

The Interloper

By

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EPILOGUE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TO
AN UNDYING MEMORY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

BEFORE proceeding with this story I must apologize for a striking inaccuracy which it contains. I have represented the educated characters as speaking, but for certain turns of phrase, the ordinary English which is now universal. But, in Scotland, in the very early nineteenth century, gentle and simple alike kept a national distinction of language, and remnants of it lingered in the conversation, as I remember it, of the two venerable and unique old ladies from whom the characters of Miss Hersey Robertson and her sister are taken. They called it 'Court Scots.'

For the assistance of that tender person, the General Reader, I have ignored it.

V. J.

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I THE HEIR

HALF-WAY up the east coast of Scotland, the estuary of the North Lour cuts a wide cleft in an edge of the Lowlands, and flows into the North Sea among the sands and salmon nets.

The river winds in large curves through the shingles and green patches where cattle graze, overhung by woods of beech and birch, and pursuing its course through a country in full cultivation—a country of large fields; where rolling woods, purple in the shadow, stretch north towards the blue Grampians.

A bridge of eight arches spans the water before it runs out to sea, the bank on its further side rising into a line of plough-fields crowning the cliffs, where flights of gulls follow the ploughman, and hover in his track over the upturned earth. As the turnpike runs down to the bridge, it curls round the policies of a harled white house which has stood for some two hundred years a little way in from the road, a tall house with dead-looking windows and slates on which the lichen has fastened. A clump of beech-trees presses round it on two sides, and, in their bare branches, rooks' nests make patches against the late autumn skies.

Inside the mansion of Whanland—for such is its name—on a December afternoon in the first year of the nineteenth century, two

men were talking in the fading light. The room which they occupied was panelled with wood, polished and somewhat light-coloured, and had two arched alcoves, one on either side of the chimney-piece. These were filled with books whose goodly backs gave a proper solemnity to the place. The windows were narrow and high, and looked out to the beeches. A faint sound of the sea came droning in from the sand-hills which flanked the shore, and were distant but the space of a few fields.

The elder of the two men was a person who had reached that convenient time of life when a gentleman may attend to his creature comforts without the risk of being blamed for it. He was well-dressed and his face was free from any obvious fault. He produced, indeed, a worse effect than his merits warranted, for his hair, which had the misfortune to look as though it were dyed, was, in reality, of a natural colour. Nothing in his appearance hinted at the fact that he was the family lawyer—or ‘man of business,’ as it is called in Scotland—of the young man who stood on the hearthrug, nor did his manner suggest that they had met that day for the first time.

He sat looking up at Gilbert Speid^[1] with considerable interest. Though he was not one to whom the finer details of another’s personality were apparent, he was yet observant in the commoner way. It did not escape him that his companion was shy, but he did not suspect that it was with the shyness of one, who, though well accustomed to the company of his kind, had no intimacies. A few hours ago, when starting to meet him at Whanland, he had told himself that his task would be easy, and he meant to be friendly, both from inclination and policy, with the strange laird, who was a stranger to his inheritance. But though he had been received with politeness a little different from the amenity of anyone he had

known before, he felt that he was still far from the defences of the young man's mind. As to Gilbert's outward appearance, though it could hardly be called handsome, the lawyer was inclined to admire it. He was rather tall, and had a manner of carrying himself which was noticeable, not from affectation, but because he was a very finished swordsman, and had a precision of gesture and movement not entirely common. He did not speak with the same intonation as the gentry with whom it was Alexander Barclay's happiness to be acquainted, professionally or otherwise, for, though a Scot on both sides of his family, he had spent most of his youth abroad, and principally in Spain. His head was extremely well set and his face gave an impression of bone—well-balanced bone; it was a face, rather heavy, and singularly impassive, though the eyes looked out with an extraordinary curiosity on life. It seemed, to judge from them, as though he were always on the verge of speaking, and Barclay caught himself pausing once or twice for the expected words. But they seldom came and Gilbert's mouth remained closed, less from determination to silence than from settled habit.

It was in the forenoon that Gilbert Speid had arrived at Whanland to find Barclay awaiting him on the doorstep; and the two men had walked round the house and garden and under the beech-trees, stopping at points from which there was any view to be had over the surrounding country. They had strolled up a field parallel with the road which ran from the nearest town of Kaims to join the highway at the bridge. There Gilbert had taken in every detail, standing at an angle of a fence and looking down on the river as it wound from the hazy distance of bare woods.

'And my property ends here?' he asked, turning from the fascinating scene to his companion.

‘At the bend of the Lour, Mr. Speid; just where you see the white cottage.’

‘I am glad that some of that river is mine,’ said Gilbert, after a long pause.

Barclay laughed with great heartiness, and rubbed his hands one over the other.

‘Very satisfactory,’ he said, as they went on—‘an excellent state of things.’

When they returned to the house they found a stack of papers which the lawyer had brought to be examined, and Speid, though a little oppressed by the load of dormant responsibility it represented, sat gravely down, determined to do all that was expected of him. It was past three o’clock when Barclay pulled out his watch and inquired when he had breakfasted, for his own sensations were reminding him that he himself had done so at a very early hour.

Gilbert went to the bell, but, as he stood with the rope in his hand, he remembered that he had no idea of the resources of the house, and did not even know whether there were any available servant whose duty it was to answer it. His companion sat looking at him with a half-smile, and he coloured as he saw it.

When the door opened, a person peered in whom he dimly recollected seeing on his arrival in the group which had gathered to unload his post-chaise. He was a small, elderly man, whose large head shone with polished baldness. He was pale, and had the pose and expression we are accustomed to connect—perhaps unjustly—with field-preachers, and his rounded brow hung like the eaves of a house over a mild but impudent eye. His was the type of face to be

seen bawling over a psalm-book at some sensational religious meeting, a face not to be regarded too long nor too earnestly, lest its owner should be spurred by the look into some insolent familiarity. He stood on the threshold looking from Speid to Barclay, as though uncertain which of the two he should address.

It took Gilbert a minute to think of what he had wanted; for he was accustomed to the well-trained service of his father's house, and the newcomer matched nothing that had a place in his experience.

'What is it?' inquired the man at the door.

'Is there any dinner—anything that we can have to eat? You must forgive me, sir; but you see how it is. I am strange here, and I foolishly sent no orders.'

'I engaged a cook for you and it is hardly possible that she has made no preparation. Surely there is something in the kitchen, Macquean?'

'I'll away down an' see,' said the man, disappearing.

'Who is that?' asked Gilbert, to whom the loss of a dinner seemed less extraordinary than the possession of such a servant.

'His name is Mungo Macquean. He has had charge of the house for a great part of the time that it has stood empty. He is a good creature, Mr. Speid, though uncouth—very uncouth.'

In a few minutes the door opened again to admit Macquean's head.

'There's a chicken she'll roast to ye, an' there's brose. An' a'm to tell her, are ye for pancakes?'

'Oh, certainly,' said Gilbert. 'Mr. Barclay, when shall it be?'

‘The sooner the better, I think,’ said the other hopefully.

‘Then we will dine at once,’ said Gilbert.

Macquean’s mouth widened and he stared at his master.

‘You’ll get it at five,’ he said, as he withdrew his head.

The lawyer’s face fell.

‘I suppose it cannot be ready before then,’ he said, with a sigh.

The two drew up rather disconsolately to the fireside. The younger man’s eyes wandered round the room and lit upon one of those oil-paintings typical of the time, representing a coach-horse, dock-tailed, round-barrelled, and with a wonderfully long rein.

‘That is the only picture I have noticed in the house,’ he observed. ‘Are there no more—no portraits, I mean?’

‘To be sure there are,’ replied Barclay, ‘but they have been put in the garret, which we forgot to visit in our walk round. We will go up and see them if you wish. They are handsomely framed and will make a suitable show when we get them up on the walls.’

The garret was approached by a steep wooden stair, and, as they stood among the strange collection it contained in the way of furniture and cobwebs, Speid saw that the one vacant space of wall supported a row of pictures, which stood on the floor like culprits, their faces to the wainscot. Barclay began to turn them round. It irked the young man to see his fat hands twisting the canvases about, and flicking the dust from the row of faces which he regarded with a curious stirring of feeling. Nothing passed lightly over Gilbert.

He was relieved when his companion, whose heart was in the kitchen, and who was looking with some petulance at the dust which had fallen on his coat from the beams above, proposed to go down and push forward the preparations for dinner.

Speid stood absorbed before the line of vanished personalities which had helped to determine his existence, and they returned his look with all the intelligent and self-conscious gravity of eighteenth-century portraiture. Only one in the row differed in character from the others, and he took up the picture and carried it to the light. It represented a lady whose figure was cut by the oval frame just below the waist. Her hands were crossed in front of her, and her elbows brought into line with her sides, as were those of the other Speid ancestresses; there was something straight and virginal in her pose. Never had Gilbert seen such conventionality of attitude joined to so much levity of expression. She wore a mountain of chestnut hair piled high on her head and curling down one side of her neck. Her open bodice of warm cream colour suggested a bust rather fuller than might be expected from the youthful and upright stiffness of her carriage, and, over her arm, hung an India muslin spotted scarf, which had apparently slipped down round her waist. Her eyes were soft in shade and hard in actual glance, bold, bright, scornful, under strongly marked brows. The mouth was very red, and the upper lip fine; the lower lip protruded, and drooped a little in the middle. Her head was half turned to meet the spectator.

Her appearance interested him, and he searched the canvas for an inscription. Turning it round, he saw a paper stuck upon the back and covered with writing: '*Clementina Speid, daughter of John Lauder, Esq., of Netherkails, and Marie La Vallance, his wife. 1767.*'

The lady was his mother; and the portrait had been painted just after her marriage, three years before his own birth.

Never in his life had he seen any likeness of her. His father had not once mentioned her name in his hearing, and, as a little boy, he had been given by his nurses to understand that she existed somewhere in that mysterious and enormous category of things about which well-brought-up children were not supposed to inquire. There was a certain fitness in thus meeting her unknown face as he entered Whanland for the first time since he left it in the early months of his infancy. She had been here all the time, waiting for him in the dust and darkness. As he set the picture against the wall her eyes looked at him with a secret intelligence. That he had nothing to thank her for was a fact which he had gathered as soon as he grew old enough to draw deductions for himself; but, all the same, he now felt an unaccountable sympathy with her, not as his mother—for such a relationship had never existed for him—but as a human being. He went to the little window under the slope of the roof and looked out over the fields. On the shore the sea lay, far and sad, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. The even, dreary sound came through a crack in the two little panes of glass. He turned back to the picture, though he could hardly see it in the strengthening dusk; her personality seemed to pervade the place with a brave, unavailing brightness. It struck him that, in that game of life which had ended in her death, there had been her stake too. But it was a point of view which he felt sure no other being he had known had ever considered.

Mr. Barclay's voice calling to him on the staircase brought him back from the labyrinth of thought. He hurried out of the garret to find him on the landing, rather short of breath after his ascent.

‘The Misses Robertson are below, Mr. Speid; they have driven out from Kaims to bid you welcome. I have left them in the library.’

‘The Misses Robertson?’

‘Miss Hersey and Miss Caroline Robertson; your cousins. The ladies will not be long before they find you out, you see. They might have allowed you a little more law, all the same. But women are made inquisitive—especially the old ones.’

‘I think it vastly kind,’ said Speid shortly. ‘I remember now that my father spoke of them.’

As they entered the library, two small figures rose from their chairs and came forward, one a little in front of the other.

The sisters were both much under middle height, and dressed exactly alike; it was only on their faces that the very great difference in them was visible. There was an appealing dignity in the full acknowledgment of her seventy years which Miss Hersey carried in her person. She had never had the smallest pretension to either intellect or attraction, but her plain, thin face, with its one beauty of gray hair rolled high above her forehead, was full of a dignity innocent, remote, and entirely natural, that has gone out of the modern world. Miss Caroline, who was slightly her senior, was frankly ugly and foolish-looking; and something fine, delicate, and persuasive that lay in her sister’s countenance had, in hers, been omitted. Their only likeness was in the benignity that pervaded them and in the inevitable family resemblance that is developed with age. The fashion of their dresses, though in no way grotesque, had been obsolete for several years.

‘Welcome, Mr. Speid,’ said Miss Hersey, holding out a gentle, bony hand. ‘Caroline, here is Mr. Speid.’

It was no slight effort which the two feeble old ladies had made in coming to do him honour, for they had about them the strangeness which hangs round very aged people when some unaccustomed act takes them out of their own surroundings, and he longed to thank them, or to say something which should express his sense of it. But Barclay’s proximity held him down. Their greeting made him disagreeably aware of the lawyer’s presence; and his incongruity as he stood behind him was like a cold draught blowing on his back. He made a hurried murmur of civility, then, as he glanced again at Miss Hersey’s face, he suddenly set his heels together, and, bending over her hand, held it to his lips.

She was old enough to look as if she had never been young, but seventy years do not rob a woman, who has ever been a woman, of everything; she felt like a queen as she touched her kinsman’s bent head lightly with her withered fingers.

‘Welcome, Gilbert,’ she said again. ‘God bless you, my dear!’

‘We knew your father,’ said the old lady, when chairs had been brought, and she and her sister installed, one on either side of the fireplace.

‘We knew your father,’ echoed Miss Caroline, smiling vaguely.

‘I do not remember that he was like you,’ said Miss Hersey, ‘but he was a very handsome man. He brought your mother to see us immediately after he was married.’

‘You’ll have to keep up the custom,’ observed Mr. Barclay jocosely. ‘How soon are we to look for the happy event, Mr. Speid?’

There will be no difficulty among the young ladies here, I'm thinking.'

'My cousin will do any lady honour that he asks, Mr. Barclay, and it is likely he will be particular,' said Miss Hersey, drawing herself up.

'He should be particular,' said Miss Caroline, catching gently at the last word.

'Your mother was a sweet creature,' continued the younger sister. 'He brought her to our house. It was on a Sunday after the church was out. I mind her sitting by me on the sofy at the window. You'll mind it, too, Caroline.'

'A sweet creature indeed; a sweet creature,' murmured Miss Caroline.

'She was so pleased with the lilies of the valley in the garden, and I asked Robert Fullarton to go out and pull some for her. Poor thing! it is a sad-like place she is buried in, Gilbert.'

'I have never seen it, ma'am,' said Speid.

'It's at Garviekirck. The kirkyard is on the shore, away along the sands from the mouth of the river. Your father wished it that way, but I could never understand it.'

'I shall be very pleased to show you the road there,' broke in Barclay.

'It was a bitter day,' continued Miss Robertson. 'I wondered your father did not get his death o' cold, standing there without his hat. He spoke to no one, not even to Robert Fullarton who was so well acquainted with him. And when the gentlemen who had come to

the burying arrived at the gate of Whanland, he just bade them a good-day and went in. There was not one that was brought in to take a glass of wine. I never saw him after; he went to England.'

While her sister was speaking, Miss Caroline held her peace. Her chin shook as she turned her eyes with dim benevolence from one to the other. At seventy-two, she seemed ten years older than Miss Hersey.

Gilbert could not but ask his cousins to stay and dine with him and they assented very readily. When, at last, dinner was brought, he and Mr. Barclay handed them to the table. There was enough and to spare upon it, in spite of Macquean's doubts; and Miss Hersey, seated beside him, was gently exultant in the sense of kinship. It was a strange party.

Gilbert, who had never sat at the head of his own table before, looked round with a feeling of detachment. It seemed to him that he was acting in a play and that his three guests, whom, a few hours before, he had never seen, were as unreal as everything else. The environment of this coming life was closing in on him and he could not meet its forces as easily as a more elastic nature would have met them. He accepted change with as little equanimity as a woman, in spite of the many changes of his past, because he knew that both duty and temperament would compel him to take up life, and live it with every nerve alongside the lives running parallel with his own. He could see that he had pleased Miss Hersey and he was glad, as he had a respect for ties of blood imbibed from the atmosphere of ceremonious Spain. He was glad to find something that had definite connection with himself and the silent house he had entered; with its wind-blown beech-trees and the face upstairs in the dust of the garret.

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