

FIRE AND SWORD:

A STORY OF THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE.

CHAPTER XV.

HOPES AND FEARS.

M'Ian went to bed under Barcaldine's roof with a mind ill at ease with itself, and full of the most gloomy forebodings.

The hour which had ushered in to others a New Year of hope and promise, had brought with it to him and his people a sword of vengeance which hung suspended above their heads, Damocles-like, by a single thread, which design or treachery might at any moment snap.

Jealous, along with others of the Jacobite Chiefs, of the conduct of Breadalbane in the distribution of the peace money entrusted to his care, M'Ian had all along resented the Earl's meagre recognition of him as an open affront, and had refused to ally himself with his scheme of pacification, partly in the hope that his refusal of submission would in the end bring him and his people better and more advantageous terms.

In this hope he now found himself deceived, and it galled and saddened him to think that the plausible tongues of the Earl's parasites had been encouraged if not instructed, to assist him in his delusion.

Several of the Chiefs had, it was true, stood aloft till within a week of the expiry of the term of grace, but all had finally hurried in ere the gates of mercy were closed—albeit the recalcitrant old lion of Glencoe, the renegade whom, above all others of the party, the crafty and designing Breadalbane had wished and plotted to entrap. In his attempt to checkmate the Earl's ambitious schemes of pacification M'Ian found himself foiled at all points, and the thought that Colonel Hill's unexpected refusal to "swear" him might be part of a design to exclude him from mercy gave him real cause of alarm.

That night, therefore, his head lay unasily on the pillow, and worn-out as he was with the long day's journey he slept but little, and restlessly and ill.

How that melancholy wind did howl and moan around the turrets of Barcaldine's house! It took tone, too, from the state of his mind. He had often-times heard the winds of winter moan and scream through the hollows of his own sterile and sublime glen, but never had they before seemed so full of foreboding paths are now. And thinking of the long miles of mountain roads which lay between him and Inverary, with winter on his path and with the heavens full of fatal snows, his brain whirled in an apprehensive agony of fear.

God! how he longed for the morning light to appear! His conscience was up in arms against him, and often as he attempted to reason an excuse for himself it wrestled with and threw him.

He craved sleep, but the burning thoughts in his brain forbade it. An open gate, too, situated on the exposed side of the house somewhere, was ever and anon flung back on its noisy hinges by the unquiet winds, and was as often bayed by the deep-throated watch-dog, whose voice warned away tinkers and mendicants from the enclosed grounds.

At length, however, the winds fell quiet, the watchdog sought the repose of its kennel, and M'Ian at last slept.

He slept a short feverish sleep, and while he slept he dreamed.

He had returned, he thought, from a long and weary journey, and reaching a secluded and peaceful spot in his native Glen, he rested himself and fell quickly asleep.

A tinkle of falling water was in his ears; the rude warmth, with the sweet fragrance of the hather, was round him, and all was sweetness, security and peace.

Suddenly the valley darkened, and all around him rose the shrieks of defenceless men, women, and children, mingled with the shouts of a savage and bloody soldiery.

With a cry of fear, born of an agony of remorse, he wakened from this dream within a dream, and sat up in bed, staring at vacancy, with a cold sweat distilling itself on his brow.

Mentally thanking God that it was, as yet, only a dream he uttered a short ejaculatory prayer, and relapsed into a second broken sleep.

The dawn had greyed the eastern sky ere the Chief's sons arose from the comfortable bed where they had together occupied. The fatigue of the previous day's journey was great, and their bodies sought corresponding repose from repose and rest. The morning air they felt was crisp and cold with frost, but the wintry had fallen away, and the snow was in its way over for the time.

Repairing to M'Ian's bedroom, they found the old Chief tossing uneasily in bed.

At mention of his name he started, and

at once sprang to his feet, and presently began dressing himself preparatory to undertaking the day's journey towards Inverary.

"Late a-bed, I fear; what sort of a morning, lads!" he asked, directing his eyes to the window.

"The snow has taken off and the winds are down," answered Malcolm.

"I am rejoiced at that, lads. Let us hurry forward without delay. By pushing well on, we may reach the head of Loch Awe before dusk, and reporting our message at Kilchurich Castle, obtain shelter there for the night, and if the Earl is within he shall hear from my own lips my earnest desire of submission; and if he is honest in his intentions—which I hardly hope—he shall then be in duty bound to forwarn the King's officers taking proceedings against us."

"You forget," interposed Malcolm, "that if what Barcaldine said last night is true, then the Earl is expected here to-day, in which case the journey need not be precipitated at personal risk."

"Right, Malcolm," replied the Chief. "I was forgetting last night's arrangement. This fatal business weighs so heavily on my heart and conscience that my thoughts are incoherent and mixed," and he struck his brow with his hands several times expressive of the mental agony he was enduring. "If I was only assured of Barcaldine's honesty into the matter, I would encourage my mind to be at peace and hope for the best, but I fear treachery in this matter—rightly or wrongly, I fear treachery!" and taken with emotion the old Chief strode backwards and forwards the length of the room.

"When is the Earl expected here, does Barcaldine say?" asked John, the Chief's son.

"He has said nothing definite to me," answered M'Ian. "I only know the visit is expected."

"Then he had better ask an audience of Barcaldine and get a definite assurance on the matter," put in Malcolm.

"If the visit is only vaguely expected, then we can hardly venture to risk losing twenty-four precious hours on the chance of it; if, on the other hand, Barcaldine's statement is so evasive or unsatisfactory as to suggest treachery on his part, then there is nothing left us but the snow-wrapped road—come storm, come calm—and our own individual courage to face it."

"Well spoken, Malcolm! We can do nothing beyond that. I shall see Barcaldine at once," and desiring them to remain behind, M'Ian went to seek a short audience of his host.

Descending the stairway he found himself confronted by Glenbucket, who was pirouetting on his left heel in the centre of a passage communicating with the kitchen, making a partially successful attempt to fill, for what his condition obviously attested the twentieth time, a substantial looking dram glass, his dexter hand clutching firmly by the neck a bottle of old fashioned but capacious shape. M'Ian paused before him and looking on involuntarily and in silence.

"The rule dew o' the mountain, your honor whae'er (hie) ye may chance to be," began Glenbucket, leaning at M'Ian with a generous side smile which opened his mouth from ear to ear. "This, ye see, is Ne'erday mornin', an' I'm just takin' a toothfu' in private before (hie) adjourning to the kitchen to wet the craigs o' the hale housefu'. Thir' Heblin' devils, ye ken beggin' yer (hie) gracious pardon, for I see ye've on the hill, thir' roughhaud' sons o' the mountain hae aye sic a (hie) plaguey lot o' dry mist to wash out o' their heathery craigs, that I was e'en takin' the cannie precaution o' fillin' out a thimblefu' o' mase' before venturing any faiver but the hose wit. But, noo, since ye're here on the grun', ye'll jist empty that first, and I'll follow smart—hae, pit it ower!" and he extended the dram glass to M'Ian, who, however, refused the offer with an open gesture of contempt.

"What!" exclaimed the astonished Glenbucket, as he made an involuntary backward bicker, "ye'll no mind it, willna ye? Wee that bates everything. It's none o' yer clam stuff, mind ye; but it's a rare grand blend o' Ben Nevis, Ben Cruachan, an' a' the ither big Ben Humplocks in the north o' Scotland. Here, man, clap it in yer cheek—it's (hie) Ne'erday mornin'!"

"Can I see your master?" asked M'Ian, preserving a dry manner.

"Where?" whistled out Glenbucket, having emptied the glass with a single gulp. "If ye'll no, ye see I woff. What was that ye was (hie) asking me?"

"That I must and will do," promptly rejoined M'Ian. This suspense is tragic, I must needs end it. Remain here till my return," and quick on the impulse of the moment the old Chief once more went in quest of Glenbucket, whom he found returning from the kitchen minus the bottle and glass.

"You will show me your master's bedroom, Glenbucket, I must see him, and at once too. Do you hear?" said M'Ian in a commanding tone of voice.

"Oo ay, Laird, I hear brawly," replied Glenbucket, with considerable deliberation of tone and manner, being half-sobered by Glencoe's sauterie. "Oo ay, Laird, I hear brawly; but as for seeing the master a' in a crack—jist the noo like, that I simply canna," and the

forth from his presence in quest of his sleeping master.

"Deed, my guid frien', whae'er ye turn out to be—the Laird o' Glencoe I'm tell'd ye are—I'll no tak' on my heid the (hie) grave and unco risky responsibility o' waukenin' up Barcaldine. I've been ow'r lang servin' my superiors—an' Barcaldine especially—noo tae ken the wisdom o' lettin' sleepin' dogs lie. I'll e'en no meddle wi' for two hours at least. But what wad ye wi' the master? I'm his responsible fac' (hie) totum here. Speak yer will, and I'll see what can be (hie) dune tae serve ye," and straightening himself up to his full height, he made several abortive and highly ridiculous efforts to steady himself, glass and bottle in each hand, working at the same time these two handy if ill matched articles of equipage so as to recover his reat-tered balance.

This exhibition of heroic dignity and self-conscious importance on the part of Glenbucket was ludicrous, but M'Ian's mind was too tragically preoccupied with the urgency of the business he had in hand to notice it; so, turning about, he re-ascended the stairway leaving Glenbucket to his libations.

"Weel, weel," soliloquized Glenbucket, swinging round on his left heel like an unheeding door, "that's so. Aft he gings as if I had dune him an injury. Wauken up the master! Frith, no; I ken a trick worth twa o' that, ony day. He's a self-sustained auld cockalorum that," he added, looking after the retreating figure of M'Ian, "an' he'll hae naething to do with the adjectives—neither guid, better nor best. I offered him in turn, free, gratis, and for naething, guid freenship, better drink, an' the best advice, but nane o' the three comparative qualities wad he choose—dell grup him!" and Glenbucket who in his youth had once had remote views of a clachan schoolmastership, filled up a

fresh glass, and having emptied it, made a successful though highly divergent advance on the kitchen, muttering to himself as he went, "Thir' oolandiish Heblin' devils dunn ken hoo tae hand an auld Scotch Ne'erday. If Barcaldine hooe was i' the Midlothians, or situated in the heart o' the West o' Scotland, the wad be riging wi' mirth and fun frae dawn tae e'en. But here, the Guid help us, the hoose is as quiete's a parish kirk between the services. I've jist tried tae thowe that glum auld curmudgeon Glencoe, but he'll neither sing, dance, nor whistle; and noo for a bit social tiff wi' the lassocks in the kitchen," and a hearty skirl of surprise emanating from that quarter a moment afterwards attested that Glenbucket had entered the culinary apartment of the house unannounced. Thus happily placed, we shall leave him for the time, and proceed to take up the leading thread of our story.

"I much fear we shall not see the Earl here to-day, lads," said M'Ian, on returning to his bedroom, wherein John and Malcolm Macdonald had remained during his brief absence. "He is still a-bed, and I suspect treachery between him and Captain Drummond. They were in secret conference last night. I accidentally learned from Glenbucket—a house domestic—and what is certain is that the pair either plotted so long that they have unconsciously overstepped themselves, or what I more deeply suspect—the Earl will not be here to-day at all. What think you lads?"

Making a step across the floor, Malcolm closed the door of the room, which the entrance of M'Ian had left partially open, and returning to M'Ian's side, he said—

"Barcaldine is one of the Earl's parasites; the Earl is Glencoe's enemy; therefore, Barcaldine cannot be our friend. Let us suspect and distrust him as honorable men suspect and distrust knaves. In view of the urgency of our business, it is our privilege, may more, it is our dire necessity to do so. Let us go forth of this house at once."

"We have not yet his explanation," interposed John, the Chief's eldest son; he may be expecting the Earl only late in the day."

"The possible consequences are so tremendous," urged M'Ian, "I cannot afford to rest on hopes and surmises, and he kept pacing the floor, his mind torn by the conflicting emotions which possessed it."

"So Glenbucket said," suggested Malcolm, "and demand an audience of his master, otherwise we instantly lift and go."

"That I must and will do," promptly rejoined M'Ian. This suspense is tragic, I must needs end it. Remain here till my return," and quick on the impulse of the moment the old Chief once more went in quest of Glenbucket, whom he found returning from the kitchen minus the bottle and glass.

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why domestic emphasized the decorum by chopping his chin on his breast by a sudden down-throw of his head."

"And why not?" demanded M'Ian. "Because he's (hie) asleep," replied Glenbucket, relapsing at once into self-assurance and hieology.

"Then waken him up to be d—d to you!" retorted M'Ian, losing possession of his mind in the excitement of the moment, and making a threatening gesture at the self-conscious domestic.

Glenbucket, stricken with an equal blend of amazement and fear, turned up the white of his eyes at the angry Chief like a shot pheasant, hincoughed three distinct times, retained suggestive silence, and very obviously marvelled amazingly and perceptibly much.

"Will you announce me to your master?" determinedly urged M'Ian, making a menacing step towards him.

"Not for ten thousand worlds," replied Glenbucket, falling back on his kitchen reserves.

"Then find me another domestic who will," urged the excited Chief; "I am in earnest, sir."

"There's (hie) two o' us in earnest, Laird, that's the plague o't," promptly rejoined Glenbucket; "but as for another domestic serving ye in that way, it simply canna be. This is Ne'erday mornin', Laird, and the male domestics are a' as fu' as the Clydes in space. I'm (hie) the only sober representative o' the hale up-an-down-stairs Barcaldine establishment."

"That you at once announce me to your master, my good fellow," said Glencoe, altering his manner towards the obtuse domestic, and slipping into his ready palm a piece of money as the easiest method of subduing the pot-valiant domestic to reason and instant compliance with his expressed wish.

Glenbucket stole a quick glance at the coin proffered him, and finding its color of the right sort he smiled from ear to ear, and making a kidnapping admission that there were times and seasons when rules—moral as well as domestic—could be probably set aside, he motioned M'Ian to remain behind a moment until his return.

Within two minutes he returned, and beckoned the Chief to follow him.

"It's a' richt, Laird, as richt as tip-pence," he garrulously began; "I knook'd him up at the risk o' my (hie) life. It's noo for a bit money I'd serve ye, Laird, but jist because I see ye're in extremis, as the Latimers say. Takin' the richt side o' him, Laird, ye'll find Glenbucket's no a bad sort an' that's me, Laird (touching his breast with his fore finger while he spoke). His heart is ever open to the tale o' distress, and the tear o' (hie) sympathy is ever richt dry frae his e'e. There, Laird, there," he added, "then they had reached Barcaldine's bedroom door," knook and it shall be opened unto thee. There's Scripser for as much, Laird, Scripser for as much. Guid mornin'!" and wheeling about, he swung precipitately off in an extreme hurry, wishing, presumably, to keep out of his master's immediate sight.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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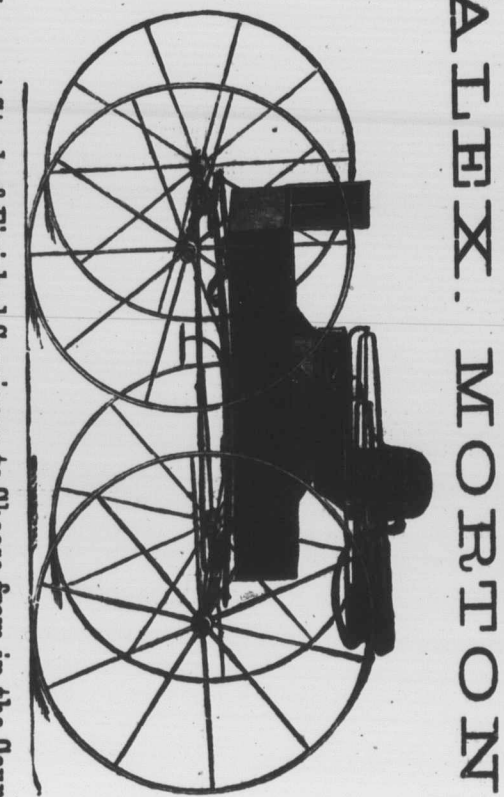
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