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The Last of the Smugglers.

A Christmas Eve Adventure.

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I had been so long away from my own country that when I looked out once more upon the heather at the little wayside station of Dornal, on the Port Murdoch line, the width and space about me, the loneliness of the hills, and the crying of the muir-fowl affected me almost to tears. It was not long, however, before I had other things to think about.

I had long been an orphan, and, indeed (to tell the truth) had not felt much the worse for it. My father and mother died when I was a boy at school, and the uncle who brought me up and put me into his own business in England must have taken some permanent distaste to his native country of Galloway. At any rate, he never revisited it, nor for that matter encouraged me to do so. Nevertheless, he gave me an excellent education and trained me well to his own profession of architect and building contractor, with the idea that I should succeed him in Highgate when he should wish to retire to the pretty house he had built for himself on the shores of one of the most beautiful of English lakes.

But quite suddenly one morning, when I was twenty-four, my uncle was found dead in his bed, and I, Hal Grierson, came into immediate possession of a good business and a very considerable sum in money.

Among other things in my uncle's safe I found a large number of letters, receipts for money, and private memoranda. From these I learned for the first time that I had a relative living of whom I had never so much as heard. My deceased uncle, Walter Arrol, was, of course, my mother's brother, and a man singularly reticent in all things not pertaining to business. Still, it struck me as strange and in a way humorous that as a young man of twenty-four, I should come first to the knowledge that I had a grandfather still living. Yet after many perusals and re-perusals of the letters and memoranda I could come to no other conclusion.

It was now the middle of December, and so lately as the month before, there was a letter dated from the "Cothouse of Curlywee." It ran as follows:—"Dear Son, herewith I enclose bank-bill for £25. We have had a good back-end and are well. Please acknowledge receipt. Your affectionate father, John Arrol."

I laughed aloud when I came upon the letter. It seemed to me that it was rather late to add a live grandfather to my family connections. Then the "we" puzzled me. Had I an unknown grandmother, too—or several unacknowledged uncles? At any rate my curiosity was highly excited.

But so far as correspondence went I found no clue. My uncle had never encouraged sentiment, and though there were many similar notes, dating at half-yearly intervals for nearly fifteen years back, his "affectionate father" never got beyond the simple and perspicuous statement that it had been a "good" or a "bad" year, that "the lambs were doing fine," or that "there were many daiths among the yowes." I discovered, however, that fifteen years before, Walter Arrol had bought a little moorland property in Galloway which had then come into the market. He paid what with my knowledge of English prices seemed to me a ridiculously inadequate price for the five or six thousand acres it was stated to comprise.

The title deeds were there, all in due order, and the receipt for taxation, stamps, and lawyers' charges. There was also the memorandum of a loan of a thousand pounds to "John Arrol, my father, to stock the farm of Curlywee with black-faced sheep," together with notes of payment of interest at four per cent. for the first five years.

After that I could trace no further receipts on that account.

It was just the day before Christmas that I set out from a Midland town where I had had some business, resolved to find out all that I did not know about my Galloway relatives. I might easily have written indeed, either to "John Arrol" himself, who from his style of correspondence would have been the very man to give me exact (and concise) information, or to the firm of lawyers in Cairn Edward whose name was upon the deeds and parchments.

But, though it would have ruined me from a business point of view had it been known in Highgate, I have always had a romantic strain in my blood, and the little adventure pleased me. I would take a little climb, so I told myself, into the branches of my family tree. I would go in person to the Cothouse of Curlywee, and make the acquaintance of my grandfather.

I wondered if "John Arrol" would turn out to be as ignorant of my existence as I had been of his. At any rate he was clearly not a person to waste words or squander his sentiment broadcast. Had I been content to prove my title to my uncle's property he would doubtless have continued to sign himself "John Arrol," to enclose his half-yearly rent, and to require a receipt therefor to the end of the chapter, without making the least effort to cultivate my acquaintance.

So this was the errand upon which I found myself standing in the little wayside station of Dornal. It was a grim and greyish winter afternoon, and I had occupied myself in speculating as the train slowly struggled up the incline, how long this rough bouldery desolation was to continue, and at what point it would issue forth upon the level strath and kindly hamlets of men, where I had pictured to myself my venerable relative residing in patriarchal dignity.

"Can you show me the way to the village of Curlywee?" I said to the station master, who came suddenly out of his office to take my ticket. In fact he made a dash at me almost like a terrier at a rat.

"The what?" he said, sharply, dropping his official manner in his surprise. "The village of Curlywee?"

The station master laughed a short quick laugh; almost as one would expect the aforesaid terrier to do in mirthful mood. He turned about on the pivot of one heel.

"Rob," he cried sharply, "come ye here!"

"I canna come! I'm at the lamps—foul fa' them—the oil they hae sent us this time will no burn any mair than as muckle spring water!"

"Come here, I tell ye. Rob—or I'll report ye!"

"Report awa'—an' be——!" Something that I did not catch.

The station master did not further attempt to bring his official dignity to bear upon his recalcitrant subordinate. He tried another tack.

"There's a man out here wants to ken the road to the village of Curlywee!"

And as he spoke the little wry station master glanced quizzically up at me, as much as to say, "That will fetch him!"

I failed to see the humour—then, immediately I heard a bouncing sound. Heavy feet trampled in the unseemly lamp room, a stool was knocked over, and a great, broad, jovial faced man came out, still rubbing a lamp globe with a most unclean piece of waste.

"The village of Curlywee," he inquired, smiling broadly at me, as if were from head to foot. "Did I understand ye to say the village o' Curlywee?"

I nodded brusquely. I was growing vexed.

"I never heard tell o't," he continued, slowly, still smiling and shaking his head.

"Is there not a conveyance—an omnibus, or a trap of any kind which I can hire to take me there?"

"I was getting more than a little angry by this time. It seemed past belief that I should have come so far to be laughed at by a couple of boors in the middle of a Galloway moorass."

"Ow, aye, there's a conveyance," said the porter, "a pair o' them!"

"Then," said I, tartly, "be good enough to put my bag in one of them, and let me get off!"

The big man continued to rub and grin. The stationmaster watched me as a terrier watches a rat-hole, with his grey birse of a head at the side.

Then with the piece of dirty waste in his hand "Rob" pointed to my knickerbockered legs and brown leather shoes.

"That's the only conveyance ye'll get to Curlywee if ye wait a month at the Dornal!"

"What," I cried, "is there no road? There surely must be some kind of a highway."

Again the waste rag pointed. It was waved like a banner across the bleak moorish wilderness upon which the twilight was settling grey.

"Road?" he cried, gleefully. "Highway? Aye, there's the hillside—just the plain hillside!"

He waved me an introduction to it, like a master of ceremonies.

"Enough of this!" I said, tartly. "I have come from London—"

"So I see by your ticket. It's a fine big place—London!" interjected the stationmaster, with the air of one about to begin an interesting conversation.

"To see a gentleman in the neighbourhood, of the name of Arrol, who lives at Curlywee. I would be obliged to you if you would point out to me the best and quickest way of reaching his house!"

The two men looked at each other. There was nothing like a broad grin on the big man's face now. The stationmaster, also, had lost his alert and amused air, and had become suddenly thoughtful.

As neither of the two spoke I added still more sharply, "Do you know the gentleman?"

"Ow, aye," said Rob; "we ken the man!"

"Well, be good enough to put me on the road to his house!"

Rob of the lamp and rag turned slowly, as one of my own cranes turns with a heavy load of stone. His arm pointed out over the thin bars of shining steel of the railroad track.

"Wonder!" he said. "Keep straight up the gully till ye come to yon nick in the hill. Then turn to the left for three or four miles through the Dead Man's Hollow. Syne ye will come to a water; and if ye can get across, bauld up the face of the gairy, and gin ye dinna break your neck by faain' until the Dungeon o' Buchan or droon yourself in the Cooran Lane, ye will see the Cothouse o' Curlywee right afore your nose!"

It was not an appetising description, but anything was better than staying there to be laughed at, so I thanked the man, asking him to put my bag in the left luggage office, and proffered him a shilling.

The big man looked at the coin in my fingers. "What's this for?" he said.

"To pay the ticket for the left luggage," I said; "and the rest for yourself!"

Slowly he shook his head. "There's no sic a thing nearer than Cairn Edward as a left luggage office," he said, "but I'll put the bit bag in the lamp room. It'll be there if ever ye want it agatun'!"

"What do you mean?" I cried, furiously. "Do you know that I am—!"

"I mean," said Rob, deliberately, "that ye are like to hae a saft walk and to need a' your daylight before ye get to Curlywee this night. A guid pair o' legs to ye. Ye will need them!"

Upon the details of that weary and terrible journey I need not linger. Though when at first I threw my leg

over the wire fencing of the railway and stepped out on the moor, the instinct of the heather seemed to come back to me. I lost my way at least half-a-dozen times. Indeed if the moon had not been shingling about half full behind the grey veil of cloud, I must have wandered all night without remedy and most likely frozen to death. My London-made single-soled shoes were soon completely sodden, and presently the uppers began to part company with the welt. I was wet to the waist or above it by falling into deep moas-holes, where the black peaty water oozed through the softest of verduous green.

I was bruised by constant stumbles over unseen boulders, and scratched as to my hands by slipping on icy rocks. A thousand times I cursed myself for leaving my comfortable rooms, which looked over to Hampstead Heath. I might have been reading a volume of "Rob Roy," with my feet one on each side of the mantelpiece. And—at that very moment my foot plunged through the heather in to a deep crevasse between two boulders, and I wrenched my ankle sideways with a stound of pain keen as a knife.

By this time I had been six or seven hours on the moor. I had, to the best of my ability, endeavoured to steer the course set for me by the big-boned genius of the lamp-room. I possessed a little compass at my watch chain, and my profession had made me accustomed enough to using it. But in the grey, uncertain light the glass seemed to turn all the wrong way, and what the "face of the gairy" might be I had not the least idea. I only knew that at the moment when I sprained my ankle I had been descending a hill side as lonely as an African desert and apparently as remote from anywhere as the North Pole.

I managed, however, by an effort to get my leg out of the trap into which I had fallen, and sat down upon a rack, half-dazed with the shock. I remember that I moaned a little with the pain and started at the sound, not realising that I had been making it myself.

When I came round a little I was looking down into a kind of misty valley. The ground appeared to fall away on every side, and I could see shadowy and ghostlike forms of boulders, all about me, some standing erect like Breton menhirs, pointing stony fingers into the grey winter sky; some with noses sharpened to the exact shape of polar bears scenting a prey, as you may see them in the plates of my favourite Arctic explorer.

Gradually it dawned upon me that there was some sort of a light beneath me in the valley. It seemed most like a red pulsing glow, as if a nearly extinct smithy fire were being blown up with bellows. A sense of eeriness came over me. I had been educated by my uncle in a severe school of practicality. To be a contracting builder in the better-class suburbs of London is destructive of romance. But I have the Pictish blood in me for all that. Aboriginal terrors prickle in my blood as I pass a graveyard at midnight, and never when I can help it do I go under one of my own ladders. But now for the first time in my life I felt a kind of stiffening of the hair of my scalp.

But this did not last long. My foot and ankle recalled me to myself. I could not, I thought, be worse off than I was—wet, miserable, hurt. If that light beneath me betokened a human habitation in the wild, I was saved. If not—well, I was no worse than I had been before.

So with a certain amount of confidence I made shift to limp downward towards the strange, pulsing, undulating glow. But though the sweat ran from me like rain, I could only go a few yards at a time. Nevertheless, the ruddy eye grew ever plainer as I descended, winking slowly and irregularly, waxing and waning like a fire permitted to go low and then again replenished.

At last I was near enough to see that the light proceeded from beneath a great face of rock, which sprang upwards into the sky, so high that it faded ghostlike into the milky glow of the mist-choked moonlight. Just then my injured foot jarred painfully upon a stone which gave beneath its thrust. The loose boulder thundered away down the declivity, and with a cry I sank upon my hands and knees.

When I came to myself I could not speak. Something had been thrust into my mouth, something that gagged and almost choked me. My