

- - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

BY E. J. JENKINSON.

CHAPTER XVI.

... A LOST CHANCE.

The sun was dawdling towards its setting when John Vor met Fergus Macdon on the fallen pillar alone and unarmed.

Roderick sat on a hawthorn pillar moodily digging holes in the sand at his feet with the point of his sword. His face was white as the face of a man in agony, and his brow was furrowed and damp.

"We are but straws cast hither and thither by the winds of Fate," he muttered, "cast hither and thither in the dark night. I feel almost like a lost child." Then he took a pull of brandy and traced new patterns on the sand.

The wild birds returned to their accustomed haunts, and as the hour grew later called to one another from the water or flickered across it in lonely flight.

The Vors were sullen. They began to murmur at the long vigil; at Rory's haughty reply to Fergus, who might, after all, they said, mean nothing but fair dealing. True Morag had prophesied ill-luck, but she was mad. She was always prophesying some disaster or other. They were impressionable, too, and as the grey mists gathered over the bens and stole down the braes on all sides to lie cold and damp in the glen—to sleep as the dead sleep—they shuddered.

"This can't last," said Rory obliterating with one sweep the hieroglyphics at his feet. "Would to God I knew what my brother means! See, lads, don't let the horses stray. Curse this place! we've put ourselves in a tight hole for once."

"We've you to thank for that, Captain," replied one, Coll by name.

The outlaw shot a fierce glance at him then at the rest. He saw it all in a flash. The men were frightened, utterly frightened. Their short-lived courage had gone down with the sun, and he was alone with them, and with double their number ready to spring upon him like so many tigers when the darkness had fallen.

What of the Chief, John Vor?

Slowly, bit by bit, he had been drawn further and further away from the hawthorn and protection of his own people towards the cliffs where the Sarno men were encamped.

Fergus had glozed, had flattered, had wheedled; had built up a tremendous fabric of lies and promises. He had exerted all his pleasing, his courtesy and glamour to win the old man and he had succeeded.

Stron-Saul fell into the snare dug so warily for his feet; he clasped the Macdon's hand in hearty good-will and allowed himself to be drawn still nearer the enemy's camp.

Roderick noted the gradually widening space between himself and Stron-Saul. Vague fears that had hitherto flapped like a host of formless spirits round him became terribly real and menacing.

"Put the hearts of men in your breasts," he cried starting up and turning to his followers. "Let us fall on them hip and thigh. We can't win—I don't see much hope of that; I will not deceive you—but we can die as heroes."

The Vors hung back.

"The chief has not yet settled with Fergus," said they doggedly, "He is in no danger."

"Lads! have you forgotten the hunters?"

"No; but you yourself, captain, warned us against believing Mad Morag. We were rash then; we will be sober now and—wait."

Rory bit his lip and was silent. Silent! with a bitter maddening pain at his heart that he could not make fools into men, could not, with all his will and determination, add one spark of strength to their shrivelled valour. And he knew that they, in their inmost being, believed there was treachery afoot.

Twilight came down and in the shadows and mist the two figures began to fade. Fergus had drawn his arm through the old man's; they were sauntering towards the cliff.

A sudden impulse came to Rory.

There was one last, desperate chance of saving the old chief.

His horse stood near, saddled and bridled. Should he spring on its back and dash to his aid? It was barely possible he would reach John Vor in time. The Macdons were certain to be watching, and a dozen of them might be on him before he was half way across. Still the mist and the gloaming would hide his movements for a time and give him the start. Should he do it? Yet he hesitated. He rose to his feet and then sat down again. A few steps more and the old man would be too far off. It was now or never. Still he sat undecided. Why should he run such fearful risk for John Vor? He had warned him; had begged him not to go. What if he should die? Perhaps it were better so. He was evidently rousing himself to a new activity, but an activity that would lead him into a very headstrong and unwise course, and his people with him. He might ruin all now. Yet—was he not bound in honor to save him?

In this tremendous crisis Rory's life seemed to come to a standstill. His nerves were strained to their highest pitch; and as the moment for action slipped by, he listened vaguely to the whispering of his followers.

"What say you, Coll?" one murmured "it seems to me the Captain is mightily put about at this meeting of our Chief and Fergus Macdon."

"Aye, aye. He kept Sir Collin in his own hands, you mind? But we're more likely to see the old home again, now his finger's out of the pie."

"Damn you!" said Rory turning around "damn you!"

John Vor and Fergus had passed out of sight; the opportunity was lost and gone forever. But he might have savor his old friend; he did not blind his eyes to that.

"Another chance gone," he thought, "to join the host already gathered against me. I shall see it always jeering at me when I cast my glance backward. My Future will be choked regrets. Ah God! what a hideous reality is life."

The mad light in his eyes told plainly enough its tale of fever and pain. The fear too, that he was losing control of himself when the utmost caution and cool-headedness was required, hung like a nightmare on him.

"Oh for a sight of my own black band!" he groaned. "John Vor, John Vor, you're a fool, and I'm another, I'd yield my soul to the devil this night, if he'd give me one jot of the cunning born and bred in the brain

of Fergus. What can I do. What think Hark! there are footsteps."

They leaned forward and listened. They had waited so long, so anxiously for some sound. A voice called to them. It was not John Vor's, but the harsh dry voice of the last messenger.

"When will Fergus stop this flat-tedore and shuttlecock of words" cried Rory. What does he want now Well—"

"Stron-Saul is a prisoner!"

"A prisoner!"

"Ay! but Sir Fergus will set him free for a ransom."

"A ransom!" exclaimed the Vors. "Curse you, foul-mouth—"

"Don't waste wind," said Rory, "don't for heaven's sake. What is the ransom, man?"

There was a curious calm in his voice now. He knew his brother feared him: that all boys since at the Vors were meant to find in his heart a goal: that he was the one-man on earth whose living power haunted and haunted Fergus from year's end to year's end. It was not only that he, Rory, had been unjustly outlawed, and might at any time gain the King's favour; but he was secretly adored by many of the clan Iona, and by right was its chief. Fergus could not feel that his feet were firmly planted in Sarno unless Rory's head was in the dust.

"Sir Fergus Macdon will return John Vor to his clan, if Dark Rory leaves the land, if he gives up all claim to Castle Sarno and the chieftainship."

The words fell: There could be no misunderstanding now: the day, the moment had come for Roderick to show what all those years of plotting and planning at Glen Lara were leading to.

He thought of the dark castle on the sea-cliffs, of the power which by right belonged to him, which he knew, given fair play, he could make his own. With his prosperity, would come the prosperity of the Vors: when he was lord of Sarno, the key should keep the cottage, and the tank the sheep. There would be no more cattle-stealing o' nights, no more midnight raids on the unsuspecting farmers, no more dark deeds done in the dark places of the earth. And Fergus asked him to give up his dream: give it up for the sake of the people who, belike, had paid one of their number to shoot him a week ago, who, even now would not fight at his side for their own. Was it likely?

This was no chance at all. No! Justice had declared that he should not be given another, but the shadow of one. His old friend, the man who had asserted his own authority for the first time only to drag them all down with him into the vortex of ruin, was as good as dead, for all he could do to save him.

He knew the ransom was but a blind. If he once laid down his arms there was nought for him but shackles and Sarno dungeon and after that the pit or the axe.

"The world is full of darkness," he said to himself, "treachery glints in every soul. I must take my own path and my own way. Oh God for another chance!"

He stood with one foot on the great stairway and one on the barren land, gazing at the time of which he dreamed, as it opened before him in imagination, like a flower,—fragrant, gorgeous, glowing with the glory of sun and summer—his Heart's Desire. He could never give it up, least of all for such a promise as Fergus Macdon's.