

He pressed her to his breast with a feverish fondness. "Not now," he replied, "not now my love."

"Ah! Varno, I know it, I know it," she exclaimed, clasping his hand, "you have tried to make grief a stranger to the bosom of Spoldanka, but in vain. I watch your face as hinds watch the stars, Varno, and though love spreads sunshine there, yet it could not conceal the dark clouds behind it. Cowards have assailed the honor of my husband, and the bow of Northumbria is preferred to the spear of Varno; but the day must come when Pictavia will again honor her hero."

"Never, Spoldanka, never," replied the Maomer; "never will Pictavia know her best friend. Pictavia," he continued, sighing deeply, "is already no more. Osneth is king; a bubble only glittered on the brow of Drusken. Had Brudus lived he could have matched our crafty ally. Let Drusken have pleasure; Osneth may take power, and give our chiefs hills and broad fields, and they will deny their fathers hearths and glory in the name of Saxon."

"Nay!" cried Spoldanka. "Varno, my husband, that cannot be; none are so vile as to forget their fatherland. They feel sore at thy fame now; but let Osneth dare to enslave Pictavia, and thy foes will sue for thy friendship, and Varno shall again be the saviour of his country."

"Never, my love," he replied calmly, "that may never be; look within the ramparts."

She turned, and started. Below was a moving mass bristling with bow, spear and battle-axe, and overtopping all floated the banner of Varno. The colour fled from her cheeks; her lips trembled, and with a look of blended love, pity and scorn, she hurriedly exclaimed, "Could Varno indeed turn traitor!"

"Nay," replied he, and pressing her to his bosom; "but Drusken and Osneth are resolved this night to try the strength of our castle;" and continued he, smiling, "you know it becomes the Maomer of Fife to give his king a suitable reception when he honors our home with his presence."

"Certainly," she cried, and started to her feet, "certainly; aye," she continued, waving her arm, while her dark eyes flashed with a light which might have kindled the soul of a coward. "Aye, I see it now, princely visitors must have a princely welcome. Ah! fool that I was to think they would rouse the bear and let him pass unharmed. Dishonor blast the name of Drusken and perish the chiefs of Pictavia. The country that honors not its friends must be trampled on by the foe. I thought, I suspected,—no,—no,—yes,—ah! I must have known that Varno had a tale not meet for lady's ear. But Spoldanka may have heard it. Say, do I dread danger? When cowards turned pale did Spoldanka tremble? O God! O God! is death the wreath that Pictavia awards my Varno?"

"Nay, my dearest, be calm," replied Varno hurriedly; "I know thee well; if I have erred, blame not thy lord, but thy lord's love. Hasten to thy bower; night sinks

rapidly. Ha! saw ye the fire flash on Whitecraig? They come,—away, away my dearest, and leave Varno to welcome his prince."

He caught her in his arms, kissed away the tears that began to glisten on her cheek, and disappearing with her from the walls, hastily placed her in her own chamber.

CHAPTER V.

Twilight was fast settling into night. The rugged cliffs and grey ramparts of Castle Clatchart gradually diminished in magnitude, and looked more and more grim and cold, as their chasms, embrazures and angles became less and less distinct. Heavily and slow the banner of Fife waved its dark folds over the donjon-tower, and fitful and deep the night breeze came moaning through the black masses of Earnside forest. The slow pacing sentinel moved his measured round; now seen, now hid, as his form athwarted the blue sky, or was lost in the dark shade of the castle, whilst his tread, audible and full, fell upon the heart with a dull, solemn cheerlessness which whispered insecurity, doubt, and danger. Now westward among the hills was heard the clamorous cry of the lapwing, as if intruders had disturbed the quietness of her solitude; and ever and anon the whirr of blackcock and hurried bound of red deer sweeping to the eastward told plainly that prowlers were abroad. Nor were the swamps of Blackcarn forest enjoying the repose. The bittern boomed dismally, the snipe whizzed viewless over head; and the wild boar, pressing through the crackling underwood, rushed furiously along, as if pressed by the spear of the hunter.

At length the indistinct trampling of many footsteps was audible, which grew louder and thicker the nearer they approached the Castle, and a hum and fitful rustling as the night breeze fell on the rose was heard from the black depth of the wood below, as if thousands were groping and straining up the steep acclivity. In a short while the noises met and mingled on the plain beneath the western wall, which looked as if covered with ever shifting masses of dark clouds. Anon all was settled and silent, but for a short time only. The music of a single harp, low and mellow, now sounded from the extremity of the dark field; the melody breathed nothing of war or midnight assault, but seemed rather to be the harbinger of peace and goodwill. It ceased, and in a few minutes the footsteps of a single individual were heard ascending with difficulty the steep road which led to the western gate.

"Who comes?" demanded the sentinel.

"The friend of Pictavia and no foe to Varno," was the reply.

"Your name, calling and mission, friend, before you proceed farther?" demanded the sentinel.

"My name is Eric," answered the stranger, "my calling nobler than even that of a gallant warrior. I raise the song and awake the harp before king Drusken. My mission is above a vassal's ear; your lord only must