OUR LITTLE FEUDAL COUSIN OF LONG AGO

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Our Little Feudal Cousin of Long Ago

by

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"'Tis A Doo Pasty!' She Cried."

PREFACE

THIS little book was published some years ago under the title of "The Little Master," and was intended, as the dedication tells, as a key to the great gate that leads to "the ballad country." It is thought now that Alan Gordon and his sister Elspat may well join the company of Little Cousins of Long Ago with whom so many of our young people are making acquaintance. They certainly are our cousins, not in common humanity alone, but in blood and race, for we Americans, of English descent, claim near kinship with the Scots, and their traditions run side by side with ours. Especially is this the case with the old ballads, many of which are found, in different versions, on either side of the Border between England and Scotland. The minstrels, making their way from house to house, from castle to castle, had friends in every part of the country. In those days, when books were few, and none — as a rule — could read except the priests, the minstrel and his harp were eagerly welcomed by high and low. They wove into simple rhyme the wild doings, the wilder legends, of the countryside, Highland, Lowland, or Saxon; and recited them, or sang to the wild, sweet music of their harps, while the hearers listened spellbound, often calling for a favorite ballad over and over till they

knew it by heart, and so made it their own. It is to the minstrels that we owe much of our knowledge of old times in England and Scotland.

The following pages tell in simple fashion of the life of a Scottish boy and girl in the fourteenth century, and of how David the harper helped them in their hour of need.

April 12, 1922.

CHAPTER I

LONG AGO AND LONG AGO

LONG ago and long ago, in the Lowlands of Scotland, lived a boy just about your age, who was called the Little Master. He had another name, and that was Alan Gordon; he was the son of a great Baron, and Master[1] was the title that belonged to him. It was a castle that he lived in, great and gray and old, with winding stone staircases, and queer narrow windows, and lofty turrets; yes, it was exactly like the pictures of castles in the story-books. You see, the pictures were made from real castles, not the other way. There the Little Master lived, with his father the Lord, and his mother the Lady, and his sister the Lady Elspat. These were the principal people, but there were many others in the castle, and every one of them his friend. There was the old nurse, Oona, who had been the Baron's nurse when he was little, and who was now so old and white that she was more like a white shadow than a real woman, and yet so kind and dear that one loved to be with her; and there

1 Master. In Scotland, the title of the eldest son of a viscount or baron.

was Duncan the steward, her son, himself an old man; and there was John the smith, and Donald the falconer, and Leezie the dairymaid, and a dozen more of them, young and old. And beside these was David Johnstone, the harper. David did not live in the castle; he wandered about the country with his harp, staying a night here and a night there, welcome wherever he went for the sake of his kindly face, the sweetness of his voice and harp, and the songs he sang.

All these people the Little Master loved, first for themselves, because they loved him and were kind to him; secondly, for the stories they told and the songs they sang. For the Little Master, and little Lady Elspat, who was about your little sister's age, loved songs and stories just as much as you do, and perhaps a good deal more; and they had no story-books: think of that! There were no books at all in the great old castle, and if there had been no one could have read them except Father Neil, the chaplain. I forgot Father Neil in my list of the Little Master's friends, and that was a sad forgetting, for he was one of the best of them, and knew some of the very best stories of all. But, as I was saying, no one else could have read books if there had been any. Those were wild, rude times, long ago and long ago. Very few people could read or write, and the Baron thought it a foolish and an

unmanly thing for a man to be seen poring over a written page. (There were no printed books in those days.)

Knotting a man's brains into cobwebs! he would say, when Father Neil would beg to be allowed to teach the Little Master to read and write. Not for my son! Set him on a horse, and let him ride till he drops asleep in the saddle; so shall we make a man of him, not with moth-eaten parchment scrawled with foolish signs.

All the same, the Little Master wished to learn, and hoped some day to persuade his father to allow it; but now he must be content with stories; and as I said, he heard many and many of them; for all the Scottish people loved stories, too, and do to this day; and in the want of books they stored their brains with tales and ballads, grave and gay, gentle and savage: of Border rides, fights, escapes, brave deeds of rescue and heroism, cruel deeds of blood and revenge. All these the two children, Alan and Elspat, used to hear, over and over, till they knew them by heart; and then they liked them all the better, because if Oona or Duncan or David made a mistake of a single word they could correct it, and that was a pleasant thing to do.

Suppose it was the story of Kempion that old Oona

was telling, as she sat at her spinning-wheel, twirling the white flax in her fingers.

They would be sitting on the wide landing at the head of the great stone staircase; all three close in the corner, to be out of the cold blast that whistled up the stairs; Alan on his three-legged stool (he called it a creepie); Elspat on the pretty little low cricket that Tam the joiner made for her, of walnut wood, with a wreath of daisies carved round it. The little girl wore a short frock of homespun cloth, or in summer of linen; wool and linen alike were spun by old Oona, and woven by the Lady and her maids at the looms that stood in the great stone workroom; but the boy's frock or tunic was of soft leather, with a leather belt round it, and wooden buttons, carved by the same skilful Tam, into the likeness of animal's heads: a dog, a horse, a wolf, and a fox. Alan wanted a stag, but Tam said no, the horns would break too easily, and his buttons were to last him all his life.

And what were the children like, inside these quaint clothes? Why, the Little Master was brown like his own coat, from running in sun and wind. His hair was brown too, and his eyes like dark diamonds. He could run like a hare, and whistle like a blackbird; he rode his pony bareback, and he was learning to shoot straight and far.

Oona, Alan And Elspat.

For the rest of him, you shall see for yourself what kind of boy he was.

And little Elspat was just a posy out of a garden, so sweet and fair was she, with her yellow hair and her rosy cheeks. She could ride too, but not shoot. While Alan was practising with bow and arrow, she would be sewing her seam at her mother's knee, or watching the weaving, or learning from Oona how to twirl the flax for the spinning.

But all this time poor Oona is waiting with her story to tell!

"'Tis of a sweet young lassie," said the old woman, "as if it were sister to you, my bairn, but older, well on her way to be a woman; and ohon! and alas! Her mother dying when she was a wee bairn, and her father married again to the worst woman ever lived in this world. And this— Witch, for she was no better, put a cruel charm on the poor young thing, and turned her into a fiery snake, and bade her swim over the seas, and climb the Estmere Crags, and there bide.

"'And never, never shall ye be saved,' she said, 'till Kempion, the king's own son, come to the crag and thrice kiss thee. Till the world comes to an end, saved shall ye never be.' So the poor young thing, she took her yellow hair about her and tried to flee, but that moment

the change came, and she turned into the most fearsome dragon beast that ever ye saw."

"I never will see one!" cried little Elspat, shivering and drawing close to her brother.

"I would," cried the Little Master, "if there was one alive now. I wish there was, so that I might kill it. Is there one, do ye think, Oona?"

"Nay! Nay, thank the good Lord!" the old nurse would say. "This was before good Saint Patrick of Ireland came and drove out all the wicked snakes and dragons and the like. But this poor thing, now, she wasn't wicked, ye see, for never the bit could she help herself. So there she stayed in a den, like, by the Estmere Crags, and all day long she cried on Kempion, if he would only come and save her. So word of that came to Kempion, the bravest prince that was in Scotland, and he built a boat, and he and his brother sailed the sea till they came near the Estmere Crags; and there they could not come anigh the shore, for the fiery beast that she was flung herself out of the den and struck the boat, and banged it as if she would have it in pieces. 'Be still!' the Prince bade her; but she cried all the louder, she never would quit her den till Kempion, the king's own son, would come to the crag and kiss her three times."

"Thrice, Oona!" cried the Little Master. "Not 'three times!'"

"Sure, child, dear, 'tis the same," the old nurse would say. "Thrice, then, it was. So with that what did he do, the bold lad that he was, but bend over the crag and kiss her on the ugly snout of her. Into her hole she swung, and out she came, and worse than before, all fire and flames; and what but the same words over again—she never would come out of it till Kempion, the king's own son, would come to the crag and kiss her thrice so, child, dear, that was what he did, the bold young heart of him, that's like your own, Master Alan. And with the third kiss, see now, what happened. All at once and behold, she changed from a flaming dragon to the most beautifulest maiden the sun ever shined on; and when he looked at her he saw—what would he see, Elspat, my bonnie?"

"His own true love!" cried little Elspat. "Oh, this is the part I like. It was his own true love, and her hair came down in a golden cloak to her feet that were white as cream. Go on, Oona!"

"And so it was!" said the old woman. "And ye may think how he grieved in his heart at the trouble that was put upon her. But now it was all past and gone, for he took the sweet young lady in his boat, his brother by to help him, and home they went to the king's court, and

there Kempion married his own true love, and she to tread on velvet and lie on satin the rest of her life.

"So there is the story, and now run away to your supper, the two of ye."

"Good-by, Oona. Thank you for the story!" cried the Little Master. "Come, Elspat."

"By, Oona," said the little girl, throwing her arms around the nurse's neck. "Dear Oona!"

Then hand-in-hand the two children sped down the winding stone stair to the great hall, in a corner of which their little table was laid.

What did they have for supper? Porridge (they called it "parritch!") and milk—no sugar! and oatcake baked in the ashes. This was their supper and breakfast all the year round. They never thought of anything else. And for dinner—but we will tell about dinner another time. When they had finished their supper they would curl up together on the broad window-seat, and watch Duncan laying the table for my Lord's and my Lady's supper that was to follow; the plates and dishes of silver and pewter, the horn spoons (no forks in those days!), the gilt cup that the Queen had sent to my Lady on her marriage. Or they would gaze through the great window at the sunset sky with the dark trees against it, and the long sweep of the avenue; gaze eagerly till round the curve they saw

the glitter of steel and heard the tramp of horses. Then down the long avenue, under the arching trees, would ride the Baron and his men, sometimes in hunting trim, with maybe a deer slung across the saddlebow of the chief huntsman, and each man of them dangling a rabbit or a brace of moorfowl; sometimes from war, grim and dusty, with dark stains on their leather coats and bright armor. When they saw this, little Elspat would cry, and shudder, and run to hide her head in her mother's lap; but Alan would throw his head back, and his eyes would flash and his hands clench. Was he not the Master of Morven, to be the Baron some far-off day? When he was a man he would ride with his father, on hunting, yes, and on war-parties too. But just then, most likely, Oona would come, blinking over her little horn lantern, and off must go little Master and little Lady to bed, as if they were any cottager's children instead of those of a noble Lord.

CHAPTER II

THE SMITH'S STORY. VALENTINE AND ORSON

IT was a wild afternoon of wind and rain, and the Little Master could not ride out to try the young hawks, as he had meant to do. Elspat was at her embroidery lesson, and Duncan would not let him play at ball in the great hall because he had broken a pane of glass there the day before. Glass was a rare thing in those days, and the pane might go long unmended. Altogether the Little Master was feeling rather forlorn; he looked out into the courtyard, where the rain was beating and the gusts whirling. Presently, from an open doorway came another kind of whirl, a puff of smoke shot through and through with fiery sparks; and at the same time, clink! clink! clink! came the friendly, musical chime of hammer on anvil. The Little Master's brow cleared; he would go see John, the smith. There would be warmth and light and friendliness. He ran down and across the court, and was soon there, shaking the raindrops from his doublet.

"And what are you doing, John Smith?" he asked.

The smith looked up with a friendly nod.

"You're there, Little Master, eh?" he said. "What am I doing? See! the sword my Lord broke on his last foray. 'Tis a good blade, and I shall make a rare dirk of it. Hey! Gibbie, blow me the bellows there!"

Gibbie, a rough, clumsy lad about Alan's own age, started forward, and in so doing jostled the Little Master, rubbing his sooty shoulder against the brown doublet.

"Out of my way, clumsy oaf!" cried the Little Master, and struck the lad a swinging blow on the ear. He drew back with a dark look.

"Hoot, toot!" said John, the smith. "Softly! softly! be not hard upon Orson, young Valentine! God made ye both with one stir of His finger in the clay-pool behind the door."

"I'm sorry, Gibbie," said Alan, who seldom could hold anger for a full minute. "I'll fight you if you like; or—here! Take this pastry cake! Cook gave it me out of the oven. Nay, you shall eat it!" and he thrust the dainty into the lad's mouth before he could speak. "There, John Smith, I have made amends. Now, show me the blade!"

The smith moved aside, and there on the anvil lay a broken sword—the hilt and perhaps half the blade—glowing ruddy white. Waves of light seemed to run up and down its length; Alan thought he had never seen

so beautiful a thing. Now the smith struck the glowing metal lightly, and the sparks flew out like drops of fire on either side. Taking it up in his tongs, he looked it all over carefully, and shook his head.

"Not yet!" he said. "Into the fire with you once more, my beauty!"

He nodded to Gibbie, who blew the bellows with right good will, the Little Master lending a hand. The flames leaped roaring up the chimney, the coals glowed red and white. Thrusting the blade among them, he heaped them over it, turning it this way and that to meet the full strength of the fire; then drawing it out and laying it once more on the anvil, he fell to hammering and shaping the white-hot iron, humming to himself the while.

The two boys watched eagerly. Gibbie was to be a smith too when he was man grown, and then he would make swords and daggers for his young lord, and that would be Alan. Perhaps both were thinking the same thought; but now another came into Alan's mind.

"What were those names you called us but now, John Smith? Valentine, Orson? 'Tis a story, maybe. Tell it to us now! See, we are friends, aren't we, Gibbie?"

Gibbie nodded, his mouth full of pastry; John, the smith, looked across his anvil well pleased.

"'Tis a story, sure," he said, "a true tale my grandame

told me. Long ago she died, but I mind the most of it and you shall hear it."

He bent over his work again, turning and shaping the glowing blade, and as he wrought he told the story of Valentine and Orson.

"Once upon a day, and it was the day of Saint Valentine, the King of France rode out a-hunting with his knights. King Pepin it was. I mind me of the name, always thinking it strange to call a King so near after an apple. He hunted here and there in the forest, and as he looked through a green bush he saw something shining on the ground. He came nearer, and what was it but a new-born babe, wrapped in a mantle of gold that was pinned with a silver pin, and lying on a kerchief of scarlet silk. 'Twas a fair child, white as snow, with rose-red cheeks; and as the King looked it held out its arms and smiled like any cherub. So the King, who was kind of heart as any simple man, bade his knights take up the child and bring it home to court; and, since it was Saint Valentine's Day, he named the babe Valentine, and had him well and tenderly reared till he grew up a good knight and true. Now the very day that Valentine was made a knight came three pilgrims to the King making great outcry. There was a wild boy, they said, in Artois forest, who made destruction of everything that came

within his reach, being strong as a bear, and savage as one: looked like a bear, too, they said, and altogether a fearsome thing. No one in that countryside dared go near him, and would King Pepin send help?

When Valentine heard that, he cried out for joy. 'Let me go, Master King,' he said, 'so I shall have my first knight's adventure!' So the King gave him his blessing and a good sword, which was worth three of it, and Sir Valentine mounted his horse and rode off to Artois forest. No sooner there but he saw the savage boy: a big, strong youth, of his own age or thereabout. He was shaggy as a bear, with the thick, brown hair that was on him, and for all his clothing a bear-skin over his shoulders, and in his hand a great, knotted club the size of my biggest sledge there." The smith nodded at a huge hammer that hung against the wall. "When the man-bear saw young Valentine he up with his club and at him with a growl and a roar as of twenty bears in one; but the knight was ready for him with his good blade, and I warrant you he roared in other fashion when he first felt cold steel."

"What like was the sword?" asked the Little Master. "Was it like the great two-handed one that hangs in the hall?"

"E'en just!" said John, the smith. "And you may guess how the taste of it came to him. Well, 'twas a stout battle,

strength to skill, knotty oak to shiny steel, but it ended the right way, and the bear-lad came to court, who but he, tied to the tail of Sir Valentine's charger. At first he drooped and pined, but Valentine had that goodness and gentleness in him—mind that, my little Lord!—that he tamed the wild spirit of the lad till he had him like the dog that licked his hand, and taught him this and showed him that, till he grew a true and gentle squire to Valentine, and the two were like brothers for love.

"Now, there is half the story for you," said John Smith, "and for the other half ye must wait till I cool my blade in the water. Hey, there, Gibbie! shut thy mouth and open thine eyes, and fetch the bath!"

Gibbie ran, and brought from a dusky corner a long wooden box or trough, full of water. The smith held up the dagger, still glowing rosy white; then he plunged it into the cold water, and it hissed like the fiery snake in the old nurse's story. The brightness went out of it, and it lay black and lifeless.

"There!" said John Smith. "Lie there awhile, my beauty, and cool thy hot temper a bit. Finished, Master? Nay! nay! there's a mort of work yet before 'tis finished. This, look you, is to be as pretty a bit of steel as ever Lord wore at his belt. After this must come the oil bath, and then the

rubbing down, and then the polishing, and then—whew! 'tis hot work enough, so it is!"

"Sit ye down and rest, John Smith!" cried Alan; "and while you rest, you can finish the story!" he added slyly. "You left it cut in the middle like an apple."

The smith rubbed his sooty hand across his forehead.

"The story!" he said. "'Tis more of supper than story I'm thinking now, Little Master. But you're right: a promise is a promise, full or fasting. Sit ye down again, and we'll have it. Where was I now? The work has driven the play clean out of my slow butter-wits."

"Valentine was grown up a knight!" said the Little Master.

"He had fought the wild boy!" said Gibbie.

"And made him tame, and was good to him!" said the Master.

"And his name was Orson!" both boys ended together.

"So 'twas!" said John the smith. "Meaning a bear, or some such, from his breeding and manners, though now he had left those behind.

"Well, sirs, so lived they happily at the King's court till one day some popinjay made game of Valentine for that he was a foundling and knew not his parents' name. Right mad was the young knight at that, and vowed he would not rest till he found those parents, were they