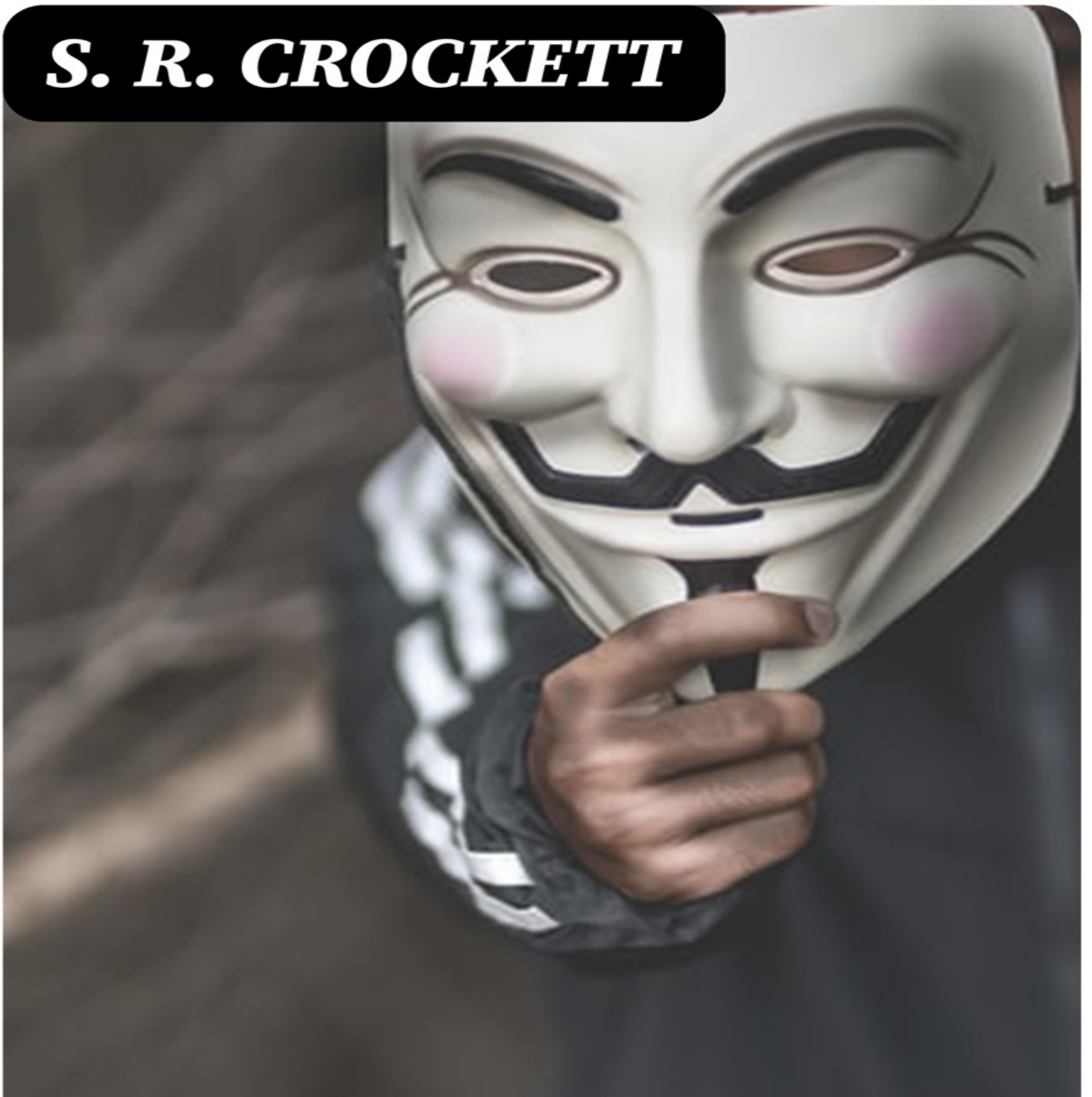


S. R. CROCKETT



***THE GREY
MAN***

S. R. CROCKETT



***THE GREY
MAN***

S. R. Crockett

The Grey Man

EAN 8596547025559

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

THE OATH OF SWORDS

CHAPTER II

THE LASS OF THE WHITE TOWER

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND TAUNTING OF SPURHEEL

CHAPTER IV

THE INN ON THE RED MOSS

CHAPTER V

THE THROWING OF THE BLOODY DAGGER

CHAPTER VI

THE CROWN OF THE CAUSEWAY

CHAPTER VII

MY LADY'S FAVOURS

CHAPTER VIII

THE LAIRD OF AUCHENDRAYNE

CHAPTER IX

CARTEL OF CONTUMELY

CHAPTER X

SIR THOMAS OF THE TOP-KNOT

CHAPTER XI

SWORD AND SPIT

CHAPTER XII

THE FLITTING OF THE SOW

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRYST AT MIDNIGHT

CHAPTER XIV

THE ADVENTURE OF THE GARDEN

CHAPTER XV

A MIDNIGHT LEAGUER

CHAPTER XVI

GREYBEARDS AND DIMPLE CHINS

CHAPTER XVII

THE CORBIES AT THE EAGLE'S NEST

CHAPTER XVIII

BAIRNS' PLAY

CHAPTER XIX

FIGHTING THE BEASTS

CHAPTER XX

THE SECRET OF THE CAIRD

CHAPTER XXI

MINE ANCIENT SWEETHEART

CHAPTER XXII

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HELL

CHAPTER XXIII

A GALLOWAY RAID

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SLAUGHTER IN THE SNOW

CHAPTER XXV

MARJORIE BIDS HER LOVE GOOD-NIGHT

CHAPTER XXVI

DAYS OF QUIET

CHAPTER XXVII

ON THE HEARTSOME HEATHER

CHAPTER XXVIII

WARM BACKS MAKE BRAW BAIRNS

CHAPTER XXIX

THE MURDER AMONG THE SANDHILLS

CHAPTER XXX

I SEEK FOR VENGEANCE

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BLUE BLANKET

CHAPTER XXXII

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE DEVIL IS A GENTLEMAN

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN THE ENEMY'S COUNTRY

CHAPTER XXXV

THE OGRE'S CASTLE

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE DEFENCE OF CASTLE AILSA

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE VOICE OUT OF THE NIGHT

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A RESCUE FROM THE SEA

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE CLEFT IN THE ROCK

CHAPTER XL

THE CAVE OF DEATH

CHAPTER XLI

THE WERE-WOLF OF BENERARD

CHAPTER XLII

ANE LOCHABER AIX GIED HIM HIS PAIKS

CHAPTER XLIII

THE MOOT HILL OF GIRVAN

CHAPTER XLIV

THE MURDER UPON THE BEACH

CHAPTER XLV

THE MAN IN THE WIDE BREECHES

CHAPTER XLVI

THE JUDGMENT OF GOD

CHAPTER XLVII

THE PLACE OF THE LEGION OF DEVILS

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE FINDING OF THE TREASURE OF KELWOOD

CHAPTER XLIX

THE GREAT DAY OF TRIAL

CHAPTER L

THE LAST OF THE GREY MAN

CHAPTER LI

MARJORIE'S GOOD-NIGHT

CHAPTER LII

HOME-COMING

CHAPTER I

[Table of Contents](#)

THE OATH OF SWORDS

[Table of Contents](#)

Well do I mind the first time that ever I was in the heartsome town of Ballantrae. My father seldom went thither, because it was a hold of the Bargany folk, and it argued therefore sounder sense to give it the go-by. But it came to pass upon a time that it was necessary for my father to adventure from Kirrieoch on the border of Galloway, where we dwelt high on the moors, to the seaside of Ayr.

My father's sister had married a man named Hew Grier, an indweller in Maybole, who for gear's sake had settled down to his trade of tanner in Ballantrae. It was to his burying that we went. We had seen him snugly happed up, and the burial supper was over. We were already in a mind to set about returning, when we heard the sound of a great rushing of people hither and thither. I went aloft and looked through a gable window upon the street. Arms were hastily being brought from beneath the thatch, to which the laws of the King had committed them under the late ordinance anent weapons of war. Leathern jackets were being donned, and many folk cried 'Bargany!' in the streets without knowing why.

My Aunt Grisel went out to ask what the stir might be, and came in again with her face as white as a clout.

'It is the Cassillis folk that are besieging the Tower of Ardstinchar, and they have come near to the taking of it, they say. Oh, what will the folk of Ballantrae do to you, John, if they ken that you are here? They will hang you for a spy, and that without question.'

'That,' said my father, 'is surely impossible. The Ballantrae folk never had any great haul of sense ever since Stinchar water ran; but yet they will hardly believe that Hew Grier, decent man—him that was your marrow and lies now in his resting grave, poor body—took on himself to die, just that I might come to Ballantrae to spy out the land!'

But my aunt, being easily flustered, would not hearken to him, thinking that all terrible things were possible, and so hid the two of us in the barn-loft till it should be the hour of the gloaming.

Then so soon as the darkening came, putting a flask of milk into my pocket and giving a noble satchel of cakes to my father, she almost pushed us out of her back door. To this day I remember how the unsteady glare of a red burning filled all the street. And we could see burghers' wives standing at their doors, all looking intently in the direction of the Castle of Ardstinchar upon its lofty rock. Others set their heads out of the little round 'jaw-holes' that opened in each gable wall, and gossiped shrilly with their neighbours.

My father and I went cannily down by the riverside, and as soon as we turned Hew-the-Friar's corner, we saw all the noble tower of Ardstinchar flaming to the skies—every window belching fire, and the sparks fleeing upward as

before a mighty wind, though it was a stirless night with a moon and stars floating serenely above.

Down by the waterside and straight before us we saw a post of men, and we heard them clank their war-gear as they marched from side to side and looked ever up at the castle on its steep, spitting like a furnace, flaming like a torch. So at sight of them my father turned us about sharply enough, because, in spite of what he had said to my Aunt Grisel, he had much reason to fear for his neck. For if, on the night of a Cassillis raid, one of the hated faction should be found in the town of Ballantrae, little doubt there was but that a long tow and a short shrift would be his fate.

We climbed the breast of the brae up from the waterside, intending to make a detour behind the castle. My father said that there would be an easy crossing at Heronford, where he knew a decent man that was of his own party. Thence we could make up the glen of the Tigg Water, which in the evil state of the country was as good and quiet a way back to Minnochside as one might hope to find.

It seemed a most pitiful sight to me, that was but a young lad (and had never seen a fire bigger than a screed of muirburn screeving across the hills with a following wind at its tail), to watch the noble house with all its wealth of plenishing and gear being burned up.

I said as much to my father, who swung along with his head bent to the hill slope, dragging my arm oftentimes almost from the socket, in his haste to get us out of such unwholesome company as the angry folk of Ballantrae.

'It is an enemy's house!' he replied very hastily. 'Come thy ways, lad!'

'But what harm have the Bargany folk done to us?' I asked. For this thing seemed strange to me—that Kennedy should strive with Kennedy, burn castle, kill man, harry mow and manger, drive cattle—and I never be able to make out what it was all for.

'Hold your breath, Launcelot Kennedy!' said my father, testy with shortness of wind and going uphill, 'or right speedily you will find out for what! Is it not enough that you are born to love Cassillis and to hate Bargany?'

'Are the folk of Cassillis, then, so much better than the folk of Bargany?' I asked, taking what I well knew to be the chances of a civil answer, or of a ring on the side of the head.

It was not the civil answer that I got.

And, indeed, it was an ill season for query and question, or for the answering of them. In time we got to the angle of the castle, and there we were somewhat sheltered from the fierce heat and from the glare of light also. From the eminence we had gained, we could look away along the shore side. My father pointed with his finger.

'Boy, do you see yon?' he whispered.

I looked long and eagerly with my unaccustomed eyes, before I could see in the pale moonlight a dark train of horsemen that rode steadily northward. Their line wimpled like a serpent, being pricked out to our sight with little reeling twinkles of fire, which I took to be the moon shining on their armour and the points of their spears.

'See,' said my father, 'yonder goes our good Earl home with the spoil. Would that I were by his side! Why do I live so

far among the hills, and out of the call of my chief when he casts his war pennon to the winds?'

We looked all round the castle, and seeing no one, we made shift to get about it and darn ourselves among the heather of the further hillside. But even as we passed the angle and reached a broken part of the wall, there came a trampling of iron-shod hoofs. And lo! a troop of horsemen rode up to the main castle gate, that which looks to the north-west. It was all we could do to clamber out of sight over the broken wall, my father lifting me in his arms. There we lay flat and silent behind a pile of stones, just where the breach had been made—over which we could look into the courtyard and see the splotched causeway and the bodies of the dead lying here and there athwart it in the ruddy light of burning.

Just as the foremost horseman came to the gate, which the riders of Cassillis had left wide open, the roof of red tile fell in with an awesome crash. The flames again sprang high and the sparks soared. Soon all the courtyard was aglow with the red, unsteady leme which the skies gave back, while the moon and stars paled and went out.

'Hist!' whispered my father, 'this is young Bargany himself who comes first.'

I looked eagerly from behind a stone and saw the noblest figure of a young man that ever I saw or shall see, riding on a black horse, sitting framed in the dark of the gateway, the flames making a crimson flicker about him. After a moment's pause he rode within the deserted close, and there sat his horse, looking up sternly and silently at the

leaping flames and hearkening as it were to the crackling of the timbers as they burned.

Then another and yet another horseman came riding within, some of whom my father knew.

'See you, Launce, and remember,' he whispered; 'that loon there is Thomas Kennedy of Drummurchie, Bargany's brother. Observe his fangs of the wolf. He of all the crew is the wickedest and the worst.'

I looked forth and saw a gaunt, dark youth, with a short upper lip drawn up from teeth that shone white in the leaping flame which harvested the goodly gear of the house of Ardstinchar.

'There also is Blairquhan the Simpleton, Cloncaird of the Black Heart, and Benane the Laird's brother—a very debauched man—and there, I declare, is my Lord Ochiltree. Upon soul and conscience, I wonder what he does here thus riding with the Barganies?'

As soon as the fire died down a little, some of the party began to search about among the defences and outhouses, and a few even entered into the inner part of the tower. In twos and threes they came forth, some bringing a wounded man, some a dead man, till, on the cool, grey stones of the court, there rested five that lay motionless on their backs, and two that moaned a while and then were still. The more lightly wounded were cared for in a chamber within the gate. Then we could see all the gentlemen of the Bargany side dismounted from their horses and standing about those five that were killed.

'Alas for young Girvanmains!' I heard one cry, for we were very near. 'What shall we say to his father? And here

also is Walter Pollock, the cunning scrivener—and James Dalrymple, that was a kindly little man and never harmed anyone—the Lord do so to me, and more also, if I write not this killing in blood upon the walls of Cassillis!

The crowd thinned a little, and I saw it was the Laird himself that spoke.

Then this same young Bargany, who was taller by a head than any there, called for room. So they made a ring, with the dead men in the midst, and Bargany standing a little before. He bent him over the body of Walter Pollock, the young clerk, and drew forth a book from his breast.

'Listen!' he cried, 'all you that love Bargany, and who now behold this deed of dule and cruelty. Here lie our dead. Here is the Book of God that I have taken from one of the servants of peace, cruelly bereft of life by our enemies!'

'I warrant he drew a good sword when it came to the fighting, clerk though he might be,' whispered my father, 'I know the Pollock breed!'

Bargany looked at the book in his grasp and again at the hand which had held it.

'This falls out well,' he said. 'Here in the presence of our dead, upon the Bible that is wet with the blood of the unjustly slain, let us band ourselves together and take oath to be avenged upon the cruel house—the house of over-trampling pride—the house that has ever wrought us woe! Will ye swear?'

He looked round a circle of faces that shone fierce and dark in the lowe of the furnace beyond. As he did so he unsheathed his sword, and pointed with it to the topmost pinnacles of Ardstinchar. In a moment there was a ring of

steel all about him, for, quick as his own, every man's hand went out to his scabbard, and in every man's grip there gleamed a bare blade. And the sight thrilled me to see it, ay, more than all the religion I had ever been taught, for I was but a boy. And even though religion be learned in youth, the strength and the use of it comes not till after.

Thus Bargany stood with the brand in his right hand and the Bible in his left, to take, as was ancient custom in our countryside, the solemn oath of vengeance and eternal enmity. And thus he spake,—

'By this Holy Book and by the wet blood upon it, I, Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany, swear never to satisfy my just feud against the bloody house of Cassillis, till of all their defenced towers there stands not one stone in its place, remains alive not one scion of its cruel race. I who stand here, in the presence of these dead men of my folk, charge the Kennedies of the North with the blood of my kin, the spoiling of my vassals, and the heart-breaking of my father. In the name of God I swear! If I stay my hand and make not an end, the God of Battles do so to me, and more also!'

Gilbert Kennedy kissed the book which he gripped in his left hand, and then with sudden gesture of hatred he flung down the sword which he had held aloft in his right. It fell with a ringing dirl of iron upon the stones of the pavement beside the slain men, and the sound of its fall made the flesh creep on my bones.

Then the Laird's wicked brother, Thomas, called the Wolf of Drummurchie, came forward, hatred fairly sparkling in his eyes, and his teeth set in a grin of devil's anger.

'I swear,' he cried, 'to harry John of Cassillis, the enemy that has wrought us this woe, with fire and sword—to cut off him and his with dagger and spear, to light the thack and to lift the cattle. I will be an outlaw, a prey for the hunters for their sake. For Cassillis it was who first slandered me to the King, chased me from my home, and made me no better than a robber man upon the mountains.'

And in turn he kissed the Book, and his sword rang grimly on the pavement beside his brother's. So one by one the men of Bargany took the solemn band of eternal and bloody feud. Presently an old man stood forth. He held a spear in his hand, being, as my father whispered, but a tenant vassal and keeping to the ancient Scottish yeoman's weapon.

'By the blood of my son that lies here before me, by this spear which he held in his dying hand, I, that am but the poor goodman of Girvanmains, before death takes me to where all vengeance is Another's, I swear the vengeance of blood!'

And he cast the spear beside the swords of the gentlemen. Then issuing forth from the chamber over the gate, and leaning heavily upon the arm of a young page boy, there came creeping the strangest shape of a man—his countenance thraved and drawn, his shrunk shanks twisted, his feet wambling one over another like those of a mummer's bear. Bowed double the man was, and he walked with a staff that tapped and rattled tremblingly on the pavement as he came. The men of war turned at the sound, for there had been stark silence among them after old Girvanmains had let his spear fall.

Like one risen from the dead, the old man looked up at the tower which was now beginning to show black against the dulling red glow of the dying fire.

'Thou tower of Ardstinchar,' he cried, lifting up a voice like the wind whistling through scannel pipes, 'they have burned you that erstwhile burned me. Curse me Cassillis and the Lords of it! Curse me all that cleave to it, for their tender mercies are cruel. I, Allan Stewart, sometime Abbot of Crossraguel, lay my curse bitterly upon them for the cruel burning they gave me before their fire in the Black Vault of Dunure. But bless me the House of Bargany, that rescued me from torture and took me to their strong tower, wherein I have to this day found in peace a quiet abiding chamber.'

'Mark well, boy,' whispered my father; 'remember this to tell it in after days to your children's children. Your eyes have seen the Abbot of Crossraguel whom the King of Carrick, the father of our Earl John, roasted quick in the vault of Dunure—a deed which has wrought mickle woe, and will yet work more.'

And even as my father spoke I saw the old cripple hurple away, the young Laird himself helping him with the kindest courtesy.

Then, last of all that spake, came a voice from one who had remained in the gloomy archway of the gate, by the entering in of the courtyard. He that broke the silence was a tall man who sat on a grey horse, and was clad from head to foot in a cloak of grey, having his face shaded with a high-crowned, broad-brimmed hat of the ancient fashion.

'Give me the Book and I also will swear an oath!' he said, in a voice which made all turn towards him.

'Who may that man be? I ken him not,' said my father, for he had named all the others as they came within.

So one gave the man the blood-stained Bible, and he held it in his hand a moment. He was silent a space before he spoke.

'By this Christian Book and among this Christian people,' he cried, 'I swear to root out and slay utterly all the house of Cassillis and Culzean, pursuing them, man, woman and child, with fire and sword till they die the death of pain and scorn, or I who swear die in the accomplishing of it.'

The unknown paused at the end of this terrible oath, and gazed again at the Book. The dying flame within the castle flared up for a chance moment as another rafter caught fire.

'Fauch!' said he of the grey cloak, looking at the Bible in his hand, 'there is blood upon thee. Go thou into the burning as the seal of our oaths. A bloody Bible is no Christian book!'

And with that he threw the Bible into the red embers that glowed sullenly within the tower.

There broke a cry of horror from all that saw. For though in this dark land of Carrick deeds of blood were done every day, this Bible-burning was accounted rank blasphemy and ungodly sacrilege. But I was not prepared for its effect upon my father. He trembled in all his limbs, and I felt the stones shake upon which he now leaned breast high, careless who should see him.

'This is fair devil's work,' he muttered. 'The fires of Sodom, the brimstone of Gomorrah shall light upon us all for this deed!'

He would have said more, but I never heard him finish his words. Sudden as a springing deer, he tore from the covert

of the wall by my side and bounded across the court, threading the surprised group and overleaping the swords and the bodies of the slain men. He disappeared in a moment through the door into the tower, within which the flames still glowed red, and from which every instant the crash of falling timber and the leaping flames answered each other.

Ere my father sprang back, his figure stood plain and dark against the fire within, like that of a smith at his forge seen in the bygoing upon a snowy night. He held the unburned Bible clasped to his breast, but his left hand hung straight down by his side.

A moment after he had sprung from a window and fallen upon his face on the pavement with the Bible beneath him.

A dozen men ran towards him and seized him—Thomas of Drummurchie the first among them.

'A traitor! A spy!' he cried, lifting a sword from the pile with clear purpose to kill. 'To the death with him! It is John Kennedy of Kirrieoch—I ken him well, a rank Cassillis thief!'

And he would have slain my father forthwith, but that I ran among his legs and gripped him so close to me that he fell clattering on the pavement among the swords. Then I went and took my father's hand, standing by his side and crying out the while,—

'Ye shallna, ye shallna kill my father. He never did ye harm a' the days o' his life!'

'Who are you, and what do you here?' asked young Bargany in a voice of command, when they had set my father on his feet.

'I am John Kennedy of Kirrieoch on Minnochside, and I came to Ballantrae to bury the corpse of my sister's man, Hew Grier, merchant and indweller there, that was this day laid in the earth.'

So, right quietly and calmly, my father spoke among them all.

'But what seek you in my burned Castle of Ardstinchar and alone with these dead men?' asked the young Bargany.

With a quietness that came of the hills my father told the chieftain his plain tale, and his words were not words that any man could gainsay.

Then Bargany answered him without consulting the others, as none but a great chief does whose lightest word is life or death.

'Ye are here within my danger, and had I been even as your folk of Cassillis, ye should have died the death; but because ye stopped devil's work and, it may be, kept away a curse from us for the burning of the Holy Book, ye shall not die in my house. Take your life and your son's life, as a gift from Gilbert Kennedy of Bargany.'

My father bowed his head and thanked his house's enemy.

'Bring a horse,' cried the Laird, and immediately they set my father on a beast, and me in the saddle before him. 'Put the Bible for a keepsake in your winnock sole, turn out the steed on Minnochside, and come no more to Ballantrae in time of feud, lest a worse thing befall you!' So said he, and waved us away, as I thought grandly.

Some of the men that had sworn enmity murmured behind him.

'Silence!' he cried, 'am not I Lord of Bargany? Shall I not do as I will? Take your life, Kirrieoch. And whenever a Bargany rides by your door, ye shall give him bite and sup for the favour that was this night shown you in the courtyard of Ardstinchar.'

'Ye shall get that, Bargany, and welcome, whether ye let me gang or no!' said my father. And pressing the Book to his bosom, and gathering up the reins in his unwounded hand, we rode unquestioned through the arch of the wall into the silence of the night. And the hill winds and the stillnesses without were like God's blessing about us.

But from a knoll on the left of the entrance the man of the grey habit, he who had thrown the Bible, sat silent upon his horse and watched. And as we looked back, he still sat and watched. Him my father took to have been the devil, as he said to me many times that night ere we got to Minnochside.

Also ere we left the clattering pavement behind, looking out from the postern door we saw the thrawn visage of him who was Allan Stewart, the tortured residue of the man who had once been Abbot of Crossraguel, and in stature like a square-shouldered tower.

And this is the way my father brought home the burnt Bible to the house of Kirrieoch. There it bides to this day, blackened as to its bindings and charred at the edges, but safe in the wall press at my father's bed-head, a famous book in all the land, even as far as Glencaird and Dranie Manors upon the Waters of Trool.

But it brought good fortune with it—a fortune which, God be thanked, still remains and grows. And as for my father,

he never lifted sword nor spear against the house of Bargany from that day to this, because of the usage which Gilbert Kennedy gave him that night at the burning of Ardstinchar.

Nevertheless, for all that, he exercised me tightly in the use of every weapon of war, from the skill of the bow to the shooting of the hackbutt. For it was his constant intent to make me an esquire in the service of Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean,[#] reputed the wisest man and the best soldier in all the parts of Carrick and Ayr. As, indeed, I have found him.

[#] Culzean is pronounced Culayne, as though to rhyme with 'domain.'

And this saving of the burning Bible was, as I guess, the beginning of my respect for religion—which, alas! I fear this chronicle will show to have been both a late-garnered and a thin-sown crop.

CHAPTER II

[Table of Contents](#)

THE LASS OF THE WHITE TOWER

[Table of Contents](#)

Now, as the manner is, I must make haste to tell something of myself and have by with it.

My name is Launcelot Kennedy, and I alone am the teller of this tale. In a country where all are Kennedies, friends and foes alike, this name of mine is no great head-mark. So 'Launcelot of the Spurs' I am called, or sometimes, by those who would taunt me, 'Launcelot Spurheel.' But for all that I come of a decent muirland house, the Kennedies of Kirrieoch, who were ever lovers of the Cassillis blue and gold—which are the royal colours of France, in memory of the ancient alliance—and ever haters of the red and white of Bargany, which we hold no better than butchers' colours, bloody and desolate.

The story, or at least my own part in it, properly begins upon the night of the fair at Maybole—whither to my shame I had gone without troubling my master, Sir Thomas Kennedy of Culzean, with the slight matter of asking his permission. Indeed, none so much as knew that I had been to the town of Maybole save Helen Kennedy alone; and she, as I well knew (although I called her Light-head Clattertongue), would not in any wise tell tales upon me. There at the fair I had spent all my silver, buying of trittle-trattles at the lucky-booths and about the market-stalls. But

upon my return I meant to divide fairly with Helen Kennedy, though she was fully two years younger than I—indeed, only sixteen years of her age, though I grant long of the leg and a good runner.

So, being advised of my excellent intentions, you shall judge if I was not justified of all that I did to be revenged on the girl afterwards.

It was the early morning of a March day when I came to the foot of the Castle of Culzean. I went with quiet steps along the shore by the little path that leads to the coves beneath. I carried the things that I had bought in a napkin, all tied safely together. Now, the towers of Culzean are builded upon a cliff, steep and perilous, overlooking the sea. And I, being but a squire of eighteen (though for my age strong and bold, and not to be beaten by anything or feared by any man), was lodged high up in the White Tower, which rises from the extremest point of the rock.

Now, as I say, I had not made mention of the little matter of my going abroad to Sir Thomas, both because it was unnecessary to trouble him with so small a thing, and also on account of the strictness of his opinions. It was, therefore, the more requisite that I should regain my chamber without putting lazy Gilbert in the watch-house at the gate to the trouble of letting fall the drawbridge for me. I did not, indeed, desire to disturb or disarrange him, for he would surely tell his master, being well called Gabby Gib-cat, because he came of a race that never in their lives has been able to hold a secret for a single day in the belly of them—at least, not if it meant money, ale, or the goodwill of their lord.

So it happened that before I went to Maybole I dropped a ladder of rope from the stanchions of my window, extremely strong and convenient, which came down to a ledge someway up among the rocks, at a place which I could easily reach by climbing. Thither I made my way while, as I tell you, the night was just beginning to dusk toward the dawning. I had all my buyings in my arms, tied up well and that tightly in the napkin, just as I had carried them from the lucky-booths of Maybole. I tied the outer knot of my bundle firmly to the last rung of the ladder, praying within me that Sir Thomas might be fast asleep. For I had to pass within three feet of his window, and, being an old man, he was somewhat wakerife in the mornings, easily started, and given to staring out of his lattice without method or sense, in a manner which had often filled me with pain and foreboding for his reason.

But by the blessing of God, and because he was somewhat tired with walking in the fields with his baron-officer the night before, it happened that Sir Thomas was sound asleep, so that I was nothing troubled with him. But immediately beneath me, in the White Tower, were the rooms of his two daughters, Marjorie and Helen Kennedy; and of these Helen's room was to the front, so that my rope ladder passed immediately in front of her window, while the chamber of Marjorie was to the back, and, in this instance, concerned me not at all.

So as I scrambled up the swinging ladder (and, indeed, there are not many that would venture as much on a cold March morning) I passed Helen Kennedy's window. As I went by, the devil (as I take it) prompted me to scratch with my

toe upon the leaden frame of her lattice, for the lass was mortally afraid of ghosts. So I pictured to myself that, hearing the noise at the window, she would take it for the scraping of an evil spirit trying to find a way in, and forthwith draw the clothes over her head and lie trembling.

Pleasing myself, therefore, with this picture, I scraped away and laughed within myself till I nearly fell from the ladder. Presently I heard a stirring within the chamber, and stopped to listen.

'She has her head under the clothes by now,' I said to myself, as I climbed on up to my own window, which I found unhasped even as I had left it. I entered, gripping the edge of the broad sill and lifting myself over with ease, being very strong of the forearm. Indeed, I had won a prize for wrestling at the fair that day, in spite of my youth—a thing which I intended to keep secret till Helen Kennedy should begin to taunt me with being but a boy and feckless.

It chanced, however, that I, who had been thus victorious with men older than myself, was now to be vanquished, conquered, and overset, by one who was two years younger, and she a lassie. Then being safe in my chamber, I began to pull up the ladder of cords with all my goods and chattels tied at the end of it. And my thoughts were already running on the good things therein—cakes and comfits, sweetmeats, some bottles of Canary wine, and gee-gaws for the adorning of my person when I rode forth—the latter not for pride, of which I have none, but in order that I might ride in good squirely fashion, and as became the gentleman attendant of so great a lord as Sir Thomas Kennedy of

Culzean, Tutor of Cassillis, brother of the late, and uncle of the present Earl of that name.

I drew up my rope ladder all softly and with success, because from the stanchions it swung clear of the walls of the castle, for the reason that my turret jutted a little way over, as is the custom with towers of that architecture. And so all went well till my bundle came opposite the window of Helen Kennedy's room. There it was suddenly caught and gripped tight, so that I could in no wise pull it further. Nevertheless I wrestled with it so strongly, even as I had done with grown men at Maybole, that the cord suddenly gave way. And what with the stress and pith of pulling, I fell *blaff* on my back, hitting my head upon one of the low cross-beams of my little chamberlet.

This made me very angry indeed, but I leave you to judge how much more angered I was, when I found that the cords of my rope ladder had been cleanly severed with a knife, and that my bundle and all it contained had been most foully stolen from me.

I looked out of the window, rubbing my sore head the while with my hand.

'Nell Kennedy!' I called as loudly as I dared, 'you are nothing but a thief, and a mean thief!'

The lass put her head out of the window and looked up at me, so that her hair hung down and I saw the soft lace ruffle of her night apparel. It was long and swayed in the wind, being of a golden yellow colour. (The hair, I am speaking of, not, by'r Lady, the bedgown.)

'Mistress Helen Kennedy from you, sirrah, if you please!' she said. 'What may be the business upon which Squire

Launce Spurheel ventures to address his master's daughter?'

'Besom!' said I, taking no heed of her tauntings; 'thief, grab-all, give me back my bundle!'

My heart was hot within me, for indeed I had intended to share everything with her in the morning, if only she would be humble enough and come with me into the cove. Now, there is nothing more angering than thus to be balked on the threshold of a generous action; and, indeed, I was not given to the doing of any other kind—though often enough frustrated of my intention by the illsetness of others.

'Thou wast a noble ghost, Spurheel,' she cried, mocking me. 'I heard thee laughing, brave frightener of girls! Well, I forgive thee, for it is a good bundle of excellent devices that thou hast carried for me all the way from the fair at Maybole. Everything that I craved for is here, saving the brown puggy-monkey wrought with French pastry and with little black raisins for the eyes which I heard of yesterday!'

'I am glad I ate that by the way,' I said, in order to have some amends of her; for, indeed, there was no such thing in the fair, at least so far as I saw.

'May it give thee twisty thraws and sit ill on thy stomach, Spurheel!' she cried up at me. For at sixteen she was more careless of her speech than a herd on the hill when his dogs are not working sweetly.

Nevertheless she spoke as though she had been saying something pleasant and, by its nature, agreeable to hear.

For I do not deny that the lass was sometimes pleasant-spoken enough—to others, not to me; and that upon occasion she could demean herself as became a great lady,

which indeed she was. And when no one was by, then I took no ill tongue from her, but gave as good as I got or maybe a kenning better.

I could hear her at the window below taking the packages out of the bundle.

'Ye have good taste in the choice of cakes!' she said, coming to the window again. 'The sweetmeats are most excellent. The pastry melts in the mouth.'

As she looked out, she munched one of the well-raised comfits I had bought for my own eating. At Culzean we had but plain beef and double ale, but no lack of these. Also puddings, black and white.

'See, it flakes tenderly, being well readied!' she cried up at me, flipping it with the forefinger of her right hand to show its delicate lightness. She held the cake, in order to eat it, in the palm of her left hand.

At which, being angered past enduring, I took up an ornament of wood which had fallen from the back of an oak chair, and threw it at her. But she ducked quickly within, so that it went clattering on the rocks beneath.

She looked out again.

'Ah—um—blundershot!' she said, mocking me with her mouth. 'Remember you are not shooting at a rantipole cockshy at Maybole fair.'

'Give me my property,' I replied with some dignity and firmness, 'else in the morning I will surely tell your father.'

'Ay, ay,' cried she, 'even tell him about Maybole fair, and coming home through the wood with your arm round the waist of bonny Kate Allison, the Grieve's lass! He will be most happy to hear of that, and of the other things you