

said Laidlaw. "If you have trouble, you shall be paid for it; and since you are pleased, my auld lady, to talk about the south, let me say a word of the north. I have got money in my pouch to pay my way wherever I go, and this is mair than some of your bonnie Highland huids can say. Here it lies my lady!" and he struck with the palm of his hand the large and well replenished pocket-book, which bulged out from his side.

"I want none of your money," said the old crone, her eyes nevertheless sparkling with a malicious joy; "walk in; you will have the company of strangers for the night."

He followed her advice, and went to the end of the cottage, near which, upon the floor, blazed a large fire of peat. There was no grate, and for chimney, a hole in the roof sufficed, through which the smoke ascended in large volumes. Here he saw the company mentioned by the sybil.

It consisted of three men, of the most fierce and savage aspect. Two of them were dressed as sailors, the third in a sort of a Highland garb.

He had never seen any persons who had so completely the air of desperadoes. The two first were dark in their complexions, their black bushy beards apparently unshorn for many weeks. Their expressions were dark and ominous, and bespoke spirits within, which had been trained up in crime. Nor were the red locks of the third, and his fiery countenance, and sharp, cruel eyes, less appalling, and less indicative of evil.

So near an intercourse with such people, and under these circumstances, would have thrown a chill over most hearts; but William Laidlaw was naturally a stranger to fear, and, at any rate, his great strength gave him a confidence which it was very difficult to shake; he had, besides, a most unbounded confidence in scientific cudgel-playing, and in the virtues of "Knock-him-down."

These three men were seated around the fire; and when our traveller came alongside of them, and saluted them, not one returned his salutation. Each sat in dogged silence. If they designed to recognise him, it was by looks of ferocious sternness and these looks were momentary, for they instantly relapsed into their former state of sullen apathy.

William was this time beset by two most unfortunate inclinations. He had an incorrigible desire, first, to speak, and secondly, to eat; and never had any propensities come upon a man so *mal-apropos*. He sat for a few minutes absolutely nonplussed about the method of gratifying them. At length, after revolving the matter deeply in his mind, he contrived to get out with the following words:—

"I have been thinking, gudewife, that some-

thing to eat is very agreeable when a body is hungry." No answer.

"I have been thinking, mistress, that when a man is hungry he is the better of something to eat." No answer.

"Did you hear what I was saying, mistress?"

"Perfectly weel."

"And what is your opinion of the matter?"

"My opinion is, that a hungry man is the better of being fed." Such was the old dame's reply; and he thought he could perceive a smile of bitter ridicule curl up the savage lips of his three neighbours.

"Was there ever such an auld hag?" said the yeoman to himself. "There she sits at her wheel, and cares nae mair for a fellow-creature than I would for a dead sheep."

"Mistress," continued he, "I see you will not tak hints. I maun then tell you plainly, that I am the next door to starvation, and that I will thank you for something to eat."

"This produced the desired effect, for she instantly got up from her wheel, went to a cupboard, and produced a plentiful supply of cold venison, bread and cheese, together with a large bottle of the finest whisky."

William now felt quite at his ease. Putting "Knock-him-down" beside him, and planting himself at the table, he commenced operations in a style that would have done honour to Friar Tuck himself. Venison, bread and cheese, disappeared like magic. So intently did he keep to his occupation, that he neither thought nor cared about any other object.

Every thing which came under the denomination of eatable having disappeared from the table, he proceeded to discuss the contents of the black bottle which stood by. He probably indulged rather freely in this respect, for shortly after commencing, he became very talkative, and seemed resolved at all risks, to extract conversation from his mute companions.

"You will be in the smuggling trade, frien?" said he, slapping the shoulder of one of his dark complexioned neighbours. The fellow started from his seat, and looked upon the borderer with an expression of anger and menace, but he was suddenly quieted by one of his companions, who whispered into his ear, "Hush, Roderick; never mind him: the time is not come."

"I was saying, frien," reiterated Laidlaw, without perceiving this interruption, "that you will be in the smuggling trade?"

"May be I am," was the fellow's answer.

"And you are a fish of the same water?" continued William to the second, who nodded assent.