

The True Witness,

AND

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THE HIGHLAND CONVOY.

A few months ago I indulged myself in a sail down the Firth of Clyde in one of the countless steamers of the river. To me this is like a returning voyage up the stream of time; for every murmur of these haunted waters is laden with the voices of other years, and from every nook of the varied shores there start forth to meet me the spirits of the past. I am in a dream, which is not all a dream, for the places are substantial realities, although the persons are shadows; and the spectral show receives no interruption from the cold stony images of humanity by whom I am surrounded on the deck, for these belong in a remarkable manner to the present world, and to the new form into which society has been cast in the course of the last thirty years.

On the occasion referred to, the somewhat uncommon circumstance occurred of my exchanging looks, and finally words, with one of my fellow-passengers. He was a man well on to fifty years of age; but although his head was already sprinkled with the snows of time, his step was elastic, his eyes clear, though serious, and his forehead smooth and white, as if it possessed some natural power of repulsion to throw off the cares of the world, that draws the brows of other men into wrinkles. What attracted me, however, was his air of solitariness, his abstraction from the things and persons of the present, and I knew by intuition that he was conversing, like myself, with the world of shadows. This actually proved to be the case. He had left the Clyde (the opposite shore from mine) in early youth, and after a long pursuit of happiness and fortune, returned a few years, convinced that the former was an illusion, and the latter merely independence, irrespective of the amount of income. We were soon well acquainted; nay, old friends. And what wonder? since our companionship led us to trace back together for one score and ten years the stream of time, and made us feel, as we paced the deck side by side, that every step conducted us further from the living.

After some hours had been spent in this way, my new-old friend was curious to learn the circumstances of my return; but I had nothing to relate beyond the disagreeable impressions made upon me by the people, in their transition state between picturesque rudeness and cold refinement—a state in which they had lost the cordial warmth of the one, before gaining the elegance of the other.

"It is not that I mean," said he. "But after so long an absence, and so unexpected a return, did you meet with nothing remarkable, no incident, no adventure, no?" I smiled, and my companion looked grave.

"It was too late in the day!" I replied, touching ostentatiously with my glove a whisker which is not yet utterly gray.

"It is not that I mean," he repeated, more impatiently, and with some touch of disdain. "We are both of us, it is to be hoped, too old for romance, and too wise for the delusions of a sex placed among mankind as a trial and a test, a mockery and a punishment. You met, then, with nothing remarkable?—nothing to signalize your return?—nothing to stand forward as a landmark in your memory connecting the epochs of your life from boyhood even to middle age? Would but I could say the same!"

"Say anything but the same," cried I. "I am thankful that you have an adventure to relate, and you ought to be thankful that you have a listener to hear it. Let us sit down, for the evening has stolen upon us unawares,

and there is nothing more to be seen on these dusky shores."

"It was in the dusk," began my companion, when we had seated ourselves side by side—

"At what season?"

"When the autumn was far advanced; when the Clyde, like our own heads, my friend, had put on her livery of gray and brown; and when the nights were long and chill, but steeped in the radiance of a harvest moon. My elder brother is a petty laird in the country we have been talking of, on the Highland or right bank of the river, and his house stands in a wild nook of the hills a little more than fifteen miles from the shore. I had informed him by letter of the time I expected to be with him; and, thanks to the regularity of this kind of navigation, I landed in a small boat from the steamer on the appointed day. This was the first time I had touched Scottish ground for thirty years; and even at the rude hamlet, well known to me in my early days, I observed some of the changes that were afterwards so obvious. Indeed the only individual among the lookers-on who harmonized completely with my boyish recollections was a wild-looking Highlander; and even him, in consequence of the change that had taken place in me, I could not help regarding with a feeling of distrust and dislike. And yet the fellow, with his erect athletic figure, his unkempt locks, flowing from beneath a broad blue bonnet, his mist-colored plaid, drawn from one shoulder over a broad chest, with the end hanging down gracefully behind, and his trowsers, furled up to his knees, so as to display the naked leg and foot of a young Hercules, presented a fine specimen of the unrefined Gael. I believe, however, that my suspicions were at first excited by nothing more than the eager attention with which he regarded my baggage as I gave it into the charge of the boatman, and the avidity with which he listened to, and appeared to treasure up, my directions as to its being taken care of till sent for on the following day. When his keen eye caught mine fixed upon him with severity, he looked down instantaneously, as if afraid of betraying his thoughts, and shrank aside with a sudden abjectness of deference which by no means disarmed my suspicion.

Soon after, a new circumstance occurred to draw my attention to this man. Having taken some refreshment in the little public-house, to prepare me for a walk of fifteen miles over a mountainous country, I pulled out my purse, to be ready to pay my reckoning as I went out. I had no more silver, and while hunting in a handful of gold for a half-sovereign to change, the little window darkened, and I looked up; the Highlander stood outside, with his nose literally flattened against the glass, and his eyes fastened upon the treasure with a wolf-like glare that made me start. His expression, naturally wild and fierce, was at this moment tinged with an exulting joy, throwing an illumination, like that of a torch, over the whole face. A foreboding of evil crossed my mind; but instead of attending to it, I rose up like a man in a dream, and went out mechanically. I paid my reckoning, and took my way to the hills." Here the narrator paused and looked towards the darkening shore, as if tracing in imagination some route full of pain and peril.

"Come," said I at length, "proceed; I should not wonder if we hear a little more, before all is done, of your bare-legged vagabond!"

"Hurry me not," replied my friend solemnly; "it must come as it will, or not at all. As you proceed in this direction from the Clyde, the country is much confused with hills, woods, and masses of rock; but it is not till you arrive at the glen through which the mountain tributary rushes that waters my brother's property, that you observe the grander features of the picture. In the meantime, in following the wild road I had often traversed when a boy, I was struck with the shrunken character of the objects. Those hills appeared to me to be small, and those woods more shrubby, on which my imagination had hitherto dwelt as so many mountains and forests, and a strong feeling of disappointment began to gather upon my mind, when my thoughts were suddenly into a new channel. On reaching the summit of an eminence lofty enough to afford a more extensive view than the huddled nature of the scenery usually permitted, I saw a plaided figure disappearing behind an angle of a rock in the distance. I saw this object only for an instant, but I could not be mistaken; it was the Highlander. I even thought he turned his head over his shoulder, as if to watch whether I was following; but in this I may have been mistaken. Now I am not more deficient in animal courage than another; but I had gold in my pocket, and papers of still more value, and although armed, like him, with a serviceable staff, I was conscious that I had been for many years out of training, and should be as easily plucked as a pigeon by that Gaelic vulture. In short, without a second thought, I forsook the beaten road, and trusting to my recollection of the face of the country, made for my destination by a circuitous route.

"It was now late in the afternoon, and if I would reach my brother's house before the departure of day-light; it was necessary to step

out. I did so to some purpose; but after more than an hour's hard walking I began to have some doubt as to the landmarks, and lost considerable time in ascending a hill to obtain a general view of the district. I found that my detour had been greater than I contemplated; but still I was right in the main, and I clearly saw a gap in the mountains beyond, in which was the resting-place I sought. But the strong lights on the higher ground, contrasted by the deep shadows below, made me begin to calculate time and distance in some anxiety; and when at length I descended to the level of the route I had chosen, it was not without uneasiness I found that day-light had entirely deserted the lower regions of the earth. Had this change come on gradually, I should perhaps have felt little; but one moment to have the ruddy beams of the still visible sun in my eyes, and the next to be plunged in permanent and still deepening gloom, was, in circumstances like mine, a little trying to the nerves; but at that moment I saw on the summit of a hill before me, just touched, and no more by the level rays of the west, a human figure. This would, in any case, have been a picturesque and striking object, bathed as it was in mellow light, which appeared to sever it from the dark rounded mass on which it stood; but the outline of the plaid and bonnet invested it at the moment with a character of the preternatural; and as I stood gazing with distended eyes, I fancied that the Highlander was penetrating, with the glance of a bird of prey, the gloom in which I stood. "But this absurd notion lasted not longer than a minute."

"I use the freedom of saying," said I, taking advantage of a catching of the breath which interrupted the narration—"I use the freedom of saying that it gives me much pleasure to hear it! I am tired of that thievish caterer, and I would we had you at the death-grips without more ado."

"I was tired likewise," continued my companion, "and with more cause than you.—Whether he had actually seen me I could not tell; but this I know, that when treading soon after a belt of fir, I saw him waiting for me at the opening as distinctly as I now see you. On this occasion I did not shun him. My pride was touched, and my temper chafed; and grasping my staff by the middle, I advanced to try the fate of battle, if it was that he wanted. When I reached the end of the belt, the plaided figure was gone. It had flitted to a distance of twice the space I had traversed, and was just disappearing behind a mountain rock.

"But either owing to the familiarity of the appearance, or to the presence of danger of another kind, I soon ceased to think much of the Highlander. I was now entering upon the wild and romantic portion of the landscape; and those features, the contemplation of which in the daytime would have filled me with a peculiar enjoyment, had now much more of the terrible than sufficed for the composition of the sublime. I could already hear, borne on the wailing night-wind, the roar of the mountain river, and was entering the savage valley, or rather glen on a larger scale, through which it wanders, now sweeping in a full deep stream, and now tumbling in headlong rapids. The ford I sought, as nearly as I could judge, was at least two miles distant; and between was a country not very easy of travel even in the daylight, and at this uncertain hour, full of danger for the unaccustomed wayfarer. Lamenting the folly which had exposed me to such perils, for the sake of escaping the perhaps imaginary ore of a conflict with the Highland robber, I pushed cautiously on, now glaring at some indefinite shadow in my path, which might be the opening of an abyss, and now starting as the roar of waters broke upon my ear, coming up, as it were, from the chasm at my feet. Have you ever traversed a wild uneven country when the twilight was fading into night?"

"Yes," said I, "and one not very far from yours—within the huge shadow of Ben Lomond."

"Then I need not describe the bewilderment of mind under which a man labors, the shock with which he strikes against a stone, while supposing that he is stepping down a declivity, and the headlong descent into which he plunges, while raising his foot to climb. In my case the uncertainty was all the more perplexing, from the knowledge I had that I was in the near neighborhood of precipices, diving sheer down several hundred feet to the bed of the river. It now became darker; the gusty wind came more wailingly over the heath; and although the harvest moon had long risen, the glare she gave at long intervals through the densely-packed clouds only served to prophesy the danger it did not reveal."

"And the Highland thief? Where was he by this time?"

"I cannot tell. Sometimes I thought I saw his figure sketched upon the dull sky behind; and sometimes I heard—perhaps only in imagination—his footsteps close by my side. My thoughts, however, were now concentrated upon a much more imminent peril; for the night came down upon my path in thick darkness, and at length the moon ceased to emerge from the rack that hurried across the sky: but when the stratum of cloud was less dense than usual,

merely signified her whereabouts by a faint spectral gleam, that wrapped the world for an instant in a formless winding-sheet, and then left it to the blackness of the grave. My situation was very tantalizing, for I could not be at any great distance from what I knew to be a safe and easy ford, at the opposite side of which my brother's lands commenced. It was impossible, however, to advance otherwise than slowly and cautiously; for although I could not tell the exact locality I was in, I knew that somewhere in this neighborhood there were frightful precipices, plunging sheer down into the river, and every now and then I continued to hear the ominous voice of the waters ascending from depths that seemed close at my feet. It was impossible, however, that this could continue much longer. I had now been for a considerable time in the tract of the elgs, and I should soon, no doubt, find the country begin to open, and sink into the smoothly-swelling mounds of turf that swept down like billows to the ford.

"I had, in fact, arrived at what appeared to me to be this point in my journey, for in front I suddenly missed—or imagined that I did so—the dark masses of shadow which the rocks and jungle had hitherto left upon the sky. I pushed forward with more confidence, although it was now almost pitch dark. I endeavored to persuade myself that I recognized the very stones over which I stumbled; and when turning the angle of a rock which I could feel like a wall upon my right hand, and almost see through the gloom, I was about to thank God that my difficulties were at an end. At that moment a wild cry smote upon my ear, and turning my head with a superstitious thrill, I saw, by one of the momentary glimpses of the moon, the plaided figure standing in relief against the sky. The idea, immediately flashed through my brain that I, in my sheltered situation, must be unseen by him, and that it would be to the last degree absurd to dare the issue of an encounter which he had seemed to defer purposely till I was completely worn out, and almost fainting from fatigue. Onward, therefore, I plunged; but on turning the angle of the wall of rock, there was another and a very different cry. It was the roar of waters, softened by distance, and yet seeming to come from some fathomless abyss at my very feet. I could not resist my impetus, for the ground sloped, although I had the presence of mind to throw myself down; but even this was unavailing, and I rolled over the precipice."

Here the narrator paused to wipe his brow, although the evening was cold. I began to feel nervous. The lights on the shore seemed to dance before my eyes, and I acknowledged that I awaited the sequel of the adventure in some trepidation.

"You are over the precipice," said I at length.

"Yes; but holding on, like grim-death, to the top, and digging my feet into its crevices. Yet to what purpose? My head was rather under than above the summit of the cliff; and being able to find a resting place only for the points of my toes, I had no purchase for an effort to climb. What possibility of escape was there left? Even had I been able to hang on for an indefinite time, I might be bleaching there for weeks in that wild and lonely country before attracting observation. I cried for help, hoping that the robber himself might hear me; but the sound fell dull and dead against the rock, and the kelpie voices below seemed to scream in derision. This was the rest to which I had returned after thirty years' battling with the world; this was the salutation I received from my native river! I think my brain began to waver, as the convulsions gathered force that I could not much longer maintain my hold; for I replied to the shrieking cries that rose from the abyss, and yelled hoarsely, not in hope, but defiance. But this mood was not of long duration; it was the last symptom of the fever which burned in my blood, through over-excitement of mind and body; and as my limbs began to stiffen, and my fingers to lose sensation, a dreamy calm descended upon my soul.

"Then rose the spirits of memory upon the night. Some there came from the village churchyard, embosomed in the gap of the mountains; they were my mother, two sisters and a baby phantom, who opened its arms as of yore, and tried to say 'Brother!' Some there came from beneath the tumbling surges of the Atlantic; they were my father and a young cousin. Some there came from the southern country, some from far lands, some from cities, some from hamlets; they were my friends, enemies, rivals, benefactors—fellow-wayfarers in the journey of life. How terrible it is to meet the dead! There was not one of that company I saw without self-reproach. Oh that I had listened to those saintly counsels which were wont to be poured into my ear in bed, till they mingled with the hymns of angels in my childish dreams! Oh that I had left harsh words unspoken, low sentiments unthought, ignoble deeds undone! And she!—is it possible that I judged her wrongly? Could that seeming phantom of delight be indeed a fiend of the abyss? or are the songs of poets true when they tell that faith, mercy and gentleness are attributes

of women, and that

"Love is no cheat, and happiness no dream?"

"My dear friend," said I, when he began to quote poetry, "were not your fingers benumbed by this time?"

"They were altogether devoid of sensation, and yet I felt that they were slipping slowly from their hold. At that moment a faint and momentary glimpse of the moon revealed a face looking down upon me from the brink of the cliff—a face which I recognized distinctly as that of the plaided Highlander. But what mattered this? I was surrounded by faces of all sorts, and the faint roar of the waters beneath was heavy with human voices. That this apparition was as unsubstantial as the rest, was evident from its looking at me with a strange and eager stare, without moving hand or foot either to rescue or destroy me; and yet it was not without a shudder that I saw it leap wildly from the precipice, and felt the waving of its plaid as it shot past me into the abyss.

"Fat to devil is t'ou sticking to the stanes for, like a wul'-cat?" cried the mocking spectre beneath me; and it drew my feet, with a sudden jerk, from the side of the precipice.—My benumbed fingers could no longer support the dead weight of my body; and as they slipped from their hold, a wild scream broke from my lips, and mingled with the manifold voices of the river below. I fell, and all was over." Here the narrator paused, and wiped his brow again.

"You were over," said I, with a gasp, as a sudden suspicion flashed across my mind that my friend was insane! "What became of you? Were you brained, or drowned, or hurried away in an eddy of the night-wind by the spectre Gael?"

"I lost my senses for a time, and when I reopened my eyes, the whole scene was steeped in a flood of moonlight. I was lying upon one of the billowy mounds of turf that sweep down to the ford; and looking up, I saw the edge of the face of rock from which I had fallen at a height of little more than six feet! Had I been able to put down my feet only a few inches, I should have felt the solid earth; but this being impossible without losing my hold of the summit, I had hung for more than an hour in a position as terrible as the mind of man can conceive, although its terrors were purely imaginary."

"And the Highlander!" said I, a little disconcerted, if the truth must be told, at my friend's safety.

"He was a favorite servant of my brother's, and had been deputed to conduct me home; although feeling, as he did instinctively, the mistrust and dislike with which I regarded him from the outset, and rendered diffident by his almost total ignorance of English, he had executed his mission by watching over me from a distance. After all, had it not been for the kindness of this faithful fellow's nature, united with his strength of limb, I must have passed the rest of the night on the hill-side, and thus submitted to a consummation I had suffered so much to avoid. But he supported me to the ford; and then catching me up in his arms, as I drew back, afraid of my feebleness, bore me across the torrent, striding from stone to stone with a firmness and rapidity of step that were altogether marvellous.

"And so ended the convoy of Donald MacDonald?"

"Not quite. Although a tender welcome, a good supper, and cosy bed restored me to my usual vigor, that was not the last night I stuck to these awful stones 'like a wul'-cat.' To this day, when my health is out of order, or my mind darkened with the shadows of the world, the midnight rock, the plaided Gael, and the spectre faces of the past, return upon my dreams—and perhaps I do not feel myself to be the worst man for having endured the horrors of the Highland Convoy."

L. R.

FATHER BURKE'S LECTURE

"The Pope.—The Crown which He Wears, and of which no Man can Deprive Him."

(From the *N.Y. Metropolitan Record*.)

The following magnificent lecture was delivered by the Very Rev. Father Burke in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Long before the appointed time every available foot of standing room in the spacious building was occupied by an eager and expectant audience, numbering between three and four thousand ladies and gentlemen. The Rev. gentleman spoke as follows:—

MY FRIENDS: You are here, as an illustration of the old proverb, that a man can get used to anything. We say in Ireland that the cels got used to being skinned. (Laughter.) I have heard of a man who was seven times tossed by a mad ox, and he swore on the four Evangelists that he was tossed so often that he got to like it. The last time that I was in this great hall, when I looked up and saw the mass of friends that were around me, I confess that I was a little frightened. This evening I have got used to it. (Laughter.) I have also got used to your kindness; got used to it—yes, and I hope I shall never abuse it.