

The Legend of Sauchope.

IT was the 20th of March 1708. Night had closed in, and a raw, cold, bleak night it was indeed. Against the iron-bound coast of the East Neuk the raging billows of the North Sea were lashing themselves, and ebbing away again with a noise like distant thunder; and along the streets of the Flemish-looking town of Crail, its wings laden with an easterly haar which penetrated one through and through like the edge of a sword, swept a bitter biting blast, making the street grass which grew unheeded save by our equine friends and their bovine relations, wave to and fro in the misty starlight.

The old church-bell had just tolled the hour of ten, and, as the dolorous clang of the tremulous instrument died away, the good folks of the ancient burgh barred their doors and windows, preparatory to making themselves snug and secure for the night. The last reveller had departed from the Thane o' Fife, as the inn or chief hostel in the town was called, and at the door gazing after the retreating figure stood the landlord, old Master Spiggot, muttering with many a sad and solemn shake of his hoary head, "There *was* a time!" Yes, there was a time, but that was before the much-hated union of the two countries depauperated the coast towns of Fife of much of their foreign commerce.

Out of his reverie Master Spiggot was awakened by the sudden appearance of a horseman, whose approach had been muffled by the length and softness of the grass which covered the street. Cheerily greeting the landlord the traveller lightly dismounted, and, stooping, entered the low-arched door of the

inn, with its old monastic legend and its well-known signboard, adorned with the Thane of Fife, armed *cap-a-pie*, careering at full gallop on a gaily caparisoned charger from the ireful rage of Macbeth.

Boniface Spiggot measured the stranger with great diligence as he strode into the bar, his gilt spurs clanking accompaniment to his stern soldier-like tread. All in all, he was rather prepossessing, well-made, of middle age, with dark, piercing eyes, and short moustache which breathed of foreign warfare. Everything bespoke a free and gentlemanly bearing. Everything about him was so picturesque and handsome that Master Spiggot who had seen many wonderful things in his days, looked on in perfect wonder and admiration. He was arrayed in a brightly coloured and profusely furred roquelaur-cloak, over which flowed the essenced love-locks of his massive peruke, so common among the courtiers of that time. A broad-leafed beaver hat with a large, white plume rested upon his head. Such was his outward appearance. Divesting himself of his richly-embroidered roquelaur there was displayed a slashed doublet of white velvet, edged all the way with broad bars of exquisite lace, and drawn in at the waist by a handsome belt, fastened by a monster gold buckle.

The sight bedazzled the landlord's eyes. Verily, he thought, here is a Prince, and hastened to apologise for the meanness of his entertainment. At the same time he set before his guest his poor viands—to wit, a Crail capon or broiled haddock, done just as only Boniface himself knew how to do them, and a stoup of the best wine. His love of pelf—maybe, however, it was merely his curiosity—had been pricked, and he remarked—“Your honour canna think o' ridin' on the nicht.” The stranger told him that it was impossible for him to tarry; he must set out again as soon as he had supped and drunk. At this Master Spiggot, with genuine Fifeish hospitality, proceeded to warn him of the dangers he might encounter should he lose his way.

“Never fear!” said the traveller laughing. “I know every inch of the road, and am therefore quite able to avoid the pitfalls and the rocks.”

Like his contemporaries, the publican of the Thane was inquisitive—dreadfully so; and, like many another person, deemed himself omniscient so far as a knowledge of the persons and places of the East Neuk was concerned. But though he scrutinised the stranger’s visage with great deliberation, he could not for the life of him recal any precognition of it, and had for once to acknowledge himself fairly beaten, simply saying, “Your Lordship kens the country hereabouts, then?”

“Yes, mine host!” replied the cavalier, in a tone that carried conviction with it and was meant to be decisive. Then, after reflecting a moment, he asked, “Are there any visitors with thee just now, gudeman?”

“Alack-a-day! sir, our guests are unco few and far between noo. But there’s one cam’ just at the gloamin’—a gey foreign-looking-like chap who has been asking the way to Balcomie Castle. A soldier I would tak’ him to be, frae the way he cocks his beaver.”

“Balcomie—did you say? Commend me to him, and bid him come and sup with me.”

“What name did you say, kind sir?” asked Spiggot.

“Get out, thou inquisitive scoundrel,” replied the knight most good-naturedly. “I gave thee no name; but say to this foreigner that the Major of the Earl of Orkney’s Dragoons solicits his companionship in a stoup of Bordeaux wine.”

Boniface hastened to obey his guest’s commands, the result of which was that the latter soon found himself in the presence of the Continental cavalier who greeted his visitor with characteristic politeness. An exceedingly tall dark man he was, with a Grecian nose, over which his almost jet-black eyebrows formed one continuous line. He was faultlessly attired in a green velvet suit, so lavishly adorned with lace that the silk was all but invisible.

Introductions over, the two fell a-talking. The conversation hinged on the wars which they had passed through. It turned out that both had fought in the same campaigns—particularly in that of Ramillies in 1706, when the Scottish soldier served in the Grey Dragoons and the foreign knight under the “old tyrannical dog,” Baron Van Vandenberg, on the side of the allies, for he was a French Protestant refugee. One incident in the battle neither of the men, thus strangely met, could forget, and the visitor asked the Scotsman to give his version of the affair, whereof the following is an epitome:—

It was at the attack on Pont-a-Vendin. Two young Frenchmen, serving like yourself in Vandenberg’s regiment, had connived at the escape of an illustrious French prisoner whom some averred was none other than Marshal Villeroi himself. Of course, the affair caused great excitement in the camp, and the hard-hearted, inhuman Dutchman insisted that the culprits should be unconditionally handed over to him for punishment. Marlborough, who was Commander-in-Chief of the allied forces, whether from want of thought or in haste, granted the Hollander’s request. As the Duke’s aide-de-camp, the written order was conveyed by me, so I witnessed the whole ghastly scene—a scene which I never recal without sadness and horror.

Vandenberg received the despatch as a lion might his prey—with a growl of savage delight. I shall never forget his face—it haunts me even yet. He would have bowed, but the shortness of his neck and the rotundity of his body would not permit of such a condescension. I could have laughed outright at the oddity of his aspect, but with becoming grace delivered my message, then retired, ostensibly to humbly await any reply, but in reality to hide the smiles that would, in spite of me, play bo-peep with one another across my face.

His eyes gleamed with diabolical wrath and exultation. Seizing his speaking trumpet he shouted—“Ruyters—halt! Form open column—trot! Forward the flanks—form circle—sling musketoons! Trumpeters—to the centre and dismount!”

The manœuvres were executed so suddenly that, before I was aware of it, I found myself surrounded by the Ruyters, and thus became, perforce, a spectator of the awful drama. I saw a specimen of Dutch discipline and barbarity. One of the young volunteers was stripped to the skin, and the savage Hollander, after surveying him for a moment with mingled rage and triumph thundered out the single word—"Flog!"

Never shall I forget the scene. A brawny trumpeter stepped forth. Down came the many-knotted scourge again and again, leaving at each fell swoop nine deep furrows as if a red-hot plough had gone over the skin. An awful stillness reigned, broken only by the muffled groans of the victim, the whiz of the horrible whip as it lashed the air in its descent, and the spluttering of the torches, for it was night and the snow was falling fast.

"Flog!" Another powerful trumpeter administered his twenty-five strokes.

"Flog! Flog! Flog!" More trumpeters wielded the weapon; the drums rat-a-tapped the time, and the blows numbered now not dozens, but hundreds. At last there was a convulsive shudder, the jaws relaxed, the head fell—the brave young Frenchman was dead.

Orders were at once given to prepare the other prisoner for the slaughter. But I had seen enough, and was not inclined to stand any more; so, disgusted and enraged, I approached the heathenish monster and said—"Mynheer Baron Van Vandenberg, here are one hundred guineas—wilt thou hand over to me this prisoner?"

The Dutchman's greed was well-nigh as matchless as his brutality. "Ach!" he cried, "dat's ver small—zay two hunder ponds."

I was determined to have the prisoner, however, and therefore told him that I would refer the matter to the Commander-in-Chief, whereupon he grinned furiously and said, "Gib me de bills, ant de schleman iz yours."

Thus the young soldier's life was saved. The Ruyters marched away. Sadly and tenderly we drew the half-frozen clothing over the stiffened form of the murdered brother, and, tying it across the saddle of my horse, set out for the nearest town.

At this point the foreign cavalier who had refrained at first from giving his companion his name, and had listened to the story with but little interruption, started to his feet. Grasping the Scotsman by the hand, he exclaimed, "For Armentières, near Lille! Oh, Monsieur, I am that Frenchman," and could say no more, but kissed his saviour's hand again and again.

"You!" cried the Major in blank amazement. "What in all the world are you doing here in this out-of-the-way place, and at such a perilous time for a foreigner?"

"It's the same old tale, monsieur—love, ambition, and envy. Doubtless you have heard of M. Henri Lemercier?"

"What!" said his companion, "the great swordsman and fencer, whom all Europe know? Give me your hand again. There is but one man whom knights of the rapier place alongside of you, sir, and that is Sir William Hope."

"Here is my secret, monsieur. I love Mademoiselle Athalie, whom, no doubt, you have heard of. Mon dieu! she has indeed set me a task. Nothing will satisfy her but I must cross swords with the Scottish chevalier who, Athalie thinks, usurps my reputation. In token of my conquest I must take back this handkerchief stained with his blood. When I have accomplished this, her hand becomes mine."

"Monsieur Lemercier," said the Scotchman impressively, "permit me as one who hath knowledge of Sir William Hope to warn thee. He has a sure hand and a steady eye, and thou mayst have to bite the ground."

The Frenchman, however, was obdurate, and his friend volunteered to be the bearer of his challenge to the Laird of Balcomie. When he departed he bade Monsieur Lemercier be

at the Standing-Stone of Sauchope on the morrow as the sun was rising out of the German Ocean.

Next morning Lemercier was up betimes. Attiring himself with greater scrupulousness than usual, and following the directions given him by the landlord of the Thane, he proceeded towards the Sauchope Stone—a tall, rough, ungainly obelisk of ages long ago, and with a history all its own. As he approached the time-worn relic he perceived a gentleman standing near it, and though the latter's back was towards him, recognised his friend of the preceding night.

“Bon jour, monsieur,” he cried when he came within speaking distance. “I was beginning to fear that Sir William was not going to accept my challenge.”

“Oh, yes,” answered the other, as he mounted his horse. “I am Sir William Hope of Balcomie, and await your pleasure.”

Words fail to picture the Frenchman's astonishment and dismay. He lamented his ill-luck, and the evil fate that had driven him to a strange land. He would have retired from the contest without striking a blow, but Balcomie told him to remember his promise to Athalie, and to think of her only. And with this Lemercier had to be satisfied.

So the fight commenced. Greek met Greek. Both combatants were the envy of their contemporaries. Lemercier was the primordial swordsman in France, where every knight practised the art of fencing and excelled in it; while Sir William Hope's prowess as a handler of the rapier and falchion and quarterstaff was known over all the world.

Cautiously they approached each other as if unwilling to strike. By-and-by, however, their passions became whetted with rivalry, and the stipulation they had made at the commencement of the fray, to sheathe their swords whenever blood was drawn, was soon lost sight of in a fierce desire to conquer. The swords clashed furiously together, and their sheen shone like the morning sun upon the waters near by. Now and again the combatants ceased their exciting play to take breath,

and in the intervals regarded each other with mortal hatred which death alone could quench.

Then each at once his falchion drew,
Each on the ground his scabbard threw,
Each looked to sun and stream and plain,
As what they ne'er might see again.

Once more they engaged—warily and sternly. The champing and foaming of the steeds, the straining of the stirrup-straps, the laboured breathing of the mortals as they lunged and parried each deadly thrust, their tattered coats and scarred faces and hands—all showed how dreadful was the combat. At last Lemercier, thoroughly exhausted, failed to parry a lunge which pierced him under the fifth rib, so that he fell gasping to the ground.

In an instant Sir William was on his knees beside his prostrate rival, to render him what comfort and assistance he could. Lemercier was unfortunately beyond mortal aid. He could only draw from his finger his exacting sweetheart's hair-ring with her rich brown tresses clasped in its initialed shield, and, breathing "Athalie," he died.

Such is the legend of Sauchope. The combat Sir William Hope never forgot. To his dying day he cursed the evil fate that had made him the slayer of the gallant Lemercier. The latter was honourably interred in the ancient kirk, and a marble tablet placed over the spot but feebly indicated the Scotsman's affliction. We naturally wonder what became of Mademoiselle Athalie. The victorious knight, in obedience to the Frenchman's dying behest, carried the ring to her; but ere that happened she had ceased to mourn for her dead lover, and had wedded one of her innumerable admirers. Such is the world's love, and here our story ends.