The Seven Lights

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JOHN M'PHERSON was a farmer and grazier in Kintyre—a genuine Highlander. In person, though of rather low stature than otherwise, he was stout, athletic, and active; bold and fearless in disposition, warm in temper, friendly, and hospitable—this last to such a degree that his house was never without as many strangers and visitors of different descriptions, as nearly doubled his own household.

To the vagrant beggar his house and meal−chest were ever open; and to no one, whatever his condition, were a night's quarters ever refused. M'Pherson's house, in short, formed a kind of focus, with a power to draw towards itself all the misery and poverty in the country within a circle whose diameter might be reckoned at somewhere about twenty miles. The wandering mendicant made it one of his regular stages, and the traveller of better degree toiled on his way with increased activity, that he might make it his quarters for the night.

Fortunately for the character and credit of M'Pherson's hospitality, his wife was of an equally kind and generous disposition with himself; so that his absences from home, which were frequent, and sometimes long, did not at all affect the treatment of the stranger under his roof, or make his welcome less cordial.

But the hospitality exercised at Morvane, which was the name of M'Pherson's farm, sometimes, it must be confessed, led to occasional small depredations—such as the loss of a pair of blankets, a sheet, or a pair of stockings, carried off by the ungrateful vagabonds whom he sometimes sheltered. There were, however, one pair of blankets abstracted in this way, that found their road back to their owner in rather a curious manner.

The morning was thick and misty, when the thief (in the case alluded to) decamped with his booty, and continued so during the whole day, so that no object, at any distance, however large, could be seen. After toiling for several hours, under the impression that he was leaving Morvane far behind, the vagabond, who was also a stranger in the country, approached a house, with the stolen blankets snugly and carefully bundled on his back, and knocked at the door, with the view of seeking a night's quarters, as it was now dusk. The door was opened; but by whom, think you, good reader? Why, by M'Pherson!

The thief, without knowing it, had landed precisely at the point from which he had set out. Being instantly recognised, he was politely invited to walk in. To this kind invitation, the thief replied by throwing down the blankets, and taking to his heels—thus making, with his own hands, a restitution which was very far from being intended. Poor M'Pherson, however, did not get all his stolen blankets back in this way.

This, however, is a digression. To proceed with our tale. One night, when M'Pherson was absent, attending a market at some distance, an elderly female appeared at the door, with the usual demand of a night's lodging, which, with the usual hospitality of Morvane, was at once complied with. The stranger, who was a remarkably tall woman, was dressed in widow's weeds, and of rather respectable appearance; her deportment was grave, even stern, and altogether she seemed as if suffering from some recent affliction.

During the whole of the early part of the evening she sat before the fire, with her face buried between her hands, heedless of what was passing around her, and was occasionally observed rocking to and fro, with that kind of motion that bespeaks great internal anguish. It was noticed, however, that she occasionally stole a look at those who were in the apartment with her; and it was marked by all (but whether this was merely the effect of imagination, for all felt that there was something singular and mysterious about the stranger, or was really the case, we cannot decide) that, in these furtive glances, there was a peculiarly wild and appalling expression. The stranger spoke none, however, during the whole night; but continued, from time to time, rocking to and fro in the manner already described. Neither could she be prevailed upon to partake of any refreshment, although repeatedly pressed to do so. All invitations of this kind she declined, with a wave of the hand, or a melancholy, yet determined inclination of the head. In words she made no reply.

The singular conduct of this woman threw a damp over all who were present. They felt chilled, they knew not how; and were sensible of the influence of an indefinable terror, for which they could not account. For once, therefore, the feeling of comfort and security, of which all were conscious who were seated around M'Pherson's cheerful and hospitable hearth, was banished, and a scene of awe and dread supplied its place.

No one could conjecture who this strange personage was, whence she had come, nor whither she was going;

nor were there any means of acquiring this information, as it was a rule of the house—one of M'Pherson's special points of etiquette—that no stranger should ever be questioned on such subjects. All being allowed to depart as they came, without question or inquiry, there was never anything more known at Morvane, regarding any stranger who visited it, than what he himself chose to communicate.

Under the painful feelings already described, the inmates of M'Pherson's house found, with more than usual satisfaction, the hour for retiring to rest arrive. The general attention being called to this circumstance by the hostess, everyone hastened to his appointed dormitory, with an alacrity which but too plainly showed how glad they were to escape from the presence of the mysterious stranger who, however, also retired to bed with the rest. The place appointed for her to sleep in, was the loft of an outbuilding, as there was no room for her accommodation within the house itself; all the spare beds being occupied.

We have already said that M'Pherson was from home on the evening of which we are speaking, attending a market at some distance. He, however, returned shortly after midnight. On arriving at his own house, he was much surprised, and not a little alarmed, to perceive a window in one of the outhouses blazing with light (it was that in which the stranger slept), while all around and within the house was as silent as the tomb. Afraid that some accident from fire had taken place, he rode up to the building, and standing up in his stirrups—which brought his head on a level with the window—looked in, when a sight presented itself that made even the stout heart of M'Pherson beat with unusual violence.

In the middle of the floor, extended on her pallet, lay the mysterious stranger, surrounded by seven bright and shining lights, arranged at equal distances—three on one side of the bed, three on the other, and one at the head. M'Pherson gazed steadily at the extraordinary and appalling sight for a few seconds, when three of the lights suddenly vanished. In an instant afterwards, two more disappeared, and then another. There was now only that at the head of the bed remaining. When this light had alone been left, M'Pherson saw the person who lay on the pallet, raise herself slowly up, and gaze intently on the portentous beam, whose light showed, to the terrified onlooker, a ghastly and unearthly countenance, surrounded with dishevelled hair, which hung down in long, thick, irregular masses over her pale, clayey visage, so as almost to conceal it entirely. This light, like all the others, at length suddenly disappeared, and with its last gleam the person on the couch sank down with a groan that startled M'Pherson from the trance of horror into which the extraordinary sight had thrown him. He was a bold and fearless man, however; and, therefore, though certainly appalled by what he had seen, he made no outcry, nor evinced any other symptom of alarm. He resolutely and calmly awaited the conclusion of the extraordinary scene; and when the last light had disappeared, he deliberately dismounted, led his horse into the stable, put him up, entered the house without disturbing any one, and slipped quietly into bed, trusting that the morning would bring some explanation of the mysterious occurrence of the night; but resolving, at the same time that, if it should not, he would mention the circumstance to no one.

On awaking in the morning, M'Pherson asked his wife what strangers were in the house, and how they were disposed of, and particularly, who it was that slept in the loft of the outhouse. He was told that it was a woman in widow's dress, of rather a respectable appearance, but whose conduct had been very singular. M'Pherson inquired no further, but desired that the woman might be detained till he should see her, as he wished to speak with her.

On some one of the domestics, however, going up to her apartment, shortly after, to invite her to breakfast, it was found that she was gone, no one could tell when or where, as her departure had not been seen by any person about the house.

Baulked in his intention of eliciting some explanation of the extraordinary circumstance of the preceding night, from the person who seemed to have been a party to it, M'Pherson became more strengthened in the resolution of keeping the secret to himself, although it made an impression upon him which all his natural strength of mind could not remove.

At this precise period of our story, M'Pherson had three sons employed in the herring fishing, a favourite pursuit in its season, because often a lucrative one, of those who live upon or near the coasts of the West Highlands.

The three brothers had a boat of their own; and, desirous of making their employment as profitable as possible, they, though in sufficiently good circumstances to have hired assistance, manned her themselves, and, with laudable industry, performed all the drudgery of their laborious occupation with their own hands.

Their boat, like all the others employed in the business we are speaking of, by the natives of the Highlands,

was wherry−rigged; her name—she was called after the betrothed of the elder of the three brothers—The Catherine. The take of herrings, as it is called, it is well known, appears in different seasons in different places, sometimes in one loch, or arm of the sea, sometimes in another.

In the season to which our story refers, the fishing was in the sound of Kilbrannan, where several scores of boats, and amongst those that of the M'Phersons, were busily employed in reaping the ocean harvest. When the take of herrings appears in this sound, Campbelton Loch, a well−known harbour on the west coast of Scotland, is usually made the headquarters—a place of rendezvous of the little herring fleet—and to this loch they always repair when threatened with a boisterous night, although it was not always that they could, in such circumstances, succeed in making it.

Such a night as the one alluded to, was that that succeeded the evening on which M'Pherson saw the strange lights that form the leading feature of our tale. Violent gusts of wind came in rapid succession down the sound of Kilbrannan; and a skifting rain, flung fitfully but fiercely from the huge black clouds as they hurried along before the tempest that already raged above, swept over the face of the angry sea, and seemed to impart an additional bitterness to the rising wrath of the incipient storm. It was evident, in short, that what sailors call a "dirty night" was approaching; and, under this impression, the herring boats left their station, and were seen, in the dusk of the evening in question, hurrying towards Campbelton Loch. But the storm had arisen in all its fury long before the desired haven could be gained. The little fleet was dispersed. Some succeeded, however, in making the harbour; others, finding this impossible, ran in for the Saddle and Carradale shores, and were fortunate enough to effect a landing. All, in short, with the exception of one single boat, ultimately contrived to gain a place of shelter of some kind. This unhappy exception was The Catherine. Long after all the others had disappeared from the face of the raging sea, she was seen struggling alone with the warring elements, her canvas down to within a few feet of her gunwale, and her keel only at times being visible. The gallant brothers who manned her, however, had not yet lost either heart or hope, although their situation at this moment was but too well calculated to deprive them of both. Gravely and steadily, and in profound silence, they kept each by his perilous post, and endeavoured to make the land on the Campbelton side; but, finding this impossible, they put about, and ran before the wind for the island of Arran, which lay at the distance of about eight miles. But alarmed, as they approached that rugged shore, by the tremendous sea which was breaking on it, and which would have instantly dashed their frail bark to pieces, they again put about, and made to windward. While the hardy brothers were thus contending with their fate, a person mounted on horseback was seen galloping wildly along the Carradale shore, his eyes ever and anon turned towards the struggling boat with a look of despair and mortal agony. It was M'Pherson, the hapless father of the unfortunate youths by whom she was manned. There were others, too, of their kindred, looking, with failing hearts, on the dreadful sight; for all felt that the unequal contest could not continue long, and that the boat must eventually go down.

Amongst those who were thus watching, with intense interest and speechless agony, the struggle of the doomed bark, was Catherine, the beloved of the elder of the brothers, who ran, in wild distraction, along the shore, uttering the most heart−rending cries. "Oh, my Duncan!" she exclaimed, stretching out her arms towards the pitiless sea. "Oh, my beloved, my dearest, come to me, or allow me to come to you that I may perish with you!" But Duncan heard her not, although it was very possible he might see her, as the distance was not great.

There were, at this moment also, several persons on horseback, friends of the young men, galloping along the shore, from point to point, as the boat varied her direction, in the vain and desperate hope of being able to render, though they knew not how, some assistance to the sufferers. But the distracted father, urged on by the wild energy of despair, outrode them all, as they made, on one occasion, for a rising ground near Carradale, from whence a wider view of the sea could be commanded. For this height M'Pherson now pushed, and gained it just in time to see his gallant sons, with their little bark, buried in the waves. He had not taken his station an instant on the height, when The Catherine went down, and all on board perished.

The distracted father, when he had seen the last of his unfortunate sons, covered his eyes with his hands, and for a moment gave way to the bitter agony that racked his soul. His manly breast heaved with emotion, and that most affecting of all sounds, the audible sorrowing of a strong man, might have been heard at a great distance. It was, however, of short continuance. M'Pherson prayed to his God to strengthen him in this dread hour of trial, and to enable him to bear with becoming fortitude the affliction with which it had pleased Him to visit him; and the distressed man derived comfort from the appeal.

"My brave, my beautiful boys!" he said, "you are now with your God, and have entered, I trust, on a life of everlasting happiness." Saying this, he rode slowly from the fatal spot from which he had witnessed the death of his children. It was at this moment, and while musing on the misfortune that had befallen him, that the strange occurrence of the preceding night recurred, for the first time, to M'Pherson's mind. It was obtruded on his recollection by the force of association.

"Can it be possible," he inquired of himself, "that the appearances of last night can have any connection with the dreadful events of to−day? It must be so," he said; "for three of the lights of my eyes, three of the guiding stars of my life, have been this day extinguished." Thus reasoned M'Pherson; and, in the mysterious lights which he had seen, he saw that the doom of his children had been announced. But there were seven, he recollected, and his heart sunk within him as he thought of the three gallant boys who were still spared to him. One of them, the youngest, was at home with himself, the other two were in the Army—soldiers in the 42nd Regiment, which then boasted of many privates of birth and education. M'Pherson, however, still kept the appalling secret of the mysterious lights to himself, and determined to await, with resignation, the fulfilment of the destiny which had been read to him, and which he now felt convinced to be inevitable.

The gallant regiment to which M'Pherson's sons belonged was, at this period, abroad on active service. It was in America, and formed a part of the army which was employed in resisting the encroachments of the French on the British territories in that quarter.

The 42nd had, during the campaigns in the western world of that period—viz. 1754 and 1758,—distinguished themselves in many a sanguinary contest, for their singular bravery and general good conduct; and the fame of their exploits rung through their native glens, and was spread far and wide over their hills and mountains; for dear was the honour of their gallant regiment to the warlike Highlanders. Many accounts had arrived, from time to time, in the country, of their achievements, and joyfully were they received. But, on the very day after the loss of The Catherine, a low murmur began to arise, in that part of the country which is the scene of our story, of some dreadful disaster having befallen the national regiment. No one could say of what nature this calamity was; but a buzz went round, whose ominous whispering of fearful slaughter made the friends of the absent soldiers turn pale. Mothers and sisters wept, and fathers and brothers looked grave and shook their heads. The rumour bore that, though there had been no loss of honour, there had been a dreadful loss of life. Nay, it was said that the regiment had made a mighty acquisition to its fame, but that it had been dearly bought.

At length, however, the truth arrived, in a distinct and intelligible shape. The well−known and sanguinary affair of Ticonderago had been fought; and, in that murderous contest, the 42nd Regiment, which had behaved with a gallantry unmatched before in the annals of war, had suffered dreadfully—no less than forty−three officers, commissioned and non−commissioned, and six hundred and three privates having been killed and wounded in that corps alone.

To many a heart and home in the Highlands did this disastrous, though glorious intelligence, bring desolation and mourning; and amongst those on whom it brought these dismal effects, was M'Pherson of Morvane.

On the third day after the occurrence of the events related at the outset of our narrative, a letter, which had come, in the first instance, to a gentleman in the neighbourhood, and who also had a son in the 42nd, was put into M'Pherson's hands, by a servant of the former.

The man looked feelingly grave as he delivered it, and hurried away before it was opened. The letter was sealed with black wax. Poor M'Pherson's hand trembled as he opened it. It was from the captain of the company to which his sons belonged, informing him that both had fallen in the attack on Ticonderago. There was an attempt in the letter to soothe the unfortunate father's feelings, and to reconcile him to the loss of his gallant boys, in a lengthened detail of their heroic conduct during the sanguinary struggle. "Nobly," said the writer, "did your two brave sons maintain the honour of their country in the bloody strife. Both Hugh and Alister fell—their broadswords in their hands—on the very ramparts of Ticonderago, whither they had fought their way with a dauntlessness of heart, and a strength of arm, that might have excited the envy and admiration of the son of Fingal"

In this account of the noble conduct of his sons the broken−hearted father did find some consolation. "Thank God!" he exclaimed, though in a tremulous voice, "my brave boys have done their duty, and died as became their name, with their swords in their hands, and their enemies in their front." But there was one circumstance mentioned in the letter, that affected the poor father more than all the rest—this was the intimation, that the writer

had, in his hands, a sum of money and a gold brooch, which his son Alister had bequeathed, the first to his father, the latter to his mother, as a token of remembrance. "These," he said, "had been deposited with him by the young man previous to the engagement, under a presentiment that he should fall."

When he had finished the perusal of the letter, M'Pherson sought his wife, whom he found weeping bitterly, for she had already learned the fate of her sons. On entering the apartment where she was, he flung his arms around her, in an agony of grief, and, choking with emotion, exclaimed, that two more of his fair lights had been extinguished by the hand of heaven. "One yet remains," he said, "but that, too, must soon pass away from before mine eyes. His doom is sealed; but God's will be done."

"What mean ye, John?" said his sobbing wife, struck with the prophetic tone of his speech—"is the measure of our sorrows not yet filled? Are we to lose him, too, who is now our only stay, my fair−haired Ian. Why this foreboding of more evil—and whence have you it, John?" she said, now looking her husband steadfastly in the face; and with an expression of alarm that indicated that entire belief in supernatural intelligence regarding coming events, then so general in the Highlands.

Urged by his wife, who implored him to tell her whence he had the tidings of her Ian's approaching fate, M'Pherson related to her the circumstance of the mysterious lights.

"But there were seven, John," she said, when he had concluded—"how comes that?—our children were but six." And immediately added, as if some fearful conviction had suddenly forced itself on her mind—"God grant that the seventh light may have meant me!"

"God forbid!" exclaimed her husband, on whose mind a similar conviction with that with which his wife was impressed, now obtruded itself for the first time; that conviction was, that he himself was indicated by the seventh light. But neither of the sorrowing pair communicated their fears to the other.

Two days subsequent to this, the fair hair of Ian was seen floating on the surface of a deep pool, in the water of Bran; a small river that ran past the house of Morvane. By what accident the poor boy had fallen into the river, was never ascertained. But the pool in which his body was found was known to have been one of his favourite fishing stations. One only of the mysterious lights now remained without its counterpart; but this was not long wanting. Ere the week had expired, M'Pherson was killed by a fall from his horse, when returning from the funeral of his son, and the symbolical prophecy was fulfilled—and thus concludes the story of "The Seven Lights."