

- - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

BY E. J. JENKINSON.

CHAPTER XXI.

Hag's Hall.

The daffodil East blossomed like a huge flower, unfolded its petals to the wind, and displayed the warm glow of its heart. Clouds and hills and glens brightened and the day began.

A merry day? No; a strange wild day; for all at once the winds were rising, the rains gathering, the storm-tends joining hands for their frenzied dance.

Round and round in the North they circled like a wheel of lurid fire, but at present there was no sign nor whisper near to Hag's Hall of the coming tempest.

The old inn lost some of its dismalness in the golden flow of light that bathed it. The great artist, Spring, had been at work there as elsewhere, and had woven a filigree of moss over the blotched walls. Marsh-marigolds—their cups filled to over-dowing with the yellow morning sunshine—grew in patches among the bog-lands, and bordered each side of the path to the house-door. There was colour and life on the marshes at that time of year. But though this outward change had taken place in the appearance of the alehouse, within all was still as damp and repellant as in the middle of Winter.

Maisie Lamont sat in the ingle nook her head buried in her hands. Some half-dozen mugs and a few crusts scattered over the table showed that visitors had lately partaken of refreshment. But the fire was dead, the hearth choked with wood-ash; the air heavy with the sickly smell of spirits. She was alone.

In the silence that overhung the deserted kitchen there rose the murmur of voices from the other end of the house.

She paid no heed to the indistinct, though persistent sound for a while; but, at last, the monotony of it claimed attention.

She rose, pushed back the hair from her face, opened the door noiselessly and stole out into the passage.

"I tell you, Stron-Saul, I can and will." The voice was unmistakable. The soft, though sneering tones, could only belong to one man, Fergus MacIona. Maisie, however, knew he was there; he had interviewed her already.

"Sir Fergus"—the words were so low she could hardly hear them—"Sir Fergus, if you do this thing, you'll commit a sin against your God, against your conscience, against all the canons of justice and mercy."

"Justice and mercy to the devil! What have I cared for them? and as for my conscience—well, I'm willing to bear the weight of it myself."

A groan fluttered and sank.

"When you come to die, Fergus, when you're as near death as I am, you'll think of your ruined life with despair."

"Repentance is proper for the dying. It saves a deal of trouble in the next world—so folk say."

A deeper groan reached Maisie's ear.

"We shall all pay to the full for what we have done with our eyes open."

"Well, old man, I've offered my terms. You can think over them till to-night. Then Dark Rory and Alastor shall both swing if you can't lay your fatherly commands on Helen."

"You're reckoning too confidently, Fergus MacIona. I pray God they may not fall into your hands."

"Pray as much as you like, if it gives you consolation; I don't forbid it." Fergus laughed sardonically.

"My orders are few, I might almost say nil, for of course the wearing of those pretty wrist-bands depends entirely upon yourself. Hugh will see that you have everything you can desire. Ay, Hugh? Adieu."

"Stay," was the response; the voice suggested pain and exhaustion—"Stay, Fergus, there's a last word I mean to speak. I know I am in your power and I ask nothing for myself. It would be futile, but I warn you things are not as you see them. All your life you've been a schemer and plotter. You've never fought us fair and square; you've never dared to come out in the open field where men meet face to face and win by their courage and skill. No, you've intrigued; tripped folk up in the dark; struck them behind their backs. I believed in you once, not now. And what has it all come to? Nothing. You would recover your shattered fortunes by a baser plot, would blacken your soul with a crime that could never be wiped out. You think to destroy Rory and Alastor by treachery; you think that threats of torture and death will force me to give you my daughter. I tell you, with the insight of the dying, that you're self-deceived. Your plots will come to nothing."

"My dear Stron-Saul," replied Fergus "I'd no idea there was so much breath left in your body—life in the old dog yet! It is quite astonishing! But really I must fight with the weapons, God—or Satan, I don't know which—gave me, namely my wits. As to falling—we shall see. As to Helen—she'll be lady of Sarnio before the week's by, with or without your consent."

"That consent I'll die rather than give."

"Ay. I'm glad you see the point. Your brain, dear Sir, has quite the clearness of youth. 'Point' said I? No, rather, the end; for its the end of the rope for you, Stron-Saul, unless you do my will."

Maisie heard footsteps coming towards the door; she slipped back to the kitchen.

Her father and Fergus came out into the passage. They whispered together for a moment then entered.

"In this world," said Fergus meditatively, "there are two ways a man may use to get what he wants—he may fight, he may plot. If he fights the chances are he'll be killed, if he plots—well—he may be found out; and there's no worse paymaster than Fergus MacIona unless it be the devil."

He stood still and looked at Maisie questioningly.

"Well?" said he.

"Sir, sir, I can't do it. I daren't face Dark Rory and Helen Vor again."

Maisie clasped her hands and looked at the tall, slim figure before her with startled eyes.

"As for Helen," he replied, "if she's there she'll save me some trouble with the old man yonder. He's a stubborn old carle when he's roused. But I doubt there's no such luck for us."

"I can't do it," repeated Maisie.

Fergus turned to Hugh.

"You've failed me more than once," he said in his calm unpassioned tones that had yet such deadly meaning: "You'll not fail again; it would be too unfortunate—for you and Maisie. You bungled badly at Lara. Bring

if you'd carried our little business through successfully instead of getting shot by that gin of a mad woman yourself, none of these late disasters would have come to pass. But you'll do better tonight; you must. I've arranged everything and we'll succeed just as we did at Stron-Saul, sixteen years ago."

"Ay, ay, Sir Fergus, we had bad luck at Glen Lara, very bad. But it'll not happen again. Maisie's a good lass, although I say it myself. She'll play her part well."

The girl turned a white face to him. "Father," she gasped, "I daren't: they'll kill me. They'll see through the disguise, you know they will."

Fergus walked to the window and thought. It was true, Maisie might be discovered, but what other plan could he devise? There was none. He could not hold Castle Sarnio. He had not the men. That unlucky attempt on the Hunter's Gully had destroyed his forces. Many had been killed, others scattered and demoralised. The handful left would certainly desert on the appearance of the Vorns before the castle. Discontent and disloyalty ran rife among them. The idea was spreading that Dark Rory should be chief, outlawed though he was and an ally of the Vorns. Still Fergus congratulated himself that most of his plots in the past succeeded. There was the raid on Stron-Saul—that had been a master-stroke; then the bold piece of intrigue which had resulted in the outlawry of Roderick; and lastly the neat little schemes to get Sir Collin out of the way, and John Vor into his hands. If some of his plans had failed, and the outlook was dark, Fergus MacIona was not the man to distrust his own cunning, when so much had been crowned with success. After all, he was lord of Sarnio; and once this miserable rising of the Vorns was put down, he could make his place secure. Yes, his plan should be carried out, whether willingly or unwillingly, and Maisie was the one to do it.

He came back to her side.

"Now, Maisie, my lass," said he, "you're giving way to foolish fears. You and your father are my good friends—a friend in need is a friend indeed, they say; and Hugh has done me service in guarding the old man in the other room, a service I'll not forget—and when this little affair is settled, you'll not be left out of the reckoning either."

"I'll do anything, anything," answered Maisie, "but that."

Fergus MacIona frowned and half closed his eyes.

"In fact," he replied, "you'll do anything to give Dark Rory Castle Sarnio and get me out of the way. Remember the ring! How do I know that you have not given it to my brother?"

"I've told you I lost it."

"Well! If it's lost, it's lost, and I've all the more right to claim your help now. I'll have my money's worth, Maisie Lamont, down to the last farthing. You'll do as I tell you, girl."

She wrung her hands and glanced around. But there was no loophole of escape; her father and Fergus were inexorable.

"I can't," she muttered.

"It's a little thing to open a door."

"Rory will be there."

"He won't know you."

"Father, father," she cried, "say I can't—your own daughter."

"Don't be a fool," he answered with a grunt.

"I'll be killed," she repeated.

"Ay! that's why you'll go," replied Fergus, "they'll kill you, for certain