

The Haunted Ale-House

By H. Pease

'*An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,*' so Donald Macgregor muttered to himself as he strode cautiously down the water of Coquet, halting at the many crooks of that wayward water to spy out the land as he went forward.

He had already good suspicions of where his quarry was harboured, for he had seen and interviewed drovers who had returned from the great Stagshawbank Fair, and had gleaned certain information of his foster-brother Alastair.

But more than this he had to direct his feet; there was in his ears the echo of Alastair's pibroch—the *piobaireachd*—which he was to hear whenever the Laird would be in trouble or wanting him.

Onward the *piobaireachd* led him—down the water of amber-coloured Coquet—and now round the last crook he had just turned he saw a building of dark grey stone upon the edge of the haugh below him.

He halted at once, retraced his steps, and hid himself in the bracken, for he knew from the descriptions given him that the Slyme ale-house lay there below him—the last place on the English border at which Alastair had been seen or heard of. The Slyme ale-house had an ill repute, and was said to be haunted moreover; none would lie there the night who had anything to lose—'twas the haunt of kites and 'corbie craws.' As he watched and waited there stole down from the fells above him 'on-come' of mist or 'haar' from the eastward, which soon drew a plaid of hodden grey above the shoulder of Shillmoor. On the lower level a ray of white light still showed like the gleam of a malevolent eye behind a mask.

Meantime a cold mist came stealing up the valley. The eerie lonely aspect of all about him made Donald shiver and earnestly debate his intention.

Spying about, he saw an outcrop of rock some two hundred yards further along the fell side. Thither he crawled like a rogue collie, and watched therefrom, keen-eyed as a kestrel, the ale-house below.

He had some strips of meat with him and oatmeal in a bag, and with this he satisfied his hunger as he lay at watch. All the while the *piobaireachd* was still sounding in his ears.

Through the mist he could see two cows 'coming home' on the haugh below slowly and sedately to their milking.

Now three figures emerged from the inn; a tall, thin man came first—a collie at his heels—that was at once sent off to round up a hirsle of ewes on the hill.

A woman followed, calling 'guss-guss' to the pig routing on the bank; finally a third figure—short, misshapen—a hunchback, as the watcher noted, who called 'coop-coop' to a rough pony cropping grass in the intake beyond the inn.

Shortly this gear was rounded up and driven into the walled enclosure—a half pound attached to the western end of the buildings.

The three figures followed their stock within, and the watcher surmising that all were housed for the night cautiously made his way down the slope, but on a sudden all three reappeared, and the watcher dropped like a shot rabbit straight into a bed of thistles and nettles, fearful of discovery.

It seemed that they were about to secure themselves, and their flocks against evil by way of charm and spell, for round about the ale-house they bent their steps—the way of the sun—brandishing rowan boughs and chanting a fragment of ancient rhyme:

*'By the rowan's power—
By the thorn's might
Safe i' the bower
Be all our insight!'*

Having perambulated round their buildings and wall three successive times they disappeared within, and the watcher heard to his gratification the sound of bolt and bar being pushed home.

The solitary watcher smiled to himself—the secret smile of the Highlander who has grasped the situation and knows how to make profit thereof unknown to others.

The tall, thin man was the innkeeper—evidently a timorous fellow; the hunchback was his 'man'—malevolent probably, the doer of the other's dark behests; whilst the woman was presumably his wife, the cook and housekeeper of the alehouse.

Well, while they slept he would investigate and complete his plans for the early morn at the time when all three would reappear and drive forth their flocks again.

There was a small haystack at the west end of the inn, which Donald marked out as his resting-place for the night. Thither he made his cautious way—the *piobaireachd* sounding ever more clearly in his ears.

When he reached the haystack the melody seemed to be intensified; then suddenly he heard it no more.

Ha! a flash of inspiration shook him. This must be the very spot where Alastair was done to death—perhaps even buried here. He looked about him and noted that the wind was freshening and the mist was scurrying in dense clouds above as if it might lift, and then the moon might light him to further discovery.

Thus reflecting he sat down behind the stack, and waited patiently for the moon to rise and shine above the mist.

An hour passed, then a faint glimmer showed in the east above Shillmoor's edge.

He stood up and peeped round the stack; he could distinguish the rounded moon—nearly at the full—beating with white wings like an owl through the tangled mist.

In another quarter of an hour he could see sufficiently well to commence investigation. He noted as he searched the ground about him that quite recently the earth had been disturbed just beyond the verge of the haystack. A space had evidently been roughly dug over—a space that seemed the size of a grave.

Hereupon he sought for some instrument wherewith to make further investigation, and by good luck soon hit upon an old, broken-shafted spade that lay in a small potato croft adjoining. With this he set to work to hawk the turf away, and found it light to work, for it had been loosely shovelled in, and came away with ease. Working incessantly, at four feet below the excavated turf, he saw an object lying loose, which he seized in excited, trembling hands, and surveyed in the moonlight. Ay, it was Alastair's bonnet, for there was the black-cock's tail feathers which Alastair had always proudly worn in right of his birth. Stained with blood—the bonnet itself cloven in twain with a blow from hatchet or axe. 'My bonny Alastair!' he groaned aloud. 'Dear laddie! But, by Gott—ye'll be avenged fine the morn's morning!' Reverently he went on with his

howking, and soon Alastair's pale face showed in the moonlight, stained with soil, and bloody under the gash above his forehead.

Donald kneeled down in the grave and kissed like a lover his foster-brother on the brow.

Then pondering awhile he muttered brokenly, 'I'll hap ye in again, Alastair, beloved; when I've a sign to bury wi' ye that will prove to ye my troth.'

So saying he sat down beside the grave and cleaned Alastair's bonnet, then placed it on his own head in token of his vow, and waited for the dawn and his revenge.

He did not sleep, but thought again of the past: how he had had the care of the young fatherless Laird, had learned him to stalk the red deer and draw salmon from the river; how Alastair had even outstripped his teacher, and how each after Culloden's fight had saved the other's life. Then, finally, how he had counselled Alastair to turn drover with him till the 'Redcoats' should depart, as the best method avoid capture, and how constantly Alastair's high spirits led them into danger. And now it was all over—all over save the final duty to his brother. As he thus meditated long and deeply the hours went swiftly by, and it was with a sudden shock that he heard the bolts and bars being withdrawn on the further side of the inn. Instantly he sprang to his feet, prepared for action. He left his sword ready in the scabbard and his dag primed for use. Then he stole round the corner, and there saw the tall man and the hunchback before him.

'Tis his wraith!' cried the tall man, noticing the bonnet, and swung back in his terror, as he tried to cross himself by way of charm.

'I tell't ye,' quoth the hunchback unperturbed, 'that we should ha' driven a stake through his inside to prevent him from walkin' this gate.'

'Whisht ye, haud your damned whisht!' cried the other in a fury, his knees shaking in terror. Then turning servilely towards Donald, whom he now perceived to be a stranger, 'Ye are welcome, sir, to any ale or Rhenish my poor inn affords, for ye will be a Highland grazier—yen of our best customers,' he ended in an attempt at a bow.

'Draw and defend your nainsel', was Donald's reply.

The tall man laid his hand to his whinger at his side, and shouted to his 'man,' 'Draw, Jarret, and knife this murdering Scots villain.'

The hunchback, nothing loath, produced an evil-looking jockteleg, and hastened to his master's assistance.

'Knife him i' the back,' cried the former, 'whiles I haud him i' play i' front.'

The hunchback was so furious in his attack, which he pressed right home within Donald's guard, that Donald was unable to ward off the tall man in front of him.

Then just as the innkeeper had Donald at his mercy, and was in the very act of striking home, his arm was suddenly paralysed, a spasm of terror shook him through and through, his eyes glazed over. '*There's twa o' them,*' he muttered, and instead of striking he shrank his hand back as if to ward off a new assailant, and Donald had a momentary vision of his brother by his side. The innkeeper made a pass, then his whinger dropped; he turned to flee, tripped and fell upon his face, and lay motionless—his whinger by his side. At this the hunchback broke into rage, 'Ye're no worth fightin' for,' he cried in his fury, gave a kick at his fallen master, and fled to the inn door.

Donald fired his dag at his retreating foe, winged him in the shoulder, and hastened his retreat, but failed to bring him down. The door was slammed to, the bolt was shot. The hunchback had gained his city of refuge.

All was quiet; Donald was victorious; he looked upon the fallen innkeeper, turned him over, and saw that his eyes were fixed in death.

‘Ye hae helped fine to your ain vengeance, Alastair,’ he said quietly, as he picked up the fallen whinger. ‘Ye niver failed me yet; and I haena failed ye.’

Then Donald carried the whinger with him and went back to the graveside, still open to the sky.

‘I ha’ paid the debt, Alastair,’ said Donald, taking off his bonnet and laying the whinger in the grave as proof of his fealty, ‘and it is farewell, my brother.’

Kneeling down he reverently happed him in afresh, then rising with a heart contented, whistled triumphant as a pibroch, and took the airt of Scotland by way of Cocklawfoot, murmuring to himself, ‘*an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.*’