

- - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

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CHAPTER XX.

The Hunters' Gully.

Stealthy, dark shadows spread over the glen, and buried the Hunters' gully in night;—a night so still that there seemed to be no living thing moving amid its vastness. Nature was swallowed up in one black gulf of infinity.

Most of the clan were wrapped in profound slumber, but Helen could not sleep. She sat by the camp fire self-absorbed.

The drowsy tinkle of running water filled her ears with strange, far-away music. It took her thoughts back to that mystery-land where she had wandered as a child, before those latter troubles had fallen to bar her entrance, and make her face the real and the absolute. But it was only a glimpse that she caught now; for the Present had its hand on her heart,—a hard, unrelenting hand, whose grasp was too firm to be relaxed even for a moment.

"Mistress Helen! have you seen the hunters?" Morag came to her side and laid her long, bony fingers on the girl's arm.

"The hunters!" repeated Helen slowly, "what do you mean Morag?"

The old woman made no answer. She lifted her head and listened. The red kerchief, that usually bound her hair, had fallen back, and the grey locks straggled down each side of a face white and ghastly as a corpse. Some mental agitation was stirring her. It burnt in her eyes like a will of the wisp, a living, a lurid flame. Both life and death were present in those wild features.

Helen shivered; her brows contracted and she looked aside. She felt that if she gazed longer into Morag's unnatural eyes she would find a Gorgon there who would freeze her into stone.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Hark! I hear the baying of their dogs—far-away—on the moor. They are after the deer. Don't you hear them, Helen Vor? Nearer they come and nearer yet. I see them—like shadows—racing down the gully. What a noble stag leads the herd! and the dogs at their heels—Yonder's Big Nell, the first of the band. I hear the wind whistling in his plaid; I hear the scrape of his brogues on the stones. Now, come the rest—hurrying—laughing—strange they should laugh!—There, they're past—the ghostly hunters—and the sound dies away in the burn. I've heard them already this night. If they come again, I shall ken it for a sign."

Helen shook off the old woman's hand.

"You're dreaming, Morag," said she.

"Dreaming! never. I saw them as surely as I see you, Helen Vor; you with your warm young blood, your life, your passion. You're no dream."

"Oh, God knows there's little left for me to dream of!" answered the girl. "All is past. I am real, terribly real."

She pressed her hand to her breast and stifled a sob.

Morag drew back.

"Better to live in the truth, though it murders joy than live in a lie with a heart full of laughter. Better, Helen Vor, as it is. And I saw them truly—the ghostly hunters. Heavens! that I had not! But I saw their

eyes gleam with the fires of life, their cheeks flush with returning health, even the long red tongues of the hounds as they followed the deer panting, with noses to the ground."

"Don't say a word of this to the clan."

Why not? Better they should know it. If it's only a dream—which you believe—'twill not harm them."

"My word is law."

"I bend to no law, young mistress. I am a law unto myself."

The girl rose; standing she was taller than the old woman.

"I know what there's to fear if you breathe a word of this—"

A silence fell on the two, broken only by the soft lullaby of the burn, and the whispered voices of some of the clan. Morag strained her eyes up the gully: her form trembled as though struck with an ague, and drops of moisture hung like dew on her shaggy eye-brows. Behind her rose the cliffs. Their wet walls glistened in the fire-light, and a little stream, oozing out of a crevice near, trickled down in faint silver, beyond the circle of the fire however, was blank night, a wide canvas on which a troubled brain might paint illudicrously its strange fancies and illusions.

"They have passed for the third time," muttered Morag, "God-a-Mercy!"

She covered her face with her hands and turned away. Helen stopped her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Mean! But you'll ken soon enough. Thrice have the ghostly hunters passed. Death is on our track: it grasps us: it points with warm finger to Castle Sarno. Death and Destiny go hand in hand, Helen Vor."

Murmuring to herself, the old woman vanished into the darkness.

Helen sat down again, uneasy, disturbed, shaken by preternatural fears. What did Morag mean by her enigmatical words? There was an awful mystery behind all the commonplaceness and meanness of the world. Things which some felt and knew to be real, the eyes and ears of others utterly denied. She had found this contradiction in herself. Often had her inmost being stirred to what neither the sense of sight nor hearing more incomprehensible. How much more incomprehensible, then, must that deep be which forever divides human souls? Had Morag seen the ghosts of the murdered hunters? or was there some more palpable danger on the moor, of which her marvellous quickness of hearing and sight had warned her? Helen could not tell, but the memory of the mad woman's face with its wisps of grey hair and fierce eyes haunted her.

After a while, however, she fell into a short slumber; but her dreams were tumultuous and strange. What was it that she saw before her? Was it her father's face, or Rory's, or Morag's, ever vanishing and disappearing? Was it her own? Yes horror of horrors! her own features, wild and white and haggard staring with great pool-like eyes into her own eyes. Then she heard the hurried tramp of the hunters, the deep bell-notes of the hounds passing and repassing continually. She woke up: it was the dead of night but she knew that there was no more sleep for her.

"I'll send for Rory and Alaster," she said to herself and summoning a

guard bade him call the leaders.

They came, curious to know what had made her send for them at that hour. She told them of Morag and her vision.

Alaster gave a little laugh.

"Poor old dame," he said, "she's mad, stark mad. Put it all out of your mind, Mistress Helea."

She shook her head and looked at Rory.

"What do you think, Roderick?" asked she.

"There may be more in it than we dream of," he answered. "I haven't seen Morag since arriving here. She's been away on the moor; she kens every glen and gully; every sheep track for miles around. I'll send out more scouts."

Saints and martyrs! Rory, are you going to a lot for ghosts?" exclaimed the young soldier.

Dark Rory frowned.

"No," he replied haughtily, "but I think there's a reason for her fantastic delusion—worthless trash you may call it. Old, though she is, Morag's sight is as keen as a hawk's and her hearing—well! its perfect. We can't tell what she may have seen or heard on the moor. You did well to tell me, Helen."

The night wore slowly away. The sky turned pallid, a dull, unpromising colour, but imparting a faint light on the moor: though mists still overhung the gully and wrapped it in darkness.

Helen gave her attention to the women, to whose ears a vague rumor of danger had come. In the hunters' hat were crowded all the children and their mothers, and thither she took her courage and her confidence. They knew nothing, why, then, should they fear the worst? But her eyes fell on one face, the white, despairing face of a young woman clasping in her arms a sleeping boy, and its dull, hopeless-ness staggered her.

"There's nothing to fear," she said gently.

"Nothing? oh, Mistress Helen, you've not lost father and brothers and husband in this wild work. You've no child to lose as I have, my bonny, wee, Alex. He must not fall into the hands of the MacIons. They'd toss him on their swords without mercy—they have no mercy. Poor, white, wee lamb! If the worst comes, I must lie down with him in the burn and let it drown us both, o'chone!"

"That shall never be," answered Helen, "we've a good stout band to protect us. Meanwhile—"

Rory touched her on the shoulder and beckoned her outside.

"The MacIons are on our track," said he.

"The MacIons!" replied Helen, "where?"

"Over the Moor. They've killed the scouts—all, save one, who has just come in. Some one is guiding them to the gully who does not know it well. They're waiting till there's more light."

"Oh! Rory, Rory," she cried in spite of her brave words but a moment before, "what of the women?"

The cry broke from her unconsciously, it was the cry of a woman fearing what lay before her and her sex.

"Keep up your heart, Nell," he answered and laid his hand on hers. "My rieviers are mustering, and Alaster's rallying the clan. Keep up your heart. Morag's dream has forewarned us all and we'll lie in ambush at the head of the gully, and give them a taste of what they least expect—cold steel."