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Wild Wullie, The Waster

By TOD ROBBINS

When billiard balls carom on a green felt table all of their own accord . . . it might be the wind! But when a *massé*, and a draw shot, and a perfect three-cushion are scored consecutively by unseen hands . . . ?

I MUST bridge the River Styx and retrace my steps to the other shore. It is difficult for me to once again inhabit the worn-out shell which for so many years I called *myself*; to mentally conjure up the petty human emotions which spurred me to rash words and still rasher deeds; to describe to you, my gentle ghostly readers, the lamentable and inexcusable quarrel which ended so disastrously for Roderick Dingwall and myself. However, I must not dodge the issue. I have taken up the pencil, and I will not turn back. Unfortunately for my natural egotism, this chronicle opens at a period when I was still alive.

As I sit beside the library window in a pale shaft of moonlight, what a pitiful atom of dust my former mortal self appears! Blown hither and thither by every earthly passion, it yet had the colossal conceit to consider itself a reasonable being living according to a reasonable plan. Roderick is sitting near me, his chin resting on his hand. The white linen about his throat glimmers faintly. Poor Roderick! He was another such as I—both blind atoms whirling in the wind. And now he must wear that stock always or else— But I must begin at the beginning or there can be no end.

When my brother—the twelfth Laird of Brangler—died I was living a shabby, out-of-elbows existence in a small boarding-house in London. Since my father's death, forty years before, Alexander and I had scarcely laid eyes on one another. Perhaps I was to blame for this; for, although I had run through a considerable part of the family fortune, I had never squandered a grain of the family pride—but I rather think it was my mem-

ory of him which held me back like a ball and chain.

He was a mean man even when young—mean and cunning with a white film over one eye like a patch of frost on a window-pane. They say he had a bag of gold pieces still clutched in his fist when they fished him out of the lake back of the house; and that, if he could have made up his mind to let go of it, he might have weathered it through to the other bank. However, that's beside the question.

When I received word that Alexander was dead, my first thought was of Roderick. He and I had grown old together. Starting out as wild lads, we had had vices enough to fill a stable. But a vice is a poor nag to ride when a man has no gold spurs strapped to his heels. Then old age and old wine had taken the marrow out of our bones. Two doddering fossils now, all we cared for was our Saturday-night game of billiards. Once a week we met in a rowdy basement just off the Strand and played with cues like shillalahs and billiard-balls like the eggs of some unsystematic mother goose.

Now, of course, all this could be changed. Roderick and I would pack up and leave London for good. We would settle at Brangler Hall and there regale ourselves in a manner becoming elderly gentlemen of means. I remembered with a kindling of the blood the well-appointed billiard-room my father had installed shortly before his death. Surely the rats and spiders had not been able to completely destroy this sanctum during my brother's unsympathetic reign. And then there was the old gentleman's wine cellar. Surely between those hallowed walls

Roderick entered into my plans for the future with enthusiasm. The prospect of a happy old age spent in the seclusion of Brangler Hall, with unlimited leisure to bestow on his favorite pastime, brought a glint to his eye and a flush to his cheek. He even trod a few steps of the Highland fling, his old knee-bones clattering.

Well, to cut a long story short, we sailed for Scotland that very week with never a thought of the black trouble in store for us. Indeed, as we drove up the broad driveway, we were more like two schoolboys out on a jaunt than two gray-bearded old sinners with not many more



"I was standing immediately above my discarded, mortal shell, and I viewed it with a new-born loathing"

the mellow port and burgundy had gained the subtle tang which only longevity bestows. Although, as I have already said, my friend and I had pawned most of our vices, still a glass of rare old wine could enhance the moments we spent tête-à-tête.

years of life in our bones at the most. Every tree and bush, every thicket and hedge, seemed to hold out a hand in greeting. And the old house itself, with the red ivy clinging to it like the rusted armor of my forebears, had all the look of a proud mother.

"Welcome home!" the wind seemed to be singing through the fir trees. "Welcome home to Brangler Hall!"

AS SOON as Roderick and I had removed the stains of travel, we hurried down to the banquet hall. Here it was, in this great wainscoted room—a room where the gentry for miles around had so often wine and feasted till the break of dawn—that we met with our first mischance. Two steaming bowls were waiting for us, one at either end of the board, and they contained nothing but a meager mess of porridge. I gave you my word, the very portraits on the walls curled their lips at the sight of it.

"Like master, like man," I thought to myself and clapped my hand down on the bell. And then old Tam—serving man in the family for fifty-odd years—hobbled in, soft-footed in his list slippers.

"What's the meaning of this?" said I, cocking my eye at the bowl of porridge. "Is such hogs' swill fit for the Laird of Brangler Hall and his guest?"

At that, Tam grinned at me in a most disrespectful fashion. "Aye," he mumbled. "It's been gude enow for the Laird of Brangler Hall and his guests for mony years. 'Tis better for the saul when the belly's no ower full o' flesh and fowl and ither pulr murdered beasties—so at least my dead master was thinkin'."

"He and his thoughts are buried together," I broke in sternly. "There's a new master in Brangler Hall, and you'd best be minding it. Now be off to the kitchen and tell the cook to serve us something fit for a gentleman's stomach. And you can be bringing back with you a bottle of wine from the cellar."

"But I dinna ken rightly whar to be lookin' for the wine, Master Wullie."

"You need not be looking," Roderick broke in very sharp. "By the shade of your nose, it should lead you aught."

Tam left the room with a grieved air.

"Daft fules both!" I heard him mutter under his breath. "A puir body's no safe wi' 'em." But for all his dolorous shakes of the head, his prolonged sighs, when next he appeared he carried with him cheer for two hungry and thirsty men—a nice cut of venison and a bottle of wine gray with cobwebs.

You may be sure that Roderick and I did the provender ample justice. Between mouthfuls, I cross-questioned Tam

about my dead brother. As yet the mystery attached to his sudden and ungentlemanly demise had not been cleared up.

"What induced the laird to go out of the house at that time of night?" I asked.

Tam's wizened face drew up into knots of cunning.

"'Tis no so difficult to understand," he mumbled. "'Twas just the fear of his ain brother spurred him on."

"The fear of me?"

"Just that. Dr. MacPherson told him a month back that his days were numbered. He got thinkin' o' the ill use ye'd be puttin' to all the gude siller he'd saved betimes. The thought o' that was like fire in the puir body's brain. 'Wild Wullie, the Waster,' was his name for ye in his best moods. Soon he got wanderin' awa' from the Hall, searchin' nae doot for a hidin'-place for his treasure. Midnight was his favorite hour for prowlin' aboot the grounds. One dark night he slipped into the lake by mischance. Alec was a gude lad, but one who wadna let a bag o' siller slip frae his fingers once he gripped it. I misdoot this wee vice led him to his watery grave—him, who should hae died like a Christian between white sheets, with God lookin' on and smilin' or maybe droppin' a tear from His een. It's great and wonderful what the power of prayer—"

"Roderick," I broke in, rising, "let's you and me seek the seclusion of the billiard-room. Religion is the one subject which Tam and I agree upon."

The old man gave me a disbelieving stare as I turned to the door.

"'Wild Wullie the Waster' a Christian!'" he mumbled. "Na, na! I'll no believe that till the puir sauls in the kirk-yard rise up and confirm the glad news. Wild Wullie the Waster is kin to the prodigal son. First he maun lie down with hogs and eat husks. So 'tis written in the gude Book."

CHAPTER II

THE LAST GAME

SOON Roderick and I settled comfortably into the groove of our new existence. Fortunately the billiard-room, although in disuse for so many years, had been kept scrupulously clean. Tam did not number laziness among his faults. Each morning, with a gray duster wound tight about his bald pate, resembling a

decrepit old pirate retired from the high seas, he superintended the maids at their work. And what a taskmaster he was with the lasses!—his sharp, old tongue snapping behind their bent backs like the lash of a dog-whip, his bitter blue eyes roving here and there for a speck of dust overlooked. Like many another old bachelor, he considered that the opposite sex owed him a lasting debt, and was not slow in taking his payment in threats and gibes.

But Roderick and I gave Tam little heed, except to see that he provided us with the wine and food due our station. All our time was spent at billiards. Winter set in before we had been a week in Brangler Hall—great falls of snow which made the driveway impassable and a steady wind from the northeast which cut the face like sharp, snapping twigs. So we had no mind to go out, but just stayed in the house as snug as two fleas on a sheep-dog, and played billiards from morn till night.

Now, say what you will, it's a difficult thing to see but one face day after day and not in time grow to hate it. And it's aggravating for two men to sit by the fire-side with nothing to say to each other but just the threadbare topics of speech grown thin from overhandling. There's madness in solitary confinement, yes; but there's madness and there's murder when two are locked up in the same cage.

It was not long before Roderick began to get on my nerves. He had a slow, hesitating way of speech which set my eardrums tingling as though a handful of nettles had been thrown into them, a wart just beneath his right cheek-bone which seemed to grow larger as the days went by; but what aggravated me most in the man was his Adam's apple. It was a gymnastic Adam's apple, popping up and down like a jack-in-the-box; and it was as large and round as a billiard-ball, making the wrinkled skin of his neck all tight and shining where it bulged out like an orange through a paper bag. Toward the last, the sight of it would unnerve me so that I would often miss a simple shot.

Now, do not judge by this that my nerves alone were chafed raw. Roderick has since confided in me that there were little mannerisms of my own which touched him on sensitive spots like a lash. The way I had of clicking my tongue when I had made a difficult shot, the

leisurely fashion with which I took aim, the jubilant air in which I called out the points I had scored—all these trifles at the time made him see red.

Well, matters went on from bad to worse between us. Soon we had no civil word for one another. Silent we were for the most part, sitting with averted eyes while Tam poured out the wine with a sour grin. The friendly rivalry of old times had disappeared entirely, giving place to a dour determination to win at all costs, a sweating anxiety over each shot. As Tam said—we were ganging clean draft ower that dell's game.

AT LAST our smoldering resentment flared up into open hatred and even bloodshed. What a disgraceful scene it was for two doddering old men who should have long since put worldly matters out of their heads!

One bitter cold night in December—a night when the wind was waltzing around the house like a mad old lady, beating out time to her antics by clapping the shutters together like castanets—Roderick and I, as usual, repaired to the billiard-room in grim silence. Each man drew his cue from the rack as though it had been a sword, and then our final game of billiards in the flesh began.

Roderick won the toss. With frowning brows and stealthy-sliding Adam's apple, he bent over the table and made a very pretty three-cushioned shot. He followed that up with another which very nicely bunched the balls in one corner. At that, he paused to shoot a scornful grin at me over his shoulder. Then he bent forward again with the air of a man who intends making the most of a good opportunity.

Now, as the cue moved slowly back and forth between his finger-bones, just as he was about to shoot, a great gust of wind dropped down the chimney and blew a handful of ashes into my face. I sneezed—God bless me, how could I help it?—Roderick's bent elbow twitched and the cue-ball slipped to one side, missing both the others as neat as a whistle.

"I see you've missed your shot," said I, speaking pleasant enough.

"Missed!" says he, looking up with a fiery red face. "By Heaven, Mr. Campbell, your ancestors should be proud of you this night!"

"How's that, Mr. Dingwall?" I asked, cold as ice. The jerking Adam's-apple of the man made my gorge rise.

"By that, Mr. Campbell, I'm meaning that 'tis not a gentlemanly way to resort to such tricks and contrivances while engaged in sport. In short, Mr. Campbell, to sneeze at such a critical moment is proof enough for me of what I've long suspected."

"And what may that be, Mr. Dingwall?"

"That there's very little of the gentleman about you but the name, Mr. Campbell," he says very short, turning his back on me. "A clip-eared, bob-tailed kind of gentleman were you always, although I was fool enough not to heed it."

Now, there's a strain of the wild MacGregor blood in me—blood which makes me see red at an insult. Roderick's words and his lifted lip stirred up a raging Rob Roy. Without a thought to our lifelong friendship, I strode up to the man and struck him with my open hand which brought the crimson to his cheek.

"You'll keep a civil tongue in your head when speaking to your betters, Mr. Dingwall!" I cried.

At that, being a man of some temper himself, he went wild, and was at me with the cue in his hand. Up and down the room it went—blow for blow, cues rattling like the devil's dice box, and with no thought in either of us but to kill. At the best, it was no Christian sight to see.

What with the rattling of cues and roaring of oaths, it was no time before old Tam and the waiting lasses were peering in at us through the open door.

"Gude save us!" cried Tam, wringing his hands for all there was a wicked light in his eye. "Gude save us! What's all this to do? Put by your weapons, gentlemen! Think on your ain gray hairs!"

But we gave him no heed. We had warmed to our work by now, and the devil himself could not have parted us. Both skilled swordsmen when young, some of our former prowess had returned to us. Two nimble old bucks we were, leaping about like chestnuts on the hob. Soon Tam's tune changed. Some of the fire of combat had oiled his old joints. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him hopping about.

"Gude stroke, Master Wullie!" he cried as I laid my cue across Roderick's shoulders. "Gude stroke, Master Wullie! Gle it to him again! Dinna step back, Master Wullie! It's no the way o' a Campbell! Watch his een—that's aye the

fashion wi' swordsmen. Hoot, mon! Guard your head, Master Wullie! Ah, the dell's in it!"

At that moment my cue slipped from my hand. Before Roderick realized what had happened, he struck again—this time at my now unprotected head. A great flame leaped before my eyes, followed almost immediately by silence and blackness. I felt that I was dying—I died.

CHAPTER III

THE MARK OF THE ACT

AS ALL true ghosts know, the transition from one life to another is instantaneous. And yet what momentous transformations take place in the mind! All our meager human thoughts are enlarged a thousand times. The puzzling enigmas of human existence immediately become childishly simple. A great tide of understanding sweeps through us, making us blush for our former blunders. The knowledge of the infinite—that enduring mental peace of clarified vision—unites us forever. We are a great brotherhood of spirits in which both competition and jealousy are unknown.

Hardly had I died before I opened my eyes and lived again. I was standing immediately above my discarded, mortal shell. Now I looked down on it with contempt. I had thought rather highly of my body only a few short minutes ago, now I viewed it with disgust. So this was the thing which I had been pampering all these years, feeding it lavishly, obeying its vicious caprices, and even studying it with adoring eyes in my shaving mirror. What a fool I had been! Surely there was nothing lovable in this fat old man lying dead on the carpet—in this waxen puppet with the lack-luster eyes and protruding paunch. For the first time I caught a true vision of myself, and it was far from flattering.

"Gude save us! Ye've slain Master Wullie!"

It was Tam who thus broke the silence. He was on his knees beside the corpse with his hand on its breast. His withered old face was ashen, and his head shook from side to side as though he had the palsy.

My eyes sought Roderick. He was standing in identically the same spot as when I had seen him at my last gasp—his feet wide apart, his right hand grasp-

ing the billiard cue. But the expression on his face had changed. On it now was written a great horror and self-loathing.

"'Til just be gangin' awa' to Dr. MacPherson," said Tam, rising unsteadily to his feet and stepping through me as though I had been so much air. "Not that there's any hope at all," he added sourly. "Master Wullie's *puir saul* hae sped." At the door he paused, and I knew that he was whispering to the scared lasses: "Mary, just slip awa' to Squire Templeton's over the hill and tell him murder's been done at the Hall. Peg, bide here a bit and keep your een on that Dingwall man. Justice will no owerlook this, I'm thinkin'."

When Roderick and I were left alone together he went down on his knees by the corpse. He was shaking all over like a tree in a gale, and his Adam's-apple was leaping about as though demented. "God help me!" he muttered. "God help me!"

Well, I put my hand on his shoulder then, so great a pity I had for the man, and I spoke kind words in his ear—but neither my touch nor my voice was consoling at all. You see, he could neither feel my hand nor yet hear my voice; and I knew it well enough at the time, but habit was too strong for me.

And also I knew what was going on in his brain. Self-destruction was plotting there. And how was he to know that it is only the blow which a man strikes himself that leaves a telltale mark in his second life? But I knew, and I feared for my friend.

After a time he stood up again with a wild light in his eye. "They'll never take me alive," he says very solemn, and tramps out of the room without so much as a look behind.

Down the great hall he went, while I fitted at his heels—down the great hall and out into the moonlight and cold. Then away through the snow he plodded, taking long steps like a man walking a race; and I still at his heels, like a spaniel.

Well, there was a full moon that night—a calm moon with a patient, sorrowful face. Across the glistening snow she beckoned us on to the lake which shone like a black diamond through the trees. Roderick never paused or faltered. He was a firm man, once he made up his mind; and I knew there was no stopping him. Soon we were standing on the

bank, all glistening now as though encrusted with tiny sapphires. And it was here I met my brother.

Yes, there he sat as lonely as a scarecrow, his blind eye squinting up at the moon and all frosted with cold, a bag of gold pieces gripped tight in his fist. All in all, he was a deplorable sight to see.

"So this is what comes of taking your own life!" I thought as I seated myself beside him. "Will Roderick be such another?"

AFTER a moment Alexander spit a piece of ice out of his mouth and spoke. "Wullie," he says very pleasant, while the icicles in his beard tinkled faintly like tiny bells. "Wullie, are ye bringin' me company?" And he jerked his thumb toward Roderick, who stood very tall and straight on the bank.

"Heaven forbid, Alec!" said I, slipping into the familiar speech of our boyhood. "It's no the sort o' death I'd be wishin' a friend of mine. Nor the sort o' life after," I added, with a look at his frosty eye.

"Ye'll be no haunting him then to his end?" he says with a kind of sigh. "Weel, that's a pity. It's lonely here on winter nights—unclo lonely! But in the summer it's no so wearisome. We hae the music o' frogs and whippoorwills and wee hoot-owls. Ye should see the bats frisk about it! It's a merry spot in the summer!"

"He'll no join ye wi' my consent," I broke in sharply.

"But, mon, I tell ye he'd like it in the summer," Alexander says as smooth as oil. "There's life here then—weasels and ferrets and snakes ye can wear about your neck like a chain." He bent forward, and I felt his breath like a cold draft in my ear. "And there's money—Wullie—muckle gold pieces to spend."

At that I laughed aloud. "I misdoot ye'd be only too glad, Alec, to have him share your load. But he'll no do that, for I'm thinkin' this lake has a good foot of ice above water. He canna very weel drown himsel' tonight."

"But he can try," says Alexander, still hopeful. "He can try, Wullie. Now, should he dive from that bank yonder, he'd crack his skull like a hickory-nut."

"Na, na!" I cried in anger. "Ye hae no changed muckle since lang syne. Ye are ever thinkin' o' yersel', Alec. But ye canna hae Roderick—even now he's awa' to the house."

Indeed, Roderick had turned away with a doleful shake of his head, and was plodding back wearily over the snow. His black shadow lay at our feet.

"'Tis a pity," says Alexander then with a shake of his head and a hypocritical smile. "I'm thinkin' he'll be findin' a worse way to shake off his skin—some coarse, bluddy way, nae doot. Weel, 'tis yer ain business, Wullie."

With that, my brother turned his back on me and closed his eyes. But I could see by the way he munched his jaws that he was out of sorts with the world. He never even wished me good night as I flitted away.

Well, as I followed Roderick back to the house, Alexander's unpleasant prophecy haunted me. What could I do to keep my friend from some rash act which would leave a lasting mark in his life to come? Then, for the first time, I realized the pitiful impotence of a ghost to shape the affairs of the living. I wrung my hands in despair as I flitted over the snow.

But soon a ray of hope came to me. Surely there was one thing I could do—I could appear before Roderick in my old bodily shape at twelve o'clock. It was the unwritten law of the spirit world. At twelve o'clock, then, if he lived till that hour, I would appear before him and make him understand by gestures the severe punishment which attended the crime of suicide.

By now we had reached the house. Roderick, without a glance to right or left, mounted the stairs to his own room. In gloomy silence he approached his dresser, pulled out one of the drawers and took a razor from it. As he opened it, the blade shone blue in the moonlight.

You can imagine my feelings, then, my gentle ghostly readers. Horror overmastered me. I called to him, but he did not hear me; I seized his arm, but it passed through my fingers. And now my only hope rested in the grandfather clock which stood in the hall. Would it strike twelve before this crime was perpetrated?

One fact gave me hope. Roderick did not seem to be in any hurry about cutting his throat. On the contrary, he went about his preparations with marked deliberation. Several times he felt the edge of the razor with his thumb, and once he stropped it carefully to a fine edge.

Finally he raised it to his throat, but even then he hesitated. Evidently he wished to taste the unlawful sweets of suicide to the dregs.

Lowering the razor, he was plunged into a profound reverie. I heard him murmur: "If I don't get it over with, they'll swing me up as high as a church steeple. Think of the disgrace in a Dingwall dangling from the gallows'-tree. I maun do it."

Again he lifted the razor till it hovered just beneath his Adam's-apple. But at that very instant, to my joy, the clock below stairs began to strike twelve. "I'll wait till it's done," he muttered peevishly. "It's—"

But I gave him no time to finish his sentence. With a glad cry, I leaped out of the shadows and confronted him in my bodily form. Pointing at his throat, I shook my head angrily.

Alas, poor Roderick! He thought that I'd come out of my grave to see that he went into his. At my sudden appearance, his hand shot backward and the blue steel blade sheared his throat from ear to ear.

As I bent over him, as I tried to quench the flow of his blood, he cowered away with fear and loathing in his eyes. "Gang awa', ye warlock!" he gasped through foam-flecked lips. "Gang awa'—the deil and ye hae done for me!" Then his head slithered back on the floor, and he died with the black curse of suicide on him.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEIL'S GAME

NOW it wasn't longer than the space of a deep breath before Roderick lived again. But it was as I had thought—the poor man bore the mark of his last earthly misdeed. His throat, where the razor had bitten home, was not a pretty thing to see. Red it was, and gaping like a toothless laugh. But poor Roderick did not heed it at first. He was all for shaking my hand and thanking me for what I had tried to do.

"To think," said he, with a tear in his eye, "that you should have bothered so over a man who had just taken your life! That bespeaks a kind heart, Wullie Campbell. A misdirected good action is none the less a good action."

"Misdirected?" I cried. "What may you be meaning by that?"

"It's as plain as the nose on your face, man," says he, giving his corpse on the

floor a scornful look. "Am I not better out of that ugly carcass when all's said and done?"

"Perhaps," said I, realizing that the man had not as yet grasped the truth. "But will you be saying that, Roderick, when you know the worst? Step up to the mirror on the wall and just be taking a look at yourself."

At that his face fell, and I could see that there was fear in him. He wheeled about on his heel and stepped up to the mirror, which shone gray in the moonlight. For a long moment he stood there without a word—then I heard a click in his throat like a clock running down.

"Good heavens!" he cried, putting his hand over his eyes. "Good heavens!"

And that was all I could get out of him for a long time. Poor Roderick! A neat man he had been in life, a man who had ever kept an eye on his personal appearance; and now in death he was a neat ghost by temperament and training, supersensitive to anything which might mar his good looks. No wonder the sight of that red, smiling throat was enough to turn the joy of resurrection sour in his mouth.

Well, I did my best to console him. But it was hard going at the best. Finally I hit on a scheme which made him brighten up a bit.

"You'd best wear a white stock from now onwards, Roderick," I suggested. "It's becoming enough to a ghost with your cast of feature. And it's neat as a pin, Roderick."

"Neat it may be," he says with a sour smile, "but it's an article of dress I never much fancied. It's suggestive of bolls. However, when the deil drives—" He shook his fist at the mirror. "Well, Willie man, I'll be doing just as you say."

The stock worked miracles with my friend's peace of mind. It wasn't long before Roderick was his old merry self again. And also it had a quieting effect on my own nerves. To say nothing of his cut throat, he had always had a gymnastic Adam's-apple which, in my opinion, was better hid. With the stock nicely tied, his long, curly locks all silvery in the moonlight, he was as handsome a ghost as a man could find in a night's walk.

WE SOON settled back into our mid-night game of billiards—only now there was no bitterness at all, but just

pride in our skill and mutual understanding. And we discarded the cues altogether, just guiding the balls by the strength of our minds. A calm, thoughtful game it was, with the moon as a marker—the balls clicking gently together, and now and then the sad sigh of the wind in the fireplace.

And we were careful not to let Tam and the waiting lasses get sight or sound of us. We knew well enough that if they once caught a glimpse of us standing about in corners, they'd be out of the house in no time. Then who could we get to tidy the billiard-room and brush the dust from the table? It's been my experience that only a silly, childish ghost goes about trying to impress humans by maybe a groan or two or by the glimpse of his face in the moonlight. What's to be gained by it?—just silence and dust and loneliness. A deserted house with the cobwebs dangling from the ceiling, and the rats playing hide-and-go-seek in the walls, is no proper home, as I have found by bitter experience.

Well, as I have already said, Roderick and I were silent and wary. But we hadn't taken into consideration Tam's prying, thieving ways—his old ears religiously pricked for the devil's gossip, his old eyes squinting through keyholes and around corners. One night he caught us red-handed.

It was well past twelve o'clock. Roderick and I had been playing billiards for upwards of an hour. Absorbed in our game, and thinking the servants safe in bed and snoring, we were little prepared for the sudden opening of the door and the flashing on of the lights. In fact, Roderick had just made a shot, and the ball was still rolling.

"What hae I told ye?" cried Tam, hopping about like a Punch and Judy. "The deil's playing billiards in Brangler Hall!"

He spoke to a solemn man who had come in with him, a man wearing glasses whom I recognized as Lawyer McTavish, of Edinburgh. The two of them were staring at the billiard balls with their eyes nearly popping out of their heads.

"A very pretty shot," said McTavish at last with a kind of sick smile. "Three cushions and never a hitch to it! A well-planned shot. What's the trick to it, Tam?"

"There's no trick to it at all!" cried Tam in anger. "Tis naething more nor

CHAPTER V

THE NEW OWNER

less than Master Wullie and his friend playin' at billiards. Mony's the night I've stood out in the hall in my night-cap and slippers, drawn frae my bed by the click o' the balls. I canna rightly dance attendance on ghaists. It's no seemly for a mon o' my years."

While Tam thus expressed himself, McTavish examined the billiard table carefully. First he picked up the balls and held them to his short-sighted eyes; next he rolled them across the green cloth; and finally he bent down and looked under the table. Roderick and I, swathed in our garments of invisibility, interchanged smiles. All he could get would be a crick in the neck for his pains.

"Ye'll find naething o' interest," Tam continued. "Weel enow I grasp that ye lawyer bodies hae little or no respect for the ways o' the dell. Ye think ye've improved on 'em, nae doot. Howsomever, here's real witchcraft afoot, and ye may as weel confess it."

At that, McTavish looked up and straightened his back. "I can't understand it, and that's true enough," said he. "Now, if the window had been up, I'd say the wind might have done it. Or if we had not switched the lights on, I'd say a rat had started the ball rolling with the swish of his tail. But as it is, perhaps—"

"Hoot, mon!" cried Tam peevishly. "Gle the dell credit and hae done! 'Tis no muckle matter when all's said—just a wee three-cushion shot like I've seen Master Wullie contrive mony's the time."

McTavish ran his hand through his hair. "I think the least said about this the better," he muttered. "Keep a quiet tongue in your head when the new owner of Brangler Hall arrives in the morning."

"I'll no be about the premises," said Tam. "'Tis time I was restin' my auld bones. I'm awa' wi' the sunrise."

"Well, I wouldn't talk about it to the neighbors," McTavish continued. "Silence is golden." He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a guinea. "Here's for your trouble, my man," he says very lordly. "Now, you can just be showing me the upstairs rooms before I take my departure."

With that, the two of them stole out of the room, peering back warily over their shoulders, and leaving Roderick and me to our thoughts and our billiards. But, as for me, I could not give the game my undivided attention for wondering about the new owner of Brangler Hall.

TAM was as good as his word. At the first peep of dawn, just as Roderick and I were off to the attic where we rested for the day, we saw him hobbling away across the snow. There was a great sack on his back, containing his worldly goods, and a round dozen bottles of my father's best wine besides; and a stout staff in his hand like the holy men of old time leaned their weight upon. As he breasted the hill, a shaft of sunlight turning his bald pate to a halo, he seemed more like a saint than a sinner.

"Now who'll be dusting up after us?" says Roderick very solemn. "A neat man's been lost to Brangler Hall, Willie."

"Neat he may have been," said I, "but he was not too well disposed towards us, I'm thinking. Peeping through keyholes at an hour when decent bodies are in their beds, pricking his ears to catch an echo from hell like an old woman living over an ale-house! No, Roderick, I think Brangler Hall's well rid of him."

"It may be," says he with his eye at the broken lattice. "But he was neat, for all that—and neatness comes next to godliness. He kept the billiard-table in grand shape, Willie. But who's this coming up the driveway? I'm thinking it's the new master of Brangler Hall."

At that, I wheeled about on my heel and took another long look through the shutter. A carriage had drawn up in front of the house; and out of it presently stepped two handsome lads, dressed in the height of fashion. One was tall and dark as the night, with a cast of feature which proclaimed him a Campbell; the other was short and broad, with flaxen hair and a bold blue eye. They could have scarcely numbered twoscore years between them.

"I'm thinking the taller one is my own cousin's son, Hector Campbell," I said with a sudden warmth in my heart. "By right he falls heir to the Hall. Is he no a bonnie laddie?"

"Aye," says Roderick, with his face to the lattice, "he's got the Campbell looks. But the other, Willie! Man, man, who do you think that fair-haired laddie is?"

"Surely no kin of yours, Roderick?"

"He is that!" cried Roderick. "My own brother's son. He was in Oxford the last I heard. The world's a small place!"

"So small we're always rubbing elbows. Hector was at Oxford, too. They're fast friends, no doubt; and here for the vacation together. Well, we'll give them a warm welcome to Brangler Hall."

"Welcome?" says Roderick, with a sad smile. "Alas, but we cannot! If they see hide or hair of us, they'll be off like startled bucks. We'd just better be hiding ourselves as much as possible. 'Tis the only way for two ghosts to keep their guests satisfied."

"But we can hover about unbeknownst



As the clock struck twelve Roderick leaped between the two combatants, crying, "Desist!" in an agonized voice

to them," said I. "And maybe we can get joy from their company—listening to their young voices and perhaps directing their tastes in wine."

"Be careful, Willie," says Roderick very solemn. "You must not forget for a moment that a ghost is a ghost and a laddie a laddie. They're not altogether companionable."

Well, neither Roderick nor I could sleep that day for thinking of the two lads beneath stairs. Although we had been contented enough up to this, now the great ache of loneliness was in our bones. The sight of these two young kinsfolk of

ours brought up a thousand recollections of our own youth—not nice tales for a Sunday-school, perhaps; but still diverting enough to keep our sides shaking till dusk.

No sooner had night fairly settled in than we flitted out of the attic and down the great stairs to the banquet-hall. The young men by now were seated at table, doing justice to every dish put before them. And what merry lads they were, laughing and joking, with never a care; drinking their wine as gentlemen should and giving no heed to the shadows of Brangler Hall. It was a joy to watch them. Soon Roderick and I were grinning in spite of ourselves; and once, try as I would, the dry humor of my young kinsman was too much for me, and I ventured a laugh.

"What's that?" cried Hector, with a start. "Have they got ghosts hereabouts?" "So they tell me in the village," said young Dingwall with a grin. "But I'm thinking that noise you heard was just the wind wheezing a bit in the chimney."

"It sounded uncommonly like a laugh," says Hector. "But what did they tell you in the village, Jamie?"

"I was strolling down there this afternoon, and I ran into an odd-looking old chap with a head as bald as a billiard-ball. I hadn't more than passed the time of day with him before he began a wild tale about the ghosts who played billiards at Brangler Hall. It seems he was a servant here when your kinsman, 'Wild Willie, the Waster,' and my daft Uncle Roderick fought each other with billiard cues. He remembered it all; and it was a rare tale, I can tell you."

"And did he say their ghosts walked?"

"He did that," said Jamie. "It seems that the two of them steal out of the graveyard each night to play billiards. You're in rare luck to own a haunted house."

Hector drained his glass at a swallow and laughed. "I am so," says he. "But it's a pity the lasses did not figure in his tale. I have no aversion for them, be they of this world or the next."

"Nor I," says Jamie. "But we'll just have to be contenting ourselves with what's here. What do you say if we play billiards ourselves tonight and cheat the ghosts of their game?"

"I'm your man!" cried Hector, jumping to his feet. "It's a long time since we've crossed cues, Jamie."

WELL, without any more words on the matter, the two lads strode into the billiard-room, Roderick and I close at their heels. As luck would have it, Hector Campbell picked up my old cue, while Jamie chose his dead uncle's. Then the game started—if you could call it a game, which I much misdoubt.

I give you my word, those two made us blush for them. The way they handled their cues was enough to sicken a man. They had no skill in their fingers and less in their heads. The simplest shot was too much for them. It was all Roderick and I could do to hold our tongues and our tempers in check.

Well, time went drearily on till the stroke of twelve, with never a flash of excitement. They'd shoot and they'd miss, and they'd shoot again till my back teeth were all of an edge. Here they were, the young fools, keeping Roderick and me from our game—and they with no more right to be playing than two scarecrows in a wheat-field. My old fingers were fair itching for the cue.

At last Roderick could stand it no longer. "Willie," he whispered, "this fool game is near driving me daft. Let's you and me take a hand."

"And how may we be doing that?" I murmured. "The way it looks now, these lads will be playing till morning."

"Never worry your head over that, man," says Roderick in my ear. "They shouldn't count. It's only by sheer luck that they ever score a point. Eliminate them from the game altogether. Or better yet, you play your kinsman's shots for him by the strength of your mind, and I'll just be helping Jamie."

"But will it work, Roderick?"

"At least there's no harm in trying," says he. "Now, concentrate, Willie. It's your shot, for Hector Campbell's juggling the cue between his fingers."

Well, I did as he told me. With the full force of my mind, I planned a very neat shot with a reverse English to it. Around the table the cue ball went and clicked against the others, like a mother kissing her children.

"Well played!" cried Jamie, with a laugh. "I suppose you planned that shot, Hector?"

Young Campbell looked up with a startled face. "I'll not say so much as that," says he. "However, here goes for another try." Once more he bent over the table.

Instantly I focused my mind on a draw shot which might gather the balls together like sheep in a hurdle. It worked to the queen's taste, and this time Jamie let out an oath of astonishment. But Hector was too amazed to speak at all, and just stared at the balls pop-eyed.

"Go on!" says Jamie, with a wry smile. "The dell's in your finger-bones."

So Hector went on; and before he was through he chalked up a hundred points or more. I was in rare form that night, and I could see that old Roderick was on pins and needles to be playing. At last his chance came. Hector shot before I had time to think, and missed the two other balls entirely.

Jamie had been silent for some time back, but now he spoke up. "Hector Campbell," he says very solemn, "if I had not known you since we were bairns together, I'd be thinking that you'd been laying for bets. As it is, I see there's only one answer for this scandalous conduct—man, you're bewitched."

"It's your turn, Jamie," said my kinsman, putting the best face he could on the matter.

"My turn, is it?" cried Jamie, with a laugh. "Well, I'll not profit by it much, I'm thinking. However, here's hoping I get a grip of the dell's tail."

Now, as Jamie got ready to shoot, I could see Roderick's face twitching with excitement. His eyes were glowing like live coals as he bent over his kinsman's shoulder. I could see that he was planning the shot.

Well, it worked admirably. Around the table the cue ball went, taking the cushions at just the right angle, and then *click, click* and the thing was done.

"Well played, Jamie!" cried Hector, clapping his hands. "Say what you will, the dell's not partial. He's come here to lend us both a hand with our game. Shoot again, Jamie."

So Jamie shot again and again with never a miss at all till the day was breaking—shot with a white face of fear and a glance from time to time over his shoulder. Roderick was in fine form. Never had I seen him take such care with each play. Something of the old sweating pride in his skill was written on his furrowed forehead; and there was a twitch of a smile to his lips which I didn't quite fancy.

When the dawn finally broke like a bubble of blood, we flitted up to the attic

after seeing the lads to their beds. Roderick was still grinning like a sick cat—a nasty grin which set all my nerves on edge.

"I'm thinking Jamie had the better of your kinsman," says he, just before we closed our eyes for the day.

"You'll not say that tomorrow at this time, Roderick Dingwall!" I cried hotly. "I'll see to it that Hector holds his own!"

"You mean you'll *try*," he says with a grin. "But if I were you, Willie, I would not set my heart on it."

CHAPTER VI

THE SACRIFICE

NOW, the life of a ghost is hard sometimes, and none knows it better than I. Just as long as a body keeps to his own and doesn't go mixing himself up into human affairs, he's as safe and happy as a bug in a rug. But just let him once start being too companionable with flesh and blood, then all hell's let loose.

And the same is true of a mortal. If he once consorts with ghosts by even so much as a prayer to the devil, as likely as not he'll be marked for life like an apple which hangs too long on the tree. Many a man has been ruined by just such a walk with a friendly ghost in the moonlight. Such companionship, if it leads to nothing worse, exposes a human to boils and fits and, some say, a touch of Saint Vitus' dance as well.

At the time, Roderick and I, being inexperienced ghosts knew nothing of all this. We entered into our kinsmen's nightly game of billiards with a vim. But gradually, as time passed, a change came over the players, and over us as well. The lads would no longer chaff each other about a remarkable shot. No; they began to take their new-found skill as a matter of course. And we, for our part, began to feel the old sting of rivalry. Bitter competition crept into the game. We no longer planned their shots for the joy of it, but rather as a blow directed at the other. A deadly feud sprang up between the house of Campbell and the house of Dingwall.

Well, matters went from bad to worse, as the saying is. Soon Roderick and I had no civil words for each other. And the lads were just the same, glowering and glooming at one another across the table, with sarcastic speech from time to time,

like the sputtering of wet powder. One night, at small provocation—an argument over the careless way young Campbell had of scoring his tally—the four of us would have been at each other's throats if the dawn had not intervened.

When Roderick and I climbed up to our attic that morning, I had a glimmer of reason. What was all this leading to but just murder and suicide again? Here were these two handsome laddies being haunted into their graves by two selfish old ghosts who wouldn't leave them alone at their game! What right had *we* to interfere?—*we* who were supposed to have given up the sinful joys of the flesh.

"Roderick," said I, addressing him for the first time in ten days—"Roderick, all this must stop."

"If you are referring to your kinsman's inability to count correctly," he says very stiffly, "why, I'm agreeing with you in the matter, Mr. Campbell."

"Man, man!" I cried, grasping him by the arm in my excitement, "cannot you see where this game is leading? And the bonnie laddies below stairs! Are you wanting their blood on your head, Roderick Dingwall? Was not mine enough?"

"When a gentleman is owed a debt by another gentleman, he should not be the first to speak of it," says Roderick, still very stately. But for all that, I could see that he had given heed to my words.

"This is no time to stand on your dignity, man!" I cried, pressing my point. "Another night and it may be too late! There was murder in Jamie's eyes but a few moments back!"

"And Hector was showing his teeth like a wildcat," Roderick put in. "But just what are you advising, Willie?"

"That we stop this game for once and for all."

"And how may that be done? The lads are prepared to play it out to the bitter end. Each is determined to vanquish the other."

"But suppose we make the game ridiculous?" I cried, with the germ of an idea taking root in my brain. "Suppose we sicken them of it by not only subtracting our own skill but by making them bungle the most simple shot?"

Roderick was silent for a moment, evidently giving thought to my plan. "It sounds feasible enough, Willie," he said at last. "Man, it should work."

Well, after that, we turned in for the day in a couple of old linen chests, and

soon were sleeping peacefully. Little did we think that our plans would go all awry. Two silly old ghosts, we thought we had solved our difficulties.

That night Jamie and Hector sat late over their wine in brooding silence. It was well after eleven before they entered the billiard-room and drew their cues from the rack. They had the look on their faces of men who are determined to do or die.

Jamie won the toss, and I tipped Roderick the wink. He concentrated his mind on a miss to such an extent that his kinsman's cue barely grazed the white ball, moving it but a few inches to one side.

At that, Jamie rapped out an oath. "I miscued!" he cried. "Hell's fire! I forgot to use the chalk!"

"That's a pity," said Hector with a polite sneer. "It's a game that requires thought." He ostentatiously chalked his cue and bent over the table to shoot.

Now, in my turn, I concentrated on a miss, but with more delicacy than Roderick. This time the cue ball ran in the right direction, but I saw to it that it missed the others by a hair.

Hector looked amazed. "I missed!" he muttered. "That's strange! It was an easy shot enough!"

Now it was Jamie's turn to sneer. "I've seen you miss easier shots than that. I guess your streak of luck's about through. Science will tell in the end," says he, and misses a carom which a blindfolded child could have made.

WELL, they bungled shot after shot.

But they kept at it just the same. And the longer they played the worse their tempers grew. They were not so much disgusted with the game as they were just disgusted with one another. Roderick and I were at our wits' end. At any moment we expected to see murder done.

"Shall we give them back some of our skill?" Roderick whispered.

"It wouldn't do any good now," I murmured sadly. "I'm afraid we've been con-sorting too much with the lads."

Hardly had I spoken before the climax came. Hector was taking aim, when Jamie, intent on chalking his cue, accidentally brushed against his arm. At that, my kinsman straightened his back and his eyes flashed sparks.

"I'll trouble you to play like a gentle-

man, Mr. Dingwall," says he cold as ice. "While you're in the house of a Campbell, you'd best remember that it's not a Campbell's way to stoop to stable-boys' tricks in order to win a game."

At that, Jamie puffed up like a pouter-pigeon. "By Heaven, Mr. Campbell," cried he, "I'll have you know that a Dingwall can learn nothing from a Campbell but just how to lead cattle away in the moonlight."

Now, at this direct blow at the MacGregor blood in his veins, Hector struck Jamie with his open hand across the cheekbone. And Jamie, being a lad of some spirit himself, was at him like a wild man with his cue gripped by the small end.

"My God!" I cried to Roderick, wringing my hands. "Stop them before it's too late. We've driven them to this, just you and I! Man, man, stop them before murder's done!"

"What can I do, Willie?" he wailed, with his face in his hands. "What can I do?"

Just at this moment the clock in the hallway struck bravely above the din of the rattling cues. It was *twelve*—that hour when ghosts can assume their old bodily form.

Hardly had the last stroke died away before Roderick raised his face. On it was a look of brave purpose. A sensitive man he had always been, sensitive to a fault about his personal appearance, but now I read in his eyes a great renunciation.

"What are you about to do, Roderick?" I whispered.

For answer, his hand went up to his stock and began to fumble with the safety pin which held it in place. Unwinding the band of white linen, he leaped to his feet and bounded between the two combatants. Then, assuming his old bodily form, he pointed at the gaping wound in his throat. "Desist!" he cried in an agonized voice. "Look on me, Jamie! I am the spirit of your Uncle Roderick, the suicide. Behold in me, Hector Campbell, the ghost of him who murdered Wild Wullie, the Waster!"

It was a magnificent act. When one considers the supersensitiveness of his nature, one must give Roderick due credit. He had sacrificed his personal vanity to make his appearance effective. At the best, that slit throat of his was an unsightly thing to see.

And if the act were magnificent, so were the results of the act. Instantly the combatants dropped their cues in horror. For a moment or two they stared open-mouthed at the terrible apparition confronting them, and then, uttering wild cries, they fled, bareheaded, out into the starlit night.

"Roderick," I cried, grasping his hand. "I congratulate you!"

But with averted eyes and trembling fingers he was hurriedly replacing his stock, and so gave me no heed. At last he murmured: "Whatever will Jamie be thinking of his own uncle this night?"

It was the one complaint I ever heard out of the man.

ALL this happened a long time ago. Since that night Roderick and I have had Brangler Hall quite to ourselves. Hector and Jamie have never ventured back. In fact, we've seen no mortal face in thirty long years. No doubt, it is better so.

But the rats and spiders give us no peace. Long ago they ended our billiards, tearing the cloth on the table to shreds and weaving their webs from corner to corner. Then there is the dust which half covers the balls, and which only mortal hand may remove. Often, sitting idle in a corner, we have wished that thieving old Tam were still with us.

Roderick is smiling at me as I write. He thinks my literary aspirations are a pose. Like many another kindly ghost, he is perfectly content to sit in the moonlight and twiddle his thumbs. Because he had lived on such intimate terms with me, he cannot understand why I should have an artistic bent. Perhaps these pages will open his eyes. Indeed, Wild Wullie, the Waster, is Wild Wullie the Waster, no more.