

THE SCOTTISH CHIEFS; OR THE LIFE OF SIR WILLIAM WALLACE

BY MISS JANE PORTER.

CHAPTER VII. THE CONVENT OF SAINT FILANS.

De Valence having left the castle, Grimby thought his might depart in safety, and begged permission of the prior to quit his journey.

Murray, at a pulse of gold into the soldier's hand, as the prior covered his armor with a pilgrim's gown, Grimby, with a respectful bow, returned the gift.

The prior, being convinced that he was speaking with some messenger of Wallace, made no hesitation to answer: "Your master is a knight; and a braver never drew breath since the time of his royal namesake, William the Lion."

The good man, thinking it was time to call the young lord of Bothwell, entered the library where Murray was waiting. On his entrance, the impatient youth exclaimed, "Have you rescued him?"

"No," rejoined the young man; "I fear they have been taken by the English; for, on my way to Sir William Wallace, not knowing the English were so close to his sanctuary, I was nearly seized myself.

"What would you do?" interrupted the prior; "your single arm could not save the soldier. The cross has more power; I will seek these violent men; meanwhile stay here, as you value the lives of all in the convent."

"What is his offence?" "He is a traitor."

The prior apprehended that it was of Wallace he spoke. "You came to request military aid from the Earl of Mar?"

The stranger replied: "If, reverend sir, you are in the confidence of the good earl, pronounce but the Christian name of the man who charged me with the bugle, and allow me then, for his sake, to ask you what has happened to the earl, that I was seized by foes, when I expected to meet with friends only?"

While these transactions occupied the morning, Lady Helen slept sweetly, with a heavenly calm at her head. When the prior visited her, he informed her of the departure of the English soldier, and of the alarm which he and Murray had sustained for his safety.

"When I see you again, my brave cousin, tell me that father is free and his preserver safe. Your own life, dear Andrew, must always be precious to me," Murray withdrew, and Helen was left alone.

Having no method of conveying baggage, the armour intended for Wallace was left in the care of the prior; and Murray and Ker, putting peasants' cloaks over their armor, proceeded under cover of the night through the obscure paths of the wood which divided Bothwell from Drumsburghard.

"My father's means," replied Murray, "are for a time cut off; but mine shall be exerted to the utmost. Did you not meet a number of Scots whom I sent off yesterday morning to the support of our gallant friend?"

"I fear they have been taken by the English; for, on my way to Sir William Wallace, not knowing the English were so close to his sanctuary, I was nearly seized myself."

"Your brother, when he heard of the Lady Helen's continuing in the convent, he highly approved of it. Then I rejoice she is there," replied Murray, "and I will, in season, till your generous assistance empowers me to rescue her father."

"Lord Mar has been very rash, nephew," returned Drumsburghard; "what occasion was there for him to volunteer sending men to Sir William Wallace; and how must he bring ruin on Bothwell Castle by doing this, unauthorized by my brother, his vassals for such a dangerous experiment?"

"Kill me!" cried Helen, "kill me, and I will bless you!" "That would be a poor vengeance," cried he; "you must be humble, proud as you are; learn to fawn on me for a smile; to weep, as my slaves, for one of those embraces which you spurned to receive as my wife. I will make you feel the tiger in my love; and then if she will, the dishonoured and despised Lady Helen may die!"

"My lord!" said the other man, "I expected different treatment for the Earl of Mar's daughter."

"Then my father lives! They are safe!" cried she.

"He yet lives," returned the officer, "but his wounds opening afresh, and the fatigues of his journey, have so exhausted him that Lord Ayrmer de Valence has granted the prayers of the countess, and wishes to take you to receive his last blessing."

A cry of anguish burst from Lady Helen; and falling into the arms of the prior, she found refuge in insensibility. Having recovered, she took leave of the inmates of the monastery, and led by the prior, bent her steps towards the grand entrance. At the gates stood the English knights, with their attendants. She kissed the crucifix held by the prior, and giving her hand to the Scot, was placed by him on a horse superbly caparisoned. He sprang on another himself; and the English officer, who was already mounted drawing up to her, she pulled down her veil; and all hailing to the holy brotherhood, rode off at a gentle pace.

A long stretch of woods lay before them. Through these they pursued their way till they had crossed the river; and then she saw that the knights turned their horses' heads into one of the obscure mountain defiles. When they had been employed for an hour in breaking their way through this trackless place, they came to a wider space, where other ravines opened themselves. The Scot raised his bugle, and blew so sudden a blast that the horse on which Lady Helen sat took fright, and began to plunge and rear. Some of the men, seeing her danger, seized the bridle, and the English knight extricated her from the saddle, and carrying her through some bushes, he entered a cave, and laid her at the feet of an armed man.

"I will release me! I am an unprotected woman, praying for your mercy; withhold it not, for the sake of heaven and your own soul!"

"Kneel to me, then, thou siren!" cried the warrior with fierceness. As he spoke, he threw the knees of Lady Helen on the rocky floor. His voice echoed terribly in her ears; but she obeyed him. "Free me," cried she, "for the sake of my dying father!"

"Never, till I have had my revenge!" At this she shuddered to the soul, but yet she spoke: "Surely I am mistaken for some one else!—Oh, how can I have offended any man, to incur so cruel an outrage?"

"The warrior burst into a satanic laugh, and throwing up his visor, he gazed on Helen's face. Behold me," he cried, "as he grasping her hands; 'my hour is come!'"

"At sight of the face of Souils, she comprehended all her danger; and, wrestling her hands from his hold, she burst out of the cave. Her two first enemies stood at the entrance, and catching her in their arms, they bore her back to their lord. But it was an insupportable load before him; overcome with horror at being again dragged into the power of a ravisher, her senses fled. However, water was thrown on her face, and she awoke to recollection, lying on the bosom of her enemy. Again she struggled, again her cries echoed from side to side of the cave.

"Peace!" cried the monster; "you cannot escape—you are mine by a force that shall compel you to submit, when I airt where I will. How often have I knelt at your feet begging for that mercy on my passion which you denied! Twice you refused to be my wife—you dared to despise my love and my power; now you shall feel my hatred and my revenge!"

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"Base Scot!" returned Souils, "when you brought a woman to my arms, you had no right to expect that I should use her otherwise than as a wanton, and you as the minister of my pleasures. From this hour, dare but to pass a judgment on my actions, and your infamy shall be published as widely as trumpets can blow the tale."

"This language, Lord Souils!" rejoined the man; "but you mistake me. I mean it not to reproach."

"Do not you think me," and, turning from him, he listened to Macgregor, who, stooping towards Helen, took her hand, and observed that her pulse beat.

"Pools!" returned Souils; "did you think I would so rashly throw away what I have been at such pains to gain? Call your wife, Macgregor; she knows how to bring women out of those fits; and she will teach her to know the wisdom of submission to my will."

Margery expressing surprise at the countess's words, she stepped forward, followed by her vassal, the woman was left with Helen. Water, and a few drops which Margery poured into her mouth, restored the unhappy lady to her senses.

"Open your eyes, the sight of one of her own sex inspired her with hope; but stretching out her arms, she had been struck at the clink of the chains. 'Why am I thus?' demanded she; but recollecting having attempted to pierce Souils with his own dagger, she added, 'Is Lord Souils killed?'"

"No, my lady," replied she; "my husband says he is but slightly hurt; and surely your fair face belies your heart, when you attempt the life of so brave and loving a lord."

"You then belong to him?" cried Helen; "alas, how am I beset! what will be my unhappy fate? O Virgin of Heaven, take me to thyself!"

"Heaven forbid!" cried the woman, "that you should pray against being the favourite lady of our noble chief! Many are the scores, round Hermitage Castle, who would come hither on their hands and knees, to arrive at the happiness which you reject."

"Himself and all that bear his name is accused to me," returned Helen. "Fie, my kind creature; and if you have a daughter whose honour is dear to your prayers, think you see her in me, and have compassion on me!"

"Poor young soul!" cried the woman, "I would pity you, if I durst; but my life, and my husband's, and my children's would all be sacrificed to the rage of Lord Souils! You must be content to submit to his will, and as for your making lamentation about not reaching your father, if he be as little your friend as your mother is, you have not much cause to break your heart on that score."

Helen started aghast. "My mother! what of her?—speaking, tell me!—It was her signal that betrayed me into these horrors. She cannot have conspired! Oh, no! some villain—speak, tell me what you would say of my mother!"

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Valence had prevailed on the countess to give her up to him; and he accused the English nobleman of treachery. His Lordship denied it vehemently; a quarrel ensued, and Souils departed, with a few of his followers, giving out that he was retiring to Douglas; but he lurked about Berthwell wood, and saw Cressingham's household march by to take possession of the castle.

A description of the castle and the conversation that took place between them; but it was interrupted by one of the spies who had been sent by the chief in quest of news, and who returned with a woman, a tenant of the convent of St. Fillans. She told him, that a beautiful young lady, who could be no other than the Lady Helen Mar, was concealed in that convent. On this information, the delighted Souils laid his plan; and sent for Macgregor's wife and a litter from Douglas, that she might be ready to attend this beautiful prey.

Macgregor's wife entered. "Here, Margery," said he, "take this lady under your care. It never her from this woman, and while I go to have the litter prepared for her, counsel her to behave with more gratitude to so true a lover."

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