

A Journey of Little Profit

By John Buchan

“The Devil he sang, the Devil he played
High and fast and free.
And this was ever the song he made,
As it was told to me.
‘Oh, I am the king of the air and the ground,
And lord of the seasons’ roll,
And I will give you a hundred pound,
If you will give me your soul.’”

The Ballad of Grey Weather.

THE cattle market of Inverforth is, as all men know north of the Tweed, the greatest market of the kind in the land. For days in the late Autumn there is the lowing of oxen and the bleating of sheep among its high wooden pens, and in the rickety sale-rings the loud clamour of auctioneers and the talk of farmers. In the open yard where are the drovers and the butchers, a race always ungodly and law-despising, there is such a Babel of cries and curses as might wake the Seven Sleepers. From twenty different adjacent eating-houses comes the clatter of knives, where the country folk eat their dinner of beef and potatoes, with beer for sauce, and the colliers grovel on the ground for stray morsels. Hither come a hundred types of men from the Highland cateran

with scarce a word of English, and the shentleman-farmer of Inverness and Ross, to lowland graziers and city tradesmen, not to speak of blackguards of many nationalities and more professions.

It was there I first met Duncan Stewart of Clachamharstan, in the Moor of Rannoch, and there I heard this story. He was an old man when I knew him, grizzled and wind-beaten ; a prosperous man, too, with many herds like Jacob and much pasture. He had come down from the North with kyloes, and as he waited on the Englishmen with whom he had trysted, he sat with me through the long day and beguiled the time with many stories. He had been a drover in his youth, and had travelled on foot the length and breadth of Scotland ; and his memory went back hale and vigorous to times which are now all but historical. This tale I heard among many others as we sat on a pen amid the smell of beasts and the jabber of Gaelic :

“When I was just turned of twenty-five I was a wild young lad as ever was heard of. I had taken to the droving for the love of a wild life, and a wild life I led. My father’s heart would be broken long syne with my doings, and well for my mother that she was in her grave since I was six years old. I paid no heed to the ministrations of godly Mr. Macdougall of the Isles, who bade me turn from the error of my ways, but went on my own evil course, making siller, for I was a braw lad at the work and a trusted, and knowing the inside of every public from the pier of Cromarty to the streets of York. I was a wild drinker, caring in my cups for neither God nor man, a great hand with the cards, and fond of the lasses past all telling. It makes me shameful to this day to think on my evil life when I was twenty-five.

“Well, it chanced that in the back of the month of September I found myself in the city of Edinburgh with a flock of fifty sheep
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which I had bought as a venture from a drunken bonnet-laird and was thinking of selling somewhere wast the country. They were braw beasts, Leicester every one of them, well-fed and dirt-cheap at the price I gave. So it was with a light heart that I drove them out of the town by the Merchiston Road along by the face of the Pentlands. Two or three friends came with me, all like myself for folly, but maybe a little bit poorer. Indeed, I cared little for them, and they valued me only for the whisky which I gave them to drink my health in at the parting. They left me on the near side of Colinton, and I went on my way alone.

“Now, if you’ll be remembering the road, you will mind that at the place called Kirk Newton, just afore the road begins to twine over the Big Muir and almost at the head of the Water o’ Leith, there is a verra fine public. Indeed, it would be no lee to call it the best public between Embro’ and Glesca. The good wife, Lucky Craik by name, was an old friend of mine, for many a good gill of her prandy have I bought; so what would I be doing but just turning aside for refreshment? She met me at the door, verra pleased-like to see me, and soon I had my legs aneath her table and a basin of toddy on the board before me. And whom did I find in the same place but my old comrade Toshie Maclean from the backside of Glen-Lyon. Toshie and I were acquaintances so old that it did not behoove us to be parting quick. Forbye the day was chill without; and within the fire was grand and the crack of the best.

“Then Toshie and I got on quarrelling about the price of Lachlan Farawa’s beasts that he sold at Falkirk; and, the drink having aye a bad effect on my temper, I was for giving him the lie and coming off in a great rage. It was about six o’clock in the evening and an hour to nightfall, so Mistress Craik comes in to try and keep me. ‘Losh, Duncan,’ says she, ‘ye’ll never try
and

and win ower the muir the nicht. It's mae than ten mile to Carnwath, and there's nocht atween it and this but whaups and heathery braes.' But when I am roused I will be more obstinate than ten mules, so I would be going, though I knew not under Heaven where I was going till. I was too full of good liquor and good meat to be much worth at thinking, so I got my sheep on the road an a big bottle in my pouch and set off into the heather. I knew not what my purpose was, whether I thought to reach the shieling of Carnwath, or whether I expected some house of entertainment to spring up by the wayside. But my fool's mind was set on my purpose of getting some miles further in my journey ere the coming of darkness.

"For some time I jogged happily on, with my sheep running well before me and my dogs trotting at my heels. We left the trees behind and struck out on the proad grassy path which bands the moor like the waist-strap of a sword. It was most dreary and lonesome with never a house in view, only bogs and grey hillsides and ill-looking waters. It was stony, too, and this more than aught else caused my Dutch courage to fail me, for I soon fell wearied, since much whisky is bad travelling fare, and began to curse my folly. Had my pride no kept me back, I would have returned to Lucky Craik's; but I was like the devil for stiff-neckedness and thought of nothing but to push on.

"I own that I was verra well tired and quite spiritless when I first saw the House. I had scarce been an hour on the way, and the light was not quite gone; but still it was geyan dark, and the place sprang somewhat suddenly on my sight. For, looking a little to the left, I saw over a little strip of grass a big square dwelling with many outhouses, half farm and half pleasure-house. This, I thought, is the verra place I have been seeking and made sure of finding; so whistling a gay tune, I drove my flock toward it.

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“When I came to the gate of the court, I saw better of what sort was the building I had arrived at. There was a square yard with monstrous high walls, at the left of which was the main block of the house, and on the right what I took to be the byres and stables. The place looked ancient, and the stone in many places was crumbling away ; but the style was of yesterday and in no way differing from that of a hundred steadings in the land. There were some kind of arms above the gateway, and a bit of an iron stanchion ; and when I had my sheep inside of it, I saw that the court was all grown up with green grass. And what seemed queer in that dusky half-light was the want of sound. There was no neighing of horses, nor routing of kye, nor clack of hens, but all as still as the top of Ben Cruachan. It was warm and pleasant, too, though the night was chill without.

“I had no sooner entered the place than a row of sheep-pens caught my eye, fixed against the wall in front. This I thought mighty convenient, so I made all haste to put my beasts into them ; and finding that there was a good supply of hay within, I leff them easy in my mind, and turned about to look for the door of the house.

“To my wonder, when I found it, it was open wide to the wall ; so, being confident with much whisky, I never took thought to knock, but walked boldly in. There’s some careless folk here, thinks I to myself, and I much misdoubt if the man knows aught about farming. He’ll maybe just be a town’s body taking the air on the muirs.

“The place I entered upon was a hall, not like a muirland farmhouse, but more fine than I had ever seen. It was laid with a verra fine carpet, all red and blue and gay colours, and in the corner in a fireplace a great fire crackled. There were chairs, too, and a walth of old rusty arms on the walls, and all manner of whigmaleeries

whigmaleeries that folk think ornamental. But nobody was there, so I made for the staircase which was at the further side, and went up it stoutly. I made scarce any noise so thickly was it carpeted, and I will own it kind of terrified me to be walking in such a place. But when a man has drunk well he is troubled not overmuckle with modesty or fear, so I e'en stepped out and soon came to a landing where was a door.

"Now, thinks I, at last I have won to the habitable parts of the house; so laying my finger on the sneck I lifted it and entered. And there before me was the finest room in all the world; indeed I abate not a jot of the phrase, for I cannot think of anything finer. It was hung with braw pictures and lined with big bookcases of oak well-filled with books in fine bindings. The furnishing seemed carved by a skilled hand, and the cushions and curtains were soft velvet. But the best thing was the table, which was covered with a clean white cloth and set with all kind of good meat and drink. The dishes were of silver and as bright as Loch Awe water in an April sun. Eh, but it was a braw braw sight for a drover! And there at the far end, with a great pottle of wine before him, sat the master.

"He rose as I entered, and I saw him to be dressed in the pink of town fashion, a man of maybe fifty years, but hale and well-looking, with a peaked beard and trimmed moustache and thick eyebrows. His eyes were slanted a thought, which is a thing I hate in any man, but his whole appearance was pleasing.

"'Mr. Stewart?' says he courteously, looking at me. 'Is it Mr. Duncan Stewart that I will be indebted to for the honour of this visit?'

"I stared at him blankly, for how did he ken my name?

"'That is my name,' I said, 'but who the tevil tell't you about it?'

"'Oh,

“‘Oh, my name is Stewart myself,’ says he, ‘and all Stewarts should be well acquaint.’

“‘True,’ said I, ‘though I don’t mind your face before. But now I am here, I think you have a most gallant place, Mr. Stewart.’

“‘Well enough. But how have you come to’t? We’ve few visitors.’

“So I told him where I had come from, and where I was going, and why I was forwandered at this time of night among the muirs. He listened keenly, and when I had finished, he says verra friendly-like, ‘Then you’ll bide all night and take supper with me. It would never be doing to let one of the clan go away without breaking bread. Sit ye down, Mr. Duncan.’

“I sat down gladly enough, though I own that at first I did not half-like the whole business. There was something unchristian about the place, and for certain it was not seemly that the man’s name should be the same as my own, and that he should be so well posted in my doings. But he seemed so well-disposed that my misgivings soon vanished.

“So I seated myself at the table opposite my entertainer. There was a place laid ready for me, and beside the knife and fork a long horn-handled spoon. I had never seen a spoon so long and queer, and I asked the man what it meant. ‘Oh,’ says he, ‘the broth in this house is very often hot, so we need a long spoon to sup it. It is a common enough thing, is it not?’

“I could answer nothing to this, though it did not seem to me sense, and I had an inkling of something I had heard about long spoons which I thought was not good; but my wits were not clear, as I have told you already. A serving man brought me a great bowl of soup and set it before me. I had hardly plunged spoon intil it, when Mr. Stewart cries out from the other end:

‘Now,

‘Now, Mr. Duncan, I call you to witness that you sit down to supper of your own accord. I’ve an ill name in these parts for compelling folk to take meat with me when they dinna want it. But you’ll bear me witness that you’re willing.’

“‘Yes, by God, I am that,’ I said, for the savoury smell of the broth was rising to my nostrils. The other smiled at this as if well-pleased.

“I have tasted many soups, but I swear there never was one like that. It was as if all the good things in the world were mixed together—whisky and kale and shortbread and cocky-lecky and honey and salmon. The taste of it was enough to make a body’s heart loup with fair gratitude. The smell of it was like the spicy winds of Arabia, that you read about in the Bible, and when you had taken a spoonful you felt as happy as if you had sellt a hundred yowes at twice their reasonable worth. Oh, it was grand soup!

“‘What Stewarts did you say you comed from,’ I asked my entertainer.

“‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I’m connected with them all, Athole Stewarts, Appin Stewarts, Rannoch Stewarts; and a’ I’ve a heap o’ land thereaways.’

“‘Whereabouts?’ says I, wondering. ‘Is’t at the Blair o’ Athole, or along by Tummel side, or wast the Loch o’ Rannoch, or on the Muir, or in Mamore?’

“‘In all the places you name,’ says he.

“‘Got damn,’ says I, ‘then what for do you not bide there instead of in these stinking lawlands?’

“At this he laughed softly to himself. ‘Why, for maybe the same reason as yoursel, Mr. Duncan. You know the proverb, “A’ Stewarts are sib to the Deil.”’

“I laughed loudly; ‘Oh, you’ve been a wild one, too, have you? Then you’re not worse than mysel. I ken the inside of every
public

public in the Cowgate and Cannongate, and there's no another drover on the road my match at fechtin' and drinking and dicing.' And I started on a long shameless catalogue of my misdeeds. Mr. Stewart meantime listened with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"'Yes, I've heard tell of you, Mr. Duncan,' he says. 'But here's something more, and you'll doubtless be hungry.'

"And now there was set on the table a round of beef garnished with pot-herbs, all most delicately fine to the taste. From a great cupboard were brought many bottles of wine, and in a massive silver bowl at the table's head were put whisky and lemons and sugar. I do not know well what I drank, but whatever it might be it was the best ever brewed. It made you scarce feel the earth round about you, and you were so happy you could scarce keep from singing. I wad give much siller to this day for the receipt.

"Now, the wine made me talk, and I began to boast of my own great qualities, the things I had done and the things I was going to do. I was a drover just now, but it was not long that I would be being a drover. I had bought a flock of my own, and would sell it for a hundred pounds, no less; with that I would buy a bigger one till I had made money enough to stock a farm; and then I would leave the road and spend my days in peace, seeing to my land and living in good company. Was not my father, I cried, own cousin, thrice removed, to the Macleans o' Duart, and my mother's uncle's wife a Rory of Balnacroy? And I am a scholar too, said I, for I was a matter of two years at Embro' College, and might have been roaring in the pulpit, if I hadna liked the drink and the lassies too well.

"'See,' said I, 'I will prove it to you;' and I rose from the table and went to one of the bookcases. There were all manner of books, Latin and Greek, poets and philosophers, but in the main, divinity.

divinity. For there I saw Richard Baxter's 'Call to the Unconverted,' and Thomas Boston of Ettrick's 'Fourfold State,' not to speak of the *Sermons* of half a hundred auld ministers, and the 'Hind let Loose,' and many books of the covenanting folk.

"'Faith,' I says, 'you've a fine collection, Mr. What's-your-name,' for the wine had made me free in my talk. 'There is many a minister and professor in the Kirk, I'll warrant, who has a less godly library. I begin to suspect you of piety, sir.'

"'Does it not behoove us,' he answered in an unctuous voice, 'to mind the words of Holy Writ that evil communications corrupt good manners, and have an eye to our company? These are all the company I have, except when some stranger such as you honours me with a visit.'

"I had meantime been opening a book of plays, I think by the famous William Shakespeare, and I here proke into a loud laugh. 'Ha, ha, Mr. Stewart,' I says, 'here's a sentence I've lighted on which is hard on you. Listen! 'The Devil can quote Scripture to advantage.'

"The other laughed long. 'He who wrote that was a shrewd man,' he said, 'but I'll warrant if you'll open another volume, you'll find some quip on yourself.'

"I did as I was bidden, and picked up a white-backed book, and opening it at random, read: 'There be many who spend their days in evil and wine-bibbing, in lusting and cheating, who think to mend while yet there is time; but the opportunity is to them for ever awanting, and they go down open-mouthed to the great fire.'

"'Psa,' I cried, 'some wretched preaching book, I will have none of them. Good wine will be better than bad theology.' So I sat down once more at the table.

"'You're a clever man, Mr. Duncan,' he says, 'and a well-read

read one. I commend your spirit in breaking away from the bands of the kirk and the college, though your father was so thrown against you.'

"'Enough of that,' I said, 'though I don't know who telled you ;' I was angry to hear my father spoken of, as though the grieving him was a thing to be proud of.

"'Oh, as you please,' he says ; 'I was just going to say that I commended your spirit in sticking the knife into the man in the Pleasaunce, the time you had to hide for a month about the backs o' Leith.'

"'How do you ken that,' I asked hotly, 'you've heard more about me than ought to be repeated, let me tell you.'

"'Don't be angry,' he said sweetly ; 'I like you well for these things, and you mind the lassie in Athole that was so fond of you. You treated her well, did you not ?'

"I made no answer, being too much surprised at his knowledge of things which I thought none knew but myself.

"'Oh yes, Mr. Duncan. I could tell you what you were doing to-day, how you cheated Jock Gallowa out of six pounds, and sold a horse to the farmer of Haypath that was scarce fit to carry him home. And I know what you are meaning to do the morn at Glesca, and I wish you well of it.'

"'I think you must be the Devil,' I said blankly.

"'The same, at your service,' said he, still smiling.

"I looked at him in terror, and even as I looked I kenned by something in his eyes and the twitch of his lips that he was speaking the truth.

"'And what place is this, you ' I stammered.

"'Call me Mr. S.,' he says gently, 'and enjoy your stay while you are here and don't concern yourself about the lawing.'

"'The

“The lawing!’ I cried in astonishment, ‘and is this a house of public entertainment?’

“To be sure, else how is a poor man to live?’

“Name it,’ said I, ‘and I will pay and be gone.’

“Well,’ said he, ‘I make it a habit to give a man his choice. In your case it will be your wealth or your chances hereafter, in plain English your flock or your ——’

“My immortal soul,’ I gasped.

“Your soul,’ said Mr. S., bowing, ‘though I think you call it by too flattering an adjective.’

“You damned thief,’ I roared, ‘you would entice a man into your accursed house and then strip him bare.’

“Hold hard,’ said he, ‘don’t let us spoil our good fellowship by incivilities. And, mind you, I took you to witness to begin with that you sat down of your own accord.’

“So you did,’ said I, and could say no more.

“Come, come,’ he says, ‘don’t take it so bad. You may keep all your gear and yet part from here in safety. You’ve but to sign your name, which is no hard task to a college-bred man, and go on living as you live just now to the end. And let me tell you, Mr. Duncan Stewart, that you should take it as a great obligation that I am willing to take your bit soul instead of fifty sheep. There’s no many would value it so high.’

“Maybe no, maybe no,’ I said sadly, ‘but it’s all I have. D’ye no see that if I gave it up, there would be no chance left of mending? And I’m sure I do not want your company to all eternity.’

“Faith, that’s uncivil,’ he says; ‘I was just about to say that we had had a very pleasant evening.’

“I sat back in my chair very down-hearted. I must leave this place as poor as a kirk-mouse, and begin again with little but the clothes

clothes on my back. I was strongly tempted to sign the bit paper thing and have done with it all, but somehow I could not bring myself to do it. So at last I says to him: 'Well, I've made up my mind. I'll give you my sheep, sorry though I be to lose them, and I hope I may never come near this place again as long as I live.'

"'On the contrary,' he said, 'I hope often to have the pleasure of your company. And seeing that you've paid well for your lodging, I hope you'll make the best of it. Don't be sparing on the drink.'

"'I looked hard at him for a second. 'You've an ill name, and an ill trade, but you're no a bad sort yoursel, and, do you ken, I like you.'

"'I'm much obliged to you for the character,' says he, 'and I'll take your hand on't.'

"So I filled up my glass and we set to, and such an evening I never mind of. We never got fou, but just in a fine good temper and very entertaining. The stories we telled and the jokes we cracked are still a kind of memory with me, though I could not come over one of them. And then, when I got sleepy, I was shown to the brawest bedroom, all hung with pictures and looking-glasses, and with bed-clothes of the finest linen and a coverlet of silk. I bade Mr. S. good-night, and my head was scarce on the pillow ere I was sound asleep.

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"When I awoke the sun was just newly risen, and the frost of a September morning was on my clothes. I was lying among green braes with nothing near me but crying whaups and heathery hills, and my two dogs running round about and howling as they were mad."