

The Rival Clansmen:

A Scottish Venetia.

CHAPTER IX.

FLIGHT OF FLORA—A SORROWING MOTHER—OVERTAKEN BY IAN.

"It is, she gasped—"how?" "Be in no way alarmed," interrupted our heroine, seeing the agitation of her companion.

Flora then told her of her flight with Hector, the attack upon them by Ian McKenzie in the hut, and how, when all but overcome, Ned Gordon had arrived in time to rescue Hector from the hands of Ian and Angus.

"Oh, the poor girl moaned, "I have been mad—infatuated. I should never have left my parents' roof to follow him who deserted me."

"Which he would most assuredly have done," responded Flora. "But have courage," she continued; "he has not yet left this district. He is much before his time if he has returned to Kinloch-Ewe."

"Bless you, bless you, for the confidence and hope with which you have inspired me," said Jeannie, gazing at Flora.

"Surely a kind Providence has thrown us together. My mission I might have regarded as hopeless long ago—to find him whom I claim as my husband, and if possible secure from him an avowal of our union."

Flora said nothing. A question several times rose to her lips, but she could utter it. But Jeannie, overcome as she was with fatigue, was scarcely able to talk further, and the two rising made their way to the spot where Flora had slept during the day, and laying down the child between them, they wrapt themselves up as best they could—two lonely outcasts, suffering because they struggled to be true and virtuous—and Jeannie's eyelids were soon closed in slumber, Flora lay and mused on the events which were crowding upon her.

For her it was a weary night; but she was cheered by the knowledge that she was enabled, by speaking kind words to this weeping girl, to requite in some measure the debt of gratitude she owed to Gordon, whose kindness she could never forget.

Jeannie slept soundly, and Flora was inspired with the hope that when she awoke in the morning she would be able to go forward with her so far, at least, as would put them at such a distance from Droghdaire that little danger might be apprehended of her own re-capture.

The child, doubtless sharing in the fatigue of its mother, also slept soundly; but sometimes during the short hours of the morning, just as Flora was smiling pleasantly away into the land of dreams, it awoke with a loud sharp cry, recalling Flora, and arousing its mother from her slumber.

Upon being interrogated by our heroine, Jeannie Gordon stated that she was much better, and that although weak she would now be able to accompany her.

The last fragments of food were divided between them. And then, while yet it wanted several hours of the dawn, the two proceeded on their journey—Flora carrying the child to relieve the wearied and already travel-worn mother of the burden.

When they started the clear moon was shining steadily down from the cloudless sky. But as the hours wore on, and the morning set in, the moon brightness became dissipated—not shut out by the intervention of dark clouds and mists, but paling before the effulgence of the rising sun, resembling the close of a good man's life, which sets not amid the gathering around of a tempestuous night, but amid the brighter revelations of a glorious morning.

Shortly after daybreak, feeling much fatigued, both rested. The spot where they did so was an oasis amidst the wilderness of bleak mountains by which they were surrounded—Loch Leuchart, a sweet and charming lake.

It was refreshing to sit and pour their tales of sorrow into each other's ears, and of this encouragement and strength thus afforded they availed themselves to the utmost extent. Already the girls both loved and trusted each other, short as their acquaintance had been. They had not sat long at this spot, at which they espied a man upon the opposite side pushing off a boat and pulling towards them.

A vague feeling of alarm stole over Flora, but she shook it off with the remark that she was now becoming frightened at the sight of every human being—believing all to be enemies.

Jeannie proposed to make off, but Flora suggested that if the man was a shepherd they might obtain from him some food to serve them during the remainder of their journey.

The boat continued to near them, and both girls began to watch it with much eagerness.

Suddenly Flora paled a little, and a tremor shot through her frame. Then she sprang to her feet, clasping her hands and exclaiming— "My God, I am lost! It is Ian McKenzie!"



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