

- - A SOUL OF FIRE - -

BY E. J. JENKINSON.

CHAPTER XIV. THE NIGHT MYSTERY.

"Maisie!" said Helen turning quickly round, "that is Maisie's laugh. I should know it in a thousand."

Rory dropped his arms, and frowned. "One never can tell where she is," he replied, "she haunts my path like a shadow. Maisie!"

"Sure and I'm here, Captain," was the answer from among the trees, "what do you want of me?"

"Why are you wandering alone in the wood at this hour?" he demanded.

She laughed softly again, and came to his side. Her hands were full of primroses—pale forest-children that quivered when the wind sighed through the pine aisles.

"I was gathering flowers," said she, "and bringing a message to you from my father."

"From Hugh?"

"Ay, who else? He's the only father I ken."

"What does he want?"

"Sure! and I didn't ask him," she answered carelessly, "but he would meet you at the Lara Burn at moon-rise."

Rory cast his glance over the sky. There was nought above, but a billowy expanse of cloud, with here and there a vista of deepest night-blue sparkling with stars. On the fringe of an Eastern mist-drift a silver haze was spreading.

"It's moonrise now," he said, "why have you been so long delivering your message?"

He was angry. When Hugh Lamont had anything to say it was usually of importance. What might not the old man, with his quick ears and eyes, have ferreted out, worth the knowing.

The girl pouted like a spoilt child.

"I followed you as quickly as I could, Captain," she replied, "Master Alaster at the stronghold said you were down by the shore, and I went there first."

"Don't stop to pluck a nosegay next time Hugh sends you on an errand, Maisie," he retorted, sharply.

She bit her lip, and flung the flowers down.

"You didn't speak to me so when you used to come to Hag's Ha' at nights, a while past. Then it was Mistress Maisie; sweet Mistress Maisie, by your leave sweet Mistress Maisie I'll. . . That's all changed now. You're like your clan, Roderick MacIonn."

Rory turned away without a word to her and plunged into the wood.

Helen took her path homewards.

Maisie followed closely on her heels. It is strange that hate, like love, knows no deeper joy than to be near the object of its passion. She commenced to hum snatches of old-time songs as she went; but she did it with puckered brows and no gaiety in her voice. Clearly the change-house lass was not singing through lightness of heart.

Helen took no notice of her.

"But I'll make you cringe yet, my fine lady," said Maisie to herself. "Those grand airs won't do for me. I'll have your black eyes, red as a whipped bairn's before I've done, those black eyes Dark Rory thinks so much of. You'll be a beauty then, Helen Vor."

She made her feet rustle through the thick carpet of dead leaves that clothe the forest-floor.

"Why are you so silent, Mistress?" she asked in a tone of stimulated humbleness.

"Sure, I did not mean to break in on your trysting with Dark Rory. I was loathe to do it, but the message had to be given."

"I didn't mind."

"Are you going home now?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you don't care for the company of the change-house lass, but the woods are so dark I'd—. Still I'm not afraid. I'll leave you if you wish."

"Leave me," said Helen.

Maisie's breath went for a second; she did not quite expect that answer.

"I was good enough company for even the Captain a while back," she said, with sly insolence, aggrieved.

Helen's shoulders straightened.

"We'll not discuss the point," she replied.

There was a coolness in her tone supremely suited for nipping the young buds of familiarity in Maisie's breast.

"Now I've offended you!" cried the girl, quick to take the hint. "It's my fate to offend, though God knows how unwittingly. First the Captain, then you. Oh! Helen Vor, if you knew half that I know, you would be kinder to the poor girl who gave up her lover for your sake."

Waiting for no reply she covered her face with her hands and turned away back along the path they had just come.

Helen's lips parted, her hands clenched.

A sudden colour flashed into her face.

"It's false," she muttered, through closed teeth, "I'll never believe it. It's false."

Maisie, now out of sight, sped along the track to the Lara bridge.

"I'll find out what tricks the old man has in his mind," she murmured as he flying feet took her further and further away from Helen, and nearer to the trysting-place of the two men.

"He can do what he likes with Stron-Saul and the Vorse—sell them all to Ferguson—but Rory! No he shall not harm him, never."

Helen continued her way home.

She was sad, and tired, and heart-sick.

An air of trouble seemed to hang over the forest-trees. A murmur as of a great moaning from far away came stealing through the dark colonnades, and even the owls wailed in mused voices.

Rory, she knew, would not have felt the night mystery, nor Maisie, nor Alaster; but to her it was as real as that the moon was up above the clouds, and the moments hurrying her onward, onward with unbroken tread to the future.

The night was still early; she felt she could not return home yet to Lara stronghold reeking with peat-smoke and to Alaster's boyish talk. Morag lived in a hut near; she would go and see her and perhaps find some comfort in the old woman's praises and faith in the clan.

She had hardly come to this decision, however, when a voice accosted her; "Helen Vor! where is Dark Rory? I've waited for him and you these three hours."

The question, sudden as it was, did not startle her. She looked down, and saw, on the claw-like roots of a fallen tree, Mad Morag, holding on her lap a dead hare.

"He should have passed with you. Where is he?"

"At the Lara brig, Morag. Do you want him?"

"Ay! there will be no luck for the Vorse. A black hare crossed the loaning while the women milked. See! I shot it, but not before it crossed before them all. Luckless are we, Helen Vor."

"Sure, Morag, our luck will turn with "Would that it might! Did you say that Dark Rory was at the brig?"

"Yes."

"With whom?"

"Hugh Lamont," she answered; and then to herself, "strange that two women should come seeking Rory in the same night."

"Hugh!" muttered the old woman, dropping her burden. "Hugh! God's mercy! Hugh Lamont trysting with Dark Rory! Sure an' he promised. . . Hugh!"

"And why not? It was he that helped Rory to save me."

"Helped him to the devil!"

"I wish," said the girl impatiently, "there was less mystery in the glen. Never a man speaks but his words bear a double meaning. Why can't you say what you mean?"

"Say what we mean," repeated Morag.

"if we did, Helen Vor, we should shake a tempest on the world." Then she turned away. "Get home, girl, and bury your head in your pillow. Use neither ears, nor eyes, nor heart for there's strange things moving in the wood this night. Get home and sleep, and pray God you may never waken."

Then another woman set bridge-wards to the tryst of Hugh Lamont and Dark Rory, but Helen did not know it.

She went on again alone, and the dead hare, emblem of ill luck, lay where it had fallen, on a mossy bank with its glazed eyes staring into the darkness.

"There are strange things, as Morag says, brewing in the glen," she murmured "they throw their shadows before them; they have thrown them on me, I know. When will all these troubles be over-past, when, I wonder?"

And the night-breath as it stirred the plumed fir over-head seemed to echo "when," but with no hope of an answer.

She wandered on sadly. The moonlight fell on her path, sometimes, through an opening in the forest-branches, but for the most part her way lay in a green-twigged hush of sleep. How quiet and calm the whole world seemed!

"I am tired," she murmured wearily, "of this perpetual struggle. Oh! Rory, Rory, if you gain your heart's desire, I shall go with you to Sarno, but God! how I hate it. How I shudder at its winding galleries and dark corners. Tonight I envy the peasant with his hut and ben, I envy his wife milking her one cow on the loaning at dawn. I envy them their free, careless life, hard though it may be. But that cannot—"

She stopped hurriedly. There was the crack of a pistol in the wood and an angry cry, followed almost immediately by another crack and a still wilder cry. She turned in the direction of the sound.

It came from the bridge over the Lara Burn.

"Good heavens!" she said, "what is wrong? Rory?"

With strained eyes and ears she plunged through the thick undergrowth of hazels, towards the stream, listening for a voice or a sound that would guide her.

But after the two renorts and wild cries, a deeper silence had fallen broken only once by a faint scream as from a woman.

She pushed aside the bushes, snatched among the bogs that lay black and still in all the darkest places, and with torn skirts and bleeding hands passed through the almost impassable heart of the wood.

She came out at length into the open, and followed the burn upwards. Faintly outlined against the sky she could see the bride.

The water foamed and swirled beneath it, drowning her foot-falls and the sound of a voice murmuring fond words but a few yards away.

Helen sprang to the side of the figure with a cry.

Maisie raised her head, her lips had been pressed to the pale, bloodless lips of Rory on the ground.

"Oh, it is you," she said quickly, "some-one has shot him, he will die, he will die. Run for help; see how he bleeds, I cannot stop it."

"Where is Hugh?" answered Helen in a hard voice, her heart had frozen.

Maisie pointed to the fringe of the wood with one arm, the other was under Dark Rory's head.

"Dead, I believe," she said with a sob, "he was fired on too."

Helen groped her way to where the little old man lay half propped against a tree trunk. He heard the swish of her skirts across the grass and almost started up in terror though he fell back with a groan.

"Damn you, damn you," he screamed, "didn't I promise not to tell, but you must needs steal up, are, like a snake in the grass. You've spoilt the game, Morag."

Helen bent over him and he saw her face by the moonlight.

"Oh! it's you Helen Vor," he said, in a

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