

FIRE AND SWORD:

A STORY OF THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE AUCHENAU WATCHERS STARTLED—THE WORK OF DEATH CONTINUED.

The work of slaughter which had begun at the foot of the Glen in the midst of a snow storm, and under the cover of darkness, was not confined to that spot alone, but by preconcerted arrangement progressed simultaneously throughout the entire district of the Macdonalds, wherever a cluster of clansmen's huts nestled together in the hollows of the great Glen.

Taking up the dropped thread of our narrative we return in this chapter to the uplying village of Auchenaon.

On being made aware of the murder of Allister Macdonald's domestic, and the warning words he had muttered with his expiring breath, Malcolm and young Ronald Macdonald, brother of the village tacksman, had jointly resolved that they would abide till daybreak under the tacksman's roof, and if aught unusual occurred arouse the clansmen of the village to the defence of their lives and homes.

The Sergeant's party had marched down the north western slope of the Glen, and as Auchenaon lay between that and the humble farm at the Craigs—where so much that was dear to his heart was enshrined under a humble roof of turf—Malcolm Macdonald was happy in the thought of her security from injury or insult at the hands of Sergeant Barber's rude soldiery. The Craigs could not be reached in the ordinary way without first crossing his path, and was on the head of the red-coat who might stealthily seek a location there. A swift pursuing foot, a strong arm and a keen blade would settle eternal accounts with him ere his dastard mission was accomplished. This resolve Malcolm had mentally attested a score of times that fatal morning, and he and high heaven were alone conscious of the strength and intensity of his determination.

"God!" he exclaimed within his mind as the dark possibility of and again took possession of him, "but for one justifiable chance of grappling the dastard Sergeant on the threshold of Helen Cameron's door. The just sword of Retribution and not of ignoble Revenge would then pierce his plotting, e-ward heart." But whether that satisfaction was yet to be his let the succeeding incidents of our story disclose.

Meantime the tacksman and his brother Ronald, and one or two more of the prominent village clansmen sat around a glowing fire of peat under the tacksman's sheltering roof. Malcolm was also by preference one of the watching party, as stated, and wild and startling were the stories of legend, feud and foray erst shared in by the clan, or related of their daring forefathers, which circulated round that picturesque fire of burning peat.

Stories of the personal prowess of M Ian and his followers during the late Jacobite war, of Dundee, under whose banners the Macdonalds had conspicuously arched and marched, were vauntfully repeated and dwelt on; and such stories were amply interlarded with the supernatural element which is never absent from the superstitious mind of the true Celt. The turn of the conversation naturally took color from the circumstances of their immediate surroundings. The snows and winds of winter were above and around them, and the Glen and its tenants were in the power of a hostile and suspected soldiery, who, under the guise of friendship, treacherously thirsted for their blood.

With increasing fury, the man's blast threw itself against the closed door and windows of the apartment wherein they sheltered themselves, and then, defeated of its purpose, ingress, fled shrieking down the mountain hollows of the Glen. Ever and anon, the watchers, startled out of the sense of security for the moment, listen to the moaning blast outside, and one of the party going to the door would look narrowly around the place lest the soldiers might, perchance, return on them unawares.

"God in heaven!" exclaimed the tacksman, retaining from an observation made outside the door, "I saw the wrath of M Ian a moment ago fall bleeding on the shuddering snow."

As if stricken by one impulse the entire group of watchers sprang to their feet with a questioning look of horror on their faces, but the next moment as if recollecting their senses, they one by one resumed their seats around the glowing fire of peat.

"A friend's wrath seen before day-break is death to that friend," solemnly remarked one of the group, a truism which they all knew or at least believed. "But surely," added the speaker, "your eyes mislead you? (addressing the tacksman personally.) Like thoughts, like visions, you know, Tacksman."

"Yes; but, lads, that was a true sight!" rejoined the bewildered tacksman, drawing his fingers across his eyes

as if to clear away the lingering vision; and you may think me possessed of a spirit, but I distinctly hear now the sound of musketry down the Glen.

"Peace, Allister, peace!" whispered Malcolm, the fire of expectation in his eyes. "We are watched in turn; I saw this moment a shadow darken the window," and grasping the naked blade of his dirk, he crept on all fours towards the door, and thrusting it quickly aside, he sprang suddenly across the intervening space and confronted—the Red Hughie.

"Wretch!" exclaimed Malcolm, stung with sudden passion, "take that, and sleep to-night on the snow," and coincident with the strong words, the uplifted dirk gleamed whiter than the falling snowflakes for a brief moment, and was swiftly buried the next instant in the apostate's heart.

A wild, strange cry of pain cut with piercing edge the thin cold air, and ere the crowd of watchers had well risen from their faces round the fire, the stalwart young Highlander had dragged his just victim across the threshold as an evidence of their danger, and of his justification of the fatal act.

"The Red Hughie!" they had only time to conjointly exclaim when the half-closed door was thrust violently up, and the narrow threshold blocked with wrathful faces and gleaming levelled bayonets.

The small group of Clansmen—only some six or seven in number—were blanched with a sudden astonishment at the sudden appearance of the red-coats, and grasped blindly at dirk and claymore as if by instinct rather than preconcerted design, realizing for the moment that all hope of escape or successful defence was thus in overwhelming measure cut away.

"Fire!" cried the voice of Sergeant Barber from behind his men, and quick on the order, a dozen shots riddled the back wall of the small apartments, and dropped in their passage five of the seven clansmen, leaving Malcolm and young Ronald Macdonald alone on their feet.

"Follow me," cried Malcolm, and swinging his claymore around his head he made a rush at the crowd of red-coats blocking the doorway, who fell back on approach, and striking down several who attempted to oppose him he fled across the flat ground at the back of the village and was presently sheltered by the rough crags of the adjacent hill foot from the shots of the pursuing soldiery.

Pausing to recover his breath and bewildered senses for a moment, he looked back towards the dimly-shadowed village, and was aware that he stood unpursued and alone.

Ronald Macdonald was nowhere to be seen. It had fared less fortunate with him. In making to follow up Malcolm's death-struggled passage a shot had pierced his right arm, and the uplifted claymore, edged with death, had dropped useless at his feet. Thus rendered defenceless, a desperate ingenuity had come to his aid, and tearing with his left hand his plaid from his shoulders, he threw it across the faces and pointed muskets of the soldiers, and in the confusion of the moment, leapt lightly past them, and swift as a young stag fled down the main pass of the Glen, his passage stained with the blood which was flowing from his wounded right arm.

Of all this Malcolm of course knew nothing. In the intense excitement of the thrilling moment he was only aware of his own existence, and the presence of his opposing enemies.

Momentarily, and while he yet paused from further flight, he heard the voices of the soldiery sounding in the hollow below. They were approaching him stealthily, he could hear, and a shout which whistled past him and rang on a massive boulder a few yards beyond him, clearly announced his discovery.

One by one in a close line they came scrambling up towards him, and were presently visible to the eye.

He counted them—one—two—three—four—five—and so on to the ninth man.

They were loading and firing in succession as they came on. To face nine armed men with a single broad sword was to court instant death. As much he knew, and he resolved only to throw away his life in defence of Helen Cameron if that was jeopardised and the opportunity should chance to occur.

"Shoot down the dog! pop him, men! A guinea for the musket that drops him! After him, men!" These were the malice-breathing words which reached the solitary fugitive as he turned to escape the bullets of the red-coats, and the voice he full well knew to be that of his rival and mortal enemy—Sergeant Barber. But the cowardly knave, true to his savage instincts, kept well and safely in the rear, and was all but hid from sight by the intervening space.

The soldiers were at his heels and now almost within reach of him, but his familiarity with the locality gave him an immense advantage over his pursuers, and within a few minutes he had entirely distanced the red-coats, who, finding their prey gone, returned at Barber's order to complete the work of slaughter among the remaining clansmen of the clachan.

Malcolm's route had lain in the direction of the adjacent hill-foot, and all ready converging on the base of the hill

range beyond the village, he found further progress in that direction practically retarded by the great masses of snow which were drifted into the hollows, and lay piled up against the jutting escarpments which everywhere abounded.

Free of further pursuit, his thoughts once more reverted to the fair object of his heart's love, and he resolved to instantly return to the Craigs, in the face of death or capture at the hands of the Sergeant's party. Freedom, with Helen Cameron's life or virtue imperilled, was the bitterest bondage he could think of.

He would first assist her to escape from the Glen, and afterwards return to the Chief's aid at Invercoe. As much he mentally resolved, unconscious that while he yet concluded so, the slaughtered body of M Ian was laying prostrate and silent in death on the floor of his own private bed-room.

Acting on the resolve, he at once began retracing his steps for a portion of the way, and, reaching a comparatively flat and level piece of ground, he then made a necessary detour to avoid detection by the soldiery, whose muskets were intermittently awakening the wailing and crying echoes of the Glen.

That the work of destruction was progressing apace the repeated snap of the fatal muskets only too well assured him.

Strung to intensest emotion, he plunged energetically and recklessly forward, sometimes stumbling over snow-shouldered ridge of low rock, and anon sinking nearly waist-deep into the heart of some snow-filled scarp.

In making his escape he fled in a direction entirely opposite to the locality of the craigs; and, retracing his steps, as he was now doing, he at length stood opposite the tacksman's house, situated as it was at the nether end of the village of Auchenaon. The considerable detour which he had made, however, kept him clear of the Sergeant's party.

The snow storm had at length almost ceased, and the atmosphere having been speedily blown clear by the high, cold winds, he was able to see a considerable distance ahead.

Lighted torches, he saw, were being handled by the red-coats, and a thrill of horror seized him as the conviction flashed in upon his mind that the savage soldiery, their fierce appetites whetted to madness by the sight of blood, were deliberately firing the deserted huts of the hamlet, the inmates having either escaped to the fastnesses of the mountains, or been shot down on their own hearths.

His path, coursing along the hill foot, gave him ample observation of the road beneath him, and the scene presented was heart-rending in the extreme. The main passage of the Glen, south-east of the clachan, was thronged with the helpless families of clansmen, who were making their escape from a sharp and sudden death at the hands of the savage soldiery to face a slow, wretched, and lingering extermination on the exposed paths of the wintry hills.

The small farm of the Craigs in the foreground at last! With a bounding step he sped towards it, and with horror-stricken eyes and fast beating heart he saw the dark outlines of two human bodies lying across the threshold of the door half drifted over with snow.

With an involuntary cry of agony on his blanched lips he rushed up to them, and, merciful heavens! the butchered bodies were those of Uncle Sandy and Helen Cameron!

The bodies were only partially clothed from his bed, and shot through the head at his own door step, with the arms of his loving and beloved niece twined around his neck. She had fallen with him, pierced through the left shoulder with a cruel bullet and her loving arms still unconsciously clasped his bloodied neck.

Paralysed by a sorry too-deep remorse, Malcolm dropped on his knees beside the bleeding victims, and imprinting one burning kiss on the maiden's pallid lips, in which his whole soul was impacted he registered on the spot, and while yet on his knees, a terrible oath to avenge their deaths on the wretch by whose orders, he was certain, the old crofter and his fair niece had been brutally massacred.

Another moment, and he had gently lifted the maiden's inanimate form in his strong arms and placed it on a bed within the warm kitchen of the house, placing the dead body of the old crofter along side of it. Nobody was within or about the house, the two domestics having fled on the first alarm of the red-coats.

Emerging from the cover of the house, he once more stood in view of the wretched families of the Glen flying eastwards from the wrath of their heartless murderers. Here a mother with a child in her arms, and several children hugging on by her skirts, fled shrieking from the side of her murdered husband, whose heart-blood was fast emptying itself to death on the stained snows. There a strong-bodied young clansman, with his bare dirk grasped between his teeth, and his invalid wife, wrapped in a blanket, in his arms, was struggling heroically through the clogged pathway of snows. And was he to be the reckless red-coat who would dare to singly cross the clans-

man's path. That sacred burden would be gently but quickly dropped, and the next moment a sharp cry of agony would tell that the dirk had done its righteous work well. Yonder a filial son carried an aged burden on his strong back, whose feeble glimmering light of life would that dark morning, ere approaching daybreak broke, go out as a rush light struck by the chill sharp winds of the snow-clad hills.

Scenes of such pity and even worse horror Malcolm was witness to on leaving the Craigs and hurriedly descending on the main road through the Glen.

Burning with a passionate ardor to avenge so much cruelty and blood, he crossed the road and attempted to induce some of the escaping Macdonalds to turn about with him, and, claymore in hand, die avenged by their own outraged doorsteps.

It was a useless effort, however. His words fell unheeded on the ears of the panic-stricken Highlanders thus flying unarmed from the vengeance of "fire and sword" along with their wives and children, who frantically besought them to stay and continue to assist and protect them.

Everywhere throughout the length of the Glen the cries of the victims alternated with the sharp crack of musketry, and Malcolm was soon made aware of the extent of Glenlyon's and Lindsay's bloody work at the village of Invercraig and Invercoe. The Chief of the Sept had been ruthlessly slaying his own homestead, and his outraged spirit had ascended to God amid the smoke of the burning hamlets of the Glen.

Possessed by a madness of feeling, which was purposeless, save in one intention of in some way being able to confront the ruffian Sergeant, at whose door he laid the crime of Helen Cameron's death, Malcolm once more retraced the path leading back to Auchenaon.

His own father, he afterwards came to know, was one of the first slain of the victims, and the smoke of his burning homestead, along with those of the leading villagers, already filled to the upper reaches of the Glen.

Approaching the village he could see several of the red-coats applying lighted torches to such of the clansmen's huts as yet remained unscathed, the remainder of the party occupying themselves by "picking off" such stragglers as chanced to unguardedly pass within reach of their muskets.

At an angle of the road Malcolm suddenly found himself in the presence of two red-coats, who had seized on a youth and were deliberately loading to shoot him. The young Macdonald pleaded for his life, but the prayer for mercy was only answered by a brutal laugh.

The backs of the soldiers were turned towards Malcolm, so that he could see without risk of being seen. The terror-stricken youth was speedily placed at a distance of some ten paces, and, blindfolded, was awaiting the fatal shot.

In another moment and while the musket was levelled to shoot him, an avenging sword flashed between the red-coats and their victim, and with lightning stroke nearly severed the arms which upheld the musket ready to fire.

An instant after, Malcolm had bounded forward and torn the handkerchief from the eyes of the shivering youth and half dragged him from the spot, urging him to fly and follow him to the hills.

A cry of alarm broke from the remaining red-coats, which was heard and answered by others lying in ambush around, and ere the fugitives had well cleared the spot half a score of muskets were levelled after them.

With the first discharge the poor youth fell, pierced through the back of the head with a deadly bullet.

Stopping in his flight Malcolm stooped down to assist the dying youth, who had only strength left to cry—"Save yourself, Malcolm! I am gone!" when the life left him in a heavy sigh.

Lying the head of the murdered youth lie once more back on the stained snows, Malcolm sprang to his feet, and casting a glance behind him, he saw that his pursuers had gained on him for the moment, and were already closing in on him in a semi-cordon line from two opposite sides. His blood was on fire and he almost hailed the chance of death in such a way, so grasping his long claymore with a firmer clutch, he swung it aloft, and rushed determinedly forward in the face of the odds which barred his escape.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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