

X.

THE FOREST OF GAICH;

OR, THE CAPTAIN DHU.

AFTER the Flemish campaign, under his Royal Highness the Duke of York, and the terrible retreat to Deventer—a retreat in which the sufferings of our troops rivalled those endured by the French after Moscow—the 42nd Highlanders were encamped during the spring of 1795 at Hanbury, in England, under the command of General Sir William Meadows, when their strength, which had been weakened by their recent operations against the French republican armies, was greatly augmented by volunteers from various Highland fencible corps, which had been raised in the preceding year. Among others, they were joined by the two entire flank companies of the Grant Fencibles, or old 97th Regiment, which had been raised to the number of thirteen hundred men by Sir James Grant of Grant, Bart. (locally known as the *Good Sir James*), almost entirely among his own name and clan in Strathspey, a district which has long been famous for its stirring music and the military spirit of its people. These volunteers, in the month of September, set out on their march through Badenoch to join the 42nd, under the command of Captain MacPherson of Ballychroan, who

had been appointed to the corps, the colonel of which was then Major-General Sir Hector Munro, K.B.

Evan MacPherson was generally known in that wild and mountainous district named Badenoch as the Captain *Dhu*, or Black Officer, in consequence of his raven-coloured hair, his swarthy complexion, and dark eyes, and, perhaps also, from the peculiarities of his character, which, though brave to recklessness, was stern, severe in discipline, and at times mysterious, savage, and vindictive.

The captain swore high, drank deep, and gambled as if he had the mines of Peru among the glens of Ballychroan. These qualities, together with his great strength and stature, rendered him more feared than loved in the district of Badenoch, where it was currently believed that he was in league with the devil, and where the story of his terrible end is yet remembered with a shudder by the people round the winter hearth. There are many yet alive in Strathspey who saw and knew Black Evan, and remember the events which I am about to record.

From Speyside he marched his volunteers through Glentromie, and, following the course of the river which gives that valley its name, entered the wilder and more romantic parts of Badenoch, between the Stoney Mountain and Drum Ferrich, till about night-fall, when, to the great bodily discomfort and greater mental discomposure of the soldiers, who dared not complain save in whispers to each other, he halted in the haunted Forest of Gaich, a wild and uninhabited tract of country on the northern slope of the mighty Grampians.

There he ordered them to pile arms, and have a fire lighted in a place which he indicated, near a well, deemed holy, as the water of it had been blessed

by St. Eonaig of old. On this, a white-haired sergeant, Hamish Grant, from Brae Laggan, respectfully ventured to suggest that the fire might burn equally well elsewhere.

MacPherson, who was not accustomed to be trifled with or have his orders disputed, stormed and swore terribly, according to his wont, both in Gaëlic and English.

"Good will never come of it," said the sergeant, moodily.

"Let evil come if it may, and welcome be it!" responded MacPherson, scornfully; "let the old fellow who blessed the well come from his grave at Kilmaveonaig, and, if he chooses, I'll give him a jorum of its water flavoured with Ferintosh."

Muffled in their grey great-coats, or in their plaids of the bright red Grant tartan, the soldiers sat or lay in groups near the fire, which burned cheerfully, and shed a wavering glare along the green mountain slope. The night was calm, and the stars shone brightly overhead; no moon was visible yet, and scarcely a breath of wind stirred the light foliage of the silver birches. Attracted by the unwonted light of the fire, the dun deer were visible at times, but for a moment only, as they peered from their lair among the feathery bracken leaves, and then fled to distant parts of the forest.

The soldiers sung Gaëlic songs to while away the time, and each shared with his comrade the contents of his canteen and havresack; for, having just left their homes in Strathspey, all were amply provided with bread and cheese, beef, venison, and plenty of good usquebaugh; thus, though the place of their halt was weird, wild, and—all save the little runnel that

trickled down the heather slope—unholy, the night seemed likely to pass awfully enough.

Apart from all his men lay Evan MacPherson, of Ballychroan, who on this night was unusually sullen, gloomy, and taciturn; so much so, that the soldiers, all of whom knew him well, remarked that a *tarne-coill*, or black cloud, was upon him; for at times he had his dark or melancholy hour.

"And how could he be otherwise?" said old Sergeant Hamish, in a whisper, as he took a huge *sneishen* from the silver-mounted mull of Corporal Shon Grant, his own cousin, "only seventeen times removed," as Bailie Jarvie has it. "Oich! oich! who but he would have halted in the Forest of Gaich, and at night too?"

"I'll sleep with one eye open, at all events," replied the corporal, impressively, with a wink.

"And I with both my ears," said Duncan Bane, the piper; "for, by the horns of the devil—"

"Whisht! Oich, don't name *him* here, for he is, perhaps, nearer than we know of; but what were you about to say?"

"That we shall be lucky if we pass the night without hearing the scream of Comyn's eagles as they fly towards the Tarff."

"It is said, they pass through the forest from Benoch Corrie Va always at midnight," said Donald Bane Grant, or Fair-haired Donald the piper, in a whisper.

Some of the younger soldiers laughed; but the older shrugged their shoulders, and took an additional dram and *sneishen*, as they thought of all the Forest of Gaich had witnessed in other times.

In a previous legend, the fate of the Red Comyn

has been mentioned ; but this forest was the death-scene of his father, the equally traitorous Black Comyn ; and it was to the story of his terrible death the soldiers referred.

“He was killed,” said one, “by a fall from his horse, which a weird woman had bewitched.”

“Not at all,” said the sergeant, bluntly ; for he was well versed in all the oral literature of his native hills.

“How then—how ?” asked several.

“His death happened thus,” began the sergeant in Gaëlic. “The Black Comyn was a fierce tyrant, who dwelt in the black Castle of Inverlochy, to which he added the great round western tower, that still bears his name ; and there he and his wife, who was the Lady Marjorie, daughter of John Baliol, King of Scotland, were a terror and a grievance to the whole country by their exactions, extortions, and severity. Every one in Badenoch knows the story of his conceiving a love for two pretty girls whom he saw reaping in a field near Cnoc Barroth, and whom, because they fled from him, he ordered his Lowland men-at-arms to strip nude as they came into the world, and in that condition he compelled to finish the reaping of the field in the light of open day, while he and his friends mocked them, and looked on.

“Two days after this, he was at the Cell of St. Eonaig, in Blair Athole, where he tarried at a wayside cottage to obtain a draught of beer. The baron was thirsty, and he drank deep ; the day was hot—he had ridden far, and the beverage was cool, sharp, and refreshing.

“‘This beer of yours pleases me much,’ said he ; ‘whence get you it, dame ?’

“‘I am my own brewer,’ replied the cottager ; ‘but the malt is brought from St. John’s Town.’

“‘And the water ?’

“‘From yonder stream.’

“‘The Aldnehearlinn ?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Good ! I shall have such beer made in my Castle of Inverlochy, if it cost me a thousand lives and fifty thousand silver crowns !’ said Comyn, wiping the white froth from his coal-black beard with his steel glove.

“‘Then you must make a road over the Grampians,’ said the woman.

“‘And a road I shall make, dame,’ he exclaimed.

“The woman laughed covertly, and bitterly uttered a curse under her breath ; for she was the mother of one of the young reapers whom he had so recently dishonoured. Now this woman was a witch, and the beer she had given the Lord of Badenoch was brewed under a spell ; thus, whoever drank thereof became her victim and the instrument of her will.

“The Black Comyn resolved that whatever might be the result, he would have beer of the same kind in his Castle of Inverlochy ; but to procure the ingredients a road was necessary, and he at once ordered one to be made. Then thousands of men were soon seen at work, with axe and shovel hewing a path from the lonely little cell of St. Eonaig, through the dense fir woods of Craig Urrand, building a bridge across the Bruar in Athole, and digging a way straight to this Forest of Gaich ; and thus far it was made when the work was stopped by witchcraft.

“Daily the Black Comyn came to survey the road and to watch its progress over hill and glen, and wood and water, and many observed that daily two eagles

hovered above his head, but high in mid-air, where the arrows of his best archers failed to reach them; for these screaming eagles were witches, the mother of the two pretty reapers—the beer woman of St. Eonaig, and another cailloch who dwelt by the Lochy, and who came hither to scheme out vengeance and to destroy the Black Comyn's road, lest when finished it might prove an easy avenue for the Perthshire clans to march into Badenoch.

"By the day of St. Eonaig the road had been made nearly to Gaich, and the dun deer, roused from their lair, were flying before the workmen, when the screams of the two giant eagles were heard overhead; the men were dispersed or rendered powerless by a spell, while all their horses and oxen took to flight, as if possessed by the demons which entered the swine of old, and rushing headlong over the precipices were destroyed.

"Comyn beheld this sudden catastrophe with emotions of astonishment and rage, which were soon changed to fear, when the flapping wings and shrill cries of the furious eagles rang close in his ears, and with dusky wings outspread, and monstrous beaks open, he saw them descending swoop upon him.

"He turned his fleet horse, and goring him with his spurs, fled he knew not whither.

"The infernal birds pursued him closely, and the summer sun cast their shadows like flying clouds upon his path. He crossed the ridge of the Grampians, and galloped downward at a frightful pace towards Craignaheilar; but there they overtook him, though he cowered upon his horse's mane, and implored God to save him! His entreaties were in vain, for God seemed to have abandoned the Black Comyn to the fiends, even as He abandoned his son the Red

Traitor to the dagger of Bruce; and now the eagles, plunging their beaks and talons in his flesh, tore him limb from limb, and scattered the reeking fragments of his body in the wilderness. One of his legs was still dangling in the silver stirrup when his terrified horse fell dead on the banks of the Tarff.*

"And once in every hundred years," concluded the sergeant, "his spirit is said to ride from Gaich, followed by the screaming eagles."

"And here, too," said the corporal, glancing about him and stirring the embers of the fire, "has been seen many a time, as I have heard my mother say, the great Black Cat of the Woods—the king of all cats."

"Aire Dhia!" exclaimed the sergeant, uneasily; "that is the devil himself."

"Cat or devil, I care not which," said the corporal; "but we all know the story of the Laird of Brae na Garacher, who fought in the wars of Montrose, and when hunting here in Gaich, on Yule Eve, shot a black cat of enormous size, and just as he approached, cautiously, to examine the scratching brute, to his astonishment it opened its red mouth and addressed him in very good Gaëlic, begging that he would have the Christian charity to inform the cats at home of his untimely end. You may be sure that Brae na Garacher lost little time after that in making his way out of the forest and reaching home, where he related what had happened, and all the family laughed at him, saying, there was nothing in the world like good Campbelton whiskey for making even a cat speak!

"But lo! the moment his story was concluded, a

* "At a place still named *Lechois*, or *one foot*, according to Mr. Scrope. See his work on "Deerstalking."

little black kitten, that sat by the hearth, sprang with a fierce bound to the back of a high arm-chair, with its tail bushy like a fox's brush, its ears flat on its head, its yellow eyes glaring with rage, its back erect, and its little body swollen to all appearance thrice its usual size. There it sat for a minute spitting and howling like an evil spirit, and then vanished up the chimney! This event silenced the laughers, and sorely disturbed the mind of the laird, who resolved to consult with the minister about it on the morrow, and, in the meantime, to drink deep before going to bed. About midnight he was awakened by a sound, and, by the dim rays of his night-lamp, saw a black mass hovering over him.

"It was the huge black cat he had shot in the Forest of Gaich!

"Its eyes shone like those of a snake, its fierce claws were extended towards him, its red mouth was open, and its hot breath came balefully upon his cheek, as slowly, surely, and deliberately, it descended from the roof of his bed upon him, and clutching at his throat, lacerated and strangled him to death!"

"And I have heard from my father, who was *out* with the Prince, God rest them both!" said the piper, "that on the same night of Brae na Garacher's death, when the minister of Kingussie was riding home by the skirts of this forest, he passed a mighty multitude of cats. They covered all the sides of the hills, and swarmed among the rocks and trees, like mites in an old cheese. On reaching home, he found that every cat in the village, and all the adjacent cottages, had disappeared, and gone towards the Forest of Gaich, from whence they never returned."

Just as this third veracious story was concluded by Donald Bane the piper, he, the sergeant, and others

who yet lingered by the watch-fire, as if in that place, so weird and lone, they were loth to commit themselves to sleep, were startled by the presence of a man—a stranger—who suddenly appeared among them, without any one having seen or heard him approach—appeared as if he had sprung from the ground.

His aspect was remarkable, and had something alike impressive and terrible about it. He was dressed like a Lowland peasant; but his complexion was dark as that of a mulatto. His hair, beard, and whiskers were of raven blackness; the latter appendages, which he wore in great profusion, grew close up to his keen and restless eyes, which glared from under the shadow of his beetling brows and broad round bonnet, like those of a polecat from under a bush; but his grey plaid, the folds of which were full and ample, rose high upon his breast and concealed his mouth.

His eyes, which had all the fascinating glare of the fierce bright orbs of the rattle-snake, leisurely surveyed the quailing soldiers one after another in silence, and then he grinned, as if pleased by the startling impression his sudden appearance created, and spreading his strong, brown, swarthy hands over the flames, thrust them almost *into* the fire, without seeming to feel the heat in any way oppressive.

"Who are you?" asked the sergeant, firmly.

"One whom you may perhaps know well enough by-and-by," replied the other, with a grimace.

"Are you a Lowlander?" asked the corporal.

"Dioul!" growled the other; "did such pure Gaëlic as mine ever come from the tongue of a bodach in breeks? But speak out, my friends; of what are you afraid?"

"I fear nothing human," replied the sergeant; "but I fear God, and hate the devil and all his works."

"What wrong has the devil ever done *you*?"

"He put it in the heart of a vile Cateran to draw his dirk on me at the Inverness cattle tryst in August last."

"Nay, sergeant, it was not the poor devil who caused this, but your hot Highland whiskey and temper to boot. Yet I do not think you have much to complain of, as you well nigh slew him afterwards."

"The devil?"

"No—the Cateran, as you call him. As for the devil, he, poor fellow, is very much maligned on earth, I assure you."

"'Twas only a dab with a dirk I gave the Cateran, and he gave me another."

"A dab—a severe wound?"

"Bah! I would let any honest man do as much to me, for a good dram, any day; like true Highlanders, we parted after the first blood drawn."

The dark man gave one of his ferocious grins, as he said,

"You parted—true; but how fared it with your assailant?"

"He was lodged by the meddling provost and bailies in the bottle dungeon in the middle arch of Inverness Bridge."

"Yes—confined there, with nothing between him and the rain and wind of heaven but an iron grating—a narrow hatch of steel ribs, over which the wayfarers tread, and there he is yet."*

"All this is the provost's fault, *not* mine. We march by daybreak," said the sergeant, who had imbibed a strange mistrust and fear of this nocturnal visitor; "whither go you?"

* This *oubliette* perished with the old Bridge of Inverness.

"To a warmer place than even the warmest West Indian Isle," was the significant reply of the other, with a withering glance of malevolence and irony; "but it was not to talk with you I sought the Forest of Gaich to-night. My man is here!"

With these strange words, the tall dark man strode to the foot of a tree. There, muffled in his cloak and fast asleep, or to all appearance so, Captain MacPherson was lying with his head pillowed on the root of a gigantic larch, and when shaken roughly by the shoulder, he started up with one of his terrible oaths, but grew pale on beholding the person who aroused him. On recovering himself partially,

"What errand brings you here to-night?" he asked, in a low and stifled voice.

"To see *you*," was the brief reply.

"But why now, fiend?"

"Where so fitting a place as the Forest of Gaich?"

"True—true! fool—madman that I was! What lured me to halt here?"

"What lured you?"

"Yes."

"Shall I tell you?" grinned the other.

"Yes."

"Fatality,"

"Alas! alas!"

"Come," said the visitor, fiercely, "for time presses."

"Hurry no man's cattle," grumbled MacPherson; "so begone, fiend, for I go not with you to-night."

"You will not?"

"No!"

The dark stranger laughed till the very hills seemed

to echo; and that weird sound made the marrow freeze in the bones of the old sergeant, who was listening.

"Come," continued the visitor, "lest I drag you hence."

"Drag!" reiterated the captain, with a furious malediction.

"Yes, drag; for you are powerless as a suckling, and your will is mine."

For a moment their swarthy eyes glared like live coals upon each other. At last those of the Captain Dhu lowered, and he said, in a broken voice,

"Go to the place of tryst, and I shall be with you."

"When?"

"In the snapping of a flint," he groaned, while the perspiration rolled over his pallid brow.

"Ha! ha! Nay, I go not without you."

"Then the curse of God—the bitter, blighting curse that marked the front and withered up the soul of Cain—be on you!" exclaimed the captain, maddened with fear and rage. "Hound of hell, lead on—I follow you! Stand by your arms, men. Sergeant, at your peril, see that no man follows us!"

The swarthy man grinned again on hearing this outburst and these orders; and while the startled soldiers gazed in each other's faces with blank astonishment at the progress and issue of a conversation so strange, and at the aspect of one before whom this terrible officer, the Captain Dhu—he so stern and stormy, so fierce and unyielding—seemed to quail and bow, he and his weird-like visitor went from amidst them, and together sought a lonelier and more sequestered part of the forest.

They remained absent for some time. The whole

party of soldiers were now awakened, and muttered strangely among themselves; while, regardless of the orders he had received, old Sergeant Hamish Grant, impelled by an irresistible and, perhaps, laudable curiosity, crept slowly forward on his hands and knees; but he had not proceeded far thus, when he heard the voices of the captain and his nocturnal visitor—the former in tones of entreaty, and the latter in those of authority and fierce derision. Creeping on a few paces further, with a drawn bayonet in his hand, he beheld a sight which, when he considered the proud and stern character of his leader, filled him with blank wonder.

The waning moon was now visible; it shone out for a moment from behind a mass of crapelike cloud. The dark figures of MacPherson and the stranger were distinctly seen. The place of their meeting was a green fairy ring, covered with rich grass, which waved solemnly in the breeze. Close by it towered three gigantic granite blocks, spotted with green lichens, silent, grim, and lonely, for they were Druidical obelisks; and in the middle of this circle of Loda lay the "mossy stone of power," the altar of other times. MacPherson was on his knees; the dark man towered over him, threatening and commanding, but what he said, the trembling sergeant knew not, though all around was deathly still, save the trembling of the wiry pine foliage; for at times a tremulous motion will agitate a wood, even when the breath of the wind has passed away. Wan, white, and ghastly, the rays of the sinking moon poured over Benoch-corri-va aslant, and threw the shadows of the Druid stones, and of those who lingered there, far beyond the ancient circle.

A cloud passed over her face, veiling everything for a moment.

When again the still white moonbeams fell on the fairy ring and the Druid stones, no one was there.

The place was lonely and silent.

Full of terror and awe, the sergeant rushed back to the bivouac to tell what he had seen; but for a time his lips were sealed, for he heard the voice of the captain, who had reached the night-fire before him, ordering the whole to stand to their arms and prepare to march.

Evan MacPherson was deadly pale; his manner was wild and excited; but the strictness of discipline, and the known severity of his character, alike forbade inquiry or remark. The arms were unpiled in silence, knapsacks were strapped on, and just as the light of daybreak began dimly and faintly to eclipse the waning moon, the Strathspey men proceeded on their march, which lay across the Grampians, and through Glen Bruar towards Blair Atholl.

A dead silence pervaded the ranks: if any spoke, it was in a whisper, and each man suggested to his comrade that Evan Dhu of Ballychroan had sold himself to the Evil One. If further proofs were required than those afforded by this night-interview, Sergeant Hamish Grant and the piper, Donald Bane, were ready to aver on oath that in every place around the fire and across the forest towards the fairy ring whereon the foot of that mysterious visitor had trod, the grass was scorched and withered. Their clansman, the corporal, who was somewhat sceptical on this point, suggested that these black spots might have been caused by the birch and pine sparks from their watchfires, but old Hamish indignantly repelled the idea; and the future career of Evan of Ballychroan more than corroborated all that was averred to have

taken place on that eventful night, in the haunted Forest of Gaich.

About the end of September, MacPherson, with his Strathspey men, joined the regiment, which embarked on the 27th October for the West Indies, forming part of the expedition of twenty-two thousand one hundred and fifty-nine infantry, and three thousand and sixty cavalry, led by Sir Ralph Abercrombie, and destined to reduce the isles of St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Trinidad. Tempestuous weather succeeded the embarkation, and on the 29th the wind blew a hurricane, which drove many of the Indians and transports from their anchors, dismasted some, and bulged others on the beach. The expedition was thus delayed until the 11th November, when again the whole fleet, consisting of three hundred sail, put to sea; but the flagship *Impregnable* was stranded on a sand-bank, and unable to proceed; other disasters succeeded; the *Middlesex*, with five hundred of the Black Watch on board, had her bowsprit and foretopmast carried away by the *Undaunted* when off the Isle of Wight, and was thus left astern of the whole squadron; which had no sooner cleared the British Channel, than it was dispersed by another dreadful tempest, which totally disabled the *Commerce de Marseilles*, a hundred-and-twenty-gun ship (French prize), having the 57th Regiment on board, and caused the loss of several transports and many hundred lives. The admiral was driven back to Portsmouth, and his fleet, after being long tempest-tossed, and scattered over the stormy winter sea, reached Barbadoes in detail.

In the Black Watch, this strange series of disasters were secretly but unanimously attributed to the malevolence and interference of the Devil. The myste-

rious meeting in the Forest of Gaich was remembered, and Evan of Ballychroan was viewed with anything but favour by the soldiers under his command ; yet he did his duty bravely and cheerfully, and was stern and severe as ever when any fault or dereliction of orders occurred. The superstitious dread with which his mountaineers regarded the events of the voyage need not excite surprise, when we remember that, about the same period, the crew of one of his Majesty's crack frigates flatly refused to sail until the captain thereof sent his black tom-cat ashore, or had its ears and tail docked, to alter its feline aspect.

But this long succession of mishaps by sea, and upon the events which preceded the voyage, were forgotten by the Strathspey men, when, on the 9th of February next year, the *Middlesex* ran into one of the harbours of Barbadoes, and the clear brilliant sky and blue waters of the Caribbean Sea were beaming around them ; and then the charming greenness and fertility of this place, the most eastern of these lovely Indian isles, made all long for the shore, eager to disembark, and to escape the vertical heat of a tropical sun blazing on the decks of a crowded transport.

Brigades were now detailed to attack and reduce the principal isles of the West Indies. General Whyte, with the brave 39th ("*Primus in Indis*"), the Sutherland Highlanders, and the old 99th, sailed against Demerara and Berbice, which he captured almost without resistance ; while Brigadier-General Moore (the future hero of Corunna), with our old friends the 42nd and other troops, sailed to favour the French in St. Lucia with a visit, and found themselves off the Pigeons' Isle on the 27th April, when they were ordered to land at a little sandy bay, into which the bright blue water ran in glittering ripples,

under shadowy foliage of the most luxuriant and brilliant green.

The landing was made by the troops in four divisions, at four different points ; and the first man who leaped ashore was Evan MacPherson of the Black Watch. His company followed with a loud hurrah ! and when the four united columns advanced against Morne Fortunée, the principal military post in the island, on officers desirous of leading the forlorn hope being requested "to enclose their cards to the brigademajor," the first on the list for this perilous work was the Captain Dhu !

This caused his men to consider and have serious doubts of the affair during the halt in Gaich ; for, as Sergeant Grant said, a man who had really sold himself to the Devil would have chosen some less dangerous trade than soldiering ; and, moreover, would not have been in such a deuced hurry to risk promotion to a warmer climate than the West Indies.

"But how if his life be charmed," suggested the corporal, "and his skin proof to shot and steel ? we have heard of such things in the Highlands. Like Claverhouse, he may have his *appointed time*."

"Lambh dhia sinn !" exclaimed the sergeant ; "so have we all."

But the corporal's opinion was not given without finding due weight ; and it caused the unfortunate captain to be more closely watched than ever.

Ere nightfall the troops were all under arms, and on the march to assault the great fort of the island ; and when, as usual in such cases, old Rawlins the quartermaster was made custodian, *pro temp.*, of all the rings, watches, and purses of the officers, that they might be safe with him in the rear, it was remarked that MacPherson retained his own valuables.

"Ballychroan is a cool fellow," said the officers; "he has quite made up his mind to escape scatheless."

The eve of the tropical sun is brief and beautiful; in the forcible lines of Scott—

"No pale gradations quench his ray,
No twilight dews his wrath allay;
With dislike battle target red,
He rushes to his burning bed;
Dyes the wild waves with bloody light,
Then sinks at once—and all is night!"

So sank the disc of the West Indian sun into the burning Caribbean sea, and sudden darkness veiled the march of the troops, while the pipes of Donald Bane, and other kilted minstrels of the Black Watch, woke the echoes of the fertile valleys and green cocoa-groves, as the corps formed the *avant garde* of the midnight movement, which brought the troops close to *Morne Fortunée*, in the attack on which *MacPherson* charmed all by his rashness and headlong bravery.

By a mistake of the black guide, *General Moore* found himself entangled with the French outposts two hours before the other columns came up. An immediate encounter ensued. The 53rd Regiment drove back the enemy; and here *Evan MacPherson*, ever foremost in danger, leaving his own ranks, pushed on with the English corps, as the dispatch of *Lieutenant-Colonel Abercrombie*, its commander, relates; and after a hand-to-hand conflict, slew the French Republican general, piercing him through the body with such force that the long fluted blade of the Highland claymore would not come forth; so that he had actually to place his feet upon

the corpse before he could withdraw his weapon. Spurning the body off his sword, he uttered one of his old ferocious oaths of passion and blind fury.

The outpost was carried; by daybreak the other columns came up, and with the loss of fifty grenadiers *Morne Fortunée* was completely invested.

After this, five companies of the Black Watch, the Black Rangers under *Malcolm of Lochore* (a Fife-shire gentleman, who had a powerful presentiment that he would that day close his earthly career), the 55th Regiment, and the Light Company of the 57th, were ordered to assault the battery of *Secke* which was close to the outworks of *Morne Fortunée*, and, by a dangerous flank-fire, enfiladed the approach thereto.

As they advanced to the attack, *MacPherson*, being senior volunteer for the forlorn hope, led the stormers. He seemed wild with excitement; his cheek was red, and his dark eyes sparkled with a fiery glow.

Followed closely by six men carrying a scaling-ladder, with his sword clenched in his teeth, and bearing in his arms one of those huge grass-bags which are often used in such affairs to prevent stormers from being hurt by falling into the trenches, and which, for this purpose, are filled with freshly cut grass, he rushed forward at the head of the forlorn-hope-men, nearly all of whom were swept away by a rolling fire of grape, canister, and musket-shot. He tossed his grass bag into the trench, and seizing the ladder, shook off the dying men who clung to it, and with his own powerful hands he erected it at once against the slope of the stone bastion, uttering shouts of rage and triumph as he ascended.

Pell-mell a cheering mass of the Black Watch and 55th men intermingled followed him.

The fire concentrated upon this point was terrible ; it seemed the very crater of a volcano, vomiting flame and missiles, and bristling with points of steel. Lieutenant James Frazer of the Black Watch, and Donald Bane, now the pipe-major, fell dead. The former was caught in the arms of Sergeant Grant just as he was falling over the bastion, and many more were killed and wounded. MacPherson received several cuts and scars ; but he seemed to be regardless alike of danger and pain. On the old sergeant falling in the embrasure stunned by a blow from a musket-butt, the captain snatched the halbert from his hand to replace his claymore which had been broken on a musket-barrel, and armed anew, he hewed a passage into the battery, which was carried in triumph ; but not until the brave Malcolm of Lochore was slain by a grape-shot (thus fulfilling his solemn presentiment) and many of his Rangers had perished by his side.

MacPherson's bonnet had been denuded of its gay plumage by musket-shot, his plaid and uniform had been cut and pierced by sabres and bayonets ; yet he had but three wounds of consequence, and when he presented to General Moore the tricolour which he had pulled down from the battery, the brigadier said,

"By my soul, Captain MacPherson, you seem to bear a charmed life."

To this the captain replied only by one of his strange laughs, as he tore a Frenchman's tricoloured sash into strips to bind up the wounds in his sword-arm, for he had received two bayonet-stabs and a sword-cut in the affair.

But though the battery of Secke had thus fallen, Morne Fortunée was yet untaken ; and when the

Vizie, a fortified ridge under its guns was to be mined and carried by assault, MacPherson again volunteered for service in the front.

The local features and scenery of these isles, torn as they were by convulsions of nature into deep gorges covered with bosky thickets, or invaded by abrupt cliffs and bluffs, made the operations of the troops, who were cross-belted for weeks consecutively, severe and harassing. The hardihood and power of endurance which are characteristic of the Scottish Highlanders, rendered the Black Watch of the greatest service, while, on the other hand, the cavalry of the expedition were soon totally unfit for duty, and the 26th Light Dragoons gradually disappeared altogether.

"St. Lucia presents a chequered scene of sombre forests and fertile valleys, smiling plains and towering precipices, shallow rivers and deep ravines ;" but the chief of all its hills are the huge pyramidal Pitons, two sugar-loaf shaped masses of rock, which from their base in the blue ocean to their summits in the sky are ever covered with waving foliage of the most brilliant green. The steep and rugged nature of the country and its pathless woods, where of old the painted Carib lurked, presented innumerable difficulties to the soldiers and seamen, who had to drag the battering guns from the beach into position against Morne Fortunée ; but on the 17th May a sufficient number were in readiness to open a fire against the Vizie, or fortified ridge, which had been strengthened by palisades, earthworks, and bastions of stone, on which the French had mounted some of their heaviest guns.

It was proposed to undermine one of these bastions, and Evan MacPherson, who had volunteered for

the engineering department, discovered—no one knew how—an arched place almost immediately under it; and he at once resolved to turn this vault to the best advantage. It was small and domed with stone, having been an oratory hewn out of the hill-side in the days of the Sieur de Rousselan, a French Governor of St. Lucia, who died in 1654, and who was much beloved for his gentleness even by the fierce Caribs, one of whose women he had married.

Here, for three nights preceding the seventeenth of May, the Captain Dhu, with ten soldiers of the 27th Regiment, worked to lay a mine, which, when fired, would blow the whole upper work, with its men, cannon and shot into the air. In the dark they crept to and fro on their hands and knees, reaching the place unmolested it is true, but not *unseen*; for on the third night they were attacked by the French, and a terrible close combat with bayonets and pistols took place in the dark. Most of MacPherson's men were slain and cruelly butchered by the infuriated French; but him they could neither kill, capture, overcome, or drive out of the vault.

Plying his broadsword with both hands, he swept aside the charged bayonets and clubbed muskets like dry reeds by a winter brook; the wounds he inflicted were terrible! Lights were now brought, and in the red blaze of torches, and the ghastly green glare of fire-balls, his tall and muscular form was seen towering over a pile of fallen men who encumbered the slippery and gory floor, towering like an infernal spirit or destroying angel, his sword-blade and his eyes flashing together, his swarthy cheek a deep red, and his black hair waving in elf-like locks.

"*C'est le diable!*" exclaimed the French, and precipitately retired, leaving the vault, but only to adopt

measures more surely to destroy him. Piles of straw, damp hemp, tar-barrels, and powder were flung in. Then fire was applied, and thus all the miserable wounded were suffocated or burned alive, with the corpses of the dead. Even the Captain Dhu did not come forth after this; and at midnight his regiment, with the 27th or Inniskillings, and the 31st or Huntingdonshire Foot, commenced the attack on the fortified ridge of the Vizie without him; and his company was led by Lieutenant Simon Frazer, who was afterwards so severely wounded at the capture of St. Vincent.

Six days the fighting continued, and an unceasing fire was exchanged between the British battery and the fort, until the 27th Regiment, by a desperate exertion of bravery, effected a lodgment within five hundred yards of the French works, where they repulsed a furious sortie of the enemy, and maintained their ground almost over the very place where the miners had been destroyed. This movement proving successful, the French capitulated on the twenty-sixth May, and from that day the Isle of St. Lucia became a British colony, after the loss of one hundred and ninety-four officers and men killed, and five hundred and fifty-four wounded, according to the nominal return; but that document was in error by one; for among those returned as slain six days before the capitulation, was the Captain Dhu.

When the interment of the dead took place, the fatal mine was explored, and it presented a dreadful scene, being full of dead soldiers, half scorched, roasted, decomposed, and covered with black festering wounds, while the pavement was so slippery with blood and hideous slime, that the fatigue party could scarcely bear out the remains of their comrades to

their hastily-made graves under the fatal guns of Morne Fortunée.

The 27th found old Bill Hook, the corporal of their Pioneers, literally burned to a mere piece of charcoal; and the remains were alone identified by a brass tobacco-box which the deceased was known to possess.

One body, fearfully blackened by smoke, and having the uniform scorched off it, a sword in its fingers calcined by the fire to a mere stripe of rusty iron, was borne out and laid upon the grass in the bright sunshine; and then with a shout of astonishment old Hamish Grant and others recognised the famous Captain Dhu!

"It is MacPherson, Black Evan of Ballychroan!" they exclaimed; and the whole regiment crowded to gaze on what they believed to be the remains of this brave but terrible fellow.

"Quick—let us bury him!" said some of the soldiers.

But louder cries of astonishment rose from all, when he began to move and breathe; and then, like one awakening from a long trance, opened his eyes and gazed wildly about him.

For six days he had survived the horrors of that dark and terrible vault! The surgeons were promptly on the spot, and no means were left untried to restore MacPherson.

"Oich! oich!" muttered the Strathspeymen; "leave him to himself—the hour of his end is not yet come." Sergeant Grant, who was ordered to see if the vault was now cleared of dead bodies, entered it slowly and with some reluctance; but in a moment after he came forth with a bound, as if he had been shot from a mortar, leaving his bonnet behind him; his grey

hair was on end, his eyes dilated, and his usually nut-brown and weather-beaten cheek was deadly pale with terror.

"What the devil is the matter now?" asked several officers.

"The Devil himself is the matter," gasped the sergeant.

"How—what have you seen?" asked General Moore, laughing.

Hamish could not explain himself in English; but to the Black Watch who crowded about him he related that, on entering the *black-hole*—for so they named the mine—he had seen in the further end thereof the figure of a man, and believing he was some Frenchman who had found concealment there, he drew his sword and approached. Then a pair of bright, fierce, and terrible eyes, glaring like those of an owl or snake, met his gaze; and while secret awe and horror filled his soul, he found himself confronted by a man who was of giant stature, and whose face was darker than that of a mulatto, with a beard of raven blackness, and wearing a grey plaid and Lowland bonnet.

He was the stranger whom they had seen in the Forest of Gaich!

He uttered a shrill laugh, which rung round the vault, and for a moment rooted the poor sergeant to the bloody pavement; then the soldier, wild with terror, rushed into the light of day.

The story that a Scottish sergeant had seen the Devil in the mine occasioned great laughter in the camp, for no trace of his Satanic majesty—not even the print of a cloven hoof—could be found, when the 31st Regiment demolished the whole fabric next day, after dismantling the Vizie.

After the capture of Morne Fortunée, a marked change came over the Captain Dhu. He was subject to fits of profound melancholy and abstraction, and to gusts of passion and fury, when he drank deep and became almost mad, exclaiming that he was tormented by fiends—that the atmosphere was full of flame—that hell was yawning under his feet, and so forth. His excesses soon impaired his health so severely, that he was sent home with invalids, on a year's leave of absence, with a constitution broken by war, wounds, and the wine-bottle; and with a temper soured and furious, none knew by what.

The transport *Queen Charlotte*, in which he sailed from St. Vincent, was wrecked in the Irish Channel; and of three hundred souls who were on board, the Captain Dhu—though but the ruins of what he had been in bodily strength—alone escaped, being cast ashore, lashed to a spar; and after many strange and perilous adventures among the Irish, who were then in arms against the government, in the winter of 1799, he found himself at home in his native place, the beautiful valley of the Spey: and now we have reached the last chapter in his mysterious history—an event which is still locally remembered by the Grants and others in Strathspey as the DARK DEED in the Forest of Gaich.

On the 11th of January, 1800, being the day preceeding Yule, he summoned a party of gillies, and announced his intention of proceeding up the mountains to hunt the red deer in that place.

The Badenoch men looked at each other with perplexity and fear—as, from time immemorial, the Eve of Yule has been the epoch for all mischief, devilry, and witchcraft in the Highlands; and the scene of the proposed hunting was just the

place that men might be supposed to avoid at such a time.

“To hunt on Yule Eve—and in the Forest of Gaich!”

Irresolute and unwilling alike to offend or obey, they gazed at each other in silence.

“Go not forth to hunt to-day,” said old Hamish Grant, the sergeant, who, being discharged after long service, was an occasional visitor at the house of his old leader.

“And why not to-day?” thundered Black Evan, with a terrible oath.

“Can you ask?”

“What day is it in particular?”

“The Eve of Yule.”

“Would you refuse to fight the enemy on Yule Eve?” asked the captain, scornfully.

“No, Ballychroan,” replied the sergeant, proudly; “for on that day in the year '76 I fought with the Americans on the Delaware.”

“And what is Yule to me?” exclaimed the captain, as he drank a deep draught. “Ha! ha! what is that to me? Go I shall, though the fiend—the accursed fiend—came up from hell with all his legions to bar the way. Go I shall, Hamish; and go I must?”

“This is most strange!”

“Fatality compels me,” said the captain, mournfully and wildly. “Oh, how few could comprehend the misery of a conviction like this! Fain would I give up *existence* if I could receive oblivion in exchange, but not life—*this* life at least. Fain would I rest in my grave, Hamish; but in the grave, even of a saint—yea, under the altar-stone of Iona—I could not find repose.”

"I do not understand all this," said the old sergeant, solemnly; "so let us consult the minister about it."

"The minister—bah!"

"You never feared death, Ballychroan?"

"Death—no! for he has everywhere eluded me. You have seen me rush into the breach amid a thousand dangers, and escape them all. I have flung myself upon the levelled bayonets, and among the uplifted swords of the enemy; but the bayonets became pointless, the swords blunted, the bullets harmless as snow-flakes! In the dark vault of the Vizie, the flames spared me; even the ocean itself repelled me, when three hundred brave men went down into its greedy gulf; and, like he who wanders for ever—he who mocked his Saviour on the ascent to Calvary—I seem to bear a charmed life; but yet, like that more happy wretch, I cannot live for ever. No, Hamish, no—my days are numbered!"

"Go not forth to-day," reiterated the old soldier, grasping the arm of the excited captain.

"Bah!" he responded, and drained another glass of whiskey.

"What did Kenneth Ower foretel two hundred years ago?"

"That when a *black* Yule overtook a *black* Laird of Ballychroan, the race would cease."

"Well—you are the first of your family who have the name of Evan *Dhu*—and you have no son."

"Thank Heaven, no! I care not for predictions, and Kenneth Ower Mackenzie, the Brahn prophet, was a fool."

"He foretold strange things though."

"Such as, that oats would replace the fairies on the hill of Tomnahourich, and that ships with sails

unfurled would pass and repass it; but the green bracken and the purple heather wave yet on the Fairies' Hill, and we have heard nothing of the ships.*"

"Kenneth Ower never spoke in vain," said the white-haired sergeant.

"I am too old a soldier to be terrified by silly predictions," exclaimed the captain, wrathfully; "so enough of this. Set forward, men—away to the forest! Let us drink, dance, and hunt while we may!"

And quaffing off a huge jug of alcohol, with a party of gillies, whom he had made half tipsy, he departed towards the Forest of Gaich.

Of all that band of hunters, not a man ever came down from the Grampians again!

On that night, when the whole atmosphere seemed calm and still, a terrific tempest, sudden as the discharge of a cannon, swept over the mountains. For hours the forked lightning played and flashed over Benoch-Corri-Va and the haunted Forest of Gaich, while the thunder-peals made the old women in every cottage and clachan totter down on their knees to mutter a prayer for deliverance from evil and danger, as the electric salvos hurtled over the great wooded

* The captain spoke in 1800. "Tomnahourich, the far-famed Fairies' Hill, has been sown with oats," states the *Inverness Advertiser* of 1859; "according to tradition, the Brahn prophet, who lived 200 years ago, predicted that ships with unfurled sails would pass and repass Tomnahourich; and further, that it would yet be placed under lock and key. The first part of the prediction was verified by the opening of the Caledonian Canal, and we seem to be on the eve of seeing the realization of the rest by the final closing up of the Fairies' Hill." In what succeeds I have closely followed local and oral tradition; but the black officer was *not* the last of his race, as he left a daughter, who, I believe, was married in England.

valley, through which the swollen Spey, the most furious of the Scottish rivers, laden with the spoil of a hundred forests, swept with a ceaseless roar to the German Ocean.

Over Gaich, the sky seemed all on fire. It was an expanse of crimson flame streaked with forky green flashes; and against this steady flush the huge Grampians stood strongly forth in sombre outline.

With night this storm passed away.

Three days after, some shepherds who, in pursuit of their scattered flocks, ventured into the wilderness of Gaich, saw a sight, the memory of which causes many yet to shudder, as they tell to their grandchildren around the winter hearth the story of the Captain Dhu.

A lonely shieling, in which he and his twenty gillies took refuge, had been destroyed by a thunderbolt. Its rafters and stones were scattered over the forest, with the corpses of its inmates—every man of whom had been *torn limb from limb*, and scattered far apart, as if by the hands of some mighty fiend!

Such was the startling end of the Black Captain and his companions.

His evil reputation, the weird locality of his hunting, and the equally weird character of this tempestuous night, have fixed the idea deeply in the minds of the peasantry that Evan Dhu, of Ballychroan, decoyed these twenty Badenoch men into Gaich Forest for the sole purpose of delivering them to the fiend, in conformity with some terrible compact; for the whole scene of the catastrophe bore evidence of their destruction by some infernal agency, rather than, as others averred, the levin brand of Heaven.

At times, on the returning Eve of Yule, those who have been belated in the forest suddenly find them-

selves in the midst of an invisible company of roisterers, whose laughter, shouts, imprecations, and impious songs, fill the poor loiterers with affright; for though the voices seem close to the ear, no one is visible: and these unearthly bacchanalians are supposed to be the spirits of the doomed captain and his companions.

On other occasions, screams, yells and entreaties for mercy—wild, and thrilling, and heartrending—with the hoarse, deep baying of infernal dogs, are swept over the waste on the wind. But since that terrible catastrophe on Yule Eve, 1800, none pass willingly through the Forest of Gaich alone!