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CHAPTER FORTY FOUR
THE SIXTEEN DRIFTY DAYS

Without, the hurricane drove ever from the south. It was the first of the famous Sixteen Drifty Days which are yet remembered over all the face of the hill country, when of sheep and cattle the dead far outnumbered the living. The snow drove hissing round the corner of the Aughty and faced against the entrance in a forty foot wreath. Looking down in the breaks of the storm we could see only the wild whirl of drifting whiteness in the gulf of the Dungeon of Buchan.

But it was warm and pleasant within. The fire drew peacefully with a gentle draught up the side of the rock, and the heather couches on the floor were dry and pleasant. Even the House of Rathan had hardly been more homelike than the cave called the Aughty, on the eastern face of the precipice of the Star which overlooks the Dungeon.

It was here that Silver Sand, that was John Faa, belted Earl and Gypsy, told his story.

'There was never,' he said, 'I think, any man so strangely driven as I of the gypsy blood, who am yet an earl of this realm of Scotland; I who am of the reiver kin have ridden with the king's men and worn the dragoon's coat; I that have looked on at many a killing of the poor Whig folk, have kin at Peden's hip in the caves by the Crichope Water—a true-blue Whig mysel'! I that was Richard Cameron's man and proscrivit by the Government of the Stuarts, have likewise lain under ban by the Government of the Whigs for the riding and reiving of my clan. King's man or Hill Whig, Society man or Lag's rider—the Faa has ever been at the tow's end; and never, save as pair Silver Sand that maes his living by the keel and the scythe sand, has he ever rested sound in his bed.'

'I was but a young lad when the riding time began, an' there was screevin' and chasin' over a' the Westland after the Whigs. All this to a gypsy of the blood royal was but the squattering and quackin' of ducks upon a mill-dam—a matter for themselves. But I was in Dumfries on a day, and standin' on the brig-end o' Devorgill, wha should come by up the Vennel but the red-wud Laird o' Lag.'

'There's a proper lad that should be nae Whig,' he cried, as soon as ever he saw me standing there; 'I ken by the cock o' his beaver bonnet and the gawsy feather intil't.'

'The troop that was riding with him, three files of King's troopers, and some young blades o' the country lairds that cam' themselves wi' twa-three led horses to ride wi' Lag—maistly lads that hated the Kirk for meddlin' wi' their gentrice richt o' free fornication, cried oot for me to mount an' ride wi' them.

'Wull ye tak' service wi' the King, His Excellent Majesty, an' wull ye curse the Whigs?' they said.

'That last I was fain to do; indeed I love them little, for they had held my father's sept down wi' an iron hand all through the thirty years of their greatness. But to ride wi' the trooping men and bite bread wi' them, was just as little to the stomach of a Faa.

'But needs must when the devil drives.

'Fess him on till the bonny braes o' Maxwelltoon!' cried the laird; 'he can mount an' hunt, or he can bide an' blood when we get him there.'

'So they carried me across till we came to a wide grassy place where the broom was growing and the wind blowing. It was fresh and free, and the innocent birds were singing.

'Lag halted his troop.

'Noo, bonny lad,' says he, 'we hae little time to pit aff wi' the likes o' you, but ye can hae the free choice. Here's a silver merk, for the King's arles, and here's Sergeant Armstrong's file wi' twal unce o' the best lead bullets. Three meenites to tell us whatna yin ye'll hae.'

'The birdies whistled on the yellow whins, and the wind waved the branches they sat on. The summer airs blew soft. The green leaves laughed drily. They were beech-leaves, and their talk is aye a wee malicious.

'In three minutes I was mounted on a grey horse o' the wild laird's, and that night they drank me fu' in the auld Lag's Too'er, where to this day that same laird, that has his

hand black with blood, sleeps in his silken bed under the safe conduct o' the Government—while I that have been under a dozen Governments nor done ill to vin o' them, am a broken man and the King's enemy to this day. But then I am but John Faa and an Egyptian.

'But sae we rade an' better rade at the tail o' the wicked laird, an' as for his ill-doin' and ill-speakin' there was nayther beginnin' or end to it.

'He wad ride up to a farmhoose an' chap on the door wi' the basket hilt o' his broadsword.

'Is the guidman in?' says he.

'Deed, he is that!' says the mistress; 'he's gettin' his parritch.'

'Haste him fast, then,' says Lag, 'for the Archangel Gawbriel' (nae less) is waitin' to tak' his fower-'oors 1 wi' him, an' it's a kittle thing to keep the likes o' him waitin'!

'Then in ten minutes that wife's a weedow, an' gatherin' up her man's harns in a napkin!

'Ridin' under the cloud o' nicht to droon the psalm wi' the rattle o' the musket shot; oot on the wide uplands, where there are but the burn bees an' the heatherbleats, stelling up a raw o' five or six decent muirland men on their knees, as yince I saw at Kirkconnel, some wi' the white napkins roond their broos, an' some lookin' intil the gun muzzle, it was waesome wark—waesome wark! An' the curse o' God Almichty has lain on a' that had a hand in it—savin' that de'il's knight, Sir Robert himself, wha's iniquities the Almichty is most surely reckoning at compound interest, for he sits snug an' hearty to this day in his hoose at Lag's Too'er, while in muckle Hell the de'il banks his fires and heats his irons for him.'

'But there was yae morn in'that I gat my fill— heathen gypsy though I was. We had lain a' nicht at Morton Castle, an' it was daybreak or we set hip to saddle leather. There was a bairn that we cam' on by the gully o' the Crichope—a laddie o' ten. He was sittin' by his lane in a bit bouroch when we cam' up till him, whistlin' like a Untie. He had a can o' the guid sweet milk an' a basketfu' o' bannocks. He was close by the mouth o' the Linn. It behoved, then, that he was takkin' them to some cave whaur the outlawed minister was hiding.'

'It was just like the laird to get the lad to inform. It was sic a bit o' de'il's wark that pleased him weel an' also David Graham that they had made Sherra o' Gallowa' in the place o' the Agnews o' Lochnaw. They war a bonny pair. They feared the bit boy, half daffin, half in earnest, till the wean was blae wi' fricht.'

'Lag gruppit him by the collar and shook him by the coat-neck ower the Linn, like a bit whalpie that ye nicht lift by the cuffo' the neck.'

'Tell,' he says, 'whaur lies auld Tarn Glen, or ower ye gang.'

'The bit laddie lookit doon, an'—O Pattrick! me that is an auld man can see the terror glint in the e'e o' him as he saw the great trees nae bigger than berry busses at the bottom. Syne he lookit up at us that sat oor horses ahint the laird and the sherra.

'Hae nane o' ye ony wee laddies at hame that ye should let a bairn dee?'

'He had a voice like a wean I yince kenned, and at the word o' him, I that was but a youngster, an' no lang frae the mither's milk mysel', burst out in a kin o' gowl o' anger.

'Lag turned quick, the de'il's dead-white thumb marks on ilka side o' his nose.

'What cursed Whig's that?' says he, in his death voice.

'Then I canna tell whether the bairn's bit coatie rave oot o' his hand, or whether Lag let him drap; but when we lookit again there was Lag's hand empty, an' up the Linn cam' a soun' like a bairn greetin' in the dark his lane.

'Lag stood maybes three heart-loups in a swither. I think he hadna juist bargained for that, but he turns an' cries wi' a wave o' his ruffled lace band—

'The corbies will hae sweet pickin' aff that whalp's bones!'

'But I had had aneuch an' mair—a bellyfu' to settle me for yince an' a'.

'I was aff my horse an' doon among the busses on the Linn side wi' a great clatter o' stanes.

'Wha's that?' cries Lag, ower his shooter, for he was turned to ride awa'.

'Gypsy Jock,' says yin, 'deserted.'

'Give him a volley, lads. I never thocht the loon a true man!' cried Lag.

'But the riders had little stomach for the shootin'. The wee bit laddie lay on their hearts, and in especial his words, for most o' them had bairns o' their ain, though some no juist owned wi'. So but few shot after me, an' them mostly Hielan' men that kenned no

English except 'Present! Fire!' whilk they had heard often aneuch in a' conscience since they rade wi' Lag.

I was doon at the laddie afore the troop had ridden away. But he was bye wi't. A bonny bit laddie as ever ye saw. I carried him till his mither, strippin' aff the regimentals as I gaed, but keepin' the sword, the musket, an' the brass mounted pistols. His mither met us at the gable end. The bairn had the empty can claspit in his wee bit hand. O sirce me! sirce me! Paitrick! gin I could forget it.'

And Silver Sand set down his head on the rude shelf in the Aughty and sobbed till I feared he might do himself a hurt.

'An' his mither took him oot o' my airms, that am but a rude man; an' she said never word, neither did the tear rin doon her cheek, but bade me come ben as ceevil as gin I had been a minister. She set before me to eat, but ye may ken what heart I had for victual. I juist roared an' grat, but she pat her hand on my shoother, an' hushed me as gin I had been the mourner. Syne she laid him on the bed.

'My wee Willie,' says she, as she smoothed his bonny broo an' kaimed his hair that was lang and yellow an' fell on the sheet in wavy ringlets.

'Even so,' she said, 'Lord, I had thocht ye micht hae spared this bit boy to me for company, seein' he was the last. But it's no to be. Yin at Drumclog, yin at Kirkconnel, an' yin by the bonny links o' the Cluden. I thocht the Lord wad hae spared the widow's yae bit hindmost lamb. The wull o' the Lord be dune.'

'She turned sharp to me.

'Hoo died he?' she asked, as calm as a What's-o'-the clock?'

I tried to tell her, between the sabs—her waitin' till I cam' to myself an' giein' me a bit clap on my shoother—me that am but a sinfu' man, as if I had been her ain bairn himsel'.

'Noo na—noo na,' says she, aye fleechin' like.

'O wae's me! wae's me!' Silver Sand cried, sinking his head on the table board. 'The Lord forgie the sins o' my youth.'

I was weeping too by this time, and I think the King himself had wept as well to hear the tale.

Silver Sand went on.

'She stood ower him a gye while, sortin' him an' touchin' him an' straikin' him.

'He was a carefu' boy,' she said, c an' that guid to his mither, my bit boy Willie! Ye helpit her ilka day, an' ye sleepit in her bosom ever since her ain guid man won awa'. Aye, Willie, my wean, ye sail sleep this yae nicht in yer mither's airms, for they shall never meet about onything that is the desire o' her heart in this world main Even this yae nicht ye shall lie in the airms o' her that bore ye, an' that close gain her side, where she carried ye the black vear she lost her man.'

'She turned to me with a kind o' anger.

'An' what for no?' she said, as if I had forbidden her. 'An' what for no, I wad like to ken? Pit your hand on him, man; he's warm an' bonny—no a mark on him that the yellow lint locks canna cover, an' that I can wash. What for shouldna he sleep by his ain mither? He will sleep sae soond. I'll no wakkin' him gin he be tired. This mornin' I raise on my bare feet that he should get a langer lie and a soond sleep —aye, an' a soond sleep he's got, my laddie, O mv laddie!'

'An' ye were a kind boy to your mither, Willie—a kind, kind boy—an' I hae nae mair; it's a sin to mourn for them that the Lord has ta'en. But O he was a carefu' boy Willie, an' the maist thochtfu' for his mither. See man, see—he has brocht his mither's bit can safe hame in his hand. '

'O, waes me! waes me!' wailed Silver Sand, rocking himself to and fro, so that little Marion woke, and seeing us weeping, wept too, like a young child that knows not why.

Then there was a long pause, and the fire flickered and the wild storm raved outside the Aughty. And the storm within our bosoms sobbed itself out, and we watched little Marion silently till she slept again, our right hands being clasped each in the other.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE
ALIEN AND OUTLAW

'So that day,' continued Silver Sand, 'made me a believing man—that is, so far as a gypsy and a Faa may be a believing man.'

'But it was a long time before I was trusted by the moormen, because I was known for a gypsy and a red-hand follower of the chief persecutor. I was even as Paul at Damascus to them; yet in time they believed, and treated me not as a spy but as a brand plucked from the burning. Yet it was my lot to be cast among the extremer sect, who were the followers of Richard Cameron.'

'As you may have heard, these received but scant justice at the Revolution, so that when all was over, and I went to what home I had, I found that they of my own clan had been attainted, and were under worse condemnation than ever, for their lawless deeds whilst I had been away from them.'

'It was not likely that I could take part with them now, for the order of the King's council caused them to become worse outlaws and reivers than ever— though, I think, no murderers.'

'Yet I could not live with them; nor, being a Faa, and the chief, could I betray them. Nor yet, for my father's sake and my name's sake, would I claim any indulgence that might not be extended to them. So I took to the hills and to the trade of selling the bonny scythe sand and the red keel for the sheep. And though I have not where to lay my head, I am a better and happier man, than the man who witnessed that sight by the Linn of Crichope ever deserved to be. But I have dwelt with my Maker and humbled myself before Him in secret wood and lonely fell. The men of the hills ceased their hiding in the mosses and moors near forty years ago—all but one, and he a persecutor, a heathen man, and one whose hand had been dyed in the blood of God's saints. For forty years I have dwelt where God's folk dwelt, and striven with the devil and the flesh in many a strange place—often not sure whether indeed I had gotten me the victory.'

'And I fear me that in these later troubles I have taken too much to do with carnal things, for which I must be constant in prayer that the Lord will forgive me—an unworthy man and an aged. But I have not steeped my hands in taking of blood; and, so far as I may, I have both been faithful to my friends and to my name. But the task has not been light, and sometimes I have suffered from the unbelief of both.'

I stretched out my hand, and humbly asked him to forgive me my unjust words and unworthy suspicions.

'And I cannot call you aught but Silver Sand, and you will come and camp by the Water of Rathan?' I said.

Silver Sand assented with a sweet smile, and took my hands and kissed them; for a gypsy has strange ways.

But there were many things that I desired to have explained.

'Why did you, being the man you are,' I said, 'threaten warlock threats to the men down there the other night.'

Silver Sand smiled.

'In Rome I must do as the Romans,' he said; which, however, I did not think a very sound exposition or deduction.

'But could you indeed perform these things?' I asked, still doubtfully.

'They believed I could, which is the same thing. You see,' he went on, 'I have been forced to practise simple stratagems to keep myself safe between a wild clan and an unjust law, and there are many things that are easy to do and hard to make others understand. My arms which were twisted in the torture of the Star Chamber before James, Duke of York, have served me in that I can run like a beast, and when we hunt as the Loathly Dogs, Quharrie and I fear the foolish folk out of their wits.'

'Indeed, I think you are no that canny myself,' I said, with a kind of awe on my face.

'Weel,' said Silver Sand, 'I doubt not that gin some o' the landward presbyteries got me, I might burn even at this day, as did Major Weir. Yet is all my magic of the simplest and most childish—even as simple as keel and scythe sand.'

I asked, had he ever applied for grace from Government.

He told me no; for that there were none in any Government who would believe that a Faa could be other than a sorner and a limmer. That grapes do not grow on thorns nor figs

on thistles is good Government doctrine.

'An' to tell the truth,' said John Faa, 'I was none that anxious, for I am a man that has been so long at the horn, that I could not lie happy were I hand in glove wi' King's men and baron baillies. I love best the fowl o' the air that cackle and cry on the moorland, the spotted eggs o' the pee-wees an' the great marled eggs o' the whaup, the fish frae the burn an' the haddock frae the salt sea flats. All these and the taking o' them are marrow to the bones o' Silver Sand.'

I asked him again (but not continuously, for we had plenty of time for our converse, during the sixteen days and nights of the great storm) among other things, what he thought of the Freetraders. He gave me a queer look.

'I think verra much what your faither thocht,' said he, 'in his latter days. I dinna meddle wi' the stuff myself, but I lay no informations on them that hold otherwise. I hae nocht, for instance, to say aboot your freends the Maxwells—only (a word in your lug) gin I war you I wad pit my fit doon again them using the cellars o' Rathan for their caves o' storage.'

He nodded significantly.

'Ye dinna mean that they hae dune that!' I said, with indignation.

'An' what else?' said Silver Sand. 'They are as fu' as they can stick o' French brandy, and Vallen-ceens; an' gin ony o' Agnew's men were gaun snowkin' roond, it micht cause misunderstandings atween them that's in poo'er an' you that's sic a grand King's man.'

'And are you quite content as you are, Silver Sand?' I said to him again, to pass the time. Little Marion, to whom the quiet of the cave was heaven, sat at our feet and played with the quaint toys which Silver Sand had made her.

'Content!' said Silver Sand; 'what for shouldna I be content? I ken nane that has mair cause to be. I look on the buik o' God a' the day under His wide, high lift for a roof-tree, an' often a' nicht forbye gin the storms keep aff. I hae God's Word in my oxter forbye—see here!'

He pulled out two dumpy little red-covered Bibles, with the Old Testament divided at Isaiah, and the Psalms of David in metre, very clean, but thumbed yellowish like a banknote at the end.

'What mair could a man want?' he said.

'But sellin' the sand an' the keel can only tak' a sma' part o' your time—what do ye do wi' the rest when ye are awa' frae the Rathan?'

Silver Sand smiled and made a curious little noise in his throat, as May does when she calls the hens for their 'daich.'

'I play at bogle wi' the lasses,' he said, 'aboot the cornstacks.'

I looked at him, and was silent with surprise. He had just been telling me that his aim was to be a godly man according to his possible.

'Did ye never hear o' the Brownie?' he said, seeing my surprise.

'Aye,' said I; 'but I believe nothing in freets, There's nae siccan thing.' For being young I knew no better.

'The first starlicht nicht after we are back at the Rathan I'll show ye,' said he.

'Tell me noo,' I said, 'Guid kens there's plenty o' time in this auld Aughty.'

'Tell on,' said Marion, who was awaking quickly from her daze, and beginning to take an interest in many things.'

If I could have forgotten the great rambling house where the women-folk waited—May and Eppie and the Lady Grizel—these days in the Aughty, with the wild men and the wild nature alike shut out, with the peril past (or so I thought) had been as happy and memorable as any in my life. I have often noticed that an unexpected experience of bodily comfort, as coming to a house wet and weary and finding a welcome, a warm fire and dry socks, clings to the heart longer than anything else, and is oftener recalled than many greater kindnesses.

So the Aughty comes to me whenever the winds howl and the shutters clatter. I think we were all happy in the Aughty, and certainly little Marion gained in beauty and fearlessness every day. At first it was sad to see her shrinking when any one moved suddenly near her. But this also gradually ceased.

To this day I can hear the soft whish of the snow against the flap of heather curtain, the roaring of the wind above, the crackle of the heather roots and broom branches on the fire. I can see the red loom of the peats at the back—indeed all things precisely as they were on these days of storm when the winds drifted the snow for sixteen days, till in many of the

hollows the wreaths lay a hundred feet deep, and over half of Scotland one sheep out of every two died—as well as many men that were shepherds and wanderers. Once we heard a great roar as though the mountains were falling, and we all instinctively cowered and prayed that the Destroying Angel might pass over our heads.

'That's a most mighty hurl of stanes somewhere,' said Silver Sand.

'I wish the Star Hill bena comin' doon on our heids,' said I. But it was not the Star Hill. It was further off, somewhere about the Hill of the Dungeon.

We waited for a long time, but we could hear no more of it, and from the doorway we could only see the great tide of snow-flakes running steadily up the Dungeon o' Buchan far below, and occasional swirls entering into the sheltered bend in which the mouth of the Aughty lay. The snow was not falling now, but blowing uninterruptedly north with the mighty wind, as level as ruled lines on a copybook.

So we let fall the flap, after having taken Marion to the door that she might wonder at the white driving world of snow.

'I think I could float in it like a feather,' she said—a feeling which I had myself.

It is but little to read the gypsy's strange relations, or for the matter of that to write them, in the bien comfort of one's own dwelling; but it was quite other to hear them told in the slow, level voice of Silver Sand himself, who was Johnny Faa, the bloody persecutor and Cameronian gypsy—for such things were never heard of before in broad Scotland. All this, too, while the greatest storm of the century raved without, and the winds of the Sixteen Drifty Days sped past outside like fiends that rode to the yelling of the damned.

It was comfortable too at meal-times to hear the bacon skirling in the pan, and smell the canty smell of the oatmeal fried among it. Sometimes Quharrie would rise from one side of the fireplace and walk solemnly round to the other, whither Marion would presently follow him, and lie down beside him with her head on his mighty flank. Then he would lift his head and look at her like a great benignant wolf (the first of that race) and because he loved her down in his rough-husked heart somewhere, he licked her on the point of her nose, which seemed to turn up a little on purpose.

Then at night it was pleasant to draw about the fire while Silver Sand read out of his book—often from John's Gospel, oftenest from the Apocalypse, which somehow appealed strongly to him. Then all kneeling upon the hearth, he poured out his soul in prayer—such a prayer as he had heard from Renwick and Shields in the last days of the sufferings when John Faa was yet on his probation. He would often fleech on me to take part in the exercises, but though my heart was very much attuned to do it, I never could come at the performance of it till I was in a house of my own.

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