

## THE MISSING PEDLAR.

A TALE OF FOXCOMBE HILL, NEAR OXFORD, 1772.

FOUNDED ON FACT.

"NAE letter again the day, Annie?"

"Nae mither, nae; wae's me!"

There was silence on both sides when these words had been spoken, and Annie, a girl of some fourteen years, fastened the latch of the door, and going up to the table, proceeded to empty the contents of her basket, and arrange the store of provisions for the coming week, which she had just brought with her from the neighbouring town. Mrs. Sanderson and her two children, Annie and Willie, lived in a small cottage in Perthshire. Her husband was a pedlar, and always travelled south with his wares, taking them to all parts of England, and to the midland counties, at Michaelmas especially.

David Sanderson was always looked for anxiously by the lads and lassies at the farms, when harvest was over, and the Michaelmas money had been paid. In those days shops were few, and roads were bad for getting to the towns, so pedlars' packs were welcomed alike by mistresses and servants; and David was a favourite too, for sometimes he would linger late, and many a weird Scotch story could he tell, to which the lassies listened shuddering, but with open-mouthed interest as well.

David was never at his home in Scotland for many weeks together, and at the time when my story begins, it was two months and more over his time for returning for the five or six weeks that he usually spent at home in the spring. An occasional letter found its way to the cottage from the itinerant husband and father; but a long time had elapsed since any letter had come, and day after day passed and no David came. The poor wife's heart sank within her, but Annie and Willie did their best to cheer her with hopes of their father's speedy return, and the laird and his wife on whose estate they lived were very good to them.

It was a fine October evening in 1772,

the sun had set about an hour, and the moon was just shewing over the hill-top, when David Sanderson made his way up the rough sandy track which led from Abingdon and the neighbouring villages, over Foxcombe Hill, on past Bagley Wood, and so down to Oxford. David had parted with many of his wares during the last few days, and it was with a considerably lightened pack, but well-filled purse, that he entered "The Fox and Hounds" on the edge of the hill. In the inn he found mine host alone, but they were presently joined by Farmer Hill, who lived in a village handy by, and one of his farm lads. The farmer had been to Wantage to sell some farm produce, and had looked in to report how the sale had prospered; *so he said.*

In a short time, warmth and a comfortable arm-chair, combined with two or three glasses of Michaelmas ale, produced its effect on David, and after various ineffectual attempts to join in the conversation and keep awake, he fell into a sound sleep. The lad, tired out with his long day, followed his example; and looking cautiously round, and winking significantly at one another when a loud snore was heard to proceed from David, the other two drew their chairs, and began to lay their heads together as though for some scheme. At this period Foxcombe Hill and Bagley Wood were wild tracts of country quite unenclosed, and the roads very hilly and rough, and but little frequented. Indeed, a brace of pistols and a good horse were very necessary accompaniments to a traveller who wished to make his way safely through Bagley Wood.

David slept on, till he was roused by a rough shake, and, "Come, wake up man, and be getting on; I can't be sitting all night here for you, and I've no bed to give you, so you'd best be going."

The clock struck ten at this moment.