

Thomas Dick Sir Lauder



*The Wolfe
of Badenoch*

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A Historical Romance of the Fourteenth Century



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CHAPTER I.

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The Scottish Knights—Journeying Homewards—The Hostelry of Norham Towers.

It was in the latter part of the fourteenth century that Sir Patrick Hepborne and Sir John Assueton—two young Scottish knights, who had been serving their novitiate of chivalry under the banners of Charles the Sixth of France, and who had bled their maiden lances against the Flemings at Rosebarque—were hastening towards the Border separating England from their native country. A truce then subsisting betwixt the kingdoms that divided Britain had enabled the two friends to land in Kent, whence they were permitted to prosecute their journey through the dominions of Richard II., attended by a circumscribed retinue of some ten or a dozen horsemen.

“These tedious leagues of English ground seem to lengthen under our travel,” said Sir John Assueton, breaking a silence that was stealing upon their march with the descending shades of evening. “Dost thou not long for one cheering glance of the silver Tweed, ere its stream shall have been forsaken by the last glimmer of twilight?”

“In sooth, I should be well contented to behold it,” replied Hepborne. “The night droops fast, and our jaded palfreys already lag their ears from weariness. Even our unbacked war-steeds, albeit they have carried no heavier burden than their trappings, have nathless lost some deal of their morning’s metal, and, judging from their sobered paces, methinks they would gladly exchange their gay chamfronts for the more vulgar hempen-halters of some well-littered stable.” [18]

“Depardieux, but I have mine own sympathy with them,” said Assueton. “Saidst thou not that we should lie at Norham to-night?”

“Methought to cast the time and the distance so,” replied Hepborne; “and by those lights that twinkle from yonder dark mass, rising against that yellow streak in the sky, I should judge that I have not greatly missed in meting our day’s journey to that of the sun. Look between those groups of trees—nay, more to the right, over that swelling bank—that, if I mistake not, is the keep of Norham Castle, and those are doubtless the torches of the warders moving along the battlements. The watch must be setting ere this. Let us put on.”

“Thou dost not mean to crave hospitality from the captain of the strength, dost thou?” demanded Assueton.

“Such was my purpose,” replied Hepborne; “and the rather, that the good old knight, Sir Walter de Selby, hath a fair fame for being no churlish host.”

“Nay, if thou lovest me, Hepborne, let us shun the Castle,” said Assueton. “I have, ’tis true, heard of this same Sir Walter de Selby; and the world lies if he be not, indeed, as thou sayst, a hospitable old knight. But they say he hath damsels about him; and thou knowest I love not to doff mine armour only to don the buckram of etiquette; and to have mine invention put upon the rack to minister to woman’s vanity. Let us then to the village hostel, I entreat thee.”

“This strange unknighly disease of thine doth grow on thee, Assueton,” said Hepborne, laughing. “I have, indeed, heard that the widowed Sir Walter was left with one peerless daughter, who is doubtless the pride of her father’s hall; nay, I confess to thee, my friend, that the much-bruited tale of her beauty hath had its own share in begetting my desire to lodge me in Norham; but since thou wilt have it so, I am content to pleasure thee, trusting that this my ready penance of self-denial may count against the heavy score of my sins. But stay;—What may this be that lies fluttering here among the gorse?”

“Meseems it a wounded hawk,” said Assueton, stooping from his horse to look at it.

“In truth, ’tis indeed a fair falcon,” said Hepborne’s esquire, Mortimer Sang, as he dismounted to pick it up. “He gasps as if he were dying. Ha! by’r Lady, but he hath nommed a plump partridge; see here, it is dead in his talons.”

“He hath perchance come by some hurt in the swooping,” said Hepborne; “Canst thou discover any wound in him?”

“Nay, I can see nothing amiss in him,” replied Sang. [19]

“I’ll warrant me, a well-reclaimed falcon,” said Hepborne, taking him from his esquire; “ay, and the pet of some fair damsel too, if I may guess from his silken jesses. But hold—he reviveth. I will put him here in the bosom of my surcoat, and so foster the small spark of life that may yet remain in him.”

At this moment their attention was arrested by the sound of voices; and, by the meagre light that now remained, they could descry two ladies, mounted on palfreys, and followed by two or three male attendants, who came slowly from behind a wooded knoll, a little to the left of the path before them. Their eyes were thrown on the ground, and they seemed to be earnestly engaged in looking for something they had lost.

“Alas, my poor bird!” said one of the ladies, “I fear I shall never see thee more.”

“Mary, ’tis vain to look for him by this lack of light,” said an esquire.

“Do thou thy duty and seek for him, Master Turnberry,” said the second lady, in a haughty tone.

“A murrain on’t!” said the esquire again; “this comes of casting a hawk at a fowl at sundown.”

“I tell thee he must be hereabouts,” said the second lady again; “it was over these trees that I saw him stoop.”

“Stoop! ay, I’ll be sworn I saw him stoop,” said the esquire. “But an I saw him not dash his brains ’gainst one of those gnarled elms, my name is not Thomas, and I have no eyes for falconry. He’s amortised, I promise thee.”

“Silence, Master Turnberry,” said the same lady again; “thou givest thy tongue larger license than doth well beseem thee.”

“By the Rood, but ’tis well to call silence,” replied the esquire, sulkily, “and to me too who did verily steal these two hours’ sport of hawking for thee at mine own proper peril.”

“Ay, stolen indeed were they on thy part, Master Turnberry,” replied the same lady; “but forget not that they were honestly bought of thee on ours.”

“Nay, then, bought or not,” said the esquire, “the last nail’s breadth of thy merchandize hath been unrolled to thee. We must e’en clip short, and haste us to Norham, else will Sir Walter’s grey beard become redder than a comet’s tail with ire. Thou knowest this has been but a testy day with him.”

“Peace with thy impudence, sir knave,” said the same lady hotly. “Dost thou dare thus to speak in presence of the Lady Eleanore de Selby? A greybeard’s ire shall never——” [20]

“Nay, talk not so,” said the first lady, mildly interrupting her. “The honest squire equeary hath reason. Though it grieveth me to lose my poor falcon thus, we must e’en give him up, and haste us to the Castle.”

“Stay, stay, fair damsel,” cried Hepborne, urging his steed forward from the hollow bushy path where he and his party had hitherto remained concealed, from dread of alarming the ladies, a precaution which he now entirely forgot in his eagerness to approach her, whose person and manners had already bewitched him. “Stay, stay—fly not, lady—your hawk—your falcon!”

But the sudden appearance of armed men had so filled the ladies with alarm, that they had fled at his first word; and he now saw himself opposed by sturdy Squire Turnberry, who being too much taken by surprise to catch the knight’s meaning, and taking it for granted that his purpose was hostile, wheeled his horse round, and planting himself firmly in the midst of the path, at the head of the grooms, couched his hunting-spear, as if determined to prevent pursuit.

“What, ho! sir stranger knight—what seek ye, in the fiend’s name?” demanded the squire, sternly.

“Credit me no evil,” said Sir Patrick. “It galleth me sore that mine intemperate rudeness should have so frayed these beauteous damsels. Mine intent was but to restore the fair lady’s lost falcon, the which it was our chance to pick up in this hollow way. He had ta’en some unseen hurt in swooping at this partridge, which he had nommed.”

“Nay, by the mass, but I thought as much,” said the squire.

“Tell the lovely mistress of this fair bird, that Sir Patrick Hepborne willingly submits him to what penance she may enjoin for the alarm he caused her,” said

the knight; "and tell, too, that he gave life to her expiring falcon, by cherishing it in his bosom."

"I give thee thanks in mine own name, and that of the lady who owneth the hawk," said the esquire. "Trust me, thy sin will be forgotten in the signal service thou hast done her. The bird, methinks, rouseth him as if there were no longer evil in him."

"Yea, he proyneth and manteleth him as if rejoicing that he shall again embrace his lady's wrist with his sengles," said the knight. "Happy bird! depardieux, but he is to be envied. Tell his fair mistress, that if the small service it hath been my good fortune to render her, may merit aught of boon at her hands, let my reward be mine enlistment in that host of gallant knights who may have vowed devotion to her will." [21]

"Sir Knight," said the squire, "I will bear thy courteous message to her who owneth the falcon; and if I tarry not longer to give the greater store of thanks, 'tis that the Lady Eleanore de Selby hath spurred away so fast, that I must have a fiend's flight if I can catch her." And turning his horse with these words he tarried not for further parlance.

"'Tis a strange adventure, Assueton," said Hepborne to his friend, as they pursued their journey; "to meet thus with the peerless Eleanore de Selby at the very moment she formed the subject of our discourse."

"'Tis whimsical enow," said Assueton, drily; "yet it is nothing marvellous."

"Albeit that the growing darkness left me but to guess at the excellence of her features, from the elegance of her person," continued Hepborne, "yet do I confess myself more than half enamoured of her by very intuition. Didst thou observe that her attendant who talked so forwardly, though not devoid of grace, showed in her superior presence but as a mere mortal beside a goddess?"

"Nay," replied Assueton, "though I do rarely measure or weigh the points of women, and am more versant in those of a battle-steed, yet methought that the attendant, as thou callest her, had the more noble port of the two."

"Fie on thy judgment, Assueton," cried Hepborne; "to prefer the saucy, pert demeanour of an over-indulged hand-maid, to the dignified deportment of gentle birth. The Lady Eleanore de Selby—she, I mean, in the reddish-coloured mantle, she who wept for the hawk—was as far above her companion in the elegance of her air, as heaven is above earth."

"May be so," replied Assueton with perfect indifference. "'Tis a question not worth the mooting."

"To thee, perhaps, it may be of little interest," said Hepborne; "but I could be well contented to be permitted to solve it in Norham Castle. Why wert thou born with feelings so much at war with what beseemeth a knight, as to make thee eschew all converse with those fair beings, the sun of whose beauty shineth but to brace up the otherwise damp and flaccid nerves of chivalrous adventure?"

“Nay, thou mightest as well demand of me why my raven locks are not as fair as thine,” said Assueton with a smile; “yea, or bid him who is born blind to will to see.”

“By Saint Baldrif, but I do pity thee as much as if thou wert blind,” said Hepborne. “Nay, what is it but to be blind, yea, to want every sense, to be thus unmoved with——” [22]

“Ha! see where the broad bosom of Tweed at last glads our eyes, glistening yonder with the pale light that still lingers in the west,” exclaimed Assueton, overjoyed to avail himself of so happy an opportunity of interrupting his friend’s harangue.

“Yonder farther shadowy bank is Scotland—our country,” cried Hepborne, with deep feeling.

“God’s blessing on her hardy soil!” said Assueton, with enthusiasm.

“Amen!” said Hepborne. “To her shall we henceforth devote our arms, long enow wielded in foreign broils, where, in truth, heart did hardly go with hand.”

“But where lieth the hamlet of Norham?” inquired Assueton.

“Seest thou not where a few feeble rays are shed from its scattered tenements on the hither meadow below?” replied Hepborne. “Nay, thou mayest dimly descry the church yonder, sanctified by the shelter it did of erst yield to the blessed remains of the holy St. Cuthbert, what time the impious Danes drove them from Lindisferne.”

“But what, methinks, is most to thy present purpose, Sir Knight,” observed Mortimer Sang, “yonder brighter glede proceedeth, if I rightly guess, from the blazing hearth of Master Sylvester Kyle, as thirsty a tapster as ever broached a barrel, and one who, if he be yet alive, hath hardly, I wot, his make on either side the Border, for knavery and sharp wit.”

“Pray heaven his sharp wit may not have soured his ale,” muttered Roger Riddel, the laconic esquire of Sir John Assueton.

They now hastened down the hollow way that led to the village and soon found themselves in its simple street.

“Ay,” exclaimed Sang, “by St. Andrew, but old Kyle’s gate is right hospitably open. I promise ye, ’tis a good omen for Border quiet to find it so. So please thee, Sir Knight, shall I advance and give note of thine approach?”

“Do so,” said Hepborne, to the esquire, who immediately cantered forward.

“Ho! house there!” cried Sang, halting in the gateway. “Come forth, Monsieur, mine host of the hostel of Norham Tower. Where art thou, Mr. Sylvester Kyle? Where be thine hostlers, drawers, and underskinkers? Why do not all appear to do themselves honour by waiting on two most puissant knights, for I talk not of their esquires, or the other gentlemen soldiers of pregnant prowess, of the very least of whom it were an honour to undo the spur?” [23]

By the time that Sang had ended his summons, the party were at the gate, and had leisure to survey the premises. A rude wall of considerable length faced the irregular street of the village, having the gateway in the centre. The thatch-roofed buildings within formed the other three sides of the quadrangular court. Those to the right were occupied as stables, and in those to the left were the kitchen, and various other domestic offices; whilst the middle part was entirely taken up by one large room, from whence gleamed the light of a great fire, that burned on a hearth in the midst, shedding around a common comfort on the motley parties of noisy ale-drinkers seated at different tables.

“What, ho! Sylvester, I say—what a murrain keeps thee?” cried Sang, although the portly form of the vintner already appeared within the aperture of the doorway, like a goodly portrait in a frame, his carbuncled face vying in lustre with the red flare of the torch he held high in his hand. “Gramercy, Master Kyle, so thou hast come at last. By the mass, but that paunch of thine is a right fair warrant for the goodness of thine ale, yet it will be well that it do come quicker when it be called for than thou hast.”

“Heyday, what a racket thou dost make, gaffer horseman!” cried Kyle. “But the emptiest vessel doth ever make the most din.”

“Tut, man, thou hast hit it for once with thy fool’s head,” replied Sang. “I am, as thou sayest, at this present, in very sober earnest, an empty vessel; yea, and for that matter, so are we all. But never trust me and we make not a din till we be filled. The sooner thou stoppest our music, then, the better for thine ears, seeing that if we be forced to pipe thus, and that thou dancest not more quickly to our call, thou mayest perchance lose them.”

“By the mass, but thy music is marvellously out of tune, good fellow,” replied the publican. “Thy screeching is like that of a cracked rebeck, the neck of which must be hard griped, and most cruelly pinched, ere its tone be softened. But of what strength is thy company?” continued he, whirling his torch around so as to obtain a general view of the group of horsemen. “By St. Cuthbert, I wish there may be stabling for ye all.”

“Stabling for us all, sir knave?” cried Sang; “marry, thou dost speak as if we were a herd of horses.”

“Cry you mercy, noble esquire,” rejoined Kyle. “An thou beest an ass, indeed, a halter and a hook at the gate-cheek may [24]serve thy turn, and so peraunder I may find room for the rest.”

A smothered laugh among his comrades proclaimed Squire Sang’s defeat. The triumphant host ran to hold Sir Patrick Hepborne’s stirrup.

“By the Rood,” cried the squire, as he dismounted, with a good-natured chuckle at his own discomfiture—“by the Rood, but the rogue hath mastered me for this bout. But verily my wit is fasting, whilst his, I warrant, hath the full spirit of his potent ale in’t. Never trust me but I shall be even with him anon.”

“Master Kyle,” said Assueton, to their host, as he ushered his guests into the common room, “we should be glad to see some food. The rising sun looked upon our last meal; so bestir thyself, I pr’ythee, goodman, and let us know as soon as may be how we are to fare.”

“Room there, sirs, for two valiant knights,” cried Kyle, getting rid of the question by addressing himself to a party seated at a table near the hearth; “room, I say, gentlemen. What, are ye stocks, my masters?”

“Nay, treat not the good people so rudely,” said Hepborne, as some eight or ten persons were hastily vacating their places; “there is room enow for all. Go not thou, at least, old man,” continued he, addressing a minstrel who was following the rest, his snowy locks and beard hanging luxuriantly around a countenance which showed all the freshness of a green old age; “sit thee down, I do beseech thee, and vouchsafe us thy winning discourse. Where is the chevalier to whom a bard may not do honour?”

The minstrel’s heart was touched by Sir Patrick’s kind words; his full hazel eye beamed on him with gratitude; he put his hand to his breast, and modestly bowed his head.

“My time is already spent, most gentle knight,” said he. “Ere this I am looked for at the Castle; yet, ere I go hence, let me drink this cup of thanks for thy courtesy. To thee I wish tender love of fairest lady; and may thy lance, and the lance of thy brave companion, never be couched but to conquer.” And so draining the draught to the bottom, he again bowed, and immediately retired.

“So, Master Kyle,” said Assueton to the host, who returned at this moment, after having ascertained the country and quality of his new guests, “what hast thou in thy buttery?”

“Of a truth, Sir Knight, we are now but ill provided for sike guests,” replied Kyle. “Had it been thy luck to have sojourned here yestere’en, indeed, I wot ye mought ha’ been feasted. [25]But arrives me my Lord Bishop of Durham at the Castle this morning; down comes me the seneschal with his buttery-men, and whips me off a whole beeve’s carcasse; then in pour me the people of my Lord Bishop—clerks, lacqueys, and grooms; bolt goes me a leg of mutton here—crack goes me a venison pasty there—gobble goes me a salmon in this corner, whilst a whole flock of pullets are riven asunder in that; so that there has been nothing from sunrise till sundown but wagging of jaws.”

“Marry, these church-followers are wont to be stout knights of the trencher,” said Assueton, with a smile. “But let us have a supper from what may be left thee, and that without more ado.”

“Anon, courteous Sir Knight,” said Master Kyle, with a grin. “But, as I was a-saying, there hath been such stuffing; nay ye may know by the clinking of their cans that the rogues drink not fasting. By the mass, ’tis easy to guess from the seas of ale they are swallowing, what mountains of good provender they have to

float in their stomachs. Why, yonder lantern-jaws i' the corner, with a mouth that opens as if he would swallow another Jonas, and wangs like the famine-ground fangs of a starving wolf—that same fellow devoured me a couple of fat capons single-head; and that other churl——”

“Have done with thine impertinence, villain, said Assueton, interrupting him; “have done with thine impertinence, I say, and let us straightway have such fare as thou canst give, or by St. Andrew——”

“Nay, then, sweet sir,” replied the host, “there be yet reserved some delicate pig’s liver for myself and Mrs. Kyle, but they shall be forthwith cheerfully yielded to thy necessities.”

“Pestilence take thee, knave,” cried Assueton, “couldst thou not have set them down to us at once, without stirring up our appetites to greater keenness by thine enumeration of the good things that are gone? Come, come, despatch—our hunger is beyond nicety.”

Sir John Assueton now sat down to put in practice that patience of hunger, the exercise of which was one of the chief virtues of knighthood. As for Sir Patrick Hepborne, his attention was so entirely absorbed by a conversation that ensued at the adjoining table, to which the Bishop’s people had retired, that he altogether forgot his wants.

“And was it thy luck to see the Lady Eleanore de Selby, Master Barton?” demanded one of the persons of the dialogue; “Fame speaketh largely of her perfections.” [26]

“Yea, Foster, I did indeed behold her,” replied the other, who seemed to be a person of more consequence than the rest. “When I entered the Castle-hall this morning, to receive the commands of my Lord the Bishop, she was seated between him and her father. They were alone, and the old knight was urging something to her in round soldier-like terms; but I gathered not the purport of his speech, for he broke off abruptly as I appeared.”

“And is she so rare a beauty as folks do call her?” demanded Foster.

“Verily, so much loveliness did never bless these eyes before,” replied Barton. “Yet was the sunshine of her face disturbed by clouds. Tear-drops, too, had dimmed the lustre of her charms. But methought they were more the offspring of a haughty spirit than of an afflicted heart.”

“Nay, of a truth, they do say that she lacketh not haughtiness,” observed Foster. “’Tis whispered that she hath already scorned some noble knights who would fain have wedded the heiress of the rich Sir Walter de Selby.”

“Nay, I warrant me she hath had suitors enow, and those no mean ones,” replied Barton. “What thinkest thou of Sir Rafe Piersie, brother to the gallant Hotspur? Marry, they say that he deigns to woo her with right serious intent.”

“Sayest thou so?” exclaimed Foster; “then must the old knight’s gold have glittered in the young knight’s eyes, that a proud-blooded Piersie should even

him thus to the daughter of him who is but a soldier of Fortune.”

“Ay, and welcome, I ween, would the old knight’s hard-won wealth be to the empty coffers of a younger brother who hath never spared expense,” replied Barton.

“Yea, and high, I wot, mought Sir Walter’s hoar head be held with such a gallant for his son-in-law,” observed Foster again.

“Trust me,” said Barton, “he would joyfully part with all the golden fruits he hath gleaned from Scottish fields, to see this solitary scion from his old stock grafted on the goodly and towering tree of Northumberland. But they say that the Lady Eleanore is so hard to win, that she even scorns this high alliance; and if I might guess at matters the which to know are beyond my reach, I should say, hark ye, that this visit of our Right Reverend Lord Bishop to Sir Walter de Selby, hath something in it of the nature of an ambassage from the Piersie touching this same affair.”

“I do well know our Right Reverend Lord’s affection for that house,” said Foster. [27]

“Nay, he doth stand related to the Piersie in no very distant degree,” replied Barton.

“Perchance this marriage treaty then had something to do with the lady’s tears,” observed Foster.

“Doubtless,” said Barton. “But I mistake if she carrieth not a high brow that will be ill to bend. Her doting father hath been ever too foolishly fond of her to thwart her will, till it hath waxed too strong for his opposing. She will never yield, I promise thee.”

“Then hath our Bishop lost his travel,” said Foster. “But when returneth our Reverend Lord homeward?”

“His present orders are for to-morrow,” replied Barton.

“How sayst thou, Assueton?” said Hepborne, in a whisper to his friend, after the conversation between the two strangers had dropped; “how sayst thou now? Did I right, think ye, to yield to thine importunity, to shun the hospitality of Norham Castle, that we might hostel it so vilely here i’ the nale of the Norham Tower? Dost thou not grieve for thy folly?”

“Why, faith,” replied Assueton, “to thee it may be cause of some regret; and I may grieve for thee, seeing that thou, an idolater of woman’s beauty, hast missed worshipping before the footstool of this haughty damsel. Thou mightest have caught a shred of ribbon from her fair hand, perchance, to have been treasured and worn in thy helmet; but, for mine own particular part, I despise such toys. Rough, unribboned steel, and the joyous neighing of my war-steed, are to me more pleasing than the gaudy paraments and puling parlance of love-sick maidens.”

“Nay, then, I do confess that my desire to behold this rare beauty hath much grown by what I have heard,” replied Hepborne. “Would that thou hadst been less indolently disposed, my friend. We might have been even now in the Castle; and ere we should have left it, who knows but we might have rescued this distressed damosel from an alliance she detesteth. Even after all these protestations to the contrary, thine icy heart mought have been thawed by the fire of her eyes, and the adventure mought have been thine own.”

“St. Andrew forbid!” replied Assueton. “I covet no such emprise. I trust my heart is love-proof. Have I not stood before the lightning-glances of the demoiselles of Paris, and may I not hold my breastplate to be good armour against all else?”

“Nay, boast not of this unknightly duresse of thine, Assueton,” replied Hepborne. “Trust me, thou wilt fall when thine hour cometh. But, by St. Baldrid, I would give this golden [28]chain from my neck—nay, I would give ten times its worth, to be blessed with but a sight of her.”

“Ay,” said Assueton, “thou art like the moth, and wouldst hover round the lamp-fire till thy wings were singed.”

“Pshaw, Sir Adamant,” said Hepborne, “thou knowest I have skimmed through many a festal hall, blazing with bright eyes, and yet are my opinions as whole as thine. But I am not insensible to woman’s charms as thou art; and to behold so bright a star, perdie, I should care little to risk being scorched by coming within the range of its rays.”

“Nay, then, I do almost repent me that I hindered thee from thy design of quartering in the Castle,” said Assueton. “Thou mightest have levied new war on our ancient and natural foemen, by snatching an affianced bride from the big house of Northumberland.”

“Depardieux, but it were indeed a triumph, and worthy of a Scottish knight, to carry off the Lady Eleanore de Selby by her own consent from the proud Piersie,” said Hepborne. “But ’tis well enow to jest of.”

Whilst this dialogue was going on between the two friends, their esquires entered the place. Mortimer Sang, after reconnoitring the different tables, and perceiving that there were no convenient places vacant, except at that occupied by the attendants of the Bishop, went towards it, followed by his comrade Roger Riddel.

“By your good leave, courteous gentlemen,” said Sang, with a bow, at the same time filling up an empty space with his person; “I hope no objection to our joining your good company? Here, tapster,” cried he, at the same time throwing money on the table, “bring in a flagon of Rhenish, that we may wash away the dryness of new acquaintance.”

This cheering introduction of the two esquires was received with a smiling welcome on the part of those to whom it was addressed.

“Come ye from the south, Sir Squire?” demanded Barton, after the wine had silently circulated, to the great inward satisfaction of the partakers.

“Ay, truly, from the south, indeed,” replied Sang, lifting the flagon to his head.

“Then was I right, Richard, after all,” said Barton, addressing one of his fellows. “Did I not tell thee that these strangers had none of the loutish Scot in their gait?”

“Loutish Scot!” cried Sang, taking the flagon from his lips, and starting up fiercely; “What mean ye by loutish Scot?” [29]

Barton eyed the tall figure, broad chest, and sinewy arms of the Scottish esquire.

“Nay, I meant thee not offence, Sir Squire,” replied he.

“Ha!” said Sang, regaining his good-humour; “then I take no offence where none is meant. Your Scot and your Southern are born foes to fight in fair field; yet I see no just cause against their drinking together in good fellowship when the times be fitting, albeit they may be called upon anon to crack each other’s sconces in battle broil. Thine hand,” said he, stretching his right across the table to the Bishop’s man, whilst he poised the flagon with his left. “Peraunter thou be’st a soldier, though of a truth that garb of thine would speak thee to be as much of a clerk as an esquire; but, indeed, an thy trade be arms, I am bold to say, that Scotland doth not hold a man who will do thee the petites politesses of the skirmish more handsomely than I shall, should chance ever throw us against each other. Meanwhile my hearty service to thee.”

“Spoke like a true man,” said Roger Riddel, taking the flagon from his friend. “Here, tapster, we lack wine.”

“Nay, Roger,” said Sang, “but we cannot drink thus fasting. What a murrain keeps that knave with the——Ha! he comes. Why, holy St. Andrew, what meanest thou, villain, by putting down this flinty skim-milk? Caitiff, dost take us for ostriches, to digest iron? Saw I not hogs’ livers a-frying for our supper?”

“Nay, good master Squire,” said the flaxen-polled lad of a tapster, “sure mistress says that the livers be meat for your masters.”

“Meat for our masters, sirrah!” replied Sang; “and can the hostel of Master Sylvester Kyle, famed from the Borders to the Calais Straits—can this far-famed house, I say, afford nothing better for a brace of Scottish knights, whose renown hath filled the world from Cattiness to the land of Egypt, than a fried hog’s liver? Avoid, sinner, avoid; out of my way, and let me go talk to this same hostess.”

So saying, he strode over the bench, and, kicking the rushes before him in his progress towards the door, made directly for the kitchen.

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CHAPTER II.

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The Host and the Hostess—Preparing the Evening Meal.

On entering the kitchen, Master Mortimer Sang found the [30]hostess, a buxom dame with rosy cheeks, raven hair, and jet-black eyes, busily employed in cooking the food intended for the two knights. Having already had a glimpse of her, he remarked her to be of an age much too green for so wintry a husband as Sylvester Kyle; so checking his haste, he approached her with his best Parisian obeisance.

“Can it be,” said he, assuming an astonished air —“can it possibly be, that the cruel Master Sylvester Kyle doth permit so much loveliness to be melted over the vile fire of a kitchen, an ’twere a piece of butter, and that to fry a paltry pig’s liver withal?”

The dame turned round, looked pleased, smiled, flirted her head, and then went on frying. Sighing as if he were expiring his soul, Sang continued,—

“Ah, had it been my happy fate to have owned thee, what would I not have done to preserve the lustre of those charms unsullied?”

Mrs. Sylvester Kyle again looked round, again she smiled, again she flirted her head, and, leaving the frying-pan to fry in its own way, she dropped a curtsey, and called Master Sang a right civil and fair-spoken gentleman.

“Would that thou hadst been mine,” continued Sang, throwing yet more tenderness into his expression: “locked in these fond arms, thy beauty should have been shielded from every chance of injury.” So saying he suited the action to the word, and embracing Mrs. Kyle, he imprinted on her cheeks kisses, which, though burning enough in themselves, were cold compared to the red heat of the face that received them. Having thus paved the way to his purpose—

“What could possess thee, beauteous Mrs. Kyle,” said he, “to marry that gorbellied glutton of thine, a fellow who, to fill his own rapacious bowke, and fatten his own scoundrel carcass, starveth thee to death? I see it in thy sweet face, my fair hostess; ’tis vain to conceal it; the wretch is miserably poor; he feedeth thee not. The absolute famine that reigneth in his beggarly buttery, nay, rather flintery (for buttery it were ridiculous to call it), cannot suffice to afford one meal a-day to that insatiable maw of his, far less can it supply those cates and niceties befitting the stomach of an angel like thyself.”

Mrs. Kyle was whirled up to the skies by this rhapsody; Master Sylvester had never said anything half so fine. But her pride could not stand the hits the squire had given against the poverty of her larder.

“Nay thee now, but, kind sir,” said she, “we be’s not so bad [31]off as all that; Master, my goodman

Kyle hath as fat a buttery, I warrant thee, as e'er a publican in all the Borders."

"Nay, nay, 'tis impossible, beautiful Mrs. Kyle," said Mortimer again—"tis impossible; else why these wretched pigs' entrails for a couple of knights, of condition so high that they may be emperors before they die, if God give them good luck?"

"La, now there," exclaimed Mrs. Kyle; "and did not Sylvester say that they were nought but two lousy Scots, and that any fare would do for sike loons. Well, who could ha' thought, after all, that they could be emperors? An we had known that, indeed, we might ha' gi'en them emperor's fare. Come thee this way, kind sir, and I'll let thee see our spense."

This was the very point which the wily Master Sang had been aiming at. Seizing up a lamp, she led the way along a dark passage. As they reached the end of it, their feet sounded hollow on a part of the floor. Mrs. Kyle stopped, set down her lamp, slipped a small sliding plank into a groove in the side wall made to receive it, and exposed a ring and bolt attached to an iron lever. Applying her hand to this, she lifted a trap door, and disclosed a flight of a dozen steps or more, down which she immediately tripped, and Sang hesitated not a moment to follow her. But what a sight met his eyes when he reached the bottom! He found himself in a pretty large vault, hung round with juicy barons and sirloins of beef, delicate carcasses of mutton, venison, hams, flitches, tongues, with all manner of fowls and game, dangling

in most inviting profusion from the roof. It was here that Master Kyle preserved his stock-in-trade, in troublesome times, from the rapacity of the Border-depredators. Mortimer Sang feasted his eyes for some moments in silence, but they were allowed small time for their banquet.

A distant foot was heard at the farther extremity of the passage, and then the angry voice of Kyle calling his wife. Mortimer sprang to the top of the steps, just as mine host had reached the trap-door.

“Eh! what!” exclaimed Kyle with horror and surprise—“A man in the spense with my wife! Thieves! Murder!”

He had time to say no more, for Sang grappled him by the throat, as he was in the very act of stooping to shut the trap-door on him, and down he tugged the bulky host, like a huge sack; but, overpowered by the descent of such a mountain upon his head, he rolled over the steps with his burthen into the very middle of the vault. More afraid of her husband’s wrath than anxious for his safety, Mrs. Kyle put her lamp on the ground, [32]jumped nimbly over the prostrate strugglers, and escaped. The active and Herculean Sang, rising to his knees, with his left hand pressed down the half-stunned publican, who lay on his back gasping for breath; then seizing the lamp with his right, he rose suddenly to his legs, and, regaining the trap-door in the twinkling of an eye, sat him down quietly on the floor to recover his own breath; and, taking the end of the lever in his hand, and half

closing the aperture, he waited patiently till his adversary had so far recovered himself as to be able to come to a parley.

“So, Master Sylvester Kyle,” said the esquire, “thou art there, art thou—caught in thine own trap? So much for treating noble Scots, the flower of chivalry, with stinking hog’s entrails. By’r Lady, ’tis well for thee thou hast such good store of food there. Let me see; methinks thou must hold out well some week or twain ere it may begin to putrify. Thou hadst better fall to, then, whiles it be fresh; time enow to begin starving when it groweth distasteful. So wishing thee some merry meals ere thou diest, I shall now shut down the trap-door—bolt it fast—nail up the sliding plank—and as no one knoweth on’t but thy wife, who, kind soul, hath agreed to go off with me to Scotland to-night, thou mayest reckon on quiet slumbers for the next century.”

“Oh, good Sir Squire,” cried Kyle, wringing his hands like a maniac, “let me out, I beseech thee; leave me not to so dreadful a death. Thou and thy knights and all shall feast like princes; thou shalt float in sack and canary; thou shalt drink Rhinwyn in barrells, and Malvoisie in hogsheads, to the very lowest lacquey of ye. No, merciful Sir Squire, thou canst not be so cruel—Oh, oh!”

“Hand me up,” said Sang, with a stern voice, “hand me up, I say, that venison, and these pullets there, that neat’s tongue, and a brace of the fattest

of these ducks; I shall then consider whether thou art worthy of my most royal clemency.”

Mine host had no alternative but to obey. One by one the various articles enumerated by Sang were handed up to him, and deposited beside him on the floor of the passage.

“Take these flagons there,” said he, “and draw from each of these butts, that I may taste.—Ha! excellent, i’ faith, excellent.—Now, Sir knave, those of thy kidney mount up a ladder to finish their career of villainy, but thy fate lieth downwards; so down, descend, and mingle with thy kindred dirt.”

He slapped down the trap-door with tremendous force, bolted it firmly, and replaced the sliding plank, so that the wretch’s [33] shrieks of horrible despair came deafened through the solid oak, and sounded but as the moaning of some deep subterranean stream.

Master Sang had some difficulty in piling up the provender he had acquired, and carrying it with the flagons to the kitchen. There he found Mrs. Kyle, who, in the apprehension of a terrible storm from her lord, was sitting in a corner drowned in tears.

“Cheer up, fair dame,” said Sang to the disconsolate Mrs. Kyle; “thou needest be under no fear of him to-night. I have left him in prison, and thou mayest relieve him thyself when thou mayest, and on thine own terms of capitulation. Meanwhile, hash up some of that venison, and dress these capons, and this neat’s tongue, for the knights, our

masters, and make out a supper for my comrade and me and the rest as fast as may be. I'll bear in the wine myself."

Mrs. Kyle felt a small smack of disappointment to find that the so lately gallant esquire, after all he had said, should himself put such an office upon her; but she dried her eyes, and quickly begirding herself for her duty, set to work with alacrity.

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CHAPTER III.

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The Knights Invited to Norham Castle.

On the return of Mortimer Sang to the common room, he found that a new event had taken place in his absence. An esquire had arrived from the Castle, bearing a courteous message from Sir Walter de Selby, its captain, setting forth that it pained him to learn that Sir Patrick Hepborne and Sir John Assueton had not made experiment of his poor hospitality; that their names were already too renowned not to be well known to him; and that he trusted they would not refuse him the gratification of doing his best to entertain them, but would condescend to come and partake of such cheer and accommodation as Norham Castle could yield. An invitation so kind it was impossible to resist. Indeed, whatever Sir John Assueton might have felt, Sir Patrick Hepborne's curiosity to see the fair maid of the Castle was too great to be withstood. The distance was but short, and Sir Walter's messenger was to be their guide. Leaving their esquires and the rest of their retinue, therefore, to enjoy the feast so ingeniously provided for them by Sang, their horses were ordered out, and they departed.

The night was soft and tranquil. The moon was up, and her [34]silvery light poured itself on the broad walls of the keep, and the extensive fortifications of Norham Castle, rising on the height before them, and

was partially reflected from the water of the farther side of the Tweed, here sweeping wildly under the rocky eminence, and threw its shadow half-way across it. They climbed up the hollow way leading to the outer ditch, and were immediately challenged by the watch upon the walls. The password was given by their guide, the massive gate was unbarred, the portcullis lifted, and the clanging drawbridge lowered at the signal, and they passed under a dark archway to the door of the outer court of guard. There they were surrounded by pikemen and billmen, and narrowly examined by the light of torches; but the officer of the guard appeared, and the squire's mission being known to him, they were formally saluted, and permitted to pass on. Crossing a broad area, they came to the inner gate, where they underwent a similar scrutiny.

They had now reached that part of the fortress where stood the barracks, the stables, and various other buildings necessarily belonging to so important a place; while in the centre arose the keep, huge in bulk, and adamant in strength, defended by a broad ditch, where not naturally rendered inaccessible by the precipitous steep, and approachable from one point only by a narrow bridge. Lights appeared from some of its windows, and sounds of life came faintly from within; but all was still in the buildings around them, the measured step of the sentinel on the wall above them forming the only interruption to the silence that prevailed.

The esquire proceeded to try the door of a stable, but it was locked.

“A pestilence take the fellow,” said he; “how shall I get the horses bestowed?—What, ho!—Turnberry—Tom Equerry, I say.”

“Why, what art thou?” cried the gruff voice of the sentinel on the wall; “what art thou, I say, to look for Tom Turnberry at this hour? By’r lackins, his toes, I’ll warrant me, are warm by the embers of Mother Rowlandson’s suttling fire. He’s at his ale, I promise thee.”

“The plague ride him, then,” muttered the squire; “how the fiend shall I find him? I crave pardon, Sirs Knights, but I must go look for this same varlet, or some of his grooms, for horses may not pass to the keep; and who knoweth but I may have to rummage half the Castle over ere I find him?” So saying, he left the two knights to their meditations.

He was hardly gone when they heard the sound of a harp, [35]which came from a part of the walls a little way to the left of where they were then standing. The performer struck the chords, as if in the act of tuning the instrument, and the sound was interrupted from time to time. At last, after a short prelude, a Scottish air was played with great feeling.

“By the Rood of St. Andrew,” exclaimed Assueton, after listening for some time, “these notes grapple my heart, like the well-remembered voice of some friend of boyhood. May we not go nearer?”

“Let us tie our horses to these palisadoes, and approach silently, so as not to disturb the musician,” said Hepborne.

Having fastened the reins of their steeds, they moved silently in the direction whence the music proceeded, and soon came in sight of the performer.

On a part of the rampart, at some twenty yards’ distance, where the wall on the outside rose continuous with the rock overhanging the stream of the Tweed, they beheld two figures; and, creeping silently for two or three paces farther, they sheltered themselves from observation under the shadow of a tower, where they took their stand in the hope of the music being renewed. The moonlight was powerful, and they easily recognized the garb of the harper whom they had so lately seen at the hostel. He was seated on the horizontal ropes of one of those destructive implements of war called an *onager* or *balista*, which were still in use at that period, when guns were but rare in Europe. His harp was between his knees, his large and expressive features were turned upwards, and his long white locks swept backwards over his shoulders, as he was in the act of speaking to a woman who stood by him. The lady, for her very mien indicated that she was no common person, stood by the old man in a listening posture. She was enveloped in a mantle, that flowed easily over her youthful person, giving to it roundness of outline, without obscuring its perfections.

“By St. Dennis, Assueton,” whispered Hepborne to his friend, “’tis the Lady Eleanore de Selby. The world lies not; she is beautiful.”

“Nay, then, thine eyes must be like those of an owl, if thou canst tell by this light,” replied Assueton.

“I tell thee I caught one glance of her face but now, as the moonbeam fell on it,” said Hepborne; “’twas beauteous as that of an angel. But hold, they come this way.”

The minstrel arose, and the lady and he came slowly along the wall in the direction where the two knights were standing.

“Tush, Adam of Gordon,” said the lady, in a playful manner, [36]as if in reply to something the harper had urged, “thou shalt never persuade me; I have not yet seen the knight—nay, I doubt me whether the knight has yet been born who can touch this heart. I would not lose its freedom for a world.”

“So, so,” whispered Assueton, “thou wert right, Master Barton; a haughty spirit enow, I’ll warrant me.”

“Hush,” said Hepborne, somewhat peevishly; “the minstrel prepares to give us music.”

The minstrel, who had again seated himself, ran his fingers in wild prelude over his chords, and graduating into a soft and tender strain, he broke suddenly forth in the following verses, adapted to its measure:—

**Oh think not, lady, to despise
The all-consuming fire of Love,**