

McAlister

By S. Baring-Gould

The city of Bayonne, lying on the left bank of the Adour, and serving as its port, is one that ought to present much interest to the British tourist, on account of its associations. For three hundred years, along with Bordeaux, it belonged to the English crown. The cathedral, a noble structure of the fourteenth century, was reared by the English, and on the bosses of its vaulting are carved the arms of England, of the Talbots, and of other great English noble families. It was probably designed by English architects, for it possesses, in its vaulting, the long central rib so characteristic of English architecture, and wholly unlike what was the prevailing French fashion of vaulting in compartments, and always without that connecting rib, like the inverted keel of a ship, with which we are acquainted in our English minsters. Under some of the modern houses in the town are cellars of far earlier construction, also vaulted, and in them as well may be seen the arms of the English noble families which had their dwellings above.

But Bayonne has later associations with us. At the close of the Peninsular War, when Wellington had driven Marshal Soult and the French out of Spain, and had crossed the Pyrenees, his forces, under Sir John Hope, invested the citadel. In February, 1814, Sir John threw a bridge of boats across the Adour, boats being provided by the fleet of Admiral Penrose, in the teeth of a garrison of 15,000 men, and French gunboats which guarded the river and raked the English whilst conducting this hazardous and masterly achievement. This brilliant exploit was effected whilst Wellington engaged the attention of Soult above the Gaves, affluents of the Adour, near the Orthez. It futher interesting, with a tragic interest, on account of an incident in that campaign which shall be referred to presently.

The cathedral of Bayonne, some years ago, possessed no towers—the English were driven out of Aquitaine before these had been completed. The west front was mean to the last degree, masked by a shabby penthouse, plastered white, or rather dirty white, on which in large characters was inscribed, “Liberté égalité et fraternité.”

This has now disappeared, and a modern west front and twin towers and spires have been added, in passable architecture. When I was at Bayonne, more years ago than I care to say, I paid a visit to the little cemetery on the north bank of the river, in which were laid the English officers who fell during the investment of Bayonne.

The north bank is in the Department of the Landes, whereas that on the south is in the Department of the Basses Pyrénées.

About the time when the English were expelled from France, and lost Aquitaine, the Adour changed its course. Formerly it had turned sharply round at the city, and had flowed north and found an outlet some miles away at Cap Breton, but the entrance was choked by the moving sand-dunes, and the impatient river burst its way into the Bay of Biscay by the mouth through which it still flows. But the old course is marked by lagoons of still blue water in the midst of a vast forest of pines and cork trees. I had spent a day wandering among these tree-covered *landes*, seeking out the lonely lakes, and in the evening I returned in the direction of Bayonne, diverging somewhat from my course to visit the cemetery of the English. This was a square walled enclosure with an iron gate, rank with weeds, utterly neglected, and with the tombstones, some leaning, some prostrate, all covered with lichen and moss. I could not get within to decipher the

inscriptions, for the gate was locked and I had not the key, and was quite ignorant who was the custodian of the place.

Being tired with my trudge in the sand, I sat down outside, with my back to the wall, and saw the setting sun paint with saffron the boles of the pines. I took out my Murray that I had in my knapsack, and read the following passage:—

“To the N., rises the citadel, the most formidable of the works laid out by Vauban, and greatly strengthened, especially since 1814, when it formed the key to an entrenched camp of Marshal Soult, and was invested by a detachment of the army of the Duke of Wellington, but not taken, the peace having put a stop to the siege after some bloody encounters. The last of these, a dreadful and useless expenditure of human life, took place after peace was declared, and the British forces put off their guard in consequence. They were thus entirely taken by surprise by a sally of the garrison, made early on the morning of April 14th; which, though repulsed, was attended with the loss of 830 men of the British, and by the capture of their commander, Sir John Hope, whose horse was shot under him, and himself wounded. The French attack was supported by the fire of their gunboats on the river, which opened indiscriminately on friend and foe. Nine hundred and ten of the French were killed.”

When I had concluded, the sun had set, and already a grey mist began to form over the course of the Adour. I thought that now it was high time for me to return to Bayonne, and to table d’hôte, which is at 7.30 p.m., but for which I knew I should be late. However, before rising, I pulled out my flask of Scotch whisky, and drained it to the last drop.

I had scarcely finished, and was about to heave myself to my feet, when I heard a voice from behind and above me say—“It is grateful, varra grateful to a Scotchman.”

I turned myself about, and drew back from the wall, for I saw a very remarkable object perched upon it. It was the upper portion of a man in military accoutrements. He was not sitting on the wall, for, if so, his legs would have been dangling over on the outside. And yet he could not have heaved himself up to the level of the parapet, with the legs depending inside, for he appeared to be on the wall itself down to the middle.

“Are you a Scotchman or an Englishman?” he inquired.

“An Englishman,” I replied, hardly knowing what to make of the apparition.

“It’s mabbe a bit airly in the nicht for me to be stirring,” he said; “but the smell of the whisky drew me from my grave.”

“From your grave!” I exclaimed.

“And pray, what is the blend?” he asked.

I answered.

“Weel,” said he, “ye might do better, but it’s guid enough. I am Captain Alister McAlister of Auchimachie, at your service, that is to say, his superior half. I fell in one of the attacks on the citadel. Those”—he employed a strong qualification which need not be reproduced—“those Johnny Crapauds used chain-shot; and they cut me in half at the waistbelt, and my legs are in Scotland.”

Having somewhat recovered from my astonishment, I was able to take a further look at him, and could not restrain a laugh. He so much resembled Humpty Dumpty, who, as I had learned in childhood, did sit on a wall.

“Is there anything so rideeculous about me?” asked Captain McAlister in a tone of irritation. “You seem to be in a jocular mood, sir.”

“I assure you,” I responded, “I was only laughing from joy of heart at the happy chance of meeting you, Alister McAlister.”

“Of Auchimachie, and my title is Captain,” he said. “There is only half of me here—the etceteras are in the family vault in Scotland.”

I expressed my genuine surprise at this announcement. “You must understand, sir,” continued he, “that I am but the speeritual presentment of my buried trunk. The speeritual presentment of my nether half is not here, and I should scorn to use those of Captain O’Hooligan.”

I pressed my hand to my brow. Was I in my right senses? Had the hot sun during the day affected my brain, or had the last drain of whisky upset my reason?

“You may be pleased to know,” said the half-captain, “that my father, the Laird of Auchimachie, and Colonel Graham of Ours, were on terms of the greatest intimacy. Before I started for the war under Wellington—he was at the time but Sir Arthur Wellesley—my father took Colonel Graham apart and confided to him: ‘If anything should happen to my son in the campaign, you’ll obleege me greatly if you will forward his remains to Auchimachie. I am a staunch Presbyterian, and I shouldn’t feel happy that his poor body should lie in the land of idolaters, who worship the Virgin Mary. And as to the expense, I will manage to meet that; but be careful not to do the job in an extravagant manner.’ ”

“And the untoward Fates cut you short?”

“Yes, the chain-shot did, but not in the Peninsula. I passed safely through that, but it was here. When we were makin’ the bridge, the enemy’s ships were up the river, and they fired on us with chain-shot, which ye ken are mainly used for cutting the rigging of vessels. But they employed them on us as we were engaged over the pontoons, and I was just cut in half by a pair of these shot at the junction of the tunic and the trews.”

“I cannot understand how that your legs should be in Scotland and your trunk here.”

“That’s just what I’m aboot to tell you. There was a Captain O’Hooligan and I used to meet; we were in the same detachment. I need not inform you, if you’re a man of understanding, that O’Hooligan is an Irish name, and Captain Timothy O’Hooligan was a born Irishman and an ignorant papist to boot. Now, I am by education and convection a staunch Presbyterian. I believe in John Calvin, John Knox, and Jeannie Geddes. That’s my creed; ye are disposed for an argument——”

“Not in the least.”

“Weel, then, it was other with Captain O’Hooligan, and we often had words; but he hadn’t any arguments at all, only assertions, and he lost his temper accordingly, and I was angry at the unreasonableness of the man. I had had an ancestor in Derry at the siege and at the Battle of the Boyne, and he spitted three Irish kerns on his sabre. I glory in it, and I told O’Hooligan as much, and I drank a glass of toddy to the memory of William III., and I shouted out Lillibulero! I believe in the end we would have fought a duel, after the siege was over, unless one of us had thought better of it. But it was not to be. At the same time that I was cut in half, so was he also by chain-shot.”

“And is he buried here?”

“The half of him—his confounded legs, and the knees that have bowed to the image of Baal,”

“Then, what became of his body?”

“If you’ll pay me reasonable attention, and not interrupt, I’ll tell you the whole story. But—sure enough! Here come those legs!”

Instantly the half-man rolled off the wall, on the outside, and heaving himself along on his hands, scuttled behind a tree-trunk.

Next moment I saw a pair of nimble lower limbs, in white ducks and straps under the boots, leap the wall, and run about, up and down, much like a setter after a partridge.

I did not know what to make of this.

Then the head of McAlister peered from behind the tree, screamed "Lillibulero! God save King William!" Instantly the legs went after him, and catching him up kicked him like a football about the enclosure. I cannot recall precisely how many times the circuit was made, twice or thrice, but all the while the head of McAlister kept screaming "Lillibulero!" and "D—the Pope!"

Recovering myself from my astonishment, and desirous of putting a term to this not very edifying scene, I picked up a leaf of shamrock, that grew at my feet, and ran between the legs and the trunk, and presented the symbol of St. Patrick to the former. The legs at once desisted from pursuit, and made a not ungraceful bow to the leaf, and as I advanced they retired, still bowing reverentially, till they reached the wall, which they stepped over with the utmost ease.

The half-Scotchman now hobbled up to me on his hands, and said: "I'm varra much obleeged to you for your intervention, sir." Then he scrambled, by means of the rails of the gate, to his former perch on the wall.

"You must understand, sir," said McAlister, settling himself comfortably, "that this produces no pheelsical inconvenience to me at all. For O'Hooligan's boots are speeritual, and so is my trunk speeritual. And at best it only touches my speeritual feelings. Still, I thank you."

"You certainly administered to him some spiritual aggravation," I observed.

"Ay, ay, sir, I did. And I glory in it."

"And now, Captain McAlister, if it is not troubling you too greatly, after this interruption would you kindly explain to me how it comes about that the nobler part of you is here and the less noble in Scotland?"

"I will do so with pleasure. Captain O'Hooligan's upper story is at Auchimachie."

"How came that about?"

"If you had a particle of patience, you would not interrupt me in my narrative. I told you, did I not, that my dear father had enjoined on Colonel Graham, should anything untoward occur, that he should send my body home to be interred in the vault of my ancestors? Well, this is how it came about that the awkward mistake was made. When it was reported that I had been killed, Colonel Graham issued orders that my remains should be carefully attended to and put aside to be sent home Scotland."

"By boat, I presume?"

"Certainly, by boat. But, unfortunately, he commissioned some Irishmen of his company to attend to it. And whether it was that they wished to do honour to their own countryman, or whether it was that, like most Irishmen, they could not fail to blunder in the discharge of their duty, I cannot say. They might have recognised me, even if they hadn't known my face, by my goold repeater watch; but some wretched camp-followers had been before them. On the watch were engraved the McAlister arms. But the watch had been stolen. So they picked up—either out of purpose, or by mistake—O'Hooligan's trunk, and my nether portion, and put them together into one case. You see, a man's legs are not so easily identified. So his body and my lower limbs were made ready together to be forwarded to Scotland."

"But how—did not Colonel Graham see personally to the matter?"

"He could not. He was so much engaged over regimental duties. Still, he might have stretched a point, I think."

"It must have been difficult to send the portions so far. Was the body embalmed?"

"Embalmed! no. There was no one in Bayonne who knew how to do it. There was a bird-stuffer in the Rue Pannceau, but he had done nothing larger than a seagull. So there could be no question of embalming. We, that is, the bit of O'Hooligan and the bit of me, were put into a cask

of eau-de-vie, and so forwarded by a sailing-vessel. And either on the way to Southampton, or on another boat from that port to Edinburgh, the sailors ran a gimlet into the barrel, and inserted a straw, and drank up all the spirits. It was all gone by the time the hogshead reached Auchimachie. Whether O'Hooligan gave a smack to the liquor I cannot say, but I can answer for my legs, they would impart a grateful flavour of whisky. I was always a drinker of whisky, and when I had taken a considerable amount it always went to my legs; they swerved, and gave way under me. That is proof certain that the liquor went to my extremities and not to my head. Trust to a Scotchman's head for standing any amount of whisky. When the remains arrived at Auchimachie for interment, it was supposed that some mistake had been made. My hair is sandy, that of O'Hooligan is black, or nearly so; but there was no knowing what chemical action the alcohol might have on the hair in altering its colour. But my mother identified the legs past mistake, by a mole on the left calf and a varicose vein on the right. Anyhow, half a loaf is better than no bread, so all the mortal relics were consigned to the McAlister vault. It was aggravating to my feelings that the minister should pronounce a varra eloquent and moving discourse on the occasion over the trunk of a confounded Irishman and a papist."

"You must really excuse me," interrupted I, "but how the dickens do you know all this?"

"There is always an etherial current of communication between the parts of a man's body," replied McAlister, "and there is speeritual intercommunication between a man's head and his toes, however pairted they may be. I tell you, sir, in the speeritual world we know a thing or two."

"And now," said I, "what may be your wishes in this most unfortunate matter?"

"I am coming to that, if you'll exercise a little rational patience. This that I tell you of occurred in 1814, a considerable time ago. I shall be varra pleased if, on your return to England, you will make it your business to run up to Scotland, and interview my great-nephew. I am quite sure he will do the right thing by me, for the honour of the family, and to ease my soul. He never would have come into the estate at all if it had not been for my lamented decease. There's another unpleasantness to which I desire you to call his attention. A tombstone has been erected over my trunk and O'Hooligan's legs, here in this cemetery, and on it is: 'Sacred to the Memory of Captain Timothy O'Hooligan, who fell on the field of Glory. R. I. P.' Now this is liable to a misunderstanding for it is me—I mean I, to be grammatical—who lies underneath. I make no account of the Irishman's nether extremities. And being a convinced and zealous Presbyterian, I altogether conscientiously object to having 'Requiescat in pace' inscribed over my bodily remains. And my great-nephew, the present laird, if he be true to the principles of the Covenant, will object just as strongly as myself. I know very weel those letters are attached to the name of O'Hooligan, but they mark the place of deposition of my body rather than his. So I wish you just to put it clearly and logically to the laird, and he will take steps, at any cost, to have me transferred to Auchimachie. What he may do with the relics of that Irish rogue I don't care for, not one stick of barley sugar."

I promised solemnly to fulfil the commission entrusted to me and then Captain McAlister wished me a good night, and retired behind the cemetery wall.

I did not quit the South of France that same year, for at the winter at Pau. In the following May I returned to England, and there found that a good many matters connected with my family called for my immediate attention. It was accordingly just a year and five months after my interview with Captain McAlister that I was able to discharge my promise. I had never forgotten my undertaking—I had merely postponed it. Charity begins at home, and my own concerns engrossed my time too fully to allow me the leisure for a trip to the North.

However, in the end I did go. I took the express to Edinburgh. That city, I think candidly, is the finest for situation in the world, as far as I have seen of it. I did not then visit it. I never had previously been in the Athens of the North, and I should have liked to spend a couple of days at least in it, to look over the castle and to walk through Holyrood. But duty stands before pleasure, and I went on directly to my destination, postponing acquaintance with Edinburgh till I had accomplished my undertaking.

I had written to Mr. Fergus McAlister to inform him of my desire to see him. I had not entered into the matter of my communication. I thought it best to leave this till I could tell him the whole story by word of mouth. I merely informed him by letter that I had something to speak to him about that greatly concerned his family.

On reaching the station his carriage awaited me, and I was driven to his house.

He received me with the greatest cordiality, and offered me the kindest hospitality.

The house was large and rambling, not in the best repair, and the grounds, as I was driven through them, did not appear to be trimly kept. I was introduced to his wife and to his five daughters, fair-haired, freckled girls, certainly not beautiful, but pleasing enough in manner. His eldest son was away in the army, and his second was in a lawyer's office in Edinburgh; so I saw nothing of them.

After dinner, when the ladies had retired, I told him the entire story as freely and as fully as possible, and he listened to me with courtesy, patience, and the deepest attention.

Yes," he said, when I had concluded, "I was aware that doubts had been cast on the genuineness of the trunk. But under the circumstances it was considered advisable to allow the matter to stand as it was. There were in-superable difficulties in the way of an investigation and a certain identification. But the legs were all right. And I hope to show you to-morrow, in the kirk, a very handsome tablet against the wall, recording the name and the date of decease of my great-uncle, and some very laudatory words on his character, beside an appropriate text from the Scriptures."

"Now, however, that the facts are known, you will, of course, take steps for the translation of the half of Captain Alister to your family vault."

"I foresee considerable difficulties in the way," he replied. "The authorities at Bayonne might raise objections to the exhuming of the remains in the grave marked by the tombstone of Captain O'Hooligan. They might very reasonably say: 'What the hang has Mr. Fergus McAlister to do with the body of Captain O'Hooligan?' We must consult the family of that officer in Ireland."

"But," said I, "a representation of the case—of the mistake made—would render all clear to them. I do not see that there is any necessity for complicating the story by saying that you have only half of your relative here, and that the other half is in O'Hooligan's grave. State that orders had been given for the transmission of the body of your great-uncle to Auchmachie, and that, through error, the corpse of Captain O'Hooligan had been sent, and Captain McAlister buried by mistake as that of the Irishman. That makes a simple, intelligible, and straightforward tale. Then you could dispose of the superfluous legs when they arrived in the manner you think best."

The laird remained silent for a while, rubbing his chin, and looking at the tablecloth.

Presently he stood up, and going to the sideboard, said: "I'll just take a wash of whisky to clear my thoughts. Will you have some?"

"Thank you; I am enjoying your old and excellent port."

Mr. Fergus McAlister returned leisurely to the table after his "wash," remained silent a few minutes longer, then lifted his head and said: "I don't see that I am called upon to transport those legs."

“No,” I answered; “but you had best take the remains in a lump and sort them on their arrival.”

“I am afraid it will be seriously expensive. My good sir, the property is not now worth what it was in Captain Alister’s time. Land has gone down in value, and rents have been seriously reduced. Besides, farmers are now more exacting than formerly; they will not put up with the byres that served their fathers. Then my son in the army is a great expense to me, and my second son is not yet earning his livelihood, and my daughters have not yet found suitors, so that I shall have to leave them something on which to live; besides”—he drew a long breath—“I want to build on to the house a billiard-room.”

“I do not think,” protested I, “that the cost would be very serious.”

“What do you mean by serious?” he asked.

“I think that these relics of humanity might be transported to Auchimachie in a hogshead of cognac, much as the others were.”

“What is the price of cognac down there?” asked he.

“Well,” I replied, “that is more than I can say as to the cask. Best cognac, three stars, is five francs fifty centimes a bottle.”

“That’s a long price. But one star?”

“I cannot say; I never bought that. Possibly three francs and a half.”

“And how many bottles to a cask?”

“I am not sure, something over two hundred litres.”

“Two hundred three shillings,” mused Mr. Fergus; and then looking up, “there is the duty in England, very heavy on spirits, and charges for the digging-up, and fees to the officials, and the transport by water——” He shook his head.

“You must remember,” said I, “that your relative is subjected to great indignities from those legs, getting toed three or four times round the enclosure.” I said three or four, but I believe it was only twice or thrice. “It hardly comports with the family honour to suffer it.”

“I think,” replied Mr. Fergus, “that you said it was but the speeritual presentment of a boot, and that there was no pheesical inconvenience felt, only a speeritual impression?”

“Just so.”

“For my part, judging from my personal experience,” said the laird, “speeritual impressions are most evanescent.”

“Then,” said I, “Captain Alister’s trunk lies in a foreign land.”

“But not,” replied he, “in Roman Catholic consecrated soil. That is a great satisfaction.”

“You, however, have the trunk of a Roman Catholic in your family vault.”

“It is so, according to what you say. But there are a score of McAlisters there, all staunch Presbyterians, and if it came to an argument among them—I won’t say he would not have a leg to stand on, as he hasn’t those anyhow, but he would find himself just nowhere.”

Then Mr. Fergus McAlister stood up and said: “Shall we join the ladies? As to what you have said, sir, and have recommended, I assure you that I will give it my most serious consideration.”