

**IT WAS A LOVER AND
HIS LASS**

By

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CHAPTER I.

There stands in one of the northern counties of Scotland, in the midst of a wild and wooded landscape, with the background of a fine range of hills, and in the vicinity of a noble trout-stream, a great palace, uninhabited and unfinished. It is of the French-Scottish style of architecture, but more French than Scotch—a little Louvre planted in the midst of a great park and fine woods, by which, could a traveller pass, as in the days of Mr. G. P. R. James, on a summer evening when the sun had set, and find himself suddenly face-to-face with such an edifice amid such a solitude, the effect even upon the most hardened British tourist would be something extraordinary. There it stands, white and splendid, raising its turreted roofs, such a house as a prince might live in, which would accommodate dozens of guests, and for which scores of servants would be needful. But all naked, vacant, and silent, the glassless windows like empty sockets without eyes, the rooms all unfinished, grass growing on the broad steps that lead up to the great barricaded door, and weeds flourishing upon the approach.

Round about it are avenues of an exotic splendour, like the building, tall araucarias of kin to nothing else that flourishes in Scotland, blue-green pines of a rare species, and around these, in long-drawn circles, lines of level green terraces, upon which you can walk for miles—terraces more fit for Versailles than for Murkley, where the grass is generally wet, and promenades of this kind not very practicable for the greater part of the year. The pines have taken hold of the soil, have thriven and flourished, the araucarias are unequalled in Great Britain. Nature and the landscape have assimilated them, and made them free of the

country in which they are to stand for ages. But the house, being due to human-kind, cannot be thus assimilated. No kindly growth, naturalizes it, no softening of years makes it fit into its place. It is too big and imposing to be run over by honeysuckles and roses like a cottage; it stands like a ghost among all the paths that lead to its blocked-up door. The rows of melancholy openings where windows ought to be glare out in their emptiness, in contrast with that door which never opens, and makes all natural access to the place impossible. An army of tramps might clamber in at the windows, and make carnival in the vacant rooms, but the master of the house could not without an organized assault find admittance in the recognized way. At night, or when the evening glooms are falling, nothing can be more startling than to stray into the presence of this huge thing, which is not a habitation, and which seems, all complete yet so incomplete, to have strayed into regions quite uncongenial and out of sympathy with it, where it stands as much out of its element as a stranded boat.

But all the same there is nothing ghostly or terrible about Murkley Castle. It involves no particular mystery of any kind—nothing but the folly of a man who built a house without counting the cost, and who found himself without means to complete, far less enjoy, the palace he had constructed. Not the less is it a strange feature in the landscape, and it would be still stranger if popular superstition did not see sights and bear sounds in it of nights, for which the wiser persons in the country declared they could not account, though of course they did not believe in anything supernatural. This was the reason given by the driver of the gig from the "George" at Kilmorley for the round he wanted to make on a certain June night in the lingering daylight, as he conducted the gentleman reckoned as No. 5 in the books at the

'George' to Murkley village, where this ill-advised person, not knowing when he was well off, as the "George" was of opinion, meant to establish himself at the village inn, which was no better than a public-house.

"It's no from ony superstition," the driver said. "I'm no a man, I hope, to be feared for ghosts; I'm mair feared for flesh and blood. I've a good watch in my pocket, and life's sweet, and if it's tramps, as is maist likely, that have a howff in the auld castle, and mak' a' thae noises to frichten the countryside, the mair reason, say I, to gi'e the auld castle a wide berth."

"But it's daylight," said the traveller; for, after all, as in the days of Mr. G. P. E. James, it is a traveller of whose early impressions the historian avails himself; "and there are two of us; and that beast of yours could surely show a clean pair of heels——"

He spoke with a slight accent which was foreign, but which the countryman took to be "high English:" and had certain little foreign ways, which Duncan was not clever enough to understand. He responded, cautiously,

"Oh, ay; she'll gang weel enough—but a mare ye see's a flighty creature—they're mair nervous than a fine leddy—and, if they think they see something they canna account for——"

"But, man alive!" cried the stranger, "you're not afraid of ghosts in broad daylight."

"I'm no speaking about ghosts—and ye ca' this braid daylight! It's just the eeriest licht I ever saw. Do you ken what o'clock it is? Nine o'clock at nicht, and ye can see as plain as if it was nine in the morning. I come from the South mysel', and I'm no used to it. Nor

it's no canny either. It's no the sun, it's no the moon; what is it? Just the kind of time, in my opinion, that ye might see anything—even if it wasna there——"

This lucid description gave our traveller great pleasure.

"I had not thought of that," he said, "but it is quite true. Here is a half-crown for you, if you will drive by Murkley—is it Murkley you said?"

"You kent a' about Murkley when you made up your mind to make your habitation there," said Duncan, with a glance of suspicion. "If you ken the village, ye maun ken the castle. They're ower proud to have such a ferly near them, thae ignorant folk."

"You don't mean to win the half-crown," said the other, with a good-humoured laugh.

Duncan, who had slackened his pace when the offer was made, and evidently, notwithstanding his ungracious remark, contemplated turning, which was not so easy in the narrow road, here suddenly jerked his mare round with an impatience which almost brought her on her hind quarters. "It's of nae consequence to me," he said.

But this clearly meant not the half-crown, but the change of route. They went in through a gate, to which a castellated lodge had been attached, but the place was empty, like the castle itself. A slight uncertainty of light, like a film in the air, began to gather as they came in sight of the house, not darkening so much as confusing the silvery clearness of the sky and crystalline air. This was all new to the stranger. He had never been out in such an unearthly, long-continued day. It was like fairyland, or dreamland,

he could not tell which. The evenings he had known had been those rapid ones, in which darkness succeeds day with scarcely any interval; this fairy radiance gave him a strange delight, the pleasure of novelty mingling with the higher pleasure of a beauty which is exquisite and has scarcely any parallel. It seemed to him the very poetry of the North, the sentiment—far less glowing and passionate, yet, at the same time, less matter of fact than that to which he was accustomed—of the visionary land into which he had come. He did not know Scotland, nor yet England, though nobody could more pride himself on the quality of an Englishman. He knew Ossian, which had delighted him, as it delights the fancy of those who know nothing about its supposed birthplace. To be sure, storm was the Ossianic atmosphere, and nothing could be more completely removed from any indication of storm than this. The sky was like an opal descending into purest yellow, remounting into a visionary faint blue, just touched with gossamer veils of cloud. It was not like the glories he had read of a midnight sun. It was like nothing he had ever read of. And into this strange, unearthly light suddenly arose the great white bulk of the palace, with its rows upon rows of hollow eyes looking out into space. Lewis Grantley started, in spite of himself, at the sight, and, what was more remarkable, the mare started too, and required all the efforts of her driver to hold her in.

"I tellt ye!" Duncan said, with a smothered oath, directed at the horse or his companion, it would be difficult to say which. He did not himself so much as look at the great house, giving his entire attention to the mare, whom he held in with all his might, with a lowering countenance and every sign of unwilling submission, when Grantley bid him draw up in front of the castle. Two or three minutes afterwards, the stranger waved his hand; and the animal

darted on like an arrow from a bow. She scarcely drew breath, flashing along through the avenue at full speed, till they reached the further gate, which was opened for them by a respectable woman, neat and trim, as one under the eye of her master. Lewis could only perceive among the trees the small *tourelles* of an old house as they darted out of the gate.

"I'll no get her soothered down till she's in her ain stable," Duncan said. "Your half-a-crown's hard won. She'll just pu' my hands off on the road hame, with her stable at the hinder end, and this pawnic in her. And now ye have seen it are you muckle the better for it? That's what I aye ask when folk risk their necks for the pleasure of their een."

"My good fellow," said Lewis, "are all Scotchmen, I would like to know, as uncivil as you?"

A spark of humour kindled in Duncan's eyes.

"No—no a'," he said, with a somewhat perplexing confusion of vowels, and burst into a sudden laugh. "And even me, my bark's worse than my bite," he added, with an amused look. Then, after a pause, "You're a gentleman that can tak' a joke. I like that sort. The English are maistly awfu' serious. They just glower at ye. You've maybe been in this countryside before?"

"Never before. I have never been in Scotland before, nor in England either, for that matter," said the young man.

"Lord sake!" cried Duncan, "and where may ye belong to, when you are at hame?"

But the stranger did not carry his complacency so far as this. He said, somewhat abruptly,

"Do you know anything about the family to whom that place belongs?"

"Do I ken onything about—— It's weel seen you've no acquaintance with this countryside," said Duncan. "What should a person ken about if no the Murrays? Was it the Murrays ye were meaning? I ken as much about them as ony man, whaever the other may be. My sister cam' frae Moffatt with them—that's my caulf-ground—and my little Bessy is in the kitchen, and coming on grand. I can tell you everything about them, if that's what you want."

"Oh, not so much as that," said Grantley; "I am not so curious. Do they intend to finish the Murkley Castle?" he asked.

"Finish it! Oh, man, but it's little you ken. I'll tell ye the hail story, if you like. You see there was old Sir Patrick. He was the man that biggit yon muckle castle; but his siller failed, and he took a disgust at it; then he gaed abroad, and things turned, and he got his money back. But do ye think he was the man to do like other folk, to let it go to them that had a right? Na, na, ye're out of your reckoning. He was an auld fool—him that had a son, and grandchildren, and a' that—what must he do but take up with some urchin he picked out of the streets, and pet it, and make of it, and set it up for a gentleman, and leave all his siller to that."

Lewis Grantley had started again at this description. He said, hastily,

"How do you know that it was out of the streets? How do you know——" and then he stopped short, and laughed. "Tell the story, my good fellow, your own way."

"I'll do that," said Duncan, who despised the permission. "Out o' the streets or no out o' the streets, it was some adventurer-lad that took the fancy o' the auld man. True flesh and blood will not aye make itself over agreeable, and the short and the long is that he left all his siller to the young fellow, that was not a drap's blood to him, and left the muckle castle and the little castle and twa-three auld acres mortgaged to their full valley to his son. He couldn't help that, that was the bit that was settled, and that he couldn't will away."

The young man listened with great interest, with now and then a movement of surprise. He did not speak at first; then he said, with a long breath,

"That was surely a very strange thing to do."

"Ay was it—an awfu' strange thing—but Sir Patrick was aye what's ca'ed an eccentric, and ye never could tell what he wouldna do. That's Murkley down yonder, on the water-side. Ye'll be a keen fisher, I'm thinking, to think o' living there."

"And the son?" said the young man. "I suppose he had behaved badly to his father. It could not be for nothing that he was disinherited. You people who know everything, I suppose you know the cause too."

"The general?" said Duncan. "Well, he wasna a saint: and when an auld man lives twice as long as is expected, and his son is as auld as himself, there's little thought of obedience to him then, ye may weel suppose. The general had a way of pleasing himself. He married a lady that was thought a grand match, and she turned out to have very little; and syne when she was dead he married anither that had nothing ava, and I suppose he never asked Sir Patrick's consent. If it was that, or if it was something else, how can I tell?"

But you'll no find many men to beat the general. They're a' very proud of him in this countryside."

"I thought he was dead," said the young man, hurriedly.

"Oh, ay, he's deed: and now it's the misses that has it. I have the maist interest in them, for, as I tellt ye—but ye were paying no attention—Moffatt, where their little bit place is, is my caulf-ground. They're living in the auld castle, just by the gate we came through. Lord, if he had been content with the auld castle, it would have been better for them a' this day. But 'deed I shouldna say that matters. It would have gane in every probability to yon creature I was telling ye of, the foreign lad."

"You don't seem," said the stranger, with a laugh, "to have much charity for this foreign lad. Are you sure he is foreign, by the way?"

"Ye'll maybe ken him, that ye ha'e a doubt," said the sharp-witted countryman.

"How should I know him?" the young man replied, with a peculiar smile.

"I say foreign, for nae Englishman—or maybe rather nae Scotchman, for I am no so clear of the other side—would do such a dirty trick. Take a doited auld man's siller that had kith and kin and lawful progeny of his ain. Fiech! I couldna do it if I was starving. And I ha'e a wife and bairns, which are things that are aye craving for siller. The Lord haud us out o' temptation! But I wouldna do it—no, if I was master of mysel'."

"I did not know," said Grantley, with a forced gaiety, "that you were so scrupulous in Scotland. It is not the character you usually

get in the world. But you are harsh judges all the same. Perhaps this unfortunate fellow did not know the circumstances. Perhaps—
—"

"Unfortunate! with the Lord kens how mony thousands! I dinna ca' that misfortune, for my part."

"But then to balance the thousands he has not the privilege of possessing your esteem," Grantley said. He had an air of anger and pain under the pretended lightness of his tone, and meant to be bitterly satirical, forgetting evidently, in the warmth of the feelings raised by these animadversions, that the critic by his side was not very likely to be reached by shafts of this kind.

Duncan gave him a stolid stare.

"Ye'll be joking?" he said.

The young man perceived the ludicrousness of his attempted sarcasm, and burst into a laugh which was somewhat agitated, but betrayed no secret to Duncan, who joined in it quite good-humouredly; but, growing grave immediately, added,

"That's a' very weel. What I'm thinking of him's nae importance, nor what's thought in the countryside; but for a' that it's an ill thing to scandaleeze your fellow-creatures, whether they're folk of consequence or no. Yon's the 'Murkley Arms,' and Adam at the door. Ye maun be an awfu' keen fisher, sir, as I was saying, to leave a grand house like the 'George' for a country public, for it's no to call an inn—just a public, and no more. Here, Adam, here's a gentleman I've brought you; you'll have to give me a good dram for handsel, and him your best room, and as many trout as he can set his face to. He deserves it for coming here."

The person thus addressed was a tall man, with a red beard, revealing only about a quarter of a countenance, who stood smoking and leaning against the doorway of the "Murkley Arms." He looked up, but somewhat languidly, at the appeal, and said,

"Ay, Duncan, is that you?" with the greatest composure without deranging himself. Thereupon Duncan jumped down, throwing the reins on the mare's neck, who was much subdued by her rapid progress, and besides had the habit of standing still before the door of a "public."

"And hoo's a' wi' ye, and hoo's the fushing?" Duncan said, plunging into an immediate conversation with his friend, at which Grantley, first in consternation, afterwards in amusement, listened with only partial understanding, but a most comical sense of his own complete unimportance and the total want of interest in him of the new world into which he was thrown. He sat for about five minutes (as he thought) quietly surveying from that elevation the village street, the river in the distance, the homely sights and sounds of the evening. Cows were coming home from the riverside meadows, and wondering no doubt why night and milking-time were so long of coming; the children were still about in the road, the men in groups here and there, the women at the doors. They said to each other as a chance passenger went by, "It's a bonnie nicht," interrupting the quiet now and then by a scream at Jeanie or Jackey adjuring them to "come in to their beds." "They should be a' in their beds, thae bairns; but what can ye do when it's sae lang light?" the mothers said to each other.

Young Lewis Grantley in the leisure and surprise of his youth, still fresh and pleased with everything novel he saw, was well enough occupied in contemplating all this, and in no hurry to assert

his own consequence as a visitor. But by-and-by he got tired of his eminence and jumped down from the dog-cart; the sound disturbed the lively conversation at the inn door.

"Lord, we've forgotten the gentleman," said Duncan.

Long Adam took no notice of the gentleman, but he put his hand to his mouth and called "Jennit!" in a sort of soft bellow, thunderous and rolling into the air like a distant explosion. In a minute more quick steps came pattering along the brick-paved passage.

"What's it noo?" said a brisk voice. "A gentleman. Losh me! what am I to do with a gentleman?—no a thing in the house, and the curtains aff a' the beds. I think ye're crackit, Duncan Davidson, to bring a gentleman to me."

"He's crackit himself to want to come, but I have nae wyte o't," said Duncan. "Would you have had me tak' him to Luckie Todd's? They'll take him in, and welcome there."

"No, I wouldna be so illwilly as that," said the woman, with a laugh: and she advanced and looked curiously at the neat portmanteau and dressing-bag, which no one had attempted to take down from the dog-cart. "Ye'll be for the fushin'," she said, dubiously; but the absence of all a fisherman's accoutrements struck Janet with surprise. She added, with a slight sigh of care, "I can give you a good bed, sir, if you're no particular about your curtains; the curtains is a' doon on account o' the hot weather; and something to eat, if you can put up with onything that's going for the night. I'll promise you a fine caller trout the morn," she said, with a smile. "But, ye see, it's rare, rare that we have onybody here

by the folk of the town; and it's drink that's a' they're heeding," she added, with a shake of her head.

"I am not hard to please," said Grantley, with the little accent which Duncan had taken for "high English."

Janet, better informed, made a little pause, and looked at her visitor again. The lingering light had got more and more confused, though it was nothing like dark. Janet's idea of "a foreigner," which was not flattering, was that of a dark-bearded, cloak-enveloped conspirator. The light, youthful figure, and smooth face of the new arrival did not intimidate her. She took down the bag briskly from the dog-cart, and bid her husband give himself a shake and see if he had spirit enough to bring in the gentleman's portmanteau; then at last, after so many delays, beckoned to him to follow her, and led the way upstairs.

CHAPTER II.

The village of Murkley next morning bore an aspect wonderfully different from that of the enchanted dreamland of the previous night. In that wonderful light, everything had been softened and beautified—a sort of living romance was in the air; the evening softness and the strange magic of the lingering light had given a charm to everything. When Lewis Grantley looked out next morning, the prospect was not so idyllic. The "Murkley Arms" was in the centre of the village, where the street widened into a sort of *place* by no means unlike that of a French country town of small dimensions. The house exactly opposite was an old one, with a projecting gable and outside stair, washed with a warm yellow, such as the instincts of an earlier age found desirable, and with excellent effect, in a climate never too brilliant. There were two or three of these old houses about, which gave a quiet brightness to the grey stone and blue slate which, alas, were in the majority. The road was partly causewayed and partly in a state of nature—and mud: though the dryness of the weather about which everybody remarked, though it had not especially struck the stranger, had kept this in check. A handful of hay dropped here and there, a few stalks of straw or other litter, gave a careless look to the place, which otherwise was not disorderly. The little stone houses, with the blue-slated roofs, had a look of comfort. It was not half so pretty, but it was a great deal more well-off than many villages the stranger knew, and he recognized the difference. He could scarcely, by craning his neck, get a glimpse from his window of the river, which, with one or two rare bits of meadow on its

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