

na; there's nae good fechtin' again fate—
and the judges. Weel, I wush you well o'
yer victory. Aiblins' twill be oor turn next."

Then a rush, headed by Sam'l, roughly
hustled the one away and bore the other off
on its shoulders in boisterous triumph.

In giving the Cup away, Lady Eleanour made
a prettier speech than ever. Yet all the while
she was haunted by a white, miserable face;
and all the while she was conscious of two
black moving dots in the Murk Muir Pass op-
posite her—solitary, desolate, a contrast to the
huzzaing crowd around.

That is how the champion challenge Dale
Cup, the world-known Shepherds' Trophy,
came to wander no more; won outright by the
last of the Gray Dogs of Kenmuir—Owd Bob.

Why he was the last of the Gray Dogs is
now to be told.

PART VI

THE BLACK KILLER

CHAPTER XXVI

RED-HANDED

THE sun was hiding behind the Pike. Over the lowlands the feathery breath of night hovered still. And the hillside was shivering in the chillness of dawn.

Down on the silvery sward beside the Stony Bottom there lay the ruffled body of a dead sheep. All about the victim the dewy ground was dark and patchy like dishevelled velvet; bracken trampled down; stones displaced as though by striving feet; and the whole spotted with the all-pervading red.

A score yards up the hill, in a writhing confusion of red and gray, two dogs at death grips. While yet higher, a pack of wild-eyed hill-sheep watched, fascinated, the bloody drama.

The fight raged. Red and gray, blood-splattered, murderous-eyed; the crimson froth dripping from their jaws; now rearing high with arching crests and wrestling paws; now rolling over in tumbling, tossing, worrying disorder—the two fought out their blood-feud.

Above, the close-packed flock huddled and stamped, ever edging nearer to watch the issue. Just so must the women of Rome have

craned round the arenas to see two men striving in death-struggle.

The first cold flicker of dawn stole across the green. The red eye of the morning peered aghast over the shoulder of the Pike. And from the sleeping dale there arose the yodling of a man driving his cattle home.

Day was upon them.

James Moore was waked by a little whimpering cry beneath his window. He leapt out of bed and rushed to look; for well he knew 'twas not for nothing that the old dog was calling.

"Lord o' mercy! whatever's come to yo', Owd Un?" he cried in anguish. And, indeed, his favorite, war-daubed almost past recognition, presented a pitiful spectacle.

In a moment the Master was downstairs and out, examining him.

"Poor old lad, yo' have caught it this time!" he cried. There was a ragged tear on the dog's cheek; a deep gash in his throat from which the blood still welled, staining the white escutcheon on his chest; while head and neck were clotted with the red.

Hastily the Master summoned Maggie. After her, Andrew came hurrying down. And a little later a tiny, night-clad, naked-footed figure appeared in the door, wide-eyed, and then fled, screaming.

They doctored the old warrior on the table

in the kitchen. Maggie tenderly washed his wounds, and dressed them with gentle, pitying fingers; and he stood all the while grateful yet fidgeting, looking up into his master's face as if imploring to be gone.

"He mun a had a rare tussle wi' some one—eh, dad?" said the girl, as she worked.

"Ay; and wi' whom? 'Twasn't for nowt he got fightin', I war'nt. Nay; he's a tale to tell, has The Owd Un, and—Ah-h-h! I thowt as much. Look 'ee!" For bathing the bloody jaws, he had come upon a cluster of tawny red hair, hiding in the corners of the lips.

The secret was out. Those few hairs told their own accusing tale. To but one creature in the Daleland could they belong—"Th' Tailless Tyke."

"He mun a bin trespassin'!" cried Andrew.

"Ay, and up to some o' his bloody work, I'll lay my life," the Master answered. "But Th' Owd Un shall show us."

The old dog's hurts proved less severe than had at first seemed possible. His good gray coat, forest-thick about his throat, had never served him in such good stead. And at length, the wounds washed and sewn up, he jumped down all in a hurry from the table and made for the door.

"Noo, owd lad, yo' may show us," said the Master, and, with Andrew, hurried after him down the hill, along the stream, and over

Langholm How. And as they neared the Stony Bottom, the sheep, herding in groups, raised frightened heads to stare.

Of a sudden a cloud of poisonous flies rose, buzzing, up before them; and there in a dimple of the ground lay a murdered sheep. Deserted by its comrades, the glazed eyes staring helplessly upward, the throat horribly worried, it slept its last sleep.

The matter was plain to see. At last the Black Killer had visited Kenmuir.

"I guessed as much," said the Master, standing over the mangled body. "Well, it's the worst night's work ever the Killer done. I reck'n Th' Owd Un come on him while he was at it; and then they fought. And, ma word! *it munn ha' bin a fight too.*" For all around were traces of that terrible struggle: the earth torn up and tossed, bracken uprooted, and throughout little dabs of wool and tufts of tawny hair, mingling with dark-stained iron-gray wisps.

James Moore walked slowly over the battlefield, stooping down as though he were gleaning. And gleaning he was.

A long time he bent so, and at length raised himself.

"The Killer has killed his last," he muttered; "Red Wull has run his course." Then, turning to Andrew: "Run yo' home, lad, and fetch the men to carry yon away," pointing to the carcass, "And Bob, lad, yo've

done your work for to-day, and right well too; go yo' home wi' him. I'm off to see to this!"

He turned and crossed the Stony Bottom. His face was set like a rock. At length the proof was in his hand. Once and for all the hill-country should be rid of its scourge.

As he stalked up the hill, a dark head appeared at his knee. Two big grey eyes, half doubting, half penitent, wholly wistful, looked up at him, and a silvery brush signalled a mute request.

"Eh, Owd Un, but yo' should ha' gone wi' Andrew," the Master said. "Hooiver, as yo' are here, come along." And he strode away up the hill, gaunt and menacing, with the gray dog at his heels.

As they approached the house, M'Adam was standing in the door, sucking his eternal twig. James Moore eyed him closely as he came, but the sour face framed in the door betrayed nothing. Sarcasm, surprise, challenge, were all writ there, plain to read; but no guilty consciousness of the other's errand, no storm of passion to hide a failing heart. If it was acting it was splendidly done.

As man and dog passed through the gap in the hedge, the expression on the little man's face changed again. He started forward.

"James Moore, as I live!" he cried, and advanced with both hands extended, as though welcoming a long-lost brother. "'Deed and

it's a weary while sin' ye've honored ma puir hoose." And, in fact, it was nigh twenty years. "I tak' it gey kind in ye to look in on a lonely auld man. Come ben and let's ha' a crack. James Moore kens weel hoo welcome he aye is in ma bit biggin'."

The Master ignored the greeting.

"One o' ma sheep been killed back o' t' Dyke," he announced shortly, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

"The Killer?"

"The Killer."

The cordiality beaming in every wrinkle of the little man's face was absorbed in a wondering interest; and that again gave place to sorrowful sympathy.

"Dear, dear! it's come to that, has it—at last?" he said gently, and his eyes wandered to the gray dog and dwelt mournfully upon him. "Man, I'm sorry—I canna tell ye I'm surprised. Masel', I kent it all along. But gin Adam M'Adam had tell't ye, no ha' believed him. Weel, weel, he's lived his life, gin ony dog iver did; and noo he maun gang where he's sent a many before him. Puir mon! puir tyke!" He heaved a sigh, profoundly melancholy, tenderly sympathetic. Then, brightening up a little: "Ye'll ha' come for the gun?"

James Moore listened to this harangue at first puzzled. Then he caught the other's meaning, and his eyes flashed.

"Ye fool, M'Adam! did ye hear iver tell o' a sheep-dog worryin' his master's sheep?"

The little man was smiling and suave again now, rubbing his hands softly together.

"Ye're right, I never did. But your dog is not as ither dogs—'There's none like him—none,' I've heard ye say so yersel, mony a time. An' I'm wi' ye. There's none like him—for devilment." His voice began to quiver and his face to blaze. "It's his cursed cunning that's deceived ivery one but me—whelp o' Satan that he is!" He shouldered up to his tall adversary. "If not him, wha else had done it?" he asked, looking, up into the other's face as if daring him to speak.

The Master's shaggy eyebrows lowered. He towered above the other like the Muir Pike above its surrounding hills.

"Wha, ye ask?" he replied coldly, "and I answer you. Your Red* Wull, M'Adam, your Red Wull. It's your Wull's the Black Killer! It's your Wull's bin the plague o' the land these months past! It's your Wull's killed ma sheep back o' yon!"

At that all the little man's affected good-humor fled.

"Ye lee, mon! ye lee!" he cried in a dreadful scream, dancing up to his antagonist. "I knoo hoo 'twad be. I said so. I see what ye're at. Ye've found at last—blind that ye've been!—that it's yer ain hell's tyke that's the Killer; and noo ye think by yer leein' impita-

tions to throw the blame on ma Wullie. Ye rob me o' ma Cup, ye rob me o' ma son, ye wrang me in ilka thing; there's but ae thing left me—Wullie. And noo ye're set on takin' him awa'. But ye shall not—I'll kill ye first!"

He was all a-shake, bobbing up and down like a stopper in a soda-water bottle, and almost sobbing.

"Ha' ye no wranged me enough wi' oo that? Ye lang-leggit liar, wi' yer skulkin murderin' tyke!" he cried. "Ye say it's Wullie. Where's yer proof?"—and he snapped his fingers in the other's face.

The Master was now as calm as his foe was passionate. "Where?" he replied sternly; "why, there!" holding out his right hand. "Yon's proof enough to hang a hunner'd." For lying in his broad palm was a little bundle of that damning red hair.

"Where?"

"There!"

"Let's see it!" The little man bent to look closer.

"There's for yer proof!" he cried, and spat deliberately down into the other's naked palm. Then he stood back, facing his enemy in a manner to have done credit to a nobler deed.

James Moore strode forward. It looked as if he was about to make an end of his miserable adversary, so strongly was he moved. His chest heaved, and the blue eyes blazed. But just as one had thought to see him take

his foe in the hollow of his hand and crush him, who should come stalking round the corner of the house but the Tailless Tyke?

A droll spectacle he made, laughable even at that moment. He limped sorely, his head and neck were swathed in bandages, and beneath their ragged fringe the little eyes gleamed out fiery and bloodshot.

Round the corner he came, unaware of strangers; then straightway recognizing his visitors, halted abruptly. His hackles ran up, each individual hair stood on end till his whole body resembled a new-shorn wheat-field; and a snarl, like a rusty brake shoved hard down, escaped from between his teeth. Then he trotted heavily forward, his head sinking low and lower as he came.

And Owd Bob, eager to take up the gage of battle, advanced, glad and gallant, to meet him. Daintily he picked his way across the yard, head and tail erect, perfectly self-contained. Only the long gray hair about his neck stood up like the ruff of a lady of the court of Queen Elizabeth.

But the war-worn warriors were not to be allowed their will.

"Wullie, Wullie, wad ye!" cried the little man.

"Bob, lad, coom in!" called the other. Then he turned and looked down at the man beside him, contempt flaunting in every feature.

"Well?" he said shortly.

M'Adam's hands were opening and shutting; his face was quite white beneath the tan; but he spoke calmly.

"I'll tell ye the whole story, and it's the truth," he said slowly. "I was up there the morn"—pointing to the window above—"and I see Wullie crouchin' down alangside the Stony Bottom. (Ye ken he has the run o' ma land o' neets, the same as your dog.) In a minnit I see anither dog squatterin' alang on your side the Bottom. He creeps up to the sheep on th' hillside, chases 'em, and doons one. The sun was risen by then, and I see the dog clear as I see you noo. It was that dog there—I swear it!" His voice rose as he spoke, and he pointed an accusing finger at Owd Bob.

"Noo, Wullie! thinks I. And afore ye could clap yer hands, Wullie was over the Bottom and on to him as he gorged—the bloody-minded murderer! They fought and fought—I could hear the roarin' a't where I stood. I watched till I could watch nae langer, and, all in a sweat, I rin doon the stairs and oot. When I got there, there was yer tyke makin' fu' split for Kenmuir, and Wullie comin' up the hill to me. It's God's truth, I'm tellin' ye. Tak' him hame, James Moore, and let his dinner be an ounce o' lead. 'Twill be the best day's work iver ye done."

The little man must be lying—lying palpably. Yet he spoke with an earnestness, a seeming belief in his own story, that might

have convinced one who knew him less well. But the Master only looked down on him with a great scorn.

"It's Monday to-day," he said coldly. "I gie yo' till Saturday. If yo've not done your duty by then—and well you know what 'tis—I shall come do it for ye. Ony gate, I shall come and see. I'll remind ye agin o' Thursday—yo'll be at the Manor dinner, I suppose. Noo I've warned yo', and you know best whether I'm in earnest or no. Bob, lad!"

He turned away, but turned again.

"I'm sorry for ye, but I've ma duty to do—so've you. Till Saturday I shall breathe no word to ony soul o' this business, so that if you see good to put him oot o' the way wi'oot bother, no one need iver know as hoo Adam M'Adam's Red Wull was the Black Killer."

He turned away for the second time. But the little man sprang after him, and clutched him by the arm.

"Look ye here, James Moore!" he cried in thick, shaky, horrible voice. "Ye're big, I'm sma'; ye're strang, I'm weak; ye've ivery one to your back, I've niver a one; you tell your story, and they'll believe ye—for you gae to church; I'll tell mine, and they'll think I lie—for I dinna. But a word in your ear! If iver agin I catch ye on ma land, by—!"—he swore a great oath—"I'll no spare ye. You ken best if I'm in earnest or no." And his face was dreadful to see in its hideous determinedness.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR THE DEFENCE

THAT night a vague story was whispered in the Sylvester Arms. But Tammas, on being interrogated, pursed his lips and said: "Nay, I'm sworn to say nowt." Which was the old man's way of putting that he knew nowt.

On Thursday morning, James Moore and Andrew came down arrayed in all their best. It was the day of the squire's annual dinner to his tenants.

The two, however, were not allowed to start upon their way until they had undergone a critical inspection by Maggie; for the girl liked her mankind to do honor to Kenmuir on these occasions. So she brushed up Andrew, tied his scarf, saw his boots and hands were clean, and titivated him generally till she had converted the ungainly hobbledehoy into a thoroughly "likely young mon."

And all the while she was thinking of that other boy for whom on such gala days she had been wont to perform like offices. And her father, marking the tears in her eyes, and mindful of the squire's mysterious hint, said gently:

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"Cheer up, lass. Happen I'll ha' news for you the night!"

The girl nodded, and smiled wanly.

"Happen so, dad," she said. But in her heart she doubted.

Nevertheless it was with a cheerful countenance that, a little later, she stood in the door with wee Anne and Owd Bob and waved the travellers Godspeed; while the golden-haired lassie, fiercely gripping the old dog's tail with one hand and her sister with the other, screamed them a wordless farewell.

The sun had reached its highest when the two wayfarers passed through the gray portals of the Manor.

In the stately entrance hall, imposing with all the evidences of a long and honorable line, were gathered now the many tenants throughout the wide March Mere Estate. Weather-beaten, rent-paying sons of the soil; most of them native-born, many of them like James Moore, whose fathers had for generations owned and farmed the land they now leased at the hands of the Sylvesters—there in the old hall they were assembled, a mighty host. And apart from the others, standing as though in irony beneath the frown of one of those steel-clad warriors who held the door, was little M'Adam, puny always, paltry now, mocking his manhood.

The door at the far end of the hall opened,

and the squire entered, beaming on every one.

"Here you are—eh, eh! How are you all? Glad to see ye! Good-day, James! Good-day, Saunderson! Good-day to you all! Bringin' a friend with me—eh, eh!" and he stood aside to let by his agent, Parson Leggy, and last of all, shy and blushing, a fair-haired young giant.

"If it bain't David!" was the cry. "Eh, lad, we's fain to see yo'! And yo'm lookin' stout, surely!" And they thronged about the boy, shaking him by the hand, and asking him his story.

'Twas but a simple tale. After his flight on the eventful night he had gone south, drovering. He had written to Maggie, and been surprised and hurt to receive no reply. In vain he had waited, and too proud to write again, had remained ignorant of his father's recovery, neither caring nor daring to return. Then by mere chance, he had met the squire at the York cattle-show; and that kind man, who knew his story, had eased his fears and obtained from him a promise to return as soon as the term of his engagement had expired. And there he was.

The Dalesmen gathered round the boy, listening to his tale, and in return telling him the home news, and chaffing him about Maggie.

Of all the people present, only one seemed unmoved, and that was M'Adam. When first

David had entered he had started forward, a flush of color warming his thin cheeks; but no one had noticed his emotion; and now, back again beneath his armor, he watched the scene, a sour smile playing about his lips.

"I think the lad might ha' the grace to come and say he's sorry for 'temptin' to murder me. Hooiver"—with a characteristic shrug—"I suppose I'm onraisonable."

Then the gong rang out its summons, and the squire led the way into the great dining-hall. At the one end of the long table, heavy with all the solid delicacies of such a feast, he took his seat with the Master of Kenmuir upon his right. At the other end was Parson Leggy. While down the sides the stalwart Dalesmen were arrayed, with M'Adam a little lost figure in the centre.

At first they talked but little, awed like children: knives plied, glasses tinkled, the carvers had all their work, only the tongues were at rest. But the squire's ringing laugh and the parson's cheery tones soon put them at their ease; and a babel of voices rose and waxed.

Of them all, only M'Adam sat silent. He talked to no man, and you may be sure no one talked to him. His hand crept oftener to his glass than plate, till the sallow face began to flush, and the dim eyes to grow unnaturally bright.

Toward the end of the meal there was loud tapping on the table, calls for silence, and men

pushed back their chairs. The squire was on his feet to make his annual speech.

He started by telling them how glad he was to see them there. He made an allusion to Owd Bob and the Shepherds' Trophy which was heartily applauded. He touched on the Black Killer, and said he had a remedy to propose: that Th' Owd Un should be set upon the criminal's track—a suggestion which was received with enthusiasm, while M'Adam's cackling laugh could be heard high above the rest.

From that he dwelt upon the existing condition of agriculture, the depression in which he attributed to the late Radical Government. He said that now with the Conservatives in office, and a ministry composed of "honorable men and gentlemen," he felt convinced that things would brighten. The Radicals' one ambition was to set class against class, landlord against tenant. Well, during the last five hundred years, the Sylvesters had rarely been—he was sorry to have to confess it—good men (laughter and dissent); but he never yet heard of the Sylvester—though he shouldn't say it—who was a bad landlord (loud applause).

This was a free country, and any tenant of his who was not content (a voice, "'Oo says we bain't?")—"thank you, thank you!"—well, there was room for him outside. (Cheers.) He thanked God from the bottom of his heart that, during the forty years he had been responsible for the March Mere Estate, there

had never been any friction between him and his people (cheers), and he didn't think there ever would be. (Loud cheers.)

"Thank you, thank you!" And his motto was, "Shun a Radical as you do the devil!"—and he was very glad to see them all there—very glad; and he wished to give them a toast, "The Queen! God bless her!" and—wait a minute!—with her Majesty's name to couple—he was sure that gracious lady would wish it—that of "Owd Bob o' Kenmuir!" Then he sat down abruptly amid thundering applause.

The toasts duly honoured, James Moore, by prescriptive right as Master of Kenmuir, rose to answer.

He began by saying that he spoke "as representing all the tenants,"—but he was interrupted.

"Na," came a shrill voice from half-way down the table. "Ye'll except me, James Moore. I'd as lief be represented by Judas!"

There were cries of "Hold ye gab, little mon!" and the squire's voice, "That'll do, Mr. M'Adam!"

The little man restrained his tongue, but his eyes gleamed like a ferret's; and the Master continued his speech.

He spoke briefly and to the point, in short phrases. And all the while M'Adam kept up a low-voiced, running commentary. At length he could control himself no longer. Half rising from his chair, he leant forward with hot

face and burning eyes, and cried: "Sit doon, James Moore! Hoo daur ye stan' there like an honest man, ye whitewashed sepulchre? Sit doon, I say, or"—threateningly—"wad ye hae me come to ye?"

At that the Dalesmen laughed uproariously, and even the Master's grim face relaxed. But the squire's voice rang out sharp and stern.

"Keep silence and sit down, Mr. M'Adam! D'you hear me, sir? If I have to speak to you again it will be to order you to leave the room."

The little man obeyed, sullen and vengeful, like a beaten cat.

The Master concluded his speech by calling on all present to give three cheers for the squire, her ladyship, and the young ladies.

The call was responded to enthusiastically, every man standing. Just as the noise was at its zenith, Lady Eleanour herself, with her two fair daughters, glided into the gallery at the end of the hall; whereat the cheering became deafening.

Slowly the clamor subsided. One by one the tenants sat down. At length there was left standing only one solitary figure—M'Adam.

His face was set, and he gripped the chair in front of him with thin, nervous hands.

"Mr. Sylvester," he began in low yet clear voice, "ye said this is a free country and we're a' free men. And that bein' so, I'll tak' the

liberty, wi' yer permission, to say a word. It's maybe the last time I'll be wi' ye, so I hope ye'll listen to me."

The Dalesmen looked surprised, and the squire uneasy. Nevertheless he nodded assent.

The little man straightened himself. His face was tense as though strung up to a high resolve. All the passion had fled from it, all the bitterness was gone; and left behind was a strange, ennobling earnestness. Standing there in the silence of that great hall, with every eye upon him, he looked like some prisoner at the bar about to plead for his life.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I've bin amang ye noo a score years, and I can truly say there's not a man in this room I can ca' 'Friend.'" He looked along the ranks of upturned faces. "Ay, David, I see ye, and you, Mr. Hornbut, and you, Mr. Sylvester—ilka one o' you, and not one as'd back me like a comrade gin a trouble came upon me." There was no rebuke in the grave little voice—it merely stated a hard fact.

"There's I doot no one amang ye but has some one—friend or blood—wham he can turn to when things are sair wi' him. I've no one.

'I bear alane my lade o' care'—

alane wi' Wullie, who stands to me, blaw or snaw, rain or shine. And whiles I'm feared he'll be took from me." He spoke this last

half to himself, a grieved, puzzled expression on his face, as though lately he had dreamed some ill dream.

"Forbye Wullie, I've no friend on God's earth. And, mind ye, a bad man aften mak's a good friend—but ye've never given me the chance. It's a sair thing that, gentlemen, to ha' to fight the battle o' life alane: no one to pat ye on th' back, no one to say 'Weel done.' It hardly gies a man a chance. For gin he does try and yet fails, men never mind the tryin', they only mark the failin'."

"I dinna blame ye. There's somethin' bred in me, it se ms, as sets ivery one agin me. It's the same wi' Wullie and the tykes—they're doon on him same as men are on me. I suppose we was made so. Sin' I was a lad it's aye bin the same. From school days I've had ivery one agin me."

"In ma life I've had three friends. Ma mither—and she went; then ma wife"—he gave a great swallow—"and she's awa'; and I may say they're the only two human bein's as ha' lived on God's earth in ma time that iver tried to bear wi' me;—and Wullie. A man's mither—a man's wife—a man's dog! it's aften a' he has in this warld; and the more he prizes them the more like they are to be took from him." The little earnest voice shook, and the dim eyes puckered and filled.

"Sin' I've bin amang ye—twenty-odd years—can any man here mird speakin' any word

that wasna ill to me?" He paused; there was no reply.

"I'll tell ye. All the time I've lived here I've had one kindly word spoke to me, and that a fortnight gone, and not by a man then—by her ladyship, God bless her!" He glanced up into the gallery. There was no one visible there; but a curtain at one end shook as though it were sobbing.

"Weel, I'm thinkin' we'll be gaein' in a wee while noo, Wullie and me, alane and thegither, as we've aye done. And it's time we went. Ye've had enough o' us, and it's no for me to blame ye. And when I'm gone what'll ye say o' me? 'He was a drunkard.' I am. 'He was a sinner.' I am. 'He was ilka thing he shouldna be.' I am. 'We're glad he's gone.' That's what ye'll say o' me. And it's but ma deserts."

The gentle, condemning voice ceased, and began again.

"That's what I am. Gin things had been differ', aiblins I'd ha' bin differ'. D'ye ken Robbie Burns? That's a man I've read, and ead, and read. D'ye ken why I love him as some o' you do yer Bibles? Because there's a humanity about him. A weak man hissel', aye slippin', slippin', slippin', and tryin' to haud up; sorrowin' ae minute, sinnin' the next; doin' ill deeds and wishin' 'em undone—just a plain human man, a sinner. And that's why I'm thinkin he's tender for us as is like him. *He*

understood. It's what he wrote—after ain o' his tumbles, I'm thinkin'—that I was goin' to tell ye:

' Then gently scan yer brother man,
Still gentler sister woman,
Though they may gang a kennin' wrang,
To step aside is human'—

the doctrine o' Charity. Gie him his chance, says Robbie, though he be a sinner. Mony a mon'd be differ', mony bad'd be gude, gin they had but their chance. Gie 'em their chance, says he; and I'm wi' him. As 'tis, ye see me here—a bad man wi' still a streak o' good in him. Gin I'd had ma chance, aiblins 'twad be—a good man wi' just a spice o' the devil in him. A' the differ' betune what is and what might ha' bin."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE DEVIL'S BOWL

HE sat down. In the great hall there was silence, save for a tiny sound from the gallery like a sob suppressed.

The squire rose hurriedly and left the room. After him, one by one, trailed the tenants.

At length, two only remained—M'Adam, sitting solitary with a long array of empty chairs on either hand; and, at the far end of the table, Parson Leggy, stern, upright, motionless.

When the last man had left the room the parson rose, and with lips tight-set strode across the silent hall.

"M'Adam," he said rapidly and almost roughly, "I've listened to what you've said, as I think we all have, with a sore heart. You hit hard—but I think you were right. And if I've not done my duty by you as I ought—and I fear I've not—it's now my duty as God's minister to be the first to say I'm sorry." And it was evident from his face what an effort the words cost him.

The little man tilted back his chair, and raised his head.

It was the old M'Adam who looked up.

The thin lips were curled; a grin was crawling across the mocking face; and he wagged his head gently, as he looked at the speaker through the slits of his half-closed eyes.

"Mr. Hurnbert, I believe ye thocht me in earnest, 'deed and I do!" He leaned back in his chair and laughed softly. "Ye swallered it all down like best butter. Dear, dear! to think o' that!" Then, stretching forward: "Mr. Hornbut, I was playin' wi' ye."

The parson's face, as he listened, was ugly to watch. He shot out a hand and grabbed the scoffer by his coat; then dropped it again and turned abruptly away.

As he passed through the door a little sneering voice called after him:

"Mr. Hornbut, I ask ye hoo you, a minister o' the Church of England, can reconcile it to yer conscience to think—though it be but for a minute—that there can be ony good in a man and him no churchgoer? Sir, ye're a heretic—not to say a heathen!" He sniggered to himself, and his hand crept to a half-emptied wine decanter.

An hour later, James Moore, his business with the squire completed, passed through the hall on his way out. Its only occupant was now M'Adam, and the Master walked straight up to his enemy.

"M'Adam," he said gruffly, holding out a sinewy hand, "I'd like to say——"

The little man knocked aside the token of friendship.

"Na, na. No cant, if ye please, James Moore. That'll aiblins go doon wi' the parsons, but not wi' me. I ken you and you ken me, and all the whitewash i' th' warld 'll no deceive us."

The Master turned away, and his face was hard as the nether millstone. But the little man pursued him.

"I was nigh forgettin'," he said. "I've a surprise for ye, James Moore. But I hear it's yer birthday on Sunday, and I'll keep it till then—he! he!"

"Ye'll see me before Sunday, M'Adam," the other answered. "On Saturday, as I told yo', I'm comin' to see if yo've done yer duty."

"Whether ye come, James Moore, is your business. Whether ye'll iver go, once there, I'll mak' mine. I've warned ye twice noo"—and the little man laughed that harsh, cackling laugh of his.

At the door of the hall the Master met David.

"Noo, lad, yo're comin' along wi' Andrew and me," he said; "Maggie'll niver forgie us if we dinna bring yo' home wi' us."

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Moore," the boy replied. "I've to see squire first; and then yo' may be sure I'll be after you."

The Master faltered a moment.

"David, ha'n yo' spoke to yer father yet?" he asked in low voice. "Yo' should, lad."

The boy made a gesture of dissent.

"I canna," he said petulantly.

"I would, lad," the other advised. "An' yo' don't yo' may be sorry after."

As he turned away he heard the boy's steps, dull and sodden, as he crossed the hall; and then a thin, would-be cordial voice in the emptiness:

"I declar' if 'tisna David! The return o' the Prodeegal—he! he! So ye've seen yer auld dad at last, and the last; the proper place, say ye, for yer father—he! he! Eh, lad, but I'm blithe to see ye. D'ye mind when we was last thegither? Ye was kneelin' on ma chest: 'Your time's come, dad,' says you, and wangs me o'er the face—he! he! I mind it as if 'twas yesterday. Weel, weel, we'll say nae mair about it. Boys will be boys. Sons will be sons. Accidents will happen. And if at first ye don't succeed, why, try, try again—he! he!"

Dusk was merging into darkness when the Master and Andrew reached the Dalesman's Daughter. It had been long dark when they emerged from the cosy parlor of the inn and plunged out into the night.

As they crossed the Silver Lea and trudged over that familiar ground, where a fortnight since had been fought out the battle of the Cup, the wind fluttered past them in spasmodic gasps

"There's trouble in the wind," said the Master.

"Ay," answered his laconic son.

All day there had been no breath of air, and the sky dangerously blue. But now a world of black was surging up from the horizon, smothering the star-lit night; and small dark clouds, like puffs of smoke, detaching themselves from the main body, were driving tempestuously forward—the vanguard of the storm.

In the distance was a low tumbling like heavy tumbrils on the floor of heaven. All about, the wind sounded hollow like a mighty scythe on corn. The air was oppressed with a leaden blackness—no glimmer of light on any hand; and as they began the ascent of the Pass they reached out blind hands to feel along the rock-face.

A sea-fret, cool and wetting, fell. A few big rain-drops splashed heavily down. The wind rose with a leap and roared past them up the rocky track. And the water-gates of heaven were flung wide.

Wet and weary, they battled on; thinking sometimes of the cosy parlor behind; sometimes of the home in front; wondering whether Maggie, in flat contradiction of her father's orders, would be up to welcome them; or whether only Owd Bob would come out to meet them.

The wind volleyed past them like salvos of artillery. The rain stormed at them from

above; spat at them from the rock-face; and leapt up at them from their feet.

Once they halted for a moment, finding a miserable shelter in a crevice of the rock.

"It's a Black Killer's night," panted the Master. "I reck'n he's oot."

"Ay," the boy gasped, "reck'n he is."

Up and up they climbed through the blackness, blind and buffeted. The eternal thunder of the rain was all about them; the clamor of the gale above; and far beneath, the roar of angry waters.

Once, in a lull in the storm, the Master turned and looked back into the blackness along the path they had come.

"Did ye hear onythin'?" he roared above the muffled sougling of the wind.

"Nay!" Andrew shouted back.

"I thowt I heard a step!" the Master cried, peering down. But nothing could he see.

Then the wind leaped to life again like a giant from his sleep, drowning all sound with its hurricane voice; and they turned and bent to their task again.

Nearing the summit, the Master turned once more.

"There it was again!" he called; but his words were swept away on the storm; and they buckled to the struggle afresh.

Ever and anon the moon gleamed down through the riot of tossing sky. Then they could see the wet wall above them, with the

water tumbling down its sheer face; and far below, in the roaring gutter of the Pass a brown-stained torrent. Hardly, however, had they time to glance around when a mass of cloud would hurry jealously up, and all again was blackness and noise.

At length, nigh spent, they topped the last and steepest pitch of the Pass, and emerged into the Devil's Bowl. There, overcome with their exertions, they flung themselves on to the soaking ground to draw breath.

Behind them, the wind rushed with a sullen roar up the funnel of the Pass. It screamed above them as though ten million devils were a-horse; and blurted out on to the wild Marches beyond.

As they lay there, still panting, the moon gleamed down in momentary graciousness. In front, through the lashing rain, they could discern the hillocks that squat, hag-like, round the Devil's Bowl; and lying in its bosom, its white waters, usually so still, ploughed now into a thousand furrows, the Lone Tarn.

The Master raised his head and craned forward at the ghostly scene. Of a sudden he reared himself on to his arms, and stayed motionless awhile. Then he dropped as though dead, forcing down Andrew with an iron hand.

"Lad, did'st see?" he whispered.

"Nay; what was't?" the boy replied, roused by his father's tone.

"There!"

But as the Master pointed forward, a blur of cloud intervened and all was dark. Quickly it passed; and again the lantern of the night shone down. And Andrew, looking with all his eyes, saw indeed.

There, in front, by the fretting waters of the Tarn, packed in a solid phalanx, with every head turned in the same direction, was a flock of sheep. They were motionless, all-intent, staring with horror-bulging eyes. A column of steam rose from their bodies into the rain-pierced air. Panting and palpitating, yet they stood with their backs to the water, as though determined to sell their lives dearly. Beyond them, not fifty yards away, crouched a hump-backed boulder, casting a long, misshapen shadow in the moonlight. And beneath it were two black objects, one still struggling feebly.

"The Killer!" gasped the boy, and, all ablaze with excitement, began forging forward.

"Steady, lad, steady!" urged his father, dropping a restraining hand on the boy's shoulder.

Above them a huddle of clouds flung in furious rout across the night, and the moon was veiled.

"Follow, lad!" ordered the Master, and began to crawl silently forward. As stealthily Andrew pursued. And over the sodden ground they crept, one behind the other, like two night-hawks on some foul errand.

On they crawled, lying prone during the blinks of moon, stealing forward in the dark; till, at length, the swish of the rain on the waters of the Tarn, and the sobbing of the flock in front, warned them they were near.

They skirted the trembling pack, passing so close as to brush against the flanking sheep; and yet unnoticed, for the sheep were soul-absorbed in the tragedy in front. Only, when the moon was in, Andrew could hear them huddling and stamping in the darkness. And again, as it shone out, fearfully they edged closer to watch the bloody play.

Along the Tarn edge the two crept. And still the gracious moon hid their approach, and the drunken wind drowned with its revelry the sound of their coming.

So they stole on, on hands and knees, with hearts aghast and fluttering breath; until, of a sudden, in a lull of wind, they could hear, right before them, the smack and slobber of bloody lips, chewing their bloody meal.

"Say thy prayers, Red Wull. Thy last minute's come!" muttered the Master, rising to his knees. Then, in Andrew's ear: "When I rush, lad, follow!" For he thought, when the moon rose, to jump in on the great dog, and, surprising him as he lay gorged and unsuspecting, to deal him one terrible swashing blow, and end forever the lawless doings of the Tailless Tyke.

The moon flung off its veil of cloud. White