

‘Muckle-Mouthed Meg’

By H. Pease

‘Hang him, Provost!’¹ cried the Town Clerk; ‘he was caught red-handed; i’ the verra manner, makin’ awa aff wi’ a quey o’ your ain frae oor Common.’

‘Fear God, Provost,’ exhorted the Burgh Chamberlain, astonished at the Provost’s hesitancy, ‘but ne’er a North Tyne Robson.’

‘Ay,’ rang out a dozen voices from the crowd assembled in front of the Provost’s house in Hawick, ‘mak him “kiss the woodie”; let the prood Northumbrian thief cool his heels i’ the wind!’

‘Up wi’ him!’ cried Madge wi’ the Fiery Face, who had just been loosed from the ‘jougs,’ wherein she had been confined for ‘kenspeckle incontinence.’ ‘Up wi’ the clarty callant! Let him swing like a corby craa i’ a taty patch!’

But the canny wife of the Provost, douce man, plucked him by the sleeve. ‘Dod! man,’ she whispered him in the ear, ‘he’s a braw chield for a’ that. Bethink you o’ oor “Muckle-mouthed Meg,” that ne’er a Tery² will wed wi’ without a handsome tocher! Aweel, let him wed wi’ her the noo “ower the tangs” an’ ride awa wi’ her on his saddle-bow. ’Twere pity to hang sic a handsome chield as he is an no mak use o’ him as a son-in-law, even if he be ane o’ the “auld enemy.”’

The Provost looked anew upon the careless, intrepid young Northumbrian, who seemed not to care a bodle for his imminent fate. He regarded his proposed son-in-law approvingly, for he was the pure type of North Tyne Borderer—of medium stature, but finely formed, with tanned complexion, tawny moustache and ruddy hair, keen blue eye and oval face—most pleasant to look upon. ‘Aweel,’ concluded the Provost, ‘we wull gie him the chance.’

‘Look ye,’ he addressed himself to the captive, ‘the guidwife is verra tender hairted: she disna care to see ye trail i’ the wind, but will offer ye Meg, oor daughter, instead o’ the halter ye hae truly earned. Ye can tak Meg—an’ your life as her tocher.’

Robson’s proud determination to accept his fate and suffer silently as became a hardy Northumbrian wavered a little.

He was but twenty-five years of age, and life was very sweet to him. He thought of the merry moonlight, of the joys of riding, and the fierce excitements of the foray with passionate desire. The old song of the Borderers was ringing in his ears:

Sweet is the sound o’ the driven steers
And sweet the gleam o’ the moonlit spears,
When the red cock crows o’er byre and store
And the Borderer rides on his foraying splore.’

He looked from the tail of his eye upon ‘Meg wi’ the muckle mouth.’ No beauty certainly, but ’twas fighting he craved, not women. Yet she was not ill-natured, he surmised—the ‘muckle mouth’ signified good temper; ’twas far better than a ‘muckle tongue’—she would do at a pinch as his housekeeper.

¹ Provost is really an anacronism, Hawick having been content with Bailies till the nineteenth century.

² Tery. an inhabitant of Hawick, derived from their slogan ‘Teribus and Tery Odin.’

Meg meanwhile on her part was also eyeing him askance. He was a handsome gallant surely! Her heart longed for the canty fellow. Yet if he showed the least sign of disdain he should go hang for her.

Robson now looked directly upon her. 'Well, Meg,' he decided swiftly, 'I'll take ye'; then he added in a flash of understanding, 'if ye'll take me.' His tact triumphed. With a ready smile that stretched almost from ear to ear Meg surrendered herself joyfully.

'Ay, my lad, I'll tak ye,' she replied on the instant.

The crowd now broke into a boisterous 'hooray,' as keen for the wedding as a moment before they had been eident for the funeral. 'Bring oot the tangs!' they vociferated loudly. A pair of tongs were at once produced, and under the direction of the blacksmith the captive and the woman held hands, and took each other for man and wife.

The 'handfasting' thus concluded, 'Ye hae forgot the bride ale!' cried many voices. 'We mun drink their health, Provost, ye ken. Bring oot the ale, canny man!' 'Ay, or clairt,' suggested a thin-faced scrivener. 'A mutchkin o' usquebaugh for ilka man,' shouted a burly flesher, "'tis mair heartenin'.'

The Provost turned a little pale at their unforeseen demand he almost regretted his consent to the wedding. Then he recollected that there was a firkin of home-brewed in the cellar that a recent thunderstorm had turned sour, and his brow grew clear. 'Bring oot the pickle firkin,' he bade his man, 'an' serve it around.'

So with a taste of sour ale in their mouths man and wife rode forth from Hawick the airt of Peel Fell.

Robson's good mare—her head turned homeward—went forward at a good trot an drecked little of her double burden.

'What ails ye?' inquired Robson shortly, feeling that his bride was shaking in curious fashion behind him on her pillion.

'I was juist laughin',' responded Meg, 'at oor venture, for here we are newly marrit an' I dinna even ken your name richtly; ye are a Robson, I ken, an' "Wudspurs" is your toname, but whatten's your hame name?'

'My father and mother aye called me Si,' responded Robson. 'Ye can call me that, an' ye like.'

Meg kept silence a while, then she said coaxingly, 'Si is a pretty name eneuch; 'tis short an' sweet; gie me a kiss, Si,' she wheedled, with a gentle clasp about his waist.

'I'll kiss ye when we win home,' replied her husband cautiously.

'But just ae kiss—to gang on wi',' coaxed Meg further.

Si turned half about and smacked his wife upon her rosy cheek, which seemingly he found satisfactory.

'Plenty more for ye when we sit i' the ingle neuk together the night,' he said.

Meg, enchanted at this prospect, said no more, but looked about her as they rode up the Slitrig water.

They could see the twisted horn of Pencrest and the round Maiden Paps on their right hand, and on their left bare Carlin Tooth on the outermost edge of Carter Bar; they were soon out upon the bare moorlands that stretch away to the water of Tyne on the one side and to the waters of Liddle on the other.

As they slowly ascended by the skirts of Peel Fell Meg broke the silence again.

'Ye arena marrit a'ready?' she inquired, as a sudden suspicion assailed her.

'No fears,' retorted Si with conviction.

'Weel, ye are the noo,' said Meg to herself, slightly increasing her hold on her man.

‘Then wha is ’t that fend for ye?’ she asked further.

‘I hae an old wife—the shepherd’s—that bides with me,’ replied Si.

‘She’ll no’ fend for ye the way I can,’ returned Meg, ‘for I can bake an’ mak ye sowans, scones, brose, kail o’ all kinds, an’ parritch.’

‘I’d be fain o’ some here and now,’ replied Si,³ ‘for ye are not very hospitable in Hawick. A sup sour ale’s all I’ve had since I took the fell yestreen.’

‘Puir laddie!’ said Meg sympathetically. ‘There was sic an unco carfuffle that I had clean forgot the vivers.’ Then, preparing to descend from the pillion, she proposed that they should get down and walk so as to ease the mare up the fell.

Si, highly approving her thoughtfulness, jumped down and led the mare with bridle drawn over her head through the flows and mosses above the Deadwater of Tyne.

‘Ye can almost see my bit biggin’,’ said Si, as he halted and pointed eastward of Larriston Fell to a patch of black peat and heather high on the rolling moorland.

‘’Tis gey ootbye,’ said Meg; ‘clean aff the map a’thegither.’

‘It’s caad whiles outside i’ the wunter,’ admitted Si, ‘yet i’ the but wi’ aad Maud the collie an’ her litter, Dand the shepherd, an’ Sall his wife about the blazing peats on the hearth ye’ll be warmer an’ cosier than the Queen of Scotland.’

‘There wull be a muckle ghaists aboot?’ inquired Meg, as she gazed anxiously upon the wild expanse of moor, grasslands, and bog that stretched away, boundless as the sea, to an infinite horizon.

‘There’s nowt but the “wee grey man” o’ the moor,’ replied Si unconcernedly; ‘there’s no harm in him; he will whiles even help up a “cassen” yowe (ewe). Not but what there’s the “Bargeist”—he’s mestitched, yet red thread i’ your mutch and a branch o’ the rowan tree will keep him awa nicelies. And Dand kens fine how to fettle him whether by day or night—

“Rowan tree and red thread gar the witches come ill speed.”

‘Mount again now, my lass,’ he added, ‘for we ha’ crossed the water o’ North Tyne, and will win home to the “Bower” cheeks by the gloaming.’

As the good mare pressed on unweariedly bridegroom and bride rode up to the ‘yett’ of ‘the Bower’ in the late twilight. On hearing the mare’s shoes ring on the cobbles beside the gate the old shepherd, who had evidently been waiting, expectant of his master’s return, came hirpling out in haste. Then seeing the strange figure seated behind his master he stood stock still in astonishment.

‘Whatten’s this gear ye ha’ lifted the noo?’ he finally inquired, when he had found his voice.

‘’Tis a wife I ha’ lifted from Hawick town,’ cried Si gaily, as he leapt from his mare, overjoyed to be at home again.

‘’Twould be i’ the dark then?’ suggested Dand, his eye fascinated by the ‘muckle mouth,’ ‘or belike in an ower great haste ye lifted the first “yowe” (ewe) ye cam’ across?’

‘’Twas in broad daylight,’ retorted Si, catching him a friendly buffet on the shoulder. ‘Ye would ne’er ha’ seen your master again had it no’ been for Meg,’ and as he helped her down he briefly narrated his adventure.

³ Hawick hospitality and ‘Hawick gills’ are proverbial: any one who has been fortunate, like the author, in having been a guest at the Common Riding will have realised this.

'Aweel,' commented Dand to himself, shaking his head the while, as he led the mare to the byre, 'I'm nane so sure but I would ha' juist pit up wi' the hangin'.' Then he added aloud, 'The wife will be sair vext when she sees the Scots heifer ye ha' ridden back wi'.'

Meg's good-nature, however, her willingness to help, and her skill in cooking soon triumphed over Sall's ill-humour, and peace reigned within the 'but' as supper was being made ready that evening.

Afterwards within the 'ben,' sitting cheek by jowl upon a rough bench beside the peats the Northumbrian bridegroom, and the Scots bride found much to content them, either with the other, whilst Maud the collie, who had stolen in with them, looked with resentment in her soft brown liquid eyes upon the strange woman who had so unexpectedly taken her place with the master, and might have been seen to frown when Si redeemed his promise of 'plenty mair' to 'Meg' on their ride home to 'the Bower.'

'The Bower,' as Si had christened his dwelling—originally a shepherd's sheiling—had recently been enlarged by the addition of the 'ben' and a room above the 'but,' so that the building had the look of a lop-sided, rough peel tower.

With help of his brothers down the water and a mason from Falstone Si had run a dry-stone dyke—strengthened with fir tree trunks—round about for the protection of his sheep and nowt in the event of a foray, and was as pleased with 'the Bower' as Lord William Howard with Naworth. 'Twas a quaint name enough, for 'the Bower' stood on the true march line of the naked Border, and in the very haunt and playground of the winds. Not only was it obnoxious to the winds, but equally exposed to raiding from Scotland, as also to the 'broken men' of 'the Waste,' for it stood erect above the Lewis Burn where it flows forth from Hells-bottom on the edge of Coplestone, where the Liddesdale fells join hands with those of Cumbrian Bewcastle.

Yet Si had prospered, for his 'grayne' befriended him, and as for the fierce reivers from Liddesdale, why, he would ride with them so long as they ran their forays into Cumberland or Scotland and not within North Tyne.

And now the 'Hunters' Moon' was up, waxing nightly, and proclaiming to all about the Borderland that the customary truce of summer was over, and the time of the crowing of the 'Red Cock' was at hand.

Danger, however, came not from Scotland in the first instance, but from England, as it happened.

The tale of Si's marriage had soon got wind upon the Border, and proved occasion for many a jest and gibe far and wide, and when it came to the ears of the Land Sergeant of Gilsland he scented opportunity of revenge for a 'lick' on the head he had received in a fray with the Robsons when they drove a foray into South Tyne a few months bygone.

'Tis matter of march treason,' he said, when he heard of Si's means of escape from the Hawick halter. 'Whether he be married or no signifieth not, for all intercommuning with the Scots is clean against Border law. 'Tis a matter for the Lord Warden's court, and a hanging matter at that. Ay, "Merry Carlisle" will fit him fine.'

Thus devising his revenge he determined to act at once. Taking two of his men with him he rode up by the edge of 'the Waste' towards Coplestone Fell, with intent to capture Si, or, should he evade capture, to leave a citation at 'the Bower' for his appearance at the next meeting of the Lord Wardens on account of notorious breakage of the Border law.

But Si had already been made aware of his enemy's intention, and had instructed Meg how to act in such an emergency, for it might well be that trouble would come when he was out looking after a 'hogging' he had of 'blackfaces' that were pasturing above the Forks, where the Lewis

Burn and Oakenshaw Burn mate. The season of the foray had opened and flocks must be guarded by day and night. One afternoon when Si had ridden down to the Forks to relieve Dand, Meg stood by the 'yett,' expectant of the old shepherd's return, and watchful of enemies. As she turned her gaze southward she was suddenly aware of three figures clearly tricked out against the grey sky above the further fell: their silhouettes showed like midges dapped against the window by a boy, and Meg could see that the centaurs were coming forward on a fair round trot in Indian file. She could not distinguish at the distance horse from rider, but she could note the pose of the horse's head, and the movement against the sky-line. 'Three-quarters of an hour,' commented the gazer. 'Good going on the fell top, evil wi' peat hags, flows, an' gairs below.'

She looked eastward, and there saw to her infinite relief old Dand coming slowly up the track on the ancient pony. Then, after having gone within to make certain preparations, she set out on a brisk step to meet Dand. Dand had quickened his pace when he too saw the three black silhouettes above, and met his mistress within two yards of the dry-stone walling.

A very animated conversation took place between the two, and by the time they reached the door cheeks of 'the Bower' they seemed to have settled their scheme of strategy satisfactorily, for either turned away from other with a wink o' the eye.

The strange riders had dismounted and walked their horses through the peat hags and mosses, but now were up again, and pressing on to the 'yett.' The foremost rider—the Land Sergeant—knocked heavily on the door with the butt of his lance and demanded to see 'Robson o' the Bower i' the name o' my Lord Warden.'

'He's no' within,' cried Meg in return. 'Whatten want ye at him?'

Then she slowly slid back the bar, and, opening the door partly, stood in the space thus afforded, her hands upon her hip bones.

'So you're the Scots lass he brought back with him from Hawick,' said the Land Sergeant, after a cool survey of Meg's features. 'Doubtless there was great provocation,' he added with a grin, 'but he broke the Border laws, my lass, and must answer for 't. Intercommuning with the Scots is absolutely forbidden, and is punishable with death. So, my lass, I advise ye to slip away home as fast as Robson's mare or shanks's nag will carry ye. Meantime I must search the house for your man, and if I cannot find him I'll leave a citation for the Lord Wardens' meeting with ye for Robson.'

'When Si,' retorted Meg very deliberately, 'intercommunes wi' me, as ye ca' it,' here the 'muckle-mouth' expanded east and west, 'he intercommunes wi' me i' Scotland, an' there ye haena ony power ower him or me. The Bower is biggit on the verra march line,' she explained, 'an' the ben is ower on the Seots side whaur we intercommune,' and Meg, with her arms akimbo and her mouth on the grin, contemplated her enemy in scornful triumph.

'Here! take ye this citation,' cried the Land Sergeant in his wrath, for he heard an echo of Meg's laughter proceed from his men behind him, handing the parchment slip to her as he spoke.

Meg, however, instead of taking it, shouted a loud and mysterious summons to assistance.

'Oot an' at 'im; oot an' at 'im, Bargeist! Hoop, holla, Bargeist!' then slammed to the door.

A few seconds only elapsed when there came round the corner a strange mischancy creature, with loose hide and hanging horns, long tail and clattering hoofs. Scrambling very swiftly forward it shook its shaggy head in an angry roar, and edged its horns sharply against the Land Sergeant's nearest man.

'Come awa, Sergeant; come awa,' cried the fellow in terror. "'Tis the Bargeist, the Bargeist! Ye can fight against thae devils if ye like, but I'll no',' and therewith clapping in his spurs he turned his horse's head and fled down the path without ever a glance behind him.

His fellow—a trifle braver—stood his ground a few seconds longer, but when his horse caught sight of the fearsome threatening horns beneath his belly he shied violently, then bolted after his companion.

At this moment out came Meg with a glowing poker.

‘This wull shift ye, if the Bargeist disna,’ she cried, as she lunged at the Land Sergeant’s mare and caught her fair upon the near buttock.

With a muffled skreigh the mare leapt forward, seized the bit ’twixt her teeth, and *ventre à terre* pursued the others in spite of her rider’s remonstrances.

Some half a mile away the three men succeeded in pulling up their horses, and debated with some heat what had best be done. The Land Sergeant was for going back to the Bower to search for Robson, but his two men were for going home with all speed. As they were hotly debating this the Land Sergeant descried a solitary horseman coming up the track from the eastward, and a sudden light gleamed in his eye.

‘Hi!’ he cried sharply. ‘Here’s “Wudspurs” for a ducat! Take cover, and, when I whistle, on to him like a brock!’

’Twas Si himself that was riding gaily up the water, for he had disposed of his ‘hogging’ to a grazier from Hexham at a good price, and was now bethinking him whence he had best re-stock his farm—whether from Cumberland or Scotland.

He was just fixing upon Cumberland when a sharp whistle smote on his ear, and three figures rising forth of some brackens were instantly upon him. The foremost figure was afoot, with dag in his hand ready presented; the other two were mounting their horses, their lances in their hands. Si’s mind cleared in a flash. Shouting aloud, ‘Dand! to me! Help!’ he charged the footman fiercely. ‘Pouff!’ said the dag feebly, and a bullet grazed the horse’s withers. The horse, rearing up, struck out and caught the fellow on the forehead with his iron-shod hoof, driving him to earth, where Si pierced him through with his lance. The other two men now circled warily round him—the one barring escape eastward, the other keeping him from his home. Either was ‘waiting on’ like a hawk before a favouring chance. But now two further figures appeared upon the scene. Dand with a whinger and Meg with her glowing brand and came speeding to their master’s rescue. The Land Sergeant and his man bore down upon Si with lances levelled in haste, hoping to dispatch him out of hand.

Si wheeled and turned his horse so swiftly that he surprised his nearest foe, and ‘instantly stooped’ upon him. He caught him, turned half about, and ran him through the hip, and dragged him from his saddle. But his lance’s head was twisted, he could not free it, and the Land Sergeant bore down on him with gleaming spear. Just as Si thought he was transfixed something interposed, a sigh or groan was heard; then Si was on the ground, kneeling beside his wife whose life-blood a spear head was drinking.

‘Oh, Meg,’ he cried; ‘my Meg! Twice ye ha’ saved my life, and now I canna save yours,’ and he supported his wife in his arms with infinite tenderness. Meg lay quietly against his bosom, her eyes fixed upon his, then she murmured softly with ’ane little laughter,’ ‘Kiss me good-bye, Si, an’—on the “muckle moo.”’ Even as their lips met a mist stole gently over Meg’s eyes, and she saw Si no more.