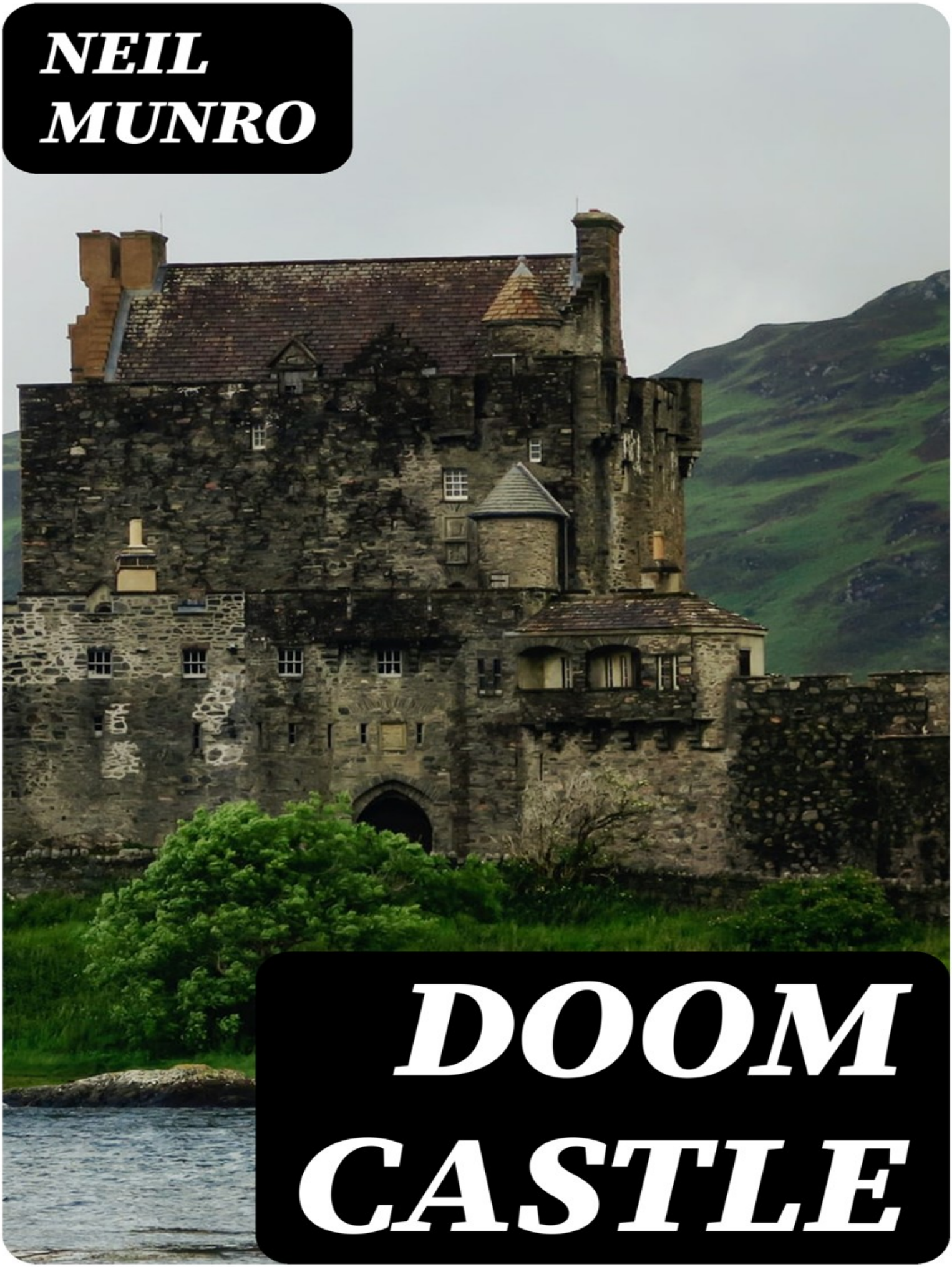
NEIL MUNRO



DOOM CASTLE

Neil Munro

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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CHAPTER I — COUNT VICTOR COMES TO A STRANGE COUNTRY

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It was an afternoon in autumn, with a sound of wintry breakers on the shore, the tall woods copper-colour, the thickets dishevelled, and the nuts, in the corries of Ardkinglas, the braes of Ardno, dropping upon bracken burned to gold. Until he was out of the glen and into the open land, the traveller could scarcely conceive that what by his chart was no more than an arm of the ocean could make so much ado; but when he found the incoming tide fretted here and there by black rocks, and elsewhere, in little bays, the beaches strewn with massive boulders, the high rumour of the sea-breakers in that breezy weather seemed more explicable. And still, for him, it was above all a country of appalling silence in spite of the tide thundering. Fresh from the pleasant rabble of Paris, the tumult of the streets, the unending gossip of the faubourgs that were at once his vexation and his joy, and from the eager ride that had brought him through Normandy when its orchards were busy from morning till night with cheerful peasants plucking fruit, his ear had not grown accustomed to the still of the valleys, the terrific hush of the mountains, in whose mist or sunshine he had ridden for two days. The woods, with leaves that fell continually about him, seemed in some swoon of nature, with no birds carolling on the boughs; the cloisters were monastic in their silence. A season of most dolorous influences, a land of sombre shadows and ravines, a day of sinister solitude; the sun slid through scudding

clouds, high over a world blown upon by salt airs brisk and tonic, but man was wanting in those weary valleys, and the heart of Victor Jean, Comte de Montaiglon, was almost sick for very loneliness.

Thus it came as a relief to his ear, the removal of an oppression little longer to be endured, when he heard behind him what were apparently the voices of the odd-looking uncouth natives he had seen a quarter of an hour ago lurking, silent but alert and peering, phantoms of old story rather than humans, in the fir-wood near a defile made by a brawling cataract. They had wakened no suspicions in his mind. It was true they were savage-looking rogues in a ragged plaid-cloth of a dull device, and they carried arms he had thought forbidden there by law. To a foreigner fresh from gentle lands there might well be a menace in their ambuscade, but he had known men of their race, if not of so savage an aspect, in the retinues of the Scots exiles who hung about the side-doors of Saint Germains, passed mysterious days between that domicile of tragic comedy and Avignon or Rome, or ruffled it on empty pockets at the gamingtables, so he had no apprehension. Besides, he was in the country of the Argyll, at least on the verge of it, a territory accounted law-abiding even to dul-ness by every Scot he had known since he was a child at Cammercy, and snuff-strewn conspirators, come to meet his uncles, took him on their knees when a lull in the cards or wine permitted, and recounted their adventures for his entertainment in a villainous French: he could not guess that the gentry in the wood behind him had taken a fancy to his horse, that they were broken men (as the phrase of the

country put it), and that when he had passed them at the cataract—a haughty, well-setup *duine uasail* all alone with a fortune of silk and silver lace on his apparel and the fob of a watch dangling at his groin most temptingly—they had promptly put a valuation upon himself and his possessions, and decided that the same were sent by Providence for their enrichment.

Ten of them ran after him clamouring loudly to give the impression of larger numbers; he heard them with relief when oppressed by the inhuman solemnity of the scenery that was too deep in its swoon to give back even an echo to the breaker on the shore, and he drew up his horse, turned his head a little and listened, flushing with annoyance when the rude calls of his pursuers became, even in their unknown jargon, too plainly peremptory and meant for him.

“Dogs!” said he, “I wish I had a chance to open school here and teach manners,” and without more deliberation he set his horse to an amble, designed to betray neither complacency nor a poltroon's terrors.

“*Stad! stad!*” cried a voice closer than any of the rest behind him; he knew what was ordered by its accent, but no Montaiglon stopped to an insolent summons. He put the short rowels to the flanks of the sturdy lowland pony he bestrode, and conceded not so little as a look behind.

There was the explosion of a bell-mouthed musket, and something smote the horse spatteringly behind the rider's left boot. The beast swerved, gave a scream of pain, fell lumberingly on its side. With an effort, Count Victor saved himself from the falling body and clutched his pistols. For a moment he stood bewildered at the head of the suffering

animal. The pursuing shouts had ceased. Behind him, short hazel-trees clustering thick with nuts, reddening bramble, and rusty bracken, tangled together in a coarse rank curtain of vegetation, quite still and motionless (but for the breeze among the upper leaves), and the sombre distance, dark with pine, had the mystery of a vault. It was difficult to believe his pursuers harboured there, perhaps reloading the weapon that had put so doleful a conclusion to his travels with the gallant little horse he had bought on the coast of Fife. That silence, that prevailing mystery, seemed to be the essence and the mood of this land, so different from his own, where laughter was ringing in the orchards and a myriad towns and clamant cities brimmed with life.

CHAPTER II — THE PURSUIT

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Nobody who had acquaintance with Victor de Montaiglon would call him coward. He had fought with De Grammont, and brought a wound from Dettingen under circumstances to set him up for life in a repute for valour, and half a score of duels were at his credit or discredit in the chronicles of Paris society.

And yet, somehow, standing there in an unknown country beside a brute companion wantonly struck down by a robber's shot, and the wood so still around, and the thundering sea so unfamiliar, he felt vastly uncomfortable, with a touch of more than physical apprehension. If the enemy would only manifest themselves to the eye and ear as well as to the unclassed senses that inform the instinct, it would be much more comfortable. Why did they not appear? Why did they not follow up their assault upon his horse? Why were they lurking in the silence of the thicket, so many of them, and he alone and so obviously at their mercy? The pistols he held provided the answer.

“What a rare delicacy!” said Count Victor, applying himself to the release of his mail from the saddle whereto it was strapped. “They would not interrupt my regretful tears. But for the true élan of the trade of robbery, give me old Cartouche picking pockets on the Pont Neuf.”

While he loosened the bag with one hand, with the other he directed at the thicket one of the pistols that seemed of such wholesome influence. Then he slung the bag upon his

shoulder and encouraged the animal to get upon its legs, but vainly, for the shot was fatal.

“Ah!” said he regretfully, “I must sacrifice my bridge and my good comrade. This is an affair!”

Twice—three times, he placed the pistol at the horse's head and as often withdrew it, reluctant, a man, as all who knew him wondered at, gentle to womanliness with a brute, though in a cause against men the most bitter and sometimes cruel of opponents.

A rustle in the brake at last compelled him. “Allons!” said he impatiently with himself, “I do no more than I should have done with me in the like case,” and he pulled the trigger.

Then having deliberately charged the weapon anew, he moved off in the direction he had been taking when the attack was made.

It was still, he knew, some distance to the castle. Half an hour before his rencontre with those broken gentry, now stealing in his rear with the cunning and the bloodthirstiness of their once native wolves (and always, remember, with the possibility of the blunderbuss for aught that he could tell), he had, for the twentieth time since he left the port of Dysart, taken out the rude itinerary, written in ludicrous Scoto-English by Hugh Bethune, one time secretary to the Lord Marischal in exile, and read:—

... and so on to the Water of Leven (the brewster-wife at the howff near Loch Lomond mouth keeps a good glass of *aqua*) then by Luss (with an eye on the Gregarach), there after a bittock to Glencroe and down upon the House of Ardkinglas, a Hanoverian rat whom 'ware. Round the loch

head and three miles further the Castle o' the Baron. Give him my devoirs and hopes to challenge him to a Bowl when Yon comes off which God kens there seems no hurry.

By that showing the castle of Baron Lamond must be within half an hour's walk of where he now moved without show of eagerness, yet quickly none the less, from a danger the more alarming because the extent of it could not be computed.

In a little the rough path he followed bent parallel with the sea. A tide at the making licked ardently upon sand-spits strewn with ware, and at the forelands, overhung by harsh and stunted seaside shrubs, the breakers rose tumultuous. On the sea there was utter vacancy; only a few screaming birds slanted above the wave, and the coast, curving far before him, gave his eye no sign at first of the castle to which he had got the route from M. Hugh Bethune.

Then his vision, that had been set for something more imposing, for the towers and embrasures of a stately domicile, if not for a Chantilly, at least for the equal of the paternal château in the Meuse valley, with multitudinous chimneys and the incense of kind luxuriant hearths, suave parks, gardens, and gravelled walks, contracted with dubiety and amazement upon a dismal tower perched upon a promontory.

Revealed against the brown hills and the sombre woods of the farther coast, it was scarcely a wonder that his eye had failed at first to find it. Here were no pomps of lord or baron; little luxuriance could prevail behind those eyeless gables; there could be no suave pleasance about those walls hanging over the noisy and inhospitable wave. No

pomp, no pleasant amenities; the place seemed to jut into the sea, defying man's oldest and most bitter enemy, its gable ends and one crenelated bastion or turret betraying its sinister relation to its age, its whole aspect arrogant and unfriendly, essential of war. Caught suddenly by the vision that swept the fretted curve of the coast, it seemed blackly to perpetuate the spirit of the land, its silence, its solitude and terrors.

These reflections darted through the mind of Count Victor as he sped, monstrously uncomfortable with the burden of the bag that bobbed on his back, not to speak of the indignity of the office. It was not the kind of castle he had looked for, but a castle, in the narrow and squalid meaning of a penniless refugee like Bethune, it doubtless was, the only one apparent on the landscape, and therefore too obviously the one he sought.

“Very well, God is good!” said Count Victor, who, to tell all and leave no shred of misunderstanding, was in some regards the frankest of pagans, and he must be jogging on for its security.

But as he hurried, the ten broken men who had been fascinated by his too ostentatious fob and the extravagance of his embroidery, and inspired furthermore by a natural detestation of any foreign *duine uasail* apparently bound for the seat of MacCailen Mor, gathered boldness, and soon he heard the thicket break again behind him.

He paused, turned sharply with the pistols in his hands. Instantly the wood enveloped his phantom foes; a bracken or two nodded, a hazel sapling swung back and forward more freely than the wind accounted for. And at the same

time there rose on the afternoon the wail of a wild fowl high up on the hill, answered in a sharp and querulous too-responsive note of the same character in the wood before.

The gentleman who had twice fought *à la barrière* felt a nameless new thrill, a shudder of the being, born of antique terrors generations before his arms were quartered with those of Rochefoucauld and Modene.

It was becoming all too awkward, this affair. He broke into a more rapid walk, then into a run, with his eyes intent upon the rude dark keep that held the promontory, now the one object in all the landscape that had to his senses some aspect of human fellowship and sympathy.

The caterans were assured; *Dieu du ciel*, how they ran too! Those in advance broke into an appalling halloo, the shout of hunters on the heels of quarry. High above the voice of the breakers it sounded savage and alarming in the ears of Count Victor, and he fairly took to flight, the valise bobbing more ludicrously than ever on his back.

It was like the man that, in spite of dreads not to be concealed from himself, he should be seized as he sped with a notion of the grotesque figure he must present, carrying that improper burden. He must even laugh when he thought of his, austere punctilious maternal aunt, the Baronne de Chenier, and fancied her horror and disgust could she behold her nephew disgracing the De Chenier blood by carrying his own baggage and outraging several centuries of devilishly fine history by running—positively running—from ill-armed footpads who had never worn breeches. She would frown, her bosom would swell till her bodice would appear to crackle at the armpits, the seven hairs on her upper lip

would bristle all the worse against her purpling face as she cried it was the little Lyons shopkeeper in his mother's grandfather that was in his craven legs. Doubt it who will, an imminent danger will not wholly dispel the sense of humour, and Montàiglon, as he ran before the footpads, laughed softly at the Baronne.

But a short knife with a black hilt hissed past his right ear and buried three-fourths of its length in the grass, and so abruptly spoiled the comedy. This was ridiculous. He stopped suddenly, turned him round about in a passion, and fired one of the pistols at an unfortunate robber too late to duck among the bracken. And the marvel was that the bullet found its home, for the aim was uncertain, and the shot meant more for an emphatic protest than for attack.

The gled's cry rose once more, rose higher on the hill, echoed far off, and was twice repeated nearer head with a drooping melancholy cadence. Gaunt forms grew up straight among the undergrowth of trees, indifferent to the other pistol, and ran back or over to where the wounded comrade lay.

“Heaven's thunder!” cried Count Victor, “I wish I had aimed more carefully.” He was appalled at the apparent tragedy of his act. A suicidal regret and curiosity kept him standing where he fired, with the pistol still smoking in his hand, till there came from the men clustered round the body in the brake a loud simultaneous wail unfamiliar to his ear, but unmistakable in its import. He turned and ran wildly for the tower that had no aspect of sanctuary in it; his heart drummed noisily at his breast; his mouth parched and gaped. Upon his lips in a little dropped water; he tasted the

salt of his sweating body. And then he knew weariness, great weariness, that plucked at the sinews behind his knees, and felt sore along the hips and back, the result of his days of hard riding come suddenly to the surface. Truly he was not happy.

But if he ran wearily he ran well, better at least than his pursuers, who had their own reasons for taking it more leisurely, and in a while there was neither sight nor sound of the enemy.

He was beginning to get some satisfaction from this, when, turning a bend of the path within two hundred yards of the castle, behold an unmistakable enemy barred his way!—an ugly, hoggish, obese man, with bare legs most grotesquely like pillars of granite, and a protuberant paunch; but the devil must have been in his legs to carry him more swiftly than thoroughbred limbs had borne Count Victor. He stood sneering in the path, turning up the right sleeve of a soiled and ragged saffron shirt with his left hand, the right being engaged most ominously with a sword of a fashion that might well convince the Frenchman he had some new methods of fence to encounter in a few minutes.

High and low looked Count Victor as he slacked his pace, seeking for some way out of this sack, releasing as he did so the small sword from the tanglement of his skirts, feeling the Mechlin deucedly in his way. As he approached closer to the man barring his path he relapsed into a walk and opened a parley in English that except for the slightest of accents had nothing in it of France, where he had long been the comrade of compatriots to this preposterous savage

with the manners of medieval Provence when footpads lived upon Damoiselle Picoree.

“My good fellow,” said he airily, as one might open with a lackey, “I protest I am in a hurry, for my presence makes itself much desired elsewhere. I cannot comprehend why in Heaven's name so large a regiment of you should turn out to one unfortunate traveller.”

The fat man fondled the brawn of his sword-arm and seemed to gloat upon the situation.

“Come, come!” said Count Victor, affecting a cheerfulness, “my waistcoat would scarcely adorn a man of your inches, and as for my pantaloons”—he looked at the ragged kilt—“as for my pantaloons, now on one's honour, would you care for them? They are so essentially a matter of custom.”

He would have bantered on in this strain up to the very nose of the enemy, but the man in his path was utterly unresponsive to his humour. In truth he did not understand a word of the nobleman's pleasantry. He uttered something like a war-cry, threw his bonnet off a head as bald as an egg, and smote out vigorously with his broadsword.

Count Victor fired the pistol *à bout portant* with deliberation; the flint, in the familiar irony of fate, missed fire, and there was nothing more to do with the treacherous weapon but to throw it in the face of the Highlander. It struck full; the trigger-guard gashed the jaw and the metalled butt spoiled the sight of an eye.

“This accounts for the mace in the De Chenier quartering,” thought the Count whimsically. “It is obviously the weapon of the family.” And he drew the rapier forth.

A favourite, a familiar arm, as the carriage of his head made clear at any time, he knew to use it with the instinct of the eyelash, but it seemed absurdly inadequate against the broad long weapon of his opponent, who had augmented his attack with a dirk drawn in the left hand, and sought lustily to bring death to his opponent by point as well as edge. A light dress rapier obviously must do its business quickly if it was not to suffer from the flailing blow of the claymore, and yet Count Victor did not wish to increase the evil impression of his first visit to this country by a second homicide, even in self-defence. He measured the paunched rascal with a rapid eye, and with a flick at the left wrist disarmed him of his poignard. Furiously the Gael thrashed with the sword, closing up too far on his opponent. Count Victor broke ground, beat an appeal that confused his adversary, lunged, and skewered him through the thick of the active arm.

The Highlander dropped his weapon and bawled lamentably as he tried to staunch the copious blood; and safe from his further interference, Count Victor took to his heels again.

Where the encounter with the obese and now discomfited Gael took place was within a hundred yards of the castle, whose basement and approach were concealed by a growth of stunted whin. Towards the castle Count Victor rushed, still hearing the shouts in the wood behind, and as he seemed, in spite of his burden, to be gaining ground upon his pursuers, he was elate at the prospect of escape. In his gladness he threw a taunting cry behind, a hunter's greenwood challenge.

And then he came upon the edge of the sea. The sea! *Peste!* That he should never have thought of that! There was the castle, truly, beetling against the breakers, very cold, very arrogant upon its barren promontory. He was not twenty paces from its walls, and yet it might as well have been a league away, for he was cut off from it by a natural moat of sea-water that swept about it in yeasty little waves. It rode like a ship, oddly independent of aspect, self-contained, inviolable, eternally apart, for ever by nature indifferent to the mainland, where a Montaiglon was vulgarly quarrelling with *sans culottes*.

For a moment or two he stood bewildered. There was no drawbridge to this eccentric moat; there was, on this side of the rock at least, not so little as a boat; if Lamond ever held intercourse with the adjacent isle of Scotland he must seemingly swim. Very well; the Count de Montaiglon, guilty of many outrages against his ancestry to-day, must swim too if that were called for. And it looked as if that were the only alternative. Vainly he called and whistled; no answer came from the castle, that he might have thought a deserted ruin if a column of smoke did not rise from some of its chimneys.

It was his one stroke of good fortune that for some reason the pursuit was no longer apparent. The dim woods behind seemed to have swallowed up sight and sound of the broken men, who, at fault, were following up their quarry to the castle of Mac-Cailen Mor instead of to that of Baron Lamond. He had therefore time to prepare himself for his next step. He sat on the shore and took off his elegant long boots, the quite charming silk stockings so unlike travel in

the wilds; then looked dubiously at his limbs and at the castle. No! manifestly, an approach so frank was not to be thought of, and he compromised by unbuttoning the foot of his pantaloons and turning them over his knees. In any case, if one had to swim over that yeasty and alarming barrier, his clothing must get wet. *À porte basse, passant courbé*. He would wade as far as he could, and if he must, swim the rest.

With the boots and the valise and the stockings and the skirts of his coat tucked high in his arms, the Count waded into the tide, that chilled deliciously after the heat of his flight.

But it was ridiculous! It was the most condemnable folly! His face burned with shame as he found himself half-way over the channel and the waves no higher than his ankles. It was to walk through a few inches of water that he had nearly stripped to nature!

And a woman was laughing at him, *morbleu!* Decidedly a woman was laughing—a young woman, he could wager, with a monstrously musical laugh, by St. Denys! and witnessing (though he could not see her even had he wished) this farce from an upper window of the tower. He stood for a moment irresolute, half inclined to retreat from the ridicule that never failed to affect him more unpleasantly than danger the most dire; his face and neck flamed; he forgot all about the full-bosomed Baronne or remembered her only to agree that nobility demanded some dignity even in fleeing from an enemy. But the shouts of the pursuers that had died away in the distance grew again in the neighbourhood, and he pocketed his diffidence and

resumed his boots, then sought the entrance to a dwelling that had no hospitable portal to the shore.

Close at hand the edifice gained in austerity and dignity while it lost the last of its scanty air of hospitality. Its walls were of a rough rubble of granite and whinstone, grown upon at the upper storeys with grasses and weeds wafted upon the ledges by the winds that blow indifferent, bringing the green messages of peace from God. A fortalice dark and square-built, flanked to the southern corner by a round turret, lit by few windows, and these but tiny and suspicious, it was as Scots and arrogant as the thistle that had pricked Count Victor's feet when first he set foot upon the islet.

A low wall surrounded a patch of garden-ground to the rear, one corner of it grotesquely adorned with a bower all bedraggled with rains, yet with the red berry of the dog-rose gleaming in the rusty leafage like grapes of fire. He passed through the little garden and up to the door. Its arch, ponderous, deep-moulded, hung a scowling eyebrow over the black and studded oak, and over all was an escutcheon with a blazon of hands fess-wise and castles embattled and the legend—
“Doom

Man behauld the end of All.
Be nocht Wiser than the Priest.
Hope in God”

He stood on tiptoe to read the more easily the time-blurred characters, his baggage at his feet, his fingers pressed against the door. Some of the words he could not

decipher nor comprehend, but the first was plain to his understanding.

“Doom!” said he airily and half aloud. “Doom! *Quelle félicité!* It is an omen.”

Then he rapped lightly on the oak with the pommel of his sword.

CHAPTER III — BARON OF DOOM

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Deep in some echoing corridor of the stronghold a man's voice rose in the Gaelic language, ringing in a cry for service, but no one came.

Count Victor stepped back and looked again upon the storm-battered front, the neglected garden, the pathetic bower. He saw smoke but at a single chimney, and broken glass in the little windows, and other evidences that suggested meagre soup was common fare in Doom.

“M. Bethune's bowl,” he said to himself, “is not likely to be brimming over if he is to drink it here. M. le Baron shouting there is too much of the gentleman to know the way to the back of his own door; Glengarry again for a louis! —Glengarry *sans feu ni lieu*, but always the most punctilious when most nearly penniless.”

Impatiently he switched with the sword at the weeds about his feet; then reddened at the apprehension that had made him all unconsciously bare the weapon at a door whose hospitality he was seeking, rapped again, and sheathed the steel.

A shuffling step sounded on the stones within, stopped apparently just inside the door, and there fell silence. No bolt moved, no chain clanked. But something informed the Count Victor that he was being observed, and he looked all over the door till he saw that one bolt-boss was missing about the height of his head and that through the hole an eye was watching him. It was the most absurd thing, and experiment with a hole in the door will not make plain the

reason of it, but in that eye apparently little discomfited by the stranger having observed it, Count Victor saw its owner fully revealed.

A grey eye inquiring, an eye of middle age that had caution as well as humour. A domestic—a menial eye too, but for the life of him Count Victor could not resist smiling back to it.

And then it disappeared and the door opened, showing on the threshold, with a stool in his hand, a very little bow-legged man of fifty years or thereby, having a face all lined, like a chart, with wrinkles, ruddy at the cheeks as a winter apple, and attired in a mulberry-brown. He put his heels together with a mechanical precision and gravely gave a military salute.

“Doom?” inquired Count Victor formally, with a foot inside the door.

“Jist that,” answered the servitor a little dryly, and yet with a smile puckering his face as he put an opposing toe of a coarse unbuckled brogue under the instep of the stranger. The accent of the reply smacked of Fife; when he heard it, Count Victor at a leap was back in the port of Dysart, where it shrank beneath tall rocks, and he was hearing again for the first time with an amused wonder the native mariners crying to each other on the quays.

“Is your master at home?” he asked.

“At hame, quo' he! It wad depend a'thegether on wha wants to ken,” said the servant cautiously. Then in a manner ludicrously composed of natural geniality and burlesque importance, “It's the auld styles aboot Doom, sir, though there's few o' us left to keep them up, and whether the

Baron's oot or in is a thing that has to be studied maist scrupulously before the like o' me could say.”

“My name is De Montaiglon; I am newly from France; I—”

“Step your ways in, Monsher de Montaiglon,” cried the little man with a salute more profound than before. “We're prood to see you, and hoo are they a' in France?”

“Tolerably well, I thank you,” said Count Victor, amused at this grotesque combination of military form and familiarity.

Mungo Boyd set down the stool on which he had apparently been standing to look through the spy-hole in the door, and seized the stranger's bag. With three rapid movements of the feet, executed in the mechanical time of a soldier, he turned to the right about, paused a second, squared his shoulders, and led the way into a most barren and chilly interior.

“This way, your honour,” said he. “Ye'll paurdon my discretion, for it's a pernikity hoose this for a' the auld bauld, gallant forms and ceremonies. I jalouse ye came roond in a wherry frae the toon, and it's droll I never saw ye land. There was never mony got into Doom withoot the kennin' o' the garrison. It happened aince in Black Hugh's time wi' a corps o' Campbells frae Ardkinglas, and they found themselves in a wasp's byke.”

The Count stumbled in the dusk of the interior, for the door had shut of itself behind them, and the corridor was unlit except by what it borrowed from an open door at the far end, leading into a room. An odour of burning peats filled the place; the sound of the sea-breakers was to be heard in a murmur as one hears far-off and magic seas in a shell that

is held to the ear. And Count Victor, finding all his pleasant anticipations of the character of this baronial dwelling utterly erroneous, mentally condemned Bethune to perdition as he stumbled behind the little grotesque aping the soldier's pompous manner.

The door that lent what illumination there was to his entrance was held half open by a man who cast at the visitor a glance wherein were surprise and curiosity.

“The Monsher de Montaiglon frae France,” announced Mungo, stepping aside still with the soldier's mechanical precision, and standing by the door to give dignity to the introduction and the entrance.

The Baron may have flushed for the overdone formality of his servant when he saw the style of his visitor, standing with a Kevenhuller cocked hat in one hand and fondling the upturned moustache with the other; something of annoyance at least was in his tone as he curtly dismissed the man and gave admission to the stranger, on whom he turned a questioning and slightly embarrassed countenance, handing him one of the few chairs in the most sparsely furnished of rooms.

“You are welcome, sir,” he said simply in a literal rendering of his native Gaelic phrase; “take your breath. And you will have refreshment?”

Count Victor protested no, but his host paid no heed. “It is the custom of the country,” said he, making for a cupboard and fumbling among glasses, giving, as by a good host's design, the stranger an opportunity of settling down to his new surroundings—a room ill-furnished as a monk's cell, lit by narrow windows, two of them looking to the sea

and one along the coast, though not directly on it, windows sunk deep in massive walls built for a more bickering age than this. Count Victor took all in at a glance and found revealed to him in a flash the colossal mendacity of all the Camerons, Macgregors, and Macdonalds who had implied, if they had not deliberately stated, over many games of piquet or lansquenet at Cammercy, the magnificence of the typical Highland stronghold.

The Baron had been reading; at least beside the chair drawn up to a fire of peat that perfumed the apartment lay a book upon a table, and it was characteristic of the Count, who loved books as he loved sport, and Villon above all, that he should strain his eyes a little and tilt his head slightly to see what manner of literature prevailed in these wilds. And the book gave him great cheer, for it was an old French folio of arms, "*Les Arts de l'Homme d'Epée; ou, Le Dictionnaire du Gentilhomme*," by one Sieur de Guille. Doom Castle was a curious place, but apparently Hugh Bethune was in the right when he described its master as "ane o' the auld gentry, wi' a tattie and herrin' to his déjeune, but a scholar's book open against the ale-jug." A poor Baron (of a vastly different state from the Baron of France), English spoken too, with not much of the tang of the heather in his utterance though droll of his idiom, hospitable (to judge from the proffered glass still being fumbled for in the cupboard), a man who had been in France on the right side, a reader of the *beau langage*, and a student of the lore of *arme blanche*—come, here was luck!

And the man himself? He brought forward his spirits in a bottle of quaint Dutch cut, with hollow pillars at each of its

four corners and two glasses extravagantly tall of stem, and he filled out the drams upon the table, removing with some embarrassment before he did so the book of arms. It surprised Count Victor that he should not be in the native tartan of the Scots Highlander. Instead he wore a demure coat and breeches of some dark fabric, and a wig conferred on him all the more of the look of a lowland merchant than of a chief of clan. He was a man at least twenty years the senior of his visitor—a handsome man of his kind, dark, deliberate of his movements, bred in the courtesies, but seemingly, to the acuter intuitions of Montaiglon, possessed of one unpardonable weakness in a gentleman—a shame of his obvious penury.

“I have permitted myself, M. le Baron, to interrupt you on the counsel of a common friend,” said Count Victor, anxious to put an end to a situation somewhat droll.

“After the goblet, after the goblet,” said Lamond softly, himself but sipping at the rim of his glass. “It is the custom of the country—one of the few that's like to be left to us before long.”

“*À la santé de la bonne cause!*” said the Count politely, choking upon the fiery liquor and putting down the glass with an apology.

“I am come from France—from Saint Germains,” he said. “You may have heard of my uncle; I am the Count de Montaiglon.”

The Baron betrayed a moment's confusion.

“Do you tell me, now?” said he. “Then you are the more welcome. I wish I could say so in your own language—that is, so far as ease goes, known to me only in letters. From

Saint Germains—” making a step or two up and down the room, with a shrewd glance upon his visitor in the bygoing. “H'm, I've been there on a short turn myself; there are several of the Highland gentry about the place.”

“There is one Bethune—Hugh Bethune of Ballimeanach, Baron,” replied Count Victor meaningly. “Knowing that I was coming to this part of the world, and that a person of my tongue and politics might be awkwardly circumstanced in the province of Argyll, he took the liberty to give me your direction as one in whose fidelity I might repose myself. I came across the sleeve to Albion and skirted your noisy eastern coast with but one name of a friend, *pardieu*, to make the strange cliffs cheerful.”

“You are very good,” said the Baron simply, with half a bow. “And Hugh Bethune, now—well, well! I am proud that he should mind of his old friend in the tame Highlands. Good Hugh!”—a strange wistfulness came to the Baron's utterance—“Good Hugh! he'll wear tartan when he has the notion, I'm supposing, though, after all, he was no Gael, or a very far-out one, for all that he was in the Marischal's tail.”

“I have never seen him in the tartan, beyond perhaps a waistcoat of it at a *bal masque.*”

“So? And yet he was a man generally full of Highland spirit.”

Count Victor smiled.

“It is perhaps his only weakness that nowadays he carries it with less dignity than he used to do. A good deal too much of the Highland spirit, M. le Baron, wears hoops, and comes into France in Leith frigates.”

“Ay, man!” said the Baron, heedless of the irony, “and Hugh wears the tartan?”

“Only in the waistcoat,” repeated Count Victor, complacently looking at his own scallops.

“Even that!” said the Baron, with the odd wistfulness in his voice. And then he added hurriedly, “Not that the tartan's anything wonderful. It cost the people of this country a bonny penny one way or another. There's nothing honest men will take to more readily than the breeks, says I —the douce, honest breeks——”

“Unless it be the petticoats,” murmured the Count, smiling, and his fingers went to the pointing of his moustache.

“Nothing like the breeks. The philabeg was aye telling your parentage in every line, so that you could not go over the moor to Lennox there but any drover by the roadside kent you for a small clan or a family of caterans. Some people will be grumbling that the old dress should be proscribed, but what does it matter?”

“The tartan is forbidden?” guessed Count Victor, somewhat puzzled.

Doom flushed; a curious gleam came into his eyes. He turned to fumble noisily with the glasses as he replaced them in the cupboard.

“I thought that was widely enough known,” said he. “Put down by the law, and perhaps a good business too. *Diaouil!*” He came back to the table with this muttered objurgation, sat and stared into the grey film of the peat-fire. “There was a story in every line,” said he, “a history in every check, and we are odd creatures in the glens, Count, that we could

never see the rags without minding what they told. Now the tartan's in the dye-pot, and you'll see about here but *crotal*-colour—the old stuff stained with lichen from the rock."

"Ah, what damage!" said Count Victor with sympathetic tone. "But there are some who wear it yet?"

The Baron started slightly. "Sir?" he questioned, without taking his eyes from the embers.

"The precipitancy of my demands upon your gate and your hospitality must have something of an air of impertinence," said Count Victor briskly, unbuckling his sword and laying it before him on the table; "but the cause of it lay with several zealous gentlemen, who were apparently not affected by any law against tartan, for tartan they wore, and *sans culottes* too, though the dirt of them made it difficult to be certain of either fact. In the East it is customary, I believe, for the infidel to take off his boots when he intrudes on sacred ground; nothing is said about stockings, but I had to divest myself of both boots and stockings. I waded into Doom a few minutes ago, for all the world like an oyster-man with my bag on my back."

"Good God!" cried the Baron. "I forgot the tide. Could you not have whistled?"

"Whole operas, my dear M. le Baron, but the audience behind me would have made the performance so necessarily allegretto as to be ineffective. It was wade at once or pipe and perish. *Mon Dieu!* but I believe you are right; as an honest man I cannot approve of my first introduction to your tartan among its own mountains."

"It must have been one of the corps of watches; it must have been some of the king's soldiers," suggested the