

THE SCOTTISH CHIEFS; OR THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM WALLACE BY MISS JANE PORTER. CHAPTER IX. THE HERMIT'S CELL.

Helen had extricated herself from the dead bodies which lay upon her, and in her eagerness to escape, would have fallen over the precipice, had not the arm which had covered her ravisher with wounds, caught her as she sprang from the couch. "Fear not, madam," exclaimed a gentle voice; "you are under the protection of a Scottish knight."

"There was a kindness in the sound of her own kindred; and, dropping her head on his bosom, a shower of grateful tears relieved her surcharged heart. Aware that no time was to be lost, he clasped her in his arms, and, leaping from rock to rock, crossed two streams; then, treading with a steady step an alpine bridge of one single tree which arched the catarrh, he ordered a man, who now approached, to spread his plaid upon a rock. He laid the trembling Helen upon it, and, conjuring her to confide in him, called to his men. In a moment he was surrounded by a number. He directed them to cut away, on their side of the fall, the tree which crossed the other. He thought should the villain whom he had just assailed, should he not be killed, might follow him; and therefore he thought it prudent to demolish the bridge.

"The men obeyed; and, in five minutes, Helen heard the splash of the falling beam in the water. On this being done, the warrior returned to his fair charge. It was raining fast; and, fearful of further exposing her to the inclemency of the night, he wished to propose leading her to some secure shelter. "There is a hermit's cell," said he, "on the northern side of this mountain. I will conduct you thither, in the morning, as the sequestered asylum; but, meanwhile, you must allow me to seek you a refuge from this pitiless night."

"Anywhere, sir, with honour for my guide," answered Helen. "You are as safe with me, lady," returned he, "as in the arms of the virgin. I am a man who can now have no joy in womankind; but when, as a brother, I protect them. Whoever you are, confide in me, and you shall not be betrayed."

Helen confidently gave him her hand, and strove to rise, but the shackles pierced her ankles, and she sank to the ground. The cold iron on her wrists touched the hand of her preserver. He now recollected his surprise on hearing the clank of the chains as he carried her over the bridge. "Who," inquired he, "should do this unmanly deed?" "The wretch from whom you rescued me, to prevent my escape from a captivity worse than death."

While he spoke he wrenched open the clasps, and threw the chains into the torrent. "Oh, sir!" said she, "you have wife or sister, should they for in these terrific times who is secure? ever fall into the like peril with mine, may Heaven reward your bravery by sending them such a preserver!"

The stranger sighed. "Sweet lady," returned he, "I have no wife, no sister. But my kindred is nevertheless very numerous, and I thank thee for thy prayer." He sighed again, and led her silently down the declivity. Having proceeded with caution, they descended into a little wooded dell where stood a hut. Here the men lighted a fire; and she reposed, for the night, on a couch made of plaid.

The dawn of morning had penetrated through the broken lattices of the cottage before Lady Helen awoke; but, when she did, she was refreshed; and, opening her eyes, she started, and fixed them upon the knight seated near her. His noble air, and the serene expression of his features struck like a spell upon her; she at once remembered all she had suffered, all that she owed to him. Agitated by anxious thoughts, she moved; her preserver turned his eyes towards her. Seeing she was awake, he rose from the side of the dying embers he had kept alive during her slumber, and, expressing his hopes that she felt revived, she returned him a few words in the affirmative, mingling with them thanks for his care; and soon after he quitted her, to rouse his men for their journey to the hermit's cell.

"our you or yours, I am ready to answer for their obedience. If the villain from whom I had the happiness to release you, be yet more deeply implicated in your sorrows, tell me how they can be relieved, and I will attempt it. I shall make no new enemies by the deed; for the Southrons and I are at eternal enmity."

"Alas!" replied she, "ill should I repay such nobleness, were I to involve it in the calamities of my house. No, generous stranger, I must remain unknown. Leave me with the hermit; and from his cell I will send to a near relation of mine, who has not yet been ingulfed in the misfortunes of my family. He will take me thence, and reward the holy man for his care."

"I urge you no more, gentle lady," replied the knight. "Were I at the head of an army, instead of a handful of men, I might then have a better argument for offering my services; but, as it is, I feel my weakness, and seek to know no further."

Helen trembled. "Were you at the head of an army, I might then reveal to you the full weight of my anxieties; but Heaven has already been sufficiently gracious to me by your hands, in rescuing me from my cruellest enemy, and, for the rest, I must put my trust in the same overruling Providence."

A man entered, and told the knight that the vehicle was finished, and that his men were ready to march. He turned again towards Helen—"May I conduct you to the rude carriage we have prepared?"

Helen gathered her mantle about her; and the knight throwing his scarf over her head, as it had no other covering, she gave him her hand, and he led her to the side of the bier. It was overlaid with the men's plaid, and made a comfortable vehicle. The knight placed her on it, and the men raising it on their shoulders, her deliverer spoke the word, and they took their course down the mountain.

They proceeded in silence through the dell, till it opened into a hazardous path along the top of a cliff which overhung a deep loch. This having traversed, and the other side of the cliff descended, they entered a pass, where no trace of human footstep was to be seen. Helen would have shuddered had she not placed implicit confidence in her conductor. Amongst this chaos of nature, the men who carried Helen with some difficulty found a safe footing. However, after frequent steps and unremitted caution, they descended to the enemies of Scotland, and followed their chief into a less gloomy part of the valley. The knight stopped, and told Helen that he had arrived at the end of their journey.

"In the heart of that cliff," said he, "is the hermit's cell—a desolate shelter, but a safe one. Old age and poverty yield no temptation to the enemies of Scotland; he spoke, the venerable man, who had heard voices beneath, appeared on the rock. "Bless thee, my son," cried he, as he descended; "what good or evil accident hath returned thee so soon to these solitudes?"

"The knight replied: "After I left you yesterday, and had again gained the height over Hay's cottage, I heard a woman scream. I listened for a moment; the shrieks were redoubled. The sound proceeded from the side of the chasm; I remembered having seen a felled tree over it, and rushing across, by Heaven's assistance, freed this lady from a ravisher; and I bring her to you for protection."

Helen stepped off the bier; the hermit took her by the hand, and promised her every service in his power. He then preceded the knight, whose arm supported her up the rock, to the outer apartment of the cell.

"Here, daughter," said the hermit, "has one son of persecuted Scotland found a refuge. There is no night alluring in these wilds to attract the spoiler. The green herb is all the food they afford, and the limpid water the best beverage."

"Ah!" returned Helen, "I would to heaven all who love the freedom of Scotland were now within this glen! The herb, the stream, would be to them, the sweetest luxuries, when tasted in liberty and hope. My father, his friend—She stopped, recollecting that she had almost betrayed the secrecy she meant to maintain. The knight gazed at her, and wished to penetrate what she concealed; but delicacy forbade him to urge her again; and she, on her part, the hermit being ignorant of her reluctance to reveal her family, resumed,

"I do not express wonder, gentle lady, that you speak in terms which tell me that even your tender sex feels the galling chain of Edward. Who is there in Scotland that does not? The whole country groans beneath his oppressions; and the creature of his rage, I heard rickets run with blood. Six months ago I was abbot of Seone; and because I refused to betray my trust, and resign the archives of this kingdom, lodged there by our devout King David, Edward, the profaner of the sanctuary, sent his emissaries to sack the convent, to tear the holy pillar of Jacob from its shrine, and to thrust from my grasp records refused to deliver. All was done as the usurper commanded. I and my brother were tried out upon the waste. We retired to the monastery of Cambuskenneth; but there the tyrant found us. Crossing-ham, having seized on other religious houses, determined to make the plunder of this convent swell the hoards of his spoil. In the night his men attacked it; the brethren fled, but not until the wolves had slain several, even at the very foot of the altar. All being dispersed, I knew not whither to go. But, determined to fly far from the tracks of men, I took my course over the hills, discovered the Valley of Stones, and finding it fit for my purpose, have for two months lived alone in this wilderness."

"Unhappy Scotland!" ejaculated Helen. Her eyes had followed the chief, who leaned against the entrance of the cave. His eyes were cast upwards with an expression that made her heart vibrate. The knight turned towards her, and approached. "You hear from the lips of my venerable friend," said he, "a direful story; happy am I, gentle lady, that you and he have a shelter, though a rough one. The hours wear away, and I must tear myself from this tranquillity, to scenes better befitting a younger son

of the country he deposes. To you, my good father, I commit this sacred charge; Heaven sent me to be her temporary guardian; and, since she allows me to serve her no further, I confide her to you."

Helen felt unable to answer. But the abbot spoke, "I'm am I not to see you any more?"

"That is as Heaven wills," replied he; "but as it is not likely on this side of the grave, my best pledge of friendship is this lady. To you she may reveal what she has withheld from me; but in either case she is secure in your goodness."

"By my faith, my son; and may the Almighty's shield hang on your step!"

"The knight kissed the reverend man's hand, and turning to Helen, "Farewell, sweet lady!" said he. "My prayers for my own preserver, and for your father's, shall ever be mingled; and if ever it be safe to remember me—should Heaven arm the patriot's hand, then my father may be proud to know and thank the brave deliverer of his child."

"The knight looked with animation upon her: "Then your father is in arms, and against the tyrant! Tell me where, and you see before you a man who, with his few followers, is ready to join him, and lay down his life in the just cause!"

At this declaration, Lady Helen burst into tears. He drew towards her, and continued: "My men, though few, are brave. They are devoted to their country, and are willing, for her sake, to follow me to victory or death. As I am a knight, I am sworn to defend the cause of right; and where shall I so justly find a more noble cause than the defence of Scotland? Speak, gentle lady! trust me with your noble father's name, and he shall not have cause to blame the confidence you repose in a true, though wandering Scot."

"My father," replied Helen, "is not where your generous services can reach him. Two brave chiefs, one a kinsman of my own, and the other his friend, are now colloqued to free him. If they fail, my whole house falls in blood; and to add another victim to the destiny which the thought beyond my strength. Filled with agitation she stopped, and then added, in a suppressed voice—"Farewell!"

"Not till you hear me further," replied he. "I repeat, I have now a scanty number of followers; but I leave these mountains to gather more. Tell me where I may join these chiefs you speak of; give me a pledge to them that you come from you; whoever may be your father, he be but a true Scot, I will compass his release, or die in the attempt."

"Alas!" replied Helen, "I cannot but repeat my fears, that the bravest of men no longer blesses the earth with his existence. Two days before I was betrayed into the hands of the traitor from whom you rescued me, I saw a messenger from the gallant Wallace, and he informed me that his master was surrounded in the mountains, and that, if my father did not send forces to relieve him, he must inevitably perish. No forces could my father send: he was then made a prisoner by the English; his retainers shared the same fate, and none but my cousin escaped to accompany the honest Scot back to his master's tent. My cousin set forth with a few followers to join him; a few against thousands."

"They are in arms for their country, lady," returned the knight, "and a thousand angels guard them; fear not for them! I leave Wallace and your cousin to their own valour and your prayers; but for your father, if I guess aright, he is one of the Scots dearest to his country. Name to me the place of his confinement, and as I have not the besiegers of Carthage Crags to encounter, I engage, with God's help and the arms of my men, who never yet shrunk from sword or spear, to set the brave Earl free!"

"How!" exclaimed Helen, remembering that she had not mentioned her father's rank, "do you know his name? Is the misfortune of my father already so far spread?"

"Rather say his virtue, noble lady," answered the knight; "no man who watches over the destiny of our devoted country can be ignorant of who are her friends, or of the sufferings of them who are afflicted for her sake. I know that the Earl of Mar has made himself a general sacrifice, but I do not know the circumstances; there are I am yet to learn them from you, that I may know where to seek the fulfilment of my wish, to set him at liberty or to die."

"Thou brother in heart to the generous Wallace!" exclaimed Lady Helen, "my voice is feeble to thank thee." A few tears of grateful agitation fell from her eyes; and the hermit giving her a cup of water and a little fruit, conjured her to refresh herself before she satisfied the inquiries of the knight. She put the cup to her lips, and, turning to the knight, related the design of her father to send six cohorts under the command of his nephew, Lord Andrew Murray, to Sir William Wallace; she also described the seizure of Bothwell Castle by Aymer de Valence and the Lord Soules. "The English lord," continued she, "carried my father and all his family to Dunbarton Castle, while the Scottish one, by a base stratagem, drew me into these wilds. She then related what had been the embassy of Ker to Lord Mar; and of her cousin intending to apply to his uncle, Sir John Murray, for a few men to lead to the rescue of Wallace. "Proceed, then, to Dunbarton Castle," continued she; "Heaven have yet spared the lives of these two dear friends, you will meet them before these walls. Meanwhile, I shall seek the protection of Lady Ruthven, my father's sister; and from her castle of Ailoch, near the Forth, send a courier to Dunbarton to inform my father where I am; I shall then be in safety. Therefore, noble stranger, one who is devoted to you should you come up with my cousin, do not discover that you have met with me. He is precipitate in his resentment; and his hatred is so hot against Soules, that should he know the outrage I have sustained, he would, I fear, run himself and the general cause into great danger, by seeking immediate vengeance."

The stranger never mentioned her name to any of her family until she herself gave him liberty. "But when your father is restored to his rights," continued he, "in his presence I hope to claim my acquaintance with his lovely daughter."

Helen blushed at this compliment. It was not more than any man in his situation might have said, but it confused her, and she answered, "Heaven alone knows when that will be, for where will my outlawed parent find a refuge? None will dare yield rights to him who lies under the interdiction of Edward."

"Fear not, lady," replied he; "the sword is now raised in Scotland, that can not be laid down till it be broken or has conquered. Where all have suffered, all must be ready to revenge. And when a whole people take up arms in defence of their right and of all that is dear to fathers, sons, and husbands, what force of their violators can repel them?"

"So felt," returned Helen, "while I had not yet seen the horrors of the contest. While my father commanded in Bothwell Castle, and was calling out his men by hundreds to send as auxiliaries to the patriot chief who struck the first blow for Scotland, I felt nothing but the inspiration which led them on, and saw nothing but the victory which must crown determined courage. But now, when all whom my father commanded are slain or carried away by the enemy; when he is himself a prisoner, and awaiting the sentence of the tyrant he has opposed; when the gallant Wallace, instead of being able to hasten to his rescue, is hemmed in between numbered hosts—hope almost dies within me, and I feel that, wherever I may be fated to free Scotland, my beloved father, and those belonging to him, are first to be made a sacrifice."

"We will ascend and see," was Murray's answer. Ker led her down the rock to the most accessible point, and with some difficulty gained the top. Silence pervaded every part, and entering the recess where Wallace used to seek a few minutes' slumber, the moon discovered something bright lying in a corner. Ker approached it, recollecting what Wallace had told him, that if during his absence Kirkpatrick of Ross escaped, he would leave some weapon as a sign; a dagger, if it were by the south point, and an arrow if it were by the north, as he should then seek an asylum in the wilds of Glenfinlass."

"This was the iron head of an arrow, and Ker exclaimed, "He is safe; this leads us to Glenfinlass." He then explained to Murray what had been the arrangement of Wallace respecting this sign, and they decided to follow him.

After a toilsome march through scenery of the most desolate character, they reached Glenfinlass, where Ker sounded the pibroch of Ellerslie. A thousand voices returned the notes; and, after a pause, the air was answered by a horn from the heights of Craignacoch. At the same moment an armed man appeared on the rock. Ker called "Stephen! It is William Ker who speaks. I come with the Lord Andrew Murray, of Bothwell, to the support of our commander, Sir William Wallace."

At these words, Stephen placed his bugle to his mouth; and, in a few minutes, the rock was covered with the members of his little garrison. Women and children appeared, shouting with joy; and the men, descending the side next the glen, hastened to bid their comrades welcome. One advanced towards Murray, who recognized him to be Sir Roger Kirkpatrick of Ross, the thane. The chief saluted each other; and Lord Andrew pointed to his men. "I have brought," said he, "these few brave fellows to the aid of Sir William Wallace. Poor as is my offering, I am impatient to express my gratitude for the blessing he preserved to me, the life of my uncle Mar."

Kirkpatrick answered disappointed the young warrior. "I am sorry, brave Murray, that you have no better knight to receive you than myself. I and the gallant chief have not yet met, but I am in arms for him; and the hour of retribution for my injuries, as well as for his, is at hand!"

"But where is Sir William Wallace?" demanded Murray. "Gone towards the Forth, to rouse that part of sleeping Scotland. If all he meet have my spirit, they will not require a second call. Now is the time to aim the blow; and thanks to the accident which brought me the welcome news that an arm was raised that would strike it home."

He led Murray to a tower, which had once been a hunting lodge of the great King Fergus. "This," said he, "is the famous lodge of the three kings. Here did our heroic Fergus, attended by his royal allies, Durstus the Piet and Dionethus the Briton, reside during their huntings at Glenfinlass. And here, eight hundred years ago, did the same glorious Fergus form plans which saved his kingdom from a foreign yoke. On the same spot, we lay out; and, in their completion, rescue Scotland from a tyrannous more intolerable than that which menaced him. Yes, Murray, there is not a stone in this building that has not a voice which calls aloud to us to draw the sword from the scabbard, and to whom that monarch so often shed his blood."

"And, by the ghost of that same Fergus, I swear," exclaimed Murray, "that my honest claymore shall never shroud its head under an invader he left alive in Scotland."

Kirkpatrick caught him in his arms: "Brave son of the noble Bothwell, thou art after mine own heart! The blow which the dastard Crossing-ham durst aim at a Scottish chief, still smarts upon my cheek; and rivers of his countrymen's blood shall wash out the stain. After I had been persuaded to swear fealty to Edward, on the defeat of Dunbarton, I vainly thought that Scotland had only changed a weak prince for a wise and victorious king; but when, in the courts of Sterling, I heard Crossing-ham propose, to the barons north of the dyke, that they should give their strongest castles into English hands; when I opposed the measure, with all the indignation of a Scot who saw himself betrayed; he first tried to overturn my arguments; and finding that impossible, as I repeated them with redoubled force, he struck me. Powers of earth and heaven, what was then the tempest of my soul? I drew my sword, and would have laid him dead at my feet, had not my countrymen held my arms, and dragged me from the apartment. Covered with dishonour by a blow I could not avenge, I

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