

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

Table of Contents

<u>Grizel Cochrane's Ride</u>	1
<u>Elia Wilkinson Peattie</u>	1

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

(Founded on an incident of the Monmouth Rebellion)

IN the midsummer of 1685, the hearts of the people of old Edinburgh were filled with trouble and excitement. King Charles the Second, of England, was dead, and his brother, the Duke of York, reigned in his stead to the dissatisfaction of a great number of the people.

The hopes of this class lay with the young Duke of Monmouth, the ambitious and disinherited son of Charles the Second, who, on account of the King's displeasure, had been living for some time at foreign courts. On hearing of the accession of his uncle, the Duke of York, to the throne, Monmouth yielded to the plans of the English and Scottish lords who favored his own pretensions, and prepared to invade England with a small but enthusiastic force of men.

The Duke of Argyle, the noblest lord of Scotland, who also was an exile, undertook to conduct the invasion at the north, while Monmouth should enter England at the west, gather the yeomanry about him and form a triumphant conjunction with Argyle in London, and force the "usurper," as they called King James the Second, from his throne.

Both landings were duly made. The power of Monmouth's name and rank rallied to his banner at first a large number of adherents; but their defeat at Sedgemoor put an end to his invasion. And the Duke of Argyle, a few days after his landing in Scotland, was met by a superior force of the King's troops. Retreating into a morass, his soldiers were scattered and dispersed. Many of his officers deserted him in a panic of fear. The brave old nobleman himself was taken prisoner, and be-headed at Edinburgh, while all the people secretly mourned. He died without betraying his friends, though the relentless King of England threatened to compel him to do so, by the torture of the thumb-screw and the rack.

Many of his officers and followers underwent the same fate; and among those imprisoned to await execution was a certain nobleman, Sir John Cochrane, who had been made famous by other political intrigues. His friends used all the influence that their high position accorded them to procure his pardon, but without success; and the unfortunate baronet, a moody and impulsive man by nature, felt that there was no escape from the terrible destiny, and prepared to meet it in a manner worthy of a follower of the brave old duke. But he had one friend on whose help he had not counted.

In an upper chamber of an irregular, many-storied mansion far down the Canon gate, Grizel Cochrane, the imprisoned man's daughter, sat through the dread hours waiting to learn her father's sentence. There was too little doubt as to what it would be. The King and his generals meant to make merciless examples of the leaders of the rebellion. Even the royal blood that flowed in the veins of Monmouth had not saved his head from the block. This proud prince, fleeing from the defeat of Sedgemoor, had been found hiding in a ditch, covered over with the ferns that flourished at the bottom. Grizel wept as she thought of the young duke's horrible fate. She remembered when she had last seen him about the court at Holland, where she had shared her father's exile. Gay, generous, and handsome, he seemed a creature born to live and rule. What a contrast was the abject, weeping coward covered with mud and slime, who had been carried in triumph to the grim Tower of London to meet his doom! The girl

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

had been taught to believe in Monmouth's rights, and she walked the floor trembling with shame and impatience as she thought of his bitter defeat. She walked to the little dormer window and leaned out to look at the gray castle, far up the street, with its dull and lichen-covered walls. She knew that her father looked down from the barred windows of one of the upper apartments accorded to prisoners of state. She wondered if a thought of his little daughter crept in his mind amid his ruined hopes. The grim castle frowning at her from its rocky height filled her with dread; and shuddering, she turned from it toward the street below to let her eyes follow absently the passers-by. They whispered together as they passed the house, and when now and then some person caught a glimpse of her face in the ivy-sheltered window, she only met a look of commiseration. No one offered her a happy greeting.

"They all think him doomed," she cried to herself. "No one hath the grace to feign hope." Bitter tears filled her eyes, until suddenly through the mist she was conscious that some one below was lifting a plumed hat to her. It was a stately gentleman with a girdled vest and gorgeous coat and jeweled sword-hilt.

"Mistress Cochrane," said he, in that hushed voice we use when we wish to direct a remark to one person, which no one else shall overhear, "I have that to tell thee which is most important."

"Is it secret?" asked Grizel, in the same guarded tone that he had used.

"Yes," he replied, without looking up, and continuing slowly in his walk, as if he had merely exchanged a morning salutation.

"Then," she returned, hastily, "I will tell Mother; and we will meet thee in the twilight, at the side door under the balcony." She continued to look from the window, and the man sauntered on as if he had no care in the world but to keep the scarlet heels of his shoes from the dust. After a time Grizel arose, changed her loose robe for a more ceremonious dress, bound her brown braids into a prim gilded net, and descended into the drawing-room.

Her mother sat in mournful state at the end of the lofty apartment. About her were two ladies and several gentlemen, all conversing in low tones such as they might use, Grizel thought to herself, if her father were dead in the house. They all stopped talking as she entered, and looked at her in surprise. In those days it was thought very improper and forward for a young girl to enter a drawing-room uninvited, if guests were present. Grizel's eyes fell before the embarrassing scrutiny, and she dropped a timid courtesy, lifting her green silken skirts daintily, like a high-born little maiden, as she was. Lady Cochrane made a dignified apology to her guests and then turned to Grizel.

"Well, my daughter?" she said, questioningly.

"I pray thy pardon, Mother," said Grizel, in a trembling voice, speaking low, that only her mother might hear; "but within a few moments Sir Thomas Hanford will be secretly below the balcony, with news for us."

The lady half rose from her seat, trembling.

"Is he commissioned by the governor?" she asked.

"I can not tell," said the little girl; but here her voice broke, and regardless of the strangers, she flung herself into her mother's lap, weeping: "I am sure it is bad news of Father!" Lady Cochrane wound her arm about her daughter's waist, and, with a gesture of apology, led her from the room. Half an hour later she re-entered it hurriedly, followed by Grizel, who sank unnoticed in the deep embrasure of a window, and shivered there behind the heavy folds of the velvet hangings.

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

"I have just received terrible intelligence, my friends," announced Lady Cochrane, standing, tall and pale, in the midst of her guests. "The governor has been informally notified that the next post from London will bring Sir John's sentence. He is to be hanged at the Cross." There was a perfect silence in the dim room; then one of the ladies broke into loud sobbing, and a gentleman led Lady Cochrane to a chair, while the others talked apart in earnest whispers.

"Who brought the information?" asked one of the gentlemen, at length. "Is there not hope that it is a false report?"

"I am not at liberty," said Lady Cochrane, "to tell who brought me this terrible news; but it was a friend of the governor, from whom I would not have expected a service. Oh, is it too late," she cried, rising from her chair and pacing the room, "to make another attempt at intercession? Surely something can be done!"

The gentleman who had stood by her chair—a gray-headed, sober-visaged man—returned answer:

"Do not count on any remedy now, dear Lady Cochrane. I know this new King. He will be relentless toward any one who has questioned his right to reign. Besides, the post has already left London several days, and will doubtless be here by to-morrow noon."

"I am sure," said a gentleman who had not yet spoken, "that if we had a few days more he might be saved. They say King James will do anything for money, and the wars have emptied his treasury. Might we not delay the post?" he suggested, in a low voice.

"No," said the gray-headed gentleman; "that is utterly impossible."

Grizel, shivering behind the curtain, listened with eager ears. Then she saw her mother throw herself into the arms of one of the ladies and break into ungoverned sobs. The poor girl could stand no more, but glided from the room unnoticed and crept up to her dark chamber, where she sat, repeating aimlessly to herself the words that by chance had fixed themselves strongest in her memory: "Delay the post—delay the post!"

The moon arose and shone in through the panes, making a wavering mosaic on the floor as it glimmered through the wind-blown ivy at the window. Like a flash, a definite resolution sprang into Grizel's mind. If, by delaying the post, time for intercession with the King could be gained, and her father's life so saved, then the post must be delayed! But how? She had heard the gentleman say that it would be impossible. She knew that the postboy went heavily armed, to guard against the highwaymen who frequented the roads in search of plunder. This made her think of the wild stories of masked men who sprang from some secluded spot upon the postboys, and carried off the letters and money with which they were intrusted.

Suddenly she bounded from her seat, stood still a moment with her hands pressed to her head, ran from her room, and up the stairs which led to the servants' sleeping apartments. She listened at a door, and then, satisfied that the room was empty, entered, and went straight to the oaken wardrobe. By the light of the moon she selected a jacket and a pair of trousers. She looked about her for a hat and found one hanging on a peg near the window; then she searched for some time before she found a pair of boots. They were worn and coated with mud.

"They are all the better," she said to herself, and hurried on tiptoe down the corridor. She went next to the anteroom of her father's chamber. It was full of fond associations, and the hot tears sprang into her eyes as she looked about it. She took up a brace of pistols, examined them awkwardly, her hands trembling under their weight as she found at once to her delight and her terror that they were loaded. Then she hurried with them to her room.

Half an hour later, the butler saw a figure which he took to be that of Allen, the stable-boy, creeping down the back stairs, boots in hand.

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

"Whaur noo, me laddie?" he asked, "It's gey late for ye to gang oot the nicht."

"I hae forgot to bar the stable door," replied Grizel in a low and trembling voice, imitating as well as she could the broad dialect of the boy.

"Hech!" said the butler. "I ne'er hear ye mak sae little hammer in a' yer days."

She fled on. The great kitchen was deserted. She gathered up all the keys from their pegs by the door, let herself quietly out, and sped across the yard to the stable. With trembling hands she fitted first one key and then another to the door until she found the right one. Once inside the stable, she stood irresolute. She patted Bay Bess, her own little pony.

"Thou wouldst never do, Bess," she said. "Thou art such a lazy little creature." The round, fat carriage-horses stood there. "You are just holiday horses, too," said Grizel to them, "and would be winded after an hour of the work I want you for to-night." But in the shadow of the high stall stood Black Ronald, Sir John Cochrane's great, dark battle-horse, that riderless, covered with dust and foam, had dashed down the Canongate after the terrible rout of Argyle in the bogs of Leven-side, while all the people stood and stared at the familiar steed, carrying, as he did, the first silent message of disaster. Him Grizel unfastened and led out.

"Thou art a true hero," she said, rubbing his nose with the experienced touch of a horsewoman; "and I'll give thee a chance to-night to show that thou art as loyal as ever." Her hands were cold with excitement, but she managed to buckle the saddle and bridle upon him, while the huge animal stood in restless expectancy, anxious to be gone. She drew on the boots without any trouble, and slipped the pistols into the holsters.

"I believe thou knowest what I would have of thee," said Grizel as she led the horse out into the yard and on toward the gateway. Frightened, as he half circled about her in his impatience, she undid the fastening of the great gates, but her strength was not sufficient to swing them open.

"Ronald," she said in despair, "I can not open the gates!" Ronald turned his head about and looked at her with his beautiful eyes. He seemed to be trying to say, "I can."

"All right," said Grizel, as if he had spoken. She mounted the black steed, laughed nervously as she climbed into the saddle. "Now," she said, "go on!" The horse made a dash at the gates, burst them open, and leaped out into the road. He curveted about for a moment, his hoofs striking fire from the cobble-stones. Then Grizel turned his head down the Canongate, away from the castle. She knew the point at which she intended to leave the city, and toward that point she headed Black Ronald. The horse seemed to know he was doing his old master a service, as he took his monstrous strides forward. Only once did Grizel look backward, and then a little shudder, half terror, half remorse, struck her, for she saw her home ablaze with light, and heard cries of excitement borne faintly to her on the rushing night wind. They had discovered her flight. Once she thought she heard hoof-beats behind her, but she knew she could not be overtaken.

Through the streets, now narrow, now broad, now straight, now crooked, dashed Black Ronald and his mistress. Once he nearly ran down a drowsy watchman who stood nodding at a sharp corner, but horse and rider were three hundred yards away before the frightened guardian regained his composure and sprang his discordant rattle.

Now the houses grew scarcer, and presently the battlements of the town wall loomed up ahead, and Grizel's heart sank, for there were lights in the road. She heard shouts, and knew she was to be challenged. She firmly set her teeth, said a little prayer, and leaned far forward upon Black Ronald's neck. The horse gave a snort of defiance, shied violently away from a soldier who stood by the way, and then went through the gateway like a shot. Grizel clung tightly to her saddle-bow, and urged her steed on. On, on they went down the firm roadway lined on either side by rows of noble oaks on, on, out into the country-side, where the sweet odor of the heather arose gracious

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

and fragrant to the trembling girl. There was little chance of her taking a wrong path. The road over which the postboy came was the King's highway, always kept in a state of repair.

She gave herself no time to notice the green upland farms, or the stately residences which stood out on either hand in the moonlight. She concentrated her strength and mind on urging her horse forward. She was too excited to form a definite plan, and her only clear idea was to meet the postboy before daylight, for she knew it would not be safe to trust too much to her disguise. Now and then a feeling of terror flashed over her, and she turned sick with dread; but her firm purpose upheld her.

It was almost four in the morning, and the wind was blowing chill from the sea, when she entered the rolling woodlands about the Tweed. Grizel was shivering with the cold, and was so tired that she with difficulty kept her place in the saddle.

"We can not hold out much longer, Ronald," she said; "and if we fail, we can never hold up our heads again." Ronald, the sure-footed, stumbled and nearly fell. "It is no use," sighed Grizel; "we must rest." She dismounted, but it was some moments before her tired limbs could obey her will. Beside the roadway was a ditch filled with running water, and Grizel managed to lead Ronald down the incline to its brink, and let him drink. She scooped up a little in her hand and moistened her tongue; then, realizing that Ronald must not be allowed to stand still, she, with great difficulty, mounted upon his back again, and, heartsick, fearful, yet not daring to turn back, coaxed him gently forward.

The moon had set long before this, and in the misty east the sky began to blanch with the first gleam of morning. Suddenly, around the curve of the road where it leaves the banks of the Tweed, came a dark object. Grizel's heart leaped wildly. Thirty seconds later she saw that it was indeed a horseman. He broke into a song:

"The Lord o' Argyle cam' wi' plumes and wi' spears,
And Monmouth he landed wi' gay cavaliers!
The pibroch has caa'd every tartan thegither,
B' thoosans their footsteps a' pressing the heather;
Th' North and the Sooth sent their bravest ones out,
But a joust wi' Kirke's Lambs put them all to the rout."

By this time, the horseman was so close that Grizel could distinguish objects hanging upon the horse in front of the rider. They were the mail-bags! For the first time she realized her weakness and saw how unlikely it was that she would be able to cope with an armed man. The blood rushed to her head, and a courage that was the inspiration of the moment took possession of her. She struck Black Ronald a lash with her whip.

"Go!" she said to him shrilly, while her heart-beats hammered in her ears, "Go!"

The astonished and excited horse leaped down the road. As she met the postboy, she drew Black Ronald, with a sudden strength that was born of the danger, back upon his haunches. His huge body blocked the way.

"Dismount!" she cried to the other rider. Her voice was hoarse from fright, and sounded strangely in her own ears. But a wild courage nerved her, and the hand that drew and held the pistol was as firm as a man's. Black Ronald was rearing wildly, and in grasping the reins tighter, her other hand mechanically altered its position about the pistol.

She had not meant to fire, she had only thought to aim and threaten, but suddenly there was a flash of light in the gray atmosphere, a dull reverberation, and to the girl's horrified amazement she saw the horse in front of her stagger and fall heavily to the ground. The rider, thrown from his saddle, was pinned to the earth by his horse and stunned by the fall. Dizzy with pain and confused by the rapidity of the assault, he made no effort to draw his weapon.

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

The mail-bags had swung by their own momentum quite clear of the horse in its fall, and now lay loosely over its back, joined by the heavy strap.

It was a painful task for the exhausted girl to dismount, but she did so, and, lifting the cumbersome leathern bags, she threw them over Black Ronald's neck. It was yet more painful to her tender heart to leave the poor fellow she had injured lying in so pitiable a condition, but her father's life was in danger, and that, to her, was of more moment than the postboy's hurts.

"Heaven forgive me," she said, bending over him. "I pray this may not be his death!" She clambered over the fallen horse and mounted Ronald, who was calm again. Then she turned his head toward Edinboro' Town and hurriedly urged him forward. But as she sped away from the scene of the encounter, she kept looking back, with an awe-struck face, to the fallen postboy. In the excitement of the meeting and in her one great resolve to obtain her father's death-warrant, she had lost all thought of the risks she ran or of the injuries she might inflict; and it was with unspeakable relief, therefore, that she at last saw the post-boy struggle to his feet, and stand gazing after her. "Thank Heaven, he is not killed!" she exclaimed again and again, as she now joyfully pressed Ronald into a gallop. Throughout the homeward journey, Grizel made it a point to urge him to greater speed when nearing a farmhouse, so that there would be less risk of discovery. Once or twice she was accosted by laborers in the field, and once by the driver of a cart, but their remarks were lost upon the wind as the faithful Ronald thundered on. She did not feel the need of sleep, for she had forgotten it in all her excitement, but she was greatly exhausted and suffering from the effects of her rough ride.

Soon the smoke in the distance showed Grizel that her native town lay an hour's journey ahead. She set her teeth and said an encouraging word to the horse. He seemed to understand, for he redoubled his energies. Now the roofs became visible, and now, grim and sullen, the turrets of the castle loomed up. Grizel felt a great lump in her throat as she thought of her father in his lonely despair.

She turned Ronald from the road again and cut through a clump of elms. She came out in a few minutes and rode more slowly toward a smaller gate than the one by which she had left the city. A stout soldier looked at her carelessly and then turned to his tankard of ale, after he had noticed the mail-bags. Grizel turned into a crooked, narrow street lined on each side with toppling, frowning buildings. She drew rein before a humble house, and slipped wearily from her saddle and knocked at the door. An old woman opened the heavy oaken door and Grizel fell into her arms.

"The bags the mail," she gasped, and fainted. When she recovered consciousness, she found herself on a low, rough bed. The old woman was bending over her.

"Losh keep me!" said the dame. "I did na ken ye! Ma puir bairnie! Hoo cam' ye by these?" and she pointed to the clothes of Allen.

"The bags?" said Grizel, sitting bolt upright

"Are under the hearth," said the old woman.

"And Ronald?" continued Grizel.

"Is in the byre wi' the coos," said the other with a knowing leer. "Not a soul kens it. Ne'er a body saw ye come."

Breathlessly Grizel explained all to her old nurse, and then sprang off the bed. At her request the old dame locked the door and brought her the bags. By the aid of a sharp knife the pair slashed open the leathern covering, and the inclosed packets fell upon the floor. With trembling hands Grizel fumbled them all over, tossing one after another impatiently aside as she read the addresses. At last she came upon a large one addressed to the governor. With

Grizel Cochrane's Ride

beating heart she hesitated a moment, and then tore the packet open with shaking fingers. She easily read the bold handwriting. Suddenly everything swam before her, and again she nearly fell into her companion's arms.

It was too true. What she read was a formal warrant of the King, signed by his majesty, and stamped and sealed with red wax. It ordered the governor to hang Sir John Cochrane of Ochiltree at the Cross in Edinburgh at ten o'clock in the morning, on the third day of the following week. She clutched the paper and hid it in her dress.

The disposition of the rest of the mail was soon decided upon. The old lady's son Jock a wild fellow was to put the sacks on the back of a donkey and turn it loose outside the gates, at his earliest opportunity. And then Grizel, clad in some rough garments the old lady procured, slipped out of the house, and painfully made her way toward the Canongate.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when she reached her home. The porter at the gate could scarcely be made to understand that the uncouth figure before him was his young mistress. But a moment later her mother was embracing her, with tears of joy,

All the male friends of Sir John were hastily summoned, and Grizel related her adventure, and displayed the death-warrant of her father. The hated document was consigned to the flames, a consultation was held, and that night three of the gentlemen left for London.

The next day, the donkey and the mail-sacks were found by a sentry, and some little excitement was occasioned; but when the postboy came in later, and related how he had been attacked by six stalwart robbers, and how he had slain two of them and was then overpowered and forced to surrender the bags, all wonderment was set at rest.

The Cochrane family passed a week of great anxiety, but when it was ended, the three friends returned from London with joyful news. The King had listened to their petition, and had ordered the removal of Sir John to the Tower of London, until his case could be reconsidered. So to London Sir John went; and after a time the payment of five thousand pounds to some of the King's advisers secured an absolute pardon. His lands, which had been confiscated, were restored to him; and on his arrival at his Scottish home, he was warmly welcomed by a great concourse of his friends. He thanked them in a speech, taking care, however, not to tell who was so greatly instrumental in making his liberation possible. But we may be sure that he was secretly proud of the pluck and devotion of his daughter Grizel.