

The Rival Glansmen

A Scottish Vendetta.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF TWO VILLAINS—THE WITCH OF BEN-LAIR REVEALS HER TRUE NAME AND CHARACTER—A STRANGE STORY.

"Both have suffered," replied Hector, sadly. "Both have suffered deeply; but one of them will suffer no more."

"Suffer no more!" ejaculated the old woman, in a startled manner. "What is it you say? Is one of them dead? That I did not anticipate; but speak quickly—which is it?"

"It is Malcolm M'Leod who is dead," was the reply.

A sigh of relief seemed to escape the Witch of Ben-Lair as she heard it was old M'Leod who was gone; then she continued—

"This is sudden, and I must hear more of it; but first tell me, what of Flora Macgregor?"

"Flora Macgregor is in the power of Ian M'Kenzie, and of her uncle, Donald Cameron;" and as M'Leod uttered the words a flush as of shame rose to his face, mantling his cheeks.

The old woman gazed at him with a look of stern reproach on her face; but, observing his agitation, she seized his hand, and kindly said—

"Hector M'Leod, my first impulse was to say hard things against you for failing in your promise; but you may have done your best, and it would ill become me, who have often failed myself, to condemn you, or say aught that would hurt you before you tell me how this came about. Speak freely, M'Leod; give me the history of the events which have occurred since I last parted from you, and when you have concluded I may have something to tell to you. Matters may not yet be fully ripe, but I think I can trust you. Besides, it is well to be fully armed in the face of a desperate foe, who may yet succeed in striking the blow against me that he so much desires to strike—a foe, mark ye! who is as eager to shed your blood as is Ian M'Kenzie."

M'Leod replied by at once commencing to narrate the details, with which the reader is already sufficiently acquainted. When he came to speak of the circumstances attending the abduction of Flora, and of the desperate measures which had been taken by Cameron and M'Kenzie to effect their purpose, the old woman seemed much affected; and when he had further spoken of the now dark prospects of success attending his search for Flora and his aunt, and of their recovery safe and unharmed, the old woman, with tears dimming her eyes, and with a broken voice, turned to him and said—

"If we fail in recovering those we seek, M'Leod, we must retaliate upon those who have done the evil. It sometimes becomes necessary to use such weapons against such men as they themselves employ. They have shown no mercy; we will show none."

"Mercy!" exclaimed Hector. "From me they shall have no mercy. They have pressed me too much. If they are once in my power they may as well cry for mercy to the resistless torrent that is sweeping them to destruction, or to the falling mountain of rock that is already crushing them to atoms beneath its weight. Against them my heart is hard as adamant; and I will yet meet them to tear these already injured men from their power, if not to let them feel the fury of the enemy they have raised against themselves."

"Success attend you, young man—attend you," exclaimed the Witch of Ben-Lair. "I feel deeply grieved at what you have told me—grieved at the death of the old Chief of the M'Leods, from whom I have often obtained a favour. Malcolm M'Leod was good and generous, and it lies upon you, his son, to see to it that his loss fall not heavily upon others. But my sorrow deepens to anguish when you tell me that your betrothed, together with M'Leod's sister, is once more in the power of her worst enemy. It may seem strange that such as I should feel so deeply for the young girl; but when I have said, my say you will not marvel that I have spoken as I have done. But let me first ask you, M'Leod, was Flora Macgregor your free choice? Did you of your own inclination desire to make her the Lady of Castle M'Leod, and your companion through life?"

"My free choice she was, and with all the love possible for me to bestow upon mortal do I love her," replied the young man, wondering at these strange queries being put to him.

"And you well knew she was supposed to be of bastard birth; knew that she was penniless, and could bring nothing besides herself to Castle M'Leod?"

"I knew that her uncle had told her she had been ill-begotten, but I knew also that her nurse had informed her that her mother had often said to Donald Cameron that she was the offspring of a lawful wedlock. For these things, however, I cared not. It was Flora Macgregor, and not her surroundings and connections, that I wooed and won; it was her soul that throbbled in unison with mine and captivated my heart. Flora Macgregor is a woman worthy of any true man's love; and so far from ever thinking of whether she was, because of circumstances outside of herself and in those hands; she was powerless, a fitting bride for me, I have often been impelled to search myself closely to see whether I was worthy of her love and confidence. Flora Macgregor is a lovely, virtuous treasure, a pure unspiced gem. Would that I had but been able to prevent the pangs of sorrow and suffering which she must at present be enduring."

"Bravely and nobly spoken, Hector M'Leod. You have spoken right well, and much better would the world be if all the men and women in it would deal with other men and women as they find them. The trifling shortcomings of some men live, and are regarded as giant evils, forever, because a friend or relative may have erred grievously; while the hellish wickedness of others is petted and favoured on, because these others may be born of good honest parents, or connected with public benefactors; and worse still is the other standard of judgment—poverty and riches—the trifling fault of the poor man is a heinous offence, while the outrageous crime of the rich man is glossed over and concealed. But of these things we need not further speak. Let me tell you, you have made me proud indeed by the words you have just uttered. You look strangely at me, as if you thought me crazy when I say that your words have filled me with pride. I shall no longer keep you in suspense. Flora Macgregor is my son's daughter—the daughter of an upright and honourable man; the daughter of her mother's husband; the daughter of the man who was foully murdered—foully murdered—and the dark deed was done by Donald Cameron!"



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