

## - - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

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### Chapter XIX. "Farewell, Glen Lara."

There was a stifling smell of peat rock in the air and clouds of lurid smoke rushed skywards.

The village was on fire. Not a hut but cracked and ragged like a mad, live thing. Long spirals of yellow flame spouted through rotten thatches; tongues shot from windows and doorways, licking up all they could devour; timbers flared and fell.

Helen watched it from a slight eminence. She was seated on a splendid horse, the prize of some midnight raid of the Vors.

"You could not have done a wiser thing than command the clachan to be burnt," said Alaster riding up to her side. "I hear murmurs from a few of the old folk, but it commits us to the irretrievable."

"Ay," she answered, "I know my people. They are swayed by excitement now but—if their homes here had remained, and the women left behind—the first hint of defeat or fear would have sent them scurrying back to the Glen with what plunder they could gather like a bevy of frightened sheep."

As she spoke she glanced again at the smouldering village.

It was the wild finale to a wild and stormy past. What would the future be?

She shook the reins, and her horse curveted and bounded forward to where a band of the Vors stood waiting their orders to march.

"Clansmen," she cried pointing with her whip to the huts, "this is the last of Glen Lara. As the fire is sweeping away the traces of our old homes, so may the days to come sweep away forever the sorrow that has been ours. We must look forward now; we must onward with never a glance behind."

"To Sarno and Stron-Saul!" shouted the men.

It was nearly dawn—the dawn of that day whose close must see them well embarked upon the enterprise which was to place within their grasp the Apple of Desire.

"I have commanded your homes to be burnt," continued Helen "so that you might feel that this dark page of your history was shut eternally; so that you might know that I believe in a glorious Destiny shadowed no longer by these dim hems which have locked us in from the life we crave, and the civilization of our own land. On your shoulders, clansmen, the future rests."

"To Sarno and Stron-Saul," they repeated: "Victory or Death."

The red glow from the burning village stained their faces. It threw Helen's figure into bold relief as she confronted them. Her vehemence raised them to a pitch of excitement far beyond her own. Yet for herself she cared nothing—she had found the worthlessness of what had been to her all in all—her fervour was for them and them only. In those few days since the leadership of the clan had fallen upon her, she had bound her life to one purpose: had riveted the chains of duty to her own soul; she had flung every other consideration aside.

"Helen Vor," said Morag from the fringe of the band where she hovered like the wise women of old, "Helen Vor, we are blithe ay! blithe as the larks in Spring to see this day:—this

bonny bright day is dawning. My soul is singing and my blood leaping like a bairn's. But I ken all the woe is not past. For some there will be found graves at Sarno."

"Well Morag," replied Helen, "none of us desire a grave in Glen Lara."

"Speak not ill of Glen Lara," cried the old woman stretching her arms to the hills she could dimly see through the smoke and the morning mists. "It has been a home and a shelter to us these dreary years, when we were hunted and tracked like the wolves on the moor. I tell you men, when the days to come have bitten you as they will bite—grief and disappointment are never far off from human hearts—you will look back on your life here with some gladness. Now, you've not a word too strong to describe its desolation and hardships. You say that 's storms and its rains brought disaster and tears; its seasons but a varying of the endless monotony that hedged you round: its years only death to those whose life was the stay of the clan and life to the bairns that had better never have been born. Thus have you spoken."

"Ay! and it is true," cried one. "We are marching now to the joys, Glen Lara denied us."

"I tell you—I am the oldest among you, grey-haired men have gone before me and there are old women here whom I remember as children—I tell you that you cannot be true to the Future if you're not true to the Past. Out of what Has Been grow the deeds that Will Be."

"True," cried Helen and her voice rang proudly in the dusky air, "show, clansmen, what the Glen has done for you when you come to Sarno. They say down yonder that we Vors are cowards; that we fear the swords of war and fly like bairns to our cradles when the Slogan sounds. If Glen Lara's a cradle let the Maclons see it has nursed giants of courage and resolve, not born cravens."

"Onward to Sarno."

"To Castle Sarno and Stron-Saul."

"Let us away; the day grows and our wrongs must be avenged."

There was a great flare from one of the huts as the roof and walls fell in. Vast showers of sparks swept hissing on the wind and long spears of fire shot upwards, twisted around and round with luminous coils of smoke.

It was a scene of strong contrasts; great lights and great shadows. And in Helen's soul great lights and great shadows lay.

The wind with a flash of sunlight in it, blew the mist and the vapor away. It brought to their ears the lowing of cattle and the crack of whips. Along the Glen Lara road wound a cavalcade

The wind with a flash of sunlight in it, blew the mist and vapour away. It brought to their ears the lowing of cattle and the crack of whips. Along the Glen Lara road wound a cavalcade of horsemen followed by cart after cart of baggage and a small mob of black cattle. The rest of the vast herds which the Vors possessed were left in the strath until such time as they could be transferred to Stron-Saul in peace.

Behind them came another group, one leading them on, a solitary figure on a black horse and riding alone. It was Roderick Maclon and his reivers. Helen watched him as he approached. He came on steadily, sure-

ly silently. It seemed to her like the slow yet inexorable approach of Fate. Although sorely wounded and unable to take any command at the present crisis, yet he carried himself with that dogged determination which was his strongest characteristic. His brow was gloomy and his fierce eyes scanned the people and the glen with a searching glance.

"Is all ready?" he asked Helen when he reached her.

"All."

"And this," he pointed to the smoking ruins, "your farewell to Glen Lara!"

"Ay! my farewell to Glen Lara."

"It is of fire and smoke."

"So. It is a fitting farewell for me."

"Helen," he came nearer, "have you burnt to ashes the bitterness that is between us?"

She looked away, across the strath, across the Lara burn, to the pass that lay beyond like an arm pointing to Sarno.

"That is all over," she answered. Then she bent on him the fire-lit darkness of her eyes.

"You and I are working together for the same ends, Rory" said she: "our goal is one, our hope one, our ambition the same. That must content you; for the rest—it is over."

"You are bitter, Helen."

"No. That too has passed. I am calm now—as a sea that is frozen."

She gave her horse the rein and dashed away.

Roderick bit his lip. Never had he cared for Helen before as he did now he was losing her. Love had played a very secondary part in his life till now. Ambition had been his ruling passion. Ambition! what did it bring? he asked himself. Nothing but pain, and weariness and heartsickness. Morag had cursed him that morning. He would have drawn his sword on the old woman, but dared not for fear of rousing the clan. He felt for once that his power was gone. If only he had not been wounded. He traced all his trouble to that mysterious shot in the wood. Now Alaster had taken his place in part. Alaster was a good fellow but— He ground his teeth.

The young soldier was leaning forward in his saddle talking to Helen: his hand was on her arm; he seemed eager.

"Devil take him," said Dark Rory and his jaws clenched. A pang of jealous anger shook him.

The pipers began to tune up in the glen. A heavy tumbrel cart loaded with baggage rumbled past; the people were moving all around. He straightened his shoulders and spurred to the front. It would never do for him to be behind.

Helen too had moved on.

Up the steep path to the pass they wound, a path never made by hands but by the constant tread of hurrying feet.

Helen reined up on the brow of the hill, and gazed down on Glen Lara. Her face was calm though there were lines on her forehead, not there before.

"I know," she said to herself, "it is for the last time."

Glen Lara, cradled among its wild hills, dark and solitary as her own soul. She felt herself bound to it as none other in the clan. It was there she had tasted her brief cup of joy:

there she had buried her dream of happiness. Beyond was Sarno, the treacherous frowning castle on the cliffs. Its power had always rested like a baleful influence on her spirit,