

THE ADVENTURES OF 'THE BULL OF EARLSTOUN'

THIS is the story of the life of Alexander Gordon, of Earlstoun in Galloway. Earlstoun is a bonny place, sitting above the waterside of the Ken in the fair strath of the Glenkens, in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright. The grey tower stands ruinous and empty to-day, but once it was a pleasant dwelling, and dear to the hearts of those that had dwelt in it when they were in foreign lands or hiding out on the wild wide moors. It was the time when Charles II. wished to compel the most part of the people of Scotland to change their religion and worship as he bade them. Some obeyed the King; but most hated the new order of things, and cleaved in their hearts to their old ways and to their old ministers, who had been put out of their kirks and manses at the coming of the King. Many even set themselves to resist the King in open battle rather than obey him in the matter of their consciences. It was only in this that they were rebellious, for many of them had been active in bringing him again to the throne.

Among those who thus went out to fight were William Gordon and his son Alexander. William Gordon was a grave, courteous, and venerable man, and his estate was one of the best in all the province of Galloway. Like nearly all the lairds in the south and west he was strongly of the Presbyterian party, and resolved to give up life and lands rather than his principles. Now the King was doubtless ill-advised, and his councillors did not take the kindly or the wise way with the people at this time; for a host of wild Highlanders had been turned into the land, who plundered in cotter's hut and laird's hall without much distinction between those that stood for the Covenants and those that held for the King. So in the year 1679 Galloway was very hot and angry, and many were ready to fight the King's forces wherever they could be met with.

So, hearing news of a revolt in the West, William Gordon rode

away, with many good riders at his back, to take his place in the ranks of the rebels. His son Alexander, whose story we are to tell, was there before him. The Covenanting army had gained one success in Drumclog, which gave them some hope, but at Bothwell Bridge their forces were utterly broken, largely through their own quarrels, by the Duke of Monmouth and the disciplined troops of the Government.

Alexander Gordon had to flee from the field of Bothwell. He came home to Earlstoun alone, for his father had been met about six miles from the battle-field by a troop of horse, and as he refused to surrender, he was slain there and buried in the parish of Glassford.

Immediately after Bothwell, Alexander Gordon was compelled to go into hiding with a price upon his head. Unlike his father, he was very ready-witted, free with his tongue, even boisterous upon occasion, and of very great bodily strength. These qualities stood him in good stead during the long period of his wandering and when lying in concealment among the hills.

The day after Bothwell he was passing through the town of Hamilton, when he was recognised by an old retainer of the family.

'Save us, Maister Alexander,' said the man, who remembered the ancient kindnesses of his family, 'do you not know that it is death for you to be found here?'

So saying he made his young master dismount, and carried away all his horseman's gear and his arms, which he hid in a heap of field-manure behind the house. Then he took Earlstoun to his own house, and put upon him a long dress of his wife's. Hardly had he been clean-shaven, and arrayed in a clean white mutch (cap), when the troopers came clattering into the town. They had heard that he and some others of the prominent rebels had passed that way; and they went from door to door, knocking and asking, 'Saw ye anything of Sandy Gordon of Earlstoun?'

So going from house to house they came to the door of the ancient Gordon retainer, and Earlstoun had hardly time to run to the corner and begin to rock the cradle with his foot before the soldiers came to ask the same question there. But they passed on without suspicion, only saying one to the other as they went out, 'My certes, Billy, but yon was a sturdy hizzie!'

After that there was nothing but the heather and the mountain cave for Alexander Gordon for many a day. He had wealth of adventures, travelling by night, hiding and sleeping by day. Sometimes he would venture to the house of one who sympathised

with the Covenanters, only to find that the troopers were already in possession. Sometimes, in utter weariness, he slept so long that when he awoke he would find a party searching for him quite close at hand ; then there was nothing for it but to lie close like a hare in a covert till the danger passed by.

Once when he came to his own house of Earlstoun he was only an hour or two there before the soldiers arrived to search for him.



‘ Sometimes he would find a party searching for him quite close at hand ’

His wife had hardly time to stow him in a secret recess behind the ceiling of a room over the kitchen, in which place he abode several days, having his meals passed to him from above, and breathing through a crevice in the wall.

After this misadventure he was sometimes in Galloway and sometimes in Holland for three or four years. He might even have

remained in the Low Countries, but his services were so necessary to his party in Scotland that he was repeatedly summoned to come over into Galloway and the West to take up the work of organising resistance to the Government.

During most of this time the Tower of Earlstoun was a barracks of the soldiers, and it was only by watching his opportunity that Alexander Gordon could come home to see his wife, and put his hand upon his bairns' heads as they lay a-row in their cots. Yet come he sometimes did, especially when the soldiers of the garrison were away on duty in the more distant parts of Galloway. Then the wanderer would steal indoors in the gloaming, soft-footed like a thief, into his own house, and sit talking with his wife and an old retainer or two who were fit to be trusted with the secret. Yet while he sat there one was ever on the watch, and at the slightest signs of King's men in the neighbourhood Alexander Gordon rushed out and ran to the great oak tree, which you may see to this day standing in sadly-diminished glory in front of the great house of Earlstoun.

Now it stands alone, all the trees of the forest having been cut away from around it during the subsequent poverty which fell upon the family. A rope ladder lay snugly concealed among the ivy that clad the trunk of the tree. Up this Alexander Gordon climbed. When he arrived at the top he pulled the ladder after him, and found himself upon an ingeniously constructed platform built with a shelter over it from the rain, high among the branchy tops of the great oak. His faithful wife, Jean Hamilton, could make signals to him out of one of the top windows of Earlstoun whether it was safe for him to approach the house, or whether he had better remain hidden among the leaves. If you go now to look for the tree, it is indeed plain and easy to be seen. But though now so shorn and lonely, there is no doubt that two hundred years ago it stood undistinguished among a thousand others that thronged the woodland about the Tower of Earlstoun.

Often, in order to give Alexander Gordon a false sense of security, the garrison would be withdrawn for a week or two, and then in the middle of some mirky night or early in the morning twilight the house would be surrounded and the whole place ransacked in search of its absent master.

On one occasion, the man who came running along the narrow river path from Dalry had hardly time to arouse Gordon before the dragoons were heard clattering down through the wood from the high-road. There was no time to gain the great oak in safety,

where he had so often hid in time of need. All Alexander Gordon could do was to put on the rough jerkin of a labouring man, and set to cleaving firewood in the courtyard with the scolding assistance of a maid-servant. When the troopers entered to search for the master of the house, they heard the maid vehemently



Alexander Gordon wood-chopping in the disguise of a labourer

'flyting' the great hulking lout for his awkwardness, and threatening to 'draw a stick across his back' if he did not work to a better tune.

The commander ordered him to drop his axe, and to point out

the different rooms and hiding-places about the castle. Alexander Gordon did so with an air of indifference, as if hunting Whigs were much the same to him as cleaving firewood. He did his duty with a stupid unconcern which successfully imposed on the soldiers; and as soon as they allowed him to go, he fell to his wood-chopping with the same stolidity and rustic boorishness that had marked his conduct.

Some of the officers came up to him and questioned him as to his master's hiding-place in the woods. But as to this he gave them no satisfaction.

'My master,' he said, 'has no hiding-place that I know of. I always find him here when I have occasion to seek for him, and that is all I care about. But I am sure that if he thought you were seeking him he would immediately show himself to you, for that is ever his custom.'

This was one of the answers with a double meaning that were so much in the fashion of the time and so characteristic of the people.

On leaving, the commander of the troop said, 'Ye are a stupid kindly nowt, man. See that ye get no harm in such a rebel service.'

Sometimes, however, searching waxed so hot and close that Gordon had to withdraw himself altogether out of Galloway and seek quieter parts of the country. On one occasion he was speeding up the Water of Æ when he found himself so weary that he was compelled to lie down under a bush of heather and rest before proceeding on his journey. It so chanced that a noted King's man, Dalyell of Glenæ, was riding homewards over the moor. His horse started back in astonishment, having nearly stumbled over the body of a sleeping man. It was Alexander Gordon. Hearing the horse's feet he leaped up, and Dalyell called upon him to surrender. But that was no word to say to a Gordon of Earlstoun. Gordon instantly drew his sword, and, though unmounted, his lightness of foot on the heather and moss more than counterbalanced the advantages of the horseman, and the King's man found himself matched at all points; for the Laird of Earlstoun was in his day a famous sworder.

Soon the Covenanter's sword seemed to wrap itself about Dalyell's blade and sent it twirling high in the air. In a little he found himself lying on the heather at the mercy of the man whom he had attacked. He asked for his life, and Alexander Gordon

granted it to him, making him promise by his honour as a gentleman that whenever he had the fortune to approach a conventicle he would retire, if he saw a white flag elevated in a particular manner upon a flagstaff. This seemed but a little condition to weigh against a man's life, and Dalvell agreed.

Now the Cavalier was an exceedingly honourable man and valued his spoken word. So on the occasion of a great conventicle at Mitchelslacks, in the parish of Closeburn, he permitted a great field meeting to disperse, drawing off his party in another direction, because the signal streaming from a staff told him that the man who had spared his life was amongst the company of worshippers.

After this, the white signal was frequently used in the neighbourhood over which Dalvell's jurisdiction extended, and to the great credit of the Cavalier it is recorded that on no single occasion did he violate his plighted word, though he is said to have remarked bitterly that the Whig with whom he fought must have been the devil, 'for ever going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it.'

But Alexander Gordon was too great a man in the affairs of the Praying Societies to escape altogether. He continually went and came from Holland, and some of the letters that he wrote from that country are still in existence. At last, in 1683, having received many letters and valuable papers for delivery to people in refuge in Holland, he went secretly to Newcastle, and agreed with the master of a ship for his voyage to the Low Countries. But just as the vessel was setting out from the mouth of the Tyne, it was accidentally stopped. Some watchers for fugitives came on board, and Earlstoun and his companion were challenged. Earlstoun, fearing the taking of his papers, threw the box that contained them overboard; but it floated, and was taken along with himself.

Then began a long series of misfortunes for Alexander Gordon. He was five times tried, twice threatened with torture—which he escaped, in the judgment hall itself, by such an exhibition of his great strength as terrified his judges.¹ He simulated madness, foamed at the mouth, and finally tore up the benches in order to attack the judges with the fragments. He was sent first to the castle of Edinburgh and afterwards to the Bass, 'for a change of air' as the record quaintly says. Finally, he was despatched to Blackness Castle, where he remained close in hold till the revolution. Not till June 5, 1689, were his prison doors thrown open,

¹ See the story of 'How they held the Bass for King James.'

but even then Alexander Gordon would not go till he had obtained signed documents from the governor and officials of the prison to the effect that he had never altered any of his opinions in order to gain privilege or release.

Alexander Gordon returned to Earlstoun, and lived there quietly far into the next century, taking his share in local and county business with Grierson of Lag and others who had hunted him for years—which is a strange thing to think on, but one also very characteristic of those times.

On account of his great strength and the power of his voice he was called 'the Bull of Earlstoun,' and it is said that when he was rebuking his servants, the bellowing of the Bull could plainly be heard in the clachan of Dalry, which is two miles away across hill and stream.