

by Robert Barr

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KING JAMES VI of Scotland, attempting an incognito exploration of the Highlands, together with his companion, James MacDonald, was ostensibly a guest, but practically a prisoner of MacLeod, the Skye overlord.

"What's to be done?" asked the King.

MacDonald proposed that they should repair instantly to MacLeod and demand of him conveyance and safe conduct to the mainland.

"We scarcely can do that," demurred the King. "until we are sure that detention is intended. Let us put the matter at once to practical test and see if we are prevented from leaving the castle. If we are then is the time for protest."

Acting on this suggestion, the two went outside and took the road by which they had come. They found an agile young gillie at their heels before they were out of sight of Dunvegan.

"Why are you following us?" asked MacDonald in Gaelic.

"I was told to wait on your lordships," returned the man.

"We need no waiting on; turn back."

But the gillie shook his shaggy, uncovered head and patiently trod in their footsteps.

"Let us see how far he will follow," said the King as he strode on. The gillie accompanied them for half an hour or more without making any protest, but at last he said to MacDonald that he thought it was time to return.

"We are going through to the coast we came from," replied MacDonald.

"And we do not intend to return."

At this the gillie drew from his belt a short black tube and blew a few shrill notes. Up to that moment the way had been clear, but now there appeared over the hill in front of them a dozen armed men, who approached carelessly, as if they had merely happened to be in the neighborhood or were journeying together toward the castle.

"I think it is time to go back," suggested the gillie in a dull, uninterested voice.

"I think it is myself," replied MacDonald.

And so the futile excursion came to an end.

Once more in the castle they were confronted again by the question, "What next?"

"I am certain," said the King, "that if MacLeod is attempting to hold us there is little use in making appeal to him, and we have small chance of getting word to the fleet. I propose, then, to coerce him. He was alone in his study yesterday and he may be alone there now. A sword's point at a man's throat is an irresistible argument."

"But will he keep his word if he gives it under duress?" objected MacDonald.

"I think he will, but it is better not to put too strong a temptation on him. If we come on him alone we will make him sign a pass for us. Then we will gag and tie him securely, convey him, when the way is clear, to this room, where he will be less likely to be looked for. We will then give him the consolation that if his pass proves useless we will return and finish the business by sending him into a less troublesome world."

This advice was no sooner promulgated than it was acted upon. The pair traversed the corridors unseen until they came to the door of the study, then, slipping out their swords they entered quickly unannounced. The sight which confronted them was so unexpected that each stood there with drawn sword in hand as if stricken to stone.

MacLeod was not in the room, but in his stead, beside the wall of books, her hand upraised, taking down a small vellum-covered volume, was the most beautiful young girl of perhaps nineteen or twenty that either of them ever had looked upon. The young woman was the first of the three to recover her composure. Relinquishing the book to the shelf, she came down to her side, and she said in most charming liquid tones, but in broken English: "You are looking for my father, perhaps?"

The King, ever gallant, swept his hat from his head and bowed low, his alertness of mind saving the situation, for he answered quickly: "Indeed, no, my lady. We thought the room was empty, so I implore you to pardon our intrusion. We were here yesterday and my friend and I have just had a dispute regarding the size of these gigantic tomes on the lower shelf; my friend insisted that they exceeded our sword blades in length. Pardon me, madam, and the King stepped briskly to the largest book, laying his sword down its back as if in measurement.

"There, Jamie," he cried, "I have won the wager. I knew it was not more than three-quarters the length of my blade."

The glance of fear to which the young woman had treated them departed from her face and she smiled slightly at the young man's eagerness.

"I shall be glad to hear," she said, "that you are Miss MacLeod of Dunvegan. May I introduce my friend, James MacDonald of Sleat. My own name is James Stuart, and for a time we are your father's guests at Dunvegan."

The young lady with inimitable grace bowed her queenly head to each of them in turn. The men slipped their swords quietly back into their scabbards.

"I give you good welcome to Dunvegan," said the girl. "I regret that I do not speak fair the English."

"Indeed, my lady," rejoined the susceptible King, "it is the most charming English I ever heard."

The fair stranger laughed in low and most melodious cadence, like a distant cathedral's chime falling on the evening air.

"I shall be delighted to be your teacher," replied the King with his most courteous intonation.

"It is perhaps that you already speak the Gaelic?" suggested the young woman.

"Alas! no, madam. But I should be overjoyed to learn, and it may be you will accept me in the part of pupil. You will find me a devoted and most obedient scholar."

A puzzled expression troubled the face of the girl as she endeavored to follow the communication addressed to her, but MacDonald sprang somewhat eagerly to the rescue and delivered a long harangue in her native language. "Her delight was instant, the cloud on her brow disappearing as if by magic under the genial influence of the accustomed converse. The King's physiognomy also underwent a change, but the transformation was not so pleasing

as that which had illumined the countenance of the girl.

The tension of the situation was changed, rather than relieved, by the silent opening of the door, and the pause of MacLeod himself on the threshold, gazing dubiously at the group before him. The animation of the girl fell from her the moment she beheld her father, and the young men, turning, were confronted by the gloomy features of the chieftain. The MacLeod closed the door softly and, without a word, walked to his chair beside the table. The girl, bowing slightly, with visible restraint, quitted the room, and as she did so MacDonald's alertness again proved his friend, for he tiptoed quickly to the door, before the King, accustomed to be waited upon rather than waiting, recollected himself, and held it open for the lady, making a gallant sweep with his bonnet as she passed out.

When the supple young man returned to his place beside the King he said in a whisper: "No sword's point play with the father of such a beauty, eh?"

To this remark his Majesty made no reply, but said rather gruffly and abruptly to his host: "Do you hold us prisoners in this castle, sir?"

"That will depend on the answers I get from you," replied the MacLeod slowly.

"Are you two, or either of you, emissaries of the King?"

"We are not."

"Does the King know you are here?"

"Regarding the King, his knowledge or his doings, you had better address your inquiries to him personally."

"You are merely two private gentlemen, then, come all this distance to satisfy a love of travel and a taste for scenery?"

"You have stated the case with great accuracy, sir."

"Yesterday you spoke of my lack of manners in willing to ask you to be seated. I shall now refer to a breach of politeness on your own part. It is customary when strangers visit a customary under an acknowledged ruler that they should make a formal call upon the ruler before basking themselves to other portions of his territory. You remained for several days in Skye without taking the trouble to inform me of your arrival."

"Sir," replied James haughtily. "I dispute your contention entirely. You are not the ruler of Skye."

"Who is, then?"

"The King of Scotland, of course."

The MacLeod laughed in a fashion that somewhat resembled the snarl of an angry dog.

"Of course as you say. No one disputes that James is King of all Scotland, and I would be the last to question his right, because I hold my lands under charter bearing his signature, carrying the great seal of the kingdom; nevertheless, the MacLeods held Skye long before the present royal family of Scotland were heard of, and I would have been MacLeod of MacLeod although James had never put his hand to the parchment. Meanwhile, I take the risk of detaining you until I learn more about you, and if the King makes objection I shall apologize."

"You will apologize," said James sternly. "I say that you will apologize, not by writing at your ease in Dunvegan Castle, but on your bended knees at Stirling."

"That's as may be," said the MacLeod indifferently, and it was quite obvious that he remained unmoved by the threat. "Gentlemen, I have the honor to wish you good-morning."

"One moment. Are we then to consider ourselves?"

"You may consider yourselves whatever best pleases you. If each gives me his word of honor that he will make no attempt at escape, and also that he will not communicate with Stirling, then you are as free of my house and my grounds as if you were the most welcome of guests. But I warn you

that if, when you pass your words, you attempt to tamper with any of my men I shall know of it very soon, and then comes the dungeon."

"What do you say, MacDonald?" inquired the King sharply.

MacDonald recovered himself with a start. "To what?" he asked.

"To the terms proposed by our jailer."

"I did not hear them; what are they?"

"Will you give your word not to escape?"

"Oh, willingly."

"And not to communicate with Stirling?"

"I don't care if I never see Stirling again."

The King turned to the chief. "There is little difficulty, you see," he said, "with your fellow Highlander. I, however, am supposed to be a Lowlander, and therefore cautious. I give you my word not to communicate with Stirling. As for the other proviso, I amend it as follows: I shall not leave this island without your knowledge and your company. If that is satisfactory, I pledge my faith."

"Perfectly satisfactory," answered MacLeod, and with that the two young men took their departure.

Once more in the King's room, from which earlier in the day they had set out so confidently, MacDonald flung himself upon a bench, but the King paced up and down the apartment.

"Jamie, you hardly gave me fair play, you and your Gaelic, with that dainty offspring of so grim a sire."

"Master of Ballengeich," replied the Highlander, "a man plays for his own



THE GIRL IMPETUOUSLY FLUNG HERSELF AT THE KING'S FEET

hand. You should have learned that Gaelic long ago."

The King stopped abruptly in his walk. "Why do you call me by that name?"

"Merely to show that in this play the royal prerogative is not brought into play; it is already settled that when I meet the King I am defeated. It remains to be seen what luck James MacDonald has in a contest with plain James Stuart."

"Oh, it's to be a contest, then?"

"Not unless you wish it so. I am content to exchange all the fair damsels of Stirling for this one Highland lassie."

"You'll exchange!" cried the King. "I make bold to say she is not yours to exchange."

"I intend to make her mine."

"Ah, we'll see about that, Jamie."

"We will, Ballengeich," said MacDonald with confident precision.

The girl was at first equally charming to each. The serious Highlander, not less manly and handsome than his competitor, was gifted with an immeasurable advantage in his familiarity with every phase and inflection of his native vernacular. In his despair the King struck up a close friendship with Donald, the second son of the MacLeod, and his Majesty made a frantic effort to learn the only speech with which his new comrade was equipped. But this race against time gave MacDonald long and uninterrupted conferences with his innamorata, and

me that if I wedded the daughter of your jailer I may have enough influence with the family to secure your Majesty's release."

"I have no doubt," said the King, "that this was your object from the beginning. And so you have exchanged a temporary jailer for one that will last you all your life."

The Highlander knit his brow and compressed his lips, as if to hold back some retort which later he might regret. There was a moment's constrained silence, then the King flung off his ill humor as if it were a cloak.

"Forgive me, Jamie," he cried, springing to his feet. "Forgive the wounded vanity of the vanquished."

He extended his hand impetuously, which the other grasped with eager cordiality.

"Jamie, my lad, you were right. The crown weighs heavy when it is thrown into the scale, but with this lassie I will believe it would have made not an ounce of difference. Let the best man win, say I, and you're the victor, so you have my warmest congratulations. Still, Jamie, you must admit that the Gaelic is the cursedst lingo ever a poor lowland-bred man tried to get his tongue around. So, now you see, Jamie, we are even again. You think the crown defeated you at Stirling, and I hold the language defeated me in Skye; thus we are both able to retain a good opinion of ourselves, which is the splendid privilege of every Scotchman to hold. Your bravery deserves success, for it requires some courage to face your future father-in-law. What did the old curmudgeon say?"

"He gave little indication of pleasure or the reverse. He offered me my liberty, now that I had pledged it in another direction, but he refused to release you, so I declined to accept his clemency."

"Not so. I have a more immediate and practical remedy. You have forgotten the twenty-six-oared barge which the MacLeod was to keep for the

King, and which Malcolm MacLeod built for him."

"It is not very likely, when I issued a proclamation commending Malcolm as the greatest shipbuilder in the world."

"Well, Malcolm has arrived at Dunvegan to receive into his own hands once more that same proclamation. I asked him, in MacLeod's presence, if the fleet still lingered in Torridon Bay, and he answered that it did. MacLeod pricked up his ears at this and thinking that he was to get some information, now that I proposed myself as a member of his family, inquired if I knew why it remained so long. I said I had a suspicion of the cause. If Malcolm had not replied to the King's proclamation it was natural that the fleet would wait until he did. Old Alexander and Malcolm seemed surprised that a response was expected, Malcolm being but a simple yeoman. However, he wrote out a courteous reply to the King, in Gaelic, and Malcolm's to send it to the fleet as soon as he returns to the northern coast."

"I don't see how that is to help us," demurred his Majesty.

"Here is my proposal. If you will now write out an order to the admiral commanding the fleet to appear before Dunvegan castle, I will ride part of the way home with Malcolm and suggest to him at parting that perhaps none of the officers of the fleet understand Gaelic, or at least that none can read it, so I will fasten your letter to the other document and tell Malcolm it is a translation of his Gaelic effusion. Neither Malcolm nor any of his friends at the port can read English and as he is a simple-minded man it is not likely that he will return and allow the laird a perusal. So in that way we may get word to the fleet. Even if the letter is discovered you will have kept your word, for you promised only not to communicate with Stirling."

The King pronounced the device a

feasible one and set himself at once to the writing of the letter.

Two or three days later there was a commotion in the castle. The guards on the western headlands reported the approach of numerous ships, and by and by from the castle wall itself the fleet could be seen sailing slowly up Loch Follart. For the first time since they had known him, lines of deep anxiety marked the frowning brow of MacLeod as he stood gazing at the approaching vessels. Here were visitors who, if they proved not to his liking, he could scarcely threaten with the dungeons of Dunvegan.

"What do you make of this MacLeod?" said the chieftain, turning to his future son-in-law, as if already he looked to him for support and counsel.

But MacDonald shook his head, in spite of the fact that his wife who was to be stood very close to him.

"All negotiations have been carried on by my friend here, and so to him I must refer you."

MacLeod could restrain his impatience no longer, so without glancing at his visitor he said:

"Perhaps you, sir, can tell me the purport of all this display."

"Assuredly," answered the King with a trace of sternness in his tone that had hitherto been absent in his converse with his jailer. "The fleet comes at the command of the King; to take away your prisoners, if they are unarmed, or to batter down your castle if they have been molested."

"I suppose then I should be thankful they are unarmed?"

"You have reason," said the King shortly.

"His Majesty must set great value on your heads if he sends his whole fleet to secure you."

"He does."

"How did he know you were here if you did not break your parole and communicate with Stirling?"

"The King knows there is more going on in Skye than the making of strong drink. I did not break my parole, neither did MacDonald."

"In spite of what you said to me, you must have told the King before you left Stirling where you were going."

"I did not."

"Then word must have been brought to him from Skye?"

"It was not."

"In that case the only conclusion I can come to is that the King is unaware of your presence here."

"He is well aware of it."

"You denied being a friend of the King," persisted MacLeod, "and said you were but a small farmer near Stirling."

"I deny yet that I am a friend of the King. On the contrary, I don't mind confessing to you that I am the greatest enemy he has in the world, and it's well he knows it."

"You amaze me. Then you do not wish to meet the fleet?"

"On the contrary, I do, and I ask you to order a suitable boat for me."

"You shall have the best boat in my possession," said MacLeod, leaving them for a moment to give his command.

In a short time a large boat with ten oarsmen was waiting.

"They are ready for you," said MacLeod with an effort at geniality, which gave a most sinister effect to his face. "I am sorry to bid you good-by, but I hope you bear away with you no ill will against Dunvegan."

"Sir," said the King, ignoring his compliments, "that boat will not do for me."

"It is the best I have," said MacLeod, looking at his truculent guest with new anxiety.

"The boat you must bring to the landing is the twenty-six oared barge, which Malcolm MacLeod built for me."

The MacLeod stepped back two paces. "That boat is for the King," he said in a voice scarcely above a whisper.

"Yes, it is for the King, therefore the King demands it. Give the order instantly that it be brought to the landing, well manned with twenty-six rowers."

All color left MacLeod's face. His next words were to MacDonald. "Is this true?" he said.

"Yes," answered MacDonald, "it is true."

The girl, her wide eyes distended with fear, clutched the arm of her lover. Even she knew this was a case for the headman, but MacLeod, with not a quiver in his voice, called down to his followers:

"Bring round the King's barge and see it is well manned. I myself will take the rudder."

The stern face of the King relaxed as he saw this chieftain stand straighter than ever before since he had known him, ready to take on his head whatever might befall.

The girl impetuously flung herself at the King's feet, and in her excitement forgetting the limitations of her learning, she poured forth a plea for her father in Gaelic. The King smiled as she stooped and raised the suppliant.

"My dear," he said, "I shall never hear that language without thinking of you and my own discomfiture. If it were not that MacDonald stands there with that dour Highland look on his face it is I would kneel at your feet. Your father is to come with me to Stirling, for I have said he should, and I must, for I have kept it with myself as well as I have kept it with him. Do not draw away your hand, in spite of MacDonald's scowls, for I have this to promise you. If you and he will accompany us to Stirling, I pledge to you the King's word that I shall grant you whatever you ask. So you see you need have no fear for your father's safety." Saying this, the King, with that courtly manner which so well became him, gave the hand of the girl into that of MacDonald.

Thus it came about that the MacLeod took a voyage he had not intended, and came so unscathed from it that he long outlived the man who was the cause of his journey.