The Massacre of Glencoe

By JOHN STIRLING

It is impossible to go through the Pass of Glencoe—wilderness of bleak mountain and terrible gorge—without being thrilled and terrified. Mountains, with iron and grey flanks, lift to the sky. In the glen can be seen the Chancellor, the Three Sisters of Glencoe, and Aonach Eagach—the "notched hill."

The rugged features of Glencoe are almost terrible in their beauty, and a fitter spot could not be found anywhere for the scene of an historical crime.

Macaulay, the famous historian, says of it:—In the Gaelic tongue, Glencoe signifies The Glen of Weeping; and, in truth, that pass is the most dreary and most melancholy of all the Scottish passes—The very Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Mists and storms brood over it through the greatest part of the finest summer ; and even on those rare days when the sun is bright, and when there is no cloud in the sky, the impression made by the landscape is sad and awful. Huge precipices of naked stone frown on both sides, marking the headlong paths of the torrents. Mile after mile the only sound that indicates life is the faint cry of a bird of prey from some storm-beaten pinnacle of rock.

On the face of a mountain is Ossian's Cave, and behind the Devil's Staircase, through which escaped two sons of the Chief of MacDonald when the diabolical commands of Dalrymple were being carried out.

On the bank of the River Coe is a Celtic Cross on which is written — "Reverently Erected in Memory of MacIain, Chief of Glencoe, who fell with his people in the Massacre of Glencoe, on February 13, 1692. Their memory liveth for evermore."

Although it is two centuries since the Campbells abused the hospitality of the MacDonalds, there still exists a rivalry between certain members of the Clans. Can you wonder at it ?

I have paid two visits to the Pass of Glencoe. On each occasion I was much impressed with the rugged and stupendous cliffs of the glen. It was with feelings of pain, akin to that of mingled hate and revenge,

that I beheld the field where the massacre took place. As I gazed, my thoughts wandered away back to that far-off time when it was peopled by the MacDonalds; and, as a token of respect, I bared my head in loving memory of the brutally murdered old Chief and his clan.

The companions that accompanied me had an alfresco meal near to the Pass, during which we much admired a rivulet tumbling down, white as snow, from the very top of the mountains.

The gruesome story of the massacre is familiar to all, but its circumstances will bear repeating.

In December 1691, MacIain, Chief of the MacDonalds of Glencoe, his snow-white hair falling on his shoulders, went to Fort William to take the Oath of Allegiance to William III. He was told that the submission must be made at Inverary. At 3 o'clock in the morning the aged warrior sets out for Inverary, travelling for two days without rest through a blinding snowstorm, where he is told that Ardkinglass, the Sherriff Depute, has gone off on a Hogmanay celebration.

MacIain's submission is overdue two days, and the Sheriff does not return for other three days, when he chides MacIain for having delayed. However, he said he would swear him, but could not guarantee that it would be in order.

The submission of his certificate was forwarded to Edinburgh, accompanied by a full explanation of the circumstances; but, as the Sheriff of Argyll's letter had never been produced before the Council, it was pronounced null and void, and a body of troops was despatched to Glencoe with secret orders to "extirpate that set of thieves."

It seems, therefore, that the fact of the Chief's submission was altogether concealed from the King, and that MacIain was held out in the light of a desperate and incorrigible leader of banditti, who was the main obstacle to the peace of the Highlands.

The position of the Highlands was being discussed in London at this time by Sir John Dalrymple, the Master of Stair, the Duke of Argyll, and the King.

In a letter Dalrymple wrote—"My Lord Argyll tells me that Glencoe hath not taken the oath, at which I rejoice. It's a good work of charity to be exact in rooting out this damnable sept—the worst in the Highlands."

On the first day of February news reached Glencoe that a detachment of Campbells was approaching, when the old Chief scents danger.

"Here's a burden, cousin," said Glenlyon, who led the Campbells. "It's no doing of mine, but a poor soldier must obey orders.

We only seek bed and bite for a week or two."

"You are welcome, you and your lads," replied MacDonald. "It's not much that Glencoe has to offer, but its all yours for the taking."

In the homes of the MacDonalds, the soldiers of Argyll are shown the highest hospitality. Whatever rivalry has existed is forgotten. After eleven days there is a change in Glenlyon's manner. He becomes gloomy and depressed.

On the very night of the massacre, Captain Campbell sat up playing cards with the old Chief's sons, so friendly was the intercourse between the soldiers and the clansmen. This was a most despicable action.

The MacDonalds become anxious. And, although Glenlyon joins MacIain's two sons, and laughs and jokes with them, it was strange behaviour for a soldier who had been ordered that day to murder those with whom he and his men had supped for two weeks!

The following is the order written by Dalrymple to Glenlyon:—"You are ordered to fall upon the rebelle, the MacDonalds of Glenco, and to put to the sword all under seventy. You are to have a special care that the old fox and his sons do not escape. This you are to put into execution at five o'clock

precisely. This is by the King's special commands, that these miscreants be cutt off root and branch."

At five o'clock in the morning the Campbells prepare for the massacre, heavy snow falling before a strong gale; when the soldiers appear at the door of the MacIain, they ask permission to discuss important business that has arisen suddenly.

As the seventy-year-old Chief is struggling into his clothes he is shot; his wife stripped, and the rings torn from her fingers. Amidst the wild tempest the shots cannot be heard, and in the houses of the glen bayonets are thrust into the sleeping victims.

The two sons of the ancient Chieftan were not so confident as their father respecting the peaceful and friendly purpose of their guests. They observed, on the evening preceding the massacre, that the sentinels were doubled and the mainguard strengthened.

John, the elder brother, had even overheard the soldiers muttering amongst themselves that they cared not about fighting the men of the glen fairly, but did not like the nature of the service they were engaged in; while others consoled themselves with the military logic, that their officers must be answerable for the orders given, they having no choice but to obey them.

Alarmed with what had been observed and heard, the two brothers hastened to Glenlyon's quarters, where they found that officer and his men preparing their arms.

On questioning him about these suspicious appearances, Glenlyon accounted for them by the story that he was bound on an expedition against some of Glengary's men : and, alluding to the circumstance of their alliance, which made his own cruelty more detestable, he added—"If anything evil had been intended, would I not have told Alastair and my niece ?"

I may say here that Glenlyon's niece—sister of Rob Roy—was married to Alastair MacDonald, younger son of the old Cheftan. Scarcely a day passed that he did not visit the house of Alastair, and take his morning dram, agreeably to the most approved practice of Highland hospitality.

Re-assured by this communication, the young men retired to rest ; but were speedily awakened by an old domestic, who called on the two brothers to rise and fly for their lives.

"Is it time for you," he said, "to be sleeping, when your father is murdered on his own hearth ?"

This roused, they hurried out in great terror, and heard throughout the glen, wherever there was a place of human habitation,

the shouts of the murderers, the report of the muskets, the screams of the wounded, and the groans of the dying.

By their perfect knowledge of the cliffs amongst which they dwelt, they were enabled to escape observation, and fled to the southern access of the glen.

Meantime, the work of death proceeded with as little remorse as Stair could have desired: even the slight mitigation respecting those over seventy years was disregarded by the soldiers, who, in their discriminate thirst for blood, killed several aged and bedridden persons.

At the hamlet where Glenlyon had his quarters, nine men, including his landlord, were bound and shot like felons; and one of them, MacDonald of Auchintraiton, although he had General Hill's passport in his pocket at the time, had the same fate unscrupulously meted out to him.

A fine lad of twenty had, by some compassion on the part of the soldiers, been spared: Captain Drummond, coming on the scene, demanded to know why the orders had been transgressed, and caused him instantly to be put to death.

A boy of five or six years of age, clung to Glenlyon's knees, entreating for mercy, and offering to become his servant for life, if he would spare him. Glenlyon was moved; but

Drummond stabbed the child with his dirk, while he was in this agony of supplication.

The alarm being now general, many persons, male and female, attempted to escape. Flying from their burning huts, the half-naked fugitives rushed into a winter morning of darkness, snow, and storm, amidst a wilderness the most savage in the Western Highlands. Bewildered in the snow-wreaths, several sank to rise no more. But the severities of the storm were tender mercies compared with the unspeakable cruelty of their persecutors.

After the destruction of the houses, a heartrending scene ensued. Aged matrons, women with child, mothers with babies at their breast, and children toddling after them, might be seen wending their way, half-naked, towards the mountains in quest of some friendly hovel, beneath whose roof they might seek shelter from the pitiless tempest and deplore their unhappy fate.

Thirty-eight MacDonalds perish—among them a woman, an aged man, and a child of four years of age. Others perish in the snowdrifts of the gorges through which they try to leave in safety. As dawn broke smoke rose from the burning homes of the MacDonalds.

This detestable butchery excited general horror and disgust, not only throughout Scotland, but also in foreign countries.

Stair, however, seemed undaunted, and had the infamy to write to Colonel Hill, while public indignation was at the highest, that all that could be said of the matter was, that the execution was not so complete as it might have been.

Such is a brief account of the brutal Massacre of Glencoe.

Sir Walter Scott, in one of his poems, entitled "The Massacre of Glencoe," referring to this episode, says:—

The hand that mingled in the meal,
At midnight drew the felon steel,
And gave the host's kind breast to feel
Meed for his hospitality!
The friendly hearth which warm'd that hand,
At midnight arm'd it with the brand,
That bade destruction's flames expand
Their red and fearful blazonry.

Then woman's shriek was heard in vain,
Nor infancy's unpitied pain,
More than the warrior's groan could gain
Respite from ruthless butchery!
The winter wind that whistled shrill,
The snows that night that cloak'd the hill,
Though wild and pitiless, had still
Far more than Southron clemency.

Long have my harp's best notes been gone,
Few are its strings, and faint their tone,
They can but sound in desert lone
Their grey-hair'd master's misery.
Were each grey hair a minstrel string,
Each chord should imprecations fling,
Till startled Scotland loud should ring—
Revenge for blood and treachery!

In conclusion, let me say that no public notice was taken of this abominable crime until 1695—three years after it had been committed—when, late and reluctantly, a Royal Commission, loudly demanded by the Scottish nation, was granted, to make enquiries into the affair, and report the issue of their investigations to Parliament.

The members of the Commission, though selected as favourable to King William, proved that the letters and instructions of Stair to Colonel Hill and others, were the sole cause of the murders. They slurred over the King's share of the guilt that Stair's instructions went beyond the warrant, and reported that the whole weight of the charge fell on the Master of Stair.

It was proved that the King knew nothing of MacIain's offering to take the oaths within the time, nor of his having taken them soon after it was past; that the instructions of Stair had been the warrant for the slaughter; that it was unauthorised by the King's orders; and that the action

deserved no other name save that of a barbarous murder.

The report further named the Master of Stair as the deviser, and the military officers employed as perpetrators, and suggested that Parliament should instruct his Majesty to send home Glenlyon and the other murderers to be tried.

Stair was deprived of his office, obliged to retire from public affairs, and general indignation banished him entirely from public life. He died in 1707—on the day when the Treaty of Union was signed—not without suspicion of suicide. So ended the career of one of the most unscrupulous villains that ever polluted this land of ours.

Captain Campbell of Glenlyon, Captain Drummond, Major Duncanson, and other officers were left to be dealt with by the King; but they having gone to Flanders, the affair was allowed to fizzle out.

THE LAST OF THE MacDONALDS DIES IN THE "GLEN OF WEEPING."

LAMENT SUNG IN HIS MEMORY BY KENNETH MACRAE.

Angus MacDonald, the last of the MacDonalds of Glencoe, died on Tuesday, 3rd November, 1936, at his cottage at Tayfuirst, in the "Glen of Weeping." He was 84 years of age. Thus the last link with the massacred clan is severed, and Gaeldom has lost one of its most picturesque figures.

He had been out during the day, and went home at night and retired early to bed. Thinking he had fallen into a state of unconsciousness, members of the family became alarmed and sent for a doctor. Mr MacDonald died before the doctor arrived.

The Lament for the Sons of Gencoe was sung in his memory at a concert held in Fort William on Thursday night by a well-known Gaelic singer, Mr Kenneth Macrae, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting, and with whom I have held interesting conversations.

The audience listened with heads bowed, for Mr Macrae, who has sung this song to Scots exiled in all parts of the world, sang with deep emotion.

Angus MacDonald was a patriarchal figure, and his flowing beard and proud bearing will not soon be forgotten.

Every year, on 13th February, the anniversary of the massacre, wearing a heavy plaid and his clan's tartan, he went to the memorial cairn to pay homage to his forefathers. There he would stand, with head bowed, his snow-white hair flowing in the chill winter wind.

He was buried in St. John's Churchyard, in Ballachulish, when all the Clans were represented. There was a general stoppage of work, and the slate quarries at Ballachulish were closed.

Hundreds of people attended the funeral, many coming from Glenetive–20 miles away. They followed the cortege under grey skies from the little cottage at Glencoe.

They passed through the scene of tragic memory where MacDonald's ancestors suffered never-to-be-forgotten cruelties.

St. John's Church was packed, where MacDonald had been a faithful worshipper. The service was in Gaelic, unless for a 16th century English hymn, Deo Gracias, which was led by the united choirs of St. John's and St. Mary's Churches.

As the congregation filed out to the graveside the Lament for the MacDonalds of Glencoe was played on the organ.

Their memory liveth for evermore.