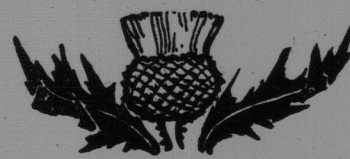
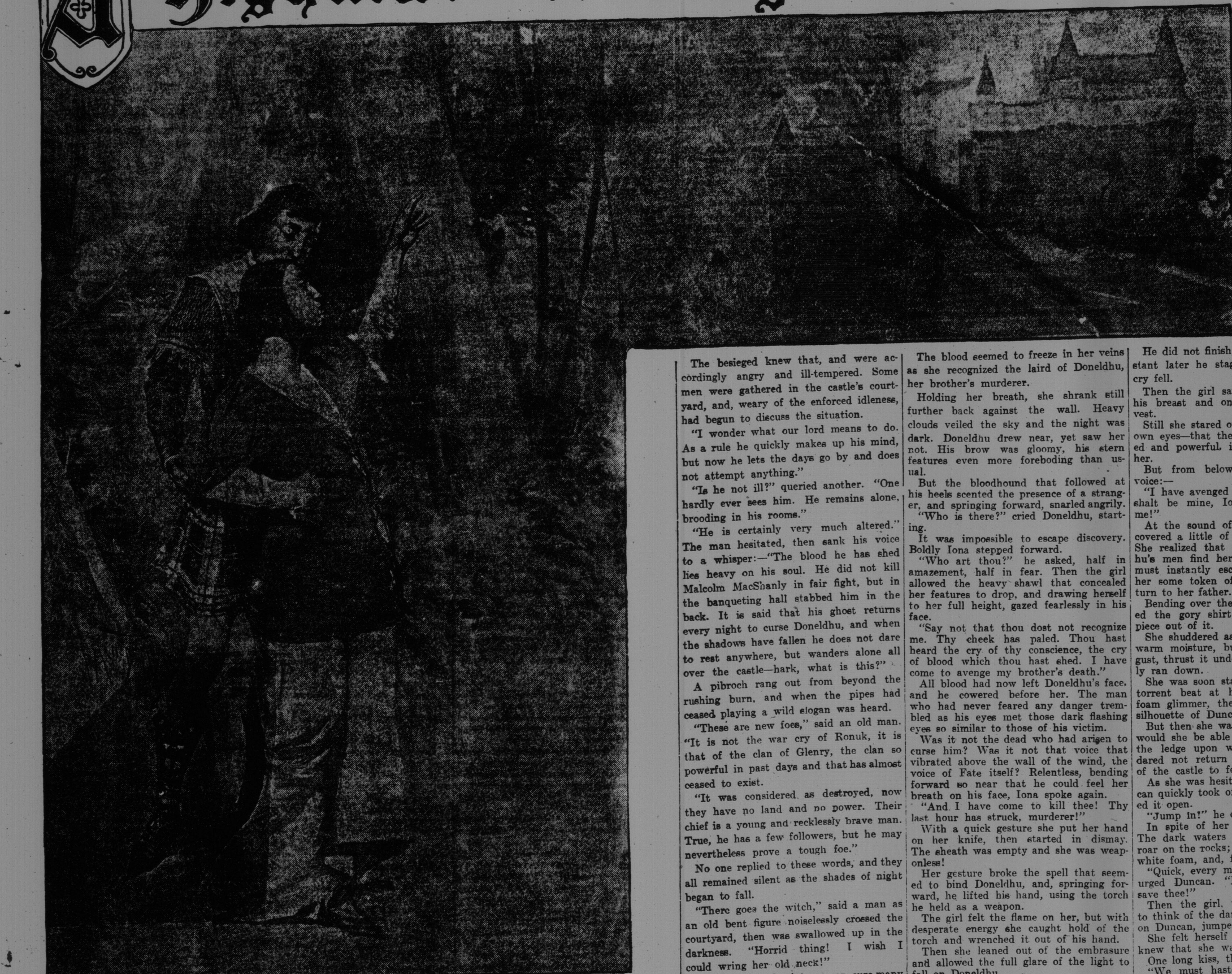
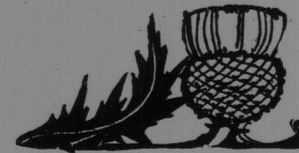




# A Highland Wooing



BY  
IDA DE THAËL



"SAY NO MORE," HE INTERRUPTED—"DOST THOU TRULY LOVE ME?"

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"W" E must have our revenge! I will avenge him!" Iona laid a particular stress on the pronoun, and, as she spoke to herself, she flung up her head with a resolute gesture. She fully shared her father's feeling. Indeed, there was not a man or woman belonging to the clan of the MacShanly who would not have willingly risked his or her life in order to avenge their young leader's death. Brave and open-hearted, Malcolm, the only son and heir of the mighty laird of MacShanly, had not hesitated to accept the invitation of his neighbor, the laird of Doneldhu, to come to his castle and discuss matters relative to some boundary land. True, Angus Doneldhu had an evil reputation. His cruelty and violence had roused a feeling of hate in many a heart. Still, the trusting young man did not believe him capable of a base treachery. Malcolm did not live to find out that he had been mistaken. A blow struck from behind had brought that young life to an end. Angus knew that his victim's father, that all his clan would rise in arms to avenge his death, but he only laughed contemptuously. Who could storm his stronghold? It was impregnable, not only because man had built high, heavy walls, but also because Nature had surrounded the high rock on which it was built by an impetuous rivulet impossible to ford. Angus Doneldhu could well afford to laugh at the threats of his enemies. Iona knew well the difficulties that such an enterprise presented, but her blood was up, and no difficulties daunted her. Yet she felt that morning sorely perplexed and dismayed when her father had unfolded his plan to her, for to strengthen his forces he had called a young and powerful neighbor, Robert of Ronuk, and asked his help. The day when Robert would bring to him the token of the death of his cowardly foe, that day Robert would become the husband of Iona, his beautiful daughter, heiress of his splendid domain. "I can't—can't marry him!" the girl repeated vehemently. "Oh, it is cruel of my father! He knows I cannot ever become a loving wife to Robert, that I have already given my heart to Duncan, and because he is poor, he refuses to listen to his suit. And now what shall I do if Robert kills Angus and comes to claim my hand? Can I refuse to pay this debt of gratitude? No. I must avenge my brother and thus be released

from the pledge that my father has taken." It was sunset when Iona slipped out of her father's castle and walked quickly away. The road was long to the trysting place, the wood behind the hill where she frequently met Duncan. Brave and upright, the young Master of Glenry had won the respect even of his foe, but he was poor, and when he had asked the laird of MacShanly for his daughter's hand he had met with a curt refusal. However, the girl had promised to be true to him, and as often as they dared, they met in the shadow of the pine trees by the rushing burn. Duncan was already there, and his heart beat more strongly as he saw outlined against the blue sky the slim figure of his betrothed bride. She walked rapidly, with the graceful, swinging stride of the mountaineer. The sun caught here and there the narrow yellow stripes of her dark tartan and shone on the buckle that gathered her kilt. But he saw only the dark flashing eyes and red lips that parted with a smile when she caught sight of him. When they were standing side by side she eagerly told him her said tale—how her father had promised her to another. "Say no more," he interrupted. "Dost thou truly love me?" "Oh, Duncan, thou knowest it surely." And Iona raised her beautiful eyes and gazed at him so lovingly that he bent and softly kissed the white, pure forehead. "Then, dearest, have no fear. Do you think that if thy brother's murderer should fall by my hand, thy father should listen to me more kindly?" "He surely would!" "Then I must succeed. I must do it." "But, think, Duncan," she nervously interrupted. "Think of all the men that Robert Ronuk can muster! His clan is so powerful! Though, powerful as he may be, he will not succeed in obtaining my love," she added. "And I, too, will try to help thee. I am ready for anything." "If thou art thus resolved nothing can part us. Our love will triumph over all obstacles," Duncan passionately replied. Night was coming. The mountains bathed in a golden light and the hard rocks threw back the bright rays. The soft purple carpet of heather glistened, but the sun no longer shone on the valley. Then it disappeared behind the hills and all grew dark. It was only then that Iona and Duncan regretfully parted. He soon disappeared in the wood and she retraced her steps toward her father's home. The moon had risen, and she was able

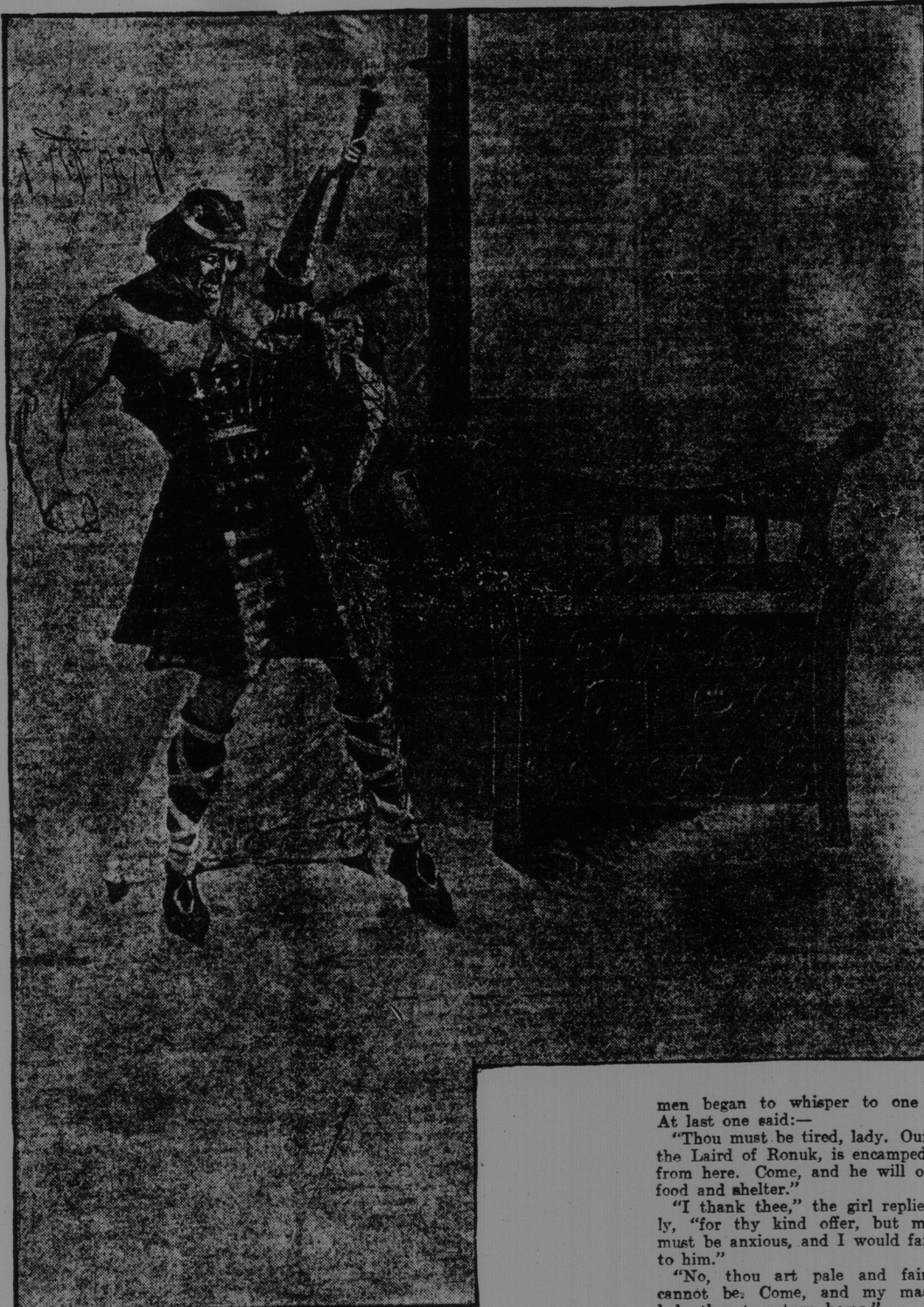
to see some way off. Suddenly she noticed a bent figure crouching on the ground. The girl stopped and gazed attentively. Who could it be? Iona was not easily frightened and she softly walked forward. Then she recognized an old gypsy woman, well known in that neighborhood. Skilled in mysterious lore, she was reputed to be a witch and regarded with a mixture of hate and awe. Once her life had been threatened, and it was only through Iona's intervention that she had escaped unhurt. Like all gypsies, she never forgot a good deed or an insult. She became devoted to the daughter of MacShanly and from her the girl learned many useful remedies. She was gathering herbs when Iona drew near, and gently touched her on the shoulder. "What are you doing, granny?" she asked. "Are you concocting some new remedies?" The old woman started, but when she recognized who it was she spoke to her, her stern features slightly relaxed. "Yes, lady. I am gathering herbs." She laughed shortly, then added:—"When men are powerful and in good health the poor woman is insulted and hounded, but when diseases come they call her back and are too glad to obtain her help." "And who is ill and needing thy skill?" the girl asked. "There are several sick men in the castle of Doneldhu. I am to go there to-morrow night and tend them." "Men of the clan of Doneldhu," she breathlessly repeated, "and you will be admitted in the castle?" She scarcely listened to the gypsy's affirmative reply. She was quivering with excitement. The idea that had flashed through her mind was a wild one, the danger was great, but was she not resolved to run any risk rather than become the wife of Robert—of the man whom honor and gratitude would force her to marry, if he succeeded in avenging her brother's death? And in her brave, resolute heart the thought took root and grew strong as the dark pines that sprang up on the mountains. Day after day the situation remained unchanged, and the men intrenched in the rocky fastnesses of Doneldhu fretted and fumed. They were closely surrounded by the soldiers of Ronuk, who knew how hopeless an assault was, but that the provisions of the besieged must some day fail them. Urged by hunger and impatience, they would make some desperate attempt to break through the circle of iron that bound them, and there would come the chance of the brave but wily and cunning laird of Ronuk.

The besieged knew that, and were accordingly angry and ill-tempered. Some men were gathered in the castle's courtyard, and, weary of the enforced idleness, had begun to discuss the situation. "I wonder what our lord means to do. As a rule he quickly makes up his mind, but now he lets the days go by and does not attempt anything." "Is he not ill?" queried another. "One hardly ever sees him. He remains alone, brooding in his room." "He is certainly very much altered." The men hesitated, then sank his voice to a whisper:—"The blood he has shed lies heavy on his soul. He did not kill Malcolm MacShanly in fair fight, but in the banquet hall stabbed him in the back. It is said that his ghost returns every night to curse Doneldhu, and when the shadows have fallen he does not dare to rest anywhere, but wanders alone all over the castle—hark, what is this?" A pibroch rang out from beyond the rushing burn, and when the pipes had ceased playing a wild slogan was heard. "These are new foes," said an old man. "It is not the war cry of Ronuk, it is that of the clan of Glenry, the clan so powerful in past days and that has almost ceased to exist." "It was considered as destroyed, now they have no land and no power. Their chief is a young and reckless brave man. True, he has a few followers, but he may nevertheless prove a tough foe." No one replied to these words, and they all remained silent as the shades of night began to fall. "There goes the witch," said a man as an old bent figure noiselessly crossed the courtyard, then was swallowed up in the darkness. "Horrid thing! I wish I could wring her old neck!" "Her herbs and mixtures can cure many diseases. She is useful." "David has not forgiven her for the disagreeable surprise she gave him." They laughed one of his companions. "He had been railing the witch about her hunched-up figure and saying that probably the beauty of the face made up for it, but that she kept it so jealously concealed that it was difficult to judge. So saying he tried to lift her heavy shawl. What do you think she did? With a wild gesture she drew out her knife and almost plunged it in his breast. He said that he could see her eyes glittering like those of the Evil One himself." "I don't believe that she is a creature of flesh and blood," David solemnly rejoined. "So it is no use to fight her with ordinary weapons." In the meanwhile the subject of their conversation had crept away. She slipped out of the castle by a small door and found herself on the rocks bounded on all sides by the rushing torrent. Then her figure suddenly straightened, and she bounded lightly from rock to rock as far as she dared to venture. Stopping, she uttered a plaintive cry similar to that of the deer calling his mate in the winter-bound woods. Another cry was heard, this time coming from the bank. Then a figure emerged, hardly perceptible, however, in the night. "Iona, my darling." The voice rose softly above the rush of the water, and the girl thrilled as she heard it, and forgot the danger. "Duncan!" she called back; then suddenly her joy was darkened by fear, and she went on anxiously:—"Are you really ready? Is there no danger that the rope should break?" "No danger. Going down these rocks will be an easy matter. To climb again to the heights where you stand will be more difficult, but you will warn and direct me from above." "Yes, I will. But take care; take care, for my sake." She had no time to add more. He had already begun to descend; a few minutes after he was at the foot of the rocks. Suddenly Iona saw a light glimmer in the darkest corner. She anxiously wondered who it might be, for very seldom came any one in that part of the castle. A faint light glimmered, then a man began to ascend the winding staircase. He held a torch in his hand and she could well distinguish his features.

The blood seemed to freeze in her veins as she recognized the laird of Doneldhu, her brother's murderer. Holding her breath, she shrank still further back against the wall. Heavy clouds veiled the sky and the night was dark. Doneldhu drew near, yet saw her not. His brow was gloomy, his stern features even more forbidding than usual. But the bloodhound that followed at his heels scented the presence of a stranger, and springing forward, snarled angrily. "Who is there?" cried Doneldhu, starting. It was impossible to escape discovery. Boldly Iona stepped forward. "Who art thou?" he asked, half in amazement, half in fear. Then the girl allowed the heavy shawl that concealed her features to drop, and drawing herself to her full height, gazed fearlessly in his face. "Say not that thou dost not recognize me. Thy cheek has paled. Thou hast heard the cry of thy conscience, the cry of blood which thou hast shed. I have come to avenge my brother's death." All blood had now left Doneldhu's face, and he covered before her. The man who had never feared any danger trembled as his eyes met those dark flashing eyes so similar to those of his victim. "Was it not the dead who had arisen to curse him? Was it not that voice that vibrated above the wall of the wind, the voice of Fate itself? Relentless, bending forward so near that he could feel her breath on his face, Iona spoke again. "And I have come to kill thee! Thy last hour has struck, murderer!" With a quick gesture she put her hand on her knife, then started in dismay. The shawl was empty and she was weaponless! Her gesture broke the spell that seemed to bind Doneldhu, and, springing forward, he lifted his hand, using the torch he held as a weapon. The girl felt the flame on her, but with desperate energy she caught hold of the torch and wrenched it out of his hand. Then she leaned out of the embrasure and allowed the full glare of the light to fall on Doneldhu. "Kill him, Duncan!" she called out. "Kill him! Kill him!" "What art thou doing?" Doneldhu cried in amazement, rushing to the embrasure. "Curse thee! Be silent! Or—"

He did not finish his sentence. One instant later he staggered and, without a cry fell. Then the girl saw an arrow buried in his breast and one blood stain on his vest. Still she stared on, hardly believing her own eyes—that the mighty laird, so feared and powerful, indeed lay dead before her. But from below she heard Duncan's voice:—"I have avenged thy brother, and thou shalt be mine, Iona! Come, come to me!" At the sound of his voice the girl recovered a little of her presence of mind. She realized that should any of Doneldhu's men find her she was lost. She must instantly escape, and, taking with her some token of their foe's death, returned to her father. Bending over the lifeless body, she seized the gory shirt and stripped a large piece out of it. She shuddered as her hand touched the warm moisture, but, conquering her disgust, thrust it under her shawl and quickly ran down. She was soon standing on the rocks, the torrent beat at her feet, she saw the foam glimmer, then made out the dark silhouette of Duncan. But then she was obliged to halt. How would she be able to let herself down to the ledge upon which he stood? She dared not return to the inhabited part of the castle to fetch some ropes. As she was hesitating what to do, Duncan quickly took off his plaid and stretched it open. "Jump!" he cried. In spite of her bravery Iona wavered. The dark waters dashed with an angry roar on the rocks; she saw the streaks of white foam, and, fascinated, jumped not. "Quick, every minute lost is precious!" urged Duncan. "Have no fear; I will save thee!" Then the girl, with an effort, refused to think of the danger, and her eyes fixed on Duncan, jumped. She felt herself caught in his arms and knew that she was safe. One long kiss, then she drew away. "We must hasten to leave this place. The men of Doneldhu may soon learn their lord's death." "We shall go to thy father, and now that I have avenged thy brother I will claim thee as my promised bride." "Take this," whispered Iona, and with a shudder she gave him the blood-stained shirt of Doneldhu. "When my father sees this he will refuse thee nothing." The night was dark and a strong wind was blowing. Unperceived they hurried off, and soon had left behind them the glimmering fire of Ronuk's camp. They soon left the glen, but when they had reached the loch's side the weather changed completely. The wind dropped, and from the water arose a heavy mist. They were soon surrounded by the fog and had to grope forward with uncertain steps. They did not dare to stop, for they wished to be already far when the sun rose, but they often lost their way. Where was the loch? Where were the hills? Nothing was visible. At last they found themselves stopped by a torrent. "Wait here a minute," said Duncan. "I will go and see whether I can't find a place where we can ford it." In spite of her strength, Iona was beginning to feel very tired, and she wearily sat down. Soon she started up, thinking she heard Duncan calling her, and took some steps forward. Suddenly she missed the ground and there was an abyss yawning in front of her, but her balance and fell forward. Down she went, crashing through branches, wildly clutching at everything her hand touched, yet unable to stop herself, then with a dull thud fell at the bottom. For a while she lay dizzy, almost unconscious. At last, slowly she began to realize what had happened. She had been standing on the high, overhanging bank of the loch, when she suddenly slipped. As she thought of Duncan, she loudly called out his name, then shuddered as she heard the echo repeat it. No, some one might be lurking near; she must not attract notice. But oh! what if she had lost Duncan? With sudden fear she sprang to her feet and attempted to scramble up. But an impassable wall seemed to be standing before her; she could not see, but only feel, and the obstacle seemed insurmountable. "I must try at another place," she thought, and hurried on. All at once she felt her feet sink in the soft slime and the cold water on them. She hastily drew back and ran in the other direction. But there large trees stopped any further progress. The branches struck her as she attempted to force her way through. An invisible hand seemed to grasp her dress. She violently turned round and saw that it was only creepers that had fallen on her. She could distinguish nothing. A wall of darkness stood before her that she could not pierce. She knew not where to fly, and a horrible fear took hold of her. With outstretched hands, stumbling, falling on loose bits of rock, she ran on, but as if in a nightmare. Iona felt that she could not make no headway, but ever turned round as in a magic circle. For many a weary hour she struggled on, panting, exhausted. At last she could walk no more, and sank on the ground. "Oh, Duncan," she sobbed, "where art thou? Where art thou?" When she awoke from her heavy torpor, half swoon, half sleep, it was daylight. The fog had lifted, the sky was clear, and, looking around, she saw two men walking toward her. She hastily sprang to her feet in dismay as she recognized the tarts of Ronuk's men. "Who art thou?" cried one of them, eyeing her suspiciously. Iona hesitated, but recognizing the impossibility of a disguise, replied, quietly:—"I am the daughter of the Laird of MacShanly. I have lost my way in the fog and wandered all night."

Without making any reply, the two men began to whisper to one another. At last one said:—"Thou must be tired, lady. Our master, the Laird of Ronuk, is encamped not far from here. Come, and he will offer thee food and shelter." "I thank thee," the girl replied, quickly. "For thy kind offer, but my father must be anxious, and I would fain return to him." "No, thou art pale and faint. That cannot be. Come, and my master will help thee to return home." (To be concluded next week.)



HE DID NOT FINISH HIS SENTENCE

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