

The Revenge of Hamish

It was three slim does and a ten-tined buck in the bracken lay;
And all of a sudden the sinister smell of a man
Awaft on a wind-shift, wavered and ran
Down the hill-side and sifted along through the bracken and passed that way.

Then Nan got a-tremble at nostril; she was the daintiest doe;
In the print of her velvet flank on the velvet fern
She reared, and rounded her ears in turn.
Then the buck leapt up, and his head as a king's to a crown did go

Full high in the breeze, and he stood as if Death had the form of a deer;
And the two slim does long lazily stretching arose,
For their day-dream slower came to a close,
Till they woke and were still, breath-bound with waiting and wonder and fear.

Then Alan the huntsman sprang over the hillock, the hounds shot by,
The does and the ten-tined buck made a marvellous bound,
The hounds swept after with never a sound,
But Alan loud winded his horn in sign that the quarry was nigh.

For at dawn of that day proud Maclean of Lochbuy to the hunt had waxed wild,
And he cursed at old Alan till Alan fared off with the hounds
For to drive him the deer to the lower glen-grounds:
"I will kill a red deer," quoth Maclean, "in the sight of the wife and the child."

So gayly he paced with the wife and the child to his chosen stand;
But he hurried tall Hamish the henchman ahead: "Go turn," —
Cried Maclean — "if the deer seek to cross to the burn,
Do thou turn them to me: nor fail, lest thy back be red as thy hand."

Now hard-fortuned Hamish, half blown of his breath with the height of the hill,
Was white in the face when the ten-tined buck and the does
Drew leaping to burn-ward; huskily rose
His shouts, and his nether lip twitched, and his legs were o'er-weak for his will.

So the deer darted lightly by Hamish and bounded away to the burn.
But Maclean never bating his watch tarried waiting below.
Still Hamish hung heavy with fear for to go
All the space of an hour; then he went, and his face was greenish and stern,

And his eye sat back in the socket, and shrunken the eye-balls shone,
As withdrawn from a vision of deeds it were shame to see.
"Now, now, grim henchman, what is't with thee?"

Brake Maclean, and his wrath rose red as a beacon the wind hath upblown.

“Three does and a ten-tined buck made out,” spoke Hamish, full mild,
“And I ran for to turn, but my breath it was blown, and they passed;
I was weak, for ye called ere I broke me my fast.”

Cried Maclean: “Now a ten-tined buck in the sight of the wife and the child

I had killed if the gluttonous kern had not wrought me a snail’s own wrong!”

Then he sounded, and down came the kinsmen and clansmen all:

“Ten blows, for ten tine, on his back let fall,

And reckon no stroke if the blood follow not at the bite of thong!”

So Hamish made bare, and took him his strokes; at the last he smiled.

“Now I’ll to the burn,” quoth Maclean, “for it still may be,

If a slimmer-paunched henchman will hurry with me,

I shall kill me the ten-tined buck for a gift to the wife and the child!”

Then the clansmen departed, by this path and that; and over the hill

Sped Maclean with an outward wrath for an inward shame;

And that place of the lashing full quiet became;

And the wife and the child stood sad; and bloody-backed Hamish sat still.

But look! red Hamish has risen; quick about and about turns he.

“There is none betwixt me and the crag-top!” he screams under breath.

Then, livid as Lazarus lately from death,

He snatches the child from the mother, and clammers the crag toward the sea.

Now the mother drops breath; she is dumb, and her heart goes dead for a space,

Till the motherhood, mistress of death, shrieks, shrieks through the glen,

And that place of the lashing is live with men,

And Maclean, and the gillie that told him, dash up in desperate race.

Not a breath’s time for asking; an eye-glance reveals all the tale untold.

They follow mad Hamish afar up the crag toward the sea,

And the lady cries: “Clansmen, run for a fee!—

Yon castle and lands to the two first hands that shall hook him and hold

Fast Hamish back from the brink!”—and ever she flies up the steep,

And the clansmen pant, and they sweat, and they jostle and strain.

But, mother, ‘tis vain; but, father, ‘tis vain;

Stern Hamish stands bold on the brink, and dangles the child o’er the deep.

Now a faintness falls on the men that run, and they all stand still.

And the wife prays Hamish as if he were a God, on her knees,

Crying: “Hamish! O Hamish! but please, but please

For to spare him!" and Hamish still dangles the child, with a wavering will.

On a sudden he turns; with a sea-hawk scream, and a gibe, and a song,
Cries: "So; I will spare ye the child if, in sight of ye all,
Ten blows on Maclean's bare back shall fall,
And ye reckon no stroke if the blood follow not at the bite of the thong!"

Then Maclean he set hardly his tooth to his lip that his tooth was red,
Breathed short for a space, said: "Nay, but it never shall be!
Let me hurl off the damnable hound in the sea!"
But the wife: "Can Hamish go fish us the child from the sea, if dead?"

Say yea!—Let them lash *me*, Hamish?"—"Nay!"—"Husband, the lashing will heal;
But, oh, who will heal me the bonny sweet bairn in his grave?
Could ye cure me my heart with the death of a knave?
Quick! Love! I will bare thee—so—kneel!" Then Maclean 'gan slowly to kneel

With never a word, till presently downward he jerked to the earth.
Then the henchman—he that smote Hamish—would tremble and lag;
"Strike, hard!" quoth Hamish, full stern, from the crag;
Then he struck him, and "One!" sang Hamish, and danced with the child in his mirth.

And no man spake beside Hamish; he counted each stroke with a song.
When the last stroke fell, then he moved him a pace down the height,
And he held forth the child in the heartaching sight
Of the mother, and looked all pitiful grave, as repenting a wrong.

And there as the motherly arms stretched out with the thanksgiving prayer—
And there as the mother crept up with a fearful swift pace,
Till her finger nigh felt of the bairnie's face—
In a flash fierce Hamish turned round and lifted the child in the air,

And sprang with the child in his arms from the horrible height in the sea,
Shrill screeching, "Revenge!" in the wind rush; and pallid Maclean,
Age-feeble with anger and impotent pain,
Crawled up on the crag, and lay flat, and locked hold of dead roots of a tree—

And gazed hungrily o'er, and the blood from his back drip-dripped in the brine,
And a sea-hawk flung down a skeleton fish as he flew,
And the mother stared white on the waste of blue,
And the wind drove a cloud to seaward, and the sun began to shine.

- Sidney Lanier