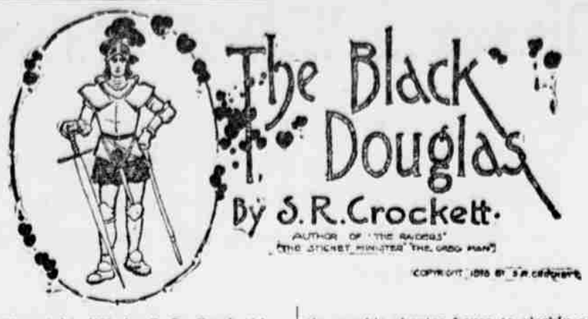

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CHAPTER V.

The Witch Woman.

One was Malise, the smith, towering like a giant. His hands rested on the hilt of a mighty sword, whose blade sparkled in the lamplight as if the master armorer had drawn it that moment from the midst of his charcoal fire.

A little in front of Malise there stood another figure, less imposing in physical proportions, but infinitely more striking in apparel. The second was a man of tall and spare frame, of a countenance grave and severe, yet with a certain kindly power latent in it also. He was dressed in the white robe of a Christian, with the black scapulary of the order. On his head was the mitre and in his hand the staff of the abbot of a great establishment which he wears when he goes visiting his subsidiary houses. More remarkable than all was the monk's likeness to the young man who now stood before him with an expression of indignant surprise on his face, which slowly merged into anger as he understood why the two men were there.

It was the Abbot William Douglas, the head of the great abbey of Dulce Corupon Solway side.

This was he who, being the son and heir of the brother of the first duke of Touraine, had in the flower of his age suddenly renounced his domains of Nithsdale, that he might take holy orders, and who had ever since been renowned for high sanctity and a multitude of good works.

The pair stood looking toward the woman and William Douglas, without speech, a kind of grim patience upon their faces.

It was the earl who was the first to speak.

"What seek you here so late, my Lord Abbot?" he said with all the haughtiness of the unquestioned head of his mighty house.

"Nay, what seeks the Earl William here alone so late?" answered the abbot with equal directness.

The two men stood fronting each other. Malise leaned upon his two-handed sword and gazed upon the ground.

"I have come," the abbot went on after vainly waiting for the young earl to offer an explanation, " as your kinsman, tutor and councilor to warn you against this foreign witch woman. What seeks she here in this land of Galloway but to do hurt? We have heard her with our own ears almost persuade you to accompany her to Edinburgh, which is a city filled with the power and deadly intent of your enemies."

Earl William bowed ironically to his uncle and his eye glittered as it fell upon Malise MacKim.

"I thank you, uncle," he said, "I am deeply indebted for your so great interest. I thank you, too, Malise, for bringing about this timely interference. I will pay my debts one day. In the meantime your duty is done. Depart, both of you, I command you!"

Outside the thunder had begun to growl in the distance. An extraordinary oppression had slowly filled the air. The lamps swinging on the pavilion rooftree flickered and flared, alternately rising and sinking like the life in the eyes of a dying man.

And the while the lady sat still on the couch with an expression of amused contempt on her face. But now she rose to her feet.

"And I also ask, in the name of the king of France, by what right you intrude within the precincts of a lady's bower? I bid you leave me!"

She pointed imperiously with her white hand to the black oblong doorway from which Malise's rude hand had dragged the covering flap to the ground.

But the churchman and his guide stood their ground.

Suddenly the abbot reached a hand and took the sword on which his master armorer leaned. With its point he drew a wide circle upon the rich carpets which formed the floor of the pavilion.

"William Douglas," he said, "I command you come within this circle, while in the right of my holy office I exercise that demon there who hath so nearly beguiled you to your ruin."

The lady laughed a rich, ringing laugh.

"These are indeed high heroics for so plain and poor an occasion. I need not to utter a word of explanation. I am a lady traveling peaceably under escort of an ambassador of France, through a Christian country. By chance I met the Earl Douglas and invited him to sup. What concern, spiritual or temporal, may that be of yours, my Lord Abbot? Who made you my lord earl's keeper?"

"Woman or demon from the pit," said the abbot, sternly, "think not to deceive William Douglas, the aged, as you have cast the glamor over William Douglas, the boy. The lust of the flesh abideth no more forever in this frail tabernacle. I bid thee let the lad go, for he is dear to me as mine own soul. Let him go, I say, ere I curse thee with the curse of God Almighty!"

The lady continued to smile, standing meantime, slender and fair, before them, her bosom heaving a little with emotion and her fair hair rippling in red gold confusion down her back.

"Certainly my lord earl came not upon compulsion. He is free to return with you, if he be yet under tutors and governors, or afraid of the master's stripes. Go, Earl William; I made a mistake. I thought you had been a man. But I bid you go back to the monk's chapter house to clerkly copies and childish toys."

Then black and sullen anger glared from the eyes of the Douglas.

"Get hence!" he cried, "hence, both of you—you, William, ere I forget your holy office and your kinship—you, Malise, that I may settle with tomorrow ere the sun sets. I swear it by my word as a Douglas. I will never forgive either of you for this night's work!"

The fair white hand was laid upon his wrist.

"Nay," said the lady, "do not quarrel with those you love for my poor sake. I am little worth the trouble. Go back with them in peace and forget her who sat by your side an hour."

"Nay," he cried, "that I will not. I will show them that I am old enough to choose my company for myself. Who is my uncle that he should dictate to me that am an earl of Douglas and a peer of France—or my servant, that he should come forth to spy upon his master."

"Then," she whispered, smiling, "you will indeed abide with me?"

He gave her his hand.

"I will abide with you till death! Body and soul I am yours alone!"

"By the holy cross of our Lord, that shall you not!" cried Malise, "not though you hang me high as Haman for this ere the morrow's morn!"

And with these words he sprang forward and caught his master by the wrist. With one strong pull of his mighty arm he dragged him within the circle which the abbot had made with the sword's point.

The lady seemed to change color. At that moment a gust of wind caused the lamps to flicker, and the outlines of her white-robed figure seemed to waver like an image in water.

"I adjure and command you in the name of God, the one and omnipotent, to depart to your place, spirit or devil, or whatever you may be!"

The voice of the abbot rose high above the roaring of the bursting storm without. The woman seemed to reach an arm across the circle, as if even yet to take hold of the young man. The abbot thrust forward his crucifix.

And then the bolt of God fell. The whole pavilion was illuminated with a flash of light so intense and white that it seemed to blind and burn up all about. The woman was seen no more. The silken covering blazed up. Malise plunged outward into the darkness of the storm, carrying his young master lightly as a child in his arms, while the abbot kept his feet behind him like a boat in a ship's wake. The thunder roared overhead like the sea bellowing in a cave's mouth, and the great pines bent their heads away from the mighty wind, straining and creaking and lashing each other in fury.

Malise and the abbot seemed to hear about them the plunging of riderless horses as they stumbled downward through the n ght, their path lit by lightning flashes, green and lilac and blue, and bearing between them the senseless form of William, earl of Douglas.

CHAPTER VI.

The Poisoning of Malise, the Smith.

These things material to the life and history of William, sixth earl of Douglas, are not written from hearsay, but are chronicled within the lifetime by one who saw them and had part therein—though the part was but a boy's one. His manuscript has come down to us and lies before the transcriber, Sholto MacKim, the son of Malise, the smith, testifies to these things in his own clerkly script. He adds particularly that his brother Lawrence, being at the time but a boy, had little knowledge of the actual facts, and is not to be believed, if at any time he should controvert anything which he has written. So far, however, as the present collector and editor can find out, Lawrence MacKim appears to have been entirely silent on the subject, at least with his pen, so that his brother's caveat was needless.

* * * * * * *

The instant Lord William entered his own castle of Thrieve over the drawbridge and without even returning the salutations of his guard, he turned about to the two men who had compelled his return.

"Ho, guard, there!" he cried. "Seize me the abbot of the new abbey and Malise MacKim."

And much surprised, but wholly obedient, twenty archers of the earl's guard, commanded by old John of Abernethy, called Landless Jock, fell in at back and front.

Malise, the master armorer, stood silent, taking the matter with usual phlegm; but the abbot was voluble.

"William," he said, holding out his hands with an appealing gesture, "I have labored with you, striven with, prayed for you. Tonight I came forth through the storm, and that though an old man, to deliver you from the manifest snares of the devil—"

But the earl interrupted his recital without compunction.

"Set Malise MacKin in the inner dungeon," he cried. "Thrust his feet into the great stocks and let my lord abbot be warded safely in the castle chapel. He is little likely to be disturbed there at his devotions."

"Aye, my lord, it shall be done!" said Landless Jock, shaking his head with gloomy foreboding as the haughty young earl in his wet and torn disarray flashed past him without further notice of the men whom his bare word had committed to prison. The earl sprang up the narrow turret stair, passing as he did so, the vaulted hall of the men-at-arms, where more than a hundred stout archers and spearsmen sat carousing and singing, even at that advanced hour of the night, while as many more lay about the halls, or on the wooden shelves which they used for sleeping upon, and which folded back against the wall during the day. At the first glimpse of their young master every man left awake among them struggled to his feet and stood stiffly propped, drunk or sober, according to his condition, with his eyes turned upon the door which gave upon the turnpike stair. But with a slight answering wave of his hand the earl passed on to his own apartment.

He found his faithful body servant, Rene le Blesois, stretched across the threshold. The stanch Frenchman rose mechanically at the sound of his master's footsteps, and, though still soundly asleep, he stood with the latch of the door in his hand and his other held to his brow in salutation.

Lord William Douglas would doubtless have cast himself, wet as he was, upon his bed had not Le Blesois, observing his lord's plight even in his own sleep-dulled condition, entered the chamber after his master, and, without question or speech, silently began to relieve him of his wet hunting dress. A looose chamber gown of rich red cloth, lined with silk and furred with "cristy" gray, hung over the back of a black oaken chair, and into this the young earl flung himself in black and sullen anger.

Le Blesois, still without a word spoken, left the room with the wet clothes over his arm. As he did so a small object rolled from some fold or crevice of the doublet, where it had been safely lodged till displaced by the loosening of the belt or the removing of the banderole of his hunting horn.

Le Blesois turned at the tikling sound and would have stooped to lift it after the manner of a careful servitor. But the eye of his master was upon the fallen object, and with an abrupt wave of his hand toward the door, and the single word "Go," he dismissed his body servant from the room.

Then, rising hastily from his bed he took the trinket in his hand and carried it to the well-trimmed lamp which stood in the niche that held a golden crucifix.

The Lord Douglas saw in his palm a ring of singular design. The main portion was formed of the twisting bodies of a pair of snakes, the jewel work very cunningly interlaced and perfectly finished. Their eyes were set with rubies, and between their open mouths they held an opal, shaped like a heart. The stone was translucent and faintly luminous like a moonstone, but held in its heart one fleck of ruby red in shape like a drop of blood. By some curious trick of light in whatever position the ring was held this drop still appeared to be on the point of detaching itself and falling to the ground.

Earl William examined it in the flicker of the lamp. He turned it every way, narrowly searching inside the golden band for a posy, but not a word of any language could he find engraved upon it.

"I saw a ring upon her hand—I am certain I saw it on her hand!" he said these words over and over to himself. "It is then no dream that I have dreamed."

There came a low knocking at the door, a rustling and a whispering without. Instantly the earl thrust the ring upon his own finger with the opal turned inward, and with the dark anger mark of his race strongly dinted upon his fair brow, he faced the unseen intruder.

"WILLIAM DOUGLAS, I COMMAND YOU COME—"

"Who is there?" he cried loudly and imperiously.

The door opened with a rasping of the iron pin, and a little girlish figure clothed from head to foot in a white night veil danced in. She clapped her hands at sight of him.

"You are come back," she cried, "and you have so fine a gown on, too. But Maud Lindesay says it is very wrong to sit up so late, even if you are Earl of Douglas and a great man now. Will you never play at 'catch-as-catch-can' with David and me any more?"

"Margaret," said the young earl, "what do you want away from your chamber at all. Our mother will miss you and I do not want her here tonight. Go back at once!"

But the little wilful maiden, catching her skirts in her hands at each side, and raising them a little way from the ground, began to dance a dainty pas seul, ending with a flashing whirl and a low bow in the direction of her audience.

William Douglas could not choose but laugh, and soon sat down on the bed, setting his clasped hands behind his dead and contenting himself with looking at his little sister.

Though at that time but 8 years of age, Margaret de Douglas was possessed of such extraordinary vitality and character that she seemed more like 11. She had the clear-cut, handsome Douglas face, the pale, olive skin, the flashing dark eyes and the crisp blue black hair of her mother. A lithe grace and quickness like that of a beautiful wild animal was characteristic of every movement.

"Our mother hath been anxious about you, brother mine," said the little girl, tiring suddenly of her dance and leaping upon the other end of the couch on which her brother was lying. Establishing herself opposite him, she pulled the coverlet up about her so that presently only her face could be seen peeping out from under the silken folds.

"O, I was so cold, but I am warmer now. And if maid Betsy Abannay comes to take me away I want you to stretch out your hand like this and say, 'Seneschal, remove that besom to the deep dungeon beneath the castle moat,' as we used to do in our plays before you became a great man.

"Then I could stay very long and talk to you all the night, for Maud Lindesay sleeps so sound that nothing can awake her."

Gradually the anger passed out of the face of William Douglas, as he listened to his sister's prattle, like the vapors from the surface of a hill tarn when the sun rises in his strength.

He even thought with some self-reproach of his treatment of Malise and his uncle, the abbot. But a glance at the ring on his finger, and the thought of what might have been his good fortune at that moment but for their interference, hardened his resolution again to adamant within his breast.

His sister's voice, clear and high in its childish treble, recalled him to himself.

"O, William, and there is such news—I forgot because I have been so overbusied with arranging my new puppet's house that Malise made me. But scarcely were you gone on Black Darnaway ere a messenger came from our granduncle James at Avondale, that he and my cousins, Will and James, will be tomorrow at the Thrieve with a company to attend the Wappenshaw!"

The young man sprang to his feet and dashed one hand into the plam of the other.

"This is ill tidings, indeed," he cried, "what does the fat flatterer at the castle of Thrieve? If he comes to pay homage, it will be but a mockery. Neither he nor Angus had ever any goodwill to my father, and they have none to me."

"Ah, do not be angry, William," cried the little maid, "it will be beautiful. They will come at a fitting time. For tomorrow is the great levy and the weapon-showing and our cousins will see you in your pride. And they will see me, too, in my best green sarcinet, riding on a white palfrey at your side as you promised."

"A weapon-showing is not a place for little girls!" said the earl, mollified in spite of himself, casting himself down again on the couch and playing with the serpent ring on his finger.

"Ah, now," cried his sister, her quick eyes dancing everywhere at once, "you are not attending to a single word I say. I know by your voice that you are not. That is a pretty ring. Did a lady give it to you? Was it our Maud's? I think it must have been our Maud. She has many beautiful things, but mostly it is the young men who come here who wish to give her such things. She never gives any of them away, but keeps them in a box, and says it is good to spoil the Egyptians. And when I am tired she will tell me the history of each and whether he was dark or fair. Or make it all up just as good if she forgets. But O, William, if I were a lady, I should fall in love with nobody but you. For you are so handsome—yes, nearly as handsome as I am myself—(she passed her hands lightly through her curls as she spoke). And you know I shall marry no one but a Douglas—only you must not ask me to marry my cousin William of Avondale, for he is so stern and solemn, besides he has always a book in his pocket and wishes me to learn somewhat, as if I were a monk! A Douglas should not be a monk; he should be a soldier."

So she lay and prattled on to her brother, who, buried in his thoughts and occupied with his ring, let the hours slip on till at the open door of the earl's chamber there appeared the most bewitching face in the world, as many in that castle were ready to prove at the sword's point. The little girl caught sight of it with a shrill cry of pleasure, instantly checked and hushed, however, at the thought of her mother.

"O, Maudie," she cried, "come hither into William's room. He has such a beautiful ring that a woman gave him. I am sure a woman gave it to him. Was it you, Maud Lindesay? You are a sly puss not to tell me if it was. William, it is wicked of you not to tell me who gave you that ring. If it had been some one you were not ashamed of you would be proud of it, and tell. Whisper to me who it was. I will not tell any one, not even Maudie."

Her brother had risen to his feet, with a quick movement girding his red gown about him as he rose.

"Mistress Maud," he said, respectfully, "I fear I have given you anxiety by detaining your charge so late. But she is a willful madam, and ill to advise."

"She is a Douglas," smiled the fair maid, who stood at the chamber door, refusing his invitation to enter with a flash of the eye and a quick shake of the head, which betokened no small share of the family qualities. "Is not that enough to excuse her for being wayward and headstrong?"

Earl William wasted no more words of entreaty upon his sister, but seized her in his arms, and, pulling the coverlet in which she had huddled herself up, with her pert chin on her knees, more closely about her, he strode along the passage with her in his arms, till he stopped at an open door leading into a large chamber which looked to the south.

"There," he said, smiling at the girl who had followed behind him, "I will lock her in with you and take the key, that I may safe bind such uncertain charges."

But the girl had deftly extracted the key even as she passed in after him, and as the bolts shot from within, she cried, "I thank you right courteously, Lord William, but mine apothecary, fearing that the air of this isle of Thrieve might not agree with me, bade me ever to sleep with the key of my door under my pillow. Against fever and quinsies, cold iron is a sovereign specific!"

And spite of his wounded heart, Earl William smiled at the girl's sauciness as he went slowly back to his chamber, in spite of his earldom taking pains to pass his mother's door on tintoe.

CHAPTER VII.

The Douglas Master.

The day of the great weapon-showing broke fair and clear, after the storm of the night. The windows of heaven had had all their panes cleaned and even after broad daylight the brighter stars appeared, only, however, to wink out again when the sun arose and shone on the wet fields, rejoicing like a bridegroom from his chamber.

And equally bright and strong came forth the young earl, every trace of the anger and disappointment of the night having been removed from his face if not from his mind by the recreative and potent sleep of youth and health.

In the hall he called for Sir John of Abernethy, called Landless Jack.

"Conduct my uncle, the abbot, from the chapel, where he has been all night at his devotions, to his chamber and furnish him with all he may require and bring up Malise the smith from the dungeon. Let him come into my presence in the upper hall."

William Douglas went up into a large oak-ceiled chamber, wide and high, running right across the castle from side to side, and with windows looking every way over the broad and fertile strath of Dee.

Presently, with a trampling of mailed feet and the double rattle which denoted the grounding of a pair of steel-hilled partisans, Malise was brought to the door by two men of the earl's outer guard.

The huge bulk of Brawny Kim filled up the doorway almost completely and he stood watching the Douglas with an unmoved gravity which in the dry wrinkles about his eyes almost amounted to humor.

Yet it was Malise who spoke first. For at his appearing the earl had turned his back upon his retainer and now stood at the window which looks toward the north, from which he could almost see over the broad and placid stretches of the river the men putting up the pavilions and striking spears into the ground to mark the space reserved for the tourney of the next day.

"A fair good morrow to you, my lord," said the smith. "Grievous as my sin has been and just as is your resentment, give me leave to say that I have suffered more than my deserts from the ill-made chains and uncouth manacles wherewith they confined me in the black dungeon down there. I trow, they must have been the workmanship of Ninian Lamont, the Highlandman, who dares to call himself housesmith of Thrieve, I am ready to die, if it be your will, my lord, but if you are well advised you will hang Ninian beside me with a bracelet of his own villian handiwork about his neck! Then shall justice be satisfied, and Malise MacKim will die happy!"

The earl turned and looked at his ancient friend. The wrinkles about the eyes were deeply ironical now, and the gray eyes of the master armorer twinkled with appreciation of his jest.

"Malise," cried his master, warningly, "do not play at cat's cradle with Douglas. You might tempt me to that I might afterward be sorry for. A man once dead comes not to life again, whatever the monks prate. But tell me how knew you whither I had gone yestereven? For, indeed, I knew not myself when I set out. And, in any event, was it a thing well done for my foster-father to spy upon me, who am also his lord?"

The anger was mostly gone now out of the frank face of the earl, and only humiliation and resentment, with a touch of boyish curiosity remained.

"Indeed," answered the smith, "I watched you not save under my hand as you rode away upon Black Darnaway, and then I turned me to the seat by the wall to listen to the questionings of Dame Barbara, the humming of the bees and the other comfortable and composing sounds of nature."

"How, then, did you come to follow me in the undesirable company of my uncle, the abbot?"

"For that you are in debt of my son Sholto, who, seeing a woman wait for you in the greenwood, climbed a tree, and there from among the branches he was a witness of your encounter."

"So—" said the Douglas, "it is to Master Sholto that I owe somewhat."

"Aye," said his father, "do not forget him. For he is a good lad and a bold, as indeed he proved to the hilt yestreen!"

"In what consisted his boldness?" asked the earl.

"In that he dared to come home to me with a cock-and-bull story of a witch lady, who appeared suddenly where none had been a moment before, and who had immediately bewitched my lord earl. Wellnigh did I twist his neck, but he stuck to it. Then came riding by my Lord Abbott, and I judged that the matter, as one of witchcraft, was more his affair than mine."

"Now, harken," cried the earl, in tones of high anger, "let there be no more such folly, or on your life be it. The lady was traveling with her companion through Galloway from France. She invited me to sup with her and dared me to adventure to Edinburgh in her company. Wherein was the witchcraft of that, saving the witchery natural to all fair women?"

"Did she not prophesy to you that today you would be duke of Touraine and receive the ambassadors of the king of France?"

"Well," said the earl, "where is your wit that you give ear to such babblings? Did she not come here from that country, as I tell you, and who should hear the latest news more readily than she?"

The smith looked a little nonplussed, but stuck to it stoutly that none but a witch-woman would ride alone at night-fall upon a Galloway moor, or unless by enchantment, set up a pavilion of silk and strange device under the pines of Loch Roan.

"Well," said Earl William, feeling his advantage and making the most of it, "I see that in all my little love affairs I needs must take my master-armorer with me to decide whether or no the woman be a witch. He shall resolve for me all spiritual questions with his forehammer. Malise MacKim a witch pricker! Ha—this is a change indeed. Malise, the smith, the censor of his lord's love affairs, after what certain comrades of his have told me of his own love-makings. Will he deign to come to the weapon-showing today, and instead of examining the swords and halberts, the French arbalasts and German fusils demit that part of his office to Ninian the Highlandman and go peering into women's eyes for sorceries and scanning their upper lips for the signs of the devil, which lurk in the dimples of their chins. In this he will find much employment and that of a congenial sort!"

Malise was vanquished, less by the sarcasm of the earl than by the fear that perhaps the Highlandman might indeed have his place of honor as chief expert at his master's right hand at the examination of weapons that day on the green holms of Balmaghie.

"I may have been overhasty, my lord,"

"HE PUT HIS THUMBS KNOWINGLY IN THE SASH."

he said, "but still do I think that the woman was far from canny!"

The earl laughed, and, turning him about by the shoulders, gave him a push down the stair, crying out: O, Malise, Malise, have you lived so long in the world without finding out that a fair woman is always uncanny!"

The levy that day of men owning fealty to the Douglas was no hasty local one. It was not, indeed, a "rising of the countryside," such as took place when the English were over the border and the beacon fires were thrown west from Criffel to Screel, from Screel to Cairnharrow, and then tossed northward by the three Cairnsmuirs and topmost Merrick far over the uplands of Kyle, till on the sullen brow of Brown Carrick the bale fire set the town drum of Ayr beating its alarming note. Still, it was a day on which every Douglas vassal must ride in mail, with all his spears behind him, or bide at home and take the consequences.

All the night from distant parishes and outlying valleys men-at-arms had been riding, clothed in complete panoply of mail. These were the knights barons, freeholders owning allegiance and duty to the house of Douglas. Each lord was followed by appointed tail of esquires and men-at-arms; behind these dense clusters of heavily armed spearmen marched steadily along the easiest paths by the waterside and over the lower hill passes. Light running footmen slung their swords over their backs by leathern bandoliers and pricked it briskly over the bent so brown. Archers there were from the border toward the Solway side, lithe men accustomed to leap from tussock to tuft of shaking grass, whose long strides and odd spasmodic side motions betrayed, on the plain and unyielding heather, the place of their amphibious nativity.

"The Jack herons of Lochar," these were named by the men of Galloway. But there was no jeering to their faces, for not one of these Maxwells, Sims, Patersons and Dicksons who would have thought twice of leaping behind a tree stump to wing a clothyard into a scoffer's ribs at thirty yards, taking his chance of the dule tree and the hempen cord thereafter for the honor of Lochar.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Crossing of the Ford.

It was still early morning of the great day when Sholto and Laurence MacKim, leaving their mother in the kitchen, their young sister Magdalen trying a yet prettier tie to her kerchief, took their way by the fords of Glen Lochar to an eminence then denominated plainly the Whinny Knowe, the same which afterwards gained and has kept to this day the more fatal designation of Knock Cannon. The lads were dressed as became the sons of so prosperous a craftsman and master armorer to boot as Malise MacKim of the Carlinwark.

Laurence, the younger, wore his archer's jack over the suit of purple velvet, with boots of yellow leather and withal a dainty cap set far back on his head, from which sprouted the wing of a blackcock in as close imitation as Master Laurence dared compass of the Earl Douglas himself. His bow was slung at his back, all ready for the inspection. A sash of orange silk was twisted about his waist, and in this he would set his thumb knowingly and stare boldly as often as the pair of brothers overtook a pretty girl. For Master Laurence loved beauty and thought not lightly of his own.

Sholto, though as we shall soon see, despised not love, had eyes more for the knights and men-at-arms, and considered that his heaven would be fully attained as soon as he should ride one of those great prancing horses and carry a lance with the pennon of Douglas upon it.

Meantime he wore the steel cap, the ringed-neck mail, the close-fitting doublet of blue, dotted over with red Douglas hearts, and having the white cross of St. Andrew transversely upon it. About his waist was a peaked brace of shining plate armor, damascened in gold by Malise himself, and filling out his almost girlish waist to manlier proportions. From this depended a row of tags of soft leather. Close chain-mail covered his legs, to which at the knees were added caps of triple plate. A sheaf of arrows in a blue and gold quiver on his right side, a sword of mettle on his left and a short Scottish bow in his hand completed the attire of a fully equipped and fully efficient archer of the earl's guard.

The lads were soon at the fords of Lochar, where in the dry summers the stones show all the way across, one in the midst being named the Black Douglas, in the place where, as tradition affirms, Archibald the Grim used to pause to look at his new fortress of Thrieve, rising on its impregnable island above the rich water meadows.

Now neither Sholto nor Laurence wished to wet their leg array before the work and pageant of the day began. This was specially the desire of Laurence, because of the maids who would assemble on the Boreland braes, and of Sholto, inasmuch as he hoped to win the prize for the best accoutrement and the most point-device attiring among all the archers of the earl's guard.. The young men had asked crusty Simon Conchie, the boatman at the ferry croft, to set them over, offering him a groat for his pains. But he was far too busy to pay any attention to them on such an occasion, only pausing long enough to cry to them that they must e'en cross at the fords, as many of their betters would do that day.

There was nothing for it, therefore, but either to strip to the waist or wait the chances of the traffic. Both Sholto and Laurence were extremely loth to take the former course. They had not, however, long to wait, for a train of sumpter mules belonging to the Lord Herries of Terregles, whose father had been with Archibald the Tineman in France, came up laden with the choicest products of the border country, which he designed to offer as part of the "service-kane" to his over lord, the earl of Douglas.

Now mules are all snorting, ill-conditioned brutes and are ever ready to run away upon the least excuse or even without any. So as soon as they caught the glint of Sholto's blue baldric and shining steel girdle-brace suddenly appeared from behind a knoll, they incontinently bolted every way with noses to the ground, scattering packs and brandishing heels like young colts turned to grass. It chanced that one of the largest mules made directly toward the fords of Lochar, and the youths catching the flying bridle at either side, applied a sort of brake which sufficiently slowed the beast's movements to enable such agile skipjacks as Sholto and Laurence to mount. But as they were concerned more with their leaping from the ground than with what was already upon the animal's back, their heads met in the midst with a crash—in which collision the superior weight of the younger had very naturally the better of the encounter.

Sholto dropped instantly back to the ground. He was somewhat stunned by the blow, but the sight of his brother triumphantly splashing through the shallows aroused him. He arose, and seizing the first stone that came to hand, hurled it after him, swearing fraternally that he would smite him in the brisket with a dirk as soon as he caught him for that dastard blow. The first stone flew wide, though the splash caused the mule to shy into deeper water to the damping of his rider's legs. But the second, being better aimed, took the animal fairly on the rump, and bringing up on a fly-galled spot, sent it with flying bags and loud squeals into the woods of Glen Lochar, which come down close to the fords on every side, where presently Laurence found himself, like Absolom, caught in the branches of a beech and left hanging between heaven and earth.

A rider in complete plate of black caught him down still holding on to his bow, and placing him across the saddle, brought down the flat of his mailed hand upon a spot of his person, which, being uncovered by mail, responded with a resounding smack. Then, amid the boisterous laughter of the men-at-arms, he let Laurence slip to the ground.

But the younger son of Brawny Kim, master armorer of Carlinwark, was not the lad to take such an insult meekly, even from a man-at-arms riding on horseback. He threw his bow into a convenient thicket, and, seizing the most convenient ammunition, which chanced to be in great plenty that day upon the braes of Balmaghie, he pursued his insulter along the glade with such excellent aim and good effect that the black unadorned armor of the horseman showed disks of defilement all over, like a tree trunk covered with toad-stool growths.

"Shoot down the intolerable young rascal! Shall he thus beard my lord Maxwell?" cried a voice from the troop who witnessed the chase. And more than one bow was bent and several hand fusils leveled from the company which followed behind.

But the knight threw up his visor.

"Hold, there!" he cried; "the boy is right. It was I who insulted him, and he did right to be revenged, though the rogue's aim is more to be admired than his choice of weapon. Come hither, lad. Tell me who thou art, and what is thy father's quality?"

"I am Laurence MacKim, an archer of my lord's guard and the younger son of Malise MacKim, master armorer to the Douglas!"

Laurence, being still angry, rang out his titles as if they had been inscribed in the book of the lion-king-at-arms.

"Saints save us!" cried the knight in swart armor, "all that!"

Then seeing the boy ready to answer still more fiercely, he continued with a courteous wave of the hand:

"I humbly ask your pardon, Master Laurence—I am glad the son of Brawny Kim hath no small part of his father's spirit. Will you take service and be my esquire, as becomes well a lad of spirit, who desires to win his way to a knighthood."

The heart of Laurence MacKim beat quickly—a horse to ride—an esquire—perhaps if he had luck and much fighting, a knighthood. Nevertheless he answered with a bold, straight look out of his black eyes.

"I am an archer of my Lord Douglas' outer guard. I can have no promotion save from him or those of his house—not even from the king himself!"

"Well said!" cried the knight, "small wonder that the Douglas is the greatest man in Scotland. I will speak to Earl William this day concerning you!"

Lord Maxwell rode at the head of his company with a courteous salutation which not a few behind him who had heard the colloquy imitated. Laurence stood there with his heart working like yeast within him, and his color coming and going to think what he had been offered and what he had refused.

"God's truth," he said to himself, "I might have been a great man if I had chosen while Sholto, that old sober sides, was left lagging behind."

And he looked about for his bow and went swaggering along as if he were already Sir Laurence and the leader of an army.

But Nemesis was upon him, and that in the fashion which his pride would feel the most.

"Take that, beast of a Laurence!" cried a voice behind him.

And the lad received a jolt from behind which loosened his teeth in their sockets, and discomposed the dignified stride with which he was commanding the armies of the earl of Douglas.

(To be Continued.)

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