

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

SOMETHING ACCOMPLISHED.

David Lyall in British Weekly.

Nobody paid much heed to Lachlan-Dunn in Tobernaid. They were used to seeing him shuffling about the roads with his hands in his pockets, sometimes whittling a stick, or twisting a bit of string. He was what they called a "nateral." He was the son of a widow who had a small croft at the lochside and who managed to get a living for herself and Lachlan out of the poorest, sourest bit of ground in the strath. Lachlan, admittedly a handful for a widow woman, had not so far done much to help her; he was seventeen and very big and strong-like-wise lazy. But people had learned to regard him as a sort of overgrown baby, of whom ordinary things could not be expected. Lachlan, however, had one distinguishing and rather unique trait, he could be absolutely trusted to deliver a message or a parcel with the utmost dispatch and correctness, and had never been known to make the smallest mistake. He got a good many odd jobs of this kind to do, receiving in return coppers or a silver sixpence, of which he was inordinately fond. Lachlan hoarded the money, but nobody knew where he kept it except the mid-eyed sheep or the startled grouse or the wild rabbits, with whom he held strange converse.

One day there came off the boat at Tobernaid, where it waited but ten minutes, a tall stranger, looking like an English or an American tourist. He was a very good-looking man and had a commanding way with him, so when he inquired with a touch of imperiousness of the harbourmaster whether anybody could be found to deliver an important message for him in the neighbourhood, Donald McCann immediately thought of Lachlan Dunn, and forthwith called him from his perch on the low drystone dyke of the pierhead.

Lachlan slouched forward, a most ungainly and unattractive-looking figure, shuffling his feet even more ridiculously than ever, and wearing his most hang-dog look.

"You're taking a rise out of me, my man," said the stranger sourly to the piermaster. "This, I fancy, is your village idiot."

Lachlan made no sign that he comprehended, but he did, and owed a grudge for the gratuitous insult. He turned on his heel carelessly, in no way anxious for the stranger's job, and not minded to have any more of his rude remarks. He heard McCann talking volubly, and after a moment he was recalled from his perch.

"Look here, my lad. I'm told you are a very reliable messenger. Can you undertake to carry a letter for me to Lairg House, and to deliver it safely into the lady's hands?"

"Ay, maybe," answered Lachlan vacantly, whereat the stranger waxed inwardly wroth.

"It is to Miss Mona Kirkpatrick I wish the note delivered. Do you know her?"

"Ay, maybe," answered Lachlan as before, whereupon the stranger glared upon McCann, and appeared as if he would course him.

"Do you think it safe?" he asked sternly. "The boy is certainly an idiot. Can I give it to him and have any expectation that it will be delivered?"

Now McCann was a proud man, and a little hot in the temper, and further, he saw no reason why he should "stand the Southern's sauce," as he expressed it; therefore he simply answered as Lachlan had done, at the same time trying to emulate his singular vacancy of expression.

"Ay, maybe."

A small, warning shriek came from the red and black funnel of the boat.

and the stranger, realising that he saw before him his only chance of getting his missive delivered, took it rather scowling from his pocket.

"There it is, then, to be delivered to Miss Mona Kirkpatrick, within two hours from now, or at least before nightfall, on pain of pain of death I was going to say, but at least you will understand that it is of the last importance. There is a shilling for you, and when I hear that it has been safely delivered, which will be to-morrow," he added menacingly, "you shall have a gold coin; but whether it be a large or a small one will depend on circumstances."

Lachlan took the letter and slipped it inside the ragged cover of his coat. But the shilling he would not touch, which surprised McCann very much.

"Tak it, Lachlan. Ye deserve payment for your job."

But Lachlan held off, and finally, when pressed, took the shilling. But after the stranger had gone on board the boat again, he heaved the coin after him, and it fell into the shining waters of the loch.

"Ye dinna like that carl, Lachlan; well, neither do I whatefer. He is up to nae good."

Lachlan grinned slowly, and McCann, who knew how vindictive the lad could be, thought it prudent to utter a note of warning.

"You'll deliver that message, Lachlan, or give it to me," he said, threateningly. "After all, a promise is a promise, an' sure it does not pay to pe leelin'."

"I'm no' leelin', an' I wull tak the letter," said Lachlan, and shuffled away.

He disappeared through the handful of houses huddled in the hollow of the rocks and was no more seen. He sped across the heathery slope at the back of the village and quickly came to the wild open space of the moorland places, where there was nobody to watch him, and where the salt breath of the sea mingled with the scent of heather and peat. Now in a small, deep dell, which looked as if it had been cleft by the furies in the heart of the moor, there was a well supposed to possess wonderful qualities. It had been called from time immemorial the Merlin's Well, which indicated that its tradition was not a new one. It was cunningly set about with boulders, in which beautiful ferns grew and flourished exceedingly; there were a few silver birch trees, too, which, sheltered by the high banks of the dell, had grown to quite luxurious proportions and made a very picturesque setting for the shrine. If there had been many lovers in Tobernaid, then surely here they would have kept tryst, but the population of the little hamlet had dwindled sadly away; the young men and maidens were obliged, through lack of work or opportunity, to seek their fortunes elsewhere, some of them very far from the Merlin's Well, even as far as Canada.

Lachlan spent a great deal of his time crooning and dreaming by the side of the gurgling stream, which fed the well, and here he had made for himself a little sanctuary. When he reached it that day, it was high noon, and the sun was golden on the heather. But in the bosky heart of the dell it was cool and quiet and full of shadows. After peering round carefully to see that he was unobserved, Lachlan began to clear away a little pile of stones under a great head of bracken, and laid open to gaze a small cavity warmly lined with moss, upon which lay a goodly pile of coins, both brown and white. But there was no gold. Often the lad had dreamed of seeing gold among it, and now the chance was his, only he did not take it. Now it may be said that Lachlan had no right to make himself judge or arbitrator in a case of this kind, but

he had a curious extra sense, denied to others, which made up in great measure for what he lacked. Lachlan never made a mistake in his man, and he knew that the glowering stranger on the pierhead was not a good man, and that there was evil in his heart. And he was determined, in his own mind, that he meant ill to his dear Miss Mona, who, of all the people in the world, spoke most kindly and sweetly to him. Therefore she should not have the letter. It was very simple reasoning, but perfectly clear to the mind of the untutored lad. And I have to tell my story as it happened. He buried it there beside his treasure without so much as a quail or a moment's hesitation. Then he laid the stones safely above it, and bent the bracken low to cover them, and went whistling from his secret place. That night a new sort of craft, a small, white-winged yacht, appeared suddenly across the grey mists of the loch. The castle of Lairg stood out on the promontory above, its lights twinkling in the quiet night, but though the boat rocked impatiently the whole night through, the signal watched for by the dark figure on board did not come. And with the dawning the boat, like a bird escaped from the hand of the Fowler, flew across the now angry waters, with a cursing man on board.

A few days after that, a message came to Lairg from the Widow Dunn begging that Miss Mona would come to see Lachlan, who was down with a low fever and kept calling her name. Now Mona, who in spite of her sad heart and her many cares, for she was unhappy in her home, was always ready to fly to the succour of any of her humble friends, did not delay a moment, but in the clear afternoon light, walked to the Widow's cottage, passed within, and found Lachlan half sitting up in bed, looking as white as death.

"Yes, he's very ill, whatefer, Miss Mona," said his anxious-faced mother. "The doctor came over from the Ferry yesterday, and he says it is but little he can do. I'm afeart, Miss Mona. I'm not liking his looks."

Mona did not like them either. She had some skill in sickness, and drawing her loose leather gloves from her firm white hands, she laid a cool finger on the lad's pulse, and found it quick and feeble.

"I want to speak to you, Miss Mona, by your lane," he added, with a glance at his mother, who, accustomed to his vagaries, retired without so much as a glance of astonishment.

"I kept the letter, Miss Mona, an' maybe it was wrong. But I did not like him. There was black evil in his heart. Will you believe that?"

Mona looked mystified, but certainly her color rose.

"What letter, Lachlan?" she asked, very gently.

"The letter he gave till me. He came on the boat. He was a pig, dark man an' he had the evil eye. Listen, an' I wull tell ye where to find it, if you'll not be saying anything to my mother about the siller."

"I will say nothing to anybody," Miss Mona assured him, and then received her instructions regarding the mysterious letter whose existence she doubted. Within the hour she was stooping over the low cairn by the Merlin's Well, and when she saw the writing on the letter, her face paled. Her fingers trembled very much as she broke the heavy seal, and made herself mistress of the contents. And when it fell from her hands at last, and fluttered to the ground, her heart was all a tumult of emotion. But for the strange intervention of Lachlan Dunn, she knew that she would have been away in the Firefy, which had lain all night under the lee of Lairg Loch, and that she would have staked