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Or, The Lass o' Gramond Brig

A ROMANCE OF OLD EDINBURGH

CHAPTER VI.

JOCK'S WRONGS RIGHTED BY THE KING—GORB IN A TERRIBLE FLIGHT—APPEARANCE OF THE KING'S DOUBLE AT BRAEHEAD.

"John Howieson, are ye forgettin' that I'm in the room?" haughtily observed Tibbie to her husband. "It's easy seen, Maister Ballangeich, that my man kens little aboot high society and gude breeding, or he wad have allooed the leddies the first priviledge. Hoo's a' wi' ye, sir? I hope ye're quite weel the day, and nane the waur o' the wound ye got last nicht."

"Hale and hearty, good dame," merrily responded the King, "and how fares the pretty Marion?" and as he took the hand of the blushing maiden he deftly encircled her with his free arm and kissed her as neatly as if he had been an accepted lover, and then poured into her ears some pretty compliments which made her doubt whether she was awake or dreaming.

"My fegs! but he's no blate," remarked Jock to his wife in an undertone, "and he looks like he was a practised hand at that kind o' thing, and Marion, the jaud, didna object muckle. I'll hae a craw to pluck wi' her when I get hame."

"Then I'll hae a pock to put the feathers in," sharply returned Tibbie, who did not look nearly so displeased as her husband. "Jist alloo me to manage thae things. Maybe the wound on his hand wasna the only ane that Ballangeich carried awa wi' him yestreen, and I may yet hae him for a son-in-law."

Womanlike, she had quickly read her daughter's feelings, and in the crimson cheeks and downcast eyes saw plainly that all that was tender had been stirred in her breast by the gallant stranger who had braved so much for her sake. Noting the young girl's confusion, the King kindly led her round the room, speaking of the pictures and grand tapestries adorning the walls, and soon had her tremors calmed; but Tibbie's eagle eye noted his every gesture, and it seemed to her that their courtly friend was as profoundly impressed with Marion's beauty and goodness as her daughter was with his own handsome face and brave heart.

"Od, it'll be something to be mother in law to a Lord," she exultantly thought, "for then I'll be received at Court, and be driven about in a coach like a lady of the land, and then Jock will be gled I'm no ane o' thee mithers that hae aye their nebs in the dirt."

"Now, my good friend John," observed the King, as he returned once more to their side with Marion, "I have thought much since we parted of the fears you expressed about being turned out of your farm———."

"Ay, wae's me, it's owre certain noo," interposed Jock, "for before we left this morning the Shirra officers were at Braehead serving me wi' notice to quit."

"Ha! say you so? Your young laird is somewhat quick in his proceedings," remarked the King. "We must be equally so, and you must e'en accompany me to the presence chamber, and tell your story to the King himself."

"The King himsel'!" cried Jock in dismay. "Lord bless me, sir, if I was beside him I wadna ken which end o' me was uppermost. Me speak to the King!—that's clean oot o' the question. I couldna though my life were on't."

"Eh, but that's like ye, ye muckle gomeril," remarked Tibbie. "Aye standing in yer ain licht, and never thinking o' yer wife and daughter. Od, if I had the chance I wad speak to the King as fearlessly as I wad to my ain faither."

"Nobly spoken, good dame," cried the King, "for I know from himself that the dearest wish of His Majesty is to be a father to his people. Forget your fears, John, and try to think that you are only addressing your own wife."

"My ain wife!" exclaimed John, with a pitying look. "Man, Ballangeich, ye're surely no a marriet man, or ye wad ken that a man is often fearder to speak to his ain wife than to a King. I can tell ye from experience that when their birse is up the less ye say to them the better. Tak' me before the King now—that word has nerved me."

The King laughed heartily, and offering an arm each to Marion and Tibbie he led the way to the presence chamber, in which the brilliant assemblage of ladies and nobles fairly took away Jock's breath. As for Tibbie, she only raised her head a little higher, and trod the floor a little more haughtily to intimate to all of her sex present that she was their inferior in nothing, while Marion's blushes and downcast eyes were the best off-set which her rare beauty could have had, and instantly attracted the admiring gaze of every gentleman present.

"Mercy on us, what a grand show?" cried Jack, holding back. "I'm a kind o' feared to gang in after a'; and hist! Ballangeich, which is the King? Hoo will I ken him?"

"Easily, quite easily, John," merrily answered the King. "He alone will remain uncovered—every bonnet but his will be off.

"Ye dinna say sae? Wait a meenit! I'm shakin' a' owre, like a new born kitlin. I really canna gang among a' thae gentry! Lord help us! there's a sicht o' diamonds and cairngorms and feathers! I think I'll awa'!"

"Nay, fear not," said the King speaking aloud, possibly for the benefit of Birkhill, who stood back in ignominy and disgrace. "Speak to the King freely, and let him hear and know the voice of truth. Lay your grievances faithfully before him or blame him not, for how should Kings redress those ills which flatterers hide or wicked men disguise?"

"Fegs, that's true," said Jock, amid a deathly silence, "but, man Ballangeich, ye've grown awfu' Englified since last night—I suppose it's Holyrood manners; but I like best to hear ye whangin' oot a gude swatch o' the mither tongue—it's mair freendly and couthie like. But dinna be dowie because yer tongue's been corrupted—nae man shall ever say that Jock Howieson despised a freend for his misfortunes, and gude kens yer heart is as truly Scottish as ony that every throbbit with thae wa's."

"Thank you, John; I am really much obliged to you for your good opinion," said the King, leading off the laugh that ran round the room, and busying himself in finding a place near the throne for Marion and Tibbie. While he was thus engaged, Jock's eye fell on the throne, and after admiring it thoroughly he calmly seated himself in its roomy depths and then waved a friendly hand to the King.

"Come on, Ballangeich; I'll mak' room room for ye here," he generously remarked. "Aweel, comin' in here's just like getting married—it tak's a lot o' courage to mak' the plunge, but ance ye're in it's very pleasant. Od, this is the maist comfortable chair I ever was in in my life. Tibbie ye maun get ane like this for me for the afternoons. It's a queer place this though, for there's only ae chair in hale room. Sit doon, man, sit doon; ye're as welcome to it as if it were yer ain," and Jock tried to pull the King down to sit beside him, but James contented himself with a seat on the cushioned arm of the throne, and said—

"Thank you, John; I shall do very well here. Well, man, do you see the King now?"

Jock looked round the whole room long and searchingly, and then at the King, who wore his plumed bonnet, and then at himself, and finally said with great glee—

"No, man, I dinna see him, but if what ye telled me be true, it maun be either you or me, for we're the only twa that hae on oor bannets."

"You have guessed aright, John," answered the courtly stranger. "I am your King!"

"Mercy me! I'm a deid man!" cried Jock, springing from his seat on the throne, uncovering his head and throwing himself flat on his face before the King.

"And I'm a deid woman," echoed Tibbie instantly imitating her husband.

Marion said nothing, but her knees gave way under her, and she was about to sink to the floor also when the King drew her arm within his own and said—

"Nay, kneel not to me, for virtue in woman and bravery in man are higher than thrones. Rise, my good dame; my pretty Marion, welcome to Holyrood. John Howieson, thou art a man, which is a title greater than Kings can confer. Rise and plead your cause boldly, man."

"You—you—your Majesty's already got the brief," stammered Jock, swiddling nervously with his bonnet; "I'm thinkin' you'll be the poor man's best advocate."

"Well spoken, John; and I'll promise you I'll plead without a fee," merrily returned the Monarch. "Is Birkhill of that Ilk still in our presence?"

"Please your Majesty, I'm here," humbly responded Sir Lewis, moving forward under guard.

"Now, young sir, is it true that you dared to insult this worthy man by making dishonourable proposals to his daughter?" sternly demanded the King.

"My liege, I believe there was a little affair of gallantry," said Birkhill, reddening painfully.

"My certie, Laird, it was a big affair!" interposed Jock, with great indignation.

"Sirrah!" exclaimed Birkhill, with a contemptuous glare at the farmer.

"Nay, my Lord," interposed the King, "big words will not cover the meanness of your conduct. Think you that greatness sanctions wickedness, or that we shall allow our nobles to be unjust or inhuman to our subjects? Never! never while the heart of James the Fifth beats true to the trust which God had placed in his keeping! Marriage alone can remedy this wrong."

"Out and alas, marriage!" cried Marion, almost fainting. "Death were to be preferred."

"Your Majesty," tremulously added Jock, "I wadna hae't for a' the wealth o' the world."

"And you, good dame?" inquiringly observed the King to Tibbie.

"Your Majesty, I wad suner see her wed to a coffin," promptly answered Tibbie.

"I hope your Majesty will consider my rank," humbly suggested Birkhil.

"Your rank, my Lord!" scathingly returned the King. "Rank vanishes at the touch of an action base or low. What makes you great? Your dress and gilded equipage? Give them to your cowering slave there," and he indicated the corpse like face of Simon Gorb, "and he's as great as thou. No, my Lord; he alone is great who acts greatly. Where's your greatness, when this poor family refuse your alliance? My Lords and gentlemen, draw near—I crave your advice. What does that man deserve who, under the shadow of night, would basely rob a father of his child, and raise his hand against his Sovereign's life?"

"Instant death!" cried all, foremost among them being Birkhill himself.

"My Lord, you have pronounced your own doom," gravely continued the King. "It was I who last night rescued that innocent maiden from your violence, and here, my Lords, behold the dagger which he basely raised against my life."

"The villain! the wuddie's owre gude for him," cried Tibbie, shaking her fist across at her humbled landlord.

"Eh, Birkhill," cried Jock, shaking his head, "wae am I to see your faither's son turn oot sic a ne'er dae weel—and your noble mither, her grey head will be brought with sorrow to the grave.

"Your life I grant in that you knew me not," sternly pursued James, "but on condition that within one month you resign in favor of your noble mother the charters which conferred your lands, and quit forever a country you have disgraced. Remove him from our presence, and for that murderous knave and slave, bind him fast, and take him with the other two cutthroats to the Canongate Jail, there to await the doom of the law."

Instantly Birkhill and Simon Gorb were seized and hurried forth.

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