

THE SCOTTISH CHIEFS; OR THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM WALLACE

BY MISS JANE PORTER.

CHAPTER V. CONTINUED.

The countess threw herself upon her husband's neck, and with tears entreated his forgiveness. "Alas! my lord," cried she, "all is madness to me that would plunge you in danger. Think of your own safety, of my innocent twins now in their cradle, should you fall. Think of our brother's feelings when you send his only son to join one whom, perhaps, he will call a rebel in arms!"

"If Earl Bothwell considered himself a vassal of Edward, he would not now be with Lord Loch-ave. From the moment that gallant Highlander retired to Argyleshire, the King of England regarded all his adherents with a suspicious eye. Bothwell's present visit to Loch-ave, you see, is sufficient offence to sanction the plunder of his castle. You saw the opening of those precious rings, which had not the death of Arthur Heselrigge prevented from coming to their dreadful issue, where, my dear Joanna, would now be your home, your husband, your children? It was the arm of the brave chief of Ellerslie which saved him from destruction, and our Helen from a ravisher."

Lady Mar shuddered. "I admit the truth of what you say; but oh, is it not hard to put my all to the hazard—to see the bloody field on one side of my beloved Donald, and the mortal scaffold on the other?"

"Hush," cried the earl, "it is justice that beckons me, and victory will receive me to her arms. Let, O power above!" exclaimed he, "let the victorious field for Scotland be Donald Mar's grave, rather than doom him to live a wretched man in his prison. I cannot hear you," answered the countess. "I must leave you, I must invoke the Virgin to give me courage to be a patriot's wife; at present your words are daggers to me." As she uttered this, she withdrew.

Meanwhile Helen had retired to her own apartments, and Lord Mar's banner being brought to her, she sat down to weave into its silken texture the locks of the Scottish chief. Wondering at their softness and beauty, while her needle flew, she pictured to herself the fine countenance which had once adorned "Unhappy lady!" sighed she, "how could what a pang must have rent her heart when she cradled a death to her from her husband; and how he must have loved her, when, for her sake, he foregoes all those joys which camps and victories may yield! Ah, what would I give to be my cousin Murray, to be near him, to be at his side! What would I give to reconcile so admirable a being to happiness again to weep his griefs, or to smile him into comfort! To be that man's friend would be a higher honour than to be Edward's queen."

While her heart was thus discoursing with itself, a page opened the door, bringing that her cousin begged admittance. Helen, having fastened the flowing charge into its azure field, was embroidered the motto when Murray entered. He led in the venerable harper, to respect to Lady Helen all he had been telling his entertainer. She rose, and showed them her work. Murray approved it, and Halbert with a full heart took the pennon in his hand. "Ah! little did my dear lady think," exclaimed he, "that one of these loved locks would ever be suspended on a staff to lead men to battle! Who changes has the days made! she, the gentlest of women laid in a bloody grave; and he, the most benevolent of human beings, wielding an exterminating sword!"

"You speak of her grave, venerable Halbert," inquired Helen; "had you then an opportunity of performing the rites which were due to her remains?"

"No, my lady," replied he; "after the worthy soldier, now in this castle, assisted me to place her precious body in my lord's oratory, I had no opportunity of returning to give her a more holy grave."

"Alas!" cried Lady Helen, "then her sacred relics have been consumed in the burning house!"

"I hope not," rejoined Halbert; "the place I speak of is at some distance from the main building."

"Then we may hope that the oratory has not only escaped the flames, but perhaps the violation of the English soldiers. Would it not comfort your lord to have his lovely wife entombed according to the rites of the church?"

"Surely, my lady; but can that be done? He thinks her remains were lost in the conflagration of Ellerslie, and for fear of precipitating him into the new dangers which might have menaced him had he sought to bring away her body, I did not disprove his mistake."

"But her lady shall be brought away," rejoined Lady Helen; "it shall have holy burial."

"To effect this, command my services," exclaimed Murray. Helen thanked him. The English soldier as a guide, and fifty men, she said must accompany him. "Alas, my young lord," interposed Halbert, "suppose you should meet the English still loitering there?"

"And what of that, my honest Halbert? Would not I and my trusty band soon make them clear the way? Is it not to give comfort to the deliverer of my uncle, that I seek the glen; and shall anything in mortal shape make Andrew Murray turn his back? No, Halbert, I was not born of St. Andrew's day nor sought; and by his bright cross I swear, either to lay Lady Wallace in the tomb of my ancestors, or to leave my bones to bleach on the grave of hers!"

"Your resolution, my brave cousin, is dear to me, and I cannot but expect a happy issue; but when we recollect the panic with which the death of Heselrigge must have possessed the English garrison, and that ruined Ellerslie has no longer attractions for rapine, I think there can be no dread of your meeting any enemy in that desolate place; so I will ask my father's permission, while you are calling out the men, and Halbert seeks a few hours repose."

The old man respectfully put her hand to his lips. "Good night," continued she; "ere you see me again, I trust the earthly part of the angel now in paradise will be safe within these towers."

On entering her father's apartment, Lady Helen found him alone. She retreated to him the substance of her conversation with Wallace's faithful servant. "And what do you think?" continued she, "to have the murdered lady's remains entombed in the cemetery beneath the chapel in this castle." The earl approved her request. "Let this be entirely your own deed, my dear Helen; choose from among my vassals whomsoever you may think deserving the honour of serving you; and let them be sent with my nephew to execute your design."

"May I then, my dear father," returned she, "have your permission to pay our debt of gratitude to Sir William Wallace, to the utmost of my power; for by such means only can I demonstrate my love for the best of parents, and my homage to that virtue which you first taught me to revere."

"You are at liberty, my noble child; do as you please; my vassals, my coffers, are at your command." Helen kissed his hand. "May I have what I please from the armoury?"

"Command even there," said the earl; "for I know Bothwell would think that too much cannot be done for the defender of his country."

Helen threw her arms round her father's neck, thanking him for the boon he had bestowed. "I have retired to prosecute her plans, Murray, who met her in the ante-room, informed her, "that fifty of the sturdiest in the glen awaited her orders; and Helen, telling her cousin of the earl's approval, took the sacred banner in her hand, and proceeded to the gallery, which ran round the hall. The moment she appeared, a shout of joy bade her welcome. She waved her hand, and smiling, "My brave friends," said she, "I thank you for the ardour with which you assist me to pay the everlasting tribute that is due to the man who has preserved to me the blessing of so good a father."

"And to you, noble lady," cried they, "the most generous of chiefs!"

"With that spirit, then," returned she, "I address you with greater confidence. Who amongst you will shrink from following this standard to the field of glory? Who will refuse to be himself the special guardian of the life of Sir William Wallace and who, in the moment of peril, will not stand by him to the last?"

"None are here," cried a tall youth, "who would not gladly die in his defence!"

"We swear it!" burst from every lip at once.

She bowed her head, and said, "Return from Ellerslie to-morrow with the banner of your sainted mistress. I will then bestow upon every man in this band a marching song, to be sung in my honour. This banner, with its emblem, will lead you to the side of Wallace; and it is my will that ye there remain a stout-er wall than that which divides the two kingdoms between him and his foes. In the shock of battle, look at this standard, and remember that God not only armeth the patriot's hand, but quickeneth his heart. In this faith, be ye the bucklers which heaven sends to guard the life of Wallace; and so honoured, exult in your station, and expect the future gratitude of Scotland."

"Wallace and Lady Helen! to death or liberty!" was the unanimous response; and, smiling and kissing her hand, they retired. Murray, ready armed for his expedition, led her back to her apartments, where the English soldier awaited her commands. Lady Helen, with a gentle grace, acknowledged her obligations to the Southern for his acquiescence.

"Lands in Mar shall be yours," added she; "or a post of honour in the little army the earl is now going to raise. Speak but the word, and you shall find, worthy Englishman, that neither a Scotsman nor his daughter know what it is to be ungrateful!"

The blood melted into the soldier's cheek: "I thank you, sweetest lady, for this generous offer; but, as I am an Englishman, I dare not accept it. England gave me birth; and with no country hostile to her can I unite myself. I swore fidelity to Edward; and with no man adverse to him will I lift my sword. I left Heselrigge because he dishonoured the name of my country; and for me to forswear her, would be to make myself infamous. All I ask is that, after I have this night obeyed your ladyship's commands, the Earl of Mar will allow me to seek my way to the nearest port."

Lady Helen replied that she reversed her sentiments too sincerely to insult them by any persuasions to the contrary; and, taking a diamond clasp from her bosom, she put it into his hand. "Wear that in remembrance of virtue, and of Helen Mar's gratitude."

The man kissed it respectfully, and swore to preserve so distinguishing a gift to the latest hour of his existence. Helen retired to finish her task, and Murray repaired to the earl's apartments to take his orders before he and his troop set out for Ellerslie.

CHAPTER VI.

BOTHWELL CASTLE—THE PRIORY OF ST. FILANS.

As soon as the sun arose, the Earl of Mar was carried out of his chamber, and laid on the couch in the state apartment. His lady had not left the room of her daughter, by whose side she had lain the whole night, in hopes of infecting her with the fears which possessed herself. Helen replied that she could see no reason for apprehensions; if her father, instead of joining Wallace in person, would, when he had sent him succours, retire into the Highlands, and there await the issue of the contest.

"It is too late to retreat, my dear mother," continued she. "The first blow against the power of England is in defence of your husband; and would you have my father act so base a part as to abandon his preserver to the wrath his generous assistance has provoked?"

"Alas! my child," answered her ladyship, "what great service will he have done to me, to my father, if he delivers him from one danger only to plunge him into another? Edward's power in this country is too great to be resisted. Have not most of our barons sworn fealty to him? How, with such a host against him, can your father venture, without despair, to support the man who breaks the peace with England?"

"Who can despair, my dear madam," returned Helen, "in so just a cause? Were I a man, the justice that leads on the brave Wallace would nerve my arm. And, if I were a woman, I would look at our country. God's gift of freedom is stamped upon it. Plains are the territories of tyranny; but mountains, glens, morasses, and lakes set bounds to conquest; and amidst these is the seat of liberty. To the defiles of Loch Katrine, to the heights of Corryarrack, I would have my father retire, and there watch the footsteps of our mountain goddess, till, led by her immortal champion, she plants her standard for ever upon the summit of Scotland's proudest hill!"

The complexion of Helen shone with a radiant glow, and she pressed the banner to her breast. Lady Mar looked at her. "It is well for me, romantic girl, that you were not a boy. In such a case, I do not guess wrong in believing that your mad-headed disobedience would have made me rue the day I became your father."

"Sex, madam," returned Helen, "could not have altered my sense of duty. Whether man or woman, I would obey you in all things consistent with my duty to a higher power; but when it commands, then, by the ordinance of heaven, she plants her standard for mother and cleave unto it."

"And what do you call a higher duty than that of a child to a parent, or a husband to his wife?"

"Duty of any kind cannot be transgressed with innocence. Nor would it be any relinquishing of duty to you, should my father leave you to take up arms in the assertion of his country's rights. Her rights are your safety; and to wish my father to shrink behind the excess of family duties, and to abandon Sir William Wallace to the blood-hounds of England, would be to devote the name of Mar to infamy."

"Then my husband, his vassals, your cousins, and the sequestration of the estates of Mar and Bothwell, are all to be put to the hazard, on account of a frantic outlaw?"

"That he is an outlaw, Lady Mar, I do not dispute; for was it not for my father's sake that his wife fell, and that he himself was driven into the wilds? I do not blush for making his preservation my first prayer; and that he may achieve the freedom of Scotland is my second."

"I shall see whose prayers will first be answered!" returned Lady Mar. "My saints are perhaps nearer than yours; and before twenty-four hours are over your head, you will have reason to repent such extravagant opinions."

The countess left the room; and Helen, with a sigh, proceeded to the armoury. The armourer had just given out arms for three hundred men, who, by the earl's orders, were to assemble on Bothwell Moor, and there wait till young Murray should join them. Helen told the man she came for the best suit of armour in his custody—it must be of the finest quality, and she grasped his oaken chest of coat of black mail, studded with gold. Helen admired its strength and beauty.

"It is the richest in all Scotland," answered he, "and it was worn by our great King William the Lion in all his battles." "Then it is worthy its destination. Bring it, with its helmet, target, and sword, to my apartment." The armourer took it up, and accompanied by the page carrying the lighter parts, followed her into the western tower.

She changed her mind alone, she employed herself in pluming the ensigns, and in forming the scarf which she meant should adorn her present. Thus time flew till the sand-glass told her it was the eighth hour. In a short time, she was roused by the doleful lament of a troop returning from Ellerslie. She dropped the scarf, and, with a gasp, she ran to the window, and, listening to the deep-toned lamentations, she threw herself on her knees, and leaning her head on the helmet, wept profusely.

Murray entered the room. "Helen! my sweet cousin!" cried he, surprised at what he saw. "I have just returned from Ellerslie, and my heart is full of grief. I lay at her feet. Helen started, and, rising, apologized for her tears by owing the truth. He told her that the body of the deceased lady was in the chapel of the adjacent priory only awaited her presence to be interred, and that she should herself be present to receive her, and then re-entering, covered with a long black veil, was led by her cousin to the scene.

The bier lay before the altar. The prior of St. Fillan stood at its head, and his vassals were ranged on each side. The countess, with her hand on her mourning garments, met their mistress at the portal. They had wrapped the corpse in the shroud prepared for it; and having laid it, strewn with flowers, on the bier, they advanced to their trembling lady. Helen bowed to the priests, and then turned to her husband, and the pall to uncover the face of Marion. Lady Helen resisted the woman's motion, by laying her hand upon the pall. The chill of death struck through the velvet to her fingers. She turned pale, and, having her hand to the prior to begin, it descended, Helen sunk upon her knees; and the anthem for departed souls was raised. When all was over, Halbert threw himself upon the cold stone, and called on death to lay him low with her. The women of Lady Helen's household, and her ladyship threw herself on her knees, and were carried, almost insensible, to her apartment.

Murray, having rewarded his followers with their war-bonnets, and despatched them to the Carlisle Craigs, went to Lady Mar, and informed her of her husband's command, and of her future orders. He found the earl surrounded by arms and armed men; fifty brave Scots, who were to officer the three hundred now on Bothwell Moor, were receiving their weapons from the hands of the armourer.

"Bear these stoutly, my gallant countrymen," cried he, "and remember that, although the dragon of England has burnt up your harvest, and laid your houses in ashes, yet there is a lion in Scotland that withers his power, and will glut you with the spoil of your foe!"

He had scarcely uttered these words, when the doors were thrown open, and his eyes were blasted by the sight of Lord Soules, the sworn partisan of Edward, accompanied by a man in splendid armour, and a train of Southron soldiers. The earl started. "My lord, what is the occasion of this unapprised visit?"

"The ensign of the liege lord of Scotland is your warrant," replied Soules; "you are my prisoner; and, in the name of King Edward, I take possession of this castle."

"Never," cried the indignant earl, "while there is a man's arm within it."

"Men or women," returned Lord Soules, "they must surrender to Edward; for an army of three thousand English have seized three hundred of your men at arms on Bothwell Moor. The castle is surrounded; resistance is impossible. Throw down your arms, ye mutinous villains!" cried he, turning to the Scots, "or be hanged for rebellion against your lawful sovereign!"

"Your lawful sovereign," returned a young man, "must be the enemy of Edward; and to none else will we yield our swords."

"Traitor!" cried the English commander, and he laid the Scot a corpse at his feet. A cry of revenge proceeded from the wounded and dying. Every sword was drawn, and before he could utter a word, Mar beheld his brave Scots at one moment victorious, and in the next, the floor strewn with their dead bodies.

A new succession of blood-hounds rushed in; and before the sword was drawn, the whole of his troops lay around him, wounded and dying. In vain his voice had called upon his men to surrender; in vain he had implored Soules and Aymer de Valence to stop the havoc. All now lay in blood; and the room, thronged by the victors, became so intolerable, that De Valence ordered the earl to be removed into another apartment.

Murray, who was present at the entrance of the enemy, no sooner heard that the castle was surrounded than he made his way by a back door to the chamber of his cousin. She lay upon the floor in a deep sleep. "Awake! Helen, awake!" cried he; "for your life, awake!"

She opened her eyes, and looked upon him with surprise. He hastily added, "The castle is full of armed men, led hither by the English commander. Aymer de Valence, and the execrable Soules, unless you fly through the vaulted passages, you will be their prisoner."

Helen gazed at him full of terror. "What! leave my father? I cannot."

"Hesitate not, my dear cousin; fly, in my father's name. What will be his anguish, should he fall into the hands of a man, whose love you have rejected, and when it will no longer be in the power of even a parent to preserve your person from the outrages of his avenged passion? If you had seen Soules' merciless eyes"—He was interrupted by the shrieks of women in the gallery, and the arm: "Alas! my poor damsels! I will go with you; lead me whither you will, to be far from him."

As Murray threw his arm about her waist, his eyes fell on the banner and the sword of his father. He had ordered the latter to be put into the hands of a man, whose love you have rejected, and when it will no longer be in the power of even a parent to preserve your person from the outrages of his avenged passion? If you had seen Soules' merciless eyes"—He was interrupted by the shrieks of women in the gallery, and the arm: "Alas! my poor damsels! I will go with you; lead me whither you will, to be far from him."

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"Do not despair," replied Murray; "look but at the banner you held fast, even while insensible: your own hands have engraved my answer—'God send the patriot!' Convinced of that, can you still fear for your father? No, will join Wallace to-morrow, our own will warriors await me at the bottom of Carlisle Craigs; and, if treachery should be meditated against my uncle, that moment we will raise the towers of Dunbarton to our foundation."

Helen's reply was a deep sigh.

"Grimsy now appeared with the iron box, and put it into the hands of Lord Murray. "This fatal treasure," said he, "was committed to my care by the earl, your uncle, to deliver to the prior of St. Fillans or to you."

"What does it contain?" demanded Murray; "I never saw it before."

"I know not its contents," returned the soldier; "it belongs to Sir William Wallace."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Helen; "if it be treasure, why was it not rather sent to him? But how, honest soldier, could you escape with it through these possessed walls?"

He replied that he was obliged to have recourse to stratagem. As soon as the English, and their Scottish partisans under Lord Soules, had surprised the castle, he saw that his only chance of safety was to throw off the bonnet and plaid, and to mix amongst the soldiers. His armour and his language showed he was their countryman; and he had no difficulty, after the carriage in the state apartment, to make his way to the chamber where Lord Aymer de Valence had ordered Lord Mar to be carried. He found the earl alone, and lost in grief. He knew not but that his nephew, and the Lady Helen, and the countess, had fallen beneath the swords of the enemy. Grimsey told him of the stratagem he had used, and satisfied his anxiety that Lord Andrew Murray had not been seen since the onset. This information inspired him with a hope that he had escaped; and when the soldier also said that he had seen the countess led by Lord Soules across the hall towards his daughter's apartment, he had overheard him promising the every-reprieve, the earl seemed comforted. "But how," inquired he, "has this hard fate befallen us? Have you learnt how De Valence knew that I meant to take up arms for my country?"

"On that head I cannot fully satisfy your lordship," replied he. "I could only gather from the soldiers, that a sealed packet had been delivered to Lord Aymer de Valence late last night at Dunbarton Castle. Soules was then with him; he immediately set off to Glasgow for the followers he had left there; and, early this morning, he joined De Valence and his legions on Bothwell Moor. The consequences there you know; but they did not end at Bothwell. The gallant Wallace—"

"What of him?" exclaimed Murray.

"Be not alarmed!" replied Grimsey; "no personal harm has happened to Sir William Wallace; but I understand that, in the same moment De Valence gave orders to his troops to march to the castle. De Valence and his legions, Bothwell Moor. The consequences there you know; but they did not end at Bothwell. The gallant Wallace—"

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"But very different would have been the case, madam, had you appeared," rejoined the soldier; "one of Lord De Valence's men told me that Lord Soules intended to have taken you and the countess to Dunglass Castle, near Glasgow, while the earl was to have been carried alone to Dunbarton, and detained in solitary confinement. Lord Soules was in so dreadful a rage when you could not be found, that he accused the English commander of having leagued with Lady Mar to deceive him. In the midst of this contention, we descended into the vaults."

Helen shuddered as she thought how near she was to falling into the hands of so fierce a spirit. In his character he united every quality which could render him formidable. Combining prodigious bodily strength with a cool simulation, and treachery, he was when by the common people as a sorcerer, and avoided by the virtuous of his own rank, as the enemy of all public law, and the violator of every private tie. Helen Mar had seen, and refused his hand; first, during the contest for the kingdom when his claim to the crown was disallowed. She was then hardly more than fourteen; but she rejected him with abhorrence. Though stung to the quick at being denied the object of her ambition, he did not hesitate, at an advanced age, to renew his offers. At the fall of Dunbarton, he again founded his uprising on the ruins of his country, he hastened to Thirlstane to throw himself at the feet of Lady Helen; her ripened judgment confirmed her dislike of his ruffian qualities, and again he was rejected. "By the powers of hell," exclaimed he, "you are the project of surprising Bothwell was reported to him, 'if I once get that proud minion into my grasp, she shall kneel as unpitied by me as I have