bellied like a Yester pear, an' gye short i' the puff, gied the hoise to put his Majesty—his Highness, I mean, i' the saddle, the Prince Regent, wha is nae licht wecht, brak' through and cam' ker-whallop to the grund. And ere he gat gathered up, a' his lords cam' rinnin' to help him, and there was puir Threep standin' wi' his mooth open like a roan pipe in a drought, no kennin' what to do! And says his Highness to him, says he, 'Laird o' Threep-mathrapple, if your ancestor had gi'en mine nae better a leg up on the day o' Worcester fecht, it's little likely that I wad hae been here this day! Fetch me a kitchen chair!'

Though guidness kens what he had to do wi' the maitter! For there's precious few draps o' Stuart bluid in him, or ony amang the crew o' them!

To this interesting family reminiscence Purslane had appeared to listen with her usual attention. It was not more than the five hundredth time she had heard it, and she would dearly have liked to ask at what date his Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, was in Scotland, but instead she only interjected a question designed to bring Mrs. Latimer's scattering ideas to a point.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'And sae ye hae made up your mind that Sidney shall mairry the Dominie's lass?'

This was said sadly and dispassionately, with the air of one washing his hands of innocent blood in the sight of the people. The old Lady of Lowran tossed her head.

'Purslane,' she said, irritably, 'it's little that ye ken about the anxieties o' a mither, wi' a son o' auld descent and landed estate, wide in acres, but sair shrunken in siller an' consequence, though by nae faut o' his—.'

'Then, I tak' it,' rasped Purslane, 'that Sidney Latimer o' Lowran is to mairry the dochter o' the drucken dominie wha was pttten oot o' his place for bein' incapacitate before the Presbytery. Weel, mistress, I'm but a puir body, I ken, and, as ye say, hae nae landed estate. But I hae my ain proper pride, and I wad rather see my son, if I had yin, bendin' his back in a ditch—aye or wi' a musket ower his shooder, mairchin' again' the enemies o' his country, than that ony bairn o' mine should sae sair demean himsel' to mate beneath his degree!'

This fixed in the moment the determination of the Lady of Lowran.

'Purslane,' she cried, 'ye are an insolent ill-bred woman, and as soon as ever we enter the door o' Lowran Hoose, ye shall get your fee and your leave. The maid is a guid maid. Naebody has a word to say again' her. She it was that, o' her ain accord, thinking hersel' to be but what she seemed to be,

forbade my son the door, and has keepit him to his word—what think ye o' that?'

'What think I o' that?' cried Purslane, sarcastically, 'I think that, in my young days, that was the very way to mak' a man think three times mair o' a woman than he did before! But I'm auld, and I am stupit (or ye gie me the name o't), and maybe lassies that cunningly flout and men that foolishly follow are changed since then. Hech, sirs, it will be a sair change! But withoot doot ye ken best! Ye are the mistress, and wha else should ken if ye dinna.'

'Purslane, the like o' ye for impertinence I never did see,' cried the old lady. 'I forbid ye to speak o' my dochter-in-law—in ony siccan a fashion.'

'Bide a wee,' said Purslane, mildly persistent; 'surely ye will gie the lass the chance of sayin' 'No!' But maybe that is altered, too! There's heaps o' new fashions since you and me were young '

Mrs. Latimer disdained this, her mind being occupied with higher things.

'And ye wad venture to suppose that a maid wi' siccan a reputation, and clever, that has ga'en a' the road to Spain to bring a puir lad hame to his mither and his duty— and after bidin' wi' him in the same ship for weeks, will no mairry him when he speers her! Certes, she'll be prood to get the chance.'

'Aye,' said Purslane, drily, 'she fetcht him hame, truly—but it was to save another man's neck!'

The old lady stamped her foot, and, catching

her companion by the arm, shook her with a senile outbreak of temper.

'Hear ye,' she cried, 'gang hame wi' ye and bide till I come to pay ye your wage. I'll hae nae mair to do wi' a woman that can think siccan thochts. Back wi' ye.'

'No a step, mistress!' said the indomitable Purslane. 'Mistress Latimer, ye are no fit to bring hame a dozen o' hens' eggs in a basket, let alane a wife to your son! When ye gang hame, I will gang. Neither later nor earlier. And after that we can talk o' feein', and leavin'!'

The Lady of Lowran, recognising the futility of prolonging the discussion on the very threshold of the cottage of Aline McQuhirr, contented herself with saying, 'Now, hear ye this, Rebecca Purslane, ye hae had your say. I hae borne your ill-regulated tongue, speaking concerning things that ye ken naething aboot. Noo, either bide here by the dyke-side, or, if ye come ben where I am to speak my mind for my son's honour and happiness, hold your tongue, woman.'

And as she turned to tap genteelly within Aline's rose-shaded porch, be it recorded that the obedient Purslane took her mistress at her word, and held her tongue with the tips of her finger and thumb, while, under the pretext of adjusting her dress, her feet beneath the widow's weeds danced a little contumelious dance, quite unbecoming her years and general deportment.

## CHAPTER FORTY THREE

## BALGRACIE OF BALGRACIE

'Madame, your servant! Will you be pleased to enter?' Aline's greeting chill, yet full of the simple equality which a consciousness of good family lends to the demeanour, was mixed with just the right amount of Scottish deference to the feudal superior on whose lands she lived. Still there was a ring of defiance in the old lady's voice, which passed unnoticed, save by Adora, who was listening from within to the unwonted sound of visitors at the cottage door.

The girl was at her work as they entered. The window stood open, and the air came pleasantly off the water. Aline had been about to make the tea, and the lid of the caddy was raised. 'The Mortal Sin' was what Adora called it. For upon some consciences, tea bought at a price above the means of their possessors can weigh heavier than all the law and the prophets. Blessed in the last days shall these be. And Aline carried her tea caddy, honestly and simply, 'to a Throne of Grace,' as something which might affect her eternal future. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' Donald Gracie was supposed to be reading, but he had dozed over with the easily coming, easily disturbed sleep of old age. The steady whoo-whoop of Adora's spinning wheel was the music that soothed him, and

he awoke from dreams of walking hand in hand with one long dead, by the rivers of water. It was beside the Water of Leith that he and she had walked, that landlady's daughter who had cost him so much. But in his dream the frowsy froth of Canonmills again ran crystal-clear over sands of silver, the trout swam red-speckled in the amber pools, while from the green bank they watched them hand in hand, he and the landlady's daughter—over whose head the twenty-year-old turf was growing.

Small wonder that Donald Gracie woke up with a start, or that the book slipped from his knee. He was young Donald Balgracie again, and in the moment his ancient manner returned to him. He rose and, setting chairs for the ladies, stood erect before them till they were seated. Then he remembered that he was in Aline's cottage, and he turned to her apologetically. But the old gentlewoman had vanished. For the request of the visitors had been that they might see Mr. Balgracie and his daughter.

Aline went out and sat on the knoll behind. But even through the bright haze of the summer afternoon, a vague uneasy feeling of being secretly watched drew her down to the road-side, along which the carts were passing, and where she could hear the men chattering to the girls on the hayricks down in the meadow. But she kept far enough away from the cottage, for Aline was no keyhole listener.

Within, Adora had simply ceased her toil upon

their entrance, accepting the compliments of the Lady of Lowran with a bow. If her father had forgotten the road from the House of Muir and the words that had been spoken there, she for one had not. The Cleuch of Pluckamin rose before her, and she heard the words: 'You—you alone have bewitched him! He left me to seek the Strange Woman. Give him back to me!'

So Adora bowed, as only a woman on the defensive can bow to another. And she stood still in her place by the window, waiting. Whenever it was a matter of the head, none was more completely armed at all points than Adora Gracie. She was not excited by her unusual visitors. Her pulse went never a beat the faster. She was not even angry, for anger mars the judgment. Behind the smooth young brow Adora's brain lay cool and ready, and her lips never so much as paled, only firming themselves a little to speak with the enemy in the gate.

It was otherwise with the Lady of Lowran. Her brain was perverse, her will contrary, her judgment nil, but within her she had a woman's heart, with all its strengths and weaknesses. And so in a way she was Adora's match and more. Instinctively, therefore, she took the only line with the girl that would have compelled her to listen to Sidney Latimer's mother with any degree of sympathy or even patience.

The Lady of Lowran began in that clear, semi-Biblical English which Scots folk of every degree still

used on any occasion recognised as important. 'I beg you to listen to me for a moment,' she said; 'I have spoken things which are beyond pardon. But I was a woman—out of myself, seeking a son lost to me, an only son, in whom was my life. I do not ask you to pardon, but only to forget—to pass from them. At such times one is apt to speak words that are but as wind. Let them be as wind—and forgive an old woman!'

This was said with considerable dignity, and it was Donald Gracie who answered.

'I am not aware,' said the old Dominie, courteously, 'to what madam refers.'

It was the simple truth, but Mrs. Latimer took it for the natural refinement of the born gentleman—a quality which, truth to tell, it would have been long before she had noticed in humble Donald Gracie, the village schoolmaster.

'It is good of you to say so,' said the Lady of Lowran, 'but only what I would have expected from Mr. Balgracie of Balgracie!'

At the word the Dominie half rose from his chair, while his face flushed up with a strange scared look.

Madam,' he began, his voice suddenly tremulous, you have addressed me by a name which— a name I do not claim any connection with. My name is Gracie. May I ask who informed you that—that the name you used—'

Rapidly increasing agitation did not permit him

to finish his sentence. Adora moved to his side, and made him sit back in his arm-chair.

'You forget—I heard you state the fact yourself, Mr. Balgracie,' said the old lady; 'but, we were all of us somewhat out of ourselves on that occasion, and maybe more was said than you or I would care to stand by. At least, I speak for myself. Let that go. But pardon me if, in calmer mood, I ask whether you are indeed Donald Balgracie, the son of sometime Archibald Balgracie of Balgracie, and the brother of the late William Balgracie of that ilk?'

The eyes of the old Dominie flashed fire. He rose trembling, holding on to the arms of his chair and steadying himself by the mantelpiece.

'The late!' He almost screamed the words. 'Did you say the late William Balgracie of Balgracie?'

Mrs. Latimer nodded with the satisfied air of one who is the first to convey an important piece of news.

'William is dead— my brother William!'— he said. Then with a spasm of remembrance transported from days very far in the past, he murmured, 'He was kind to me—sometimes. He cut me switches out of Balgracie wood. They were of willow, and I wanted them to play horses with.'

'But, sir, I do not think that you yet understand fully the position of affairs,' said Mrs. Latimer. 'I have under my hand a letter from a lawyer in Edinburgh which says that your brother William died without heirs, and that you—'

She in her turn did not get time to finish. The Dominie suddenly shot erect. The bent old shoulders straightened themselves. The head was thrown back, and the nostrils filled out.

'Then I am Balgracie of Balgracie!' he said. And letting go the arm of his chair, he paced the floor of Aline's little 'ben' room, with some of the verve of youth come back to his shrunken form. Then as rapidly recalling himself, he asked the ladies' pardon with a pleasant antique grace.

'When these things arrive late to a man,' he said, smiling, 'they make him forget his manners. I hope' (he added the words with his hand upon his breast) 'that on a future occasion I may have the pleasure of receiving you elsewhere—more fittingly—in the home of my ancestors—if you will do me that honour!'

Then it was that Adora interposed, speaking for the first time.

'You are sure, madam,' she said, 'that what you say is true? Otherwise it were cruel to play with the weaknesses of an old man. Neither of us has heard anything of this, but if you will state plainly what you know to me, I shall be deeply grateful to you!'

The old lady took from her pocket a letter:

'My glasses, Purslane!' she said, searching in her side pocket. She had to pull up her stiff skirt of flowered silk to do it, and as she groped vainly, Adora felt the first kindly human feeling come into her breast towards the woman who, in her hour of

pain, had most deeply insulted her.

But the glasses were not to be found, and so Mrs. Latimer was compelled to relate generally the purport of the lawyer's letter to whom she had applied for information. It ran as follows. Mr. William Balgracie was dead. He had lost a great deal of money in his latter days, through unfortunate speculations, and it was believed that he had to some extent impaired the estate which his father had transmitted to him, but as to that nothing definite was yet known. He had lived a very strange, irregular life, and had died intestate. Heirs had been advertised for, but so far none had been forthcoming. However, if Mrs. Latimer knew of any one likely to benefit, they should apply at once to Messrs. McKnight & McMath, Writers to the Signet, at their office in Parliament Close, Edinburgh.

Adora heard, as it were, with enchanted ears, that took in the words, but left the meaning knocking vainly without. Even then it was to her as a tale that is told— 'Balgracie of Balgracie,' and her father strutting about as if the world were but an appendage of the family name. Nevertheless, she had a question or two to ask. And first of all, one of her father.

'Is aught of this true, father?' she said, 'and if so, why have you never told me?'

The Dominie hung his head, suddenly halted in mid-stride.

'There were reasons—you were very young!' he

said. 'And afterwards—you did not believe when I told you. I do not blame you!'

He sighed as he uttered the last words.

'Then you are really a rich man's son,' she continued, 'and may be heir to an estate?'

'If this be true, as there seems no reason to doubt, I am both!' said the Dominie, not without a certain dignity. He had never expected it, but now when the thing came upon him, in a moment everything seemed as if it could not have happened otherwise.

Then there flashed through Adora's heart a strange mixed feeling. If it were so, if they were indeed rich—and a little would be riches to her, she could repay Aline. She could make it up to Captain Sinclair, to the brave Adam. She could take Daid away from all the trouble, and provide for him in a new life—where he would be cared for, and not let run wild like a beast on the hills.

There remained Sidney Latimer and Roy McCulloch.

Ah, what of them? What difference would her father's position and her heirship (the word was as strange to Adora as the thing) have on these two? First of all, and she thought it as she looked at his mother, it would put her on an equality with Sidney Latimer. The reason she had given for Sidney's not visiting at her father's house would immediately disappear. Difficulties would be resolved. But did she wish them to be removed? Ah, there was the

question.

Remained Roy McCulloch— what of him?

And at that moment something sent a sudden chill shudder through Adora's body. At every step she was being forced nearer the parting of the ways. And one of the roads seemed easy and open— that which led directly to the Great House of Lowran.

But the other—ah, that was harder, but there were heartsome blinks upon it, too, sunlight and shadow cunningly intermixed, drifts of shower and bursts of glorious light. The wide arch of the sky was lifted above it. The path led over purple moors, on which one could breathe, and— a man used to walk by her side along it—one whose presence she had never yet lacked, yet never been grateful for—all her life. That road, which now seemed to be barriered against her, led to the House of Muir.

And lo! for the first time the girl's heart threatened to overwhelm her head in a tide of feeling she had never known the like of before. A voice she had never heard began to speak with her, somewhere deep down, and would not be put to silence.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

THE NAME!

The Lady of Lowran and her far-seeing companion, Purslane, took their way homeward through the warm mid-afternoon silences. About them the broad skirts of the avenue trees spread like crinolines, already losing their first spring freshness of attire, and taking on the dull sage-green which is the livery of fullest midsummer.

They did not talk much. Purslane inly was pleased with the success of her manoeuvres and now occupied herself in pretending the necessary sulks. At the first clash of eyes the Lady of Lowran had recognised that with Adora as Sidney's wife, she would have one at Lowran who would meet and possibly master her at her own weapons. But was it equally certain that, even if Sidney asked, Adora would accept him? Ah, Mrs. Latimer was a fond mother, and the thought that any woman born of woman could long resist her son had not once occurred to her.

To Purslane and her mistress thus progressing silently homeward there entered a third— a, woman who rushed distracted through the brushwood and burst upon them with flying footsteps and the crashing of undergrowth. The Lady of Lowran and Purslane started back. The companion screamed. And small wonder. For it was a time when the

aftermath of legend concerning undiscovered crime still predisposed the more nervous sex to scream a little when a plate dropped or a rabbit scatted quickly across the path in front of them.

‘Quick—quick!—Come with me!’ cried the woman. She was panting, her hands on her breast. ‘I was sent to fetch you. Jonathan must speak with you. He is dying!’

And in her haste and eagerness she clutched Purslane's arm a little above the wrist.

‘Hands off an honest man's wifel’ cried the widow. ‘I have heard of you, woman—what has happened to Jonathan Grier? Answer me!’

For the moment the woman, a dark gipsy-faced quean, on the borderland between reckless youth and battered womanhood, took no notice of the insult.

‘Aye,’ she said, looking at the pair before her, ‘and ye'll be Mistress Latimer o' Lowran. I have been at the House to seek ye. They sent me here. Come wi' me. Jonathan is dying, I tell ye! He has had a stroke, and he canna die easy till he has spoken with you—with you, first, mistress—and with your son afterwards! He bade me bring ye baith!’

‘Who are you, woman?’ demanded the Lady of Lowran, ‘and what have you to do with Jonathan Grier?’

‘What has any woman to do with a dying man?’ cried the woman with some point, ‘but to bring him that which will let him die happy—without the guilt

of blood on his soul! But, if the thing concerns you, my name is Lizbeth Dearborn.'

The face of the Lady of Lowran whitened, but all the same she turned at the word, and the three women took their way hurriedly through the policies toward the cottage of the chief gamekeeper. Poor Lizzie Dearborn, the bunch of tashed ribbands in her lustreless black hair waving this way and that as if in mockery, would run on a little in front, and then, as if bound by a promise not to return without her companions, she would turn back again to hasten their march.

Jonathan Grier's cottage was placed in a retired part of the Lowran policies. A high wall, all that remained of the enclosure of the former deer-park, protected it on one side. Behind, a great sombre clump of spruce firs cast a blue-black barrier of shadow. The river ran in front, and made a pleasant murmuring if the three women had had any ears wherewith to listen to the summer silences. Dragon-flies darted hither and thither, the red and the green together in matrimonial and artistic complement, and also lower down on the water-edge, the blue and the orange.

Everywhere without was the still indifferent beauty of nature— within a man suddenly stricken down in his pride and sufficiency. Aging a little, but still prodigal of strength, Jonathan Grier had in a moment fallen helpless, as if the finger of God had touched him. In the simple, terrible speech of the

place and time, he had 'had a stroke.'

It was his left side, and there was little hope, the doctor had said. But he must speak to the Lady of Lowran, he himself reiterated, even to weariness, otherwise he could not die at ease. The gamekeeper was lying on a bed, roughly undressed, the coarse day-shirt he had had upon him cut away from the neck. But the sheet that was drawn across his breast was clean and cool, an island of freshness in that chamber of guns and pipes and masculine disarray. Over the mantelpiece, a cheap looking-glass, bought at a fair, and framed in gaudy ribbons, obtruded a strange note of discordant colour. There was also a fiddle with all the strings broken, hanging against the wall, but the case was smashed, as if some one had put his foot through it in a fit of anger or drunkenness.

'Set the leddies' chairs, Lizzie,' said the sick man, in that strange whisper which the dying use, hoarse and yet restrained, as if there was some one waiting in the next room whom they did not wish to summon too quickly. 'Noo, gang oot, Lizzie, but bide by the door. Let nane come in.'

'God be thankit! Here's the maister! They hae keepit their word and sent for him!' said Lizzie Dearborn at that moment. And indeed it was Sidney Latimer who passed the window as she spoke.

'Well,' he said to the woman, with a reassuring briskness which his countenance belied, 'what is the matter with Jonathan? I heard he had a bad turn in

the woods— a touch of the sun, likely. Has the doctor been here? Is he well enough to see me?’

The woman did not answer, but only motioned the young laird with her hand to enter.

‘Mother!’ he cried, in surprise and some displeasure, seeing Mrs. Latimer sit by the bed, with Purslane somewhat nearer the door on the other side. Mrs. Latimer made a gesture requiring silence. Jonathan Grier was struggling for utterance. Sidney Latimer, instantly recognising that the gamekeeper's case was far more serious than he had anticipated, went softly up to the bed. The sick man moved his hand in instinctive salute. It was the habit of a lifetime.

‘I hope this is nothing— that you will be about again in a day or two!’ said the young man. Jonathan Grier smiled a little bitterly.

‘Better—yes, better than the other—!’ he murmured, still in that same low, hoarse whisper. Then with a sudden movement he thrust his contorted face forward, ‘better than to go about kennin' that there may be a knife waitin' for ye ahint every dyke. Better— aye, better a heap than that!’

‘What is it, Jonathan?’ said his master, gently, ‘what has been disturbing you?’

‘Have I been a faithfu' servant to you and yours, ay or no? Answer me that!’ said the gamekeeper.

Sidney nodded. Sometimes, indeed, he thought, Jonathan Grier's fidelity to the family

might have been even in overplus.

'I have striven to serve you according to the thing I could,' he continued. 'At times maybe wrongeously, but —when I'm gane, I hae ae thing to ask o' you, Maister Sidney!'

'And what is that?' said the young man, in his quietest tones, for he feared what he was about to hear.

'Ye saw that lass at the door,' said the stricken man, 'ye hae seen her afore—. She has her fauts, Guid kens, and a' folk here away ken them. But dinna ootcast her a' thegither. That helps neither man nor woman, least o' a'—woman! Mony is the time puir Leezie has saved me frae death. Even noo she is watchin' oot yonder amang the black spruces that I may hae time to speak the word in peace to you, and at the last mak' a gentle end!'

'Ay,' he said, repeating himself, as if the words pleased him, 'mak' a gentle end.' No that I deserve it. I had as guid a mither as ony in the land—ye mind her, mistress? She aye thocht mickle o' you. And at schule I was a brave guid learner, and juist special in the Scriptures o' the Auld and New Testaments. I could spell every word in the bulk frae ledd to ledd! Ay, I could spell Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and be never feared! An', Lord, when I think on't, mickle guid it has done me! And then a' the texts and the chapters I learned, never gied my conscience the skart o' a preen. The ministers preach, that they do, and maybe it's true wi' some folk. A' I can say is, me

they never bothered. Na, no even noo. Though gin there were time I could gie ye rare blauds o' Scripture frae 'In the beginning' to yon awesome bit i' the Revelations about the dogs and the idolaters and the murderers bein' sent without—!'

'Open the window, sir, an it please ye. I can see the weil frae here. Thank ye, sir! There was a troot that loupit. Did ye notice? That's Tailie. I caa'ed him that because he has a split tail like a black-cock. I wadna put him an ounce under a pund and a half—a grand troot, Tailie! But it's no worth buskin' a flee for him the day, sir, the water is ower clear for him to tak'! But if ye were keen o't and if there was a chance, it wad be wi' the Grey Drake that ye wad nick him.'

So the gamekeeper wandered on, passing from one thing to another, no one daring to interrupt him.

'Ay, it's fell bonny,' he whispered, shading his eyes from the light to look out of the window, 'and if a' tales be true it'll be ocht but bonny where I'm gaun. Speak wi' the minister? Na, I thank ye, sir. A heathen man hae I leevit for fifty years on the earth, and what for should I mak' a mock and an insult o' the Almichty to his face, and me to stand afford Him maybe before the sun is set? No, na, I thank ye, sir. It's kindly thocht, I'm no denyin'—and the custom o' the countryside! Forby the doctor is a very decent man and a' he can fish nane— and I quastion whi to heeven a whit better than me. Na sae maun it lie. The Buik I learned frae as a laddie says sae. And

## STRONG MAC

Jonathan Grier haes fa'en – ay fa'en as an auld aik faa's i' the saft land o' th brave spread aboon but nae grip beneath. And sae maun he lie —sae maun he lie!

After this the gamekeeper remained silent for a while till Sidney Latimer, fearing that he to speak at all what he had on his on mind him that there was something desired to tell them.

The gamekeeper put the hand which was yet untouched of the paralysis to his brow. Then taking it down, he looked at it curiously and long.

'It is clean,' he said, thoughtfully 'Thank the Lord - clean o' the sheddin' o' bluid. Yet tangled wi' the blood-shedder. I am no denying that. Yet will I not tell you his name—lest my curse, the fear I hae carried in my heart every hour and day pass to you. Yes I am the man who at Drumfern assize, wadna declare Roy McCulloch guiltless of the blood of Muckle Sandy Ewan. Yet I kened different. There is paper on that shelf. There – the powder flask it lyin' on it! Ink? There's some in the trance – no, in the aumrie. Ye hae a pen? Then write as I bid ye, for ye are a lawyer or should be, and I will sign— a' but the name—I canna tell the name, I maun mak' shift to write the name mysel' on a place apart. And after I am deid, ye shall gie it to the sherra and he will richt the innocent. For Roy McCulloch is an innocent man, and was righteously acquitted, though I wadna gie my voice for him. But I hae paid for it since—oh, that wullcat— that ettercap, that ill-

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

contrived son o' perdition! That ever I had ocht to do wi' him! I had been a deid man lang syne had it no been for poor Lizbeth there —Lizbeth Dearborn, that ilka body can find a stane by every dykeside to throw at!'

'Write, sir, write!'

'I, Jonathan Grier, gamekeeper upon Lowran for thirty years, being about to die, and gangin' fast to my account, but wishing no back-castings when I am gane, do hereby declare (that's the lilt o't?) that Roy McCulloch is guiltless of the death of Alexander Ewan, though I held to the contrar' in the jury chamber at Drumfern. And it happened this wise, and no other:

'Sandy Ewan was angered at Roy McCulloch, and me and anither saw our chance to wile the siller oot o' him. (Eh, but he was the bitter weed, Muckle Sandy!) He wad pay to hae Roy McCulloch charged wi' sheep-stealin', and either hung or transported. Weel, we managed to get Roy pitten i' the jail, and when that was dune we were to gang and claim the first o' the siller frae him. Sae it was me that listened at the room door in Boreland, a loaded gun in my hand—wi' Dickie Dick and his mate lyin' tremblin' in the next chaumer till they shook a' the hoose, as weel we kenned, for we had seen them gang in. A guid job it was for them that they werena called upon. Then Muckle Sandy put us aff wi' fair promises. He hadna the siller—anither time—the job wasna finished yet! So seein' that nocht was to be

made o' him there wi' his cotmen hearkenin' wi' their lugs at the keyhole, we cam' oot as yin o' us had gaed in, by the lang window into the garden. By and bye Sandy followed—to look roond the place, he said. And there, lookin' ower the yett into the Glebe Road, he saw the twa o' us speakin' thegither, me an' him that I'll no name! And wi' that the great black anger cam' sudden upon him, and he up an' ordered us to gang aff his farm. Then being sair disappointed and in want o' siller, there were some sharp answers. When a' on a sudden Sandy puts up his hand to strike. It wasna me he struck! Weel for him had it been, but I saw the bricht steel flash—and the next I kenned was Muckle Sandy Ewan lyin' at my feet wi' a knife hafted sax inch in his throat!

'That's a! I'll sign it and write the name o' the man, if ye fold it, sir, and sair obleeged to you I'll be! And maybe ye will mind that, sinner as I am, it wasna a'thegither for the siller that I was led into this o't, but because I had a notion that, that—if Roy McCulloch was out of the road—ye micht maybe get mair o' your ain way wi' a lass that ye thocht mickle o'! Ay, sir, I thank ye. There ye hae it, all and hale, the confession o' Jonathan Grier, a dyin' man and yin that asks only to be let gang in peace to bear the reward o' the iniquity he has wrocht!

'And thank ye again, sir, and you, madam. Ye will find a' the accoonts richt, and the week's wage—the siller to pay the foresters is in the far drawer to the left hand. And I meant ye nae ill, Maister

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Latimer, whatever I intended to ither folk. I was first day an' last your faithfu' servant! Sae maybe, oot o' your kind heart, ye willna let puir Lizzie starve! Thank ye, sir—spoken like yoursel', sir!

Then in the completest silence of the afternoon there fell three taps, light, distinct and clear, on the green glass of the little leaden-paned window above the sick man's head.

Jonathan Grier started up, balancing himself on his still untouched arm and thigh.

'No, no,' he cried—shouted rather, 'mercy—mercy— I never mentioned ony name. I swear it. Maister Latimer, ye will will bear me oot— ye will swear to that! Dinna—dinna— blame it on a dying man!'

His face contorted itself. A thread of foam showed grey for a moment at the lips.

With a loud sudden clang that jangled all nerves, the ribbon-wreathed mirror fell on the flagged floor and smashed into atoms. Something rattled like a wheel on gravel, and Jonathan Grier, murderer's accomplice and faithful servant, fell back— dead!

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

LOVER OR FRIEND

Sidney Latimer conveyed his mother home. The old lady had been inexpressibly shocked at the terrible death of one whom she had known all her life, who had indeed come with her from her native place when she married Sidney's father. Her son left her, therefore, to the care of Purslane, while he himself went into the library to face the new problem which presented itself to him in consequence of his interview with the dead gamekeeper.

He looked at the confession. The signature was plain and distinct, but at the moment when the three taps came upon the window glass, the already half-paralysed hand had just begun to form the first letter of the murderer's name. The result was only the indistinguishable scribble which the pen had made, as Jonathan Grier had started up for the last time. Probably the knowledge that he was in act to betray the secret he had guarded so long made that light tap on the green swirls of the leaden panes above his head sound loud in his dying ear as the tmnip of doom. The which, indeed, it was!

So now, reviewing all the circumstances, Sidney knew that, though the evidence was strong enough to convince almost any doubter, without the name of the actual murderer Roy could not be more publicly cleared than he had been. Still, what Sidney

Latimer had heard made a great difference to his own mind. And for a particular reason this weighed with him. He must do that which he felt to be his duty. For though he had refrained from publicly declaring his doubts, he had not concealed his belief from Adora that Roy McCulloch was far from having cleared himself of suspicion. Indeed, on more than one occasion he had treated him as certainly guilty of the death of Sandy Ewan. Now Sidney Latimer had a violent temper, but he was a just man and a gentleman. Having done wrong and spoken hastily, he would not shrink from putting matters right. He would go to Adora and tell her what had come to his knowledge. He would take no unfair advantage over any man.

At this moment a low tap came to his door. It was Purslane with a message that his mother wished to see him before he went out.

With somewhat of an ill grace, for he had been momentarily baulked in a purpose hard to resolve and harder to perform, Sidney Latimer went upstairs to his mother's room. If the evil day must come, the sooner it was over the better. Sidney, like most men, liked the bad-quarter-of-an-hour to be the next one. So he took the oak stairs three at a time, and opened the door of her room to find the old lady resting on a chair with her eyes closed. As he entered, she motioned Purslane away with a weary air.

'I wish to speak to Sidney alone— by himself!'

said Mrs. Latimer. Purslane gathered up her scattered properties, the black satin bag, the bone knitting-needles, the patchwork, and went out mumbling defiantly to herself, 'Ye needna be that particular, mistress—as if it hadna been me that pit the first notion o't into the head o' ye! I ken ye are gaun to bid him gang and speer the lass he has been granein' for this while—the verra lass that yince on a day (and no that lang syne either) ye miscaa'ed like a tinkler's messan on the road up the Cleuch o' Pluckamin!'

'Sidney,' said his mother, 'sit ye down by me, there— nearer! This has been a shock to me! I am an old woman, Sidney, and, as is natural, I would like to see you married before—before—.'

'Mother,' said her son, with a man's awkwardness in presence of a woman's tears.

The old lady dabbed at her eyes and continued in a more assured tone.

'And I have today seen Mr. Balgracie of Balgracie— whom you have known under the name of Gracie. Mr. Greg, of Frederick Street, sent me word of his succession. I have been today over at the Gairie Cottage to give them the news. There is no room for mistake. The estate of Balgracie is in the hands of Messrs. McKnight & McMath, of Parliament Close, the Writers to the Signet. There is no doubt about the heirship at all. Owing to some family quarrel, into which I did not think it wise to enter, Mr. Donald Balgracie has thought fit up to the

present to conceal his whereabouts from his relatives, and now he is without a doubt left heir to all the family property and estates.'

Sidney Latimer stood still and collected, a little cold, as is apt to be a young man's way with a too fond mother. Mrs. Latimer had accustomed herself to be the suppliant, whether it was a question of whom he should marry or whether he should put on his heavier great-coat.

'And is it because you would like me to marry an heiress, that you tell me this?' he asked of his mother.

'Ay, Sidney, and what for no?' said Mrs. Latimer, suddenly reviving and relaxing her attempt at semi-legal phrase. 'I have never seen folk less fond the one of the other because there was a cow or two i' the byre, a horse in the stall, and a snod pickle siller in the bank. That's an auld woman's way o't, laddie. And I'm telling ye, I hae seen the lass, and she will make ye a wife ye need never be ashamed o'— though ye should hae to gang afore the King, like your cousin Threep-ma-thrapple!'

'You did not always think so, mother,' said the young laird, 'nor would you now but for the property!'

The words were hard, but Sidney Latimer smiled as he said them, and at the smile his mother was glad, as always. She rose and threw her arms about his neck, believing that she had carried her point.

## STRONG MAC

‘Well, mother, I will go and see Miss—Miss Balgracie,’ said Sidney. The new name came not a little awkwardly.

‘Oh, my Sidney,’ cried the old lady, kissing him fervently, ‘you have aye been a comfort to your mother. You are the best of sons. And oh, if ye bide late, be sure to take a pistol, for the country is no canny. And mind and turn up the collar o’ your coat. There’s a mist that lies along the river-edge that is no kindly for young folks’ throats. And ye ken ye hae aye had a weakness there, Sidney—ever since that daft auld Purslane let ye get your feet wat in the Lowran Bum at the age of six.’

As Sidney Latimer walked along the path by the waterside, and crossed the little bridge, he thought upon the wonderful changes which these months had brought to Lowran. He could not yet conceive of Adora except as the mistress of the little school, the dainty spinner at the wheel, the light-footed girl who went and came on the floor of the little flagged kitchen where he had spent his happiest hours. He wished rather that she had been there still, and that instead of going through his own policies, he had been on his way to that schoolhouse which now turned so cold and reproachful a shoulder upon him every time he passed it. For the sight of Baillie of Hardhill’s nominee sitting smoking his pipe in Donald Gracie’s seat was enough to send the young man home fast as his mare could gallop.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

When Sidney entered the cottage of Aline, he was astonished at the change that had taken place in the Dominie. Instead of an old worn man sitting drowsily over a book in the arm-chair, he found a man apparently younger by ten or fifteen years, who bowed to the Laird of Lowran with a courtly air, and offered his hand as to an equal.

'It is good of you to call upon us so promptly,' he said. 'We are remaining her for a few days in the meantime, my daughter and I. We think it is best, and the good woman, our hostess, has been exceedingly kind. But, of course, after so long time I am anxious to be at work. I have not even seen the old place for years. And as my late brother has also passed most of his life away from home, I fear I may find it sadly neglected.'

At this point Sidney made a polite inquiry.

'Oh, yes, my daughter is in the next room,' said the Dominie; 'there is so much to be attended to—so many things that need to be done in making ready for so important a change in our circumstances. I have had some vague thoughts of taking up again my work in the church. I hear that one of the parishes of which I am patron is likely to be vacant shortly. You are aware I was bred to the church, sir. But I fear that my duties in connection with my estates may prevent so desirable an arrangement and one so agreeable to my studious habits—.'

He turned and looked towards the inner room.

'Adora.'

The girl came in at that moment from her spinning, over her arm a long 'rowan' of wool, in her hand a pirn filled with yarn. At sight of this last, her father cried out in reprobation of her conduct.

'Pray— think what you owe to your position,' he said, 'and who has come to visit you! If you have no pride for yourself, consider your father!'

Adora smiled— her old smile, firm, yet gentle, in which, however, lingered a trace of that self-confidence which still withheld from her the full heritage of womanhood.

'Father,' she answered, smiling not at the Dominie but at the young man, 'Mr. Latimer has seen me spinning before. He is in good health. He can bear it just once more!'

'But,' argued her father, irritably, 'circumstances have changed. We will repay this good woman in some more practical fashion. It is not beseeching—.'

Adora, who held the fifth commandment in so much honour in the spirit that she could afford to treat the letter of it a little loosely, interrupted by laying the filled 'pirn' down on her father's knees.

'There!' she said, 'be good and hold that till I have time to shake hands with Mr. Latimer. There are, I warrant, few coats of arms as old as the distaff.' And she hummed the old Jack Cade distich:

*'When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?'*

'Ah, young folk— young folk,' said her father,

suddenly tempering his dignity, as if a pleasanter thought had crossed his mind, 'it is indeed not fitting that the old should meddle overmuch with your matters. I see—I see, I will e'en take a walk up the loaning and call upon mine host Adam— a good worthy man, and one whom I shall willingly recognise for his past kindnesses—an honest fellow, Adam— yes, a most deserving man!'

The Dominie went out with a certain swagger of gait to which he had long been a stranger, and Adora and Sidney Latimer remained alone together.

But there was no embarrassment on either side. For the conscience of Sidney Latimer was clear. He had come there for a purpose which he meant to carry out. And as for Adora, she was able (or thought she was) to let her intellect direct her affairs of the heart.

'I have something to say to you. Miss Bal—'

'Better say 'Adora,' said the girl, smiling; 'it did no harm before and it will not now!'

'No,' said Sidney, a little bitterly, 'it did no harm! But now I have come to undo a wrong. Up till today I had believed Roy McCulloch guilty, at least in part, of causing the death of Alexander Ewan. It has now been proved that my suspicions were absolutely groundless.'

'You believed that, when you came back from Spain to save him from the gallows?' Adora's voice was a little tremulous with surprise.

Sidney nodded, colouring slightly. He thought

she was angry. But Adora went over to him and laid her hand on his sleeve.

'You are a better man than I knew of,' she said, 'and—I thought you a very good man!'

I did not want to come back,' said Sidney, awkwardly; you made me.'

Better and better!' said Adora; 'if you will not give yourself credit for it, I will! I declare if it were not that men misunderstand these things, I would kiss you!'

'Ah, Adora,' said Latimer, 'this time you are indeed cruel.'

'Am I?' said the girl, 'I am sorry. I meant to be kind. I did not know.'

'You say you would kiss me,' continued Sidney Latimer, 'but it would be no more to you than if you patted Roy McCulloch's collie and called him 'Good dog!'

Adora laughed.

'I thought men cared for these things,' she said, 'but it seems that they never know when they are well off!'

'How can I care when you mean to give all the substance to somebody else,' said Latimer, fiercely. 'I was never one to care for last year's roses pressed in cardboard!'

'There again,' said Adora; 'we have come to our old gate with the five bars. You are always expecting something of me which I cannot give you—'

'Perhaps it is not yours to give?' interrupted the

young man, jealously and bitterly.

'Perhaps!' said Adora, speaking with the utmost quietness.

'I ask your pardon!' said Sidney, instantly, 'I had not meant to hurt you—only to be fair to— to everyone! I had supposed that this might make some difference—in your feelings, I mean!'

'Explain your meaning!' said Adora, calmly biting a thread.

'Well,' said Latimer, hesitating for words, 'if you are heiress to a property, you cannot very well shut me out of your house and company on the old excuse, can you? Or forbid me the door as you did at the schoolhouse!'

'No,' said Adora; 'for one thing, your temper is better than it was. You are more master of yourself!'

Sidney Latimer sighed, and looked out of the window.

'The comfort is a little wintry,' he said, ruefully; 'my mother's also has altered, to this extent, that she sent me here to ask you—a question! May I?'

A faint flush of rose flickered up into the girl's face. She looked quickly at the door, as if she expected an interruption—or perhaps hoped for one that did not come.

'I think I would not ask that question, if I were you!' she said, very softly.

At which, without another word, Sidney Latimer got up, and went quickly out without saying good-bye, or even looking at her.

## STRONG MAC

The girl stood at the little window watching him go down the road, her eyes very deep and full of sadness.

'I wonder why they all want that —why nothing less will satisfy a man than that you should marry him,' she complained; 'we could have been such good friends, Sidney Latimer and I. But then only the wisest men, they say, care for a woman's friendship, and— I have not met with any very wise man yet!'

Adora did not know that a woman must have trespassed some considerable way into her fifth decade before she can venture upon choosing a man to make a friend of.

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Yet another summer twilight settled down upon Lowran and the moorland places we know so well. It looked upon the plain Scots towers of Lowran Great House, rude and staunch, crow-stepped and overarched by immemorial beeches, among which the rooks were drifting black and 'crawling' hoarsely in the face of the sunset. Then a little farther, and lo in the same groups, to all appearance as of yore, were at gossip about the bridge-end. While within the smithy— 'Cling-a- clang! Cling-a-clang!' The sweet far-off sound of the twin hammers came to your ears. That was Ebie Cargen and his prentice at it— not too hardly, for it was the deadest summer season and work not plentiful. Opposite, there was the new house which Captain Sinclair had been building to the unmeasured astonishment of Lowran—a flag-staff, white-pebbled paths, rustic seats and the figure-head of Fortune's Queen, retired from service when that good ship was refitted. The latter was considered indecent by the villagers, because scarcity of wood, more than any feeling for realism, had prevented the artist from doing more than merely indicating the queenly drapery.

Over the hill frowned the gloomy brows of the moor, looking somewhat savagely down upon the

bien and comfortable dwellings of Gairie farm-town, together with the little flower-fringed, rose-bowered cottage, where dwelt Aline of the Silver Braids, at its gate.

As Adora looked out of the open window she could see the Cleuch of Pluckamin, a deep blue gorge trenched through the foot-hills right into the brown scarp of the moorlands.

The sunlight was still omnipresent up there, yellow on the last year's bent, rose red on the first gorgeous burst of the ling. A certain far-off purple-black, cut across by a grey line of stone dyke, indicated the situation of the Marches of Barnbarroch. Away to the right, and only to be seen by leaning your head close to that part of the window-sill at which Adora was sitting, stretched the wild braes of the Upper Airie, where in a certain shelling one Roy McCulloch was abiding.

A peculiar sadness had descended upon the girl's heart. The much-desired letter had come from Messrs. Mc-Knight & McMath, and the Dominie had hastened to forward the necessary proofs of his identity—Dr. Meiklewham cordially assisting him with extracts from the archives of the Kirk Session and from the introductions which had been supplied to him when Donald Balgracie came first to Lowran.

But still the girl could not feel that her world was elsewhere then here. These hills and valleys meant the everything to her. In ill repute and in good repute, she had clung to them. Balgracie itself

was to her no more than a name. Could she be transplanted? Her heart shrank affrayed from the thought.

Yet, for the moment, at least, residence was by no means to be desired in the parish of Lowran. The mystery of the death of Alexander Ewan, the strange unknown Thing which she had glimpsed once by the Marches of Lowran— yes, up yonder, between her and the lonely sheiling of Roy McCulloch. Her heart gave a curious throb at the identification.

‘Ah, but’—she reassured herself, ‘he is strong enough to overcome any dozen men!’

But was this indeed a man, this Thing which fled like a hunted shadow, that stabbed from underneath at the wholly innocent, that laid the fear of midnight assassination upon an entire parish?

As Adora sat at the window, she could hear her father restlessly pacing up and down the ‘ben’ room, going over and over in his mind the wonderful things he would do when he returned in triumph to the estates of his ancestors. For in his own mind he was once more the young and handsome Donald Balgracie, home for the college vacations, and not too disdainful of the common orders to allow himself to be spoilt by the pretty dairy-maids of the neighbourhood.

With the darkening of the night, the moon began to show through the rippled clouds. From a dull lead the colour of ashes, she became like molten silver. But the clouds lay across her in great

## STRONG MAC

slow-moving waves, and it was not often that the moonlight shone clear. In the west, since the sun went down, a storm had been brewing.

Adora, sitting thus and gazing out of the window, was vaguely reassured by the sight of the dumb boy motionless on a little knoll behind the house, which overlooked the loch. Daid's ways had grown more than ever strange and uncertain. Sometimes he would disappear for an entire week, not even coming to the farm for his morning porridge, and leaving the curds-and-whey from good Adam's dairy to be found untouched in the morning, on the flat stone at the gable-end where Mistress McQuhirr had set them the night before.

As Adora looked, the quick eye of the Dumbie detected her. He waved a beckoning hand, which meant that she was to come and meet him. She went promptly, her first thought being that perhaps the lad was hungry. But when she put the question to him, Daid shook his head in emphatic negation and made signs for a pencil and paper.

This was the message he wrote.

'He's coming to see ye the nicht!'

And he pointed upwards in the direction of the shell of the Upper Airie. Across the loch from where they stood, and in the direct line between them and Roy's dwelling-place, appeared, darkly ominous, the purple hollow of the Marches of Barnbarroch.

Daid caught the girl's anxious look, and swiftly added a few words to the message.

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'Dinna be feared. Daid's watching!'

And again he waved his hand in the direction of the sheil.

Almost as mysterious as the movements of Daid the Deil must have seemed to any outsider those of Strong Mac since the day of his liberation. As he looked out at eve and mom from the open door of the little sheil of the Upper Airie, he somehow knew that at last the end was not far off. True, he could not tell how. For with all the strong, slow persistence of a nature compounded of love, generosity, and the capacity of suffering, Roy McCulloch lacked Adora's quick and flashing analysis. She dashed at truth, and grasped it, where he only plodded along, looking for it. He would get there just the same, doubtless, but not so fast. When they used to be together in school, Adora was a perpetual wonder to him, finding the answer to an arithmetical or mathematical problem by some half-intuitive process of her own, often before he had even set down on his slate the elements of the question for solution.

But one day Roy met his father, and the ex-smuggler had news for his son which would take him down to the white cot by the side of the lilled waters of Lowran Loch.

'I bid you not to believe it,' Sharon said, speaking as slowly but far less grimly than had been his wont, 'but the talk of the farm-towns is— and I'll wager of the village also—that Donald Gracie is left

heir to a great property, greater than Lowran, or Barnbarroch, or Glenkells—than all three put together, indeed. So, at least, runs the tale.’

‘And what has the death of Jonathan Grier to do with that?’ Roy asked his father.

‘Ah, that is more than I can tell you,’ responded Sharon; ‘those who ken least say most. Some would have it that as long as Jonathan lived the Lady of Lowran was sworn not to reveal the secret—some that Jonathan was paid to remain in Lowran, to watch the Dominie, and keep him from going back to his own place and his own people —on account of his failing, they say.’

Roy cared nothing for the inversimilitude of the tale. But the suggestion in the last words somehow stung him to the heart. He did not answer for a moment, nor did he ask any more questions. Father and son stood on the rose-purple plain, both of them waist-high in ling, and looked different ways. Each was deep in his own thoughts.

‘Then do you think Donald Grade will go away from Lowran now— to his own place and his own people?’ the younger asked at last of the elder.

‘You mean his daughter?’ said his father, softly and stilly.

‘I mean his daughter!’ Roy answered as quietly.

‘That you had better go and see for yoursel.’

His father's retort came like a whiplash.

‘I will! Good day!’ answered the young man.

‘Good day to you!’

CHAPTER FORTY SEVEN

THE DOMINIE ASSERTS HIMSELF

And it was this brief interview with his father which brought Roy over the moors in the still time of the late afternoon, when the shadows were already lengthening, when all that the sun shone upon through the level bars of the cloud grid shone warm like yellow ochre, and all on which he did not shine was almost as deep blue as the sea under a north wind. This flat upland country, cross-barred alternately blue and yellow, lay before Mac as he started out. From horizon to horizon all was mystic and solemn. Turning at the gate, he ordered his dogs back, and they went with their tails between their legs— but without surprise, because they knew well that Roy never took them with him on his night travels.

With the caution which had become an instinct with him of late, he looked this way and that. His eye surveyed Adam's flocks feeding peacefully on the Airie hill behind him. These were his care, and he had been among them that morning. For the first time since he had been there, one was missing, and he had failed to find it, in spite of his strictest search. But now as he went striding down towards the Marches of Barnbarroch, a buzzard rose from a little rift in the moorland, where the runnel of a dry winter burn cut sharply underground and made a

trap for unwary ankles. The bird vented a scream of anger at being disturbed, and Strong Mac, pushing away the earth and dried grass with his foot and turning back the heather, found the fleece and part of the carcass of a freshly killed sheep—indeed, the very ewe he had missed off the hill that morning. For on the fell of the neck, in the place where Roy knew to look, was the keel-mark plain to be seen—and on the ear Adam McQuhirr's own sign manual, known all the way from Cairn Edward to Drumfern.

When Roy had examined the throat of the animal more carefully, he saw that the animal, instead of being killed in the ordinary way, had been struck at from beneath, just as Sidney Latimer's horse had been, near this very spot on which he stood. With a horse it was easy, but what sort of being could strike a sheep from underneath?

With a sudden angry indrawing of breath Roy raised himself to his full height and looked abroad. The peaceful face of this moorland still concealed that deadly and treacherous creeping Thing which he had seen by the Dhu Loch. While it lived no man nor beast was safe. Lurking in some covered moss-hag, which a sheep must cross with its short, bounding leap, clicking its black trotters together, which a horse must take in following the bridle path, and a man must step over, striding across the waste, death lay waiting.

Sandy Ewan's murderer, Jonathan Grier's assailant, the fierce torturer of children, the stabber

of horses, the sheep-slayer, the evil Thing for whose misdeeds he himself had twice gone to jail, and even now underlay a certain amount of suspicion— ah, let but the hand of the strong man descend on the lurking devil, there would be no mercy—assuredly none!

Curiously enough (and the circumstance is diagnostic), Roy McCulloch felt more anger at the sight of his slain ewe lying there under the heather tangles, its innocent blood staining the dank black peat, than for his own two imprisonments and the risks he himself had run, even that of the hangman's cord. His life was his own. The ewe belonged to another— and he was the man responsible.

So there on that spot Strong Mac swore anew his oath, and that with a fresh fervour. And all the while there was in his body the uneasy sensation of being watched— the feeling that comes from sympathy with the hunted creatures, that carry their little innocent lives, as it were, at the knife's point all their days. On the moorland that day there were no birds, no curlews or snipes whimpering and bleating— no peewits turning clamorous somersaults over the heather. Only very far off the buzzard hung, at intervals uttering his shrill cry, a speck against the blue, waiting for Roy's departure. One of the ewe's eyes, gouged out, but still unconsumed, told what it was he was waiting to descend upon with the noiseless flight of his kind.

## STRONG MAC

So with that habit of gentle pity which had grown up in his great true soul, Roy covered the little piteous orb deep in the moss-hag. The bird of prey should not have that, at least, even though the unknown beast of prey had all the rest. And at the thought Roy swore again.

The Marches of Barnbarroch also were quiet. There was nothing moving anywhere about as Roy passed through. Only the embers of a fire which had slightly blackened the dyke, told of a past human presence. Roy wondered if by chance his dead ewe had been cooked there. No, he decided, immediately; those who made that fire were most likely tinkers, and tinkers, too, from a distance. For there was not one belonging to the countryside that would dare to camp near the evil-reputed Marches of Barnbarroch.

'I expected you,' said Adora, smiling with a satisfied air, as Roy came near. 'I knew you were coming! I have been waiting for you!'

The girl was outwardly calm, but, all unknown to herself, she had a little red spot on each cheek, high up where the national cheek-bones might have showed but did not. She was sitting on the little knoll commanding the loch, the same that earlier in the afternoon had been Daid's look-out tower.

Roy looked surprised at Adora's greeting, but he knew enough not to feel flattered or to extract the comfort out of her confession which another man would assuredly have done. Both he and Sidney Latimer began to understand Adora by this time. Or

at least they comprehended as much as Adora had permitted them to know, which was altogether another thing.

'You saw me come down the cleuch-side?' he said, simply. 'I had lost a ewe on the hill and I came that way to look for her.'

'I had hoped that you were coming to see me, Roy,' said the girl; 'surely it is time. Are you and I to be friends no longer?'

'No,' said Roy McCulloch; 'that is, not if that which I have heard is true.'

The girl drew a little sharp breath. She thought he meant that he had heard of Sidney Latimer's visit, and guessed at his proposal. She did not want to quarrel with Roy a second time on account of Sidney Latimer. She had not the self-sufficiency she used to have, somehow. Formerly she cared nothing for a quarrel with any on the earth. She gave sharp words in plenty, and in spite of them, lost no friends. It was only Adora's way. When she meant to quarrel, she always dressed as prettily as she could and looked her best. For she knew that this is truth as revealed to the wise man, the man of the many experiences, 'Always put on your wedding garment when you are going to quarrel with any one. Sit in your chair of state, and summon the culprit before you. It is good to take every advantage you can.'

But circumstances had compelled Adora to test her friends. She had proved them in the furnace, and some had gone up with the hay and the stubble

in fire and smoke, while a few, a very few, had come forth like gold! And of these the chief were Roy, and Sidney, and Aline. So, mindful of this, the girl was far from being so offhand in her speech as formerly.

Roy sat down beside Adora without being asked. The moors spread away behind them by the thousand acres. There were miles on miles of grey granite boulder, rounded and weather-worn, with razor-edged outcrops of slaty Silurian showing here and there like sharks' fins above the moor. Heather, too, and yellow couch grass— room a-plenty to sit down. So beside Adora Roy sat and characteristically said nothing for a while. At any time Roy's words were few and well ordered. But for all that he did not abandon the subject.

'No,' he said, at last, very deliberately, 'I cannot be your friend, if that which I hear is true— that you are to be a great and rich woman— that your father is leaving Galloway to take possession of his estate! I love you, Adora. Better than I myself, better than any in the world, you know how much. You have always known. (He went on more steadily now.) Perhaps that is why you have cared so little. Because it has always been so—will always be so!'

'Have I cared little?'

The question took Roy by surprise, nevertheless he proceeded.

'Yes, you have cared little. I have never expected you to care much. I knew better than that. But you will see why I cannot be a rich woman's

friend. It is not that I am poor, or that I think that the wealth of a princess would change you. Again, I say, I know you better, Adora. But ever since you could walk, and you used to run about with your hand in mine, one thought has been in my heart. When we were together at school, I said as often as I looked at you— 'I will call that girl mine before I die!' Now I know that to be impossible. Of late I have hardly hoped at all, but I have loved you more than ever— as— as a man loves. But now — there are others worthier than I—others who will be in your own position—who will not make you ashamed of a plain country-bred man whose only merit is that he loves you, and that he has never thought of any other woman all the days of his life—nor will until he dies!

Strong Mac ceased. He had shown his strength. He had hardly ever made so long a speech in his life, and as he was speaking Adora was astonished to feel her heart beating violently. She tried to answer in the ancient manner of Adora of the spinning wheel, the maiden of the schoolhouse, but ere a word was uttered, something took her suddenly and violently by the throat.

'I thank you,' she managed to get the words out at last, 'you are good to care about me. It is true—all true—you do love me—I know it! And I am glad—but—I,'

Roy rose promptly at the word.

'In love like mine there are no but I,' he said.

'Roy, do not go—' said the girl, 'wait—let me think. I want to keep you— as my friend. I do not want you to go. Money will make no difference— nor position—.'

'No, Adora,' said Roy, 'go I must. I had better not see you again, if you cannot be more than a friend, if you cannot be a poor man's wife. You know what the House of Muir is. If you cannot be the wife of a man with a stain on his name— then I, Roy McCulloch, can do without friends! Do not fear for me. I am not afraid for myself—I will win through!'

'Wife—wife? Who talks of 'wives' to my daughter?' said a voice which made them both turn round.

It was the Dominie, clothed in his clerical suit—the straight wrinkles still in his black coat of ancient cut, and a ministerial cravat of ancient form twisted about his neck. He held a silver-headed cane in his hand, which he had picked off the little stand beside Aline's doorway.

'Sir,' he said, addressing himself to Roy, 'you are the son of a respectable man. I had a respect for your father, and for a time, also for yourself. I have not forgotten our time of sojourn in your domicile. It was healthy, I grant, and so far comfortable. You shall be rewarded, sir—both you and your father, Mr. Sharon McCulloch. Do not be afraid. But I would beg you to recall to yourself some things which may assist you to remember our relative positions—some things which you seem to be in

danger of forgetting. First, that the circumstances of our leaving House of Muir were exceedingly unpleasant—and for that, much against my will, I must hold you responsible!

And secondly, it is not for the son of a smuggler, and especially for a man who has been frequently in prison—justly or unjustly, I do not take it upon me to say—upon serious and even capital charges, to aspire to the hand of Miss Adora Balgracie of Balgracie, sole heiress of one of the oldest houses and best properties in the three Lothians!

To say that Adora was astonished at this harangue is to convey but a small portion of the girl's surprise and indignation. The Dominie had always been a particular friend of Roy's, but the sudden change in his circumstances had sufficed to turn a head seriously weakened by his own past habits, and for the time being he could think or speak about nothing but the greatness of his position.

'If it werena for the bonny lass, and indeed she's as guid as she is bonny, I wad e'en throw the haverin' auld idiot into the loch!' was how Adam looked at the matter—'him to come hectorin' and orderin' aboot the hoose as if he were the Prince Regent himsel'! Faith ye wad think the craitur expected a' the kye in the byre to get doon on their knees and do him reverence!'

When she had a little recovered from her

surprise, Adora rose from the grey rock on which she had been sitting, and went up to her father, who stood a little above them. The old man was still trembling with rage and weakness, his staff shaking from side to side as he leaned upon it.

'Father,' she said, 'have you forgotten? This is Roy, Roy McCulloch, who took us in when nobody else would. Do you not remember that we lived for months at his house?'

'He shall be amply repaid,' quavered the old man, waving her away. 'Did I not say it? Did I not repeat it? He shall not suffer. If the place of grieve at Balgracie be vacant shortly, as I have reason to believe, it shall be put at his disposal. Or, if he will perfect himself in mensuration, and apply himself a little more than (as I remember) he used to do at school, perhaps we could find him a place as factor— if not on Balgracie itself, at least upon one of the neighbouring smaller estates. I shall, naturally, have a great deal of influence, politically and otherwise. And it shall never be said of Donald Balgracie that all that he can do is not at the service of the humblest of his friends.'

'I am obliged to you, Mr. Balgacie,' began Roy, restrainedly.

Adora turned upon him in an instant, prettily furious.

'Hold your tongue,' she said, under her breath. 'Let me speak to my father!'

But the Dominie only elevated his voice the

higher, over-passing Adora's protest in order to continue his harangue unchecked.

'But pray remember, sir,' he said, 'I, on my part, must first have a promise from you. You must promise me never to breathe a word of love or marriage to my daughter. You have in the past, I admit, shown yourself not without good feeling, and you must surely see how inappropriate, how impossible, how criminal, indeed, it is to presume to approach a young lady so far above your rank. I ask, sir— nay, I demand as a father's right, a promise that you will never again address my daughter on the subject of love—never, by word or implication, request her to marry you. Sir, I await your answer.'

'I give you that promise, sir!' said Roy, instantly and firmly, looking over Adora's head as he spoke, straight at the old man, who stood quavering, his body bent over his staff, on which his hands rested. 'I will never again ask your daughter to marry me. I have the honour of bidding you both a good evening!'

And lifting his hat with a quiet sufficient dignity, and without once looking at the astonished girl, Roy turned on his heel and strode up the hill towards the entrance of the Cleuch of Pluckamin.

It will hardly be believed, but Adora was weeping. Her sobs choked her. Her head refused to reason any more.

There was nothing logical about her feelings as

## STRONG MAC

she took hold of her father's arm. He was gone. Roy was gone from her in anger, and she would never see him more.

But she had to go back with the Dominie to the cottage. His fit of anger had exhausted him. He needed attention, such rapid attention as his daughter could afford to give him. She laid him on the bed, unloosed his neckcloth, mixed a sip of brandy and water, saw his colour come back, and then crying, 'Aline, Aline—I want you,' she committed her father to her friend's care.

'Adora— Adora—what is it? Ye are greetin'?' cried her gentle hostess of the Silver Braids. But Adora had no time to answer. She had flown into the gloaming through the open door.

CHAPTER FORTY EIGHT

DAID'S CROWNING MERCY

Though the night was near, the very oncoming gloaming was the dawn of a new day for Adora. Roy had gone from her in anger—gone for ever. He had passed his word to her father, and ever since she had known anything, she had known that Roy McCulloch would keep his word. Her very life now seemed to have been based on that. She would see him no more—no more. Small wonder that she wept.

Sidney Latimer—oh, yes, yes—she was sorry for Sidney Latimer— but she could not help that. How could she? Any woman will be able to answer this question.

She sped on. The bridge was passed, and so intent was Adora on overtaking Roy that she never noticed how hollow her feet sounded on the little wooden structure, roughly put together of split pine trunks and covered with planks. Presently she was in the long green aisles of Pluckamin Cleuch, the sunset dying high above her in a flurry of aerial seas, multitudinous and incarnadine, flecked with willow leaves of floating gold.

'Roy—Roy!—Stop, Roy.'

The girl's wild cry went up, startling the rooks in the tall elms and beeches on either side, raising the blackbirds squabbling with intrusive thrushes in

the thickets, and bringing out once more the inquisitive jackdaws from the ruins of the ancient hamlet of Pluckamin. This was the cry of a heart at last— 'Roy—Roy!'

But the young man had gone fast, as men do when they carry away a great grief with them. Roy McCulloch walked in great strides, taking no heed to his going, caring neither for made road nor sheep track. Naturally, then, Adora's stem chase was a long one.

Breathlessly up the tangled path she took her way, towards the great conflagration of gold and crimson that hid the setting sun. The road in the shadowy parts was already becoming a grey purplish mystery beneath her feet. The little Pluckamin Water had limpid lights and deep violet shadows under the long fringes of the gall-bushes, like a woman's eyes.

But high above there was the light— and Roy. Adora went on as fast as she could.

At last, the moorland, open and desolate! And, far across the waste now burning in cardinal and golden brown with the last pigments of the after-glow, a tall black figure was just dipping into a hollow of the path.

'Roy — Roy, Stop! I want you, Roy.'

But he went on— his eyes on the ground, the misery quick in his heart.

Ah, sometimes the gladdest things and the sweetest things lie behind a man if he would but

look, as he presses too eagerly or too bitterly, onward.

There—there he was at last, on the rise of the great cup-like swell above the Marches of Barnbarroch.

'Roy — Roy! Stop, Roy, I can go no farther!'

He heard. He stayed, uncertainly at first. Now it was time for shame and uncertainty as to the rightness of her act to leap up in the maiden's mind. But by this time Adora's heart was speaking, and it spoke as determinately as ever her head or her intellect had done. It saw as clearly, resolved as surely.

She went straight to him, her arms outstretched, without haste, but also without hesitation.

'Roy,' she said, 'I cannot bear it. You promised my father you would not speak of love or marriage to me. You will keep your word, I know. You went from me in anger. But if you will not speak, you will listen to me when I speak. I love you, Roy, Will you come back? Will you marry me? If you will, I will. I always meant to, I think, always! At the last, I mean. And oh, when you went away like that, when you never looked at me— but over my head, it was cruel. Oh, cruel! I could not bear it. And you make me say these things now. It is your fault— your fault!'

A sweet fault! She was sobbing—comfortably now. Roy did not answer. He did better. He gathered the girl up in his arms and then and there let her

cry her cry out.

Then when the sobs grew rarer, mere little catching of the breath, he lifted up her face and kissed her wet cheeks.

‘I am always yours—’ he said, ‘in life and in death— always! You know that!’

From her fortress Adora sighed, ‘Yes, I know!’ Then she added, ‘But all the same it is good— good to be told!’

The clouds had lifted a little. The true darkness had not arrived—only the twilight had grown deep and mysterious when Adora and Roy turned homewards. They had much to talk about— much also to be silent about, in these sweet half silences of perfect understanding.

Adora asked Roy of his quest. He had sworn that he would not give up that. He would not return to the House of Muir till that was accomplished.

‘Already I know something,’ he said; ‘soon I shall know more! I shall keep my word, Adora. You shall wed a man without the stain of suspicion on his name!’

Then there came to Adora what she had heard from Sidney Latimer. She had meant to tell Roy as they sat on the knoll above Aline's cottage, overlooking the meadows and the lily-beds. But the sudden interruption of her father had put that and many other things out of her head. Besides, in comparison with the great fear that had driven her across the waste and through the Cleuch of

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

Pluckamin, the news had seemed to the girl as nothing.

'You will go back at once,' she said; 'the way is open even now—Jonathan Grier is dead. And he has confessed all—'

Some little while before, out of the darkness that filled the sinister hollow of the Marches of Barnbarroch, there had risen a figure—the figure of a man, bent almost double. At first he was on the far side of the dyke from the lovers as they walked on entranced, blotted out of all knowledge of time and place in their intentness upon each other.

But when the hollow began to feather downwards with high bracken and bending birch, the dark figure drew nearer, gliding from black crag to grey boulder like some cruel misshapen gnome, or wild beast tracking down a victim. Once when the west cleared a little, a gleam as of bare steel could be seen.

Roy's arm went about his love as they passed the splintered gates at the bottom of the hollow. It was the very place of death. Roy thought of the dead sheep in the moss-hag not far away. But his heart was high and proud within him.

'You are not afraid now—even to be here?' he said, for Adora had told him of her terror when she went to seek Daid.

She looked up, and he saw the light in her eyes. They shone like stars reflected in deep still water, but there was no fear in them. It had been

cast out.

'No,' she said, 'I am not afraid! How should I be?'

'I will soon finish the business,' he said fondly; 'this terror shall no longer oppress our lives. Whether Jonathan Grier has confessed or no—I have marked down to a certainty the murderer of Sandy Ewan!'

'Ah, have you?' cried a hoarse voice near them; 'then for that you shall die!'

There was a short couching growl of unutterable anger, the rush as of a wild beast through the underbrake, the gleam of a knife, almost before they could turn round— before Roy had time to take his right arm from about Adora. The surprise was so complete that if nothing had happened, both of them might have gone Sandy Ewan's way.

But swifter, fiercer, more deadly came the irruption of another assailant, charging as it were cross-ways upon the first, while in the middle of the path Roy and Adora stood as if turned to stone. They had not moved. The surprise was too great. Roy was ashamed that he had ventured there unarmed, without a weapon, knowing what he did. He had even left his black-thorn cudgel upon the knoll on which he had found Adora sitting. He could only clench his fists and put the girl behind him in some hope of disarming his foes by strength or trick. Happily it was not yet very dark. The clouds were

visibly lightening.

But the struggle was of no long duration. The first and larger shape bore up for a moment against the onslaught, swayed a while, and fell headlong. Something there was that leaped instantly upon the breast, striking with murderous fierceness. Adora and Roy could hear it panting with the breathless fury of the repeated blows.

Then after a moment of horrified amazement, high in the air arose the strangest of human sounds, the laughter of the speechless. It thrilled to the marrow of the two listeners. Hastily, yet with caution, Roy went forward. Momentarily the west opened up, ere the last red bands faded into grey uncoloured night. And this was what he saw.

Crob McRobb lying dead, the knife with which he had meant to add two others to the tale of his victims still in his hand, while kneeling upon his breast, striking, and labouring in the striking, was his son, Daid the Deil. And as he struck he laughed, a laugh that chilled his hearers —ay, and far out over the waste garred watchers in distant farms and women in lonely cottages swarf with fear in their comfortable beds.

Roy put his hand on the boy's shoulder, and pulled him away by force. Daid turned fiercely upon the interrupter. But recognising Roy, he laughed again. Then standing on his feet he pointed first to the dead man and then to the black cavity of his mouth from which the tongue had been torn away.

## STRONG MAC

After which he laughed again, nodding his head to say that all was now settled and finished.

He went over the hill laughing, in the direction of Lowran Loch, still laughing.

But there is yet a word to say for the wild beast slain, that had once been a man. In the struggle on the Glebe Road, it was Sandy Ewan who had been the aggressor— Sandy Ewan who, first in his insensate fury, had trampled all likeness of humanity out of his poacher accomplice. Then swift and sure came the counter-stroke which made Crob McRobb a murderer and a hider in dens and caves of the earth. Here like a true wild beast he had lain and licked his sores, so far curing himself that he was able once more to crawl abroad. But after Sandy Ewan's heel had crushed him out of all semblance of manhood, he carried no more within him the heart of a man. So it was like a very devil that he had resented the interference of his son, the espionage of Roy McCulloch, and the refusal of his request by his sometime partner in evil, Jonathan Grier.

For by this time Crob was gaining in strength and agility, and the old poacher doubtless began to feel the want of another weapon than his knife, both for the purposes of the chase and for those of revenge against human enemies. To his failure at the Dhu Loch, Roy McCulloch and many others doubtless owed their lives. To that and to the ceaseless watchfulness of the maimed boy.

It was small wonder, therefore, considering

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

what he had suffered, that Daid McRobb went over the hill and out of this history, laughing that strange, weird, triumphant laugh. He had kept his word to the Red Judge.

He had 'killed the man who had done that!'

## CHAPTER FORTY NINE

## A FEW OPINIONS

That is the whole story, but, as is always the case, certain people had a word to say about it. And first, by right of trover, let us hear Aline of the Silver Braids.

'Ye see, my dears,' she said to Roy and Adora, 'I expected it from the first. Ay, I made it a maitter o' prayer. Richt or wrang, I made it a maitter o' prayer. I ay kenned that in your heart ye cared about him—!'

'Then you knew more than I did myself!' said Adora smilingly.

'I kenned—oh, ay— brawly I kenned!' Aline continued. 'And how, says you? Juist by this—ye had never a guid word to say about him, yet the moment I began to agree wi' ye and abuse him too—fegs, ye were a' on fire like a wisp o' tow. Oh, lassie, I'm feared you twa are in my heart— whiles abune the things that are eternal and i' the heevens! And if ye had mairried the Laird, I wad never—.'

'Sidney Latimer is a good man and a true,' said Adora. And then perhaps conscious of the commonplace of her phrase, she added, 'And if I had loved him, I am not sure that you, Roy, would have come so far to save him from the gallows!'

Roy smiled but refused to be drawn. He knew Adora.

'And that puir dumb laddie,' interrupted Aline,

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

who disliked personalities; 'have they never fand him? What I can hae come o' him, think ye?'

Roy, who was still, as ever, a man of few words, pointed with his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the Loch of Lowran.

'Deed and if that be sae—I blame him little,' she said, as if answering an unspoken objection. 'It maun hae been an awfu' thing to see— and a mair awfu' thing to do. For though Crob had been a murderer and far waur, he was the laddie's ain faither, after a! Gin puir Daid be lying at the bottom o' the loch, he's maybe the better aff. I mind o' him askin' me yae nicht in the winter time, writing on the slate, if I thocht that it wad tak' lang to droon, and if the water wad be awesome cauld. So he had it in his head even then, the puir, mishandled, ill-used craitur. And it comes to me whiles that the Lord up yonder willna be that verra hard on peetifu', misguided bairns like Daid, that never had a chance to do richt since the day they were brocht into the war!' What think ye?'

And upon this point Adora and Roy, who were far from setting up as theologists, made bold to agree with Aline McQuhirr.

At this point we are honoured by the receipt of a valuable document. It is headed, 'The opinions of the Reverend Dr. Cyrus Meiklewham, Minister of the parish of Lowran, written down by himself, for the purposes of this chronicle:

## STRONG MAC

It is my matured and definite opinion (says Dr. Meiklewham), after sixty years of experience in my present position as minister of the parish of Lowran— and during forty-one of these (come next Michaelmas) as Clerk to the Presbytery of St. Cuthbertstown—that no events at all comparable in interest to those connected with the death of the J.P. Mr. Alexander Ewan, Esquire, of Boreland, and the arrest and trial of my esteemed friends, the McCullochs, elder and younger, of House of Muir, have occurred within the oldest memory in our part of the country. It was indeed a sore and heavy blow to me when my esteemed session-clerk and ruling elder Gracie, was for a time removed from our little fellowship by the somewhat hasty act of the Presbytery. I had a high regard for Mr. Gracie's person, and a yet higher for his amiable daughter. So that none rejoiced more than I when the news spread abroad through the country by a surprising turn of the wheel of fortune, Mr. Balgracie (of Balgracie), to give my old friend his proper name and style, had become the heir to a landed property and to a considerable sum in the funds, the amount has been greatly overstated, as I have just heard direct from my own sister's son, William, as most people know, apprenticed to the law in the of Messrs. McKnight & McMath in Parliament Edinburgh. But, after all, and with all deductions is enough left to be a very heartsome downstitting for the young lass and the lad McCulloch— a worthy of a worthy

father— though I should have thought she have done better for herself than marry the son of a bonnet laird. Howsomever, as I well know, young folk are apt to be headstrong and foolish. There is my daughter Hope, to look no further afield, who has no more reverence in her nature than a last year's black-face tup. But yet for all that is a good lass and a bonny, though I have to say so myself. She tells me that there never was any truth in the rumour, industriously spread abroad the parish, that the late Dominie's daughter, Adora (afterwards Miss Balgracie, of Balgracie, not to her due honours), had for a time engaged the affections of Mr. Sidney Latimer. It certainly was a thing most astonishing that she went all the long road to Spain to bring him back from the wars. But it is now abundantly manifest what her reason was for this unusual act. And a brave lass she was I am not denying, thus to risk her life and more—her reputation—to do service to the man she loved, presently in grave danger of his life. 'But as to the patron of the parish, Mr. Sidney Latimer of Lowran, ever having been seriously in love with the daughter of the village schoolmaster— the idea is preposterous. And indeed I have my daughter's direct authority for contradicting it. Moreover, she is in the direct way of knowing, as I observe many letters coming to her address (with heavy charges to pay, which it falls to me to liquidate) in the hand and under seal of Mr. Sidney himself (who remains

abroad, doing his duty at the wars with my Lord Wellington), I consider that I do no more than my duty in thus contradicting such reports with all the authority of my office.'

To which is appended the ricochet of Purslane's opinions, as expressed by Mrs. Latimer, as followeth:

'And a great blessing it is, Purslane, that I took my own opinion and not yours in the matter of this young woman. Balgracie of Balgracie is doubtless an auld name, but it has been sore trashed with trade this while back. So that, truth to tell, they are little better than Glasgow draper bodies, after a! And the auld fule, the Dominie that was—they tell me is juist oot o' his head wi' pride. And no that muckle to be heir to after a'— maistly bonded, I'se warrant, to far abune its value! And the siller in the bank nae mair than will buy the bairn a gown, as the sayin' is when a' is said and dune. Ay, a great blessing that I held to my ain advice.

'Furthermore it will be a lesson to ye, Purslane, to hearken to your mistress anither time. A bonny-like thing if my son Sidney had disgraced himsel' wi' marryin' into a family like that. Noo, there's the minister's lass. She'll no hae ony great tocher, but he's a bien snug man the doctor, and has been a saver and never a spender a' his life. Forbye the lass is bonny, and douce, ana biddable — no like a certain prood madam, that when ye speak to her for her guid, looks at ye as if she could bite brandy-

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

snaps oot o' ye. If it's to be, and I maun open the door to anither mistress at the Hoose o' Lowran—I ken never a better than juist denty, faceable Hope Meiklewham, that has been at my beck and call ever since she was born.'

'It's a Guid's blessing ye are pleased. Mistress,' said Purslane, adding under her breath, 'the noo!'

Next in order is the report in that excellent local paper, the Drumfern Observer (with which is incorporated the St Cuthbertstown Gazette),

'The recent trial at the spring assizes of two respectable Galloway householders for murder, and their subsequent triumphant acquittal, must be fresh in the memory of all our readers. But as the real murderer or murderers of the late Mr. Ewan of Boreland had not been discovered, considerable mystery continued for some time to envelop the case.

'This has at last been cleared away in a highly satisfactory manner, thanks to the unremitting efforts of our able and highly respected fiscal, Mr. Richard Henderson, seconded by the acumen and tact of our admirable sheriff-substitute, Mr. Martin Milroy.

'The culprits turn out to have been a pair of local poachers of the worst repute, father and son, of the names of 'Crob' or Crobin McRobb and David McRobb. They have been long suspected, and indeed were on the very point of being captured and

brought to justice by the active and intelligent officers of the law, when they both perished in a murderous fracas, in which one was wounded to the death and the other anticipated justice by drowning himself. The Reverend Mr. Baillie, of Hardhills, has sent us a very powerful sermon, suggested by the tragic occurrence. It is upon the text from Psalm Iv. 23: 'Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days.' The sermon is at once 'a powerful and touching appeal to the consciences of offenders and most comfortable to them that believe,' as the author himself obligingly states on his first page. But owing to an unfortunate pressure on our outer advertising columns (and what we would draw special attention to, the remarkable notice of the opening of the new premises erected by Messrs. Sharp & Scrape, near the Tron, in the finest situation our town affords) we are prevented from availing ourselves of the reverend gentleman's most obliging offer.'

From which it will be seen that, as occasionally happens, the journalistic account is defective on some points, and more than a little redundant on others.

CHAPTER FIFTY

THREADS DRAWN TOGETHER

Mr. Donald Balgracie's princely expectations were, happily for himself, not verified. Messrs. McKnight & McMath, of Parliament Close, after a careful actuarial investigation of the affairs of the late Mr. William Balgracie, died intestate, found that instead of that gentleman's speculations having conducted him to enormous fortune, there remained of the whole estate which had been left by his father, Archibald Balgracie, of Balgrade, only a paltry £12,000. Paltry, that is, in comparison with the great sums with which, as contractor for the troops on foreign service, and especially during the late unfortunate war with the United States of North America, he had juggled in a sort of game of cup and ball.

But at that date of which we speak twelve thousand pounds was not accounted a paltry sum in Galloway. It is not so accounted even now. It chanced very opportunely that Mr. Chesney, of Barwhinnock, having also had losses, through speculation and, the unkind whispered, wasterful living, wished to dispose of part of his property. It was in this way that Mr. Donald Balgracie (nominally) and Roy and Adora McCulloch really became owners of the ground on both sides of the House of Muir. Their first work was to construct a

new avenue which would lead directly down to the village, avoiding both the gloomy Cleuch of Pluckamin and the yet more tragic memories of the Marches of Barnbarroch.

After long discussion, and at the urgent request of Sharon himself, the young couple consented to make their home, as in the days of the first outcasting, at House of Muir. But first of all they had a new wing built, and in a room to the right as you enter the Dominie still has his books and his afternoon nap. His brief assumption of dignity had been but a flash in the pan, and long ere now he has quite forgotten that he was ever served heir to the estates of Balgracie. He has become quite incompetent for business, and Messrs. McKnight & McMath have engineered an amicable family arrangement, in virtue of which the purchase of the properties of Barwhinnock has been carried through and the building of the new part of the house proceeded with.

It was towards the end of their first year's occupancy of the House of Muir—that is, of the new house built by the unexhausted moneys of William the Speculator, that, in the stillness of an evening in mid-August Roy and Adora went out for their usual ramble in the twilight. The heather had been late that year, and was now coming on in a wine-hearted rush of colour.

They left the Dominie drowsing over his book. He awaked, however, momentarily, to the fact that

there was a certain stir of departure in the air.

‘Ah, good-night, Roy,’ he said, looking up, and holding out his hand, ‘come and see us again soon! We will have a page together— you and I— a page together— though tonight you made many a ‘maxie’ that you should have been soundly whipped for. See and do better next time—or who knows—perhaps you will find that the old arm has not quite lost its cunning. Methinks the Dominie could handle an ash-plant yet. Where are you going, Adora, lass?’

‘Only with Roy— to the gate!’ said the girl, smiling; ‘I will be back in time to put you to bed!’

‘Ah, do so,’ he said; ‘I heard there were ill characters about. See that the school gate is carefully locked. But do not be late. Nothing is more unfitting in a young girl than late hours.’

‘No, father!’ said the girl quietly. The fact of his daughter's marriage had been too recent to remain long at a time in the Dominie's mind.

‘Good-night, Roy, you have a long tramp before you,’ the old man called after his son-in-law, ‘but keep a stout heart for a stey brae, as the saying is!’

As they passed out Sharon was sitting by his own door reading. His stern face relaxed as Adora came in sight. He had rooms and a door of his own, but Adora managed the two united houses. The stern old man always rose courteously when he saw her. He walked with his son and daughter across the yard to the gate. Silently Adora laid her hand upon his arm, and the old smuggler, at the light touch of

her fingers on his sleeve, gripped himself with a little swift shiver.

‘Will you come with us, father?’ she said; ‘we are going down the road towards Aline’s. The Dominie will be all right with Captain Ebenezer. He is staying all night.’

‘No, no; by and bye I will join them,’ said Sharon; ‘my day for walks in the gloaming is past. But I had it, and it was a good day. Go your ways, bairns, go your ways!’

They went down the new avenue close together, the raw edges of the slate not yet overgrown with the ivy which Adora had been planting. The twilight deepened as they proceeded, gently and soothingly, a sweet close to a perfect day. The wide sweep of the moorland shut in about them, isolating them. They were solitary, with that feeling of indefinable pensive wistfulness which only a Scottish moor at twilight calls out.

‘You shiver, dear!’ said Roy, suddenly, ‘let me draw your shawl closer about you!’

‘No,’ Adora made answer, ‘it was not cold—only a thought which came to me!’

‘Ah, I know,’ he said, tenderly, ‘dark things—terrible things happened down there. But you know our agreement. You were not to think of them or speak of them if we walked this way!’

‘It is not as you think,’ she answered him, laughing bravely rather than heartily, ‘the past is past! I never think of it. I have you!’

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

'What then?' he whispered, bending a little so that his ear might be near her lips.

'I was thinking what would have happened if you had not made me ask you to marry me that night by the Marches of Barnbarroch!'

'Suppose I had said no?' said Roy, smiling happily down at her.

'Suppose—suppose!' she mimicked him petulantly, 'ah, it is too late for that now. Besides—' she clutched his arm in the swift, impulsive manner which had come to Adora with the rest of the new things.

'Besides,' she continued, 'two can play at that game. I also have a word to say to you.'

His eyes looked the question he refrained from asking. She reached up her lips to his ear, at the same time putting her platted fingers across his eyes.

'Suppose,' she said.

## STRONG MAC

Also available in Galloway Raiders digital format:

### CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF THE COMPLETE CROCKETT

- 1893 The Stickit Minister and some common men
- 1894 Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills
- 1894 The Play Actress
- 1894 The Raiders
- 1894 The Lilac Sunbonnet
- 1895 Bog Myrtle and Peat
- 1895 A Galloway Herd
- 1895 Men of the Moss Hags
- 1896 Cleg Kelly
- 1896 The Grey Man
- 1896 Sweetheart Travellers
- 1897 Lads' Love
- 1897 Lochinvar
- 1897 Sir Toady Lion
- 1898 The Red Axe
- 1898 The Standard Bearer
- 1899 The Black Douglas
- 1899 Kit Kennedy
- 1899 Ione March
- 1900 Joan of the Sword Hand
- 1900 Stickit Minister's Wooing
- 1900 Little Anna Mark
- 1901 Cinderella
- 1901 The Firebrand
- 1901 Love Idylls
- 1901 The Silver Skull
- 1902 The Dark o' the Moon
- 1902 Flower o' the Corn
- 1903 The Adventurer in Spain

## Galloway Raiders Digital Edition

- 1903 The Banner of Blue
- 1904 Love of Miss Anne
- 1904 Strong Mac
- 1904 Raiderland
- 1904 Red Cap Tales
- 1905 Maid Margaret
- 1905 The Cherry Ribband
- 1905 Kid McGhie
- 1905 Sir Toady Crusoe
- 1906 White Plumes of Navarre
- 1907 Me and Myn
- 1907 Little Esson
- 1907 Vida
- 1908 Deep Moat Grange
- 1908 Princess Penniless
- 1908 Bloom o' the Heather
- 1908 Red Cap Adventures
- 1909 The Dew of Their Youth
- 1909 Men of the Mountain
- 1909 Seven Wise Men
- 1909 My Two Edinburghs
- 1909 Rose of the Wilderness
- 1910 Young Nick and Old Nick
- 1911 The Lady of a 100 Dresses
- 1911 Love in Pernicketty Town
- 1911 The Smugglers
- 1912 Anne of the Barricades
- 1912 Sweethearts at Home
- 1912 The Moss Troopers
- 1913 Sandy's Love
- 1913 A Tatter of Scarlet
- 1914 Silver Sand

## STRONG MAC

### POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1915 Hal o' the Ironsides
- 1917 The Azure Hand
- 1920 The White Pope
- 1926 Rogues' Island
- 2016 Peter the Renegade

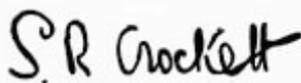
Find out more about Crockett's life literature and legacy at:

[www.gallowayraiders.co.uk](http://www.gallowayraiders.co.uk)

[www.srcrockett.weebly.com](http://www.srcrockett.weebly.com)

and The Galloway Raiders YouTube channel at  
[www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

*'Mayhap that is the best fortune of all – to be loved by a few greatly and constantly, rather than to be loudly applauded and immediately forgotten by the many.'*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. R. Crockett". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

