FIRE AND SWORD:

A Story of the Massacre of Glencoe.

SUMMARY OF OPENING CHAPTERS.

The opening scene of Mr. Murdoch's powerful story is laid in one of the Breadalbane family in the year 1691. Sir John Campbell (then Earl of Breadalbane) a professed supporter of King William's Government, had received an important commission to conciliate the Highland Chiefs by the distribution of money and honors. With this object in view he had summoned the Clans to meet at Glenorchy to hear the proposals and conditions of the Government. Among others present, although last to arrive, was M'Ian of the Valley, the Chieftain of the Macdonalds. The Macdonalds were the near neighbors of Breadalbane, and the ambitious Earl of Breadalbane was jealous of the influence which M'Ian held over the Jacobite party. The smouldering rivalry of the heads of the two septs speedily blazed forth at the conference. Breadalbane had cautiously opened business by unfolding the Government plan of reconciliation and clemency towards M'Ian, whose courage, sagacity and age gave him a tacitly acknowledged right to priority of speech. Rising to his feet he spoke with firm deliberation, and having the courage of his convictions, he fearlessly deprecated certain of the terms of the proposal, alleging that loyalty to a fallen cause was preferable to chicanery in the matter of a successful one. A murmur of approval passed around among the other leaders of the party, and it was apparent to Breadalbane that M'Ian's views had struck a chord which threatened to defeat his project. The wily Earl again depicted in glowing language the advantages which would accrue to the Highland Chiefs by the acceptance of the terms, and laid stress on the social standing and court privileges which they would enjoy. "But as for our friend, M'Ian," he added, "he must of course forgo his share of the money in respect of certain just claims which I have against his lawless and thieving tenants for the plundering of my lands of goods and cattle, and for which I insist on compensation and retention out of Glencoe's share of the reward money entrusted to my care." This declaration by Breadalbane was followed by an indignant denial, of the claims by M'Ian, and a brawl which might have ended in bloodshed was for the moment imminent, but was averted by the calmer council of cooler friends. Consideration of the proposals was delayed, and the Earl invited all present to partake of his hospitality at Kilchurn Castle. Most of those present accepted he invitation, but a conspicuous absentee was M'Ian of the Valley, who, with his two sons, John and Allister, marched off towards Glencoe, his piper playing a defiant pibroch at the head of the chief's bodyguard. Breadalbane was not displeased to see one so powerful removed for the time from the immediate presence of the majority of his guests, but the night was not to pass without the name of M'Ian bringing fresh annoyance to him. The crafty Earl had purposely omitted all reference to M'Ian from the toast list. This was perceived by the chivalrous Lochiel, who hastened to remedy the omission by proposing a bumper to "The Health and Prosperity of Glencoe," a toast which Breadalbane had the mortification to see responded to with enthusiasm by the assemblage. That night ere he slept the Earl of Breadalbane had mapped out a scheme for the isolation of Glencoe from the future counsels of the Highland Chieftains. In the heart of the wily Earl the Macdonalds were already doomed to destruction.

CHAPTER III.

THE LOVERS.

On turning his back on Breadalbane's territory Macdonald of Glencoe at once summoned his few faithful followers, and emerging from the seclusion of Auchalader, took the hill path leading straight to the rugged fastnesses of his beloved native glen.

The afternoon was already well spent when he began the return journey; but the season was summer, and the month that of warm June, and the rich sunset lingered long in the western sky, while in glen, valley, and green mountain side,

"All along the heath clad way,
Golden and purple beauty lay."

Scarcely a solitary cloud dimmed the deep lustre of the saffron tinted sky, and the encircling ranges of hills, within the impending shadows of which they walked, looked comparatively small and unimpressive to the eye when contrasted with the greater height of the calm and cloudless summer sky.

M'Ian's mind was ill at rest, and out of harmony with the peace and beauty of his surroundings. He had ostracised himself, he knew, from the favor of the bad but powerful Earl, and, as a first necessity of that, with the reigning Government as well. He had even forfeited perhaps for an equal sacrification, and as he feared, the close friendship of his brother Jacobite Chiefs, and he felt as lonely and isolated as the eagle that crowned the rocky mountain ledge, with its unwinking eye fixed on the blazing sun. But, like that eagle, he was self-reliant and strong of heart, and dwelt with his people in the heart of a comparatively unassailable evrie among the mighty, gloom-infested hills. Royal courts were full of duplicity and weak babble; self-seeking courtiers frequently betrayed each other; but the silence of hills was eternal, and their sheltering security a fixed fact, and the winds that swept the stirred brackens told no secrets against the outlawed clansmen who might perchance be forced to hide among the heather. So the lion-hearted Chief strode sturdily on, assured in his heart that whatever might happen himself or his tribe, his action at Auchaladar had at least been in conformity with the honor traditionally associated with the name of the clan.

Prominent among the score of retainers who formed a guard of honor to the stately Chief was young Malcolm Macdonald, Malcolm was the only son of the innkeeper of Auchennon—a small village situated midway in the Glen—and was a far-out kinsman of the Chief by the mother's side. He was a handsome youth, of the manly type of beauty most to be desired—tall, massive and lithe of limb, with a bright eye, a brave bearing and a courageous heart.

Beloved and trusted by the chief, he had been adopted by M'Ian as a sort of foster-son, and was proud of the destinction which the Chief's favor conferred. After Heaven, his Chief had all along been his first and dearest thought, and he had grown up in the sunshine of M'Ian's friendship, as fondly cared for almost as one of his own sons.

Wheresoever the old Chief went, whether on a business commission or on pleasure bent, Malcolm, his beloved and trusted foster-son, was never far away from his side.

He had accompanied M'Ian's retinue to Breadalbane's house at Auchalder, but etiquette had ordained that he should remain in charge of the "gillies" outside.

For that reason he had not been permitted an opportunity of resenting the affront which the haughty Earl had spitefully put on M'Ian; otherwise his claymore would have been the first to flash from its scabbard, and the Earl would have stood challenged within his own castellated halls.

On the way back, however, he had heard the incident repeated from M'Ian's own lips, and the quick red blush which mantled his brow at the recital of the incident showed how deeply the pride of the heroic young Highlander was touched.

But whereas, up to a short time prior to this, Malcolm had found his highest sense of love in a devoted affection for his Chief, a new, strange, and infinitely tenderer passion had of late stirred and quickened the finer depths of his ardent and impetuous soul.

Helen Cameron was a fair-haired, blue-eyed lassie of some eighteen summers. She was an orphan lassie, and was neice to honest old Sandy Macdonald, "a sma' laird" on the Glencoe estate. At her uncle's request, she had recently come south from her native Lochaber to act as dairymaid and assist in his farm work.

Malcolm had first met her at the Beltane e'en merry making in the previous May. Their appreciation of each other was instant and mutual. It was indeed a case of love at first sight, which is, perhaps a truer and much more common experience than some cynics and grey-wigs would have us believe.

From that hour in which his eyes had first alighted on Helen Cameron, and he had fondly touched her hand, the ardent young Highlander felt that he loved the fair maiden, and could never probably love another. In the freshness of her face and form, in the artlessness of her manner, in the whisper of her sweet voice, and especially in the soft and touching beauty of her eyes, there was that indefinable charm which thrilled Malcolm Macdonald's soul with the beauty and intensity of a first love, which had suddenly entered and taken hold of his heart, as a conqueror enters and takes possession of a capitulating town.

His adoration of M'Ian, however, was not essentially changed, nor even superseded in any, active way, by this newer, diviner passion. The worthy old chief was only less constant in his thoughts, his mind being preoccupied by a sweet selfishness of dreams, and by a perpetual realization of the angelic vision of his love at all times and places.

A true Jacobite in feeling, as indeed were all the men of the Glen, Malcolm clung to the discomfitted King James party, and to the traditional glory and prior rights of the unfortunate Stuart dynasty with a fond, if not a wise, love. He never stopped to reason out the subject; he only felt on the question, and all his feelings were unequivocally on the Jacobite side. If occasion required it, he was ready at any moment to serve it with a zeal and self-sacrificing devotion worthy of a nobler and truer ambition. For that ambition is alone truly noble that springs from an equal conviction, and as sustained thereby. His devoted and unfaltering adoration of everything appertaining to the "White Cockade," was natural, and, in a sense, unavoidable. His training and his everyday influences and surroundings induced him to think that way, and, believing in the justice of the Jacobite cause, he only saw its best side, and never sought to look beyond that.

It was well on in the evening when the Macdonald party entered the south-eastern opening of the Glen. Their steps were leisurely, and by the time they had reached the turf-thached clachan of Auchenaion the gloaming had encircled the crests of the higher hills, and was fast descending on the central pathway of the Glen.

As the village of Invercoe—which was the residence of the Chief—lay a little way further along the western extremity of the Pass, Malcolm did not seek to convoy M'Ian thither, but, proffering a graceful and manly salute, turned sharply aside from the main path, and proceeded as the crow flies o'er moss and moor towards the cot of old Sandy Macdonald, usually styled the "Croft at the Crags," where he hoped to spend a happy hour with Helen Cameron, whose beauty and modesty were already promising to make her the universal toast of the Glen.

The farm at the Crags, as possessed and tilled by old Sandy, was a croft of the humblest description, consisting of a small plot of pasturage, surrounded by patches of damp, black moorland, and shadowed by lofty and precipitous mountain ridges of bare and herbless rock. Its situation was thus more picturesque than profitable - as indeed were the majority of the Glencoe farm steads—and the honest and hard toiling old crofter found it little short of a task to extract a bare subsistence from the bleak and unproductive soil.

The simple-minded old crofter he found sitting alone by the fire of peat—if the company of the two collie dogs be overlooked. Helen was "yont the village," Sandy informed him, but would be back presently. So Malcolm was warmly invited to "sit still" and wait the "lassie's coming." He spoke a homely Gaelic, which may be best represented by an adoption, on our part, of the plain but effective Doric of the lowland counties.

"I'll go and meet her half way, Sandy" suggested the ardent lover.

"Indeed no," interposed the old crofter, rising and blocking the narrow doorway. "You'll e'en sit still, Malcolm, and tell us the best o'yer news till the lassie's return. What about the Chief's conference wi' that knave o' knaves, Breadalbane? What's like to be the upshot o't? Ye were there, wer'na ye, Malcolm?"

Thus pressed and questioned, the impetuous young Highlander consented to await Helen Cameron's return, and at once dashed into a free recital of the incidents of the Auchalander conference, with the unsatisfactory result thereof, and the Chief's hasty and angry withdrawal from Breadalbane's presence.

At mention of the private quarrel between M'Ian and the "bad Earl," as the Glencoe retainers usually styled him, the face of the rugged old Highlander darkened with a sudden anger.

"To think that a worthy man, the true and brave Chief of a grand old Clan, should be slandered and robbed of his claim by a Court-sneaking Campbell, whose forefathers first stole and afterwards fattened on lands required for the Glencoe patrimony!" exclaimed the indignant old crofter, with the fire of youth rekindled in his eyes as he strode restlessly across the common earthen floor. "And where was Malcolm Macdonald's claymore when his Chief's honor was insulted?" he abruptly asked, turning sharp around on Malcolm.

"It its szabbard——"

"In i's scabbard?" interposed the irate old Highlander.

"In its scabbard," resumed Malcolm; "and he himself outside of sight and hearing of the insult; otherwise——!" and striking his sword hilt a blow with his open hand he left the unfinished sentence understood, though unexpressed.

"Well spoken, Malcolm, well spoken! Honor before all things, save God. M'Ian's confidence in you is deserved, Malcolm," and the honest old crofter's voice was pathetically lowered as he slowly added—"I fear, lad, there is trouble in store for us—the people o' the Glen. Breadalbane's a traitor at heart, and his pretended secret affection for Jacobitism a mere purpose-serving pretence. It's his ain aggrandisement he's after; to secure that he would betray his best friend. I'm only vexed I ve nae langer the nerve and strength o' airm I was used to boast o' in my youth, that I micht be able to draw a claymore when the hour comes in defence o' our lawful King James, and M'Ian, our loyal and beloved Chief. But that noble privilege—"

"Is mine!" proudly exclaimed Malcolm with kindling countenance.

"Yes, is yours," promptly rejoined the old crofter; "and, Malcolm, my lad, when the dark hour of Breadalbane's plotted revenge comes, as come I fear it soon will, let na your right hand forsake the sword hilt, but be ready, my lad, be ready! Fling everything aside save honor and the sword and let the wild eagles of Glencoe have the flesh of the churls who would seek to drive us frae the shelter o' our native Glen."

"Long live King James!" shouted the ardent young Clansman, his eyes dilated with a dangerous emotion.

"And Macdonald o' the Glen!" added old Sandy.

"And Macdonald o' the Glen!" repeated Malcolm with a gesture of lofty pride.

"My brave, braw lad!" said Sandy, slapping Malcolm approvingly on the shoulder; "you are indeed worthy o' Helen Cameron's love."

At that moment the door of the lowly hut was lightly pushed up, and, fair as a moist violet, Helen Cameron stood discovered in the dim passage.

The quick eye of the lover alighted on the maiden as if by instinct.

"Helen!" he exclaimed, and darting towards her with extended arms, he involuntarily embraced her as she crossed the humble doorway.

A conscious blush, which even the sunbrown tan of her skin could not completely hide, suffused the maiden's sweet face as she received her lover's warm embrace, noticing which, the honest old crofter turned his back on the pair, and straightway began busying himself with his crookit horn snuff mull, and for a generously long time remained apparently entirely oblivious of anything beyond it.

"We shall walk down the Glen, a bit, Sandy," he merely said, to which an "Aweel—aweel" response readily came, and enclosing her beloved form within the ample folds of his checkered plaid, he over ruled her gentle remonstrances, and, heedless of her pleading excuses that her face was still unwashed, her hair unsnodded, and her dairy work for the day only partially done, the impulsive lover wiled her away from the vicinity of the lonely Crags to the still lonelier seclusion of the byways in the mountain-shadowed Glen.

The maiden's dress was of that plain and homespun kind and make common to the daughters of the toiling Scotch peasantry for centuries back. It consisted simply of a short gown of striped cloth, with petticoats of a somewhat similar, but heavier material. Her suntanned arms were bare to the elbows, and the mass of yellow hair which adorned her head was tied up in a great knot behind.

"No, no, Helen dear," said Malcolm, as the blushing maiden continued to lament her unwashed face and hands. "Your face is but the bonnier and your hair the snodder for want of the water and the lookingglass. Your face is just a bonnie flower, and the May dews that lately lay on the breckans never washed a prettier," and a sudden meeting of the lips attested, on the part of the speaker, the sincerity of the compliment.

Helen Cameron heasd the warm compliments of her ardent lover, but said nothing by way of reply. Her guileless heart was too full of secret joy to trust the utterance of it to her faltering lips. She had till now never once experienced the sentiment of love. She had, indeed, scarcely ever heard it spoken of. But now, in the presence of Malcolm Macdonald she was already strangely conscious of its existence, and felt her heart fluttering with its thrilling and exquisite power. And as the young birds, touched by a joyous and exquisite feeling, opened their hearts to the warm spring sunshine, and poured forth their delighted feeling in woodland song, even so did Helen Cameron, chaste and guileless as they, open her heart to the warming sunshine of Malcolm Macdonald's love with all the fervour and unselfish prodigality of a first affection. Their love was mutual and true love, and if the course of "true love" proverbially never once runs smooth, there was yet no speck of cloud in the fair sky which overarched their young lives. The ardent young Highlander was too brave of heart and purpose to fear the future, and the artless maiden too innocent and inexperienced to entertain a suspicion of fate. Dream on young hearts! and let not the shadow of to-morrow chill the sunshine of to-day.

Threading the winding pathway of the Glen for a considerable length, the lovers deviating from the common walk, turned at length into the embowered solitude of one of the many fantastic little green recesses which then, as now, softened and diversified the rugged asperities of the great Glen.

The moon, like a silver shield, shone down on them in unclouded splendor, and the multitudinous stars—the holy night lamps of the sky—were gleaming like powdered jewellery overhead. The darkening gloaming had deepened into night, and the wild tenants of the Glen—the deer, the fox and the hawk-eagle—had each sought their place of shelter, and consigned themselves to silence and rest.

The air was full of a sweet breathing calm. Not a sound palpitated on the breast of the silent night, save perhaps the subdued wind-bone murmur of Ossian's beloved stream of Cona, as it peacefully sang its way through the great gorge of the Glen, shorn of its winter might and voice.

Reaching a favorable spot, the fond lovers sat themselves down to rest a pace, and enjoy the deep peace and beauty of the hour.

Occasionally a nested song-bird croodled a sleepy note from a neighboring brake; and once a late hawk clove with darkening wing its swift way towards its rude nest, hidden away somewhere among the rocky cliffs of the valley.

Seated thus within the seclusion of the breckan-hung glade, the fond lovers rested themselves a brief time, and were happy in the exquisite possession of a mutual heart-love.

At the maiden's request Malcolm related in brief terms the result of the meeting of the Jacobite chiefs that day at Auchalader. As was natural under the circumstances, the proud, young clansman dwelt with particular emphasis on the insult offered to his Chief by the bad and plotting Earl. Every man in the glen was bound in the laws of ancient clanship to accept an insult put on his chief as his own, and was ready to resent it accordingly.

"Breadalbane is a knave—a crafty, plotting knave; and his henchman, Captain Glenlyon, is a poltroon," exclaimed Malcolm, his blood tingling with passion as he spoke. "At Auchalder," he continued, "I very nearly drew my dirk on a fellow named Barber—a sergeant in Argyle's regiment of foot—who was in charge of Glenlyon's men, and who insisted on picking a quarrel with one of the Glencoe men."

"Sergeant Barber?" exclaimed Helen Cameron, with unfeigned interjectional surprise. "Sergeant Barber?" and the color mounted to her beating temples.

The ardent lover did not fail to notice the confusion with which the mention of the sergeant's name had covered the maiden's countenance.

"Yes, Sergeant Barber," he promptly answered. "Have you heard of him before? Do you know him!"

"At Inverlocky?" questioned Malcolm, anxious for an explanation of the suggested acquaintanceship.

"Yes. I had been living there for some weeks with an aunt there, before coming down to Glencoe, and the Sergeant meeting me one night when I was on the road home from a visit to a friend in Fort William—where Argyle's regiment was then stationed—he insisted on turning back with me, and much against my wish, saw me home."

The explanation was a frank and perfectly natural one, yet Malcolm Macdonald felt strangely moved. The confession was a revelation to him, and in view of his feelings towards Helen Cameron he was perhaps inclined to attach more importance to the incident than was at all reasonable or necessary. A slight but perfectly noticeable shade of suspicion darkened the countenance of the proud young Highlander. He was unconsciously jealous of a highly imaginary rival all in a moment of time, and his natural pride piqued. His sudden mental preoccupation, however, pained the maiden less than the almost automatically expressed words which followed:—

"And he was afterwards a frequent, and I suppose, a very wel—"

"Unwelcome visitor," frankly interjected the fair maiden. "I was glad to get down to my uncle's at the Crags here, that I might so escape his unpleasant attentions. With you, Malcolm, I am both safe and happy."

"Helen, darling!" exclaimed the impassioned lover, as he suddenly threw his arms around her and drawing the yielding maiden closer to his ardent breast, a sudden kiss, as pure and sweet as light on flowers, greeted her upturned face, and was in itself more eloquent of feeling than the warmest confession in words.

There was intense silence for a moment—a silence befitting the mutual betrothal of two pure and loving hearts. Nor was the surrounding accessories out of keeping with the interesting moment. Every lichened crag in the great valley, every bold, high-set mountain escarpment, and every thin, clear torrent that hung like blades of naked steel from the precipitous sides of the star-invested hills were shining with a chastened and beautiful lustre in the silvery glow of the moonlight which lay over the vast glen.

Suddenly, and while the eyes of the betrothed lovers yet fondly dwelt on each other, a dark, winged night bird rose from a craig close beside them, and with a low, peculiar melancholy cry swooped and circled in flight over their heads for a brief space, and thereafter, with a sudden rush, as of despair, swept with rapid wing from the confines of the glen.

The startled lovers, with all the superstitutious feeling native to the uneducated Highland mind, looked inquiringly into each other's eyes, and the trembling maiden sought to cling with a still closer and more confiding faith to the breast of Malcolm, whose protecting arms encircled her.

"I do not like the cry of the night birds, Malcolm. It aye sounds sa waifu' and eerie, and it's said to be a bad omen forbye."

Malcolm hid superstitious fears, and tried to comfort the frightened maiden.

"Why trouble our minds with gloomy forebodings that are never likely to happen? We are both young, and being true to each other, may fairly defy prophecies of future misfortune or sorrow."

"The night my mother died," resumed the maiden, her voice pathetically lowered, "a black broodie-crow sat on the thach-roof o' the shielin' the whole night through, and only lifted with the dawn o' day."

"And when the bird lifted——?" questioned Malcolm.

"My poor, dear mother was dead!" and the maiden's eyes were suddenly suffused with tears.

"Courage, darling!" said Malcolm, as he gently withdrew her from the spot. "The night airs are getting chill with dew. Let us return to the Crags," and emerging from the sheltered by-path wherein they had been resting, they resumed their homeward way down the Glen.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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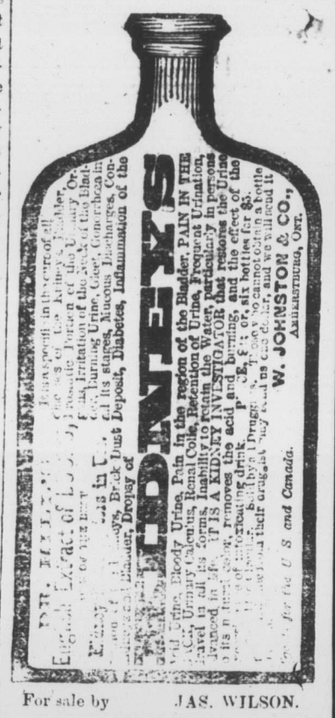

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