

- - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

BY E. J. JENKINSON.

Chapter XXIV. After the Storm.

The gulls wheeled above the battlements uttering shrill, discordant cries and beating the air with their white wings, restless and disconsolate after a night's storm.

Although the day was only breaking, Sarno was all astir. Indeed, it would have been strange had it been otherwise with such a midnight awakening.

Alaster had come out of the struggle in the south tower nearly scathless, but weighted with responsibilities that swept the last trace of boyish heedlessness for ever from his face, and set the stamp of thoughtful determined manhood there. Without his seeking, against his wish, the headship of the clan had been thrust upon him. Henceforth he was lord over some hundreds of turbulent highlanders, many of them, at that moment in arms against him. It was not an enviable position.

Dark Rory was dead. Alaster's first care, after Fergus' followers had been either captured or cut down had been to have his body removed, and placed in one of the principal rooms of the castle. Helen, although badly stunned, soon recovered consciousness.

Now, within the chamber, where the outlaw lay, old Morag moved softly. She had insisted that she, and she only, should "streak the dead." Her face was calm. All the frenzy and bitterness had died out of it; but there was a wearied droop of the head, as though she was tired, and knew her work was done; as though the one thing she had lived for and longed for most, had come to pass.

When everything was in order, she went forward, and gazed upon Rory's face. The Dark, handsome features had lost their herd lines. Already death had brought out some suggestion of secret nobility and tenderness, which the fierce struggle of his life had too often hidden. The old woman looked long and earnestly, muttering to herself meanwhile, until the tears gathered in her eyes and overflowed. Then she turned away.

Within an adjoining room, Helen sat, silent, tearless, frozen with grief. The door opened, and Morag beckoned her.

"Come," she said, and Helen rose, and followed her into the death chamber.

"Helen Vor," said the old woman, "there is a secret I must tell you in the presence of the dead. This day sees your deepest sorrow, and mine also. But ah, me! it has a sting of joy in it! Roderick Macdon was my son. You start! You never guessed it! no one ever did — save Hugh Lamont; he knows, for he helped to lay the plot which was my ruin. Yes, Helen Vor, I tell you I was his mother; and all his life I both hated and loved him. I was forced into marriage with his father, and when Rory was born, I know not why I did not kill him; for I hated him because he was his father's child. When he grew to manhood the Vor and Macdon in him were always at strife; he could never decide to be wholly one or the other; but last night—last night, the Vor conquered. He gave his life to save you, and now I can love him altogether—I shall always love him."

Morag brushed a tear from her eye lashes and glanced towards the silent majestic figure on the bed. Helen made no answer.

"But sorrow goes with the night," continued Morag speaking in a kind of drone, "joy comes with the dawn. Look Eastward, Helen, the day breaks."

The girl lifted her head mechanically.

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The window was open and the cool breath of morning puffed on her brow.

Behind the dark mountain peaks, swathed round with wisps of vapor, a pale green flame streamed up. Even as they gazed, it broadened, and deepened, and changed, and the seabirds, still continuing their restless gyrations above the parapets, swept past, with a gleam, as of old, on their wings. Their almost human cries came in through the swinging lattice, shrill and clear.

"With the night goes the old life, Helen, with the day comes the new new hopes, new joys, new songs. We have long looked into the heart of the night, we Vors. We have wandered among the dim peaks, and the midnight valleys. We have fed on revenge and sorrow. Dark were the hours that saw birth of our hate—we have all hated more than we have loved—and in those dark hours we nursed our misery and vowed our vows. We brought on ourselves tears and death. In the future let us look Eastward."

Helen clutched her head in her hands.

"I loved him so, my grief!" she cried, "what worth is life to me now Oh! Rory, Rory—"

"We were born to struggle, we Vors," replied Morag, "we are the children of strife, but no one strives in vain. You have your work to do, Helen Vor. You have your people to lead. There is Stron-Saol before you yet, and your part still to play in the world."

"My part to play, Morag! All the fire in me has gone out. I feel dead, dead. I have ceased to care."

"You must look forward, Helen." She shook her head with her eyes. She shook her head with a cry of pain.

"That is for the eyes of happier women. For me there is nothing but the past."

Morag laid her hands on the girl's shoulders.

"Rouse yourself!" she said sternly. "Rory is dead with his honour. It is better so. Turn to the new life and your duty."

Helen pushed off the old hands, not angrily, but as though they hurt. She rose to her feet and moved restlessly to and fro. Her face was full of anguish.

"It is not for him that I grieve," she cried, "but for myself. He has wiped away the stains from his name, but I have failed, when he needed me most, I withdrew, I would not forgive, I was hard. And now he will never know how I loved him! Oh! to be able to live over again the days that are gone!"

"The days that are gone, are gone" said Morag, "even the good God cannot bring them back."

"That is true! I was forgetting,"—Helen's lips grew firm. She flung back her head, and though her eyes

still held their shadows and grief, a new light dawned in them.

"There is duty for me," she replied, "something to live for at any rate. You did well to remind me of that, Morag. Whatever the future may hold for me—and it will not hold what I most long for—I will not live a useless life."

She walked over to the bed.

"Oh, Rory," she murmured, "you were true to me after all, after all, after all. Surely my sorrow is dangerously near to joy. You were true. Still—" she flung herself down on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

Morag stole away and left her alone.

But she had not gone many minutes, before Helen heard a quick movement of feet in the corridor, and immediately after, there came a tap at the door.

"Come in," said Helen rising. One of the guards entered followed by Maisie.

Maisie had found great difficulty in getting admission to Helen at all. The moment she had appeared before the castle, she had been taken in charge, and brought to the guard room in spite of her vehement assertions, that she had come on a matter of life and death, and her protestations of innocence. The Vors had seen too much of her, and her father, and had heard too much about them lately, to give heed to what she might say. But in the guard-room, Maisie, rarely at a disadvantage, when her wits were concerned, threw out vague hints about the urgency of her mission; vowed that if they wasted another second in not taking her to their mistress, they wasted another second in not taking her to their mistress, the cause for which she had come would be lost, and they would live to regret it. She alluded to the strange disappearance of John Vor, and even went so far as to say that she had seen him since he had been taken prisoner. These varied suggestions and skilfully put references had won her present audience of Helen Vor.

"Maisie!" cried Helen, "you venture here! Do you not know that your life is one which my people seek this day?"

"Send the man off," replied Maisie. "I ken I'm in your power, but I've that to tell you which no one else must hear."

Helen waved the guard outside.

"Now," she said haughtily, "what have you to say? What brings you to Sarno?"

"This Mistress Helen. I can tell you how you may save your father."

"My father!" Helen moved forward with clasped hands. "My father! do you know where he is? Where is he?"

"Not so fast, Mistress Helen, not so fast," answered Maisie, "you must first consent to my terms."

"Terms! you have terms! you who betrayed me! you, who are in our power! Girl, I'll make you speak if you will not."

"And by that time," replied Maisie, "it would be too late, Mistress Helen. But,"—with a sudden pallor—"whose that yonder."

She pointed to the bed.

Helen glanced from one to the other.

"Do you not know?" she answered, "it is—Roderick."

"Dead!" whispered Maisie.

"Dead," said Helen.

The two women looked into each other's faces. Helen was stern and cold; she had buried her feeling out of Maisie's sight, but the latter shivered and shrank away.