

were ranged on the old dresser, and which Mary Morrison always set out so well, and tended so carefully; and the old oaken kist and ambry, and the other scanty furniture of the dwelling-room, gleamed in the uncertain light. The snow could be seen clogging the small window-panes, and whirling down the hole in the heather-thatched roof that did duty for a chimney. As it fell spluttering in the peat ashes, Luath, the collie, who had been uneasy for some time past, lifted up his head and howled; a howl that was long and piercing. In vain did stern old Donald, from the recesses of his box-bed, tell Luath to whisht, and called him a 'camstary bree-yute!' in vain did he add stronger expletives in Gaelic; Luath howled on; and old Donald, restless and wakeful, ill at ease both in mind and body, told himself that Luath's howling boded no good. What would he now give, were it the New Year's morning, and the brave girl safe at home again at Glenbarr!

CHAPTER II.

A DARING DEED.

Although Mary Morrison well knew the way that led over the hills from Glenbarr to Saddell, yet it was difficult to find it on that wild night. It was not dark, however, for the snow that was lying all around her made a kind of misty moonlight; and the hills and glens were dimly visible for some distance. This helped her to note certain familiar landmarks, and to keep her in the right path.

'May the good God protect me,' she murmured, in her simple piety, 'and bring me safe back with what the master has bidden me fetch.' She shrank so much from the thought of that murderer's skull, that she could not even name it to herself. But she confided herself to God's care, and pressed bravely on her way, blown by the wind, and trudging heavily through the deep snow, but upborne by the thought that she was doing this to win her lover.

Of course she was a firm believer in the 'little folk'; but she had no fear of them, for all their deeds were of kindness to those who were themselves kind; and they helped those who did their duty simply and bravely, as she was now doing, upborne by a true maiden's love. But neither green-coated fairy nor frolicsome brownie crossed her path; nor did any fearsome gruaigach, or creature, waylay her on her lonely road. Not a soul did she see, nor at that time of night did she expect to see. Here and there a few kyloes, huddled together under any slight shelter that offered itself, looked up at her with their mild wondering eyes, as though in astonishment at her apparition. There were black-faced sheep, too, whose wool looked dark brown against the pure snow, who tossed their twisted horns as she plodded past them. If the faithful Luath had been permitted to accompany her, she would not have felt so utterly desolate as she did now, on this last night of the old year.

The range of hills over which she had to pass formed the backbone of the long peninsula of Cantire, and was upwards of a thousand feet above the level of the Atlantic, the hoarse thunder of whose mighty rollers she could hear even amid the wild gusts of the storm. She had to cross over the southern side of Beinn-an-Tuirc, the Wild Boar's Mountain, in the forests of which, according to her country's legend, Diarmid, the Fingalian Achilles, slew the terrible wild boar that was the scourge of the district, and met his own death when one of the boar's bristles pricked his heel. The mountain rose to the left of her path, but its summit of 2,170 feet was now concealed by the drifting snow and misty vapours. Here she had to cross the river Barr, near to its source in the lonely Loch Arnicle. A slight stone bridge spanned the stream, with a low parapet on either side, barely high enough in the snow to prevent her from making a false step into the stream below. The river was now in spate; and it rushed and roared, and flung itself among the rough boulders in a torrent of peat-stained water, its furious headlong dash and boiling spray contrasting strangely with the stillness of the dark tarn, from the tall reeds of which the herons and wild geese and wild swans would take their clanging flight.

Amid the banks of snow-covered heather were many morasses, with their tumps of rushes and bog-cotton, to whose white feathery down Ossian likened the snowy breasts of 'the high-bosomed Strina Dona.' No less fair than Strina Dona herself was the brave and bonnie Mary Morrison, as she gallantly faced the storm of wind and snow, and carefully picked her way amid the lichen-covered rocks and bracken. And if not less fair than Strina Dona, no less daring and devoted was she than the beauteous Grainia, beloved of Diarmid, who risked her life to bring him aid in his last extremity, the while she courageously hid the wandering arrow that had pierced her fair breast, and died with him here upon this mountain, Bienn-an-Tuirc, while the onlookers with glistening eyes murmured, 'The fondest lovers must part at last.' Brave as the beauteous and devoted Grainia, Mary Morrison hoped that she had only parted with her own fond lover for a few hours, and that this night's work would bring them many days of happiness.

On she went, and never faltered or paused, save but for a few moments to enable her to regain her spent breath, or to note the bearings of her path. Here and there, a noble Scotch fir, whose ruddy-brown trunk was planted firmly in the cleft of a crag, raised on high its twisted arms for the table of snow that had bespread its massive dark foliage. These firs, and the groups of graceful birch and larch, and the scattered rowan-trees, served her as landmarks in the snowy landscape. By carefully noting them and their bearings, she paced steadily on to her destination down into the solemn depths of the deep glen—leaping over the burnie rushing seawards, climbing the steep brae, and then away over another rolling hill, again to encounter a similar repetition of hill and glen. Yet she held on her way, and never missed it beyond a few yards, her set purpose and her deep love upbearing her through the perils and trials of this wild last night of the old year, and enabling her to brave the dangers of the solitary road. It was not the first fierce storm of wind and snow in which she had wandered abroad, sometimes to herd the straggling sheep, and sometimes to fetch up the kyloes, or to bring the milking cows to the byre. But now she had a higher motive to sustain her, and to nerve her for the task that she had undertaken; and with her plaid wrapped tightly over her head and shoulders, she pressed dauntlessly on through the bleak weather, the very picture of a brave Highland maiden.

Though the snow whirled in her face so as to wellnigh blind her, and

though it clogged her feet and muffled her path, she struggled on to her destination, and at length, to her great joy, found herself descending into Saddell Glen, and heard the dash of its river. She entered the plantation of ash and elm trees, and soon after stood among the memorial stones that were thickly scattered in the graveyard round the ruins of what was once a grand old monastery. Now it was fallen from its former high estate, and was a deserted ruin, used only occasionally for the purposes of burial. Many a gallant Macdonald and Lord of the Isles lay around her; yet there was not one of those heroes of old who had been called upon to perform a deed demanding greater courage and endurance than that which now taxed the powers of the brave girl of Glenbarr. Reginald, the son of the mighty Somerled, who had built this monastery for the Cistercian monks, and was here buried in the year 1163, had adopted the Scandinavian custom; and for the space of three years had lived without entering a house wherein a fire had been kindled, in order that he might accustom himself to privation and hardship. Yet any hardship that he had undergone in his wild and stormy career, as Thane of Argyle, and Lord of Cantire and the Isles, would hardly have surpassed that which Mary Morrison was now voluntarily undergoing for true love's sake.

This building at Saddell, which she had at length reached, was now a complete ruin. Its stones, erected on consecrated dust that had been brought from Rome, had been barbarously dealt with, and a large number of them had been carted away by a proprietor, to build dykes and offices, which he paved with tombstones of abbots and warriors. Mary Morrison well knew the local legend, how that this man had been punished for his sacrilege by soon after meeting his death by a trivial accident; and that the estate had then passed to another family. Yet at the time of her visit a certain portion of the building, commonly called 'the old church,' or kirk, still remained standing, and was cared for after a certain fashion, for its outer walls still stood intact, and at the western end there was an oaken door to shut out intruders. The snow and the rain could not be shut out, for the greater portion of the roof had fallen, and the building was, in consequence, open to the sky. Ornate sculpture still remained on the walls and on some tombs, especially on one, a memorial of some Lord of the Isles, probably of Reginald himself, the founder of the church. It was recessed in the south wall towards the east end, and was covered with a pointed arch. On the top of the slab of this tomb was laid a human skull, which was protected by the covering arch from any downpour of rain or fall of snow. This was the skull that the brave girl had pledged her word to take from its resting-place, and carry back to her stern old master at Glenbarr.

It may merely have been an ordinary skull, turned up by the sexton when digging a fresh grave, and not replaced by him in the soil, but removed by some one to the slab of the founder's tomb. The skull, however, was invested with its own particular legend in that land of legends. It was said to be the skull of the grim Macdonald, surnamed Rìgh Fiongal, who, besides murdering at the rate of one daily the chieftains of the clan M'Lean, who had come to Saddell to make peace with him, had also murdered by slow starvation in the dungeons of his castle the husband of a woman whom he had seized and borne off from Ireland; and it was said that when he pointed out to her, from the summit of the castle's square massive tower, the body of her husband being carried out for burial, she suddenly leaped from the battlements, and fell dead by the side of the corpse. The legend went that, when this cruel Macdonald died, the dogs scratched up his body from the grave, and devoured the flesh, even as that wretched man, whom he had starved to death in his dungeon, had been found to have gnawed his own hand and arm in his agony to prolong life. The bones of this once dreaded and powerful Lord of the Isles were discovered clean picked by the dogs and carrion crows; but no one could be found to give them a fresh burial in the graveyard, and the skull was placed, in a sort of mockery, on the slab of his great ancestor's tomb. It was looked upon with superstitious awe, and no one dared to touch or meddle with it.

This, then, was the grim memorial of a wicked murderer that Mary Morrison had pledged herself to take from its place, in the dead of that wild winter's night, and to carry it back on her perilous journey all the way to Glenbarr. She had often seen the skull, and well knew the legend that belonged to it; and she had never dared to lay a finger upon it. But now she had to nerve herself to do this, and to carry the ghastly burden for many miles. 'It is for Donald!' she murmured; 'may the good God protect and help me!' And she approached the building through the graveyard crowded with its memorials to the departed.

When she had reached the enclosed portion of the old monastery, she found that its door, which was ordinarily closed, was standing ajar, burst open probably by the violence of the storm. She crossed the threshold deep in snow. Although the greater portion of the roof had fallen in, and the building, for the most part, was open to the sky, yet the place was very dark; the tall trees that grew so closely to the building, and in such profusion, making a deep shade there, even at noonday. But she knew the exact spot where she should find the skull, and she began to grope her way to it in the dark. As she did so she heard a peculiar noise, made up, as it seemed to her, of low moans from many creatures. The sighing of the wind through the trees did not account for these sounds; though it made it impossible for her to listen attentively to them, or to conjecture what they could be, but they appeared to proceed from something within the walls of the old church. Then there was a trampling of light feet over the broken pavement, and she was conscious that certain forms were rushing past her in the darkness. Then there was a momentary cessation of the peculiar sounds: then they were succeeded by the mysterious plaintive moanings.

'I felt my heart give a great jump into my throat!' she afterwards said; 'but I was not going to have my walk for nothing, so I made for the skull.'

She did not tell of the effort that it cost her, terrified though not disheartened, to grope to the Macdonald's tomb, and then to stretch out her hands under its dark canopy, until she felt them touch the murderer's skull. She did not say how she kept her purpose bravely and steadily in view; and though she loathed to feel the clammy remains of the wicked man, whose skull had grinned there so ghastly for so many years, and had rarely been touched by any finger, how she seized the skull with both hands, and, though she felt its teeth rattling