

Dunira's Men

'Another Upper-Strathearn myth & legend'

In Strathearn, immediately to the north of the village of Comrie, rises a wooded mountain, which the inhabitants of the strath, in lieu of a more definite appellation, have named Dunmore, or the big hill. The bosom and shoulders of this mountain are thickly covered with oak and pine trees, but its summit is as bare and rugged as the head of a vulture. In the glen below are rich pasture lands beautifully interspersed with cultured forests; the corn of the industrious swain waves luxuriously, and the lazy black cattle graze quietly on the rich meads of Dunira. But at the period of our tale these meads and forests were in the possession of a proud highland chief, and the corn and steers were guarded by armed men. Near the foot of the Dundurn Hills stood the baronial hall of Dunira, who was as proud and haughty as if his veins contained in direct succession the unadulterated blood of Nimrod, and who looked upon his clansmen's huts and lowing herds and wide lands, and flowing tower, as mere accessories to his individual greatness. Lord of a wide heritage, which his serfs had won for him by constant aggression, he acknowledged no superior whom their swords could not subdue, and no equal whose following and pedigree were inferior to his own; impetuous in his wrath, implacable in his revenge, looking upon men as the mere creatures of his will – the slaves of brutal dogmatism which has never been opposed – he stalked about in feudal majesty, himself the slave of self-exaggeration.

Nature, which seldom deviates from the laws of hereditary transmission, which gives to the lion and tiger the ferocity of their sires, has given to this mountain despot a child as lovely, amiable, and gentle, as her father was stern, austere, and fierce. In the halls where the minstrels sang of her beauty, of that beauty's witchery and power, of her lofty and warlike lineage, of her destiny as the chieftainess of a bold and devoted clan, she preserved the soft and gentle bearing of a maiden, and looked upon the paraphernalia of war with more of dread than it would have pleased Dunira to know. Chiefs whose haughty heads were seldom stooped to mortal men, bowed low to Ely Voich: eyes that gleamed with the fire of command looked beseechingly upon the damsel; but she turned coldly from them, and she would not listen to the tongue that proffered vows. Her lordly lovers brought her ptarmigan and roedeer from the mountains, the choicest fishes from the lochs and rivers, and the richest furs from the forests, but they were thrown as carelessly aside as they were received. To have looked upon her fair smooth brow, over which her golden hair was braided; to have looked into her deep blue eyes, that combined the purity of the Highland stream with the ethereal hue of heaven – eyes that told of warm feelings and deep devotion – eyes that spoke of ardent sensibility; to have looked into her eyes, so soft and gentle, and to doubt that Ely loved would have been impossible.

Duncan Bean was a villain, but to suppose that he was vile according to the modern acceptance of the word conveys a falsehood, he was a serf, a vassal, who dwelt on the lands of Dunira, and

consequently the fighting toiling instrument of this imperious man, who reckoned it a degradation to cultivate the food without which he could not live; but in mental relation to the chief he was free and unshackled. Duncan by some inscrutable power was early led to forsake his contemporaries, and wonder alone among the hills and valleys. Flowers from the lonely island on loch Earn, heath from Ben Cailiach, and rowanberries from distant Glen Tarken, were brought to his mother on expiation of his wonderings. He loved the tiniest flowers that bloomed upon the hills, not for the greedy wish to pluck them, but for their power to please; he loved the towering hill and broad lochs, not as a selfish lord who sees in them the heritage of his family, but more as a poet whose ideality could luxuriate on them, as fancy repopulated them with patriots and heroes; to him they were an inalienable estate, expanding as his fancy expanded and becoming richer with his enriching mind. He never joined in the roistering and wassailry of his brother clansmen. Absenting himself from the games on the green and the dancing in the hall, instead he roamed amongst the solitudes of nature, imbibing from the majesty around him and corresponding majesty of soul. As he contemplated the mighty works around him Duncan felt himself elevated to the contemplation of the Creator, and casting from him the chrysalis of feudalism, he became, and knew himself to be a man. Dunira however believed himself to be important in proportion to his advantageous greatness; Duncan beheld in him a human brother more powerful and more wicked than his fellows. It was often remarked, that when marauders were in the glen Duncan was ever amongst the first to repel them; but when the fiery cross summoned the clansmen to aggressive war, he was ever wandering amongst his lonely haunts.

The youthful poet seldom approached the baron's hall; he had an instinctive aversion to Dunira, which neither the habits of feudal submission nor the admonitions of his mother could suppress; but on the seventeenth birth-day of Ely Voich, curiosity to look on the "*white fawn*" of Dunira, the fame of whose beauty had haunted him even in the valleys of his love, induced him to mingle with the throng that gathered on the lawn before the tower. A gallery formed of pine trees, rough as they come from the forest, yet tastefully decorated with heather and wildflowers, was set apart for the aristocratic spectators, while the plebeians formed a circle on the lawn below. In the centre of the gallery sat Ely Voich, dressed in the richest vestments that could be fashioned from the finest tartans of her clan, smiling and blushing as she nodded her beautiful head, with its simple sprig of heath, to the matrons who were her kindred; near stood Dunira, his haughty face surmounted with bonnet and plume, and behind and around him were the cadets of his family. The Pibroch, wail, reel and strathspey, poured their competing tones on the faithful echoes around, and it was observed that Blind Ewan lightened with more exultation when gently praised by Ely, than when he took the martial bagpipes from her hand. The active dancers plied their supple limbs, the putting stone and bar flew through the air, and the ponderous kebar, hurled from herculean shoulders, fell lazily over the sward, and still the hand of Ely awarded to the victor the prize of his strength and address. Duncan had gazed upon her face with that soul-absorbed look which loses cognisance of all else save the object of admiration on which it is concentrated; her image was engraved on his heart; his imagination had never conjured up a vision so lovely; her every motion created a sympathy with him; her every smile bound him in a deeper fascination. At last the ring was cleared for the wrestlers, and as she rose to look anxiously at the competitors, he bounded into the circle and bowed to her with the grace of an

Apollo. Duncan was not a practiced athlete, but vigorous and active from healthful exercise, and stimulated by a powerful impulse he overthrew every opponent. *"This brooch is for thee, brave boy"* said Ely, blushing and presenting him with the silver toy. *"Do you deem it mine, Lady?"* asked the clansman, as bonnet-less and with bent brow he stood before her and made no motion of accepting it. *"Certainly,"* said the lady playfully; *"thou hast won it by thy address and valour."* *"It is beautiful lady, and will well become thy silken plaid; wilt thou give me in exchange the sprig of heath that gems thy hair?"* trembling as he spoke even the posture of his head could not conceal his blushes.

The lady gaily took the bonnet from his hand, and placing the coveted heath as well as the brooch upon it, bade him go for a foolish youth, as the haughty lordlings began to murmur at the presumption to the baseborn hind.

Shall we wonder if Duncan ever after roamed in the vicinity of Ely's home, and shall we wonder if similarity of sentiments and tastes drew them together as if by intuition! He culled for her the choicest flowers of the woods; she rewarded him at first with nods and smiles; day after day found the lowly youth and highborn lady visiting the same scenes, until familiarity broke down the barriers of caste, and they mutually acknowledged that they were dear to each other; but with this acknowledgement flashed before them both the wrath and vengeance of Dunira, if ever there meetings were discovered; for Ely to have smiled upon one of inferior birth, would have been in the eyes of the great Dunira a moral degradation; but to own that she loved a vassal, would have been superlative pollution.

Duncan Bean loved Ely Voich, and he told her so. He did not apologise for his inferior birth, because he knew it to be honourable; he did not deprecate his own boldness when he made the declaration, because he felt he was worthy of her. There are few things of which a man becomes sooner cognizant, than of his true position amongst his fellows, and there are few honours so cheerfully conceded as that to modest worth. The silly coxcomb, who assumes airs which only serve to expose his utter contemptibleness, ensures to himself scorn; but the intuitive egotist, who has sense to confine the estimate of himself to his own bosom, and who has modesty and honour enough to respect the arbitration of conscience, generally receives credit for all the intellectual superiority he may possess. The old woman of Ballandalloch yielded to Duncan in their rescriptions of legendary yore; the clansmen paid him that mysterious homage which ignorance invariably offers to intelligence; and Ely's love for him was strengthened by her respect for his masculine intellect and gentle sentiments. In him she had a glowing protest against exclusive nobility; from her heart he obtained a warrant of perfect equality. On an evening of autumn, when the leaves of the forest grow thickly and assume that mellow brown hue which invests the woody landscape with peculiar charms, Duncan and Ely stood beneath the shade of a lofty pine tree, and gazed upon the full moon as it slowly climbed the sky. Wrapt in their contemplation of the majestic scene, with its combination of bold highland peaks, deep sombre corries, bleak frowning woods, and ghastly waters, that mirrored the lamp of evening, yet trembled in the death-like pallor of its light, they forgot themselves, and yet they were the most appropriate feature that could have been chosen to lend a charm of life to the scene. Duncan was clad

in the picturesque garb of the hills, and his graceful form and finely-rounded limbs could be distinctly outlined even in the shade of the forest; his bonnet was completely divested of ornament, but around his brow the golden locks curled luxuriously; on his left arm he supported the maiden, with his right he grasped a sapling at his side. Ely clung to Duncan with a sense of dependence upon his superior strength, which, with the intuitive generosity of love, his spirit reciprocated; she felt not herself not to be a high born maiden – he forgot that vassalage clung like a curse to his race. There was repose in their attitudes, a graceful contrast to their relative positions that enhanced the grace of each.

Enveloped in a mantle that completely shrouded his person, and having upon his head a bonnet whose plumes shaded his dark and hirsute face, Dunira stalked amongst the trees of the forest, not to gaze with enraptured eye on nature, but to brood over imaginary wrongs, and nurse desires of selfish aggrandisement; at last he approached the unconscious lovers, who, lost in contemplation, still gazed upon the heavens. Suddenly the chief started and peered through the darkness, then crawling stealthily towards the youth and maiden, he laid his hand upon his daughter; the girl recoiled beneath his touch as though a snake had laid its clammy head upon her fair warm shoulder, and she shrieked till the echoes answered again, as Duncan grasped her father's throat. The maddened chief's eyes gleamed in hatred, surprise, and fury, and his dirk shone in the sepulchral radiance of the moon, as Duncan, recognising him, pushed him away. Ely sprung towards him, and prostrating herself at his feet, clasped his knees and supplicated, while tears and sobs choked her utterance. Excessive joy destroys our powers of action, excessive fury also destroys volition; rage, wounded pride, and the desire of vengeance, so completely paralysed Dunira, that he could neither strike nor speak, whilst Duncan, prostrated with fears for his lover, stood with bent head and folded arms the picture of resigned despair.

"Tomorrow," growled Dunira, as he glared at the youth, and his vengeance became reflective and deadly. *"Tomorrow, at sunrise, let the dog meet its master by the stone on the plain of Dunmore."* Without uttering another word, he raised his daughter, slowly yet forcibly, who, turning a despairing look to heaven, then upon her lover, moved feebly away with her father.

Duncan, prostrated by so unexpected a blow, stood motionless for some time after he was alone, then abruptly raising his eyes to heaven, and turning a long lingering gaze upon the dark hills he moved rapidly away. The youthful poet soon felt how much our appreciation of external nature depends upon the state of our mind as we view it; a few short hours, and all he deemed so fair and beautiful was transformed into a scene of gloom; the crags scowled darkly upon him as he walked rapidly to his humble home, and the wind moaned bodingly amongst the trees as he passed them. He threw himself upon his couch of heath, but not to sleep; he had often thought, when reclining upon his humble pillow, of her whom he should see no more – of her for whom he would have died and gloried in the sacrifice – this night he felt his doom was fixed. The morning was just breaking when he arose from his sleepless bed; he buckled the claymore to his side, which had never shone in massacre or foray, and threw his target on his shoulders; he had a brother, a boy with sunburn face and golden hair, who slumbered at his side: he kissed him gently and stole away from him; he had a

mother, of whose heart he was the joy and pride; he looked wistfully upon her as she slept, it was a yearning holy look that told of filial love and piety, and then he stepped proudly out into the glen. He walked lightly along, and looked with a thrilling heart upon the scenes so familiar to his love and youth. From the hills before him the ancient Caledonians had thrown themselves upon the conquerors of the world and died the foaming Ruchil with their blood; the mouldering stones bore their feeble testimony to valour of heroes whom tradition had canonised; and the agile Roedeer, as it cropped the herbage on the hillside and frisked as the sunbeams stole brightly over the scene, brought a tear to the vassal's eye; at last he reached the circle of huge gray stones which superstition invested with a gloomy character, and found Dunira with a few of the most resolute of his clan.

The chief stalked slowly on the heath with shaded brow and folded arms; his serfs stood motionless and silent, and watched his footsteps. The morning was one of those beautiful jubilees of nature which transfuse into the lives of meaner animals and souls of men a portion of their own brightness; but Dunira, burning with all the darker passions of his nature, felt not its influence; agitated with the feelings of a demon, he staked amongst the Druid stones, those records of an age which Christianity has not yet mollified, for if the holocaust smoked not in the cromlech as an obligation to Baal, the human sacrifice was yet offered up to expiate pride and ambition. *"To the rock of Essdownie"* he said when he beheld Duncan; and the clansmen formed a circle round the youth, followed the chief in solemn silence.

Essdownie is a torrent which fiercely ploughs its way through the bosom of Dunmore; so precipitous is its descent, and so huge the stones that it carries with it, that it has shaven the rocks on its margin as smooth as if they had been hewn by a chisel, and so plainly are their strata defined that they present the appearance of an artificial wall. Imbedded in the stream are huge boulders of whinstone, completely rounded and scooped like the quern in which the highlanders, far from a mill, yet *"grind the graden;"* they are forever full of water, and always created with foam. – Near the summit of Dunmore are two perpendicular rocks on either side of the stream; they seem as if they had been split by some of the Fions, that they might form an entrance to the waters, which, roaring and struggling through them, tumble in foam into a circular basin, the Gaelic name of which is rendered in classic Doric *"Diels Cauthron;"* pointed masses of black rock jut up amidst the boiling waters; stunted trees and shrubs, and creeping plants, grow on the steep banks of the torrent below this basin, or cling to the fissures of the rocks around it, and invest it with a dark aspect; the rocks which form its portals are bare even on their summit. To the top of one of these rocks Dunira led his band, and causing them to encircle the spot, save at its side adjacent to the cauldron, he confronted Duncan with a stern savage look. In which the wrath and exultation of a savage were blended.

"The crow that aspires to mate with the eagle must have daring wings" said Dunira, sneeringly; *"Will he essay to fly from this rock?"* The clansmen looked with a firm eye upon their chief and said not a word. *"Shall I send for Father Conlath to shrive thee, ere thou make the venture?"* Said Dunira once more, in bitter mockery; *"Or wilt thou be content to be assolizied by me? Here, Donald, Ewan, Alistair we award this dog the lash; to dogs it is gentle penance."*

The clansmen rushed upon their passive clansman, and divesting him of a part of his garments, tore his back with thongs of deer hide. Dunira, watched eagerly for some indication of his spirit sinking, but in vain. At Comrie, the Ruchil dashes rudely against a rock, and seeks to drive it from its bed, but the deep-rooted stone stands as firmly as Benmore, and vexes the waves until they recoil in foam. Duncan shrunk not under the lash bravely and stoically enduring the torture. The vassal looked with a calm unclouded eye upon his tormenter; the chief, fuming and exasperated struck him on the cheek with his clenched hand. The red stain glowed upon his face; his arms twitched convulsively, and as his chest heaved his clenched teeth could scarcely shut in a groan; by an effort he recovered his equanimity, and looked fixedly at Dunira, said in a low voice, *"Is it thus Dunira breaks the swords that guard him?"* "Vassal" growled the chief, furiously. *"Vassal in body not spirit,"* answered Duncan proudly; *"I have wielded my claymore only in the right, neither in midnight raid nor feud have I stained my blade because Conlath of St Fillans told me that heaven decries such deeds. The voice of nature tells me that I am a man; as such I am thy equal, Ely Voich, obedient to the voice of love, threw down the ramparts of birth, and deemed me meet to be her mate. Thou hast struck again! Farewell forbearance!"* And springing upon Dunira before he could retreat, he grasped him in his arms and bore him to the edge of the crag; he turned his face towards the cauldron, which foamed and roared in its fury. *"Proud Chief,"* he said passionately *"behold in that dark yawning gulf the power that shall make us equal; the crow with the daring wing will bear the eagle to his death."* So saying he sprang from the crag with Dunira in his grasp and their bodies in a few moments whirled into the boiling cauldron.

The spot is rarely passed by the highland wayfarer when the sun goes down, for even when the sun shines it is solitary and gloomy. Tradition tells of a white lady, who, rising from the foam of the cauldron, gazes upon the sky and wails for her plebeian lover, and the gray haired patriarchs and wrinkled dames of Aberuchill shake their heads and tell of Dunira's daughter, who stealing from her home when the moon shone, and after reason had fled, flung herself from the rock, that she might find both her lover and father to teach them both forbearance.

