

## The Romance of Squire Meldrum.

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**A**BOUT two miles south-west of the village of Ceres stand a few fragments of the ancient house of Struthers, or, as it is called in some old papers, Auchter-uther-Struther, from the morasses which at one time surrounded it.

The seat of the Earls of Crawford, time was when the edifice, erected during an age of chivalry and warfare, and ornamented with pinnacle and turret and arch, stood in the midst of a noble park, under the broad shadow of stately and venerable beech trees. Though now ruinous, delightful associations cling tenaciously to it—some legend or romance of the feudal past, or some reminiscence of the days when royalty sought in “the kingdom” a pleasant retreat from the harassing cares of government.

Monarch and prince and peer received in this quiet spot the most welcome hospitality. And here, centuries ago, two noblemen might often have been seen walking, arm-in-arm, about the beautiful grounds, or reclining in the shade of the spreading beeches. One of them is a middle-aged man, whose grave demeanour speaks of a thorough acquaintance with the strifes of that unruly age ;

But in the glances of his eye  
A penetrating, keen, and sly  
Expression found its home.

Somewhat different is his companion—a well-built man of medium stature, in whose fair face, glowing with wanton blithesomeness, we perceive the index of the true knight of chivalry.

Just now they are engaged in earnest confabulation. Evidently they are intimate friends, for, as the fair-faced hero, William Meldrum, of Cleish and the Binn, recounts his valorous deeds, the poetic eye of Davie Lindsay mirrors the enthusiasm of the knight whose adventures and exploits, when leisure will permit him, he pencils for affection's sake, and affection's sake alone, in the most brilliant and fascinating spirit,—whose virtues and amiable gallantry he makes to glow and glint from every line and phrase with dazzling graphicness. The Romance of Squire Meldrum marks the consummation, the autumn-tide, so to speak, of the chivalric age in Scotland. Let us listen to the tale as it comes from the pen of Sir David Lindsay of the Mount, Meldrum's bosom-friend at Struthers.

Gude Williame Meldrum was he named,  
Whose honour bright was ne'er defamed ;  
Stalwart and stout in every stryfe,  
And born within the shire of Fyfe.

The squire was but twenty years of age when he began his adventures, and the graphic picture given us of the nobly-descended knight at that time straightway enlists our admiration. He looks a hero, every inch of him. On his handsome countenance sit laughter and jollity, while his manly and athletic figure, dignified and free, combined with an extraordinary amiableness of disposition, wins him hosts of warm admirers.

Because he was so courageous,  
Ladies of him were amorous ;  
He was ane lover for a dame,  
Meek in chalmer like a lamb,  
But in the field ane champion,  
Rampand like ane wild lion.

Well practised was he in all the arts of chivalry—so well indeed that, in the field—whether in earnest or in play—there were few who could compare with him ; and to his knightly accomplishments were added the inestimable qualities of virtue



STRUTHERS CASTLE.

and wisdom. But he must needs win honour on foreign strands. The opportunity soon presented itself. Scotland and France in those days were firm friends, and when James of the Iron Belt sent a fleet, with three thousand men on board, under the command of the Earl of Arran, to assist the French king against the attacks of Henry VIII., Squire Meldrum eagerly threw in his lot with the expedition.

Now, as they passed the Irish coast, Carrickfergus, where two centuries before Edward Bruce was crowned, was set on fire and destroyed. On every side scenes of the most terrible barbarity were being enacted, but this young and valiant squire stayed, wherever he could, the hand of the brutal soldiery. All at once there broke out upon the grief-laden air a doleful cry of lamentation. He hastened in the direction of the sound, and discovered as fair a vision of charming young womanhood as his eyes had ever rested upon. Nude and defenceless she stood before a couple of villainous-looking rascals who were parting her garments between them, preparatory to executing the brutal savagery that awaited their hapless victim.

Her kirtle was of scarlet red,  
Of gold ane garland on her head,  
Decorit with enamelyne ;  
Belt and brooch of silver fyne.

At Meldrum's feet she flung herself upon her knees, beseeching him to defend a helpless maiden, and he, nothing loth, at once picked up the gauntlet of love and chivalry, roundly upbraided the ruffians for their brutishness, and ordered them to restore to the lady her apparel. In reply—

They drew their swords haistily,  
And straik at him with so great ire  
That from his harness flew the fyre.

Never in all his life had the knight been so sorely beset. Happily, however, he succeeded in slaying them both, his sword crashing right through the head of the one, and breaking

asunder over the other, whom he had to despatch with his dagger. Yet he himself escaped without hurt.

By this the trumpets blew, and Meldrum hastened to bid the fair lady adieu. But her heart had been won, and into the arms of her gallant deliverer she flung herself in an ecstasy of love and admiration and thankfulness, bidding him sojourn in her country, and offering him her heart and hand.

"Fain, fain would I stay," exclaimed the heroic youth, "but duty calls me. I must first try my fortune in France, and then, perchance, after the peace is made, will I come back to marry thee."

"Oh!" pleaded the lady, "let me go with thee, my preserver; for should I not love him paramount who rescued me from death, nay, from worse than death? Have no fear for me—I will dress myself as thy page, and follow thee wheresoever thou pleasest."

"Nay; it may not be—thou art too young to sail the sea in such company; but,

Lady, I say you in certain,  
Thou shalt have lufe for lufe again,  
Truly unto my own life's end,  
Farewell! to God I you commend."

Ere he departed she bestowed on him a keepsake, a costly ruby set in a ring. By and by the ships reached the rock-bound coast of Brittany, where the army disembarked, Squire Meldrum being placed in command of five hundred warriors who would have gone through fire and water to serve their courageous captain. At that time Henry of England was lying with his army near Calais, while the army of Louis XII. was encamped not far off in Picardy. As yet there had been no actual collision between the rival hosts, though skirmishes were taking place daily. When word reached Meldrum of the state of matters, he immediately chose one hundred spearmen—the boldest and most valiant in his company, and rode with all haste to the French camp, where he was courteously welcomed by the king.

Just at that moment it happened that there went out of the English host a champion, a monstrous, powerful man—Talbart by name. He was armed with a coat of mail, and in his bonnet were silver medals to remind friends and foes of his knightly prowess. Every day, like Goliath of old, had he stalked in front of the French lines, crying—“ I defy the armies of France : choose ye a man to come down to me, that he may break his spear with me for his lady’s sake. No ? Then ye are poltroons, every man of you, and laggards, brimful of cowardice.”

At this the French were greatly afraid, but when the youthful Scot perceived the braggart warrior strutting through the army—

Right haistily he passed him till,  
 Demanding him what was his will.  
 “ Forsooth ! I can find none,” quoth he,  
 “ On horse, or foot, dare fecht wi’ me.’  
 “ Then,” said he, “ it were great shame  
 Without battle ye should pass hame ;  
 Therefore, to God I make ane vow  
 The morn myself shall fecht with you !”

Talbart disdained him, for he was but a youth, and, like the shepherd boy of Israel, ruddy and of a fair countenance. “ My good child,” said the champion, “ thou’rt surely mad ; thou art far too young and inexperienced to do battle with a giant like me. Zounds ! but thou shouldst tremble at the very sight of me, and thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth with fear.”

“ Be not too puffed up, proud knight,” was the stripling’s reply ;

“ I trust that God shall be my guide,  
 And give me grace to staunch thy pride,  
 Though thou wert great as Gaul MacMorne.”

But the English soldier only scorned him the more, calling him a presumptuous bairn, and left him with his disdainful words ringing in his ears.

On its being reported to Monsieur d’Aubigny that the squire

had decided to combat with Master Talbart, he sent for him and warmly commended his courage. Meldrum assured him that he had undertaken the task simply to uphold the honour of Scotland, and requested a suitable steed. A hundred having been collected from the cavalry, the knight chose one and proved it by leaping upon its back and spurring it to full speed, exclaiming after he had done so, that horse never ran more pleasantly.

He took his leave, and went to rest ;  
 Syne early in the morn him drest  
 Wantonly in his warlike weed—  
 All well armed, except the heid.  
 He leapt upon his courser wicht,  
 And set him in his stirrups richt.

During the night Talbart has had a horrible dream. A monstrous black otter seemed to rise out of the sea and fiercely attack him, dragging him from his steed and biting him till he bled. Much perplexed is he to know its meaning, and so he tells the dream to his companions. They deride his weakness, and bid him prepare for the fray. He arms himself cap-a-pie, and, vaulting on his horse, rides gallantly forward to the lists.

Then clarions and trumpets blew,  
 And many warriors hither drew ;  
 On every side came many a man  
 To behold wha the battle wan.  
 The field was in a meadow green,  
 Where every man might well be seen ;  
 The heralds put them in such order  
 That no man passed within the border,  
 Nor pressed to come within the green,  
 But heralds and the champions keen.

No sooner had the trumpets given the signal than the champions rushed from their posts with lightning speed. Great was the crash of their meeting. The lances shivered to atoms—even to the hilt ; but, although the weapon of the Southron

struck full and fair, as Talbart meant it should, the Scottish cavalier sat as if he had been locked in the saddle. Fresh lances being assumed, the knights, with burning ire, again charged each other in full career, colliding in the centre with a noise like thunder. Once more the spears in flinders flew, the shock being so irresistible that horses and riders were thrown in a confused heap upon the ground. On their appearing for the next encounter Talbart's horse refused to take part in the game, and he had to get another. Once more the trumpets sounded the attack.

By that with all the force they can  
 They rudely at each other ran ;  
 Of that meeting ilk man did wonder,  
 Which sounded like a crack of thunder.  
 Through cuirass and through gloves of plate,  
 That Talbart might make nae debate,  
 The trencher of the Squyer's spear  
 Stuck still into Sir Talbart's gear.

All believed him dead. Lightly leaped the victor from his saddle to offer what comfort and support he could to his vanquished foe. As Talbart looked up his eyes fell upon the Squire's shield with its sable otter emerging, just as he had beheld it in his sleep, from a sea-wave field. "Alas!" he exclaimed, "my dream has come true; yon otter, methought last night, made me bleed, and dragged me from my horse. Alack-a-day! Before heaven I vow never to joust again. Thou knowest, sir knight, the compact we made; therefore I yield up to thee, as conqueror, my horse and harness."

Nothing in history or fiction is more touching or graceful, nothing more heroic and honourable, nothing more generous and tender than the reply of the courteous Scottish knight—

"I thank you, brother, heartily;  
 But nothing from thee must I take,  
 I fight for love and honour's sake,  
 Who covets more is but a churl,  
 Be he a belted knight or earl."



Talbart's wounds are dressed and attended to ; and Meldrum, "courted and caressed" and made a welcome guest by enemies as well as friends—for those were times when soldiers loved honour and admired daring deeds—sojourns a while longer in France to add to his list of honours and adventures.

Wherever he went his fame preceded him ; and when at last he bade adieu to beautiful France, where he was so well esteemed and where he had been asked in marriage by a lady of high degree,

The Scots were glad of his return,  
Though French ladies for him did mourn.

From Dieppe he set sail in "a gay vessel," well furnished with artillery, halbert, spear, and bow, loaded with abundance of victuals and the richest and choicest wines the gardens of France could produce, and filled with a merry crew eager for new deeds of daring. One morning his ship was attacked by an English man-of-war, greater in bulk and strength than his own. But a Scotsman always puts a stout heart to a *stey brae*. A desperate conflict ensued ; sixty Southrons were slain, while the Scots lost but fifteen men, and gained a glorious victory, boarding the hostile vessel and capturing her. Two hundred of the vanquished crew were landed upon the Kentish coast, and then the gallant knight continued his voyage with the rest of the prisoners, who were immured in Blackness Castle till ransom set them free.

And now Meldrum has returned to Scotland, where he is received with great honour. In the castle of Gleneagles he is invited to stay, the natural result of which is that he captures the heart of the handsome young widow, Marion Haldane. Many happy days does he spend there—

Sometime with hawking and hunting,  
Sometime with wanton horse running ;  
And sometime, like ane man of weir,  
Full galliardly wald rin ane speir ;—

He wan the prize above them all,  
Baith at the butts and the futeball.

News is brought one morning that a baron called Macfarlane is harrying the Lennox and has already captured one of the lady's castles. Meldrum at once determines to recapture the fortress, or nobly die in the attempt. This, however, was a duty incumbent upon the squire, for, says Leslæus, "there prevailed among the Scottishmen ane ancient custom that, wherever they happen to lodge, they defend their hosts from all hurt, even to the shedding of their blood and the losing of their lives if need be." There is an old saying in Scotland, too, that

I may weill see my friend need,  
But I will not see him bleed.

By this rude law of Scottish hospitality, therefore, Meldrum is obliged to own his hostess's quarrel and take the field against Macfarlane. And, to be sure, he is not reluctant. With her glove in his helmet he sets out with his men and the Gleneagles retainers. Marching all the afternoon and all the night, he arrives early in the morning at the stronghold, which, after a stubborn resistance, he takes by scaling the walls, himself going first. Again he displays the humane conqueror, as he has always been, sparing Macfarlane and letting the others go wherever they please. On his return to Strathearn the squire is received by his hostess with every manifestation of welcome.

But bitter-sweet, short-lived, and dearly bought is to be all their joyfulness and love. A cruel knight, Sir John Strivelin (or Stirling) of Keir, has resolved on Meldrum's destruction. It seems that the squire's arrival at Gleneagles had knocked all Keir's arrangements on the head, for he had determined that Lady Marion should marry a relation of his own. Pitcottie, that quaint old chronicler, relates the same story, how that between Leith and Edinburgh, under the Rood Chapel, Squire Meldrum was treacherously set upon by Stirling and his vassals, when "he fought cruelly with them, and slew the Laird of

Keir's principall servant before his face, defendant himselve, and hurt the Laird that he was in perrell of his life, and sex and twentie of his men hurt and slaine ; yet, through multiplication of his enemies, he was oversett and driven to the earth, and left lying for dead, for he was strucken throw the bodie, and the knappis of his elbows stricken fra him. Yet, be the mightie power of God, he eschapped the death, and leived fyftie yeirs thairafter."

Beside the mangled body of her lord Lady Marion threw herself, bathing his blood-stained face with her tears.

" Alas !" quoth she, " that I was born !  
 In my quarrel thou art forlorn ;  
 Thou wast a gem of gentleness,  
 And very well of worthiness."  
 Then to the earth she rushèd doon,  
 And lay into ane deadly swoon.

Meanwhile Anthony d'Arcy, Seigneur de la Bastie, the Deputy-Governor of Scotland, has pursued the villain and apprehended him. Our hero, too, has been taken to lodgings, where he is attended to by the greatest doctors in the country, who flock spontaneously to render him all the assistance and comfort their art affords, and save his life if that be possible. Long time, however, he lay at death's door, and as his wounds mended he learned so thoroughly the art of medicine that he became himself, through dearly bought experience, an expert chirurgeon, and took a wonderful delight in after years in ministering gratuitously to the indigent, whose troubles and illnesses he was always ready to assuage and remedy. While convalescent, the squire was informed that his lady-love had been compelled to marry.

So these lovers never met again,  
 Which was to them ane lasting pain ;  
 Howbeit her body was absent,  
 Her tender heart was aye present ;  
 Penelopè for Ulysses,  
 I trow, had never more distress ;

Nor Cresseid for true Troilus  
Was one-tenth part so dolorous.

In Fife, the story goes, there lived an aged lord, Patrick Lindsay of the Byres, who, having heard of Meldrum's high renown at home and abroad, courted his company and gave him the care of his household, appointing him his chief marischal and auditor of his accounts. By Lord Lindsay, the Sheriff-Principal, the squire was also made Sheriff-Depute of his native county, and at Struthers he spent the eventide of his life. His equity to every man within his jurisdiction, and his generosity to the poor, made him a great favourite in the humblest cottage, while at the tables of the great he was ever a welcome and honoured guest by reason of his illustrious fame and courteous address.

Nor, amid the hurly-burly of life's multifarious duties, did he forget the sweetheart of his early manhood.

Each year for his lady's sake  
Ane royal banquet would he make—  
With wild fowl, venison, and wine,  
With tart, and flam, and fruitage fine,  
With mirth, music, and minstrelsy,—  
All this he did for his lady.

Many years the squire spent with his lordly patron, but at last the Angel of Death approached and struck him with his mortal dart, when his soul, remarks the poet, with joy angelical took its flight straight to heaven. As the end drew near he bade farewell—a long, last, sad farewell to all his friends on earth. “The fairest eyes of France,” says Tytler, drawing the veil over the final scene, “will be dimmed by weeping, the beauteous stars of London eclipsed by sorrow, and the lamps of loveliness which illuminate the night of the north shrouded in the darkness of grief. But most heartily does he bid farewell to the fairest of them all—the star of Strathearn :—

‘ Ten thousand times adieu, above them all,  
Star of Stratherne, my Lady-Sovereign,  
For whom I shed my blood with mickle pain.’”