

# - - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

BY E. J. JENKINSON.

## A Hut in the Waste. CHAPTER VI.

Up the lonely passes, among cloud wreaths and snow wreaths, toiled old Alan and the two girls. Glen Lara lay at the back of the mountains, whose bens rose before them grim and sheer into a grey sky. They had hoped to reach their journey's end by now, but heavy drifts and flooded burns hindered every step. The snow lay thick. Though it had vanished from the coast, it was loathe to leave the heart of the country it held in thrall. A more wild and desolate land could not be imagined than this rendezvous of the hill-robbers.

"Helen, Helen, I can go no further," humped Maisie, dropping down from the trunk of a fallen fir, "I'm so tired."

"God knows we are all dog-weary," replied Helen glancing up. It will be mid-day soon and we'll rest then.

"I can't. I won't move another step."

"Well! if you won't, you won't, and we shall leave you. But if you sit here long you'll die of cold—there's ice in that wind. Ah, Heavens! how it blows. Come! don't be a baby: take my hand."

She grasped the girl by the arm and dragged her to her feet.

"You're very cruel," whined Maisie with a reproachful glance out of her blue eyes—now bluer and colder than ever: "You have no mercy. I wish I'd never followed you. I wish I'd stayed in the lugger with Dark Rory."

Helen's brows knitted into a frown. "Why did you come?" she demanded.

It was a question that had perplexed her more than once, but to it Maisie would vouchsafe no direct answer. She said she was tired of Hag's Ha, and had friends among the Vora at Glen Lara. She wanted a change: she liked to see new things, and so had taken this opportunity of getting away from the mist of the bog-lands, where she had hitherto dragged out a slow and uneventful existence. She even hinted that she had in some mysterious way assisted in Helen's escape, and was glad to get beyond the reach of Fergus Macdon's vengeance; but her explanations were so vague and halting that they only left Helen in greater doubt and perplexity. Something was concealed which all her questions failed to unearth. She bitterly resented the company of this daughter of old Hugh Lamont, and feared that, though she had escaped from Castle Sarno, deception and treachery were still dogging her steps. Other suspicions which Maisie's good looks and interest in Dark Rory momentarily awakened brought a rush of colour to her face, but they were quickly and decisively suppressed.

Alan plodded on ahead. He drove his staff into the drifts before him at every step: for the higher he went the deeper they lay.

The country opened into a wide panorama of desolate glens and mountains. Rapid burns swept between ice banks, intersecting the endless sweep of white with a net work of black lines, and then losing themselves among the meshes of the hills. Here and there a clump of scraggy pines stood shouder-on to the north, from whence the wind cut with a low whistle which shook the last fall of snow from their sombre plumes. The cold was intense. It ceased to invigorate: it hung like a dead weight on the travellers. Not a living thing was in sight save a lean crow, hoarse with vain croaking, perched on the horns of a sheep's carcass: some miserable creature that had fallen a victim to the rigour of the season.

"But what on earth is Alan about?" said Helen suddenly. The old man was

on his knees bending over the ground. "How can I tell?" retorted Maisie.

Helen sprang into quicker steps. They had reached a spot where a rocky glen debouched on the moor. It stretched away in the direction of the more civilized regions of the South, but it was so wild, narrow and dark as to look quite impassable, yet to the lip of it came the recent trail of a horse's feet.

"What does it mean?" asked Helen.

"Where does the gully lead to, Alan?"

"You're Rory's back-lane to Sarno," said the old man. "I wonder who among our folk has been down-by in this weather? Sure! and he'd find it an ill push home."

"Home! Alan, the steps are going—"

He gave a short laugh, and looked questionably at Maisie.

"Well," said he at length, "as you're bound for Glen Lara you'll have to ken Lara's secrets. When a horse comes back to the glen, it aye comes with its shoes turned."

"Mad! ay. I'm Mad Morag o' Lara Glen. But many's the visit I've paid to Macdon's country when the mists were low." She looked at the horse and smiled sourly.

Helen also cast a sharp glance on the animal. It seemed familiar to her. She went up to it and stroked its glossy arched neck.

"Brownie," said she.

The mare whinnied and flung up her head.

"Why Morag!" exclaimed Helen, "it is Fergus Macdon's brown mare. The only thing in the world he loves. And her shoes turned too? What have you done, Morag?"

"Sit you down, Helen Vor and don't question the ways o' your own folk. Fergus Macdon's mare was she, and out of his stable she came, but de' if a bit will she ever go back to it."

Alan shook his head.

"You'll be the ruin o' us yet, Morag," he said.

"Not I! I love my own clan too well."

She sang the cauldron off the fire and dipped a little tin skillet into the contents. "The broth's ready," said she, "fine broth and strong, but where are the lads that should sup it, I wonder. He up the burn, Hector, and see if you can spy Big Neil and the hunters. Sure I thought they would have felt the smell o' their supper lang syne and been back betimes."

She served the travellers, however, but with much grumbling at the unpunctuality of the rest.

"And where is Dark Rory?" she asked after a pause. "Dark Rory should not be far off from Helen Vor. Where is he and his black band?"

"We left them on Loch Rual."

"On Loch Rual, on Loch Rual! and if Dark Rory sails home to Glen Lara, whyfore should Stron-Saul's daughter walk?"

"He is laying a trap to catch the old grey wolf and take him captive to Glen Lara," replied Maisie maliciously with a sidelong glance at Helen.

"The old grey wolf! Aye, the old grey wolf. Many a lamb and a sheep has the fell beast devoured."

She moved away shaking her head mysteriously and murmuring to herself the while. Helen and Alan looked annoyed, but Maisie cared not. She had paid them out for their indifference for her earlier in the day.

Mad Morag was a strange old woman with strange ideas, which she carried out in as strange a fashion. She was known and feared throughout Glen Lara as a spy-wife and witch, cunning in the use of herbs and healing wounds. Moreover she was the oldest living woman in the clan,

and had followed it through all its broken fortunes, but beyond that none could tell aught of her or her inmost thoughts; she kept them to herself.

"Capturing Sir Colin," she murmured, squatting down before Helen and loosening the coloured kerchief which confined her hair, "bringing him to Glen Lara, humph! Did Dark Rory see his brother at Sarno?"

"Fergus Macdon?"

"The same."

"He did."

"Like aye flies to like: both of them are devils. I see a long, long line o' coffins barring the Future."

"Whisht, Morag," said Alan, "don't frighten the lassies with your old wives' tales."

"Old wives' tales, forsooth, old wives'—I tell you this, Alan, there's a fine pot o' trouble brewing for you all. And you'll sup it, my man, sup it to the last drop. There'll be many a wry mouth in Lara Glen before Lammis or n'y name's not Morag Vor."

She drew a long hunting knife from a sheath in her belt, and held it up to the firelight. There was a sing: drop of blood on the point.

"Said I not so? trouble is abrewing for the Vora. The Dwarfie's whittle never lies."

"Hoots! granny, you skinned the hare with it," answered Hector. He had returned from a fruitless search up the burn.

"You reaving redshank," she screamed striking at him with the weapon. "Mis-call not the Dwarfie's whittle, or I'll put a malison upon you."

Hector avoided the blow, which he knew was nothing but a threat. "You're altogether too quick with curse and knife, Morag," he said: "for us poor folk, robbers and lifters though we be. Put it by, or I'll do it for my self."

Morag laughed harshly.

"You," she said wiping the knife on her grey hair, "you put it by for me; I'll see you kick in the death-throws first."

She shot it into the sheath and sprang up.

"Did you see aught of Big Neil?" she asked.

"Not a whit."

There was an uneasy pause. Alan thought of the hoof-prints on the snow; of the unseen hand that had crossed the moor before them that day. Who were they? from whence had they come? what was their purpose in that God-forsaken country at that time of year?

"I can't think what keeps them," said Morag again. "But they'll be back by the morning. Wrap this skin round you, Mistress Helen and go to sleep."

Once Helen woke during the night, but only to find the mare and Morag gone, and all else wrapped in profound calm.

"Hock!" exclaimed the girl, "I ken brawly. Sure and I've seen my father shoeing the beasts for the black-riders many's the time."

"I didn't know any of my people had been at Sarno lately," mused Helen.

"Ay! Mistress, you ken little, very little o' the ways o' your own folk."

They pushed on over the moor following the beat on the snow. Towards evening they came upon more hoof prints, but this time it was the steady regular track of some dozen horses moving in a compact body. Alan was visibly anxious.

"What do you fear?" asked Alan.

"Would to God!" he muttered, "we'd been able to push forward quicker: we should have been in Glen Lara days ago. I fear—oh! nothing. Maybe it's the Captain and his men on their way to Glen Lara before us. Not likely; not likely though. He'd not run the risk and come this way unless some misfortune had befallen him. And where could he get the horses? Ah well! we must be cautious. Mistress Helen, well move cannily, for