

LEGEND OF THE RIVAL LAIRDS OF
STRATHSPEY.

SOME time previous to the Reformation a venerable priest, of the name of Innes, lived at Easter Duthel, in Strathspey, and superintended the spiritual concerns of the people of the surrounding district. He was a benevolent old man, whose heart was devoted to the duties of his sacred office, and to those deeds of Christian benevolence which he inculcated upon his flock by example as well as by precept.

The only other occupation which the good man had was the watching over the nurture and education of his orphan niece, Helen Dunbar, who had been early left to his care by the death of her

mother, his only and much beloved sister. Helen was a beautiful young creature. Her features were of the most perfect regularity of form and arrangement,—her complexion was the fairest imaginable,—the lustre of her dark eyes was softened by their long eyelashes, and her jet-black hair fell in rich abundance over her person, which was in every respect most exquisitely and symmetrically moulded. But what was better than all this, she was as good as she was beautiful. Her whole time and thoughts were occupied in finding out objects for her uncle's benevolence, and, like his ministering angel, she was ever ready to fly to the cottage of the poor, or the bed-side of the sick, to bear thither such comfort or consolation as he had to impart, when the infirmities incidental to his declining years rendered it impossible for him to bestow them in person. When he was able to go upon his own errands of charity he never failed to do so ; and on such occasions it was a pleasing sight,—a sight that might have furnished a fine subject for a painter—to have beheld her acting as the crutch of his old age, and the ready auxiliary of all his beneficent actions. You may easily believe that

so amiable a pair as Priest Innes and his niece could not fail to secure the love and admiration of every one who knew them.

When they appeared in church, the grey hairs, and the thin, pale, spiritual countenance of the old priest were looked up to by his flock with reverential awe, as if he had been some being who was only lent to them for a brief season from another and a better world, and who might every moment be called on to return thither. But whilst there was enough of heaven in the young and healthful face and form of Helen Dunbar, she was regarded by all with an affectionate attachment which savoured more of the kind and kindred feelings of humanity, and the good folks were thus satisfied through the niece that the uncle was allied to the earth. Fathers and mothers regarded her and loved her as a daughter—young maidens looked upon her with the warmest sisterly affection—and the youths of the district, with whom modesty naturally made her less familiar, beheld her with that respectful adoration which was due to so angelic a creature. I speak, of course, of those of humbler rank; for there were many among the young knights and lairds of the neighbourhood who would have wil-

lingly robbed the old man of his treasure by carrying her home as a bride.

Of this latter class there were two, who, as they were the most remarked of the admirers of Helen Dunbar, were also believed to be the most formidable rivals to each other. These were Lewis Grant the young laird of Auchernach, and John Dhu Grant of Knockando. The first of these was a tall, handsome, fair-faced young man, universally believed to be open, brave, generous, and warm-hearted. He had the art of making himself beloved by all who knew him, and people thought that he had no fault in life but a certain degree of hastiness of temper, which, as folks said, might flash out violently upon particular occasions, and yet would pass away as harmlessly as a blaze of summer lightning, leaving every thing peaceful behind it after it was gone. The other was a dark, swart man—properly conducted, and calm and cold looking—whom it somehow happened that nobody knew sufficiently either to like or to dislike. Both of these gentlemen were observed to be very assiduous in their attentions to Helen Dunbar upon all occasions where they were seen in her company. But the talk of the

country was, that if either of them met with encouragement at all, Lewis of Auchernach was rather the happier man. As the fact, if it was a fact, could have been known to himself and the lady alone, this suspicion probably arose partly from the circumstance that Auchernach was the general favourite, and partly because his place of residence was nearer to the parsonage of Easter Duthel by some fifteen or twenty miles or so, than that of his rival. But I, who as a narrator of their story, am entitled to arrogate to myself a perfect knowledge of all their secrets, and in virtue of such my office, to be present at, and to describe scenes witnessed by no eyes but those of the actors themselves, I will venture to assure you, upon my own authority, that public opinion, however rarely it may be correct, was in this instance the true one, and that Lewis Grant of Auchernach had really for some time been the favoured lover of the fair Helen Dunbar ; that they had already plighted troth to each other ; and, moreover, that their mutual love was neither unknown nor disapproved of by the lady's venerable uncle.

You will easily guess, from what I have already told you of the good priest of Easter Duthel,

that he was not one of those sour sons of the church who think that it is their duty to keep as much aloof from their flocks as they possibly can, and who would consider it as quite unclerical to appear capable of participating in their harmless amusements, who think it better to allow rustic enjoyment to run into what riot and excess it may, than to hallow and temper it by the sacredness of their presence. Priest Innes and his niece were always invited and expected to be present at all merry-makings; and the consequence was, that he kept many such scenes within the bounds of innocence and propriety, which might have otherwise gone very much beyond their limits. A word from their pastor indeed was at any time sufficient to bring the liveliest and most exciting revel to a decent close.

It happened that a joyous meeting of this sort occurred one night at the mill of Duthel, occasioned by the marriage of the miller's daughter. As the miller was a wealthy man and well known by all ranks, and the bridegroom was highly respectable, the assemblage was graced by many of the lairds and better sort of people along the banks of the Spey; and, amongst others, both Auchernach and Knockando

were there. The matrimonial rite was performed by the good Priest Innes with all due ceremonial. But when the company adjourned to the long granary where the sports of the evening were to be held, and when the harps and the bagpipes began alternately to give animation and joy to the scene, he did not consider that the jocund dance or the merriment that ensued, brought with it any just or reasonable argument for his departure. On the contrary, seated in the chair of honour, his venerable and benignant countenance was lighted up with smiles of pleasure, from the inward gratification he felt in beholding the chastened happiness of all around him.

His niece, Helen Dunbar, sat in a chair by the old man's side, that is to say, she sat there during such intervals as she was allowed to rest from the joyous exercise in which all were participating. These indeed were few and short, because she was of all others the partner most sought after. She danced often with Auchernach, and not unfrequently with Knockando; and from that desire, natural enough to maidens, to veil the true object of her affections from prying eyes around her, she was, if possible, even more gracious that night in

her manner and conversation to the latter than she was to the former. The cold dark countenance of John Dhu Grant was flushed and animated more than it had ever been before, by the seeming preference which was thus shewn to him. Presuming upon that which his passion magnified, he persecuted Helen with attentions, which she now began to see the necessity of repressing. She could not well do this, without throwing more of her favour into the scale of him whom Knockando so well knew to be his rival. This alteration on her part inwardly galled and irritated the disappointed man beyond what his habitual self-command allowed his countenance to express. Lewis Grant of Auchernach, on the other hand, satisfied with his own secret convictions, went on joyfully through the mazes of the dance, perfectly heedless of all those minor changes on the face or manner of Helen which had so touched John Dhu, whose equanimity was not the better preserved, because he perceived how little that of his rival was affected.

“These weddings are mighty merry things, Auchernach,” observed Knockando with seeming coolness, as they accidentally stepped aside toge-

ther at the same moment to take a cup of refreshment.

“When or where can we expect mirth, Knockando, if we find it not on a wedding-night?” said Auchernach, after courteously pledging to his health. “The happy union of two devoted young hearts, as yet unscathed by the blasts of adversity,—smiling hope dancing before them,—gilding with sunshine all the brighter prospects of life, whilst her friendly hand throws a roseate veil over all its drearier and darker changes.”

“Thou speakest so warmly that methinks thou wouldest fain be a bridegroom thyself, Auchernach,” said Knochando.

“So very fain would I so be, Knockando, that I care not if this were my wedding-night,” replied Auchernach with great animation.

“Ha! ha! ha! art thou indeed so desirous to barter thy sweet liberty?” said Knockando. Well, then, I suppose that I may look for a spice of thine envy now, should I perchance submit to my fate, and yield to those blandishments which have been so skilfully used to catch me.”

“I envy no one,” said Auchernach carelessly,

“and sooth to say, very far indeed should I be from envying thee, Knockando,—trust me, no one would dance more heartily at thy wedding than I should.”

“Since thou art so fond of dancing at weddings, depend on’t thou shalt not lack an invitation to mine,” said Knockando; “nay, out of my great friendship for thee, I have half a mind to sacrifice myself and to hasten my fate, were it only to indulge thy frolicsome propensities.”

“Kindly said of thee, truly,” replied Auchernach, laughing good humouredly, “then sudden and sweet be thy fate, say I.”

“If I mistake not greatly, my fate is in mine own hand,” continued Knockando, throwing a significant glance across the room towards the place where Helen Dunbar was then sitting beside her uncle.

“What !” exclaimed Auchernach in amazement, hardly daring to trust himself with the understanding of what seemed thus to be hinted at by his rival.”

“Thou see’st how her eyes do continually rest upon me as if I were her loadstar,” continued

Knockando. "Her solicitation could not be more eloquently expressed by a thousand words."

"Whose eyes?—whose solicitation?" cried the astonished Auchernach, his countenance kindling up with an ire which it was impossible for him to conceal.

"Whose eyes?—whose solicitation?" repeated Knockando. "Those love-encumbered and pity-seeking eyes yonder, which are now darting glances of entreaty towards me, from beneath the dark-arched eyebrows of the beauteous Helen Dunbar. The girl loves me to distraction; and if no other motive could move me, feelings of compassion would of themselves urge me to show some mercy towards her, and to make her my wife."

"Villain!" cried Auchernach, at once losing all command of himself, "thou art a base traducer and a lying knave to boot!"

The previous part of this dialogue had been overheard by no one; but these last words were thundered forth by Auchernach in a voice so loud that they shook the whole room,—stopped music dance and all,—and attracted every eye towards the speaker, just in time to see him fell Knockando to the ground by a single blow.

The confusion that ensued was great. Knockando was raised from the floor by some of his dependants who chanced to be present. Dirks might have been drawn and blood might have flowed, had not the good priest immediately hastened with what speed his tottering steps enabled him to exert, to interpose his sacred person, and to use his pious influence to allay the growing storm. By his authority he now put an abrupt termination to the festivities of the evening. Ashamed of his violence, Auchernach came forward to entreat a hearing from the priest, and at the same time to offer that support to his feeble frame in his homeward walk, which, in conjunction with his niece, he was not unfrequently allowed to yield him, and of which the agitated and trembling Helen Dunbar had hardly strength at that moment to contribute her share. But he was shocked and mortified to find himself rebuffed, and his proffered services refused in a manner at once resolute and dignified.

“ No !” said the priest, waving him away, until thou shalt humble thyself, and make thy peace with Knockando, thou canst have no converse with me ; and to prevent the chance of his

suffering farther insult or injury from thine intemperance, he shall be my guest for to-night. Give me thine arm, Knockando."

"Old man! look that thou dost not pay dear for thy favour to that new guest of thine!" cried Auchernach aloud, and gnashing his teeth in the vexation and bitterness of his heart.

"What! dost thou threaten?" said Knockando, coldly, as he left the place. "This way, reverend sir, lean on me, I pray thee."

"Villain! villain!" muttered Auchernach, striking his breast with a fury which now knew no bounds, and, rushing out like a madman, he hurried homewards, to spend a sleepless and agitated night.

The miller's guests departed to their several abodes, wondering at Auchernach's strange and unaccountable conduct, talking much of it, and no one blaming him the less that his furious and apparently uncalled for violence had so rudely and so provokingly put an end to their evening's merriment.

John Dhu Grant was hospitably entertained and lodged by the priest; but Helen Dunbar allowed him to mount his horse next day, to ride home to

Knockando, without ever permitting him to be once gladdened by the sunshine of her countenance. As she had wept all that night, so she sat all the ensuing morning in her chamber, brooding over the distressing scene of the previous evening, and anxiously listening for the footsteps of Auchernach, in the hope that he might come to give her some explanation of the cause of the strange ungovernable fury to which he had given way. But he came not.

“ I had hoped to have seen our friend Auchernach here in tears and repentance,” said Priest Innes mildly to his niece, when they at last met ; “ I fear he hath hardly yet come to a due sense of his error.”

Helen was silent and sorrowful. She still trusted, however, that he might yet come. Her ears were continually fancying that she heard his well-known step and voice, and they were as perpetually deceived. The whole day and the whole evening passed away, and still he came not. With a sad heart she accompanied her uncle to his chamber, to go through those religious duties with him, in which they never failed to join before they separated for the night. Her voice trembled as she

uttered her responses to the prayers of the priest, and the old man, participating in her feelings, and fully sympathising with her, was little less affected. But her self-command altogether forsook her, when, after the prescribed formula of service was at an end, her uncle again kneeled down reverently on the cushion by his bed-side, and prayed fervently for her and for her future happiness, and that the Almighty protection might be extended over her when it should please Heaven to remove him from this earthly scene. And when, as connected with this dearest object of his heart, he put up earnest petitions for him who was already destined to be her husband and protector, she hid her face on the bed, and sobbed aloud. He besought his Creator so to deal graciously with the erring youth, as to make him deeply sensible of the wickedness of so readily yielding, as he had recently done, to the violence of passion; and he implored the Divine Being to render his repentance sincere and enduring, so that he might never again be led to sin in the same way.

“ I forgive him already !” said the good man, as he gave his niece his parting embrace ; “ I forgive him, and so will you, Helen. And if I have

been too hasty in judging *him*, as in mine erring nature I may have been, may God forgive *me*! Bless thee, my child! and may the holy Virgin and her angels hover over thy pillow!—Good night!”

Helen's tears prevented her from speaking, and after partially composing herself, she arranged the simple uncanopied and uncurtained couch which her uncle used, in obedience to his rigid rule, smoothed his pillow, placed a carved ebony crucifix, with an ivory figure of the Redeemer attached to it, on the little oaken table that stood by his bed-side, and after trimming his night-lamp, she set it before the little image, and having laid his breviary and his beads beside it, she placed the cushion so that he might the more easily perform those religious rites which his duty prescribed to him, and which he regularly and strictly attended to at certain watches of the night, and having done these little offices, she again tenderly embraced him, and retired to her own chamber.

The good priest's mind was so filled with distress about Auchernach, that he could not close an eye. For several hours he lay turning over and over in his thoughts those prospects which his

niece had before her from such a marriage—a marriage, the contemplation of which had so recently laid every anxiety of his heart regarding her most satisfactorily to rest, all of which were now again awakened afresh by the unfavourable view which last night's experience had given him of her future husband. In vain he tried to court slumber. At last, when nearly worn out with watching, he arose and kneeled before the emblems of his faith, to perform his midnight orisons. When these were concluded, he took up the crucifix with veneration, reverently kissed the image of our suffering Saviour, and, laying himself again down in bed, he covered himself with the clothes, and, placing the crucifix lengthwise upon his bosom, he committed himself in thought to the protection of his patron-saint, and composed himself confidently to rest, under the conviction that he should now be certain of enjoying sweet slumber.

And the good man was not mistaken. Sleep immediately weighed down his eyelids, and his senses were soon steeped in the deepest and most perfect oblivion. If you will only fancy to yourselves his venerable and placid countenance, pale as the sheet which partially shrouded his chin, and ren-

dered yet paler by its contrast with the black cap which he wore, his motionless form disposed underneath the bed-clothes, with the crucifix lying along over it, you will be ready to admit that his whole appearance might have well suggested the idea of a saint.

But the devil was that night abroad. The priest's habitation was humble, and, though partly consisting of two low stories, the roof was composed of a simple wattle, covered with heather thatch. His chamber was above, and away from those of the other inmates, at one end, where a lower shed was attached to the back of the building. Suppose yourselves, for a moment, invisible spectators of a scene which was alone looked down upon by that eye which sees all things. Listen to that strange deafened sound above, as if some one was crawling over the outside of the roof. What noise is that as of a cutting and plucking up of the heather? Ha! did you see that dirk-blade glisten through the frail work of the wattle?—again, and again, it comes! It rapidly cuts its way in a large circle through the half rotten material of which the roof is composed. The fingers of a hand now appear under it, as if to prevent the piece

which is about to be detached from falling downwards, and alarming the sleeper. He hears not the noise, for he sweetly dreams, that as he prays on his knees, the clouds are opened, and the beatified countenance of his patron-saint smiles upon him from the skies, and beckons to him to throw off his mortality, and to join him in the Heavens.—He awakes with the effort which he makes to obey him ; and, immediately over his bed he indistinctly beholds, by the feeble light of his night lamp, the stern and remorseless features of a man,—the eyes glaring fearfully upon him. He is paralyzed by the sight ; and, ere he can move, nay, ere he can utter one shriek of alarm, the murderer drops upon his bed, and, crouched across him, he, with his left hand, lays bare the emaciated throat of the old priest, and with his right he strikes his dirk blade through it, till it pierces the very pillow underneath. No sigh escapes from the murdered man. If groan there be at all, it comes growling from the ferocious heart of the fiend who does the atrocious deed ; who, as he sits for a moment to satisfy himself that his victim is really dead, shudders to look upon his own bloody work. To shut it out from his eyes, even for the instant, he replaces the bed-

clothes over the chin, and, adjusting the crucifix as he found it, he makes a precipitate retreat through the orifice in the roof by which he entered.

If you have well pictured to yourselves the particulars of this most revolting murder, you will be the better able to imagine the scene that took place next morning,—when, at the hour at which she usually went to awake her uncle—to receive his kiss and his blessing—to inquire how he had passed the night—and to administer to his little wants, his affectionate niece softly entered the apartment of the good Priest Innes. Her eyes were naturally directed at once to the bed, so that the hole in the roof above escaped her notice.

“How tranquilly he sleeps!” whispered she—
“I almost grudge to awaken him to the recollection of that distressing event of the evening before last, which so disturbed him, and which hath ever since so tortured me. I see, from the crucifix being laid on his bosom, that the earlier part of his night hath not been passed with the same composure as he now enjoys. But it is late, and he may chide me if I allow him longer to slumber.—Uncle!—dear uncle!—it is time for you to

be up. Ha!—still he answereth not!—can he be unwell?”

Snatching up the crucifix with one hand, and gently removing the bed-clothes from her uncle's chin with the other, the harrowing spectacle that presented itself told her the fatal truth. She stood for one moment petrified by the sight—uttered one piercing shriek that penetrated into every part of the humble dwelling, and then she fell backwards on the floor in a swoon, where the old woman, Janet, who waited on her, and James, the priest's man, both of whom came running to her aid at the same moment, found her lying, with the crucifix firmly and spasmodically embraced over her bosom.

You all know how fast ill tidings travel. The particulars of this horrible transaction, multiplied and magnified, quickly spread far and wide, and the whole neighbourhood was instantly in a ferment. The lamentations for their priest—their father—and their friend—were loud and heartfelt, and the execrations which were poured out on his murderer were deep, and were mingled with unceasing cries of vengeance. But, on whom



Designed & Engraved by William Linnell, 1834.

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were they to be avenged? Who was the person most likely to have committed so foul a deed?—a murder in every respect so unprovoked, and so perfectly without any apparent object, committed on an innocent and pious man, who could never have been supposed to have had an enemy! It could have been the work of no common robber, for the few small articles of value which the priest's chamber contained were left untouched. The outrageous conduct of Lewis Grant of Auchernach, on the evening of the previous night, at the wedding at the miller's—conduct which had already been talked of and discussed with no inconsiderable degree of reprobation by every one who had seen or heard of it, now came fresh into the minds of all. The vengeful threat which he seemed to have directed against the innocent and pious Priest Innes, in return for his calm and fatherly rebuke, was now remembered by every one. The very words had been treasured up by many of them, and were repeated from mouth to mouth—“*Old man! look that thou dost not pay dear for thy favour to that new guest of thine!*” Uttered as they had been with the gnashing teeth of frantic passion, and with rage and revenge flashing from his eyes, they were

too plain to be mistaken. High in favour as Auchernach was well known to have been with the pure inhabitants of the priest's dwelling, his violence was very easily explained by the jealousy which it was natural to suppose must have been excited in him by the visible preference which had been that evening given by Priest Innes to his rival, John Dhu of Knockando, a circumstance to which his threat had so distinctly pointed. The grounds of suspicion against him, therefore, were too evident—too damning to be for one moment doubted—and he who, two short days before, had been respected and beloved by all who knew him, was at once condemned by every one as a cool, deliberate, sacrilegious murderer. A hue and cry was immediately raised for his apprehension, and off ran the whole population, young and old, and of both sexes, to secure, or to witness his capture, leaving no one to attend to the afflicted Helen Dunbar but her old woman Janet.

But strange as it may seem, after the people had been gone for some considerable time in hot search of the felon, Lewis Grant himself rode slowly up to the priest's house. For some reason which he best knew, he came by a road quite dif-

ferent from that which should have brought him directly from Auchernach. He seemed gloomy and thoughtful—his head hung down—and as he walked his horse up to the stable and dismounted, as he was often wont to do, to put the beast with his own hand into the stall with which it was sufficiently familiar, his eyes glanced furtively in all directions, from under the broad bonnet that shaded his brow. Having disposed of the animal, he shut the stable door, and, with a downcast look and chastened step, very much unlike that which had usually carried him over the same fragment of ground, and with a sigh that almost amounted to a groan, he presented himself at the little portal of the house. With a hesitating hand, he lifted the latch, and with his limbs trembling beneath him, he moved softly along the passage that led to the priest's parlour. He halted for a moment irresolutely at the door of that little chamber where he had passed so many happy days and hours. At last he summoned up courage enough to open it, and he stood on its threshold with his eyes thrown upon the ground. Silence prevailed within, till it was broken by a deep convulsive sob. He looked up, and he beheld old Janet, with her back towards

him, kneeling beside a low couch placed against the opposite wall; and upon its pillow, and stretched out at length upon it in a state which left him in doubt whether she was dying, or already dead, lay the grief-worn countenance and the form of Helen Dunbar. He was struck dumb by this spectacle.—He stood amazed, with the blood running cold to his heart. But recollection soon returned to him—his whole frame shook with the agitation of his feelings, and, clasping his hands in an agony, he rushed forward and threw himself on his knees before the couch. The humble domestic was terrified to behold him, and started aloof at the very sight of him.

“Helen!—my life!—my love!” cried he in a frantic tone—“can I—can I, wretch that I am—can I, murderer that I am!—can I have brought death upon my beloved!—Oh, answer me!—gaze not thus silently upon me with that fearful look!—Am I then become in thy sight so accursed?—Oh, mercy!—mercy!—look not so upon me!”

He tried to take her hand. His very attempt to do so seemed instantaneously to rouse her from the stupor in which she had hitherto lain. She

recoiled from him back to the wall, as if a serpent had stung her, whilst her fixed eyes stared, and her lips moved without sound, as if she could find no utterance for the horrors that possessed her.

“Is there no mercy for me?” cried Auchernach again.—“Hast thou doomed me to destruction?—Am I to be spurned by thee as I was by thine uncle Priest Innes?”

A prolonged and piercing shriek was all the reply that his frantic appeal received from Helen Dunbar. It was echoed by her old attendant, and mingled with loud cries for help. Steps were heard pattering fast without—Auchernach started up to his feet.—The steps came hurrying along the passage—several men burst into the chamber—they stood for a moment in mute astonishment. Then it was that Helen Dunbar seemed to regain all her dormant energies. She sprung from the couch—retreated from Auchernach—and gazing fearfully at him, with her head and body drawn back, she pointed wildly towards him, with both her outstretched arms and hands—and whilst every nerve was convulsed by the torture which her soul was enduring, she at last found words to speak:

“Seize him!—Seize the murderer of mine

uncle!"—she cried, in a voice which rang shrilly and terribly in the ears of all who heard her; and altogether exhausted by this extraordinary effort, she would have fallen forward senseless on the floor, had she not been caught by some of the bystanders, who carried her in a swoon to the couch from which she had so recently risen.

Auchernach stood fixed and frozen, as if her words had suddenly converted him into a pillar of ice. He was immediately laid hold of by some of the men, who hastily bound him, and he submitted to be led away, as if utterly unaware of what had befallen him. His horse was taken from the stable—he was lifted powerless into the saddle, and strapped firmly to the animal's back. The crowd of people who had collected, some on horseback, and some on foot, looked upon him with horror, mingled with awe. But no one uttered a word, either of pity or of condemnation. He sat erect, it is true, but it was with all the rigidity of a stiffened corse, for not a feature or a muscle exhibited the smallest sign of consciousness. That night found him, after a wearisome journey, of the scenes or events of which he had no knowledge,—chained, on a heap of straw, on the floor of one of

the deepest dungeon-vaults in the Priory of Pluscarden.

The simple and unpretending funeral of the good Priest Innes had a larger following than that of any person who had been buried from that district for many years, and the silent sorrow which was exhibited by all who beheld it, was not only more sincere, but it was likewise far more eloquent than those louder lamentations, and those otherwise more obtrusive expressions of woe which had arisen around the bier of many a departed knight and laird of Strathspey. His corpse was carried the same road as they had taken the wretched man who stood charged with his murder. It was met at some distance from the Priory by its monks and their superior, who accompanied the procession, chanting hymns before the coffin, till it was carried into the church. There the services were performed for the dead, and he was laid to rest in his last narrow house, within the cemetery of that religious establishment, where the requiem masses that were sung for his soul went faintly, and with any thing but consolation, to the ears of the wretched Auchernach in his subterranean prison.

Most of the gentry of the neighbouring country

were present at these obsequies, and John Dhu Grant was there amongst others. It was especially remarked, that although his house of Knockando lay directly in the way between Easter Duthel and the Priory, and about equi-distant from the two places, his desire to show respect to the memory of the deceased was so great that he appeared at the priest's house early on the morning of the funeral, and rode with the procession all the way to the place of interment. He, moreover, took a very prominent part in the whole ceremonial. From these pregnant signs the good people naturally argued that there had been a gross mistake in the belief that had hitherto so currently prevailed, as to which of the rival lairds had been really most favoured by Helen Dunbar and her uncle ; and the wiser gossips now shook their heads, and looked forward to the time when John Dhu Grant would probably dry up the orphan's tears, and establish her in the arm-chair at the comfortable fireside of Knockando. The Laird himself never did nor said anything which might have contradicted any such supposition ; on the contrary, he always spoke and acted as if it was tolerably well founded.

A good many days passed away after the loss of her uncle, before the tide of Helen's grief had gushed from her eyes in sufficient abundance to afford any relief to her deep affliction. Many were the kind hearts that came to condole with her, but some of her more intimate friends of her own sex only had as yet been admitted to her presence to share her sorrows. John Dhu Grant had made repeated journies to call at the house, but his urgent entreaties for admission had been always met by courteous refusals. He came at length one day, and as he stated that he was the bearer of an especial message from the Lord Prior of Pluscarden, Helen could no longer decline giving him an audience. She received him, however, not only in the presence of old Janet, whose long services in the Priest's house had given her most of the privileges and indulgences of an old friend, but also in that of an elderly matron, who had kindly agreed to spend some time with her to cheer her loneliness. You will not be surprised when I tell you that Helen was deeply affected and much agitated when the Laird entered. After she was somewhat composed, and the first preliminary civilities were interchanged,—

“ I come, lady, from the Lord Prior of Pluscarden,” said Knockando, “ and I am the bearer of a message to know, with all due respect and godly greeting, on his part, whether thou art as yet sufficiently restored to be able to undertake a journey to the Priory, that thou mayest give evidence against him who now lieth in a dungeon there, charged with the crime of the most sacrilegious murder of thine uncle, Priest Innes ?”

“ I beseech thee, sir,” said Helen, much affected, and with a trembling and scarcely audible voice ; “ I beseech thee to tell the Reverend Father, that I do, with all humility, abide his command, and that when he shall see fit to demand my presence, I shall be ready to obey.”

“ I doubt not that thou art by this time most eager to see vengeance fall speedily upon the foul murderer,” said Knockando.

“ Alas ! no vengeance can restore him to me whom I have lost,” said Helen, bursting into a flood of tears.

“ But his blood crieth out for vengeance, and it lieth with thee to see it done upon the murderer,” said Knockando.

“ When the Lord Prior calleth for me, I shall

“speak the truth, and let vengeance rest with that Almighty Being who alone beheld the cruel deed !” said Helen, throwing her eyes upwards as if secretly appealing to Heaven. “As for me, I can but weep for him that is gone, and pray to have that Christian feeling supplied to me which may enable me to forgive even — to forgive even his murderer.”

“Forgive his murderer !” cried Knockando, with a strange and wild expression. “Canst thou indeed think that thou mayest yet ever be brought to forgive him?—But—no ! no ! no !” continued he calmly, and with his usual cold manner, and unmoved countenance, “it cannot surely be that thou could’st ever bring thyself to *save* the monster who could allow one passing word of just reproof to wipe out so many years of kind and hospitable intercourse, and who could revenge it by so barbarous and unheard of a murder.”

“I said *forgive*, not *save*,” replied Helen, in a half choked voice. “The laws of God and of man alike require that the murderer should die ; and I shall never flinch from the dreadful but imperious duty which now devolves upon me, to see that justice is done upon the guilty person. But

our blessed Saviour hath taught me to *forgive* even him ; and ere he be called on to expiate his crime on earth, may the Holy Virgin yield me strength to pray sincerely for his repentance, so that his unhappy soul may be assoilzied from an eternity of torment."

"What!" cried Knockando, with a recurrence of that wildness of expression which he had already exhibited, "canst thou even contemplate so much as this regarding a wretch, who, lighting down like some nocturnal fiend upon the sacred person of thine uncle, and, reckless of the emblem of Christ which lay upon his bosom——"

"Ha!" exclaimed Helen, suddenly moved as the horrors of the spectacle she had witnessed were thus so rashly and so rudely recalled to her recollection by this ill-timed speech. "What saidst thou?"

"Nay," continued Knockando, "I wonder not that thou shouldst start thus, as I stir up thy remembrance of the bloody and most inhuman act. Methinks thou wilt hardly now deny me that the man who could put aside the holy image of Christ, that he might plunge his dirk into the innocent throat of his sacred servant, must not only die the

death of a felon, but that he can never hope for mercy from him whose blessed emblem he hath outraged."

"Give me air! give me air!" cried Helen faintly, as she motioned to her companions to open the lattice; and then falling back into the couch, she covered her face with both her hands, and was seized with a long hysterical fit of laughter, followed by a convulsive shudder, from which she was relieved by a deluge of tears.

"This is no scene for a stranger to witness," said the lady who sat with her, "nor is the subject which thou hast chosen to dwell on so circumstantially, by any means suited to the weak state of this poor sufferer. I must entreat of thee to withdraw."

"Madam," said Knockando coolly, "I am no stranger. I am here as the messenger of the Lord Prior, and as the friend of the deceased. As that friend to whom the good Priest Innes did manifest his last most open act of confidence. I am here, as it were, by his posthumous authority, as the avenger of his foul murder, and as the protector of his desolate orphan niece; so that hardly even might the orders of the lady herself induce me

to quit this apartment, whilst my duty may tell me that I ought to remain."

"Thine arm, Janet," said Helen feebly; and, with the old woman's support, she slowly arose and moved towards the door.

"Stay, stay, I beseech thee, my beloved Helen!" cried Knockando, eagerly rising to follow her. "Stay, I entreat thee, or say at least when I may return to offer thee my protection—that legitimate protection which thine uncle authorized me to yield thee—that substantial protection which can alone be supplied by him, who hath the rights and the affection of a husband."

"A husband!" cried Helen, turning suddenly round and gazing wildly at him,—*"Husband!"* and being again seized with the same involuntary laugh, she was hurried away up stairs to her chamber by the women.

Knockando then slowly left the apartment, called for his horse, and departed.

Helen Dunbar kept her bed all next day, and no one was admitted to her chamber but the lady I have mentioned, and her old and faithful Janet. With these she had long, deep, and private talk, regarding all that had passed the previous day.

On the ensuing morning, the Laird of Knockando again came to the house. Janet was immediately dispatched to refuse him admittance. He now came, he said, with a letter from the Lord Prior of Pluscarden, which he trusted would be a passport for him to the lady's presence. Leaving him below, Janet carried it up stairs to her mistress. It was tied with a piece of black silk ribbon, but it had no seal. It ran in these terms:—

“To Helen Dunbar, these,—It being our will and pleasure that the vengeance with the which it doth behoove us to visit Lewis Grant of Auchernach, the murderer of thine uncle, Priest Innes, shall no longer tarry, but descend quickly upon his guilty head, so that the air of our sacred precincts may cease to be poisoned by the foul breath of his life, we do now, by these presents, call upon thee to appear before us here on Tuesday next at noon, to give thy testimony against him. And as the way hither is long and lonely, we do farther give thee our fatherly advice to avail thyself of the kind offer about to be made thee by the bearer of this, our friend, that worthy gentleman, John Grant of Knockando, who promises to shorten thy travel by lodging thee in his house on the previous night, and

to guard thee hither. And so we greet thee with our holy blessing.

“DUNCANUS PRIOR. PLUS.”

Helen was much agitated by the perusal of this letter, but after a little consultation, her friend took it upon herself to go down to tell Knockando that the Prior's summons should be obeyed; but that the Laird's offer of protection and hospitality were with all civility declined. After much vain solicitation on his part, Knockando left the house with great unwillingness.

He had not been gone an hour, when the trampling of a horse again sounded in their ears.

“Holy Virgin!” exclaimed Janet, as she looked from the lattice to ascertain who this new visitor might be; “As I hope to be saved, it is the lay brother who rides on the Lord Prior's errands. What can he want, I wonder?”

Janet hastened down, and soon returned.

“He came the short way over the hills with it,” said Janet, putting another letter into Helen's hands.

It bore the large seal of the priory, over the black silk ribbon by which it was bound.

“ What can this mean ? ” said Helen, as with trembling hands she applied the shears to divide the ribbon ; “ Again a letter from the Lord Prior ! But, as I live, in a very different, fairer, and more clerk-like hand, and, methinks, in better terms.”

“ *To our much afflicted and much beloved daughter Helen Dunbar,—these :*

“ Deeply do we and all our brethren grieve for thy cruel affliction. By ourselves, or our sub-prior, we should have ere this visited thee with heavenly comfort, had not weighty affairs hindered. But deem not thyself desolate ; for we do hold that our brother, thy much beloved and greatly lamented uncle, the umquhile Priest Innes, (whom God assoilzie !) hath left thee to our guardianship, and, as a daughter of the church, thou shalt be watched with our especial care. We have made it known to all, that, *but* farther delay, we shall, God willing, proceed on Wednesday next, after the hour of tierce, to look earnestly into the mysterious case of the good priest’s wicked and sacrilegious slaughter. We beseech thee, therefore, to do thy best, to render thyself at the priory on the forecoming day, that, assured of the best

hospitality that we can provide for thee, thou mayest rest and prepare thee for the trial of the following morrow. Till then we commend thee to the care of God, the blessed Virgin, and Holy Saint Andrew; and with this, our consolatory benediction, we bid thee farewell.

“DUNCANUS,

“Monach. Ordinis, Vallis Caulium, Plus. Prior.”

“Haste thee, good Janet,” said Helen Dunbar, after she had read the Prior’s letter; “haste thee, and see that the honest lay-brother and his beast be well looked to for this night.”

Left to themselves, the ladies compared and canvassed the two letters, one of which was so evidently a forgery. They had little difficulty in determining which was the true one. After some consultation, Helen proceeded to pen a proper answer to that which she had last received; and having sent orders to old James to get his steed ready, she dispatched him with it forthwith by that short route over the hills, which the lay brother had taken to bring the Prior’s letter to her. And a few lines of reply, which James brought her next day from the Reverend Father himself,

assured her of the safe delivery of her communication.

During the interval which elapsed before the day on which she was to set out for Pluscarden, the Laird of Knockando made two more ineffectual attempts to gain admittance to Helen, and on both of these occasions he sent her urgent messages to come to his house on her way, and to allow him to be her escort on the journey. To these courteous but resolute refusals were given by the matron, who was then her companion, and on both occasions Knockando left the house with a degree of disappointment and mortification which he could not altogether conceal.

The day fixed for her journey at last arrived. Aware of the stern necessity that existed of arming herself with fortitude to undergo all that she had to encounter, she kneeled down, and fervently prayed to God and to the Virgin to aid and to support her. She arose with the conscious conviction that her prayers had been heard, and she met her friend with a quiet and composed countenance. As that lady and Janet were to be the companions of her journey, she calmly issued her directions for getting ready the animals which were destined to

carry them. The table was already spread for their morning's meal, when suddenly a loud tramping of horses was heard, and, ere they were aware, they saw through the casements that the house was surrounded by about a dozen of mounted men-at-arms. Before they had time to recover from their astonishment, their leader threw himself from his saddle, and entered the house and the apartment.

“Knockando!” cried the ladies in astonishment and alarm.

“Fear nothing,” said John Dhu Grant, advancing and bowing with his usual imperturbable manner. “I have merely ridden up hither with a handful of brave fellows to guard thee.—Ha!—what's this?” continued he, surveying the ample table which was liberally spread with trenchers, flagons and drinking cups, and provisions of all kinds much beyond what the moderate wants of the two ladies could have required. “It was kind, indeed, to be thus hospitably prepared for our coming. But think not, I pray thee, of my fellows without there, for their hound-like stomachs are already provisioned for the day's toil. As for myself, indeed, I shall make bold to benefit by thy kindness to me, for I

rarely eat at so early an hour as my spearmen do."

"John Grant of Knoekando," said Helen Dunbar, drawing herself up with an effort to summon all her resolution, and speaking with great determination, "I lack not thine aid, and I reject it as insulting to me! And touching my hospitality, I tell thee that it is to be given solely to such as it may please me to bestow it upon—not taken, as thou wouldst have it, by a masterful hand. That board was never spread for thee, and thou shalt never partake of it with my good will!"

"These are strong and hard words, lady," said Knoekando, coolly seating himself; "they are hard, yea, and sharp too—harder and sharper, methinks, than any thing that I have unconsciously done to offend thee may well have merited. Had'st thou not better unsay them? if not with thy lips, at least by silently seating thyself here beside me, to do me the honours of the table."

"Again I tell thee, that table was never spread for thee!" said Helen, firmly. "Begone, then! and leave it untouched for me, and for such other guests as I may judge to be most fit to seat themselves there."

“Tush, tush, lady!” said Knockando, frigidly. “The good old Priest Innes never meant that this table should be spread for thee without my sitting at it with thee. That very last night we passed together, the worthy man told me that he should leave thee to me as a legacy, together with all his little means. So, lady, I have e’en come to claim thee, and I have brought these rough but staunch spearmen with me, that we may guard thee safely to Knockando, as we would a treasure. There a priest waits to make thee even yet more securely mine own. After which we shall ride together, if it shall so please thee, to Pluscarden, that we may draw down the blessing of holy mother church upon our union, by seeing condign punishment swiftly done on the murderer who now lieth there. Come, lady!—break thy fast, I pray thee, with what haste thou mayest, for thy palfrey waits by this time. Ha!—what stir is that among my people?”

“Thanks!—thanks to Heaven, they come at last!” cried Helen, clasping her hands together with fervour.

“Who comes?” said Knockando, turning to the lattice, and growing deadly pale as he looked out.

“ What !—the sub-prior of Pluscarden !—ha ! and the bailie too with him, and a strong force of mounted men-at-arms !—What means all this ?”

The small plump of men who had come with Knockando were smothered up, as it were, by the long train of horsemen who now filed up and crowded the confined space formed by the modest front of the priest's manse, and the humble out-buildings which were attached to it at right angles. The heads of the houses of Cistercian monks, of which the brethren of Vallis Caulium were but a sect, seldom travelled in later times without all those external emblems of religious pomp which their rules allowed them. Upon the present occasion, the sub-prior and his palfrey were both arrayed in all the trappings to which his official dignity entitled him. Before him appeared a monk bearing a tall and splendidly gilded crucifix, that glittered in the morning sun, and some dozen of the brotherhood came riding after him, two and two, with their white cassocks and their scapularies covered by the black gowns in which they usually went abroad. These carried banners, charged with the arms of the Priory—the figure of Saint Andrew their patron saint—and various other devices. And

a strong body of men-at-arms, who, as belonging to the regality attached to the Priory, owed service to it as vassals, preceded and followed the procession, under the orders of the seneschal or bailie. A monk dismounted to hold the stirrup of the sub-prior as he alighted at the door, and signing a cross in the air, the holy father forthwith entered.

“ The blessing of Saint Andrew be upon this house !” said he, as he stepped over the threshold. “ Benedicite, my child of sorrow !” continued he, as he entered the apartment. “ Soh !—the Laird of Knockando here ! I thought as much. How camest thou, false and lying knave, to use the sacred name, and to forge the sign-manual of our most reverend Lord Prior, to farther thine own vile frauds against this innocent daughter of the church ? Surrender thyself forthwith into the hands of this our bailie, that he may take thee prisoner to Pluscarden, where thy delicts may be duly dealt with.”

“ What ho, there, men-at-arms !” cried the bailie aloud.

In an instant the followers of Knockando were disarmed, and the apartment being filled with the men-at-arms belonging to the church, Knockando

was made prisoner—led out—and bound upon his horse.

“It was well, daughter, that the blessed Virgin gave thee wit to discover and to foil the base tricks of this false man,” said the sub-prior.

“Nay, reverend father, but rather let me say thanks be to the Virgin, and to thy timely succour,” replied Helen.—“One moment later, and my fate had been sealed. But will it please thee to partake of our humble Highland fare?—and whilst thou dost condescend to taste of the poor refreshment we have ventured to provide for thee, we women, as beseems us, will withdraw.”

“Nay, nay, fair daughter!” replied the sub-prior, “thou shalt by no means depart. Were it a meal, indeed, we might see fit rigidly to insist upon our rule. But we shall but taste thy viands, and put our lips to thy wine-cup for mere courtesy’s sake. Therefore disturb thyself not. Marry, as we broke our fast scarcely two hours since before leaving Inverallan, where we sojourned last night, we can have but small appetite now. Yet thy board looketh well, and this upland air of thine, in truth, is sharp and stimulating; and, moreover, we should never refuse to partake—moderately I mean—of

the blessings which are furnished to us by a bountiful Providence, yea, even when they are set forth on a table spread, as thine may be said to be, in the wilderness.”

Saying so, the good sub-prior seated himself, and set an example to the rest by cutting off and placing on his own trencher the leg and wing of a large turkey—relished it with some reasonably large slices of bacon—and filled himself a cup of wine from a flagon on the table, adding as much of nature’s fluid to it as might, with due safety to his conscience, enable him to call it wine and water. The rest of the holy fraternity were not slack in imitating their superior; and after he had thus shown how much the deeds of the church were better than its promises, by doing much more justice to the provisions than his preface had led his entertainer to hope for, Helen and her companions were mounted on their palfreys, and the sub-prior, and his monks and their escort, having got into their saddles, the prisoner was sent on before them well guarded, and they proceeded on their way. The site of the Priory of Pluscarden, as its picturesque ruins now prove, was like that of all the monasteries of the same order, beautifully

retired, lying at the foot of the hills that abruptly bound the northern side of its broad valley, it was surrounded by a square inclosure of many acres, fenced in by a thick and high wall of masonry, the remains of which are still visible. As the day was departing, the setting sun that shed its light athwart the motionless foliage of those woods that hung on the face of the hills behind the Priory, and gilded the proud pinnacles of the building, which arose from the tall grove in the middle of the large area I have described, threw a last ray of illumination on the glittering crucifix as the long dark line of the procession wound under the deep arch of the outer gate, and as it threaded its way among the small gardens into which the area was parcelled out for the several members of the fraternity. By the kind and hospitable care of the Lord Prior, the ladies were soon safely and comfortably lodged in one of the detached buildings on the outside of the wall inclosing the precincts of the Priory, whilst the Laird of Knockando was thrown, a solitary prisoner, into one of the subterranean dungeon vaults within.

Helen Dunbar was that night blessed with sweet

and refreshing rest after the fatiguing journey of the previous day. As her gentle spirit began to return to her towards morning from that world of unconsciousness where it had been laid by the profoundness of her sleep, pleasing visions floated over her pillow. The saint like figure of her venerable uncle, surrounded by a resplendent glory, hovered over her, and smiled upon her from above. Saint Andrew then appeared beside him, and bore him slowly upwards, till both gradually melted from her sight amidst a flood of light in the upper regions of the sky. She awaked in a transport of delight to which her bosom had been for some time a stranger. She arose and attired herself in the sad and simple habit of mourning which she wore, and she threw herself on her knees to ask again for aid from above in the trying circumstances in which she was placed, and then, having partaken of the refreshment which was liberally provided for her and her companions by the hospitable orders of the Prior, she sat patiently waiting for the moment when she should be summoned to attend the Chapter.

The brethren of the Priory had no sooner performed the *tierce*, as those services were called

which took place at nine o'clock in the morning, than the convent-bell rang to call the chapter to assemble. The chapter-house in which this convocation took place was a beautiful gothic apartment, of about thirty feet in diameter, lighted by four large windows, and having its groined roof supported by a single pillar. Arranged on one side were the seats of the members of the holy tribunal. That of the Lord Bishop of the diocese, who had come from his palace at Elgin on purpose to preside over the investigation which was about to take place, was a high gothic chair raised on several steps. Arrayed in his gorgeous Episcopal robes, he sat silent and motionless as if oppressed with the painful subject of the enquiry in which he was to be engaged. On the steps where his feet rested two handsome boys of his choir were seated, one of whom held his mitre, and the other his crosier. On his right sat the Prior, and on his left the Sub-Prior of Pluscarden, attired in their full canonicals, and the other chairs on both sides were filled with those dignitaries and brethren who were members of the chapter. The area of the place was crowded by the monks in their flowing white draperies, together with the lay brothers

in their attire, the extreme interest of the case having prevented every one from being absent who was not in the sick-list of the infirmary, or occupied with duties from which they dared not to absent themselves. A deep silence prevailed; at last the sound of arms was heard echoing through the lofty aisles of the adjacent church, and a body of spearmen, retainers of the monastery, headed by the seneschal, entered, guarding in two prisoners.

One of these was the wretched Laird of Auchernach, who appeared with his arms loaded with heavy chains. The captivity which his body had endured in his dungeon, and the mental agony which he had undergone, had manifestly done sad havoc upon him. He took up the position assigned to him by the seneschal with a subdued yet indifferent air, as if the stream of his life had been poisoned, and that he cared not how soon he should now be called upon to pour out its last bitter dregs.

The black visage of the Laird of Knockando, who was the other prisoner, seemed also to have undergone a considerable change since the morning of the preceding day. It was haggard, and his

eyes were blood-shot as if he had had but little repose during the night. There was a certain expression of mental uneasiness about it, which his habitual air of cold and motionless placidity could not altogether conceal. The two prisoners were placed near to each other in a position a little to one side, and at some distance in front of the tribunal that was about to investigate their respective cases.

“ John Grant of Knockando,” said the Bishop, whilst a subdued hush ran round among the spectators, “ thou hast been brought hither as a prisoner, charged upon very undoubted evidence of having most feloniously forged the sign-manual of the reverend superior of this holy priory, and this for the base purpose of wickedly circumventing an innocent orphan maiden, whom, for her pious uncle’s sake, we have been pleased to take under the especial protection of our holy mother church. But as thy delict is one with which we as churchmen may deal in our own good time, we shall for the present postpone and continue thy case, and proceed straightway to our enquiry into the graver and deeper charge touching that crime of a deeper dye, to wit, the most sacrilegious murder of our

pious brother the Priest Innes, of the which, he who now stands on thy left hand is accused,—I mean thee, Lewis Grant of Auchernach. But as thou, John Grant of Knockando, wert present at the last interview which the murdered man had with his suspected murderer only the night before, where that unjust cause of offence would seem to have been taken which whetted the cruel blade of the assassin for its purpose, we would first hear what evidence thou hast to give upon the matter.”

“ My Lord Bishop, and you most Reverend Fathers,” said Knockando, his eye having brightened up as the speaker had proceeded, and who had by this time regained all his wonted coolness and self-possession, “ I now stand before this holy tribunal under circumstances the most distressing that can well oppress a human being. I shall at present pass entirely by those charges which have been made against myself; and regarding which I trust I shall afterwards have little difficulty in giving ample satisfaction to my venerable accusers. I shall pass these charges by, I say, because I could not, if I were willing, find room in my mind for anything touching myself, filled, as it at this moment is, with the awful and heavy charge made

against the unhappy man who now stands beside me,—him whom I once called my friend, and for whom, in the weakness of my nature, and in despite of the unjust outrage which he did me on a recent occasion, I still cannot help being agitated by the same friendly anxiety with which I was ever moved on his account. Such being my feelings, I am sure that no one who now heareth me but must pity me, compelled as I thus am to bear an unwilling testimony, the which, I am aware, must grievously tend towards fixing on him the guilt of one of the most unnatural, cruel, and deliberate murders that ever fouled the page of the history of man, and that done, too, on the sacred person of a servant of God, with whom the murderer had for long companied in habits of the strictest intimacy, and in whose hospitalities he had so long and so often shared. But my duty to mankind,—my duty to this venerable tribunal,—and my duty to Heaven, all combine to compel me to speak out the truth, which I shall now do as briefly as I can.

“ It is already well known, most Reverend Fathers, that a merry meeting took place at the mill of Duthel on the occasion of the marriage of the

miller's daughter. There, all who were present can bear testimony, that Lewis Grant of Auchernach did, without any cause of provocation on my part—though it may perhaps be well enough urged in his exculpation, that the violence he did me arose from jealousy because Helen Dunbar took greater pleasure in my converse than in his—yet certain it is, that then and there he did most grievously assault me at unawares. The good Priest Innes, who was my most especial friend, and who is now, alas! so much lamented by me, bestowed a quiet word of reproof on the enraged Auchernach, such as a pastor or a father might have well given upon such an occasion. But instead of taking his rebuke with that humble submission with the which it doth alway become a layman to receive the admonitions of the Church, Auchernach, in the ears of all, uttered fearful denunciations against the good old man as he was in the act of leaving the place, leaning, as he was often compelled by his infirmities to do, upon the stay of this arm of mine. It sorely wounds my heart to be thus forced to repeat the very words which he used, seeing that they are of themselves enow to condemn him, but if I should fail of so doing, there is not a person of

any age or sex who was present that night who could not repeat them. They were these ;—‘ *Old man ! look that thou dost not pay dear for thy favour to that new guest of thine !*’ Thus carrying his bitter and most unjust rage from me to the good priest, who was about to show me that hospitality, which, for that night at least, had been denied to himself. He could have made no successful attempt against the good man that night, for I was in the house to act, under Heaven, as his shield from all harm. But the very next night, when I was no longer there—would I had !—to defend him, the murderer comes—and——”

“ Thou hast now gone as far as thy knowledge as an eye or ear-witness may bear thee, Knock-ando,” said the Bishop. “ When the subject of thy testimony hath been taken down, our brother the sub-prior may go forth to bring in the lady who is our next evidence.”

In obedience to the Bishop’s order, the sub-prior withdrew, and soon afterwards returned, ushering in Helen Dunbar. As she entered, she was so overcome by the feelings naturally excited by her situation, as well as by the solemn and impressive spectacle before her, that she did not very well

know how she found herself seated in the chair that was placed for her a little to one side, and at such an angle to those of the members of the chapter, so as to permit a full stream of light to fall upon her from a window. Her eyes were thrown on the ground, and she put up a secret aspiration for aid from Heaven during the interval of silence which the judges charitably allowed to give her time to compose herself.

“Helen Dunbar!” said the Bishop, at length slowly addressing her in a deep-toned voice, but with an encouraging manner; “thou already knowest but too well; and, to thine unutterable grief and affliction, that thy uncle, Priest Innes, a godly, and now, it is to be hoped, a sainted son of the church, was, upon the night of the twenty-ninth day of the last month, most cruelly and barbarously murdered, by some one at present unknown. What can’st thou say touching that strong suspicion which doth attach to the prisoner, Lewis Grant of Auchernach, who now standeth yonder?”

“My lord,” said Helen Dunbar, looking fearfully round, whilst every fibre of her frame seemed to quiver with agitation, as she caught her first view of the wasted form and countenance of the

unfortunate prisoner, and met his eye, which was now filled with a flitting fire of anxiety, which it had not before exhibited. But she seemed yet more affected by the glance of the Laird of Knockando, who stood beside him. It quite overcame her for some moments. "My lord!—my lord! I—I—"

"Take thine own time, daughter!" said the Bishop cheerily; "and begin, if it so pleaseth thee, with thy recollection of what befel at the wedding at the Mill of Duthel. The prisoner Auchernach did then and there strike down John Grant of Knockando, without cause of provocation, did he not?"

"My lord, he did strike down Knockando," said Helen; "but as I chanced to watch them standing for some time, as if in talk together, I observed their looks; and, were I to judge from what I saw, I should hold that John Grant of Knockando had by his words so chafed Auchernach, and worked upon his dormant ire, as to fret it into the sudden outburst of that flame, the which blazed forth so openly to the senses of all who were then present."

"Was he not rebuked by the good priest, thine

uncle, for the outrage of which he was then guilty?" demanded the Bishop.

"He was, my lord," replied Helen; "and in a sterner tone than he had ever heard the priest use before. But ere mine uncle went to bed, on the evening of that very night in which he was murdered, these ears did privately hear him express a doubt whether he might not have been too hasty in judging him, and he then uttered a fervent ejaculation to Heaven for pardon if he had so erred."

"Heard ye no threat from the lips of Auchernach against thine uncle?" demanded the Bishop.

"I did hear words which in mine agitation at the time I could not well interpret," said Helen. "After the murder of mine uncle, I did, in my distraction, recall and connect these words with the cruel deed which had so swiftly followed them. But certain circumstances did afterwards occur to satisfy me that the words,—'*Old man! look that thou dost not pay dear for thy favour to that new guest of thine!*' were meant by Auchernach as a friendly warning, and not as a threat."

"Against whom then dost thou believe that Auchernach's friendly warning was given? if so thou judgest it to be," said the Bishop.

“Against him who now standeth beside the accused,” said Helen Dunbar; and rising from her chair as she said so, she turned round, and drawing herself up to her full height, she regarded the individual she was addressing with a firm and resolute look, and added in a clear, distinct, and solemn voice,—“The warning of Auchernach was kindly meant, and would to the holy saints that it had been taken as it was intended! The warning of Auchernach was meant to guard against the false arts of John Dhu Grant of Knockando there, whom I do here fearlessly accuse as the real murderer of mine uncle!”

The murmurs of astonishment which ran through the assemblage at this most unlooked for accusation, may easily be imagined, as well as the change that took place on the respective countenances of the two prisoners.

“My guardian angel!” cried Auchernach, clasping his hands fervently, and looking tenderly and gratefully towards Helen, his face suddenly flushed with joy.

“Some deep conspiracy against me,” murmured Knockando, his countenance changing alternately from the deadly white of guilty fear to the black

expression of fiend-like ferocity. "A deep compact between the murderer and his paramour!—Where can the veriest shadow of proof be found against my perfect innocence of this foul deed?"

"Let the sacred dignity of our tribunal be respected!" said the Bishop sternly; "and let all such unseemly interruptions cease. Proceed maiden!—proceed to offer to us the testimony on which thou art bold enough to make so strange and so determined an accusation."

"My Lord," said Helen, still standing, and betraying deep agitation, as in her modest and respectful address to the Bishop she recalled the appalling circumstances; "I was the first person who entered mine uncle's apartment on the morning which followed the fatal night of his murder. When I did approach me to the bed I fancied that he slept; for, as was not uncommon with him, he lay with the blessed crucifix over his bosom. I lifted the holy emblem in my left hand, whilst, with my right I did remove the bed-clothes from his chin—when—when—when beholding, as I did, the bloody work which had been done upon him, I fell backwards on the floor in a swoon, and so firmly did I grasp the crucifix to my bosom in

mine unconscious agony, that those who came to mine aid, called thither by my scream, found it so placed, and it was carried with me to mine own apartment, and I so found it when my senses were restored to me. That the crucifix had ever lain that night upon mine uncle's breast at all, therefore, could have been known only to myself alone—and to him who, during that fatal night, removed it from his bosom for the purpose of doing the murder on him, and who replaced it there after he had wrought the cruel deed."

"But how can this touch the Laird of Knockando?" demanded the Bishop earnestly.

"My Lord," said Helen, "some days after the murder, the Laird of Knockando did force himself into my presence, under the false pretence of bearing a message from the Reverend Lord Prior. His object seemed to be to whet my vengeance against the person who then lay accused of the murder of mine uncle. It was then, that, in the presence of my friend and my servant, who are both now within the call of this tribunal, prepared to support this my testimony,—then it was, I say, that he used expressions, the which were, for greater security, taken down after he was gone.—

'*The wretch,*' said he, 'The wretch who, lighting down like some nocturnal fiend upon the sacred person of thine uncle, *and, reckless of the holy emblem of Christ which lay upon his bosom,* could put it aside, that he might plunge his dirk into the innocent throat of his sacred servant, must not only die the death of a felon, but he can never hope for mercy from him whose blessed emblem he hath outraged.' None but the murderer could have so circumstantially described this most barbarous deed. John Dhu Grant of Knockando did so describe it. Therefore is John Dhu Grant of Knockando the murderer! On his head the blood of my murdered uncle doth loudly call for that justice which it doth behoove man to do upon it. And may He that died for us all, grant that mercy hereafter to his guilty soul, which his own relentless sentence would have denied to another?"

As Helen Dunbar finished speaking, she fell back into her chair, exhausted by her exertion to fulfil that duty which she had wound up her mind to discharge. The murderer gasped for breath as if he was undergoing suffocation; and his eyes started from their sockets with the terrors which now overwhelmed him. The murmurs which

burst from those who were present being checked by the seneschal of the court, the Bishop ordered Helen's servants, James and Janet, and also her friend, to be all three severally called. Each of them were examined. The members of the Chapter conferred together for a few minutes apart; and after they had resumed their seats on the tribunal, a death-like silence prevailed, and the Bishop, putting on his mitre, and leaning on his crosier, began thus to speak:—

“ After the full and patient probing which we have given to this most mysterious case, it must be clear to all men who do now hear us, that this holy tribunal hath before it, as its bounden duty, to dismiss Lewis Grant of Auchernach, discharging him as free from all taint or suspicion of any participation whatsoever in the foul and barbarous murder of our pious brother, Priest Innes. And as it is beyond our power to shut our eyes to the miraculous proof which the Almighty in his wisdom hath caused the very murderer himself to bear towards his own proper condemnation, we have no choice left but to direct our bailie,—the which we now hereby do—forthwith to return John Dhu Grant of Knockando to

the dungeon whence he was taken—thence to remove him by to-morrow's earliest sun, and to convey him, under a strong guard of our men-at-arms, to Elgin, there to be delivered into the hands of the king's sheriff, that he may take measures to see that the prisoner be submitted to the knowledge of an assize, to be by it clenged or fouled of the crime laid to his charge, as the evidence laid before it may determine. This we do without all prejudice to our own claims to the full right of pit and gallows which belongeth to us; but because this crime of murder, when not fresh and red-handed, being to be considered as more especially one of the pleas of the Crown, we do think it more seemly to leave it to the judges of the King's Grace to execute justice upon the murderer."

The Laird of Knockando's countenance was all this time working like that of a fiend, especially whilst the Bishop was delivering this appalling judgment against him. He had no sooner heard it to an end, than, putting his hand into his bosom, he plucked forth a concealed dirk—that very weapon with which he had murdered the good Priest Innes. He raised it aloft. Helen saw it glancing in the air, and uttered a piercing shriek that rang

in the groined roof of the chapter-house. It saved her lover; for, as Knockando brought it down, aimed with a desperate plunge at the heart of his rival, his intended victim threw his body back, and so he most wonderfully escaped from its fatal blade. But it fell not innocuous—it cleft the very skull of a wretched lay-brother, who sat with his tablets below noting down the minutes of the procedure, and the man dropped lifeless upon the pavement. The perpetrator of this second murder was seized and pinioned, and, being instantly tried red-handed as he was—his guilt was established—he was carried out for shrift—confessed that his first crime was done for the wicked purpose of revenging himself against Auchernach by fixing upon him the guilt of the murder. After which the convent-bell tolled dismally. A long procession of monks chaunting a hymn, followed by the criminal and the bourreau, guarded by the seneschal and his men-at-arms, was seen winding from the gate of the Priory, and after a few short moments of prayer, he was forthwith executed, without farther mercy, on the gallow-hill.

I need not tell you that the Laird of Auchernach performed the part of protector to Helen Dun-

bar during her homeward journey, and that so soon as the days of mourning for her murdered uncle were fulfilled, he received from her the right to act as her protector throughout the longer journey of life. And if he had ever been supposed to be apt, when provoked on certain occasions, to yield too hastily to that indignation which chanced to be excited within him, the recollection of the terrible events which I have narrated to you had the effect of arming him ever afterwards with a degree of control over himself which few men since his time have been known to possess.

END OF VOL. II.