

# **Salute to Adventurers**

**by**

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# 1. The Sweet-Singers

When I was a child in short-coats a spaewife came to the town-end, and for a silver groat paid by my mother she riddled my fate. It came to little, being no more than that I should miss love and fortune in the sunlight and find them in the rain. The woman was a haggard, black-faced gipsy, and when my mother asked for more she turned on her heel and spoke gibberish; for which she was presently driven out of the place by Tarn Robertson, the baillie, and the village dogs. But the thing stuck in my memory, and together with the fact that I was a Thursday's bairn, and so, according to the old rhyme, "had far to go," convinced me long ere I had come to man's estate that wanderings and surprises would be my portion.

It is in the rain that this tale begins. I was just turned of eighteen, and in the back-end of a dripping September set out from our moorland house of Auchencairn to complete my course at Edinburgh College. The year was 1685, an ill year for our countryside; for the folk were at odds with the King's Government, about religion, and the land was full of covenants and repressions. Small wonder that I was backward with my colleging, and at an age when most lads are buckled to a calling was still attending the prelections of the Edinburgh masters. My father had blown hot and cold in politics, for he was fiery and unstable by nature, and swift to judge a cause by its latest professor. He had cast out with the Hamilton gentry, and, having broken the head of a dragoon in the change-house of Lesmahagow, had his little estate mulcted in fines. All of which, together with some natural curiosity and a family love of fighting, sent him to the ill-fated field of Bothwell Brig, from which he was lucky to escape with a bullet in the shoulder. Thereupon he had been put to the horn, and was now lying hid in a den in the mosses of Douglas Water. It was a sore business for my mother, who had the task of warding off prying eyes from our ragged household and keeping the fugitive in life. She was a Tweedside woman, as strong and staunch as an oak, and with a heart in her like Robert Bruce. And she was cheerful, too, in the worst days, and would go about the place with a bright eye and an old song on her lips. But the thing was beyond a woman's bearing; so I had perforce to forsake my colleging and take a hand with our family vexations. The life made me hard and watchful, trusting no man, and brusque and stiff towards the world. And yet all the while youth was working in me like yeast, so that a spring day or a west wind would make me forget my troubles and thirst to be about a kindlier business than skulking in a moorland dwelling.

My mother besought me to leave her. "What," she would say, "has young blood to do with this bickering of kirks and old wives' lamentations? You have to learn and see and do, Andrew. And it's time you were beginning." But I would not listen to her, till by the mercy of God we got my father safely forth of Scotland, and heard that he was dwelling snugly at Leyden in as great patience as his nature allowed. Thereupon I bethought me of my neglected colleging, and, leaving my books and plenishing to come by the Lanark carrier, set out on foot for Edinburgh.

The distance is only a day's walk for an active man, but I started late, and purposed to sleep the night at a cousin's house by Kirknewton. Often in bright summer days I had travelled the road, when the moors lay yellow in the sun and larks made a cheerful chorus. In such weather it is a pleasant road, with long prospects to cheer the traveller, and kindly ale-houses to rest his legs in. But that day it rained as if the floodgates of heaven had opened. When I crossed Clyde by the bridge at Hyndford the water was swirling up to the key-stone. The ways were a foot deep in mire, and about Carnwath the bog had overflowed and the whole neighbourhood swam in a loch. It was pitiful to see the hay afloat like water-weeds, and the green oats scarcely showing above the black floods. In two minutes after starting I was wet to the skin, and I thanked Providence I had left my little Dutch Horace behind me in the book-box. By three in the afternoon I was as unkempt as any tinker, my hair plastered over my eyes, and every fold of my coat running like a gutter.

Presently the time came for me to leave the road and take the short-cut over the moors; but in the deluge, where the eyes could see no more than a yard or two into a grey wall of rain, I began to misdoubt my knowledge of the way. On the left I saw a stone dovecot and a cluster of trees about a gateway; so, knowing how few and remote were the dwellings on the moorland, I judged it wiser to seek guidance before I strayed too far.

The place was grown up with grass and sore neglected. Weeds made a carpet on the avenue, and the dykes were broke by cattle at a dozen places. Suddenly through the falling water there stood up the gaunt end of a house. It was no cot or farm, but a proud mansion, though badly needing repair. A low stone wall bordered a pleasance, but the garden had fallen out of order, and a dial-stone lay flat on the earth.

My first thought was that the place was tenantless, till I caught sight of a thin spire of smoke struggling against the downpour. I hoped to come on some gardener or groom from whom I could seek direction, so I skirted the pleasance to find the kitchen door. A glow of fire in one of the rooms cried welcome to my shivering bones, and on the far side of the house I found signs of better care. The rank grasses had been mown to make a walk, and in a corner flourished a little group of pot-herbs. But there was no man to be seen, and I was about to retreat and try the farm-town, when out of the doorway stepped a girl.

She was maybe sixteen years old, tall and well-grown, but of her face I could see little, since she was all muffled in a great horseman's cloak. The hood of it covered her hair, and the wide flaps were folded over her bosom. She sniffed the chill wind, and held her head up to the rain, and all the while, in a clear childish voice, she was singing.

It was a song I had heard, one made by the great Montrose, who had suffered shameful death in Edinburgh thirty years before. It was a man's song, full of pride and daring, and not for the lips of a young maid. But that hooded girl in the wild weather sang it with a challenge and a fire that no cavalier could have bettered.

"My dear and only love, I pray  
That little world of thee  
Be governed by no other sway  
Than purest monarchy."

"For if confusion have a part,  
Which virtuous souls abhor,  
And hold a synod in thy heart,  
I'll never love thee more."

So she sang, like youth daring fortune to give it aught but the best. The thing thrilled me, so that I stood gaping. Then she looked aside and saw me.

"Your business, man?" she cried, with an imperious voice.

I took off my bonnet, and made an awkward bow.

"Madam, I am on my way to Edinburgh," I stammered, for I was mortally ill at ease with women. "I am uncertain of the road in this weather, and come to beg direction."

"You left the road three miles back," she said.

"But I am for crossing the moors," I said.

She pushed back her hood and looked at me with laughing eyes, I saw how dark those eyes were, and how raven black her wandering curls of hair.

"You have come to the right place," she cried. "I can direct you as well as any Jock or Sandy about the town. Where are you going to?"

I said Kirknewton for my night's lodging.

"Then march to the right, up by yon planting, till you come to the Howe Burn. Follow it to the top, and cross the hill above its well-head. The wind is blowing from the east, so keep it on your right cheek. That will bring you to the springs of the Leith Water, and in an hour or two from there you will be back on the highroad."

She used a manner of speech foreign to our parts, but very soft and pleasant in the ear. I thanked her, clapped on my dripping bonnet, and made for the dykes beyond the garden. Once I looked back, but she had no further interest in me. In the mist I could see her peering once more skyward, and through the drone of the deluge came an echo of her song.

"I'll serve thee in such noble ways,  
As never man before;

I'll deck and crown thy head with bays,  
And love thee more and more."

The encounter cheered me greatly, and lifted the depression which the eternal drizzle had settled on my spirits. That bold girl singing a martial ballad to the storm and taking pleasure in the snellness of the air, was like a rousing summons or a cup of heady wine. The picture ravished my fancy. The proud dark eye, the little wanton curls peeping from the hood, the whole figure alert with youth and life--they cheered my recollection as I trod that sour moorland. I tried to remember her song, and hummed it assiduously till I got some kind of version, which I shouted in my tuneless voice. For I was only a young lad, and my life had been bleak and barren. Small wonder that the call of youth set every fibre of me a-quiver.

I had done better to think of the road. I found the Howe Burn readily enough, and scrambled up its mossy bottom. By this time the day was wearing late, and the mist was deepening into the darker shades of night. It is an eery business to be out on the hills at such a season, for they are deathly quiet except for the lashing of the storm. You will never hear a bird cry or a sheep bleat or a weasel scream. The only sound is the drum of the rain on the peat or its plash on a boulder, and the low surge of the swelling streams. It is the place and time for dark deeds, for the heart grows savage; and if two enemies met in the hollow of the mist only one would go away.

I climbed the hill above the Howe burn-head, keeping the wind on my right cheek as the girl had ordered. That took me along a rough ridge of mountain pitted with peat-bogs into which I often stumbled. Every minute I expected to descend and find the young Water of Leith, but if I held to my directions I must still mount. I see now that the wind must have veered to the south-east, and that my plan was leading me into the fastnesses of the hills; but I would have wandered for weeks sooner than disobey the word of the girl who sang in the rain. Presently I was on a steep hill-side, which I ascended only to drop through a tangle of screes and jumper to the mires of a great bog. When I had crossed this more by luck than good guidance, I had another scramble on the steeps where the long, tough heather clogged my footsteps.

About eight o'clock I awoke to the conviction that I was hopelessly lost, and must spend the night in the wilderness. The rain still fell unceasingly through the pit-mirk, and I was as sodden and bleached as the bent I trod on. A night on the hills had no terrors for me; but I was mortally cold and furiously hungry, and my temper grew bitter against the world. I had forgotten the girl and her song, and desired above all things on earth a dry bed and a chance of supper.

I had been plunging and slipping in the dark mosses for maybe two hours when, looking down from a little rise, I caught a gleam of light. Instantly my mood changed to content. It could only be a herd's cottage, where I might hope for a peat fire, a bicker of brose, and, at the worst, a couch of dry bracken.

I began to run, to loosen my numbed limbs, and presently fell headlong over a little scaur into a moss-hole. When I crawled out, with peat plastering my face and hair, I found I had lost my notion of the light's whereabouts. I strove to find another hillock, but I seemed now to be in a flat space of bog. I could only grope blindly forwards away from the moss-hole, hoping that soon I might come to a lift in the hill.

Suddenly from the distance of about half a mile there fell on my ears the most hideous wailing. It was like the cats on a frosty night; it was like the clanging of pots in a tinker's cart; and it would rise now and then to a shriek of rhapsody such as I have heard at field-preachings. Clearly the sound was human, though from what kind of crazy human creature I could not guess. Had I been less utterly forwandered and the night less wild, I think I would have sped away from it as fast as my legs had carried me. But I had little choice. After all, I reflected, the worst bedlamite must have food and shelter, and, unless the gleam had been a will-o'-the-wisp, I foresaw a fire. So I hastened in the direction of the noise.

I came on it suddenly in a hollow of the moss. There stood a ruined sheepfold, and in the corner of two walls some plaids had been stretched to make a tent. Before this burned a big fire of heather roots and bog-wood, which hissed and crackled in the rain. Round it squatted a score of women, with plaids drawn tight over their heads, who rocked and moaned like a flight of witches, and two--three men were on their knees at the edge of the ashes. But what caught my eye was the figure that stood before the tent. It was a long fellow, who held his arms to heaven, and sang in a great throaty voice the wild dirge I had been listening to. He held a book in one hand, from which he would pluck leaves and cast them on the fire, and at every burnt-offering a wail of ecstasy would go up from the hooded women and kneeling men. Then with a final howl he hurled what remained of his book into the flames, and with upraised hands began some sort of prayer.

I would have fled if I could; but Providence willed it otherwise. The edge of the bank on which I stood had been rotted by the rain, and the whole thing gave under my feet. I slithered down into the sheepfold, and pitched headforemost among the worshipping women. And at that, with a yell, the long man leaped over the fire and had me by the throat.

My bones were too sore and weary to make resistance. He dragged me to the ground before the tent, while the rest set up a skirling that deafened my wits. There he plumped me down, and stood glowering at me like a cat with a sparrow.

"Who are ye, and what do ye here, disturbing the remnant of Israel?" says he.

I had no breath in me to speak, so one of the men answered.

"Some gangrel body, precious Mr. John," he said.

"Nay," said another; "it's a spy o' the Amalekites."



"It's a herd frae Linton way," spoke up a woman. "He favours the look of one Zebedee Linklater."

The long man silenced her. "The word of the Lord came unto His prophet Gib, saying, Smite and spare not, for the cup of the abominations of Babylon is now full. The hour cometh, yea, it is at hand, when the elect of the earth, meaning me and two--three others, will be enthroned above the Gentiles, and Dagon and Baal will be cast down. Are ye still in the courts of bondage, young man, or seek ye the true light which the Holy One of Israel has vouchsafed to me, John Gib, his unworthy prophet?"

Now I knew into what rabble I had strayed. It was the company who called themselves the Sweet-Singers, led by one Muckle John Gib, once a mariner of Borrowstoneness-on-Forth. He had long been a thorn in the side of the preachers, holding certain strange heresies that discomfited even the wildest of the hill-folk. They had clapped him into prison; but the man, being three parts mad had been let go, and ever since had been making strife in the westland parts of Clydesdale. I had heard much of him, and never any good. It was his way to draw after him a throng of demented women, so that the poor, draggle-tailed creatures forgot husband and bairns and followed him among the mosses. There were deeds of violence and blood to his name, and the look of him was enough to spoil a man's sleep. He was about six and a half feet high, with a long, lean head and staring cheek bones. His brows grew like bushes, and beneath glowed his evil and sunken eyes. I remember that he had monstrous long arms, which hung almost to his knees, and a great hairy breast which showed through a rent in his seaman's jerkin. In that strange place, with the dripping spell of night about me, and the fire casting weird lights and shadows, he seemed like some devil of the hills awakened by magic from his ancient grave.

But I saw it was time for me to be speaking up.

"I am neither gangrel, nor spy, nor Amalekite, nor yet am I Zebedee Linklater. My name is Andrew Garvald, and I have to-day left my home to make my way to Edinburgh College. I tried a short road in the mist, and here I am."

"Nay, but what seek ye?" cried Muckle John. "The Lord has led ye to our company by His own good way. What seek ye? I say again, and yea, a third time."

"I go to finish my colleging," I said.

He laughed a harsh, croaking laugh. "Little ye ken, young man. We travel to watch the surprising judgment which is about to overtake the wicked city of Edinburgh. An angel hath revealed it to me in a dream. Fire and brimstone will descend upon it as on Sodom and Gomorrah, and it will be consumed and wither away, with its cruel Ahabs and its painted Jezebels, its subtle Doegs and its lying Balaams, its priests and its judges, and its proud men of blood, its Bible-idolaters and its false prophets, its purple and damask, its gold and its fine linen, and it shall be as Tyre and Sidon, so that none shall know the site thereof. But we who follow the Lord and have cleansed His word from human

abominations, shall leap as he-goats upon the mountains, and enter upon the heritage of the righteous from Beth-peor even unto the crossings of Jordan."

In reply to this rigmarole I asked for food, since my head was beginning to swim from my long fast. This, to my terror, put him into a great rage.

"Ye are carnally minded, like the rest of them. Ye will get no fleshly provender here; but if ye be not besotted in your sins ye shall drink of the Water of Life that floweth freely and eat of the honey and manna of forgiveness."

And then he appeared to forget my very existence. He fell into a sort of trance, with his eyes fixed on vacancy. There was a dead hush in the place, nothing but the crackle of the fire and the steady drip of the rain. I endured it as well as I might, for though my legs were sorely cramped, I did not dare to move an inch.

After nigh half an hour he seemed to awake. "Peace be with you," he said to his followers. "It is the hour for sleep and prayer. I, John Gib, will wrestle all night for your sake, as Jacob strove with the angel." With that he entered the tent.

No one spoke to me, but the ragged company sought each their sleeping-place. A woman with a kindly face jogged me on the elbow, and from the neuk of her plaid gave me a bit of oatcake and a piece of roasted moorfowl. This made my supper, with a long drink from a neighbouring burn. None hindered my movements, so, liking little the smell of wet, uncleanly garments which clung around the fire, I made my bed in a heather bush in the lee of a boulder, and from utter weariness fell presently asleep.

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