

The Water Spectre

By Francis Lathorn

Muchardus, the usurping Thane of Dungivan, had murdered Roderic the late owner of that title, whom he had treacherously invited to an entertainment in a castle that he possessed on the banks of the Clyde. As soon as the banquet was nearly concluded, Roderic arose, courteously took leave of his entertainer and his guests, and descended the stairs. But he was not allowed to quit Boswell Castle. His faithful followers had been previously dispatched, and buried in one of the vaults beneath the edifice. To one of these, which was formed into a kind of dungeon, the hapless Roderic was forcibly dragged, and fastened to the stone wall by an iron chain.

Three days and nights did the unfortunate Roderic remain in this wretched lodging; his bed the cold ground, with oaten cake and water for food; and this vile treatment he received from one on whom he had heaped innumerable favours, and honoured with his confidence.

On the fourth night of Roderic's dreadful confinement, Muchardus entered his dungeon; in one hand he carried a written paper, in the other a dagger; the man who had always brought Roderic's food, carried a torch before the recreant lord. Roderic surveyed his foe with silent indignation.

After a pause of a few minutes, Muchardus presented to the Thane the paper which he had brought, and desired him to peruse it with attention. He did so, and found it to be drawn up as a will, by which he bequeathed to his treacherous friend all his vast possessions, and the Thaneship of Dungivan.

'For what vile purpose have you brought me this infamous scroll?' demanded the Thane.

'By signing that paper,' replied Muchardus, 'you will preserve your existence. Liberty, 'tis true, I cannot grant you, consistent with my own designs and safety; yet you shall be secreted in the best apartment my castle affords; and every wish you can form, that will not tend to a discovery of your still being an inhabitant of this world, shall be attended to with the most scrupulous exactness.'

The Thane's eyes darted fire at this disclosure of the premeditated villainy of Muchardus, and he tore the paper to atoms.

The enraged Muchardus flew towards his victim, and repeatedly plunged his dagger in his breast, till, with a heavy groan, he fell, and expired at the feet of his murderer.

Muchardus then left the dungeon, and returned to his own apartment, where he employed one of his emissaries, whom he had sworn to secrecy, to draw up another paper of the same purport as that which the Thane had destroyed. Muchardus had several papers in his possession, which had been written by Roderic, and to most of them his signature was affixed. This they copied with great exactness, and then prepared to reap the fruits of their wicked design.

The corpse of the murdered Thane was taken ere the dawn of day, and flung into a briery dell, where it was left, having been previously stript of every article of value.

The absence of the Thane and his attendants from the Castle of Dungivan, had caused a very serious alarm to his vassals and adherents, who had made many successful researches in the mountains, and inquired at every habitation, if they could give any tidings of their lord; but no one had seen the Thane since the day he went to Boswell Castle.

Some days after the murder had been committed, the body of the Thane was found in the dell, by some huntsmen, who were led to the spot by the sagacity of their hounds. The marks of

violence on his person, and his being despoiled of the property about it, which was known to have been of great value on that fatal day, as he had arrayed himself most sumptuously, and put on a variety of ornaments to honour the banquet of Muchardus, led the persons interested in the discovery, to conjecture that his attendants had murdered him, and made off with the booty. And as their bodies could no where be found, the report strengthened every day. Nor was Muchardus in the least suspected of the murder.

That chief having proceeded so far with a success equal to his most sanguine wishes, hastened to put the finishing blow to his manoeuvres. He carried the forged will to be placed in a drawer in one of the chambers where he was sure it would not be overlooked. It was accordingly found by persons empowered to search for the papers of the deceased. Muchardus was accordingly declared sole heir of the late Thane of Dungivan: not much to the surprise of any person, as the great intimacy between him and Roderick had been so apparent; yet they greatly regretted the change, as the tyrannical disposition of Muchardus was too well known, and often experienced by those whom fortune had placed under him.

Muchardus (now Thane of Dungivan) had attained the height of his ambition; yet his pillow was strewed with mental thorns. Ah! how unlike the prosperity of the good man! Conscience, from whose reproaches we cannot flee, perpetually reminded him of his crimes, and made him shudder with apprehension, lest retributive vengeance should overtake his guilty head.

The late Thane married, in early youth, a most beautiful lady, the heiress of a neighbouring chieftain. With her he fondly hoped for many years of happiness: but his hopes were vain; the peerless Matilda expired in giving birth to her first born, the lovely Donald; the traitor Muchardus being one of the sponsors that answered for his faith at the font.

Two years passed on, and the widowed Thane still indulged his grief, undiminished by the lapse of time. Muchardus artfully endeavoured to learn the sentiments of his friend, as far as regarded his re-engaging in matrimonial ties. To his great, though concealed satisfaction, he heard from Dungivan, that he had solemnly vowed never to take a second bride, but to cherish a tender remembrance of his Matilda, and pray for a reunion with her in those realms of bliss where the pangs of separation should be unknown.

Muchardus had for some time past viewed the possessions of Dungivan with a coveting eye; and he thought it feasible to obtain the Thaneship by the murder of the father and son, as they had no near relatives to make a claim. After much deliberation, he concluded that it would be most prudent to remove the child first from this world; as, in case of the death of the Thane preceding that of Donald, the latter might be placed out of his reach.

Annie, the young woman who nursed the little Lord, was walking on the banks of the Clyde, when she was seized by four men masked and armed, who tore Donald from her arms. Two of them ran off with the child; and the other two bound Annie to a tree, and then followed their companions.

The length of time that his son was absent alarmed the Thane, and he sent some of the domestics to search for Annie and her charge, and require their immediate return.

They soon discovered the nurse, and heard her dismal story. They led her back to the castle in an agony of grief, and acquainted the Thane with the tidings. He tore his hair, and rent his garments; nor would he listen to the consolations that Muchardus seemed so eager to administer.

Various conjectures were formed who could be the perpetrator of such a deed; but no one, upon mature reflection, appeared feasible.

The Thane had not, to his knowledge, an enemy existing; for his demeanour had been goodwill to all; nor did he conceive how any person, as he had no immediate heir, could be benefitted by

the death or removal of his son. Alas! he clasped to his bosom as a chosen friend, his deadly foe, the cause of all his sorrow: for it was Muchardus that had employed ruffians to seize young Donald.

Allan, the man who was trusted with the management of this vile plot, was ordered by his employer, to take the child and precipitate him into the Clyde as soon as he had got rid of the men who were joined with him in the enterprise.

Allan took the young Lord to his cottage, where he intended to secrete him till the surrounding objects were enveloped in the gloom of night, and then execute the horrid design which he had pledged his faith to commit. When he entered his humble habitation, he found Jannette, his wife, bitterly lamenting over the corpse of her son, their only child. When Allan departed in the morning, he had left the young Ambrose playing before the door of the cottage, with the rose of health glowing on his cheeks. A few hours after, death had seized his victim; and on the father's return, he found himself bereft of his only hope. Nor did he fail to attribute this calamity as the vengeance of an offended God. He felt what it was to lose a child: and he pitied the sufferings that the Thane must endure.—‘They are more than my own,’ ejaculated the now penitent Allan, ‘I know the end of mine; but the poor Lord is uncertain what is the fate of his at this moment.’

‘But tomorrow,’ continued Allan, after a pause, in which he recollected the injunctions of his employer, ‘tomorrow thy corpse will, perhaps, be discovered floating in the Clyde, and his apprehensions will be confirmed by a horrid reality.’

‘You will not, surely, murder this sweet babe,’ exclaimed Jannette in agony, and clasped the young Donald to her breast.

‘I must,’ said Allan; ‘I have sworn. Behold the price of my villainy;’ emptying the contents of a wellfilled purse on the table; ‘and I am to have as much more when Lord Muchardus is convinced that the deed is executed.’

‘I will not part with him,’ said Jannette, ‘he shall supply the place of my child. You have been very wicked, Allan; but you are not yet a murderer. The children are nearly of a size; nor are their features much different; only the heir of Dungivan is so beautifully fair, and our Ambrose is nearly olive; yet that will not be when the poor babe has lain in the water.’

‘What mean you?’ said Allan, who instantly comprehended and applauded the plan which she had in part expressed.

Jannette gave the young Donald some food; and exchanging his apparel for some belonging to her own deceased baby, she lulled him asleep; and placing him in the cradle of his predecessor, she began to prepare her design.

She dressed her lifeless infant in the costly robes which had been worn by the heir of Dungivan, placing also the ornaments of that nobleman about the little corpse; only reserving a gold chain, with a small miniature of the Thane attached to it, and which hanging loosely round the neck, might well be supposed to have dropt off in the water. As soon as it was dark, Allan went and flung the child into the river Clyde, accompanying the act with many heartfelt tears and sorrowful lamentations.

Jannette, most fortunately for their plan, had not mentioned to any of the neighbouring cottagers the death of her Ambrose. Under the pretence of the child's being afflicted with a contagious disease, she contrived to keep him in the upper chamber of her cottage, from which she so completely excluded the light, that, if anyone entered by chance, it was impossible to discover the deceit that had been practised.

The body of the infant was not discovered till the third day, when it was brought on shore by some young men who had been out in a boat fishing. It was soon recognized by the dress to be

the young Lord Donald, (for the features were not now discernible), and was conveyed to the Castle of Dungivan. The Thane was overwhelmed with despair; he ordered a sumptuous funeral, and then immured himself in a solitary apartment of the north tower.

Allan waited on Muchardus to claim his promised reward, which he gave him, with much praise for his adroitness in performing his commands. Allan then repaired to Jannette, and gathering together what they wished to convey with them, left the cottage at the dead of night, and procured a conveyance to Perth, from whence they meant to travel to some remote part of Scotland, where they might dwell in safety, for they were not without fear of Muchardus, as they supposed that he would devise schemes to annihilate all those who were acquainted with his atrocities. Nor were their conjectures ill-founded; Muchardus rested not till he had removed those whose aid he had purchased with his gold; and he felt great disappointment on discovering that Allan had escaped with safety.

To murder the Thane was the next purpose of Muchardus; but while he was deliberating on the best means to facilitate his design with safety to his own person, Dungivan was suddenly ordered to attend his monarch to England, where he was going to ratify some agreement he had entered into with the monarch of that kingdom; and the schemes of his treacherous friend were at that time defeated.

After passing some time in England, the Thane of Dungivan joined the Crusaders, and repaired to the Holy Land, where he performed wonders with his single arm against infidels. He passed sixteen years in foreign countries ere he revisited his native place, which he did with a determination to domesticate there in peace for the remainder of his days.

He was yet in the prime of his age; and his valour had made him an object of esteem and admiration. All the neighbouring nobility gave splendid entertainments in honour of his return.— Among the rest, Muchardus, with whom he had instantly renewed the friendship of their youth, was not slow in preparing the banquet, and planning the death of his unsuspecting guest.

The manner in which Muchardus obtained his ill-acquired grandeur has already been described; but he was not happy. To divert his thoughts from dwelling on the past events of his life, which were not of a nature to bear retrospection, he resolved to marry. There was an heiress of great property, who had been consigned to his guardianship by her deceased father. The beauty of Lady Catharine fascinated his senses, while her accumulating wealth held out a lure to his avarice, and fondness for ostentatious parade. Muchardus was still handsome; few men were more indebted to nature for the gifts she had so lavishly bestowed on him. His countenance was formed to command: but the tyrannical passions and habits he had for many years imbibed, sometimes spread over his features a fierceness almost terrific. Lady Catharine beheld him with a fixed aversion. Two years she had resided at Dungivan, and had witnessed enough of his disposition to make her shrink with terror, and daily deplore the infatuation by which her parent was blinded, when he chose the Thane during her minority.

At this period, Caledonia was much governed by the influence of the Weird Sisters. From the birth of young Donald, they had resolved to protect him, and work his weal, and the woe of his father's murderer.

Allan had long since lost his Jannette. He beheld Donald with the most fervent affection. The noble and heroic mind of the youth often called forth his wonder and admiration. A native dignity, that adorned his soul, was not subdued by present poverty, or the small expectations he had of acquiring any worldly wealth. Allan could not subdue the regret that constantly arose when Donald met his view; he wished to see him fill the place in society which was his right; but his fears, and the improbability of his tale being believed, made him bury the secret in his bosom.

He had been very successful in the tilling of a small farm, which he had purchased with part of the money which Muchardus had given him as a reward for the supposed murder of the child. All the savings which arose from this source were hoarded for Donald; for he had always retained that appellation from the time of his protectors leaving the precincts of Dungivan. The youth was now in his twentieth year, and the above-mentioned savings Allan was debating with himself how he could best lay out for the benefit of Donald, when he received an intimation from one of the Weird Sisters, that he was to return with his young charge to the banks of the Clyde. Allan disposed of his farm, and obeyed the commands he had received; and he was once more settled in a cottage among the mountains of Dungivan; and heard with horror of the murder of the late Thane, which, from the proofs he had already had of the villainy of the present one, he was not slow in attributing to him.

Time had silvered over the head of Allan, and so altered his person, that no one recognized him as Allan, under the name he thought it now expedient with his own safety to assume. According to the instructions he had received from the Weird Sisters, he repaired to all the neighbouring Thanes, and made an avowal of the transaction in which he had been engaged with respect to the heir of Dungivan, and the way he was preserved by Jannette's interposition.

A particular mark, which Allan asserted to be on the back of Donald's neck, was well known to several of the nobles, who had heard it remarked while the heir was yet in his infancy; this, and several other convincing circumstances, placed his identity beyond a doubt: but none of them were willing to make an enemy of the fierce Muchardus, whose power and undaunted exploits had effectually awed the neighbouring chieftains from interfering in his concerns. Nor could all the endeavours of the aged Allan raise the hapless youth one friend to assert his rights, and the poor old man soon expired under the pressure of the regret that he experienced.

Donald was ignorant of these applications, and the purport of them; for Allan had never disclosed to him the nobleness of his birth. He knew his lofty spirit would not suffer him to sink into silent obscurity while an usurper enjoyed his domains. And what could his single arm effect against his deadliest foe, who would inevitably hurl him to destruction?

Though none of the chieftains would engage in the cause of the orphan, yet their converse on the subject was not carried on so secretly, but that it reached the ears of Muchardus, and gave him the most dire apprehensions; though he openly derided the report as a most absurd imposture.

Anxious to know if he should possess his guilty honours unmolested, and win the love of the beautiful Lady Catharine, he resolved to seek the Weird Sisters. For this purpose he left Dungivan Castle, attended by Sandy, the only domestic he took with him, and repaired to a forest near the cave of Fingal, where the mysterious Sisters were said to resort, and perform their midnight orgies.

When he approached the spot, he directed Sandy to wait his return at the foot of a large tree, which he pointed out to his notice. He then proceeded fearfully on. The soul of the Thane was appalled; the wind rose to a tremendous height; the thunder rolled over his head, and the blue lightning flashed in his face—terror-struck, he resolved to give up his design of visiting the Sisters; but he had lost the path which led back to the castle, and he wandered he knew not whither. Now and then he beheld a faint light, which he hoped proceeded from the cave of some anchorite, where he could obtain shelter.

He soon came to a rock, in the hollow of which was a door partly open, whence issued a pale gleam of light. The door flew back at his touch, and he entered a misty cavern; the light in-

creased to a supernatural brightness, and in a few moments the Weird Sisters appeared, and saluted him with a discordant voice.

‘Hail! We know what brought thee here.
Wicked chieftain, shake with fear,
The assassin shuns his downy bed:
Can he shun the restless dead?
No, while in the forest drear,
Roderic, rise, and meet him here!
And the wounds he gave display.
Remorse be his by night and day.’

The mysterious Sisters then severally requested what he sought to know. ‘Ask I’—‘Require!’—‘Demand!’—exclaimed the Weird Beings.

Muchardus inquired if he should perish by an avenging sword.

The first Sister replied, ‘that no human power should harm Muchardus.’

He then demanded who was next to enjoy the domains of Dungivan.

The second Sister answered, ‘that the lawful heir of the murdered Roderic, and his bride, Lady Catharine, the peerless rose of the Clyde, would succeed him.’

Muchardus’s heart appeared to die within him at these words; and it was not till the third Sister, again repeated the question, of what he sought to know, that he recovered sufficiently to ask how many years of his existence still remained.

The bearded sister would not give an explicit answer to this important question; but remarked to him, that he had once seen the apparition of the murdered Roderic.

Muchardus, while his frame trembled with horror at the recollection of the appalling scene he had witnessed in one of the galleries of the castle, faintly replied in the affirmative.

‘Mark me then,’ said the witch; ‘you will not survive the third appearance of the dreadful spectre.’

The sisters then vanished from his view: and Muchardus, affrighted at the gloom (for the witches had left him in total darkness), was going to quit the cave with precipitation, when the murdered Roderic stood before him, and intercepted his progress.

Muchardus gazed on the hairy form with the greatest agony, till a chilling sweat bedewed his forehead; his limbs failed him, and he fell senseless on the floor of the cave.

In this situation he was found by Sandy, who alarmed by the Thane’s long absence, ventured from his leafy shelter, as soon as the storm had abated, to seek him; in which charitable design he succeeded with some difficulty, and was much terrified with meeting the Weird Sisters in his path, who maliciously diverted themselves with exciting his fears, and then suffered him to proceed.

He found his master just recovering from a death-like swoon. He assisted him to rise; and Muchardus, having glanced his eye around, and, to his great relief, perceiving no spectre, exerted himself to leave the horrid cave; and was led by Sandy to the Castle, where he retired to his splendid couch the most miserable of human beings.

Donald, since the death of Allan, his supposed parent, had remained in his cottage, as he had not yet met with the opportunity he coveted of embracing a military life.

In his solitary walks about the mountains, he frequently met Lady Catharine, and her attendant, Moggy Cameron. A fervent passion for the noble fair one took possession of his bosom; and he

reasoned with himself in vain against its increasing influence; for Love, that leveller of rank, was constantly inspiring him with hope.

Lady Catharine was not insensible to the attentions of Donald; and she often breathed forth a secret prayer that he had been of equal birth with herself.

Near five weeks had elapsed since their first casual meeting, when one morning the Lady Catharine being with some of her attendants on the Clyde, in a small sailing-boat, a sudden gust of wind upset it; and the fair lady was precipitated into the water, Donald, who had been walking on the banks for some time, and surveying the lovely Catharine with delight, as the vessel slowly glided along, immediately saw her danger, and plunged into the stream to snatch her from impending death. He happily succeeded in bearing his lovely burthen safe to the shore, and led her till they arrived at the castle gates, where he abruptly left her, ere she could express her thanks for the service he had rendered so opportunely.

From this auspicious day, gratitude, united to love, created for Donald a strong interest in her heart: yet prudence bade her avoid him; there was no prospect that the prejudices which her friends would entertain against such a suitor, could be overcome, and she resolved to spare him and herself, if possible from the pangs of a hopeless passion.

Donald no longer met her in his walks; he felt the change in her behaviour most severely, and became a votary of sorrow and despair, courting the influence of these passions in the still hours of the night, wandering among precipices and dreary forests. Chance led him to the cave where Muchardus had obtained an audience with the Weird Sisters, about an hour after that Thane had quitted it. The Sisters again appeared. Instead of cringing to them with the abject servility of Dungivan's usurping lord, he demanded with some sternness, what they wanted with him. But his asperity was soon transformed into profound respect, when they expressed their solicitude for his weal, and claimed his attention to what they had to impart.

The eldest of the Weird Sisters then gave a concise account of the crimes of the present Thane, and informed Donald that he was at that time plotting his destruction; being in dread of his revenge, and his gaining the affections of Lady Catharine.

The Weird Sisters then joined in admonishing him as to his future conduct; and one of them delivered to Donald a white silk flag, on which were woven some mysterious characters. This, she told him, would once, and once only, be of singular service to him in extreme danger, and that being the case, she exhorted him not to try its efficacy till all other resources had failed, and his own exertions proved abortive.

Donald took a courteous leave of the bounteous Sisters; and repaired to his cottage in a far different frame of mind from that he had ever experienced before. His birth was noble—worthy of Lady Catharine; and he felt that it was possible for time and perseverance to bestow on him a happiness which the preceding day he had regarded as unattainable.

The next day he was informed by a person who had a sincere regard for his safety that the Thane had discovered him to be the lawful heir of the domain, and had privately suborned persons to assassinate him, not assigning the true reason for that horrid design, but charging him with the attempt to seduce Lady Catharine from her duty, by persuading her to leave the castle of her guardian, and share a beggar's fate.—That lady, the informant added, was now strictly confined within the circle of her own apartments, and forced to listen to the hateful addresses of the Thane.

Donald on receiving this intimation, thought it most prudent to leave his present habitation, and repair to the court of King Malcolm, and submit the cause to him. In searching the papers of the deceased Allan, he discovered a written attestation of the deceit he had practised to save the

infant's life, describing some particular marks of fruit he had on his body, together with the chain he wore round his neck, which was now fastened to the paper.

These proofs were very consoling to Donald, and made him commence his journey with more alacrity; and by the noon of the day on which he set out, he had travelled many miles. The heat of the midday sun greatly incommoded him, and he grew faint and weary.

A neat cottage presented itself to view, and he knocked at the door to request admittance, that he might rest till the cool of the evening. This the loquacious hostess denied him; and during his expostulations with her on the subject, she unguardedly betrayed to his knowledge, that her inhospitable refusal was owing to her having sheltered Lady Catharine, who had escaped from the Castle to her humble roof, she having been led hither by her attendant, Moggy Cameron, who was daughter to the cottager.

Donald had betrayed so much emotion during the recital, that the good dame, alarmed at the consequences that might ensue from her communicating so much to a stranger, entered the dwelling, and closed the door.

Donald, hurt at her manner, and disappointed at not obtaining an interview with Lady Catharine, to whom he wished to impart the intelligence he had received from the Weird Sisters, and worn out by fatigue, fainted at the door of the cottage. The noise he made in falling, brought its inmates to his relief; and Lady Catharine instantly recognized her faithful Donald. He soon revived; and the fair one had just listened with pleasing surprise to his narrative, when a party of Muchardus's soldiers, who had been sent in pursuit of the fugitives, arrived, and conveyed the lovers to the Castle, where Donald was confined in a dungeon, and Sandy, having interfered in the behalf of the young lord, was also made a prisoner; and guards were set over them; but, by a successful stratagem of Moggy, who intoxicated their keepers, and procured the keys, they were liberated, and quitted the Castle walls.

By the direction of Moggy, they repaired to an isolated building about two miles from Dungiven; and in less than an hour they were joined by Lady Catharine and her attendants, they having escaped from the spies which Muchardus had set round them, by means of a subterraneous winding, which led from the stairs of the north tower to a grotto that terminated one of the avenues of the Castle grounds.

They proceeded in their flight for two days unmolested when, alas! they were again taken in the toils, and the Thane in person headed the pursuers.

As soon as they arrived at the Castle, Muchardus ordered some of his followers to take young Donald to the cave of Fingal (a long subterraneous passage cut through a rock, and filled with a branch of the river), in a boat, and destroy him. In vain Catharine knelt, and besought him to avert the sentence; he was inexorable; and the fair one, frantic with despair, rushed out of the Castle ere the Thane had time to intercept her progress. Sandy, who had attentively watched her, followed, and by her directions procured a boat, and repaired with her to the cave of Fingal. They arrived there first; and securing the boat in one of the inlets, Lady Catharine hid herself behind a projection of the rock, to watch the actions of the Thane, who soon arrived in a boat only, attended by the man who handled the oars. Contrary to the expectations of Catharine, Muchardus suspected her being in the cave, and soon discovered her hiding place, from which he dragged her into his boat, just at the instant that the one in which Donald and his intended assassins were sitting, entered the place pitched on for the scene of his destruction.

Catharine, in her struggles to get from the Thane fell into the water, and would have perished, but for the activity of Sandy, who succeeded in replacing her in the boat which had conveyed her

hither, while Donald, who was a confined spectator of the accident, was almost senseless with despair.

The Thane now offered to grant Donald his life, if he would renounce his presumptuous claim and the hand of Lady Catharine; but the youth rejected the proposal with the scorn it merited. A secret impulse made Muchardus wish to save the youth's life, if he could consistent with his own terms; and he vowed to release him, and provide for his future weal, if Lady Catharine would instantly become his bride, and resign all thought of Donald. She gave an heroic refusal; and the enraged Thane ordered the assassins to strangle their victim. Struggles were of no avail; the youth remembered the injunctions of the Weird Sisters, and waved the flag three times in the air. The Spectre of his Sire arose in the midst of the water, and pronounced the doom of his vile murderer, who sank with the boat and perished.

Donald was instantly conveyed with Lady Catharine back to the Castle, where the most lively transports of joy took place among the domestics at receiving the son of Roderic for their lord; for they had groaned under the tyranny of Muchardus.

Donald found no difficulty in getting his title acknowledged by his sovereign; and his union with the fair Catharine was productive of the utmost felicity to themselves and their offspring.