Jeannie Sinclair,

OR,

THE LILY OF THE STRATH.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE EXECUTION—AN ASTOUNDING ARRIVAL.

Let us return to the scaffold, and describe the extraordinary scene that was now going on there.

The attention of the crowd was distracted between the form on the scaffold, quivering in the death-struggle, and the men who were approaching at such wild speed, and making such vehement gesticulations. The moment the drop fell, and the convict was seen to be suffering according to his sentence, the approaching forms made despairing gestures, and shrieked loudly, 'Cut him down, cut him down!'

But the people stood amazed and bewildered, not knowing what this uproar meant, or who they were who approached so wildly. As they drew near, however, the group separated, the fleetest coming on first, each individual form being thus made to stand out to view. No sooner had this taken place than the people recognized in one of them the tall, burly figure of Wandering Ned, with his long blue garment flying behind him.

One of the figures was now seen to run at less speed than the rest, and he being alone in the rear, those in the front were continually pointing to him, as if, by directing the attention of the people to him, they could explain their purpose. This figure then became the object of general observation, and presently cries of horror and dismay burst from many lips, and those who gave utterance to them made frantic efforts to flee.

'It's his ghost!—it's his ghost!' they cried, 'the ghost of Sir Fergus Sinclair!'

And such in truth it seemed, for in the man toiling forward in the rear of the rest, the people recognised the figures and features of the Baronet of Baigley, for whose murder Lynedoch Sinclair was at that moment suffering death. Such a spectacle was well calculated to fill their hearts with terror and cause them to flee in all directions—all but the boldest of them, who, with the courage which broad daylight and numbers gave them, stood awaiting the approach of what they could not but believe was the Baronet's spirit coming, as it were, to witness the punishment of its murderer.

Of the running group one man was foremost whom no one knew. Without saying a word to anyone he bounded forward towards the scaffold and cut Lynedoch down—an act, however, which was hardly noticed in the universal horror which prevailed—every eye being fixed on the supposed ghost of Sir Fergus.

That the thing they gazed on was an exact resemblance of him there could be no manner of doubt. The dress was different and meaner than what the Baronet usually wore, but that the figure and countenance was his was indisputable. The face was indeed paler, and there were on it marks of recently healed wounds, but in nothing else was any difference discernible. All who had known Sir Fergus in life knew that his perfect image was before them.

His image it was, and something more. Yes, his veritable person in flesh and blood, in life and health, as they soon discovered by the extraordinary story he had to tell them.

Too late, however, had he come to save the life of Lynedoch. The man who had leapt upon the scaffold and cut down the body was the executioner, whose arrival at Shawhead the previous evening had been prevented in the manner explained. Mark Gideon having himself fallen under the influence of Zoe's potent powder was not in a condition to renew the dose when the hangman awoke. The latter when he came to his senses was in a state of great confusion, and for some time could not understand where he was. But very soon he remembered where he ought to be, and, snatching up the bundle which lay by his side, he—scarcely paying any heed to the sleeping form of Mark Gideon—rushed from the hut, and saw to his horror that he could not possibly reach Shawhead in time for the execution. Giddy and confused still from the effects of the powder, he ran forward in the direction of the town at as great a speed as he could muster, and on the way came upon Wandering Ned and Sir Fergus straining every nerve to reach the same goal, though with a very different object. They soon came to understand each other, and, fearful lest a substitute should have been found to do the office, they saw how necessary it was to make all possible haste to reach the town. When they came to the edge of the Common the sight of the execution going forward met their view, and frantically they shouted for it to be stayed. But even as they cried they saw the drop fall, and the convict struggling in the air. The sight quickened their flagging energies, and they flew on, making efforts as they went to make the people comprehend the truth and rescue Lynedoch from strangulation. These efforts, as we have seen, were in vain, and the executioner, followed by Ned, ascended the scaffold and freed the rope from its ghastly burden.

To no purpose, however, was all their efforts. They had come too late to save Lynedoch Sinclair from the violent death to which he had been condemned. It needed not the assertion of a doctor to convince the bystanders that life was extinct. The black face, the started eyeballs, the swollen and protruding tongue, and the limp and disjointed neck declared the truth at a glance.

Lynedoch Sinclair was dead, and the man for whose murder he had been hanged was there in life before them. Strange to say, there was no deep regret shown for the mistake which had been committed. The conviction dwelt with every one that Lynedoch had well deserved the fate which had overtaken him. In intention, in act, and in belief, he had murdered his cousin, and if by a strange arrangement of circumstances Sir Fergus had escaped the death which every one supposed him to have met with, this did not make Lynedoch's guilt the less. He was dead, and he had deserved to die. So thought and felt every one, and though he might have escaped the gallows had the truth sooner come to light, it was still considered that he had not suffered unjustly.

But though regret was absent, wonder and amazement of the strongest kind did freely abound. The question on every lip was, how was it possible that Sir Fergus could still be alive? Did they not see his dead body taken from the well? And was it not interred in the family vault at Sinclairtown? It was Sir Fergus himself who unravelled this mystery, and we now proceed to give the reader in our own words the substance of the Baronet's explanation. But this explanation deserves a short chapter to itself, and it shall have it.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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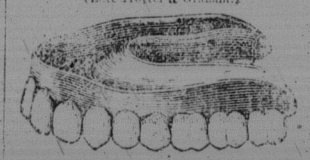

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