

CHAPTER XI.

—————This house is but a butchery ;
Abhor it, fear it, do not enter it.

SHAKESPEARE.

HE rose in the morning rather before the usual breakfast hour, to fulfil his declared intention of grouse-shooting, and descended to the parlour, where he found Mrs Macgillivray. Her eyes and her fingers were busily employed about some work, and before she observed him, he had time accidentally to notice that she was beginning to unpick the letters marked on a shirt, and these he distinctly saw were S. H. M. She no sooner perceived him, than she started up in manifest confusion, and sweeping together the shirts, and India handkerchiefs that were lying on the table beside her, huddled them all into her apron, and exclaiming, “ Eh, Maister Oakenwold, my gude-

man's sarks are nae seams for the parlour when ye are there!" she scuttled out of the room.

If any part of the circumstantial proof had been wanting, this woman's employment was sufficient to convince him of the justice of his suspicions. He resolved, however, to appear perfectly unconscious of them, at least for the present.

When the Lady returned, therefore, he threw out some indifferent remarks about the weather, and then carelessly mentioned his intention of shooting. Mrs Macgillivray called to Mary to get breakfast, saying to Amherst that her husband had gone early that morning on business, and adding, "As ye're gaun to the muirs, Mr Oakenwold, I'se warrant ye'll be glad to get away be-times, so we'll no wait for him."

Amherst had a successful day's sport, and having largely loaded O'Gollochar's game-bag, they were both returning homewards towards evening, when he happened to observe an eagle soaring aloft. As he eyed it, he saw it swoop suddenly down upon something lying at the base of a range of high cliffs, about half a mile from the path they were pursuing. As it did not rise again, he thought he had now a chance of getting a shot at

the king of birds, which he had very frequently in vain attempted before.

Having drawn his small shot, and put ball into his gun, he sent O'Gollochar home with his burden, and began to make a wide circuit, concealing himself by such banks and hollows as lay in his way. But notwithstanding all his care, the wily bird disappointed him, by rising long before he could come within proper distance, and mounting with broad and vigorous wing to the summit of the cliff, it settled there, and sat as if looking down upon him in derision, and bidding him defiance. Very much baulked, he approached the object the animal had pounced upon, and found that it was a sheep that appeared to have recently fallen from the cliff.

Seeing that he had not the smallest chance of reaching the monarch of the skies, even with ball, whilst he occupied his present lofty throne, he hastily turned his steps in the direction O'Gollochar had taken. But long before he had got into what was to him *terra cognita*, the night fell so dark that he mistook his road. He was not at first aware of this, however, and having gained a great extent of wood, where he thought he was well

acquainted with the way, he entered it confidently, but soon found himself embarrassed, and became convinced, when too late, that he had taken a wrong direction.

After wandering for a long time through trackless thickets, he was at last gladdened by the appearance of a light that glimmered through the foliage, and he scrambled towards it with the hope of finding some one who could put him on his way.

On his nearer approach, he found that the light proceeded from the interior of a hovel formed of sods, on a foundation of dry stones. It stood not far from the edge of a bank overhanging a deep ravine, through which a stream held its course. The door was more than half a-jar, and he listened for voices from within, but all was silent. He advanced and knocked, but his appeal was unattended to; he repeated his signal, and, as he still had no answer, he ventured to enter.

A wood-fire was burning on the earthen-floor, as if somebody had been recently there; but seeing no one within, he was about to leave the place, with the idea that, by following the course of the stream, he would soon arrive at the great

valley, to which it must be a tributary, when an object caught his eye that immediately arrested his attention. This was no other than the very travelling trunk he had so particularly remarked the night before, with the letters S. H. M. in brass nails upon its lid; and among a variety of other strange things scattered up and down, he descried three other trunks, of different sizes, all of them with the same letters.

Very disagreeable ideas now crowded upon his imagination, and sensible how dangerous his situation was, he was about to make a hasty retreat, when, as he moved away, a bright object glanced upon his eye from amongst some branches of brushwood, lying over the rafters at the farther end of the hut. As he looked with more attention, he thought it resembled a silver button. The brushwood seemed to be pressed down just in that particular spot, as if from a superincumbent weight, and he was seized with an irresistible desire to ascertain what was there. He lifted up a small fragment of lighted fir, and proceeded to satisfy himself. His eyes rested upon a ghastly human face, which being turned downwards, stared at him from among the withered branches.

He started involuntarily, and put his hand to his gun, believing it was some one with whom he should have to contend ; but it moved not, and he discovered, with the utmost horror, that the eyes, though wide open, were fixed in death.

Availing himself of a large chest standing underneath, he mounted, and raised his head and shoulders through between the rafters, and, holding up his light, he discovered the dead body of an officer in full regimentals. He put his hand on the corpse, and felt that it was still so warm as to indicate the murder to have been very recent.

He had hardly time to give it a cursory examination, when he was alarmed by the sound of numerous voices, and the noise of feet running towards the hut. All chance of retreating unperceived was cut off. What was to be done? To be discovered in his present situation would ensure his murder, as his single fowling-piece could have been but of small avail against many armed men. There was nothing for it but immediate concealment. He had not a moment to deliberate. The gang were almost at the door. He extinguished his torch, and, drawing himself and

his gun hastily up between the rafters, he laid himself at length by the dead body on the birch boughs.

He had hardly crept out of sight, before a party of seven or eight Highlanders came hastily into the hovel, vociferating in Gaelic, and exhibiting every appearance of having made a precipitate retreat into their concealment. They were all armed, most of them with long guns, and all with broad-swords, dirks, and pistols, and at their head was Alexander Macgillivray. From the spot where he lay, he commanded a sufficiently distinct view of the scene below, through the interstices of the dry birch boughs, which sufficiently concealed him. The men hastily shut and barred the door behind them, as if apprehensive of pursuit, and, drawing around the fire, they continued their clamorous talk in Gaelic.

“Winna ye no gie ower wi’ yere damned Erse, and let a body ken what ye’re saying?” cried one of them, whom Amherst immediately recognized as the person, with whom Alexander Macgillivray had held so much close converse in his way down the glen, when returning from the deer hunt, and whose dress, as we before remarked, par-

took of both the Highland and Lowland costume, and whose grey coat, and old hat covered with meal dust, and his red ferret eyes, that seemed almost burnt out by his long vigils over the hopper, now satisfied Amherst as to what was his ostensible profession. "Will ye no gie ower wi' yere Erse, wi' a devil till ye?"

"Hoot aye, John Forbes," said a savage-looking fellow, with long tangled red hair, and who had been speaking when he interrupted him; "hoot aye, man; I was only makin' an observe till Maister Alexander, that the fellow's horse had served him weel, or he wadna hae won awa' sae easy, sorrow gae wi' him!"

"Troth, Willy Davison," replied Forbes, "ye might hae made a better shot. An' mair na that, gin ye had na stappit in afore me, just as I was gawin to let drive at him, I wad hae turned him heels uppermost aff the beast, afore he wan a hunder yairds. Ye saw hoo I coupit the offisher chield about an hour before. Fient a word he ever spak' mair."

"You did that job very neatly, miller," said Alexander Macgillivray; "but since you speak of him, let us examine his waulees, for our watch

called us off so suddenly to this less fortunate adventure, that we had not time to ascertain the profits of the first. Ewan Maclauchan," said he to another man, "reach over behind that trunk, and pull out the red-coat's saddle-bags. These *Sidaran Dearag* seldom carry much of the king's gold in their bags, however much they may wear on their backs. But should this fellow turn out to be the paymaster man, who came from the south with money for the garrison at Inverness, his luggage may be a prize worth all the trouble we have had to-night."

A pair of small saddle-bags was now handed into the circle, and Alexander Macgillivray, taking them upon his knee, began to attempt to undo them.

"There's a padlock there," said the miller, rising from the ground; "stay a bitty, till I gang and ripe the chield's pouch, till I see whether I can find ye the key."

Amherst, now anticipating an immediate discovery, prepared to make desperate resistance, and to sell his life as dearly as he could. But he was fortunately relieved for the time, by Macgillivray calling out to the miller, "No, no, John;

sit down, man—a Highlander laughs at a lock upon leather.” And unsheathing his dirk, he ripped up the valise from end to end.

The contents were now exhibited, and along with two or three shirts, a pair or two of stockings, some handkerchiefs, a soap-box, a pocket-glass, combs, razors, blacking-ball and brushes, &c. there was found a chamois leather-bag, containing coins, which Alexander Macgillivray emptied into the lap of his kilt, in such a manner as to enable himself to form a general judgment of the amount, without permitting the others to be equally wise. Amherst, from his position aloft, had an opportunity of observing that there were a number of gold and silver pieces, but he could not possibly guess at the amount, for all the heads in the group were instantly thrust forward to reckon them, and so concealed the heap from his view, without getting any satisfaction themselves, for Alexander Macgillivray still managed very cleverly to veil them.

“ This is not so bad,” said he, “ though, after all, it can hardly be the fellow I suspected. Let me see now—there’s one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten—— !—ten yellow boys !—

then as to silver. But hold!" said he, shovelling them again into the bag,—“ We'll count them all over, and share the booty in the morning.—John Forbes, you shall have a double portion, as a reward for your good shot; meanwhile, I'll put them in here,” rising and opening a chest on which he had been sitting; “ and now let us have something to eat and drink. Donald Robertson, see what you can get us out of the pantry, man !”

In obedience to his command, one of the gang got up, and, much to Amherst's uneasiness, came towards the end of the hut over which he was lying, and lifted the lid of the large wooden chest, and going and returning once or twice, took from it some cold provisions, some bottles of spirits, and other articles for their meal. As he passed under the spot where the young Englishman was concealed, he observed a pool of blood on the clay floor, which had dropped from the death-wound made by the miller's ball in the breast of the unfortunate officer.

“ Och, hoch ! hoo she bluids !” cried he.

“ Never mind that, Duncan !” said the reckless miller, with a hardened laugh, “ it's the

blude o' the bottle, man, that we hae to do wi' ye noo,—sae come awa' wi't!"

The gang now began to eat, and to carouse it heartily, quaffing down large draughts of ardent spirits at intervals. The chief speakers were Alexander Macgillivray and Forbes the miller, who seemed to be a sort of lieutenant amongst them.

"Weel, after a' noo," said the miller, "that devil o' a hellicate drover wad hae been worth twa o' this lobster-coated fallow, had we but felled him. I'se warrant his bags were furnished in anither sort o' manner, after a' thae south kintry marcats?"

"It's a thousand pities we missed him, John," replied Alexander Macgillivray. "But what is worst of all, I fear he may tell some tales, that won't be much to the advantage of our trade."

"Troth we have muckle need to do things cannily," rejoined the miller,—“the mair, sin' we see that the Laird is sae resolved to protect that English loon that's staying wi' him the noo, down yonder at the house o' Lochandhu. An I had the sortin o' him,—my faith, I wad whittle his craig for him as soon as gif he ware ane of my ain grice.”

“ My brother Edward is too much of a gentleman for us,” said Alexander,—“ his imprudence is absolutely astonishing to me. If he didn’t mean to permit us to make our own of the youth, who, from what Angus saw at Macphie’s, has something about him well worth our while, at least it was madness to bring him to Badenoch to be a spy upon our actions.—I have argued and argued with him till I am tired about this Saxon. I have endeavoured to persuade him of the truth of what I myself believe, that he was the man who defended Lord Eaglesholme, and assisted him in killing the two brave fellows who beset him on the cliffs,—but all in vain. It won’t do,—we must not suffer Edward’s folly to hang us as well as himself. We must serve this fellow as we served Kennedy, and that soon too. The accident of his finding the corpse of that traitor has made a strong impression on him, by Lochandhu’s account. We know not all he may have learned from the villain when he was alive, and we must not give his suspicions time to operate. I should have proposed to way-lay him last night when he went to the loch, or this afternoon as he returned from the moors, where I under-

stand he went this morning, had not the job of these trunks, and these affairs to-night, given us enough to do. But to-morrow night the deed must be attempted, even if it should be in the house of Lochandhu itself; and we must even trust to our after endeavours for pacifying Edward, and overcoming those ridiculous notions of ‘the rights of hospitality,’ and ‘the hereditary claims of gratitude,’ about which he is always rhyming.”

“Can ye no shake the Laird’s determination anent him, by raising suspicions of his having discovered some o’ his secrets?” demanded the miller; “that might, maybe, be a way o’ throwin’ cauld water upon his scruples.”

“I thought I did succeed in some degree last night, after he told me of the lad’s discovery of the corpse of that rascal Kennedy,” replied Macgilivray. “Edward was very angry at first, that we should have taken such summary vengeance upon the false knave at our own hands, without consulting him. But when I told him the cause, and described to him what we had observed to pass between them that day of the deer-hunt, I thought he seemed to wince and fidgit a.

little, as if he thought that every thing was not as it should be ; and he harped, two or three times, on the unlucky accident of the Englishman having found the body.—I'll see what I can make of him to-morrow.—If I can work on him to give his consent to the thing, so much the better ; but if that cock won't fight, then we must do this job at our own hand as we did the other, and take our chance of satisfying him after it is all over. You know that, though somewhat obstinate in sticking to his opinions beforehand, he is easily appeased, when he sees that a thing is put past all chance of mending.”

The strong potations they were swallowing had been for some time operating on the heads of the rest of the gang, who, little interested in what was passing between the persons of the preceding dialogue, had been talking away among themselves in Gaelic. Their Celtic conversation became so loud by this time, that the greater part of what subsequently fell from Alexander Macgillivray and the miller was drowned in their vociferations. Amherst, however, still gathered enough to satisfy him, that he continued to form the subject of their talk.

“ His sport at the loch was stopped last night, and he will be for trying it again,” said Macgillivray.

“ It wad be a noble chance,” said the miller, after something additional that fell from the other, but which was lost in the noise.

“ It would,” said Alexander Macgillivray ; “ or what think you of his expedition to Glenmore ? Edward was telling me, that he has been raving about that place ever since he happened to come through it, in his way back from the Cairngorum. The lad is resolved to go there to spend a day or two by himself in watching the deer ; and if we could only learn when he is to follow out this whim, we might make sure of him there, without risk and without noise, and Lochandhu need never be the wiser. But, as I said before, there is no time to be lost ; we must take the first fair chance that offers. Could not you manage to sift the Irishman to-morrow morning ? He seems to be a simple sort of chap. Could we but hear from him of his master’s intentions, we might lay some certain plan, and carry it into immediate effect.”

“ Aye, faith, might we,” replied the miller ;

“ and gif he should tak’ it into his wise pow to gang till Glenmore, we might easily foregather wi’ him there; and, then, diel ha’e me, gin I get a grup o’ his craig, but the fient a out o’t he shall come. By my troth, it wad be ony thing but canny, to let that chield slip awa’ to the laigh kintra wi’ siccan notions in his head, as that senseless coof Kennedy crammed intil him. But d’ye think the Laird ’ill be here the night noo?”

“ No,” said Alexander Macgillivray, “ he had some business to settle with Macrory.”

This latter part of their conversation had gradually become more audible, from the rest of the gang dropping asleep, overcome by their draughts of whisky. Even Alexander Macgillivray and the miller, neither of whom had drank so deeply, now began to look wiser as they addressed each other.

“ I say, John,” said Macgillivray, winking at the sleepers, “ these fellows must be kept small to-morrow. This gold is too good for them. A piece each will be enough, and more than they deserve—we’ll make silver serve the rascals—eh!”

“ He! he! he!—and gude enough for them,

the knaves," said the miller. " I saw what you were after, Maister Alexander. By my faith, it seemed to be a bonny bag.—I doot gin the tallow-headed drover himsel' had a better. But ye manna forget me !"

" Forget you, my dear fellow," said Macgillivray, shaking the miller by the hand, " no, that I won't, you shall share like a prince ; but hush—let's to our straw—for we must be astir early." Then lowering his voice to a whisper, which, however, Amherst easily caught in the silence that now reigned,—“ We'll send them to bury the carcase, whilst you and I are taking our first share of the spoil—you understand me ? and then when the grand division comes, we'll behave with great show of generosity to the rogues.”

Their heads were brought closer together as he spoke. A wicked and triumphant smile, called up by the consciousness of his own superior cunning, played on his countenance ; and the miller's red eyes glared through the unvarying hue of his mealy features, as he grinned with a hellish sympathetic delight.

" Was't no a gude shot, after a', Maister Macgillivray ?" said he.—“ Od I've a mind to gang

and see hoo the red loon's lookin'," said the wretch, taking up a fire-brand;—and scrambling to his feet, he began to stagger towards that end of the hovel over which Amherst was lying. "Fich! fich! what o' bluid the chield has had in his inside! Ane o' my grumphies could na had mair," said he, as he stepped into it, and almost slipped down from the lubricity it occasioned on the clay-floor. Then steadying himself a little, he held up the blazing light to the rafters. "Aye, aye," continued he, with a fiend-like laugh, as he surveyed the dead man's visage, looking down upon him with all the grim expression produced by a violent death,—“ye may girn at me, he! he! he!—my bonny braw buck!—But faith ye're just as weil there as trotting on yonder till Inverness. I wad na care gin we had the ither Englisher lad on the same baulk wi' ye.”

“Come away, man, John,” exclaimed Alexander Macgillivray, somewhat impatiently; “you'll set fire to the birch-bushes if you don't take care. Come away to your straw.—Remember what we have to settle in the morning.”

“Od, an' that's very true,” said the other.—“Weel, guid night till ye Captain,” added he,

nodding to the dead man. "I'se warrant I needna wush ye to sleep sound."

So saying, he staggered away, much to Amherst's relief, who, by the strength of the light, had seen his red eyes staring up within a few inches of his own; and who had felt the very heat of his breath, poisoned as it was with the stench of the spirits he had been swallowing, and who, every moment dreading he must certainly be discovered by him, had more than once been on the eve of springing down in desperation, and attempting to fight his way to the door.

Having thrown his torch into the fire, the miller retired into a corner, and dropped himself down, quite overcome; and before Alexander Macgillivray had raked the embers together, he was snoring as audibly as any of the other sleepers.

The villain looked around him to see that all of them were certainly sound; and then hastily taking a key from his pocket, he opened the chest, into which he had put the money-bag, and taking it out, he picked a number of the gold pieces from it, and putting them into an old stocking, he secreted them in his otter-skin purse; then

locking up the bag again in the chest, he wrapped himself in his plaid, and lay quietly down beside the miller, where he soon composed himself to sleep.