

A Highland Wooing

BY
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(Conclusion.)

HE spoke authoritatively, and Iona understood that she was lost if she appeared to hesitate, so she answered:

"I accept thy kind offer and will accompany thee. Show me the way."

Without further parley they turned round and followed by the girl walked quickly away.

The sun had risen when they reached the castle of Doneldhu. There Iona almost cried aloud in surprise as she saw Ronuk's banner floating on the highest tower. She understood that that very night he had given an assault, and the besieged, disheartened by the death of their chief, had offered but a weak resistance.

It was with evident surprise and delight that Robert of Ronuk greeted her. "What has happened, lady?" he asked. "How is it that thou art here alone?"

"I have lost my way in the fog and have wandered far. They men found me and advised me to seek thee."

"They did well; they did their duty," he replied, warmly. "Thou lookest tired. Come and rest."

When Iona had eaten some food and rested a little in the tent where he himself led her she felt decidedly better and inclined to see things more cheerfully.

Why should she fear Robert Ronuk? He had always shown himself courteous toward her. And probably the only reason why she did not like him was that her heart was taken by another.

She did not see him until the evening. A repast had been served to her, and at the end of it Robert came in.

"I must thank thee, my lord, for thy generous hospitality," she was beginning, when he interrupted her.

"Do not thank me. I am too happy that thou hast found refuge here. Dost thou feel better?"

"Yes, indeed. I am completely rested and quite ready to resume my journey."

"Surely there is no hurry?"

Sitting down by Iona's side, Robert began talking. His attitude, his words, quickly roused in Iona a vague feeling of distrust. They were not respectful and reserved as formerly. There was in his manner an assumption of authority, even of ownership.

Vainly did she show her displeasure in making her replies cold and formal, shrinking a little as he tried to draw nearer. He saw not or refused to understand.

"Thou appearest anxious to go away and leave me?" he reproachfully said, coming still closer to her. "Why? Thou art with thy future husband! and, bending, he threw his arms round her and attempted to kiss her.

"No, no! Do not touch me!" and with a cry Iona sprang away. "How do you dare?" she went on with flashing eyes. "How do you dare to insult me?"

"It is no insult," he sulkily replied. "Thou art my betrothed; thou wilt soon be my bride."

"Never, never!" she cried. "Thy betrothed? By what right dost thou claim me?"

"Thy father pledged his word that when thy brother should be avenged thou wouldst become my wife. The castle of Doneldhu has been sacked; thy foe lies dead. I claim thee!"

"Doneldhu indeed lies dead, but he was not killed by thy hand, and I will be the bride of he who killed him!"

"He was killed accidentally by one of my men as I led the assault!"

"Nay, it was my betrothed, Duncan of Glenry, who avenged my brother!"

"It is not true!" Robert cried fiercely. "How canst thou prove that it was not one of my men?"

"I stood there by his side and saw the dead. He only has the right to claim me."

The surprise Robert experienced was so great as to make his temporarily speechless.

"I do not care," he said, at last. "I have thee; I keep thee."

"Thou shouldst not dare," Iona said defiantly though her heart beat fast.

"I not dare?" He laughed a little. "There is nothing I would not dare to obtain thee."

Trembling with passion, they stood gazing at one another; then Iona slowly said:

"Leave me now. I want to be alone."

Robert hesitated, but after a while he turned away without another word left her.

High up in the glen, where it grows so narrow as to resemble a gorge, there was

a deep cave burrowed in the mountain side. It had sheltered for over forty years an old hermit. The fame of his piety and good works had spread abroad and his aid was much sought to decide knotty questions or make peace between two rivals.

So the old man was not surprised as one afternoon as he was saying his prayers, a breathless messenger came and said that his master, the Lord of Ronuk, begged him to come at once.

"Is it a very necessary matter?" the hermit asked. "This is the anniversary of the day when our Saviour died on the cross for our sins, and I would fain spend it in prayers."

"It is a very urgent matter indeed and that brooks no delay. Wilt thou not come with us?" the man urged anxiously. The priest hesitated a little, then, with a sigh:—"Very well, I will come with thee."

The surprise of the old man was great as he saw that his companion was leading him to Doneldhu's castle. But the man explained to him how it had fallen that very night into the hands of Robert Ronuk and that the dreaded Angus was no more.

As they entered in the half-demolished courtyard they were met by the young lord, who, with an abrupt gesture, dismissed his attendants.

"Father," he began, as soon as they were alone. "I have called thee for I am going to wed Iona, the daughter of the Lord of MacShanley, and I want to be married at once."

"At once?" echoed the old man, in surprise. "But this is impossible!"

"Impossible? Why? I tell thee it must be done."

"This is not a day for rejoicings and weddings. This is the Friday of the Holy Week, a day to be devoted to prayers."

"I have no time to lose," Robert cried, passionately. "I tell thee thou must marry us."

"Nay, today," he replied, with much firmness. "On Easter Sunday Iona will become thy bride. Not before. Urge me not, this is impossible."

Abashed by the hermit's stern tone, the young lord remained silent for a while.

"Well," he said at last, "I will wait. But in two days' time thou wilt return and on Easter morn unite us."

Some time elapsed before Duncan realized that he had lost Iona. Though born and bred in the mountains, the thickness of the fog was such as to entirely baffle him. He tried to call her, but obtained no answer. Totally ignorant of his surroundings, he walked aimlessly, unmoved at the thought of the dangers that Iona was perhaps running, angry at the knowledge of his own helplessness.

The weary hours crept by. When morning came he recognized where he was but no trace could he find of Iona.

Then he hoped to meet one of his men who could have helped him in his search, but the day wore on and he saw no one.

At last, when the sky grew gray, he sat down exhausted and resolved to rest for a while.

He was awakened from his light slumber by a sharp bark and saw near him some men of Ronuk's clan accompanied by a dog.

Their greeting was a friendly one, and sitting by his side they began to talk.

They had taken part, they explained to Duncan, at the sack of Doneldhu's stronghold, and, together with the young lord, they rejoiced that the cruel tyrant was no more.

"Is it true that he has indeed fallen by thy hand?" one of them asked suddenly. A little astonished by that abrupt question, Duncan replied shortly, "It is true."

The man's eyes sparkled.

"Indeed? Then thou hast won the gratitude of many, for Doneldhu was a wicked, graceless man. But, as thou knowest, the castle was taken after a fierce assault, and I had been told that the lord had been killed by an arrow shot at random, how wilt thou be able to prove that he has fallen by thy hand?"

"Look at this," and with a smile of triumph Duncan took from beneath his plaid the bloody shirt of Doneldhu. "Is this not sufficient proof?"

The man gazed at it. Then in a changing voice he asked:

"Dost thou know who I am?"

"I see that thou belonged to the clan of Ronuk," Duncan replied in surprise. "I am David, the foster brother of Robert, and as his messenger, I have sought thee. Give up to me this bloody rag and the day that Robert weds Iona he will give to thee one-half of his lands—all that at one time belonged to thy fathers."

"And it is to offer me this shameful bargain that Robert has sent thee?" Duncan spoke with apparent calm, but there was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"It is not a shameful bargain. Thou wilt never become Iona's lord, and thou must naturally wish to see thy clan once more powerful and feared."

Duncan's patience was now exhausted and in a thundering voice he cried:

"I have listened with patience to thy foul words! Go now, leave me at once, or thou wilt fare ill."

"Thou must listen to me!" exclaimed David, laying a detaining hand on the young lord's arm.

But Duncan was prepared. With a quick gesture he threw off his hold and dashed forward toward the woods.

At full speed the two men followed him, but Duncan was a splendid runner, and he reached the shelter before they could lay hand on him.

But David was not alone with his companion. Stopping, he uttered a shrill whistle and from behind some rocks lower down in the valley a dozen men suddenly emerged.

And then the chase began in earnest. Night fell, fortunately for the hunted man, dark and moonless. He well knew that his situation was most desperate, but still his energy did not fail him.

Several times he heard distinct shouts, saw lights gleaming, but he knew well his way through the forest; the hours wore on and no serious obstacle stopped his way.

All at once a familiar yet terrible sound struck his ear—the deep baying of the bloodhounds.

For several minutes Duncan stood rooted to the ground. He saw himself lost. The foes that were now on his trail thirsted for his blood, and no courage or skill was of any avail against them.

In the midst of his despair a sudden thought struck him, bringing new hope. If he could only get to the river he might yet be saved, for the other side of the bank belonged to him.

Some rough trees thrown over the rocks formed a rude bridge, secure enough for the agile mountaineer.

All through the night he fled, urged onward by the fierce barks of the dogs. Weary and footsore, he doggedly toiled on, the sweat standing on his brow, all his muscles strained, the breath coming fast, and when dawn broke he was still uncaught.

Now the critical moment had arrived, when in the open he must make a dash for the water.

He had stopped a few seconds to recover his breath when a huge bloodhound bounded on him. Duncan was prepared. His long knife gleamed, and with a howl of pain the dog rolled on the ground.

Followed by the pack of dogs that inch by inch were gaining on him, Duncan ran toward the river.

He was reaching the bank when three hounds closed on him. He felt the sharp fangs buried in his flesh as he wildly struck backwards right and left. He, however, succeeded in disengaging himself, leaving the dogs tearing to pieces his bloody plaid.

But he cried aloud in despair as he sprang on the high rock on the water's edge, for the trees that bridged the torrent existed no more. They had been probably carried away by the flood, and now there was no way of escape.

Death surrounded him on every side. The water down below swirled and barked the threatening claws and on the bank

the hounds, their bloody teeth glistening, were already scrambling on the rocks.

He gazed in front of him. Better he rushed to death on the crags than torn to pieces by the infuriated pack.

Crouching like a tiger, he gathered all his strength, then leaped forward.

It was a dizzy fall. Such was the extraordinary impetus that he touched the bank on the other side in spite of the breadth of the chasm.

His foot slipped, but he caught hold of a tuft of heather and dragged himself up. He was barely conscious of what he was doing, and as he, exhausted, sank back, he fainted away.

For three days Iona had been a prisoner. Torn by anxiety she busied herself in making plans for her escape, that after reflection she was obliged to reject as unpracticable.

Where was Duncan? What had become of him? And her father? She did not even know where he was! The girl saw no one and was closely guarded in one of the turret's dungeons that had not been damaged in the assault.

At last one morning the door of the prison was flung open and a man bade her follow him.

Her courage rose when she stood once more in the open air and saw the sun brightly shining. She remembered it was Easter Sunday. It was a day of rejoicing. Surely God would be merciful and save her from the hands of a man whom she now hated.

She was brought before Robert and left alone with him. Iona examined him anxiously. His face was dark, his features sternly set, and he avoided her glance.

"Wilt thou now explain to me what right thou keepest me a prisoner?" she asked in a cold voice, as he kept silent.

"By the right thy father gave me when he promised me that thou shouldst become my wife should I avenge thy brother."

"Doneldhu was not killed by thee, and I have already told thee that I should never become thy wife. Why, then, dost thou insult me in detaining me?"

"And I have already told thee that thou shouldst become mine," he angrily retorted. "I have means to compel thee to obey."

"Never! I fear thee not, and nothing will make me yield. Thou knowest that I love another. What dost thou mean?"

"I do not believe it. It cannot be."

"See, dost thou recognize that?" and Robert put in Iona's hand Duncan's blood-stained plaid.

"It is not possible!" Iona despairingly cried. Then, taking up the gory tartan, she passionately kissed it. "It is not possible!" she went on in a broken voice. "Oh, Duncan can't be dead! Swear to me that thou art not speaking the truth!"

"It is the truth. This was found torn and in the state thou seest near some dangerous rocks. He is dead."

Iona scarcely heard him. Despair made her almost unconscious. She stared with eyes glazed with tears at the well-loved tartan, and listened not to Robert as he attempted to reason with her.

"Come," he said at last. "Now thou canst rest no more to be my bride."

He attempted to take her hand, but she refused him.

"No, no! I know it—if Duncan is dead thou art guilty of his blood. Don't draw nearer. I will never become thy bride!"

"Thou shalt! I have been patient enough! Either thou weddest me or—"

"I fear nothing. Why should I live, since Duncan is no more?"

"Yes, but thy death will be a terrible one. Come and look!"

He almost dragged her to the door, which he flung open.

Groups of men were gathered in the courtyard, but Iona's attention was drawn to a huge woodpile that had been erected on a sort of platform.

"Thou art a witch!" Robert hissed in her ears. "Thou art the disciple and friend of that wicked old hag whom I discovered yesterday trying to gain admittance here—probably to practice with thee her wicked arts. If thou wilt become my wife I will save thee from the punishment thou deservest. Refuse and I will have thee burned for witchcraft. Choose!"

Iona's head swam, she had to lean for support against the wall, but, feeling Robert's burning eyes fixed on her, she soon raised her head again.

She shuddered with loathing as she thought that he was perhaps the murderer of her lover.

Would she listen to the man who wooed her with threats, who had told her she must either die a horrible death or submit to his caresses?

Her throat was dry, yet a queer smile came on her lips as she replied:

"I have chosen. It is death."

A livid hue overspread Robert's face. His breath was coming fast as he repeated:

"You can't mean it! Impossible!"

"Don't you understand that I hate you now? Kill me! I care not!"

For one brief instant, trembling with passion, the young man hesitated, but his resolve was quickly taken, and pushing her forward, he cried violently:

"Very well, go to thy death!"

Proudly, her head erect, the girl walked forward. She went as in a dream hardly conscious of her surroundings, and she could not repress a slight start as a voice whispered in her ear, "Hope still! Help is coming!"

The old gypsy woman! How was she there? Iona had no time left for reflection. She found herself standing in the middle of the courtyard surrounded by an excited, hostile crowd.

Then Robert addressed his men. Iona, he declared, was a witch, the accomplice of the gypsy. The old woman had tried to be admitted to the castle in order to on Easter Day hold with the girl a sabbath.

"Bring forth the gypsy woman," he said at last.

She stood before them all, and Iona gazed anxiously at her as Robert continued:

"Thou hast led this girl into evil ways, but if thou avowest thy sin frankly thy life will be spared."

"I will speak the truth and every one will hear it," she replied calmly. Then in a ringing voice she cried:

"This girl is innocent! To revenge himself the Lord of Ronuk bribed me to say that she was a witch and wanted to hold on this day a sabbath. It is not true!"

"What does this hag mean? She lies or is mad!" Robert exclaimed furiously.

"Nay, I speak the truth! Hear me all! He wanted to force Iona to marry him!"

He —

Mad with rage, Robert sprang toward the old woman.

"Thou wert into the river, the foul speaking witch!" he cried to the two men who were holding her.

But the gypsy's struggles were so violent that in spite of their strength the two men were unable to obey the order.

Still did her voice rise, shrilly denouncing Robert, while Iona, held back by some soldiers, vainly strove to free herself and rush to her help.

Frenzied by the delay, Ronuk pushed off the soldiers, seized the gypsy by the arm and dragged her to the very edge of the rock.

With an abrupt gesture he tried to fling her over the edge of the abyss. Robert saw her eyes gleaming with fiendish hatred, felt the nervous, snake-like arms lock around his neck. She laughed a disbelieving laugh, then together, locked in a deadly embrace, they fell forward.

Two terrible cries rang out as the bodies struck the sharp rocks, then they disappeared in the rushing waters.

One red stain soiled the purity of the white foam, but it quickly vanished, and in the gay sunlight the waves again sparkled and danced.

Taking advantage of the tumult and dismay, Iona succeeded in escaping. But when she found herself outside of the castle she stopped. Where could she go, surrounded on all sides by enemies? Besides, why try to live when Duncan was no more? Rather die, and she almost repented the instinctive movement that had made her fly a few moments before.

The rapid gallop of a horse aroused her from her uncertainty. She turned around, hardly knowing herself what she feared or hoped.

The figure of the man who was coming toward her seemed singularly familiar. But though her heart was beating loudly, yet she refused to believe her own eyes.

"Duncan! Duncan!" she murmured.

Could it be his ghost coming back from the Land of Shadows to take her because she could not live without him? Was it but a phantasmal vision, borne toward her by that foam-covered, panting steed?

Suddenly, when it was but a few steps from her, she sprang forward and, stretching out her arms cried wildly:—"Duncan! O, come! Take me!" It was no dream, no vision. It was Duncan, indeed, living and well, and, springing from his horse, he took her and strained her to his heart.

"I thought you were dead!" she sobbed in his arms. "And I thought I would be too late!"

In some few words he related how he had been found unconscious by some of his men. Though severely bruised, he had no dangerous wounds, and quickly recovered. Then the old gypsy woman had come to warn him that Iona was a prisoner in Robert's hands, and he had rushed off, followed more slowly by some of his men whose steeds were not as fleet as his.

"Where are we going now?" Iona asked at last. They had been riding for some time, she mounted behind him, but in her happiness of being together she had forgotten to ask where he was taking her.

"To the further end of the glen, to the cave where the saintly hermit dwells. There I left some of my men, who, having no horses, were unable to follow the gallant brute did not slacken speed until they had reached their goal. A narrow footpath led through the underwood to the cave that stood some way up the hill.

Tying the exhausted horse to a tree, Duncan and Iona slowly walked on.

They stopped as they heard voices—loud, agitated voices, very different from the humble prayers that usually the echoes softly murmured back.

Yet it was also a prayer in a way—a father's earnest supplication for the safety of his child.

"Where is my Iona? Where can she be?" the Lord of MacShanley was repeating in a loud voice that quivered with anxiety. "She is lost! I can find no trace of her!"

"Hope! Hope still!" the grave voice of the hermit was heard saying. "Surely God will take pity on thee and thou wilt find thy daughter."

"No, no! I fear she is lost, and —"

He did not finish his sentence, but stood, his eyes riveted on the entrance of the cave.

Then he started and with a cry of joy clasped his daughter in his arms.

When he released her she smiled brightly, and again bending forward began to whisper in his ear. His rugged features were shining with a kindly light when she had finished, and, stepping to Duncan took his hand in hers.

"He has avenged my brother," she murmured.

"And he will be my son," replied her father, and taking the younger man's hand he clasped it warmly.

They were married that same Easter Sunday in this holy hermit's cave. The birds, gayly carolling in the trees, sang their bridal hymn, and when they left the glen they were united forever.

A shadow of sadness fell on Iona's face when she remembered how her life had been saved at the price of her faithful gypsy.

Their love had been born in danger and strife, their courtship darkened by bloody shadows, but they were sprung of a warlike race and their hearts knew not fear. They would reign wild and free as the golden eagles that swooped down from the mountain tops and their children would make many a glen ring with their loud war cry.

LOCKED IN A DEADLY EMBRACE, THEY FELL FORWARD.



HE HAD STOPPED A FEW SECONDS WHEN A HUGE BLOODHOUND BOUNDED ON HIM.