

LXIX

SIMON WHISPERS

TEN minutes later Robin was passing the ale-house bent on earnest errand, when a roar of laughter from the tap-room brought him to halt.

The tap-room door was ajar, and a spear of light gashed the darkness without.

The laughter ceased suddenly as it had risen, and through the silence a single voice ran tittering like a thin thread of sound.

Robin crept to the door, and standing at the edge of the dark, looked in.

The tap-room was full to overflowing. Scarcely in the old man's memory, never certainly since the night following the sudden death of the father of Simon Ogg twenty years before had he seen such a gathering. Women with their babies were there, children not a few, and the accustomed toppers of the place, all silent as in kirk, all backs towards the door, all hearkening to that single voice running through the silence.

And the teller of the good tale, the man of wit, the lord of sudden laughter and awful stillness, was he whom the Laird had pictured sitting bereaved and brooding by his lonely hearth—Simon Ogg!

He was standing on a chair in the ingle-nook, only his shoulders and flaming head seen above the press. His pale eyes were twittering, his shoulders twitching; and all the while he told his tale in rapid tittering voice, the people punctuating it with roars of laughter and applause.

Through the open door a gust of wind blew.

The teller looked over the heads of the people and beheld in the door an old ringleted face regarding him.

Simon stopped, the titter still upon his lips. "Hillo!" he gasped. "I scarce expected you here to-night."