

The Rival Glansmen

A Scottish Vendetta.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THE DARKEST HOUR PRECEDES THE DAWN"—ARRIVAL OF FRIENDS—CAMERON AND IAN BAPFLED—A CHARGE, AN ARREST, AND A DEATH. Cameron was the first to find utterance.

Hoarse, with rage and mortification, he turned to Fender, and exclaimed—"By all the furies, it is the military! But we must not be balked. Finish your work, man; the deed may keep them out till then, and we shall trust to fortune for the rest."

Fender appeared unable to move or speak as he sat in the chair upon which he had sunk, the very picture of dumb consternation; but, almost frantic, Cameron strode towards him as if to drag him forward to perform the ceremony, exclaiming as he did so—

"Pronounce him man and wife, you white livered wretch, or I will drive my claymore through your carcase where you sit."

But loud and eager tones were heard from the outside, and suddenly, as if electrified, Flora, whose hand M'Kenzie had released at the first sound of alarm, turned to Anne M'Leod, who was standing pale and mute beside her, and clasping her by the neck, cried in joyful accents—

"Oh, we are saved; it is Hector, I heard him speak." Then she exclaimed at the pitch of her voice—"Help, help, Hector M'Leod, save us, save us."

"Courage, darling, I will be with you immediately," was the response spoken by none other than M'Leod. Then followed rapid ringing words of command succeeded by a loud crash at the door.

But, feeling now that he was foiled, baffled, Cameron turned to Flora, and springing towards her with a murderous glare in his eyes, exclaimed—

"Accursed jade, it is you who have brought all this upon us, and I swear you shall suffer."

He stretched forth his hand to seize her, but the affrighted girl turned and darted to the other side of a table which stood in the middle of the floor.

M'Kenzie, who as well as Cameron seemed to be labouring under the wildest excitement, also attempted to take hold of her, but she eluded him, and clasping her hands repeated the wild cry for help.

Crash followed crash upon the door as those outside attempted to force an entrance, but still it resisted their efforts; and Flora, poor girl, felt as she gazed into the eyes of her uncle that help to be of avail to her would need to come speedily.

By darting round the table she might have eluded one successfully, but she could not escape both, and in a second more Cameron had grasped her by the dress and flung her violently to the ground.

"You shall die!" he cried. "I swear it." And as he spoke he nervously clutched the hilt of his claymore and drew it from the scabbard. Poor Flora closed her eyes when she saw the gleaming steel as Cameron raised the weapon to plunge it into her body.

But before it could descend the hand of the villain was grasped, and he was hurled backwards upon the floor—the tall form of Ned Gordon standing over him quivering with passion.

During the moments when the eyes of the others had been averted from her movements, Anne M'Leod had darted to where Gordon was lying, and had succeeded in releasing him from his bonds just in time to permit him to spring forward and save Flora from the murderous blow.

Ian M'Kenzie dashed at Gordon, who flung him back and stooped to raise Flora, while Cameron endeavoured to regain his feet.

It might, however, have fared badly with the Lowlander had not those outside at this moment succeeded in forcing the door.

A loud cheer, the sound of tramping feet in the passage, and the room door was burst open, giving admittance to Hector M'Leod and Captain Winterton, both of whom carried drawn swords in their hands.

At sight of them, like cowed dogs, the Caterans slunk away to the remotest corner of the room, where they stood glaring with distended eyes and nostrils at the new-comers.

"By whose authority?" gasped Cameron, in a vain endeavour to challenge the right of our friends to enter. "Search as they had done; but the words froze upon his lips as the Witch of Ben-Lair, accompanied by Jeannie Gordon, old Murdoch M'Donald and his son Enas, and preceded by two soldiers, slowly entered.

As he saw Jeannie, Ian's face turned ashy pale and he leant on the wall for support.

Hector had already embraced his aunt and Flora, imprinting burning kisses on their brows, while both clung to him, sobbing violently; Jeannie Gordon had drawn up to and leant upon her stalwart brother's arm; and now all turned and watched the Witch of Ben-Lair, as she slowly advanced, leaning upon her staff, to the centre of the room.

Halting, and fixing her small glittering eyes with piercing keenness upon Cameron, she exclaimed—

"Ay, Donald Cameron, you would ask by whose authority we come here. I will answer you. We come under the authority not only of the law of these realms but of high Heaven itself. We come that justice may be vindicated, that the murdered may be avenged, and his murderer visited with the punishment due to his crime. Your face reddens, and you tremble. I come to open up a page of the past and to point out a page of the future. I come to tell you that the blood of Henry Douglas has spoken the secret of its shedding, and I will show you, Donald Cameron, the weapon with which the bloody deed was done. Do you recognize it, base villain, murderer—"

A cry like that of some enraged beast escaped Cameron as the Witch of Ben-Lair drew the weapon from her breast and held it before her; and glaring at the old woman with an aspect of the most savage ferocity, he dashed towards her with his claymore, which he still grasped in his hand uplifted as if to strike her down.

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