

THE PAGE OF JAMES V. OF SCOTLAND.

Translated from the French by S. A. C. with the author's permission.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MORASS OF DUNSE. Knowing as we now do that our hero Francis has fallen into the hands of Angus, and having also learnt how it came about that Cessford was substituted for Percy, the Cardinal's envoy, and having been made acquainted with the plans and intrigues of Beaton and Angus, let us follow the fortunes of those we had left for a while—

On leaving the castle, Sir Antony directed his course towards the appointed place of meeting; he spurred his horse to a gallop, and his home was soon left far behind. It would seem as if he thus urged on his steed to prevent his resolution from giving way, and to render it impossible for him to change his mind and retain his son. Suddenly he checked his speed, and wiping his eyes, full of tears, said:

"Poor boy! he must have started by this time. Who knows if I shall ever see him again? Oh, that horrible dream! It is always in my mind. How is it that I, who have never feared the tumult or disturbed by a mere dream as now so I tremble—yes, tremble? This nervous agitation can only be caused by my uneasiness as to my son's fate. Yet Lord Home, whom I shall soon meet, may perhaps attribute it to fear of him. Fear! yes, he used that word in his insolent letter. At all costs I must surmount this nervous feeling, so that he may not perceive it; I must try to forget for the present both my son and my fears in his regard. Besides, what harm can befall him? He is now on the road to Edinburgh, well escorted by the Cardinal's faithful servants. There! I will think no more of him, but only of the meeting with this insolent lord, who dared to speak of fear in connection with me. By St. Antony! I shall teach him a lesson."

And in order entirely to recover his composure the knight spurred his horse anew to a gallop, and rode rapidly up and down for some minutes. This violent exercise having produced the desired effect, he said to himself: "Now for Lord Home, and let him moderate his language, or, by St. Antony! I will measure swords with him!" then quite himself again, he directed his course straight to the morass. Meanwhile, Home of Wedderburn was advancing towards the same spot, accompanied by ten of his retainers. Between two of these attendants walked poor Gauthier, tied to a horse's tail, his hands bound behind him, and brutally maltreated by the men, each vying with the other as to which of them could insult him the most.

Gauthier had been informed that morning that Wedderburn had sentenced him to death. In vain had he protested that Lord Home had no right to judge him or dispose of his life; in vain had he threatened them with the anger of his master and the severity of the law, and thus proved not only as his assassin, but also as his protector. In reply to his protests, he was told that their lord had condemned him, whether he had the right to do so or not; that, as to the vengeance of his master, they feared it not, and that their lord recognized no other law than his own will.

Poor Gauthier knew, therefore, that he was proceeding to certain death, and, paying no heed to the insults heaped upon him, he walked along maintaining a dignified silence. Not content, however, with insulting him with words, one of the men struck him with his riding-whip, saying: "Walk on, you clown, or you shall feel the point of my sword."

Turning towards the man, Gauthier answered in a grave tone: "The Gospel says, 'He who takes the sword shall perish by the sword.'" "Eh, what signifies the Gospel?" replied the man with a blasphemous oath: "The Gospel won't prevent your dying; walk on, walk, I say!" and he struck him again.

"I do not allow," cried Gauthier, "that your master has any right to put me to death; nevertheless I go to meet my fate without cursing him. But the curse of Heaven will surely fall on the coward who strikes a man incapable of defending himself."

"I'll brave that curse," interrupted the ferocious bandit; "and as to my master's right, yours shall judge just now how far it extends."

"What do you mean?" cried Gauthier, his interest at once awakened. "Is my noble master in danger?"

"What does that matter to you? Do you care for him?"

"Do I care for him? How can you ask me such a question?"

"If that is the case, be contented," answered the man, "for death shall not even separate you."

"Oh, speak, speak, for God's sake! Surely your lord is not threatening my master's life?"

"Hold your peace there!" cried Lord Home, who rode in front of the band and who had overheard the whole conversation. "Hold your peace, and gag that brawler."

His order was instantly executed, and then, calling to him one of the soldiers who appeared to hold authority over the others, he drew him aside, and conversed with him for some minutes in a low tone.

from where they stood, and which bordered the morass on the opposite side of the lake. Lord Wedderburn and the remainder of the troop were not long in arriving at their destination.

"We shall see," he cried, "if the Sir D'Arcy will be punctual to time, and if he dare present himself before me with only five men."

Hardly had he finished his speech before Antony D'Arcy, as if in answer to the injurious challenge, came up alone at a gallop.

"Alone! He has come alone!" said Sir Home in surprise. "It is impossible; his escort must be behind."

"Antony was now close to him. "You see me, Sir Home," he said, as he drew up. "I have come alone, and you can now judge whether or not I am afraid, as you dared to say in a certain message, a very insolent one, which you sent to me at Dunbar."

"Those who write such speeches, Sir D'Arcy, are always ready to bear them out with the sword."

"And he to whom they were addressed, Lord Wedderburn, is ready to demand satisfaction for them with the same weapon."

"That is well," replied Sir Home—"I understand you; but the meeting appointed for this morning with the Governor of the Eastern Border is wholly of a pacific nature. It is about one of your servants."

"Ah, true; I thank you, sir, for reminding me of that, which my indignation at a personal offence had caused me to forget."

"Let them bring forward the guilty party," cried Lord Home; and Gauthier was dragged to the front.

"And how, sir," exclaimed the knight, indignantly at the pitiable state of his servant—"how can you thus treat that unfortunate man for the mere offence of fishing without leave?—if, indeed, he committed any offence at all."

"Sir D'Arcy," proudly returned the chief, "Sir Home of Wedderburn is not answerable to anyone for the justice he exercises in his own domains."

"Let the Lord of Wedderburn," replied the knight, "act as he pleases by his own vassals; but I require that he treat one belonging to me with less severity, and I summon him in the name of the Regent of Scotland to have the hands of that poor man unbound."

"Sir D'Arcy may command in the Regent's name in his castle of Dunbar, where the Scottish people are base enough to obey him, but on the border of a lake belonging to me no one but myself has the right to command."

"If you will not, sir, obey a representative of the Regent, I myself will do what you refuse to command to be done," and, springing from his horse, the knight advanced towards Gauthier, intending to unbind his hands, but hardly had he taken three steps when five muskets were levelled at him.

"In the name of the King and of the Queen Regent," again cried D'Arcy, without, however, drawing back or changing color, "I command you to lay down your arms; or I declare you to be felons and traitors, and will punish you as such."

Unmoved by this threat, the men remained as before, with their muskets covering his person.

"That will do," cried Wedderburn. "Now lay aside your muskets and draw your swords."

The bandits obeyed instantly.

"You see, Sir Knight," said Wedderburn, "that the commands of the King and of the Regent of Scotland are of less value here than mine, and to convince you of this I shall have your vassal put to death at once for fishing on my property, and thus prove to you that, even though the law does not accord him the right, Sir Home exercises jurisdiction in his own domains in all cases, great or small."

Though Sir Antony was exasperated by the audacity of Sir Home, he still controlled himself.

"Sir," he said, addressing him in a gentle tone, "I beg of you to consider what you are about to do. Gauthier is my servant, and I myself serve the King of Scotland; to take the life of this man is to overpass his powers, and thus to incur his punishment in all cases, great or small."

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"That is to say," replied Sir Home to a disdainful sneer, "you take me for a bandit. But may it please you, I am a Scottish lord and Baron, and I will never receive money from a usurper and an assassin."

"Sir," said D'Arcy, laying his hand on his sword.

"Gently, gently, Sir Knight," interrupted Wedderburn, "do not so lightly lay your hand on your weapon. I have behind me brave men, who will not permit it to flash before they are upon you."

"What do you say?" asked D'Arcy.

"Have I, then, fallen into a trap?"

And he turned to look for his horse.

"You need not look for your horse, my fine sir," continued Lord Home in a mocking tone. "My men have taken charge of it, so that we may longer enjoy your company."

"What, sir!" cried the knight, now seriously uneasy. "Have you induced me to come here merely in order to entrap me?"

"I demanded your presence here, Sir Knight, so that this poor creature might not die alone in the midst of enemies, and that he might before dying at least have the consolation of looking on me on the face of the master he loves so much."

D'Arcy. "Not at all," rejoined the Baron. "I wish to show you how I treat my enemies, and those who belong to them. This man belongs to you, and you will see him executed."

"You shall kill me first," cried the knight, whose anger seemed to have doubled his strength; "and if my death, as well as that of my faithful servant, is resolved on, I will die, at least, as a brave man should;" and, quick as thought, the Chevalier, drawing his sword and running to Gauthier, cut the latter's bonds and handed him his dagger.

"Join me, Gauthier," he shouted, "and let us show that Frenchmen know how to die! To the rescue, and long live France!"

"And now, Sir Home," continued Antony, turning and facing again the Lord of Wedderburn, "coward and felon, I defy you!"

"Heaven is my witness that my plans were wholly of a pacific nature, and I am now obliged to impose on you cowardice; so you, Sir Knight, must take upon yourself the responsibility of what may happen."

"Listen, sir," said D'Arcy, still hoping to capitulate honourably, and thus save both his own and his servant's life. "I wish to believe that your intentions are peaceable; you, on your side, may easily prove them to be such. Order your men who bar the road to retire; return my horse to me; and what has passed here shall be known to none save those who have been witnesses of it."

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and after seeing the bodies of those who had perished in the combat thrown into the lake he set off for Wedderburn.

CHAPTER X.

A FATHER'S REED.

The barbarous act related in the preceding chapter was unhappily at that epoch too common a practice amongst the Scottish lords for Sir Home to consider it necessary to conceal his crime. On the contrary, he determined to make public the striking revenge he had taken for his relative. In order, therefore, the more fully to effect his purpose, he rode through the village of Wedderburn with the head of his enemy hanging from his saddle-bow, and crying aloud as he went, "Thus perish the enemies of Sir Home of Wedderburn!" As he passed before the Pine-branch Inn, proclaiming aloud his crime, a heart-rending cry issued from one of its lower rooms. Francis, through the barred window, had recognized the head of his beloved father, and after uttering this piteous cry fell down in a swoon.

The boy, as we remember, had been conducted to the inn by Cessford, who there awaited the return of Shell from Wedderburn Manor. In the meantime he had been imprisoned in a little room whose windows were protected by iron bars, and against the door of this room, on the outside, the freebooter now placed the heavy table at which he had tended to sit whilst drinking. When Sir Home rode had already swallowed several stoups of beer, to say nothing of several stoups of wine, was bawling, swearing, and storming at his men, who, nearly in the same condition as himself, were making a frightful din. Therefore, it is small wonder that Andrew Cessford neither heard nor saw his master pass, and remained on awaiting Shell's return, which had necessarily delayed by the absence of Lord Home from his castle.

When the little band surrounding Francis arrived at the village, the inhabitants, hearing the tramp of horses, had run to their doors, and stared in wonder at the severe precautions taken against one so young.

"Look; they have gagged him, as if he were mad!" said one woman whom the youth of Francis excited pity.

"Why, it's the young Frenchman, the son of Sir D'Arcy," remarked some men who had often seen Francis, and sometimes received help from him. "Poor young man! I trust no harm will come to him."

"Pooh! let him alone," replied others, and these were mostly people who lived close to the manor. "He is the son of the French usurper, the guardian of the Eastern Border, who holds that post when by right it should belong to our chief. I am glad he is caught, for he is a wicked good-for-nothing. Did he not try to drown Tankist, the laird's river keeper? Let him be thus treated; he will only get his deserts."

Amongst the villagers who were gazing at the prisoner and his captors was a lad dressed in beggar's clothes. Whoever else might view the scene with indifference, this lad evidently could not. From his looks and the gestures it was apparent that the beggar boy was strongly interested in the prisoner's fate. And well indeed he might be, for he owed his life to the captive. He was, in truth, the lad whom on the previous evening Francis had rescued from being drowned in the lake. Harry, for such was his name, was only a beggar boy; but nature had richly endowed him with noble instincts, with courage, loyalty, and above all, with gratitude. What his captors proposed to do with Francis Harry did not know; but that they intended to keep as close to his side as possible, hoping in a vague sort of way that a chance of befriending him might arise. Watching and listening intently, Harry had heard Cessford asking for a room in which to shut up his prisoner, and had seen the innkeeper pointing to a room below. Sizing an opportunity which presented itself, he said unperceived into the chamber just as Cessford was ordering the table to be moved across the door himself under a piece of furniture, waited until the soldiers began to drink.

Francis had been engaged before being imprisoned in this room, and Harry was just about to make himself known to him, when the Lord of Wedderburn rode by with his horrible trophy. Then came the heart-rending cry of anguish, after which Francis fell fainting to the ground. Happily with both the soldiers were too busy to notice either the cry of their captive or the march-past of Lord Home. Seeing his rescuer in a swoon, Harry, whose only wish was to save him, came forth from his retreat to render him assistance. Fortunately, he found some water, which he dashed on the boy's face and hands, and after a time he had the satisfaction of seeing him open his eyes.

"Where am I?" asked Francis in a puzzled tone. "I think I have had a frightful dream." Then, drawing his hand across his brow as if to recall his confused ideas, he said in a troubled voice: "No, no! it is too true! There, there! that lord who passed by just now on horseback—my father's head! Oh, yes, I recognized him! They have murdered him! Oh, oh!" And the poor boy broke out into loud sobs.

Harry tried in vain to console him, for from the few words uttered by Francis he had understood the cause of his grief.

"You mustna greet," said his youthful counsellor, using the ordinary phraseology of the Scottish peasantry on those parts. "Maybe it wass your father's head you saw. Maybe you were mistaken. It could na be."

"Yes, yes, I recognized him!" replied Francis with redoubled sobs. "Just at this moment the soldiers ceased from their bawling to listen to some new-comer, who related in all their details the horrible events which had taken place that morning in the Morass of Dunse. Francis heard all this distinctly. There could no longer be any doubt, and the poor boy gave fresh vent to his grief."

"Oh, my God!" said Harry. "Time is going on, and perhaps what they have done to the father they will do to the son. How—how can I save him? Come, come," he said, shaking Francis gently; "you mustna waste precious time in tears. I am sure you are in danger, and later on there may not be a chance of saving you."

But vainly did the poor peasant lad strive to arouse Francis from his gloomy thoughts. Indifferent to his own fate, the bereaved son could think of nothing but that bloody head hanging from the saddle-bow.

The table had now recommenced on the other side of the door. Cessford struck the table with his fist, and bawled out: "By St. Andrew! Sir Home of Wedderburn is a brave man, and there fore I will make peace with him, though it befits me not to receive his orders—no, Andrew Kerr Cessford! Who says it is my duty to receive orders from a Border lord? Is there anyone from whom I will take such a lesson? Let him speak, and I will kill him, as I break this jug!" and he dashed the crock on the ground. Then, after a pause, the freebooter continued: "Yes, by St. Andrew! the Lord of Wedderburn has done well. Behold how he avenges himself! Woe to our enemies! Here, you scoundrel host, bring a stoup of wine, that we may drink to the health of Sir Home."

A few moments later the noise began again.

We will now for a few moments leave poor Francis, overwhelmed with his sorrow; Harry, full of grief at his powerlessness to assist his benefactor; and Cessford and his men at their drunken brawl, and follow Sir Home to his manor, which he is just entering in triumph. His first words were: "Let a pike be fixed on the most public part of the ramparts, and this head be placed thereon, to remain until the last shred has been consumed by the crows and other birds of prey."

To insure his orders being obeyed, he waited to see them carried out; and when the knight's head had been hoisted on to a pike, he had a trumpet sounded to gather from all parts of the castle his household servants and guards, men and women, and with an expression of savage joy more resembling that of a satiated tiger than of a man, he pointed out the noble head to all.

"Thus," he cried again, "perish the enemies of Lord Home of Wedderburn! This is how I do myself justice. Let those who seek to harm me take heed."

After this odious proclamation, he ordered a banquet to be made ready for himself and his chief officers, and gave instructions that the castles gates should be thrown open and two roasted oxen and two casks of beer served up to the villagers in the courtyard. Sir Home was about to re-enter the castle, when the major-domo announced that a soldier, who declared himself to be a messenger from the Earl of Angus, wished to speak with him.

"Then, by my father's soul!" cried Sir Home, "swords will soon be drawn if Angus has sent me a message." And he bade the man usher in the messenger, who proved to be none other than Shell.

Having received the letter of which he was the bearer, Lord Home dismissed him and called for his chaplain. The priest was slow in obeying the summons, and when he at last appeared his countenance expressed both sadness and displeasure.

"I have been waiting for you a long time, Father," said the Baron in an impatient tone; "and when I give orders, I am accustomed to have them promptly executed."

"My lord," said the chaplain, "there is another Master Whom I serve, and Whose commands are more important than yours."

And who is he who dares give orders over my head in this castle?" "It is God, sir," replied the chaplain in a grave and severe tone. "He commanded me to pray for the soul of Sieur D'Arcy, treacherously assassinated by you this morning at the Morass of Dunse. Yes, sir," continued the chaplain, unmoved by the evident anger of Sir Home, "God commanded me to pray for the soul of the murdered knight, and for you also, who made a mistake by causing me to write the letter which brought about the death of that Christian man."

"Chaplain, chaplain! I did not bid you come here that I might listen to your preachings."

"But I, my lord, have come for the purpose of speaking the truth to you," replied the courageous priest. "I have come," he went on, "to remind you that God has in store terrible chastisements for those who shed their neighbors' blood."

"Have a care, chaplain!" shouted Sir Home. "If God has in reserve chastisements for those who rid them selves of their enemies, Sir Home of Wedderburn also has his in reserve for those who have the audacity to censure his actions."

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"What are the punishments of Sir Home in comparison with those of God?" said the priest calmly.

"You shall judge for yourself!" cried the Baron, besides himself with rage. "Here!" he shouted, "here!"

"Do as you will, my lord. You can strike the body; God will take care of the soul," said the priest, without moving his place.

Calm and serene he stood there, awaiting the