

CHAPTER XII.

O ! whither shall I run, or which way fly
The sight of this so horrid spectacle ?

MILTON.

AMHERST had watched Alexander Macgillivray's motions with considerable anxiety, being now rather impatient for an opportunity of slipping down from his irksome and hazardous concealment, and attempting his escape. But even were he certain that the villain was asleep, he saw, with great uneasiness, that it would be almost impossible to approach the door, far less to open it, without disturbing those of the gang, whose bodies lay like the spokes of a wheel round the decaying fire, and over several of whom he must step before he could get near to it.

Believing that their leader was undoubtedly slumbering, he surveyed them with much attention, studying how he could best pass over them. Two or three several times he had moved silent-

ly from his place, and was almost in the act of putting down one toe on the lid of the large chest, when an accidental motion of some of the sleepers, such as the laboured stretching of an arm, or a leg, when they dreamt of their waking deeds, or perhaps the turning of a head to an easier position, would disconcert his purpose. Being so often disappointed, he was almost resolved to risk the desperate chance, and was arming himself with the resolution necessary for the unequal combat that must have followed his attempt, when, to his astonishment, the door was suddenly forced in, and thrown down upon the sleepers, by a large stone driven with such fury against it, that it scattered the very embers of the fire about the floor.

In the aperture, a little figure appeared for an instant, shrouded in a large fleece of green moss, torn from the ample surface of some rock or bank. It screamed in a shrill voice: “ Let the dead watch their time, and come down and flee !”—and then instantly disappeared.

The whole gang, roused by the crash, were upon their legs in a moment ; but being so suddenly awakened from a profound sleep, they arose con-

fused and ignorant of what occasioned the alarm ; and the clamour in Gaelic and English was so loud, that not a word could be heard. All inquired, and none could explain.

As they were standing debating, another large stone came bang against the sods forming the back wall of the building ; and the shock was followed by a wild unearthly laugh.

“ Damnation !” exclaimed Alexander Macgilivray. “ What are ye all standing and chattering at as if it were a ghost ? There’s somebody playing tricks upon us ; let’s out after them !” And seizing a claymore, he sprang to the door, followed by the miller and the whole gang.

Amherst heard them crashing through the bushes behind the hut, as if in pursuit of some one in that direction. His first thought was to make an immediate effort to escape ; but having observed from their looks, that most of the gang believed there was something really supernatural in this assault, and arguing from thence, that they would probably not venture very far beyond the light that glimmered from the door-way, he readily interpreted the friendly hint that had been given him, and lifting the dead body of the

officer, he stripped off the bloody coat, and quickly put it over his own. He then seized his fowling piece, and dropped himself to the floor, and concealing his face as well as he could with his cap, he stalked forth from the door.

His conjectures as to the men's fears had not been groundless. They had followed their more hardy leaders no farther than to the outside of the hut, where, had he appeared undisguised, he would have been most certainly intercepted and seized by them. But, no sooner did they behold what they took to be the reanimated body of the murdered officer, walking in the stream of light that issued from the door, with the blood pouring as it were from the fatal wound in his breast, than the whole superstitious group, believing that the devil had taken possession of the corpse, uttered yells of terror, and ran off amongst those very bushes their fears had formerly hindered them from venturing to penetrate.

Amherst seeing the way clear before him, pressed forward, but, in the confusion of the moment, he took the direction up the glen, leading to the mountains. He had not gone three steps, when he heard the voice of the miller, who was

by this time returning with Macgillivray from a fruitless chase, and was within less than twenty yards.

“Damn it! there’s a man rinnin’ awa’!—this way, Maister Macgillivray!—after him!—this way!—up the water!”

Amherst urged forwards. The obscure moonlight fell partially among the trees; the shades of night being deepened to blackness in particular parts, by the thickness of the foliage above, so that, though the mere figure might occasionally be perceptible, it was more frequently lost altogether. Amherst flew,—and as he did so, he heard the quick steps, and the shouts and execrations of his pursuers, at no great distance behind him. He rushed desperately onwards along the precipices, and in passing by a steep projecting bank, where the pendant bushes made it so dark that he could only guess at his way, his foot slipped through some decayed soil projecting from the edge of a rock overhanging the hollow bed of the brook, and he tumbled headlong through the boughs of the trees below, twenty or thirty feet, down to the very bottom.

Fortunately for Amherst, he dropped upon a

dry heap of pure soft sand, loosely laid up by some recent flood. This lucky circumstance, and that of his fall having been broken by the intervening twigs, saved him from being killed. As it was, he escaped with a few unimportant bruises. He lay, however, stupified for a moment, but was soon brought to his recollection, by hearing the loud curses and exclamations of his pursuers, who, ignorant of what had happened, still scrambled along in his supposed track, from which he had much reason to be thankful he had been so suddenly and safely removed.

He lay as still as death for a considerable time, until he heard their distant voices faintly repeated by the echoes far up the glen. He then recovered his legs, and stripping off his borrowed coat, he threw it away, and groped for his fowling-piece, that had fallen as softly as he had done, and was uninjured. With much circumspection he began to feel his way down the cavernous bed of the brook, creeping in the dark with as little noise as possible, under the projecting rocks, and banks, and bushes, and occasionally wading through the shallow water, support-

ing his slippery steps with a broken bough he accidentally picked up.

Having advanced so far as to think himself beyond hearing of the banditti, he moved with more freedom, and, consequently, with greater expedition, until at length, much to his satisfaction, the shade became less profound, and he discovered that he was emerging upon the great road by which he had approached the house of Lochandhu, the night of his arrival there.

He sat down, for a little time, on a large stone by the side of the way, to recover his breath, and to offer up ejaculations for his almost miraculous deliverance from certain murder. What was now to be done, or how was he to proceed? Must he return to the house, after having such dreadful proofs that Lochandhu was the protector, if not the head, of a gang of robbers and murderers? Yet how was he to procure the means of immediate flight, without giving alarm to the wavering mind of Lochandhu? He could not leave his house that night so secretly that his departure would not be discovered by the gang, who, by short cuts known only to themselves, could easily intercept, waylay, and murder him.

Trusting, therefore, to that protection, which the conversation of the villains had led him to believe Lochandhu still felt disposed to afford him, he resolved to continue his guest for this night at least.

But after having thus determined on his more immediate line of conduct, he began to consider what his after plans should be. He remembered the keen desire expressed both by Alexander Macgillivray and the blood-thirsty miller, that they might prevail on Lochandhu to permit them to make away with him; and notwithstanding that he considered himself tolerably assured of present safety under the roof of his host, he felt convinced, that the atrocious villain Alexander, would continue to use every means that fraud or deceit might enable him to wield, to work upon their leader, to persuade him to abandon him; and he could hardly doubt, that they would eventually succeed, and that, perhaps, very soon. It therefore became prudent to terminate his visit at Lochandhu as speedily, and in as natural a manner as possible; but he could not very well decide how to do this without awakening suspicion.

Rising from the stone on which he had sat for some time, he was walking leisurely up the ascent, when something started suddenly forth from beneath the shadow of the underwood, on the dark side of the road, a few paces before him. He involuntarily cocked and presented his gun. The figure threw its arms abroad, and he instantly took down the piece from his shoulder, and uncocked it, for he beheld the *Dwarfie Carline* standing in the middle of the path.

She advanced to him with a quick step, and taking him by the arm, "Amherst Oakenwold!" said she, in a more subdued tone of voice than she had ever before used, "I have waited long for you here, but 'tis well I have met you."

"Waited for me!" said he, with surprise, "how could you have looked for meeting me here?"

"Hush!" said she, motioning with her hand, "ask no questions—time presses, and I have much to say. The hour at last approaches when you must leave these mountains. But first you have a great work to perform; and here, you must solemnly promise to meet me two hours before to-morrow's midnight, by the Fairies' Oak

on the north side of Loch an Eilan. You know the spot?"

"I do," said Amherst, with a feeling of hesitation, which, though but faintly expressed, was quickly caught at by this mysterious being.

"You cannot fear me!" said she, with much emphasis, at the same time expanding her arms, and throwing back her head with an air of dignified surprise—

"I do not fear you," said Amherst, "but yet I may be excused for wishing to have some reason assigned for so extraordinary a demand, from one of whom I know so little."

"What!" said she, "do you doubt *me*, after having within this very hour saved your life!—after having saved you from cruel and remorseless murder?"

"It was you then," eagerly inquired Amherst, "it was you then who ——"

"Hush!" said the Carline interrupting him, and lifting her hand up in the attitude of silence—
"I tell you we have no time to speak of such things now. Once for all, will you meet me at Loch an Eilan to-morrow night at the appointed trysting tree?—two hours before midnight? I

talk not of your life—what would your life be to me?—the fate of Eliza Malcolm hangs upon your promise.”

“ Eliza Malcolm !” exclaimed Amherst with astonishment. “ Good Heavens ! how can her fate be connected with any spot within the circle of these mountains ?”

“ Hush ! speak not so loud,” said the Carline. “ But, answer me—Will you come ?” She waited for his reply.

Amherst was moved by the powerful talisman of the name ; and he thought the signal deliverance this friendly being had so lately effected for him, in a manner so miraculous in itself, a sufficient guarantee that at least she could intend him no treachery.

“ I will come,” said he.

“ Then listen to me,” said the Carline. “ Come with your attendant, armed, and with your horses prepared for flight. Let not your real intentions be known at Lochandhu, but make some rational pretence for leaving it. Think of what you overheard pass to-night between those murderous villains in the hut. Nay, start not with surprise. Think you that I too heard them not ?

They will be with your attendant by cock-crow to-morrow. Let him be prepared to mislead them, with the story of your expedition to Glenmore. Leave Lochandhu to-morrow afternoon, as if for the purpose of going thither. The robbers' road lies on the south side of the loch—let your way be on the north. Halt, and conceal yourselves and your horses among the thickets of the Ord Bain, till the trysting-hour, and then fail not to meet me under the appointed tree. Return now to Lochandhu—be cautious till your departure. Again, I tell you, that upon your prudence for the next twenty-four hours depends the fate of Eliza Malcolm!—If you fail—lost to your friends and to your country, your bones shall whiten beneath yonder silent wave, and your lonely spirit shall wander through these pathless wilds, or hover amidst the cold mists of the loch, without one kindred ghost to listen to its wailings. Remember!—two hours before to-morrow's midnight, at the trysting-oak!”

As she finished speaking, she raised her lean arms, as if to impress her words more deeply upon his mind, and instantly disappeared among the brushwood, leaving Amherst in amazement.

Having recovered himself, he hastened forward, and had gone but a very short way when he met with O'Gollochar, who had just set out to look for him, and was overjoyed to meet him.

Amherst did not exactly choose to trust O'Gollochar with all the particulars of his night's adventures, prudently considering, that what he might himself find rather a difficult matter to conceal from the penetration of Lochandhu and his wife, would be still more troublesome for Cornelius to keep. He therefore described the place where he was bewildered, and his route homewards as lying in a direction quite opposite to the truth. He was glad, however, that his good fortune, by having thus thrown O'Gollochar in his way, afforded him the opportunity of talking to him without the chance of being seen or overheard by others. He told him that it was his intention to go on his Glenmore expedition on the evening of the ensuing day, and as he meant to devote at least a week, partly to the pursuit of the deer, but chiefly to the wild scenery about the base of the mountains, on which he meant to employ his pencil, he should take his baggage with him.

He told his man further, that for certain reasons, which he should afterwards know, it was absolutely necessary that he should make no secret of their proposed expedition; that he should therefore take every opportunity of mentioning it that night, by way of a piece of news, in Lochandhu's kitchen; and that, if at any time he should be questioned on the subject, he should, without reserve, tell the whole of what his master had communicated to him about his plans of future recreation.

Matters having been thus settled, Amherst hastened to the house, from which he was by this time but a little way distant. The hour of his arrival was a very late one, yet he found that his host had only come in a few minutes before him. He endeavoured to meet Lochandhu with as much frankness of manner as he could possibly assume, though he felt that to do so was no easy task, and one that went very much against his conscience. He gave him a long history of his day's ramble; and, after mentioning the circumstance of his having seen the eagle, and the disappointment he had met with in regard to it, he told him that he had been led astray in the dark, and that he had

lost his way in the woods, but he took especial care to describe his wanderings, as he had done to O'Gollochar, in a manner very wide of the reality. Lochandhu listened to the story with his usual politeness, and to the account of his sport, with much apparent interest, and Amherst, to mislead him the more, talked, with feigned rapture, of the pleasure he had lately received from such amusements.

“ You know,” said he, “ that much as I was gratified with the grand spectacle you were kind enough to indulge me with, when you contrived to show me so many head of deer, by having them driven into one spot, that I yet held the sport of that day to be a kind of butchery ; and you may recollect that I then resolved to dedicate a week, before leaving the Highlands, to the pursuit of those noble animals, attended by no one but my servant, and entirely depending upon my own exertions and my own ingenuity. As time now wears away, and I cannot much longer intrude upon your hospitality, I have resolved to put my intentions in practice immediately, lest, by postponing them too long, and leaving them till the last, I may eventually be obliged to quit the country without

fulfilling them at all. I therefore mean to go to-morrow evening to the Bothy in Glenmore I am already acquainted with, whence I can easily reach such parts of the mountains as you have told me are frequented by the deer, and I anticipate much pleasure from being thus left to an entire dependance upon my own skill in waging war upon them. But this is not my only object. For I mean to revel in the sublime scenery to be met with about the base of the Cairngorum, and to endeavour to carry off with my pencil a few of the more remarkable features, already so powerfully impressed on my mind."

As this was nothing more than the following up of an intention Amherst had previously more than once expressed, Lochandhu manifested no surprise at his resolution. On the contrary, he applauded his design, and gave his guest a long list of general instructions, which might have formed a very good pocket manual, or vade-mecum on the sublime and arduous art of deer-stalking.

"I suppose, Mr Oakenwold," said he archly, after all this—"I suppose by the time a week has passed away, I may collect all the horses in the neighbourhood to bring home the spoil. At

all events, I shall send a messenger to you in a day or two, to learn how you get on.—But I advise you to take some provisions with you, just to set up your larder with at first, as I would by no means recommend that you should entirely trust to the execution of your gun ;—though, by the bye, you will find enough of the lesser kinds of game, to ensure such a marksman as you are against starvation.”

After this conversation, Amherst retired to rest ; and notwithstanding the harassing events to which he had been that night exposed, the fatigued state of both his body and mind was too great to permit him long to ruminate upon them ; and he slept very soundly till morning, when he arose well refreshed, and ready to undergo new adventures.

When O’Gollochar came to him, he gathered from him some interesting particulars. Having gone, as usual, at an early hour to the stable, he had had a visit from Forbes the miller. This cunning villain appeared to have assailed the Irishman with questions so round-about, yet apparently so simple and natural in themselves, that Amherst had good reason, secretly to congratulate

himself, on the precautions he had taken, in veiling his real intentions even from his servant, by giving him the same story, both as to his last night's adventures, and the proposed expedition he was about to undertake, that he had told Lochandhu; for he plainly saw, that if he had acted differently, not all the slender stock of art poor Cornelius was master of, would have been sufficient to throw dust in the eyes of this sly and subtile scout. As it was, every thing fell with perfect nature from the mouth of the unsuspecting Irishman; and Amherst was convinced that the villains would become the dupes of his manœuvre.