

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## "FIRST AND BEST!"

By S. R. Crocket.

Sweet, clear and wide as if drawn with the broadest of celestial brushes the twilight of December painted itself above the Galloway hills. Yonder was Bannan—to the left Cairn Edward. The Orchar stretched itself out a long, barrow-like mound. All were streaked in brown and blue, for the first snow had not yet come and gone, sheep were still free to come and go.

John Stoba, herd of Balminnie, came down the hill towards the massive farm-steading which showed itself white and grey out of the mist that filled the valley. He was a slow man, John Stoba, a bachelor of forty years standing, and he knew well his value as a herd and as a man.

Mrs. Colvend, of Balminnie, knew it too. She was John Stoba's employer—or would have been if either of them had ever heard the word. "The Mistress," was what he called her. "Jooohn" uttered in one long-drawn monosyllable—that was his title to honor in all the head-end of Balmaghie. Everybody knew John Stoba. He had gone to herd the 'Hill of Balminnie when he was "but a callant." He had been there before Archie Colvend had married Mary Shand. He even remembered "the auld man"—Archie's father—hale, bowed, keen-faced and grippy of hand, who had so spoiled his only son, refusing him nothing—in reason and out of it—and giving him, as they said in those parts, "money to burn."

John Stoba had been a kind of providence at Balminnie, in the many evil days when young Archie Colvend was going down hill, losing money in foolish speculations, or driving recklessly home on market night with the reins trailing among the horse's feet, himself standing up shouting and threshing, while the gig pitched and tossed like a wave of the sea from one side of the road to the other.

Then when the end came (swiftly, and as might have been expected), John Stoba stayed on in his old capacity. Young Archie his master, had "broken neck-bane" at the Raiders' Brig. But because of that, Balminnie had more need of him than ever.

So John Stoba stayed on at the farm, the same solid, quiet-moving, silent man as ever. Mrs. Archie had been a little older than her husband, a tall, dark, buxom woman of Galloway type, far from uncomely, but reported to be of a most difficult temper. She had no children. So little Aggie Colvend, a niece of her late husband's, had come from Kyle to bear her company, and in time (it might be) heiress of the farm.

In the meantime, however. Aggie certainly endured hardness. She was a bright-faced and winsome maid of ten, who went to school at Bannan when the roads were fit. But her aunt was hasty with her, and tears were more frequent than smiles on Aggie Colvend's face when at home. Indeed, it was generally thought in the district that Mistress Colvend should have had "bairns" o' her ain, before she was trusted to bring up other folks.

As John Stoba came near the steading of Balminnie, he looked about him for something. No, it could not be his dogs, Glen and Cavie. They were both close at his heels, with their heads hanging low, all their morning gambols run out of their heels and toes scarce a wag left in either of their tails. A long day on the hill and the "ingathering" of the far Whinny Knowes had taken the sport out of them.

No, John Stoba was looking for the small figure of a little girl. Aggie was wont to watch for him as he came leisurely down the hill—from the cow pastures in the summer-time and from the bye door when, as now, it was the season of wintry bleakness.

But to-night he was disappointed. No little girl could he spy—neither in pasture nor yet in the byre, where the breath of a dozen cows made the air pleasantly warm and scented with the breath of the by-gone meadows—from which the hay they were munching had been cut and won.

The cows rattled their chains, and Tibbie Grier, the byre lass, called out a greeting to John. A man of forty with a good wage and "something laid by" was not to be despised. But John Stoba answered not at all to her rustic provocation.

"Where's the bairn?" he demanded.

"Wha kens!" said Tibbie, tossing her head, "there's ither lasses forbye in the world."

"Where's wee Aggie?" said John, steadily, with that faculty for keeping on which ultimately compels an answer.

"I heard the Mistress on her tappen a while since," said Tibbie, "but that's nothing new. She's aye ragin' at the lassie; for what I dinna ken. It's nae business o' mine. She's neither better nor waur than ither lasses, sae far as I can see."

John Stoba ordered Cavie, the younger and more troublesome of his colliers, to stop sniffing at a milk pail, and as Cavie did not instantly obey his master enforced the order with a "clikie"—with the result that Cavie went out of the byre door in one long yelp, and so far as could be seen in the gloaming, bent in the form of a loop.

Then John himself, showed sings of leaving, but was interrupted by Tibbie, a bold-eyed, yellow-haired, free-tongued lass of twenty-five.

"Here, John, what's your hurry!" she cried, "sit doon on the stool there and gie us your crack. Ye will forget how to speak, man alive—oot yonder on the hills since mornin'. I wadna wonder if ye henna spoken a word at this blessed day."

"Some folk," said John, sententiously, "speak mair words than sense."

"For shame, John; are ye meanin' me?" cried Tibbie. "Surely never! For I declare that I hae hardly had a sowl to talk to since yestreen. And to tell you the truth, John, ye are the only aye about the farm worth wearin' words on."

To this quite life-sized compliment John replied with his usual plain-spoken gravity:

"Aye, I heard ye sayin' thae verra words to muckle Rob Steenson yestreen." And he left Tibbie to rattle her pails and wonder for what purpose a man so impregnable to ordinary wiles had been created.

"It's that bairn," she said at last, as she drew in her stool to attack a fresh cow, and the milk began to sing its merry song in the pail.

Meanwhile, John moved towards the house. He had to cross the litter-strewn square of the yard. The back door was ruddy oblong before him and the colliers made for it with a rush. They had their appointed places under the table, and the warmth and prospect of supper attracted them.

John entered, passed the vague outline of the humble worker lines of pots and pans in the back kitchen, and so found himself within the spacious "house-place" (which was more, oh, so much more than a kitchen) of the farm of Balminnie. His grave eyes rested on the mistress

of the dwelling. She looked up with a smile at his approach, but there was something dark about her brow, a furrow a little more deeply lined between the eyes, a warm oily look about the widened black pupils, that told of anger not overpast—or at least not fully.

The "house-lass" Meg, manoeuvred about the hearth with pots and pans. A stray ploughman looked in to observe how far the supper preparations had proceeded, caught a glimpse of Mrs. Colvend's face, lost his tongue and abruptly vanished. This was that Rob of whom John Stoba had spoken to Tibbie in the byre. He knew where there was an empty stool and a better welcome.

But John Stoba drew in his chair near the fire, after hanging up his plaid. He had his own place, which was the armchair furthest from the door. Mere term-to-term ploughmen might huddle together on the log settle, but for John Stoba it was another matter. His coming to the farm antedated even that of "the mistress" herself.

"All right on the hill to-day John!" said Mrs. Colvend. She had spoken first, which, considering her temper, was itself a sign of the times. John had taught her by not speaking at all. Silence was no difficulty to him. He was in constant practice up among the sheep and the coursing colliers.

"Aye," he said gravely, with his eyes on the empty little three-legged stool in the chimney corner, "where's wee Aggie?"

The mistress of the farm compressed her lips. The frown deepened. Her eyebrows drew together, the oily density of black in the pupils seemed to absorb the whole iris. For a moment she did not answer.

"Where's the bairn?" John repeated.

"John Stoba," said his mistress, stamping her foot, "how often have I told you to mind your own business!"

"I am," said John calmly; "where's the bairn?"

Meg, the house lass, Tibbie's younger sister, let fall a "pingle" of sowens in her agitation, but Mrs. Colvend was too angry even to register this for future punishment. She stood before the slow quiet man of the hills, trembling with anger, and yet with a fierce tiger-like beauty about her, of which even Meg was dimly conscious.

"She looks famous, the mistress, when she's mad—" was her verdict, "that is" (she added) "when she's no mad at you!"

Nor was Meg Grier alone in this opinion, though the herd of Balminnie appeared entirely unconscious of either charm or anger.

"Where's wee Aggie? Where's the bairn?"

The question repeated for the third time, nearly put the mistress "by herself," as they say in that countryside.

"Where she may be is nae o' your business, John Stoba," she cried, setting her hands on the curve of her hips and bending down her face close to his.

John Stoba regarded the angry woman unflinchingly.

"If ye hae been lickin' the bairn," he said, speaking slowly, and with a certain resolute dullness, "I'll lick you! Haena! I telled ye."

"And who are you, John Stoba?" cried the mistress of the farm, "my herd nae mair!"

"That's it—nae mair," repeated John, "your herd—nae mair!"

A shiver of pain passed over the handsome woman's angry face. There came a change, strange, unexpected, pitiful.

"Oh, John," she said, catching him by the sleeve, "dinna speak to me that