

LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON

Cloud Howe

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PROEM

The borough of Segget stands under the Mounth, on the southern side, in the Mearns Howe, Fordoun lies near and Drumlithie nearer, you can see the Laurencekirk lights of a night glimmer and glow as the mists come down. If you climb the foothills to the ruined Kaimes, that was builded when Segget was no more than a place where the folk of old time had raised up a camp with earthen walls and with freestone dykes, and had died and had left their camp to wither under the spread of the grass and the whins--if you climbed up the Kaimes of a winter morn and looked to the east and you held your breath, you would maybe hear the sough of the sea, sighing and listening up through the dawn, or see a shower of sparks as a train came skirling through the woods from Stonehaven, stopping seldom enough at Segget, the drivers would clear their throats and would spit, and the guards would grin: as though 'twere a joke.

But God alone knows what you'd want on the Kaimes, others had been there and had dug for treasure, nothing they'd found but some rusted swords, tint most like in the wars once waged in the days when the wife of the Sheriff of Mearns, Finella she was, laid trap for the King, King Kenneth the Third, as he came on a hunting jaunt through the land. For Kenneth had done her own son to death, and

she swore that she'd even that score up yet; and he hunted slow through the forested Howe, it was winter, they tell, and in that far time the roads were winding puddles of glaur, the horses splashed to their long-tailed rumps. And the men of Finella heard of his coming, as that dreich clerk Wyntoun has told in his tale:

As through the Mernys on a day
The kyng was rydand hys hey way
Off hys awyne curt al suddanly
Agayne hym ras a cumpany
In to the towne of Fethyrkerne
To fecht wyth hym thai ware sa yherne
And he agayne thame faucht sa fast,
Bot he thare slayne was at the last.

So Kenneth was dead and there followed wars, Finella's carles builded the Kaimes, a long line of battlements under the hills, mid-way a tower that was older still, a broch from the days of the Pictish men; there they lay and long months withstood the folk that came to avenge the death of Kenneth; and the darkness comes down on their waiting and fighting and all the ill things that they suffered and did.

The Kaimes was left bare and ruined with walls, as Iohannes de Fordun tells in his time, a Fourdoun childe him and had he had sense he'd have hidden the fact, not spread it abroad. Some kind of a cleric he was in those days, just after the Bruce drove out the English, maybe Fordoun then had less of a smell ere Iohannes tacked on the toun to his name. Well, the Kaimes lay there in Iohannes' time,

he tells that the Scots folk halted there going north one night to the battle of Bara; and one man with the Scots, a Lombard he was, looked out that morn as the army roused and the bugles blew out under the hills, and he saw the mists that went sailing by below his feet, the sun came quick down either slope of a brae to a place where a streamlet ran by a ruined camp. And it moved his heart, and he thought it an omen, in his own far land there were camps like that; and he swore that if he should survive the battle he'd come back to this place and claim grant of its land.

Hew Monte Alto was the Lombard's name and he fought right well at the Bara fight, and when it was over and the Bruce made King, he asked of the Bruce the lands that lay under the Kaimes in the windy Howe. These lands had been held by the Mathers folk, but they had made peace with Edward the First and given him shelter and welcome the night he halted in Mearns as he toured the north. So the Bruce he took their lands from the Mathers and gave them to Hew, that was well content, though vexed that he came of no gentle blood. So he sent a carle to the Mathers lord to ask if he had a daughter of age for wedding and bedding; and he sent an old carle that he well could spare, in case the Mathers should flay him alive.

For the Mathers were proud as though God had made their flesh of another manure from men; but by then they had come to a right sore pass in the mouldering old castle by Fettercairn, where hung the helmet of good King Grig, who first had 'stablished the Mathers there, and made of the first of them Merniae Decurio, Captain-chief of the Mearns lands. So the old lord left Hew's carle unskinned, and sent back the message he had more than one daughter, and the Lom-

bard could come and choose which he liked. And Hew rode there and he made his choice, and was wedded and bedded to a Mathers quean.

But short was the time that he had for his pleasure, the English again had come north to war. The Scots men gathered under the Bruce at a narrow place where a black burn ran, the pass of the Bannock burn it was. And Hew was a well-skinned man in the wars, he rode his horse lathered into the camp, and King Robert called him to make the pits and set the spiked calthrops covered with earth, traps for the charge of the English horse. So he did, and the next day came, and the English, they charged right brave and were whelmed in the pits. But Hew was slain by an English arrow as he rode unhelmed to peer at his pits.

Before he rode south he had builded a castle within the walls of the old-time Kaimes, and brought far off from his Lombard land a pickle of weavers, folk of his blood. They builded their houses down under the Kaimes in the green-walled circle of the ancient camp, they tore down the walls of that heathen place, and set their streets by the Segget burn, and drove their looms, and were well-content, though foreign and foolish and but ill-received by the dour, dark Pictish folk of the Mearns. Yet that passed in time, as the breeds grew mixed, and the toun called Segget was made a borough for sake of the Hew that fell at the Burn.

So the Monte Altos came to be Mowat, and interbred with the Mathers folk, and the next of whom any story is told is he who be-

friended the Mathers who joined with other three lairds against the Lord Melville. For he pressed them right sore, the Sheriff of Mearns, and the four complained and complained to the King; and the King was right vexed, and he pulled at his beard--Sorrow gin the Sheriff were sodden--sodden and supped in his brew! He said the words in a moment of rage, unthinking, and then they passed from his mind; but the lairds remembered, and took horse for the Howe.

There, as they'd planned, the four of them did, the Sheriff went hunting with the four fierce lairds, Arbuthnott, Pitarrow, Lauriston, Mathers; and they took him and bound him and carried him up Garvock, between two stones a great cauldron was hung; and they stripped him bare and threw him within, in the water that was just beginning to boil; and they watched while he slowly ceased to scraich, he howled like a wolf in the warming water, then like a bairn smored in plague, and his body bloated red as the clay, till the flesh loosed off from his seething bones; and the four lairds took their horn spoons from their belts and supped the broth that the Sheriff made, and fulfilled the words that the King had said.

They were hunted sore by the law and the kirk, the Mathers fled to the Kaimes to hide, his kinsman Mowat closed up the gates and defied the men of the King that came. So they laid a siege to the castle of Kaimes; but the burghers of Segget sent meat to the castle by a secret way that led round the hills; and a pardon came for the Mathers at last, the army withdrew and the Mathers came out, and he swore if ever again in his life he supped of broth or lodged between walls, so might any man do to himself as he had done to the Sheriff Melville.

And for long the tale of Segget grows dim till there came the years of the Killing Time, and the Burneses, James and Peter they were-- were taken to Edinburgh and put to the question that they might forswear the Covenant and God. And Peter was old, in the torment he weakened, and by him his son James lay on the rack, and even when the thummikins bit right sore and Peter opened his mouth to forswear, his son was before him singing a psalm so loud that he drowned the voice of Peter; and the old man died, but James was more slow, they threw him into a cell at last, his body broken in many places, the rats ate him there while he still was alive; and maybe there were better folk far in Segget, but few enough with smeddum like his.

His son was no more than a loon when he died, he'd a little farm on the Mowat's land. But he moved to Glenbervie and there took a place, and his folk had the ups and downs of all flesh till the father of Robert Burnes grew up, and grew sick of the place, and went off to Ayr; and there the poet Robert was born, him that lay with nearly as many women as Solomon did, though not all at one time.

But some of the Burneses still bade in Segget. In the first few years of King William's reign it was one of them, Simon, that led the feud the folk of Segget had with the Mowats. For they still owned most of Segget, the Mowats, a thrawn old wife the lady was then, her sons all dead in the wars with the French; and her wits were half gone, it was seldom she washed, she was mean as dirt and she smelt to match. And Simon Burnes and the Segget minister, they prigged on the folk

of Segget against her, the weaver folk wouldn't pay their rent, they made no bow when they met the old dame ride out in her carriage with her long Mowat nose.

And at last one night folk far from Segget saw a sudden light spring up in the hills; it waved and shook there all through the dark, and from far and near as the dawn drew nigh, there were parties of folk set out on the roads to see what their fairely was in the hills. And the thing they saw was the smoking Kaimes, a great bit fire had risen in the night and burned the old castle down to its roots, of the stones there stood hardly one on the other, the Segget folk swore they'd all slept so sound the thing was over afore they awoke. And that might be so, but for many a year, before the Old Queen was took to her end and the weaving entirely ceased to pay and folk went drifting away from the Mearns, there were mickle great clocks in this house and that, great coverlets on beds that lay neist the floor; and the bell that rung the weavers awake had once been a great handbell from the hall of the Mowats up on the Kaimes high hill.

A Mowat cousin was the heritor of Kaimes, he looked at the ruin and saw it was done, and left it there to the wind and the rain; and builded a house lower down the slope, Segget below, yew-trees about, and had bloodhounds brought to roam the purviews, he took no chances of innocent sparks floating up in the night from Segget. But the weavers were turning to other things now, smithying and joinering and keeping wee shops for the folk of the farms that lay round about. And the Mowats looked at the Segget burn, washing west to the Bervie flow, and were ill-content that it should go waste.

But it didn't for long, the jute trade boomed, the railway came, the two jute mills came, standing out from the station a bit, south of the toun, with the burn for power. The Segget folk wouldn't look at things, the Mowats had to go to Bervie for spinners, and a tink-like lot of creatures came and crowded the place, and danced and fought, raised hell's delight, and Segget looked on as a man would look on a swarm of lice; and folk of the olden breed moved out, and builded them houses up and down the East Wynd, and called it New Toun and spoke of the dirt that swarmed in Old Toun, round about the West Wynd.

The spinners' coming brought trade to the toun, but the rest of Segget still tried to make out that the spinners were only there by their leave, the ill-spoken tinks, with their mufflers and shawls; the women were as bad as the men, if not worse, with their jeering and fleering in Segget Square; and if they should meet with a farmer's bit wife as she drove into Segget to go to the shops, and looked neat and trig and maybe a bit proud, they'd scraich Away home, you country cow!

But the Mowats were making money like dirt. They built a new kirk when the old one fell, sonsy and broad, though it hadn't a steeple; and they lived and they died and they went to their place; and you'd hear the pound of the mills at work down through the years that brought the Great War; and that went by and still Segget endured, outlasting all in spite of the rhyme that some coarse-like tink of a spinner had made: