

A LEGEND OF STRATHEARN.*

REIGN OF JAMES V.

“THE night was the night, and the lads were the lads!” Such was an exclamation long known in the neighbourhood of Strathearn, and originated in one of the most characteristic instances of Highland ferocity and revenge to be found in the history of the Gael. During the reign of James IV. the MacNabs and the Neishes were septs of considerable influence in the vicinity of Lochearn, and had been long opposed to each other. The families and their adherents lived in a state of mutual warfare, embittered by ancient jealousies, and by real or supposed acts of aggression, of which the one sept accused the other. The retort was of course any thing but courteous; both were equally right in their own estimation, and consequently the insults and injuries could not be allowed to pass unrevenged.

After a number of years had elapsed, during which skirmishes between the families and followers of Neish and MacNab had been frequent and fatal, a regularly pitched

* Oral Traditions of Strathearn. The present writer got possession of this story, so singularly illustrative of the habits of the Highlanders in former times, by mere accident. A version of it appeared in a work entitled “Antiquities of Strathearn, with Historical and Traditionary Tales and Biographical Sketches of Celebrated Individuals belonging to the District, by John Shearer, junior.” The First Part of it seems only to have been published at Perth in 1836

battle was fought on the confines of a glen which divides two hills rising due north of the foot of Lochearn. In this conflict both clans mustered their followers almost to a man, and it was marked by that ferocity and hatred which long series of animosities had rendered implacable. They assailed each other with savage yells and imprecations, disdainingly to ask quarter, receiving none, and fighting for revenge. At length victory declared in favour of the MacNabs, and only a remnant of the defeated sept Neish remained. Their chief fell covered with wounds, but not before several of the MacNabs had fallen by his broadsword. A large stone still marks the spot where he fell covered with dagger and dirk wounds inflicted by the MacNabs. He long kept the enemy at bay, standing with his back to this stone, on which the inhabitants of the neighbourhood credulously believe the stains of his blood are still visible, and can never be effaced.

The few of the sept Neish who escaped retired to an islet at the eastern extremity of Lochearn, and placed themselves under the command of an old Highlander, a relative of their chieftain slain in the conflict already mentioned. This Highlander seems to have been a complete personification of Donald Bean Lean in WAVERLEY. He and his followers subsisted entirely by plunder, and as they possessed the only boat on Lochearn, their retreat was inaccessible in a neighbourhood at that time, and long afterwards, thinly inhabited. They were thus enabled to carry on their warfare against all and sundry without any opposition, or any attempt on the part of the Government to punish such dangerous banditti, but in reality the Highlands abounded with similar robbers, rendered desperate by their poverty and unscrupulous by their savage life.

The clan Neish continued their freebooting and predatory incursions until an incident occurred which brought against them their old and implacable enemies the Mac-

Nabs, in the reign of James V. The then chief of the MacNabs, probably the same who had routed the clan Neish, was a personage more generally feared than respected even by his own feudal followers. He was known to be an absolute despot; his word was considered law, and to contradict, disobey, or offend him in the slightest manner, was certain to incur summary punishment. He resided in his castle, which stands upon a rocky isthmus near the head of Loch Tay, ruling his clan in the most arbitrary manner, and vindictive and unrelenting to his enemies of every rank and condition.

At the particular time stated the haughty chief of the MacNabs sent one of his domestics to Crieff for provisions of various kinds, intending to entertain his friends and allies with a great carousal on Christmas Day. The man made all his purchases in obedience to his chief's directions, and was on his way back to MacNab's castle with the goods, when he was surrounded by Neish and his followers, and robbed of every article. He threatened them with dreadful retaliation from his chief and the clan if they did not restore the goods, but the banditti ridiculed all his declarations, and even threatened to dispatch him if he annoyed them by any farther expostulations. It was probably seldom that such a quantity of tempting viands had fallen in their way, and they were determined to enjoy them whatever might be the consequences.

When the servant arrived at MacNab's residence, and informed him that he had fallen among thieves in the way, and that these thieves were the clan Neish, his rage was unbounded, and having informed his sons of the insult, the most sanguinary revenge was resolved to be inflicted. It is traditionally said that MacNab could boast of having twelve sons, all of such bodily and muscular strength that the weakest of them could drive his dirk through a board two inches thick. One of them in particular, in addition

to his athletic appearance, and a body of more than ordinary dimensions, was of such rough manners and uncompromising countenance that he was ironically distinguished by the soubriquet of *Smooth John MacNab*.

The robbery of the provisions had prevented MacNab from inviting his friends to his intended carousal, and on the evening of the Christmas Day in question Smooth John and his brothers were seated round a table which was by no means replenished in the manner it would have been if the provisions had safely arrived, and it was evident from their countenances that they were meditating some desperate deed. The old chief, who recollected with rage that the Neishes were feasting at that very time on what he had been forcibly deprived of by them, entered the apartment after taking a turn in the court-yard. He paced the floor with his arms folded, occasionally looking at his sons, and at length broke silence by exclaiming in Gaelic—"This night is the night, if the lads were but lads."

It was not uncommon among the Scottish Highlanders, as among other tribes, for the chiefs and their emissaries to communicate their sentiments and wishes by significant hints, looks, and signs, which were rarely misunderstood. On the present occasion the old chief's laconic expression, which was intended to reprove his sons for their slowness to revenge the insult, was taken precisely as he wanted. Smooth John exclaimed—"The night *is* the night, and the lads *are* the lads." He and his brothers instantly started to thier feet, and each belted his pistol, dirk, and claymore. The old chief viewed their equipment with unspeakable pleasure, and enjoined them to act *like lads*—a recommendation on his part altogether unnecessary.

The MacNabs well knew that without a boat the clan Neish were altogether inaccessible, and as they had no time to delay, led on by Smooth John, they proceeded to a creek in Loch Tay, where their pleasure-boat was lying,

and drawing it on shore they raised it upon their brawny shoulders, and man to man they carried it between them, six of the brothers occasionally relieving the other six. In this manner, with the boat on their shoulders, they ascended a hill which run to a considerable height, by steep and irregular slopes in a south direction, till betwixt it and another to the westward there is a crooked narrow pass leading to Glentarkin. Here a mountain stream served them as a guide for several miles, till it precipitates down the steep copse-covered banks of Lochearn. †

The fatigue which the MacNabs, or the *lads*, as their father designated them, must have undergone on this occasion, carrying on their shoulders a heavy boat over several miles of rugged and mountainous country in a winter night is astonishing, and evinces their determined resolution to inflict on the island caterans a dreadful punishment. None but such men, and so circumstanced and impelled, could have accomplished such a journey. Having arrived at Lochearn they launched their boat, and plied the oars across the dark and still waters of the lake. All was still and silent. A partially clouded moon afforded them a little indistinct light, and occasionally reflected on the lofty mountains which rise in all directions round this romantic lake, and terminate in various bold and rocky outlines, intersected with precipices and masses of protruding cliffs, deep hollows and ravines, from which innumerable torrents pour into the lake. The MacNabs moored their boat alongside the skiff belonging to the banditti, and landed on the islet. Proceeding to the low roofed dwelling of the Neishes, which was little better than a hovel, they found that a dead silence reigned within, occasionally interrupted by the sonorous groans and sounds of deep intoxication. Looking through a hole or aperture in the wall, the MacNabs perceived one solitary individual seated beside a few expiring embers of firewood. This person was old Neish,

the leader of the caterans. Smooth John MacNab immediately struck the door with his fist, and the unexpected noise made the heart of him within quake. Starting to his feet, he exclaimed—"Who knocks at the door?" "One whom you have no wish to be here," was the reply. Neish at once recognised the voice—"Smooth John MacNab?" he uttered. "If he has hitherto been *smooth*," replied MacNab, "you will find him *rough* for this one night."

No sooner had MacNab uttered these words than he struck the door of the hovel in such a manner as to break it in several pieces, and rushing in, followed by his brothers, he seized the old man by his few remaining grey hairs, twisted him below his knee, and deliberately severed his head from his body with his claymore. While thus employed, his brothers were busily slaughtering the drunken caterans, who were lying sound asleep in different parts of the hovel. The only one who escaped was a little boy, who contrived to conceal himself under a bed till the slaughter was over. This boy when he grew up settled peaceably in the neighbourhood, and from him, it is said, are descended the Neishes of the present time inhabiting Strathearn and Strathallan, who are known in Gaelic by the name of *Mac Ilduie*, or *sons of the black man*.

The MacNabs having completed their bloody work, and satisfied their revenge in this cruel manner, threw the dead bodies into Loch Tay, and left the islet in their own boat, carrying with them the head of the old cateran to present to their father. They resolved to carry back the boat on their shoulders, but when about half way to their own residence they felt fatigued, as well as retarded by the cumbersome load, and they threw it down on the hill side, where its mouldering planks were long visible, and regarded with superstitious dread by the people. When they appeared in their father's hall, and threw before him the head of the

old cateran, who had deprived him of his Christmas supper, the savage chieftain exultingly exclaimed—"Dread Nought," which is supposed to be the origin of the motto and of the crest of MacNab of MacNab, the former being *Dread Nought*, and the crest a bushy head with a beard. The family piper struck up a pibroch of victory; friendly cups of whisky were freely circulated among the domestics, with as many congratulations as if the most important victory had been gained, or as if the sons of MacNab had achieved a most praiseworthy, noble, and generous action, instead of having perpetrated a series of barbarous and cowardly murders on intoxicated robbers in their sleep. The old chief of MacNab made himself drunk with joy, as did also Smooth John and his brothers, and as long as he lived the Laird always referred to this exploit with peculiar satisfaction, using the expression, which was long proverbial in the district—"Aye! Aye! the night *was* the night, and the lads *were* the lads!"