The few inhabitants of the township of Jarlshof had at first heard with alarm, that a person of rank superior to their own was come to reside in the ruinous tenement, which they still called the Castle. In those days (for the present times are greatly altered for the better) the presence of a superior, in such a situation, was almost certain to be attended with additional burdens and exactions, for which, under one pretext or another, feudal customs furnished a thousand apologies. By each of these, a part of the tenants’ hard-won and precarious profits was diverted for the use of their powerful neighbour and superior, the tacksman, as he was called. But the sub-tenants speedily found that no oppression of this kind was to be apprehended at the hands of Basil Mertoun. His own means, whether large or small, were at least fully adequate to his expenses, which, so far as regarded his habits of life, were of the most frugal description. The luxuries of a few books, and some philosophical instruments, with which he was supplied from London as occasion offered, seemed to indicate a degree of wealth unusual in those islands; but, on the other hand, the table and the accommodations at Jarlshof, did not exceed what was maintained by a Zetland proprietor of the most inferior description.

The tenants of the hamlet troubled themselves very little about the quality of their superior, as soon as they found that their situation was rather to be mended than rendered worse by his presence; and, once relieved from the apprehension of his tyrannizing over them, they laid their heads together to make the most of him by various petty tricks of overcharge and extortion, which for a while the stranger submitted to with the most philosophic indifference. An incident, however, occurred, which put his character in a new light, and effectually checked all future efforts at extravagant imposition.

A dispute arose in the kitchen of the Castle betwixt an old governante, who acted as housekeeper to Mr. Mertoun, and Sweyn Erickson, as good a Zetlander as ever rowed a boat to the haaf fishing;11 which dispute, as is usual in such cases, was maintained with such increasing heat and vociferation as to reach the ears of the master, (as he was called,) who, secluded in a solitary turret,
was deeply employed in examining the contents of a new package of books from London, which, after long expectation, had found its way to Hull, from thence by a whaling vessel to Lerwick, and so to Jarlshof. With more than the usual thrill of indignation which indolent people always feel when roused into action on some unpleasant occasion, Mertoun descended to the scene of contest, and so suddenly, peremptorily, and strictly, enquired into the cause of dispute, that the parties, notwithstanding every evasion which they attempted, became unable to disguise from him, that their difference respected the several interests to which the honest governante, and no less honest fisherman, were respectively entitled, in an overcharge of about one hundred per cent on a bargain of rock-cod, purchased by the former from the latter, for the use of the family at Jarlshof.

When this was fairly ascertained and confessed, Mr. Mertoun stood looking upon the culprits with eyes in which the utmost scorn seemed to contend with awakening passion. “Hark you, ye old hag,” said he at length to the housekeeper, “avoid my house this instant! and know that I dismiss you, not for being a liar, a thief, and an ungrateful quean,—for these are qualities as proper to you as your name of woman,—but for daring, in my house, to scold above your breath.—And for you, you rascal, who suppose you may cheat a stranger as you would flinch a whale, know that I am well acquainted with the rights which, by delegation from your master, Magnus Troil, I can exercise over you, if I will. Provoke me to a certain pitch, and you shall learn, to your cost, I can break your rest as easily as you can interrupt my leisure. I know the meaning of scat, and wattle, andhawkhen, and hagalef, (b) and every other exaction, by which your lords, in ancient and modern days, have wrung your withers; nor is there one of you that shall not rue the day that you could not be content with robbing me of my money, but must also break in on my leisure with your atrocious northern clamour, that rivals in discord the screaming of a flight of Arctic gulls.”

Nothing better occurred to Sweyn, in answer to this objurgation, than the preferring a humble request that his honour would be pleased to keep the cod-fish without payment, and say no more about the matter; but by this time Mr. Mertoun had worked up his passions into an ungovernable rage, and with one hand he threw the money at the fisherman’s head, while with the other he pelted him out of the apartment with his own fish, which he finally flung out of doors after him.

There was so much of appalling and tyrannic fury in the stranger’s manner on this occasion, that Sweyn neither stopped to collect the money nor take back his commodity, but fled at a precipitate rate to the small hamlet, to tell his comrades that if they provoked Master Mertoun any farther, he would turn an absolute Pate Stewart on their hand, and head and hang without either judgment or mercy.