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SCOTTISH HISTORY. VOL. 1 ***





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THE DAYS OF BRUCE;

A Story

FROM

SCOTTISH HISTORY.

BY

GRACE AGUILAR,

AUTHOR OF "HOME INFLUENCE," "THE MOTHER'S RECOMPENSE,"
"WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP," "THE VALE OF CEDARS"
ETC. ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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1871.

PREFACE.

As these pages have passed through the press, mingled feelings of pain and pleasure have actuated my heart. Who shall speak the regret that she, to whom its composition was a work of love, cannot participate in the joy which its publication would have occasioned—who shall tell of that anxious pleasure which I feel in witnessing the success of each and all the efforts of her pen?

THE DAYS OF BRUCE must be considered as an endeavor to place before the reader an interesting

narrative of a period of history, in itself a romance, and one perhaps as delightful as could well have been selected. In combination with the story of Scotland's brave deliverer, it must be viewed as an illustration of female character, and descriptive of much that its Author considered excellent in woman. In the high minded Isabella of Buchan is traced the resignation of a heart wounded in its best affections, yet trustful midst accumulated misery. In Isoline may be seen the self-inflicted unhappiness of a too confident and self reliant nature; while in Agnes is delineated the overwhelming of a mind too much akin to heaven in purity and innocence to battle with the stern and bitter sorrows with which her life is strewn.

How far the merits of this work may be perceived becomes not me to judge; I only know and *feel* that on me has devolved the endearing task of publishing the writings of my lamented child—that I am fulfilling the desire of her life.

SARAH AGUILAR.

May, 1852.

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THE DAYS OF BRUCE.

CHAPTER I.

The month of March, rough and stormy as it is in England, would perhaps be deemed mild and beautiful as May by those accustomed to meet and brave its fury in the eastern Highlands, nor would the evening on which our tale commences bely its wild and fitful character.

The wind howled round the ancient Tower of Buchan, in alternate gusts of wailing and of fury, so mingled with the deep, heavy roll of the lashing waves, that it was impossible to distinguish the roar of the one element from the howl of the other. Neither tree, hill, nor wood intercepted the rushing gale, to change the dull monotony of its gloomy tone. The Ythan, indeed, darted by, swollen and turbid from continued storms, threatening to overflow the barren plain it watered, but its voice was undistinguishable amidst the louder wail of wind and ocean. Pine-trees, dark, ragged, and stunted, and scattered so widely apart that each one seemed monarch of some thirty acres, were the only traces of vegetation for miles round. Nor were human habitations more abundant; indeed, few dwellings, save those of such solid masonry as the Tower of Buchan, could hope to stand scathless amidst the storms that in winter ever swept along the moor.

No architectural beauty distinguished the residence of the Earls of Buchan; none of that tasteful decoration peculiar to the Saxon, nor of the more sombre yet more imposing style introduced by the Norman, and known as the Gothic architecture.

Originally a hunting-lodge, it had been continually enlarged by succeeding lords, without any

regard either to symmetry or proportion, elegance or convenience; and now, early in the year 1306, appeared within its outer walls as a most heterogeneous mass of ill-shaped turrets, courts, offices, and galleries, huddled together in ill-sorted confusion, though presenting to the distant view a massive square building, remarkable only for a strength and solidity capable of resisting alike the war of elements and of man.

Without all seemed a dreary wilderness, but within existed indisputable signs of active life. The warlike inhabitants of the tower, though comparatively few in number, were continually passing to and fro in the courts and galleries, or congregating in little knots, in eager converse. Some cleansing their armor or arranging banners; others, young and active, practising the various manœuvres of mimic war; each and all bearing on their brow that indescribable expression of anticipation and excitement which seems ever on the expectant of it knows not what. The condition of Scotland was indeed such as to keep her sons constantly on the alert, preparing for defence or attack, as the insurging efforts of the English or the commands of their lords should determine. From the richest noble to the veriest serf, the aged man to the little child, however contrary their politics and feelings, one spirit actuated all, and that spirit was war—war in all its deadliest evils, its unmitigated horrors, for it was native blood which deluged the rich plains, the smiling vales, and fertile hills of Scotland.

Although the castle of Buchan resembled more a citadel intended for the accommodation of armed vassals than the commodious dwelling of feudal lords, one turret gave evidence, by its internal arrangement, of a degree of refinement and a nearer approach to comfort than its fellows, and seeming to proclaim that within its massive walls the lords of the castle were accustomed to reside. The apartments were either hung with heavy tapestry, which displayed, in gigantic proportions, the combats of the Scots and Danes, or panelled with polished oak, rivalling ebony in its glossy blackness, inlaid with solid silver. Heavy draperies of damask fell from the ceiling to the floor at every window, a pleasant guard, indeed, from the constant winds which found entrance through many crevices and corners of the Gothic casements, but imparting a dingy aspect to apartments lordly in their dimensions, and somewhat rich in decoration.

The deep embrasures of the casements were thus in a manner severed from the main apartment, for even when the curtains were completely lowered there was space enough to contain a chair or two and a table. The furniture corresponded in solidity and proportion to the panelling or tapestry of the walls; nor was there any approach even at those doubtful comforts already introduced in the more luxurious Norman castles of South Britain.

The group, however, assembled in one of these ancient rooms needed not the aid of adventitious ornament to betray the nobility of birth, and those exalted and chivalric feelings inherent to their rank. The sun, whose stormy radiance during the day had alternately deluged earth and sky with fitful yet glorious brilliance, and then, burying itself in the dark masses of overhanging clouds, robed every object in deepest gloom, now seemed to concentrate his departing rays in one living flood of splendor, and darting within the chamber, lingered in crimson glory around the youthful form of a gentle girl, dyeing her long and clustering curls with gold. Slightly bending over a large and cumbrous frame which supported her embroidery, her attitude could no more conceal the grace and lightness of her childlike form, than the glossy ringlets the soft and radiant features which they shaded. There was archness lurking in those dark blue eyes, to which tears seemed yet a stranger; the clear and snowy forehead, the full red lip, and health-bespeaking cheek had surely seen but smiles, and mirrored but the joyous light which filled her gentle heart. Her figure seemed to speak a child, but there was a something in that face, bright, glowing as it was, which yet would tell of somewhat more than childhood—that seventeen summers had done their work, and taught that guileless heart a sterner tale than gladness.

A young man, but three or four years her senior, occupied an embroidered settle at her feet. In complexion, as in the color of his hair and eyes, there was similarity between them, but the likeness went no further, nor would the most casual observer have looked on them as kindred. Fair and lovely as the maiden would even have been pronounced, it was perhaps more the expression, the sweet innocence that characterized her features which gave to them their charm; but in the young man there was infinitely more than this, though effeminate as was his complexion, and the bright sunny curls which floated over his throat, he was eminently and indescribably beautiful, for it was the mind, the glorious mind, the kindling spirit which threw their radiance over his perfect features; the spirit and mind which that noble form enshrined stood apart, and though he knew it not himself, found not their equal in that dark period of warfare and of woe. The sword and lance were the only instruments of the feudal aristocracy; ambition, power, warlike fame, the principal occupants of their thoughts; the chase, the tourney, or the foray, the relaxation of their spirits. But unless that face deceived, there was more, much more, which characterized the elder youth within that chamber.

A large and antique volume of Norse legends rested on his knee, which, in a rich, manly voice, he was reading aloud to his companion, diversifying his lecture with remarks and explanations, which, from the happy smiles and earnest attention of the maiden, appeared to impart the pleasure intended by the speaker. The other visible inhabitant of the apartment was a noble-looking boy of about fifteen, far less steadily employed than his companions, for at one time he was posing a heavy lance, and throwing himself into the various attitudes of a finished warrior; at others, brandished a two-handed sword, somewhat taller than himself; then glancing over the shoulder of his sister—for so nearly was he connected with the maiden, though the raven curls, the bright flashing eye of jet, and darker skin, appeared to forswear such near relationship—criticising her embroidery, and then transferring his scrutiny to the strange figures on the

gorgeously-illuminated manuscript, and then for a longer period listening, as it were, irresistibly to the wild legends which that deep voice was so melodiously pouring forth.

"It will never do, Agnes. You cannot embroider the coronation of Kenneth MacAlpine and listen to these wild tales at one and the same time. Look at your clever pupil, Sir Nigel; she is placing a heavy iron buckler on the poor king's head instead of his golden crown." The boy laughed long and merrily as he spoke, and even Sir Nigel smiled; while Agnes, blushing and confused, replied, half jestingly and half earnestly, "And why not tell me of it before, Alan? you must have seen it long ago."

"And so I did, sweet sister mine; but I wished to see the effect of such marvellous abstraction, and whether, in case of necessity, an iron shield would serve our purpose as well as a jewelled diadem."

"Never fear, my boy. Let but the king stand forth, and there will be Scottish men enow and willing to convert an iron buckler into a goodly crown;" and as Sir Nigel spoke his eyes flashed, and his whole countenance irradiated with a spirit that might not have been suspected when in the act of reading, but which evidently only slept till awakened by an all-sufficient call. "Let the tyrant Edward exult in the possession of our country's crown and sceptre—he may find we need not them to make a king; aye, and a king to snatch the regal diadem from the proud usurper's brow—the Scottish sceptre from his blood-stained hands!"

"Thou talkest wildly, Nigel," answered the lad, sorrowfully, his features assuming an expression of judgment and feeling beyond his years. "Who is there in Scotland will do this thing? who will dare again the tyrant's rage? Is not this unhappy country divided within itself, and how may it resist the foreign foe?"

"Wallace! think of Wallace! Did he not well-nigh wrest our country from the tyrant's hands? And is there not one to follow in the path he trod—no noble heart to do what he hath done?"

"Nigel, yes. Let but the rightful king stand forth, and were there none other, I—even I, stripling as I am, with my good sword and single arm, even with the dark blood of Comyn in my veins, Alan of Buchan, would join him, aye, and die for him!"

"There spoke the blood of Duff, and not of Comyn!" burst impetuously from the lips of Nigel, as he grasped the stripling's ready hand; "and doubt not, noble boy, there are other hearts in Scotland bold and true as thine; and even as Wallace, one will yet arise to wake them from their stagnant sleep, and give them freedom."

"Wallace," said the maiden, fearfully; "ye talk of Wallace, of his bold deeds and bolder heart, but bethink ye of his *fate*. Oh, were it not better to be still than follow in his steps unto the scaffold?"

"Dearest, no; better the scaffold and the axe, aye, even the iron chains and hangman's cord, than the gilded fetters of a tyrant's yoke. Shame on thee, sweet Agnes, to counsel thoughts as these, and thou a Scottish maiden." Yet even as he spoke chidingly, the voice of Nigel became soft and thrilling, even as it had before been bold and daring.

"I fear me, Nigel, I have but little of my mother's blood within my veins. I cannot bid them throb and bound as hers with patriotic love and warrior fire. A lowly cot with him I loved were happiness for me."

"But that cot must rest upon a soil unchained, sweet Agnes, or joy could have no resting there. Wherefore did Scotland rise against her tyrant—why struggle as she hath to fling aside her chains? Was it her noble sons? Alas, alas! degenerate and base, they sought chivalric fame; forgetful of their country, they asked for knighthood from proud Edward's hand, regardless that that hand had crowded fetters on their fatherland, and would enslave their sons. Not to them did Scotland owe the transient gleam of glorious light which, though extinguished in the patriot's blood, hath left its trace behind. With the bold, the hardy, lowly Scot that gleam had birth; they would be free to them. What mattered that their tyrant was a valiant knight, a worthy son of chivalry; they saw but an usurper, an enslaver, and they rose and spurned his smiles—aye, and they *will* rise again. And wert thou one of them, sweet girl; a cotter's wife, thou too wouldst pine for freedom. Yes; Scotland will bethink her of her warrior's fate, and shout aloud revenge for Wallace!"

Either his argument was unanswerable, or the energy of his voice and manner carried conviction with them, but a brighter glow mantled the maiden's cheek, and with it stole the momentary shame—the wish, the simple words that she had spoken could be recalled.

"Give us but a king for whom to fight—a king to love, revere, obey—a king from whose hand knighthood were an honor, precious as life itself, and there are noble hearts enough to swear fealty to him, and bright swords ready to defend his throne," said the young heir of Buchan, as he brandished his own weapon above his head, and then rested his arms upon its broad hilt, despondingly. "But where is that king? Men speak of my most gentle kinsman Sir John Comyn, called the Red—bah! The sceptre were the same jewelled bauble in his impotent hand as in his sapient uncle's; a gem, a toy, forsooth, the loan of crafty Edward. No! the Red Comyn is no king for Scotland; and who is there besides? The rightful heir—a cold, dull-blooded neutral—a wild and wavering changeling. I pray thee be not angered, Nigel; it cannot be gainsaid, e'en though he is thy brother."

"I know it Alan; know it but too well," answered Nigel, sadly, though the dark glow rushed up to

cheek and brow. "Yet Robert's blood is hot enough. His deeds are plunged in mystery—his words not less so; yet I cannot look on him as thou dost, as, alas! too many do. It may be that I love him all too well; that dearer even than Edward, than all the rest, has Robert ever been to me. He knows it not; for, sixteen years my senior, he has ever held me as a child taking little heed of his wayward course; and yet my heart has throbbled beneath his word, his look, as if he were not what he seemed, but would—but must be something more."

"I ever thought thee but a wild enthusiast, gentle Nigel, and this confirms it. Mystery, aye, such mystery as ever springs from actions at variance with reason, judgment, valor—with all that frames the patriot. Would that thou wert the representative of thy royal line; wert thou in Earl Robert's place, thus, thus would Alan kneel to thee and hail thee king!"

"Peace, peace, thou foolish boy, the crown and sceptre have no charm for me; let me but see my country free, the tyrant humbled, my brother as my trusting spirit whispers he *shall* be, and Nigel asks no more."

"Art thou indeed so modest, gentle Nigel—is thy happiness so distinct from self? thine eyes tell other tales sometimes, and speak they false, fair sir?"

Timidly, yet irresistibly, the maiden glanced up from her embroidery, but the gaze that met hers caused those bright eyes to fall more quickly than they were raised, and vainly for a few seconds did she endeavor so to steady her hand as to resume her task. Nigel was, however, spared reply, for a sharp and sudden bugle-blast reverberated through the tower, and with an exclamation of that wondering inquiry Alan bounded from the chamber. There was one other inmate of that apartment, whose presence, although known and felt, had, as was evident, been no restraint either to the employments or the sentiments of the two youths and their companion. Their conversation had not passed unheeded, although it had elicited no comment or rejoinder. The Countess of Buchan stood within one of those deep embrasures we have noticed, at times glancing towards the youthful group with an earnestness of sorrowing affection that seemed to have no measure in its depth, no shrinking in its might; at others, fixing a long, unmeaning, yet somewhat anxious gaze on the wide plain and distant ocean, which the casement overlooked.

It was impossible to look once on the countenance of Isabella of Buchan, and yet forbear to look again. The calm dignity, the graceful majesty of her figure seemed to mark her as one born to command, to hold in willing homage the minds and inclinations of men; her pure, pale brow and marble cheek—for the rich rose seemed a stranger there—the long silky lash of jet, the large, full, black eye, in its repose so soft that few would guess how it could flash fire, and light up those classic features with power to stir the stagnant souls of thousands and guide them with a word. She looked in feature as in form a queen; fitted to be beloved, formed to be obeyed. Her heavy robe of dark brocade, wrought with thick threads of gold, seemed well suited to her majestic form; its long, loose folds detracting naught from the graceful ease of her carriage. Her thick, glossy hair, vying in its rich blackness with the raven's wing, was laid in smooth bands upon her stately brow, and gathered up behind in a careless knot, confined with a bodkin of massive gold. The hood or coif, formed of curiously twisted black and golden threads, which she wore in compliance with the Scottish custom, that thus made the distinction between the matron and the maiden, took not from the peculiarly graceful form of the head, nor in any part concealed the richness of the hair. Calm and pensive as was the general expression of her countenance, few could look upon it without that peculiar sensation of respect, approaching to awe, which restrained and conquered sorrow ever calls for. Perchance the cause of such emotion was all too delicate, too deeply veiled to be defined by those rude hearts who were yet conscious of its existence; and for them it was enough to own her power, bow before it, and fear her as a being set apart.

Musingly she had stood looking forth on the wide waste; the distant ocean, whose tumbling waves one moment gleamed in living light, at others immersed in inky blackness, were barely distinguished from the lowering sky. The moaning winds swept by, bearing the storm-cloud on their wings; patches of blue gleamed strangely and brightly forth; and, far in the west, crimson and amber, and pink and green, inlaid in beautiful mosaic the departing luminary's place of rest.

"Alas, my gentle one," she had internally responded to her daughter's words, "if thy mother's patriot heart could find no shield for woe, nor her warrior fire, as thou deemest it, guard her from woman's trials, what will be thy fate? This is no time for happy love, for peaceful joys, returned as it may be; for—may I doubt that truthful brow, that knightly soul (her glance was fixed on Nigel)—yet not now may the Scottish knight find rest and peace in woman's love. And better is it thus—the land of the slave is no home for love."

A faint yet a beautiful smile, dispersing as a momentary beam the anxiety stamped on her features, awoke at the enthusiastic reply of Nigel. Then she turned again to the casement, for her quick eye had discerned a party of about ten horsemen approaching in the direction of the tower, and on the summons of the bugle she advanced from her retreat to the centre of the apartment.

"Why, surely thou art but a degenerate descendant of the brave Macduff, mine Agnes, that a bugle blast should thus send back every drop of blood to thy little heart," she said, playfully. "For shame, for shame! how art thou fitted to be a warrior's bride? They are but Scottish men, and true, methinks, if I recognize their leader rightly. And it is even so."

"Sir Robert Keith, right welcome," she added, as, marshalled by young Alan, the knight appeared, bearing his plumed helmet in his hand, and displaying haste and eagerness alike in his flushed

features and soiled armor.

"Ye have ridden long and hastily. Bid them hasten our evening meal, my son; or stay, perchance Sir Robert needs thine aid to rid him of this garb of war. Thou canst not serve one nobler."

"Nay, noble lady, knights must don, not doff their armor now. I bring ye news, great, glorious news, which will not brook delay. A royal messenger I come, charged by his grace my king—my country's king—with missives to his friends, calling on all who spurn a tyrant's yoke—who love their land, their homes, their freedom—on all who wish for Wallace—to awake, arise, and join their patriot king!"

"Of whom speakest thou, Sir Robert Keith? I charge thee, speak!" exclaimed Nigel, starting from the posture of dignified reserve with which he had welcomed the knight, and springing towards him.

"The patriot and the king!—of whom canst thou speak?" said Alan, at the same instant. "Thine are, in very truth, marvellous tidings, Sir Knight; an' thou canst call up one to unite such names, and worthy of them, he shall not call on me in vain."

"Is he not worthy, Alan of Buchan, who thus flings down the gauntlet, who thus dares the fury of a mighty sovereign, and with a handful of brave men prepares to follow in the steps of Wallace, to the throne or to the scaffold?"

"Heed not my reckless boy, Sir Robert," said the countess, earnestly, as the eyes of her son fell beneath the knight's glance of fiery reproach; "no heart is truer to his country, no arm more eager to rise in her defence."

"The king! the king!" gasped Nigel, some strange over-mastering emotion checking his utterance. "Who is it that has thus dared, thus—"

"And canst thou too ask, young sir?" returned the knight, with a smile of peculiar meaning. "Is thy sovereign's name unknown to thee? Is Robert Bruce a name unknown, unheard, unloved, that thou, too, breathest it not?"

"My brother, my brave, my noble brother!—I saw it, I knew it! Thou wert no changeling, no slavish neutral; but even as I felt, thou art, thou wilt be! My brother, my brother, I may live and die for thee!" and the young enthusiast raised his clasped hands above his head, as in speechless thanksgiving for these strange, exciting news; his flushed cheek, his quivering lip, his moistened eye betraying an emotion which seemed for the space of a moment to sink on the hearts of all who witnessed it, and hush each feeling into silence. A shout from the court below broke that momentary pause.

"God save King Robert! then, say I," vociferated Alan, eagerly grasping the knight's hand. "Sit, sit, Sir Knight; and for the love of heaven, speak more of this most wondrous tale. Erewhile, we hear of this goodly Earl of Carrick at Edward's court, doing him homage, serving him as his own English knight, and now in Scotland—aye, and Scotland's king. How may we reconcile these contradictions?"

"Rather how did he vanish from the tyrant's hundred eyes, and leave the court of England?" inquired Nigel, at the same instant as the Countess of Buchan demanded, somewhat anxiously—

"And Sir John Comyn, recognizes he our sovereign's claim? Is he amongst the Bruce's slender train?"

A dark cloud gathered on the noble brow of the knight, replacing the chivalric courtesy with which he had hitherto responded to his interrogators. He paused ere he answered, in a stern, deep voice—

"Sir John Comyn lived and died a traitor, lady. He hath received the meed of his base treachery; his traitorous design for the renewed slavery of his country—the imprisonment and death of the only one that stood forth in her need."

"And by whom did the traitor die?" fiercely demanded the young heir of Buchan. "Mother, thy cheek is blanched; yet wherefore? Comyn as I am, shall we claim kindred with a traitor, and turn away from the good cause, because, forsooth, a traitorous Comyn dies? No; were the Bruce's own right hand red with the recreant's blood—he only is the Comyn's king."

"Thou hast said it, youthful lord," said the knight, impressively. "Alan of Buchan, bear that bold heart and patriot sword unto the Bruce's throne, and Comyn's traitorous name shall be forgotten in the scion of Macduff. Thy mother's loyal blood runs reddest in thy veins, young sir; too pure for Comyn's base alloy. Know, then, the Bruce's hand is red with the traitor's blood, and yet, fearless and firm in the holy justice of his cause, he calls on his nobles and their vassals for their homage and their aid—he calls on them to awake from their long sleep, and shake off the iron yoke from their necks; to prove that Scotland—the free, the dauntless, the unconquered soil, which once spurned the Roman power, to which all other kingdoms bowed—is free, undaunted, and unconquered still. He calls aloud, aye, even on ye, wife and son of Comyn of Buchan, to snap the link that binds ye to a traitor's house, and prove—though darkly, basely flows the blood of Macduff in one descendant's veins, that the Earl of Fife refuses homage and allegiance to his sovereign—in ye it rushes free, and bold, and loyal still."

"And he shall find it so. Mother, why do ye not speak? You, from whose lips my heart first learnt

to beat for Scotland my lips to pray that one might come to save her from the yoke of tyranny. You, who taught me to forget all private feud, to merge all feeling, every claim, in the one great hope of Scotland's freedom. Now that the time is come, wherefore art thou thus? Mother, my own noble mother, let me go forth with thy blessing on my path, and ill and woe can come not near me. Speak to thy son!" The undaunted boy flung himself on his knee before the countess as he spoke. There was a dark and fearfully troubled expression on her noble features. She had clasped her hands together, as if to still or hide their unwonted trembling; but when she looked on those bright and glowing features, there came a dark, dread vision of blood, and the axe and cord, and she folded her arms around his neck, and sobbed in all a mother's irrepressible agony.

"My own, my beautiful, to what have I doomed thee!" she cried. "To death, to woe! aye, perchance, to that heaviest woe—a father's curse! exposing thee to death, to the ills of all who dare to strike for freedom. Alan, Alan, how can I bid thee forth to death? and yet it is I have taught thee to love it better than the safety of a slave; longed, prayed for this moment—deemed that for my country I could even give my child—and now, now—oh God of mercy, give me strength!"

She bent down her head on his, clasping him to her heart, as thus to still the tempest which had whelmed it. There is something terrible in that strong emotion which sometimes suddenly and unexpectedly overpowers the calmest and most controlled natures. It speaks of an agony so measureless, so beyond the relief of sympathy, that it falls like an electric spell on the hearts of all witnesses, sweeping all minor passions into dust before it. Little accustomed as was Sir Robert Keith to sympathize in such emotions, he now turned hastily aside, and, as if fearing to trust himself in silence, commenced a hurried detail to Nigel Bruce of the Earl of Carrick's escape from London, and his present position. The young nobleman endeavored to confine his attention to the subject, but his eyes would wander in the direction of Agnes, who, terrified at emotions which in her mother she had never witnessed before, was kneeling in tears beside her brother.

A strong convulsive shuddering passed over the bowed frame of Isabella of Buchan; then she lifted up her head, and all traces of emotion had passed from her features. Silently she pressed her lips on the fair brows of her children alternately, and her voice faltered not as she bade them rise and heed her not.

"We will speak further of this anon, Sir Robert," she said, so calmly that the knight started. "Hurried and important as I deem your mission, the day is too far spent to permit of your departure until the morrow; you will honor our evening meal, and this true Scottish tower for a night's lodging, and then we can have leisure for discourse on the weighty matters you have touched upon."

She bowed courteously, as she turned with a slow, unfaltering step to leave the room. Her resumed dignity recalled the bewildered senses of her son, and, with graceful courtesy, he invited the knight to follow him, and choose his lodging for the night.

"Agnes, mine own Agnes, now, indeed, may I win thee," whispered Nigel, as tenderly he folded his arm round her, and looked fondly in her face. "Scotland shall be free! her tyrants banished by her patriot king; and then, then may not Nigel Bruce look to this little hand as his reward? Shall not, may not the thought of thy pure, gentle love be mine, in the tented field and battle's roar, urging me on, even should all other voice be hushed?"

"Forgettest thou I am a Comyn, Nigel? That the dark stain of traitor, of disloyalty is withering on our line, and wider and wider grows the barrier between us and the Bruce?" The voice of the maiden was choked, her bright eyes dim with tears.

"All, all I do forget, save that thou art mine own sweet love; and though thy name is Comyn, thy heart is all Macduff. Weep not, my Agnes; thine eyes were never framed for tears. Bright times for us and Scotland are yet in store!"

CHAPTER II.

For the better comprehension of the events related in the preceding chapter, it will be necessary to cast a summary glance on matters of historical and domestic import no way irrelevant to our subject, save and except their having taken place some few years previous to the commencement of our tale.

The early years of Isabella of Buchan had been passed in happiness. The only daughter, indeed for seven years the only child, of Malcolm, Earl of Fife, deprived of her mother on the birth of her brother, her youth had been nursed in a tenderness and care uncommon in those rude ages; and yet, from being constantly with her father, she imbibed those higher qualities of mind which so ably fitted her for the part which in after years it was her lot to play. The last words of his devoted wife, imploring him to educate her child himself, and not to sever the tie between them, by following the example of his compeers, and sending her either to England, France, or Norway, had been zealously observed by the earl; the prosperous calm, which was the happy portion of Scotland during the latter years of Alexander III., whose favorite minister he was, enabled him to adhere to her wishes far more successfully than could have been the case had he been called

forth to war.

In her father's castle, then, were the first thirteen years of the Lady Isabella spent, varied only by occasional visits to the court of Alexander, where her beauty and vivacity rendered her a universal favorite. Descended from one of the most ancient Scottish families, whose race it was their boast had never been adulterated by the blood of a foreigner, no Norman prejudice intermingled with the education of Isabella, to tarnish in any degree those principles of loyalty and patriotism which her father, the Earl of Fife, so zealously inculcated. She was a more true, devoted Scottish woman at fourteen, than many of her own rank whose years might double hers; ready even then to sacrifice even life itself, were it called for in defence of her sovereign, or the freedom of her country; and when, on the death of Alexander, clouds began to darken the horizon of Scotland, her father scrupled not to impart to her, child though she seemed, those fears and anxieties which clouded his brow, and filled his spirit with foreboding gloom. It was then that in her flashing eye and lofty soul, in the undaunted spirit, which bore a while even his colder and more foreseeing mood along with it, that he traced the fruit whose seed he had so carefully sown.

"Why should you fear for Scotland, my father?" she would urge; "is it because her queen is but a child and now far distant, that anarchy and gloom shall enfold our land? Is it not shame in ye thus craven to deem her sons, when in thy own breast so much devotion and loyalty have rest? why not judge others by yourself, my father, and know the dark things of which ye dream can never be?"

"Thou speakest as the enthusiast thou art, my child. Yet it is not the rule of our maiden queen my foreboding spirit dreads; 'tis that on such a slender thread as her young life suspends the well-doing or the ruin of her kingdom. If she be permitted to live and reign over us, all may be well; 'tis on the event of her death for which I tremble."

"Wait till the evil day cometh then, my father; bring it not nearer by anticipation; and should indeed such be, thinkest thou not there are bold hearts and loyal souls to guard our land from foreign foe, and give the rightful heir his due?"

"I know not, Isabella. There remain but few with the pure Scottish blood within their veins, and it is but to them our land is so dear: they would peril life and limb in her defence. It is not to the proud baron descended from the intruding Norman, and thinking only of his knightly sports and increase of wealth, by it matters not what war. Nor dare we look with confidence to the wild chiefs of the north and the Lords of the Isles; eager to enlarge their own dominions, to extend the terrors of their name, they will gladly welcome the horrors and confusion that may arise; and have we true Scottish blood enough to weigh against these, my child? Alas! Isabella, our only hope is in the health and well-doing of our queen, precarious as that is; but if she fail us, woe to Scotland!"

The young Isabella could not bring forward any solid arguments in answer to this reasoning, and therefore she was silent; but she felt her Scottish blood throb quicker in her veins, as he spoke of the few pure Scottish men remaining, and inwardly vowed, woman as she was, to devote both energy and life to her country and its sovereign.

Unhappily for his children, though perhaps fortunately for himself, the Earl of Fife was spared the witnessing in the miseries of his country how true had been his forebodings. Two years after the death of his king, he was found dead in his bed, not without strong suspicion of poison. Public rumor pointed to his uncle, Macduff of Glamis, as the instigator, if not the actual perpetrator of the deed; but as no decided proof could be alleged against him, and the High Courts of Scotland not seeming inclined to pursue the investigation, the rumor ceased, and Macduff assumed, with great appearance of zeal, the guardianship of the young Earl of Fife and his sister, an office bequeathed to him under the hand and seal of the earl, his nephew.

The character of the Lady Isabella was formed; that of her brother, a child of eight, of course was not; and the deep, voiceless suffering her father's loss occasioned her individually was painfully heightened by the idea that to her young brother his death was an infinitely greater misfortune than to herself. He indeed knew not, felt not the agony which bound her; he knew not the void which was on her soul; how utterly, unspeakably lonely that heart had become, accustomed as it had been to repose its every thought, and hope, and wish, and feeling on a parent's love; yet notwithstanding this, her clear mind felt and saw that while for herself there was little fear that she should waver in those principles so carefully instilled, for her brother there was much, very much to dread. She did not and could not repose confidence in her kinsman; for her parent's sake she struggled to prevent dislike, to compel belief that the suavity, even kindness of his manner, the sentiments which he expressed, had their foundation in sincerity; but when her young brother became solely and entirely subject to his influence, she could no longer resist the conviction that their guardian was not the fittest person for the formation of a patriot. She could not, she would not believe the rumor which had once, but once, reached her ears, uniting the hitherto pure line of Macduff with midnight murder; her own noble mind rejected the idea as a thing utterly and wholly impossible, the more so perhaps, as she knew her father had been latterly subject to an insidious disease, baffling all the leech's art, and which he himself had often warned her would terminate suddenly; yet still an inward shuddering would cross her heart at times, when in his presence; she could not define the cause, or why she felt it sometimes and not always, and so she sought to subdue it, but she sought in vain.

Meanwhile an event approached materially connected with the Lady Isabella, and whose consummation the late Thane of Fife had earnestly prayed he might have been permitted to

hallow with his blessing. Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan and High Constable of Scotland, had been from early youth the brother in arms and dearest friend of the Earl of Fife, and in the romantic enthusiasm which ever characterized the companionship of chivalry, they had exchanged a mutual vow that in after years, should heaven grant them children, a yet nearer and dearer tie should unite their houses. The birth of Isabella, two years after that of an heir to Buchan, was hailed with increased delight by both fathers, and from her earliest years she was accustomed to look to the Lord John as her future husband. Perhaps had they been much thrown together, Isabella's high and independent spirit would have rebelled against this wish of her father, and preferred the choosing for herself; but from the ages of eleven and nine they had been separated, the Earl of Buchan sending his son, much against the advice of his friend, to England, imagining that there, and under such a knight as Prince Edward, he would better learn the noble art of war and all chivalric duties, than in the more barbarous realm of Scotland. To Isabella, then, her destined husband was a stranger; yet with a heart too young and unsophisticated to combat her parent's wishes, by any idea of its affections becoming otherwise engaged, and judging of the son by the father, to whom she was ever a welcome guest, and who in himself was indeed a noble example of chivalry and honor, Isabella neither felt nor expressed any repugnance to her father's wish, that she should sign her name to a contract of betrothal, drawn up by the venerable abbot of Buchan, and to which the name of Lord John had been already appended; it was the lingering echoes of that deep, yet gentle voice, blessing her compliance to his wishes, which thrilled again and again to her heart, softening her grief, even when that beloved voice was hushed forever, and she had no thought, no wish to recall that promise, nay, even looked to its consummation with joy, as a release from the companionship, nay, as at times she felt, the wardance of her kinsman.

But this calm and happy frame of mind was not permitted to be of long continuance. In one of the brief intervals of Macduff's absence from the castle, about eighteen months after her father's death, the young earl prevailed on the aged retainer in whose charge he had been left, to consent to his going forth to hunt the red deer, a sport of which, boy as he was, he was passionately fond. In joyous spirits, and attended by a gallant train, he set out, calling for and receiving the ready sympathy of his sister, who rejoiced as himself in his emancipation from restraint, which either was, or seemed to be, adverse to the usual treatment of noble youths.

Somewhat sooner than Isabella anticipated, they returned. Earl Duncan, with a wilfulness which already characterized him, weary of the extreme watchfulness of his attendants, who, in their anxiety to keep him from danger, checked and interfered with his boyish wish to signalize himself by some daring deed of agility and skill, at length separated himself, except from one or two as wilful, and but little older than himself. The young lord possessed all the daring of his race, but skill and foresight he needed greatly, and dearly would he have paid for his rashness. A young and fiery bull had chanced to cross his path, and disregarding the entreaties of his followers, he taunted them with cowardice, and goaded the furious animal to the encounter; too late he discovered that he had neither skill nor strength for the combat he had provoked, and had it not been for the strenuous exertions of a stranger youth, who diverted aside the fury of the beast, he must have fallen a victim to his thoughtless daring. Curiously, and almost enviously, he watched the combat between the stranger and the bull, nor did any emotion of gratitude rise in the boy's breast to soften the bitterness with which he regarded the victory of the former, which the reproaches of his retainers, who at that instant came up, and their condemnation of his folly, did not tend to diminish; and almost sullenly he passed to the rear, on their return, leaving Sir Malise Duff to make the acknowledgments, which should have come from him, and courteously invite the young stranger to accompany them home, an invitation which, somewhat to the discomposure of Earl Duncan, was accepted.

If the stranger had experienced any emotion of anger from the boy's slight of his services, the gratitude of the Lady Isabella would have banished it on the instant, and amply repaid them; with cheeks glowing, eyes glistening, and a voice quivering with suppressed emotion, she had spoken her brief yet eloquent thanks; and had he needed further proof, the embrace she lavished on her young brother, as reluctantly, and after a long interval, he entered the hall, said yet more than her broken words.

"Thou art but a fool, Isabella, craving thy pardon," was his ungracious address, as he sullenly freed himself from her. "Had I brought thee the bull's horns, there might have been some cause for this marvellously warm welcome; but as it is—"

"I joy thou wert not punished for thy rashness, Duncan. Yet 'twas not in such mood I hoped to find thee; knowest thou that 'tis to yon brave stranger thou owest thy life?"

"Better it had been forfeited, than that he should stand between me and mine honor. I thank him not for it, nor owe him aught like gratitude."

"Peace, ungrateful boy, an thou knowest not thy station better," was his sister's calm, yet dignified reply; and the stranger smiled, and by his courteous manner, speedily dismissed her fears as to the impression of her brother's words, regarding them as the mere petulance of a child.

Days passed, and still the stranger lingered; eminently handsome, his carriage peculiarly graceful, and even dignified, although it was evident, from the slight, and as it were, unfinished roundness of his figure, that he was but in the first stage of youth, yet his discourse and manner were of a kind that would bespeak him noble, even had his appearance been less convincing. According to the custom of the time, which would have deemed the questioning a guest as to his

name and family a breach of all the rules of chivalry and hospitality, he remained unknown.

"Men call me Sir Robert, though I have still my spurs to win," he had once said, laughingly, to Lady Isabella and her kinsman, Sir Malise Duff, "but I would not proclaim my birth till I may bring it honor."

A month passed ere their guest took his departure, leaving regard and regret behind him, in all, perhaps, save in the childish breast of Earl Duncan, whose sullen manner had never changed. There was a freshness and light-heartedness, and a wild spirit of daring gallantry about the stranger that fascinated, men scarce knew wherefore; a reckless independence of sentiment which charmed, from the utter absence of all affectation which it comprised. To all, save to the Lady Isabella, he was a mere boy, younger even than his years; but in conversation with her his superior mind shone forth, proving he could in truth appreciate hers, and give back intellect for intellect, feeling for feeling; perhaps her beauty and unusual endowments had left their impression upon him. However it may be, one day, one little day after the departure of Sir Robert, Isabella woke to the consciousness that the calm which had so long rested on her spirit had departed, and forever; and to what had it given place? Had she dared to love, she, the betrothed, the promised bride of another? No; she could not have sunk thus low, her heart had been too long controlled to rebel now. She might not, she would not listen to its voice, to its wild, impassioned throbs. Alas! she miscalculated her own power; the fastnesses she had deemed secure were forced; they closed upon their subtle foe, and held their conqueror prisoner.

But Isabella was not one to waver in a determination when once formed; how might she break asunder links which the dead had hallowed? She became the bride of Lord John; she sought with her whole soul to forget the past, and love him according to her bridal vow, and as time passed she ceased to think of that beautiful vision of her early youth, save as a dream that had had no resting; and a mother's fond yearnings sent their deep delicious sweetness as oil on the troubled waters of her heart. She might have done this, but unhappily she too soon discovered her husband was not one to aid her in her unsuspected task, to soothe and guide, and by his affection demand her gratitude and reverence. Enwrapped in selfishness or haughty indifference, his manner towards her ever harsh, unbending, and suspicious, Isabella's pride would have sustained her, had not her previous trial lowered her in self-esteem; but as it was, meekly and silently she bore with the continued outbreak of unrestrained passion, and never wavered from the path of duty her clear mind had laid down.

On the birth of a son, however, her mind regained its tone, and inwardly yet solemnly she vowed that no mistaken sense of duty to her husband should interfere with the education of her son. As widely opposed as were their individual characters, so were the politics of the now Earl and Countess of Buchan. Educated in England, on friendly terms with her king, he had, as the Earl of Fife anticipated, lost all nationality, all interest in Scotland, and as willingly and unconcernedly taken the vows of homage to John Baliol, as the mere representative and lieutenant of Edward, as he would have done to a free and unlimited king. He had been among the very first to vote for calling in the King of England as umpire; the most eager to second and carry out all Edward's views, and consequently high in that monarch's favor, a reputation which his enmity to the house of Bruce, one of the most troublesome competitors of the crown, did not tend to diminish. Fortunately perhaps for Isabella, the bustling politics of her husband constantly divided them. The births of a daughter and son had no effect in softening his hard and selfish temper; he looked on them more as incumbrances than pleasures, and leaving the countess in the strong Tower of Buchan, he himself, with a troop of armed and mounted Comyns, attached himself to the court and interests of Edward, seeming to forget that such beings as a wife and children had existence. Months, often years, would stretch between the earl's visits to his mountain home, and then a week was the longest period of his lingering; but no evidence of a gentler spirit or of less indifference to his children was apparent, and years seemed to have turned to positive evil, qualities which in youth had merely seemed unamiable.

Desolate as the situation of the countess might perhaps appear, she found solace and delight in moulding the young minds of her children according to the pure and elevated cast of her own. All the long-suppressed tenderness of her nature was lavished upon them, and on their innocent love she sought to rest the passionate yearnings of her own. She taught them to be patriots, in the purest, most beautiful appropriation of the term,—to spurn the yoke of the foreigner, and the oppressor, however light and flowery the links of that yoke might seem. She could not bid them love and revere their father as she longed to do, but she taught them that where their duty to their country and their free and unchained king interfered not, in all things they must obey and serve their father, and seek to win his love.

Once only had the Countess of Buchan beheld the vision which had crossed her youth. He had come, it seemed unconscious of his track, and asked hospitality for a night, evidently without knowing who was the owner of the castle; perhaps his thoughts were preoccupied, for a deep gloom was on his brow, and though he had started with evident pleasure when recognizing his beautiful hostess, the gloom speedily resumed ascendancy. It was but a few weeks after the fatal battle of Falkirk, and therefore Isabella felt there was cause enough for depression and uneasiness. The graces of boyhood had given place to a finished manliness of deportment, a calmer expression of feature, denoting that years had changed and steadied the character, even as the form. He then seemed as one laboring under painful and heavy thought, as one brooding over some mighty change within, as if some question of weighty import were struggling with recollections and visions of the past. He had spoken little, evidently shrinking in pain from all reference to or information on the late engagement. He tarried not long, departing with dawn

next day, and they did not meet again.

And what had been the emotions of the countess? perhaps her heart had throbbed, and her cheek paled and flushed, at this unexpected meeting with one she had fervently prayed never to see again; but not one feeling obtained ascendancy in that heart which she would have dreaded to unveil to the eye of her husband. She did indeed feel that had her lot been cast otherwise, it must have been a happy one, but the thought was transient. She was a wife, a mother, and in the happiness of her children, her youth, and all its joys and pangs, and dreams and hopes, were merged, to be recalled no more.

The task of instilling patriotic sentiments in the breast of her son had been insensibly aided by the countess's independent position amid the retainers of Buchan. This earldom had only been possessed by the family of Comyn since the latter years of the reign of William the Lion, passing into their family by the marriage of Margaret Countess of Buchan with Sir William Comyn, a knight of goodly favor and repute. This interpolation and ascendancy of strangers was a continual source of jealousy and ire to the ancient retainers of the olden heritage, and continually threatened to break out into open feud, had not the soothing policy of the Countess Margaret and her descendants, by continually employing them together in subjecting other petty clans, contrived to keep them in good humor. As long as their lords were loyal to Scotland and her king, and behaved so as to occasion no unpleasant comparison between them and former superiors, all went on smoothly; but the haughty and often outrageous conduct of the present earl, his utter neglect of their interests, his treasonous politics, speedily roused the slumbering fire into flame. A secret yet solemn oath went round the clan, by which every fighting man bound himself to rebel against their master, rather than betray their country by siding with a foreign tyrant; to desert their homes, their all, and disperse singly midst the fastnesses and rocks of Scotland, than lift up a sword against her freedom. The sentiments of the countess were very soon discovered; and even yet stronger than the contempt and loathing with which they looked upon the earl was the love, the veneration they bore to her and to her children. If his mother's lips had been silent, the youthful heir would have learned loyalty and patriotism from his brave though unlettered retainers, as it was to them he owed the skin and grace with which he sate his fiery steed, and poised his heavy lance, and wielded his stainless brand—to them he owed all the chivalric accomplishments of the day; and though he had never quitted the territories of Buchan, he would have found few to compete with him in his high and gallant spirit.

Dark and troubled was the political aspect of unhappy Scotland, at the eventful period at which our tale commences. The barbarous and most unjust execution of Sir William Wallace had struck the whole country as with a deadly panic, from which it seemed there was not one to rise to cast aside the heavy chains, whose weight it seemed had crushed the whole kingdom, and taken from it the last gleams of patriotism and of hope. Every fortress of strength and consequence was in possession of the English. English soldiers, English commissioners, English judges, laws, and regulations now filled and governed Scotland. The abrogation of all those ancient customs, which had descended from the Celts and Picts, and Scots, fell upon the hearts of all true Scottish men as the tearing asunder the last links of freedom, and branding them as slaves. Her principal nobles, strangely and traitorously, preferred safety and wealth, in the acknowledgment and servitude of Edward, to glory and honor in the service of their country; and the spirits of the middle ranks yet spurned the inglorious yoke, and throbbed but for one to lead them on, if not to victory, at least to an honorable death. That one seemed not to rise; it was as if the mighty soul of Scotland had departed, when Wallace slept in death.

CHAPTER III.

A bustling and joyous aspect did the ancient town of Scone present near the end of March, 1306. Subdued indeed, and evidently under some restraint and mystery, which might be accounted for by the near vicinity of the English, who were quartered in large numbers over almost the whole of Perthshire; some, however, appeared exempt from these most unwelcome guests. The nobles, esquires, yeomen, and peasants—all, by their national garb and eager yet suppressed voices, might be known at once as Scotsmen right and true.

It had been long, very long since the old quiet town had witnessed such busy groups and such eager tongues as on all sides thronged it now; the very burghers and men of handicraft wore on their countenances tokens of something momentous. There were smiths' shops opening on every side, armorers at work, anvils clanging, spears sharpening, shields burnishing, bits and steel saddles and sharp spurs meeting the eye at every turn. Ever and anon, came a burst of enlivening music, and well mounted and gallantly attired, attended by some twenty or fifty followers, as may be, would gallop down some knight or noble, his armor flashing back a hundred fold the rays of the setting sun; his silken pennon displayed, the device of which seldom failed to excite a hearty cheer from the excited crowds; his stainless shield and heavy spear borne by his attendant esquires; his vizor up, as if he courted and dared recognition; his surcoat, curiously and tastefully embroidered; his gold or silver-sheathed and hilted sword suspended by the silken sash of many folds and brilliant coloring. On foot or on horseback, these noble cavaliers were continually passing and repassing the ancient streets, singly or in groups; then there were their followers, all carefully and strictly armed, in the buff coat plaited with steel, the well-quilted bonnet, the huge broadsword; Highlanders in their peculiar and graceful costume; even the stout farmers, who

might also be found amongst this motley assemblage, wearing the iron hauberk and sharp sword beneath their apparently peaceful garb. Friars in their gray frocks and black cowls, and stately burghers and magistrates, in their velvet cloaks and gold chains, continually mingled their peaceful forms with their more warlike brethren, and lent a yet more varied character to the stirring picture.

Varied as were the features of this moving multitude, the expression on every countenance, noble and follower, yeoman and peasant, burgher and even monk, was invariably the same—a species of strong yet suppressed excitement, sometimes shaded by anxiety, sometimes lighted by hope, almost amounting to triumph; sometimes the dark frown of scorn and hate would pass like a thunder-cloud over noble brows, and the mailed hand unconsciously clutched the sword; and then the low thrilling laugh of derisive contempt would disperse the shade, and the muttered oath of vengeance drown the voice of execration. It would have been a strange yet mighty study, the face of man in that old town; but men were all too much excited to observe their fellows, to them it was enough—unspoken, unimparted wisdom as it was—to know, to feel, one common feeling bound that varied mass of men, one mighty interest made them brothers.

The ancient Palace of Scone, so long unused, was now evidently the head-quarters of the noblemen hovering about the town, for whatever purpose they were there assembled. The heavy flag of Scotland, in all its massive quarterings, as the symbol of a free unfettered kingdom, waved from the centre tower; archers and spearmen lined the courts, sentinels were at their posts, giving and receiving the watchword from all who passed and repassed the heavy gates, which from dawn till nightfall were flung wide open, as if the inmates of that regal dwelling were ever ready to receive their friends, and feared not the approach of foes.

The sun, though sinking, was still bright, when the slow and dignified approach of the venerable abbot of Scone occasioned some stir and bustle amidst the joyous occupants of the palace yard; the wild joke was hushed, the noisy brawl subsided, the games of quoit and hurling the bar a while suspended, and the silence of unaffected reverence awaited the good old man's approach and kindly-given benediction. Leaving his attendants in one of the lower rooms, the abbot proceeded up the massive stone staircase, and along a broad and lengthy passage, darkly panelled with thick oak, then pushing aside some heavy arras, stood within one of the state chambers, and gave his fervent benison on one within. This was a man in the earliest and freshest prime of life, that period uniting all the grace and beauty of youth with the mature thought, and steady wisdom, and calmer views of manhood. That he was of noble birth and blood and training one glance sufficed; peculiarly and gloriously distinguished in the quiet majesty of his figure, in the mild attempered gravity of his commanding features. Nature herself seemed to have marked him out for the distinguished part it was his to play. Already there were lines of thought upon the clear and open brow, and round the mouth; and the blue eye shone with that calm, steady lustre, which seldom comes till the changeful fire and wild visions of dreamy youth have departed. His hair, of rich and glossy brown, fell in loose natural curls on either side his face, somewhat lower than his throat, shading his cheeks, which, rather pale than otherwise, added to the somewhat grave aspect of his countenance; his armor of steel, richly and curiously inlaid with burnished gold, sat lightly and easily upon his peculiarly tall and manly figure; a sash, of azure silk and gold, suspended his sword, whose sheath was in unison with the rest of his armor, though the hilt was studded with gems. His collar was also of gold, as were his gauntlets, which with his helmet rested on a table near him; a coronet of plain gold surmounted his helmet, and on his surcoat, which lay on a seat at the further end of the room, might be discerned the rampant lion of Scotland, surmounted by a crown.

The apartment in which he stood, though shorn of much of that splendor which, ere the usurping invasion of Edward of England, had distinguished it, still bore evidence of being a chamber of some state. The hangings were of dark-green velvet embroidered, and with a very broad fringe of gold; drapery of the same costly material adorned the broad casements, which stood in heavy frames of oak, black as ebony. Large folding-doors, with panels of the same beautiful material, richly carved, opened into an ante-chamber, and thence to the grand staircase and more public parts of the building. In this ante-chamber were now assembled pages, esquires, and other officers bespeaking a royal household, though much less numerous than is generally the case.

"Sir Edward and the young Lord of Douglas have not returned, sayest thou, good Athelbert? Knowest thou when and for what went they forth?" were the words which were spoken by the noble we have described, as the abbot entered, unperceived at first, from his having avoided the public entrance to the state rooms; they were addressed to an esquire, who, with cap in hand and head somewhat lowered, respectfully awaited the commands of his master.

"They said not the direction of their course, my liege; 'tis thought to reconnoitre either the movements of the English, or to ascertain the cause of the delay of the Lord of Fife. They departed at sunrise, with but few followers."

"On but a useless errand, good Athelbert, methinks, an they hope to greet Earl Duncan, save with a host of English at his back. Bid Sir Edward hither, should he return ere nightfall, and see to the instant delivery of those papers; I fear me, the good lord bishop has waited for them; and stay—Sir Robert Keith, hath he not yet returned?"

"No, good my lord."

"Ha! he tarrieth long," answered the noble, musingly. "Now heaven forefend no evil hath befallen him; but to thy mission, Athelbert, I must not detain thee with doubts and cavil. Ha! reverend

father, right welcome," he added, perceiving him as he turned again to the table, on the esquire reverentially withdrawing from his presence, and bending his head humbly in acknowledgment of the abbot's benediction. "Thou findest me busied as usual. Seest thou," he pointed to a rough map of Scotland lying before him, curiously intersected with mystic lines and crosses, "Edinburgh, Berwick, Roxburgh, Lanark, Stirling, Dumbarton, in the power of, nay peopled, by English. Argyle on the west, Elgin, Aberdeen, with Banff eastward, teeming with proud, false Scots, hereditary foes to the Bruce, false traitors to their land; the north—why, 'tis the same foul tale; and yet I dare to raise my banner, dare to wear the crown, and fling defiance in the teeth of all. What sayest thou, father—is't not a madman's deed?"

All appearance of gravity vanished from his features as he spoke. His eye, seemingly so mild, flashed till its very color could not have been distinguished, his cheek glowed, his lip curled, and his voice, ever peculiarly rich and sonorous, deepened with the excitement of soul.

"Were the fate of man in his own hands, were it his and his alone to make or mar his destiny, I should e'en proclaim thee mad, my son, and seek to turn thee from thy desperate purpose; but it is not so. Man is but an instrument, and He who urged thee to this deed, who wills not this poor land to rest enslaved, will give thee strength and wisdom for its freedom. His ways are not as man's; and circled as thou seemest with foes, His strength shall bring thee forth and gird thee with His glory. Thou wouldst not turn aside, my son—thou fearest not thy foes?"

"Fear! holy father: it is a word unknown to the children of the Bruce! I do but smile at mine extensive kingdom—of some hundred acres square; smile at the eagerness with which they greet me liege and king, as if the words, so long unused, should now do double duty for long absence."

"And better so, my son," answered the old man, cheerfully. "Devotion to her destined savior argues well for bonny Scotland; better do homage unto thee as liege and king, though usurpation hath abridged thy kingdom, than to the hireling of England's Edward, all Scotland at his feet. Men will not kneel to sceptred slaves, nor freemen fight for tyrants' tools. Sovereign of Scotland thou art, thou shalt be, Robert the Bruce! Too long hast thou kept back; but now, if arms can fight and hearts can pray, thou shalt be king of Scotland."

The abbot spoke with a fervor, a spirit which, though perhaps little accordant with his clerical character, thrilled to the Bruce's heart. He grasped the old man's hand.

"Holy father," he said, "thou wouldst inspire hearts with ardor needing inspiration more than mine; and to me thou givest hope, and confidence, and strength. Too long have I slept and dreamed," his countenance darkened, and his voice was sadder; "fickle in purpose, uncertain in accomplishment; permitting my youth to moulder 'neath the blasting atmosphere of tyranny. Yet will I now atone for the neglected past. Atone! aye, banish it from the minds of men. My country hath a claim, a double claim upon me; she calls upon me, trumpet-tongued, to arise, avenge her, and redeem my misspent youth. Nor shall she call on me in vain, so help me, gracious heaven!"

"Amen," fervently responded the abbot; and the king continued more hurriedly—

"And that stain, that blot, father? Is there mercy in heaven to wash its darkness from my soul, or must it linger there forever preying on my spirit, dashing e'en its highest hopes and noblest dreams with poison, whispering its still voice of accusation, even when loudest rings the praise and love of men? Is there no rest for this, no silence for that whisper? Penitence, atonement, any thing thou wilt, let but my soul be free!" Hastily, and with step and countenance disordered, he traversed the chamber, his expressive countenance denoting the strife within.

"It was, in truth, a rash and guilty deed, my son," answered the abbot, gravely, yet mildly, "and one that heaven in its justice will scarce pass unavenged. Man hath given thee the absolution accorded to the true and faithful penitent, for such thou art; yet scarcely dare we hope offended heaven is appeased. Justice will visit thee with trouble—sore, oppressing, grievous trouble. Yet despair not: thou wilt come forth the purer, nobler, brighter, from the fire; despair not, but as a child receive a father's chastening; lean upon that love, which wills not death, but penitence and life; that love, which yet will bring thee forth and bless this land in thee. My son, be comforted; His mercy is yet greater than thy sin."

"And blest art thou, my father, for these *blessed* words; a messenger in truth thou art of peace and love; and oh, if prayers and penitence avail, if sore temptation may be pleaded, I shall, I shall be pardoned. Yet would I give my dearest hopes of life, of fame, of all—save Scotland's freedom—that this evil had not chanced; that blood, his blood—base traitor as he was—was not upon my hand."

"And can it be thou art such craven, Robert, as to repent a Comyn's death—a Comyn, and a traitor—e'en though his dastard blood be on thy hand?—bah! An' such deeds weigh heavy on thy mind, a friar's cowl were better suited to thy brow than Scotland's diadem."

The speaker was a tall, powerful man, somewhat younger in appearance than the king, but with an expression of fierceness and haughty pride, contrasting powerfully with the benevolent and native dignity which so characterized the Bruce. His voice was as harsh as his manner was abrupt; yet that he was brave, nay, rash in his unthinking daring, a very transient glance would suffice to discover.

"I forgive thee thine undeserved taunt, Edward," answered the king, calmly, though the hot blood rushed up to his cheek and brow. "I trust, ere long, to prove thy words are as idle as the mood

which prompted them. I feel not that repentance cools the patriot fire which urges me to strike for Scotland's weal—that sorrow for a hated crime unfits me for a warrior. I would not Comyn lived, but that he had met a traitor's fate by other hands than mine; been judged—condemned, as his black treachery called for; even for our country's sake, it had been better thus."

"Thou art over-scrupulous, my liege and brother, and I too hasty," replied Sir Edward Bruce, in the same bold, careless tone. "Yet beshrew me, but I think that in these times a sudden blow and hasty fate the only judgment for a traitor. The miscreant were too richly honored, that by thy royal hand he fell."

"My son, my son, I pray thee, peace," urged the abbot, in accents of calm, yet grave authority. "As minister of heaven, I may not list such words. Bend not thy brow in wrath, clad as thou art in mail, in youthful might; yet in my Maker's cause this withered frame is stronger yet than thou art. Enough of that which hath been. Thy sovereign spoke in lowly penitence to me—to me, who frail and lowly unto thee, am yet the minister of Him whom sin offends. To thee he stands a warrior and a king, who rude irreverence may brook not, even from his brother. Be peace between us, then, my son; an old man's blessing on thy fierce yet knightly spirit rest."

With a muttered oath Sir Edward had strode away at the abbot's first words, but the cloud passed from his brow as he concluded, and slightly, yet with something of reverence, he bowed his head.

"And whither didst thou wend thy way, my fiery brother?" demanded Robert. "Bringest thou aught of news, or didst thou and Douglas but set foot in stirrup and hand on rein simply from weariness of quiet?"

"In sober truth, 'twas even so; partly to mark the movements of the English, as they make a movement, which, till Pembroke come, they are all too much amazed to do; partly to see if in truth that poltroon Duncan of Fife yet hangs back and still persists in forswearing the loyalty of his ancestors, and leaving to better hands the proud task of placing the crown of Scotland on thy head."

"And thou art convinced at last that such and such only is his intention?" The knight nodded assent, and Bruce continued, jestingly, "And so thou mightst have been long ago, my sage brother, hadst thou listened to me. I tell thee Earl Duncan hath a spite against me, not for daring to raise the standard of freedom and proclaim myself a king, but for very hatred of myself. Nay, hast thou not seen it thyself, when, fellow-soldiers, fellow-seekers of the banquet, tourney, or ball, he hath avoided, shunned me? and why should he seek me now?"

"Why? does not Scotland call him, Scotland bid him gird his sword and don his mail? Will not the dim spectres of his loyal line start from their very tombs to call him to thy side, or brand him traitor and poltroon, with naught of Duff about him but the name? Thou smilest."

"At thy violence, good brother. Duncan of Fife loves better the silken cords of peace and pleasure, e'en though those silken threads hide chains, than the trumpet's voice and weight of mail. In England bred, courted, flattered by her king, 'twere much too sore a trouble to excite his anger and lose his favor; and for whom, for what?—to crown the man he hateth from his soul?"

"And knowest thou wherefore, good my son, in what thou hast offended?"

"Offended, holy father? Nay, in naught unless perchance a service rendered when a boy—a simple service, merely that of saving life—hath rendered him the touchy fool he is. But hark! who comes?"

The tramping of many horses, mingled with the eager voices of men, resounded from the courtyard as he spoke, and Sir Edward strode hastily to the casement. "Sir Robert Keith returned!" he exclaimed, joyfully; "and seemingly right well attended. Litters too—bah! we want no more women. 'Tis somewhat new for Keith to be a squire of dames. Why, what banner is this? The black bear of Buchan—impossible! the earl is a foul Comyn. I'll to the court, for this passes my poor wits." He turned hastily to quit the chamber, as a youth entered, not without some opposition, it appeared, from the attendants without, but eagerly he had burst through them, and flung his plumed helmet from his beautiful brow, and, after glancing hastily round the room, bounded to the side of Robert, knelt at his feet, and clasped his knees without uttering a syllable, voiceless from an emotion whose index was stamped upon his glowing features.

"Nigel, by all that's marvellous, and as moon-stricken as his wont! Why, where the foul fiend hast thou sprung from? Art dumb, thou foolish boy? By St. Andrew, these are times to act and speak, not think and feel! Whence comest thou?"

So spoke the impatient Edward, to whom the character of his youngest brother had ever been a riddle, which it had been too much trouble to expound, and that which it *seemed* to his too careless thought he ever looked upon with scorn and contempt. Not so, King Robert; he raised him affectionately in his arms, and pressed him to his heart.

"Thou'rt welcome, most, most welcome, Nigel; as welcome as unlooked for. But why this quick return from scenes and studies more congenial to thy gentle nature, my young brother? this fettered land is scarce a home for thee; thy free, thy fond imaginings can scarce have resting here." He spoke sadly, and his smile unwittingly was sorrowful.

"And thinkest thou, Robert—nay, forgive me, good my liege—thinkest thou, because I loved the poet's dream, because I turned, in sad and lonely musing, from King Edward's court, I loved the

cloister better than the camp? Oh, do me not such wrong! thou knowest not the guidings of my heart; nor needs it now, my sword shall better plead my cause than can my tongue." He turned away deeply and evidently pained, and a half laugh from Sir Edward prevented the king's reply.

"Well crowed, my pretty fledgling," he said, half jesting, half in scorn. "But knowest thou, to fight in very earnest is something different than to read and chant it in a minstrel's lay? Better hie thee back to Florence, boy; the mail suit and crested helm are not for such as thee—better shun them now, than after they are donned."

"How! darest thou, Edward? Edward, tempt me not too far," exclaimed Nigel, his cheek flushing, and springing towards him, his hand upon his half-drawn sword. "By heaven, wert thou not my mother's son, I would compel thee to retract these words, injurious, unjust! How darest thou judge me coward, till my cowardice is proved? Thy blood is not more red than mine."

"Peace, peace! what meaneth this unseemly broil?" said Robert, hastily advancing between them, for the dark features of Edward were lowering in wrath, and Nigel was excited to unwonted fierceness. "Edward, begone! and as thou saidst, see to Sir Robert Keith—what news he brings. Nigel, on thy love, thy allegiance so lately proffered, if I read thy greeting right, I pray thee heed not his taunting words. I do not doubt thee; 'twas for thy happiness, not for thy gallantry, I trembled. Look not thus dejected;" he held out his hand, which his brother knelt to salute. "Nay, nay, thou foolish boy, forget my new dignity a while, and now that rude brawler has departed, tell me in sober wisdom, how camest thou here? How didst thou know I might have need of thee?" A quick blush suffused the cheek of the young man; he hesitated, evidently confused. "Why, what ails thee, boy? By St. Andrew, Nigel, I do believe thou hast never quitted Scotland."

"And if I have not, my lord, what wilt thou deem me?"

"A very strangely wayward boy, not knowing his own mind," replied the king, smiling. "Yet why should I say so? I never asked thy confidence, never sought it, or in any way returned or appreciated thy boyish love, and why should I deem thee wayward, never inquiring into thy projects—passing thee by, perchance, as a wild visionary, much happier than myself?"

"And thou wilt think me yet more a visionary, I fear me, Robert; yet thine interest is too dear to pass unanswered," rejoined Nigel, after glancing round and perceiving they were alone, for the abbot had departed with Sir Edward, seeking to tame his reckless spirit.

"Know, then, to aid me in keeping aloof from the tyrant of my country, whom instinctively I hated, I confined myself to books and such lore yet more than my natural inclination prompted, though that was strong enough—I had made a solemn vow, rather to take the monk's cowl and frock, than receive knighthood from the hand of Edward of England, or raise my sword at his bidding. My whole soul yearned towards the country of my fathers, that country which was theirs by royal right; and when the renown of Wallace reached my ears, when, in my waking and sleeping dreams, I beheld the patriot struggling for freedom, peace, the only one whose arm had struck for Scotland, whose tongue had dared to speak resistance, I longed wildly, intensely, vainly, to burst the thralldom which held my race, and seek for death beneath the patriot banner. I longed, yet dared not. My own death were welcome; but mother, father, brothers, sisters, all were perilled, had I done so. I stood, I deemed, alone in my enthusiast dreams; those I loved best, acknowledged, bowed before the man my very spirit loathed; and how dared I, a boy, a child, stand forth arraigning and condemning? But wherefore art thou thus, Robert? oh, what has thus moved thee?"

Wrapped in his own earnest words and thoughts, Nigel had failed until that moment to perceive the effect of his words upon his brother. Robert's head had sunk upon his hand, and his whole frame shook beneath some strong emotion; evidently striving to subdue it, some moments elapsed ere he could reply, and then only in accents of bitter self-reproach. "Why, why did not such thoughts come to me, instead of thee?" he said. "My youth had not wasted then in idle folly—worse, oh, worse—in slavish homage, coward indecision, flitting like the moth around the destructive flame; and while I deemed thee buried in romantic dreams, all a patriot's blood was rushing in thy veins, while mine was dull and stagnant."

"But to flow forth the brighter, my own brother," interrupted Nigel, earnestly. "Oh, I have watched thee, studied thee, even as I loved thee, long; and I have hoped, felt, *known* that this day would dawn; that thou *wouldst* rise for Scotland, and she would rise for thee. Ah, now thou smilest as thyself, and I will to my tale. The patriot died—let me not utter how; no Scottish tongue should speak those words, save with the upraised arm and trumpet shout of vengeance! I could not rest in England then; I could not face the tyrant who dared proclaim and execute as traitor the noblest hero, purest patriot, that ever walked this earth. But men said I sought the lyric schools, the poet's haunts in Provence, and I welcomed the delusion; but it was to Scotland that I came, unknown, and silently, to mark if with her Wallace all life and soul had fled. I saw enough to know that were there but a fitting head, her hardy sons would struggle yet for freedom—but not yet; that chief art thou, and at the close of the last year I took passage to Denmark, intending to rest there till Scotland called me."

"And 'tis thence thou comest, Nigel? Can it be, intelligence of my movements hath reached so far north already?" inquired the king, somewhat surprised at the abruptness of his brother's pause.

"Not so, my liege. The vessel which bore me was wrecked off the breakers of Buchan, and cast me back again to the arms of Scotland. I found hospitality, shelter, kindness; nay more, were this a time and place to speak of happy, trusting love—" he added, turning away from the Bruce's

penetrating eye, "and week after week passed, and found me still an inmate of the Tower of Buchan."

"Buchan!" interrupted the king, hastily; "the castle of a Comyn, and thou speakest of love!"

"Of as true, as firm-hearted a Scottish patriot, my liege, as ever lived in the heart of woman—one that has naught of Comyn about her or her fair children but the name, as speedily thou wilt have proof. But in good time is my tale come to a close, for hither comes good Sir Robert, and other noble knights, who, by their eager brows, methinks, have matters of graver import for thy grace's ear."

They entered as he spoke. The patriot nobles who, at the first call of their rightful king, had gathered round his person, few in number, yet firm in heart, ready to lay down fame, fortune, life, beside his standard, rather than acknowledge the foreign foe, who, setting aside all principles of knightly honor, knightly faith, sought to claim their country as his own, their persons as his slaves. Eager was the greeting of each and all to the youthful Nigel, mingled with some surprise. Their conference with the king was but brief, and as it comprised matters more of speculation than of decided import, we will pass on to a later period of the same evening.

CHAPTER IV.

"Buchan! the Countess of Buchan, sayest thou, Athelbert? nay, 'tis scarce possible," said a fair and noble-looking woman, still in the bloom of life, though early youth had passed, pausing on her way to the queen's apartment, to answer some information given by the senior page.

"Indeed, madam, 'tis even so; she arrived but now, escorted by Sir Robert Keith and his followers, in addition to some fifty of the retainers of Buchan."

"And hath she lodging within the palace?"

"Yes, madam; an it please you, I will conduct you to her, 'tis but a step beyond the royal suite."

She made him a sign of assent, and followed him slowly, as if musingly.

"It is strange, it is very strange," she thought, "yet scarcely so; she was ever in heart and soul a patriot, nor has she seen enough of her husband to change such sentiments. Yet, for her own sake, perchance it had been better had she not taken this rash step; 'tis a desperate game we play, and the fewer lives and fortunes wrecked the better."

Her cogitations were interrupted by hearing her name announced in a loud voice by the page, and finding herself in presence of the object of her thoughts.

"Isabella, dearest Isabella, 'tis even thine own dear self. I deemed the boy's tale well-nigh impossible," was her hasty exclamation, as with a much quicker step she advanced towards the countess, who met her half-way, and warmly returned her embrace, saying as she did so—

"This is kind, indeed, dearest Mary, to welcome me so soon; 'tis long, long years since we have met; but they have left as faint a shadow on thy affections as on mine."

"Indeed, thou judgest me truly, Isabella. Sorrow, methinks, doth but soften the heart and render the memory of young affections, youthful pleasures, the more vivid, the more lasting; we think of what we have been, or what we are, and the contrast heightens into perfect bliss that which at the time, perchance, we deemed but perishable joy."

"Hast thou too learnt such lesson, Mary? I hoped its lore was all unknown to thee."

"It was, indeed, deferred so long, so blessedly, I dared to picture perfect happiness on earth; but since my husband's hateful captivity, Isabella, there can be little for his wife but anxiety and dread. But these—are these thine?" she added, gazing admiringly and tearfully on Agnes and Alan, who had at their mother's sign advanced from the embrasure, where they had held low yet earnest converse, and gracefully acknowledged the stranger's notice. "Oh, wherefore bring them here, my friend?"

"Wherefore, lady?" readily and impetuously answered Alan; "art thou a friend of Isabella of Buchan, and asketh wherefore? Where our sovereign is, should not his subjects be?"

"Thy mother's friend and sovereign's sister, noble boy, and yet I grieve to see thee here. The Bruce is but in name a king, uncrowned as yet and unanointed. His kingdom bounded by the confines of this one fair county, struggling for every acre at the bright sword's point."

"The greater glory for his subjects, lady," answered the youth. "The very act of proclaiming himself king removes the chains of Scotland, and flings down her gage. Fear not, he shall be king ere long in something more than name."

"And is it thus a Comyn speaks?" said the Lady Campbell. "Ah, were the idle feuds of petty minds thus laid at rest, bold boy, thy dreams might e'en be truth; but knowest thou, young man—knowest thou, Isabella, the breach between the Comyn and the Bruce is widened, and, alas! by blood?"

"Aye, lady; but what boots it? A traitor should have no name, no kin, or those who bear that name should wash away their race's stain by nobler deeds of loyalty and valor."

"It would be well did others think with thee," replied Lady Campbell; "yet I fear me in such sentiments the grandson of the loyal Fife will stand alone. Isabella, dearest Isabella," she added, laying her hand on the arm of the countess, and drawing her away from her children, "hast thou done well in this decision? hast thou listened to the calmer voice of prudence as was thy wont? hast thou thought on all the evils thou mayest draw upon thy head, and upon these, so lovely and so dear?"

"Mary, I have thought, weighed, pondered, and yet I am here," answered the countess, firmly, yet in an accent that still bespoke some inward struggle. "I know, I feel all, all that thou wouldst urge; that I am exposing my brave boy to death, perchance, by a father's hand, bringing him hither to swear fealty, to raise his sword for the Bruce, in direct opposition to my husband's politics, still more to his will; yet, Mary, there are mutual duties between a parent and a child. My poor boy has ever from his birth been fatherless. No kindly word, no glowing smile has ever met his infancy, his boyhood. He scarce can know his father—the love, the reverence of a son it would have been such joy to teach. Left to my sole care, could I instil sentiments other than those a father's lips bestowed on me? Could I instruct him in aught save love, devotion to his country, to her rights, her king? I have done this so gradually, my friend, that for the burst of loyalty, of impetuous gallantry, which answered Sir Robert Keith's appeal, I was well nigh unprepared. My father, my noble father breathes in my boy; and oh, Mary, better, better far lose him on the battle-field, struggling for Scotland's freedom, glorying in his fate, rejoicing, blessing me for lessons I have taught, than see him as my husband, as my brother—alas! alas! that I should live to say it—cringing as slaves before the footstool of a tyrant and oppressor. Had he sought it, had he loved—treated me as a wife, Mary, I would have given my husband all—all a woman's duty—all, save the dictates of my soul, but even this he trampled on, despised, rejected; and shall I, dare I then forget, oppose the precepts of that noble heart, that patriot spirit which breathed into mine the faint reflection of itself?—offend the dead, the hallowed dead, my father—the heart that loved me?"

She paused, in strong, and for the moment overpowering, emotion. The clear, rich tones had never faltered till she spoke of him beloved even in death—faltered not, even when she spoke of death as the portion of her child; it was but the quivering of lip and eye by which the anguish of that thought could have been ascertained. Lady Campbell clasped her hand.

"Thou hast in very truth silenced me, my Isabella," she said; "there is no combating with thoughts as these. Thine is still the same noble soul, exalted mind that I knew in youth: sorrow and time have had no power on these."

"Save to chasten and to purify, I trust," rejoined the countess, in her own calm tone. "Thrown back upon my own strength, it must have gathered force, dear Mary, or have perished altogether. But thou speakest, methinks, but too despondingly of our sovereign's prospects—are they indeed so desperate?"

"Desperate, indeed, Isabella. Even his own family, with the sole exception of that rash madman, Edward, must look upon it thus. How thinkest thou Edward of England will brook this daring act of defiance, of what he will deem rank apostasy and traitorous rebellion? Aged, infirm as he is now, he will not permit this bold attempt to pass unpunished. The whole strength of England will be gathered together, and pour its devastating fury on this devoted land. And what to this has Robert to oppose? Were he undisputed sovereign of Scotland, we might, without cowardice, be permitted to tremble, threatened as he is; but confined, surrounded by English, with scarce a town or fort to call his own, his enterprise is madness, Isabella, patriotic as it may be."

"Oh, do not say so, Mary. Has he not some noble barons already by his side? will not, nay, is not Scotland rising to support him? hath he not the hearts, the prayers, the swords of all whose mountain homes and freeborn rights are dearer than the yoke of Edward? and hath he not, if rumor speaks aright, within himself a host—not mere valor alone, but prudence, foresight, military skill—all, all that marks a general?"

"As rumor speaks. Thou dost not know him then?" inquired Lady Campbell.

"How could I, dearest? Hast thou forgotten thy anxiety that we should meet, when we were last together, holding at naught, in thy merry mood, my betrothment to Lord John—that I should turn him from his wandering ways, and make him patriotic as myself? Thou seest, Mary, thy brother needed not such influence."

"Of a truth, no," answered her friend; "for his present partner is a very contrast to thyself, and would rather, by her weak and trembling fears, dissuade him from his purpose than inspire and encourage it. Well do I remember that fancy of my happy childhood, and still I wish it had been so, all idle as it seems—strange that ye never met."

"Nay, save thyself, Mary, thy family resided more in England than in Scotland, and for the last seventeen years the territory of Buchan has been my only home, with little interruption to my solitude; yet I have heard much of late of the Earl of Carrick, and from whom thinkest thou?—thou canst not guess—even from thy noble brother Nigel."

"Nigel!" repeated Lady Mary, much surprised.

"Even so, sweet sister, learning dearer lore and lovelier tales than even Provence could instil; 'tis not the land, it is the *heart* where poesie dwells," rejoined Nigel Bruce, gayly, advancing from the side of Agnes, where he had been lingering the greater part of the dialogue between his sister and the countess, and now joined them. "Aye, Mary," he continued, tenderly, "my own land is dearer than the land of song."

"And dear art thou to Scotland, Nigel; but I knew not thy fond dreams and wild visions could find resting amid the desert crags and barren plains of Buchan."

"Yet have we not been idle. Dearest Agnes, wilt thou not speak for me? the viol hath not been mute, nor the fond harp unstrung; and deeper, dearer lessons have thy lips instilled, than could have flowed from fairest lips and sweetest songs of Provence. Nay, blush not, dearest. Mary, thou must love this gentle girl," he added, as he led her forward, and laid the hand of Agnes in his sister's.

"Is it so? then may we indeed be united, though not as I in my girlhood dreamed, my Isabella," said Lady Campbell, kindly parting the clustering curls, and looking fondly on the maiden's blushing face. She was about to speak again, when steps were heard along the corridor, and unannounced, unattended, save by the single page who drew aside the hangings, King Robert entered. He had doffed the armor in which we saw him first, for a plain yet rich suit of dark green velvet, cut and slashed with cloth of gold, and a long mantle of the richest crimson, secured at his throat by a massive golden clasp, from which gleamed the glistening rays of a large emerald; a brooch of precious stones, surrounded by diamonds, clasped the white ostrich feather in his cup, and the shade of the drooping plume, heightened perhaps by the advance of evening, somewhat obscured his features, but there was that in his majestic mien, in the noble yet dignified bearing, which could not for one moment be mistaken; and it needed not the word of Nigel to cause the youthful Alan to spring from the couch where he had listlessly thrown himself, and stand, suddenly silenced and abashed.

"My liege and brother," exclaimed Lady Campbell, eagerly, as she hastily led forward the Countess of Buchan, who sunk at once on her knee, overpowered by the emotion of a patriot, thinking only of her country, only of her sovereign, as one inspired by heaven to attempt her rescue, and give her freedom. "How glad am I that it has fallen on me to present to your grace, in the noble Countess of Buchan, the chosen friend of my girlhood, the only descendant of the line of Macduff worthy to bear that name. Allied as unhappily she is to the family of Comyn, yet still, still most truly, gloriously, a patriot and loyal subject of your grace, as her being here, with all she holds most dear, most precious upon earth, will prove far better than her friend's poor words."

"Were they most rich in eloquence, Mary, believe me, we yet should need them not, in confirmation of this most noble lady's faithfulness and worth," answered the king, with ready courtesy, and in accents that were only too familiar to the ear of Isabella. She started, and gazed up for the first time, seeing fully the countenance of the sovereign. "Rise, lady, we do beseech you, rise; we are not yet so familiar with the forms of royalty as to behold without some shame a noble lady at our feet. Nay, thou art pale, very pale; thy coming hither hath been too rapid, too hurried for thy strength, methinks; I do beseech you, sit." Gently he raised her, and leading her gallantly to one of the cumbrous couches near them, placed her upon it, and sat down beside her. "Ha! that is well; thou art better now. Knowest thou, Mary, thine office would have been more wisely performed, hadst thou presented *me* to the Countess of Buchan, not her to me."

"Thou speakest darkly, good my liege, yet I joy to see thee thus jestingly inclined."

"Nay, 'tis no jest, fair sister; the Countess of Buchan and I have met before, though she knew me but as a wild, heedless stripling first, and a moody, discontented soldier afterwards. I owe thee much, gentle lady; much for the night's lodging thy hospitality bestowed, though at the time my mood was such it had no words of courtesy, no softening fancy, even to thyself; much for the kindness thou didst bestow, not only then, but when fate first threw us together; and therefore do I seek thee, lady—therefore would I speak to thee, as the friend of former years, not as the sovereign of Scotland, and as such received by thee." He spoke gravely, with somewhat of sadness in his rich voice. Perhaps it was well for the countess no other answer than a grateful bow was needed, for the sudden faintness which had withdrawn the color from her cheek yet lingered, sufficient to render the exertion of speaking painful.

"Yet pause one moment, my liege," said Nigel, playfully leading Alan forward; "give me one moment, ere you fling aside your kingly state. Here is a young soldier, longing to rush into the very thickest of a fight that may win a golden spur and receive knighthood at your grace's hand; a doughty spokesman, who was to say a marvellously long speech of duty, homage, and such like, but whose tongue at sight of thee has turned traitor to its cause. Have mercy on him, good my liege; I'll answer that his arm is less a traitor than his tongue."

"We do not doubt it, Nigel, and will accept thy words for his. Be satisfied, young sir, the willing homage of all true men is precious to King Robert. And thou, fair maiden, wilt thou, too, follow thy monarch's fortunes, cloudy though they seem? we read thine answer in thy blushing cheek, and thus we thank thee, maiden."

He threw aside his plumed cap, and gallantly yet respectfully saluted the fair, soft cheek; confused yet pleased, Agnes looked doubtfully towards Nigel, who, smiling a happy, trusting, joyous smile, led her a few minutes apart, whispered some fond words, raised her hand to his

lips, and summoning Alan, they left the room together.

"Sir Robert Keith informs me, noble lady," said the king, again addressing Isabella, "that it is your determination to represent, in your own proper person, the ancient line of Duff at the approaching ceremony, and demand from our hands, as such representative, the privilege granted by King Malcolm to your noble ancestor and his descendants, of placing on the sovereign's brow the coronet of Scotland. Is it not so?"

"I do indeed most earnestly demand this privilege, my gracious liege," answered the countess, firmly; "demand it as a right, a glorious right, made mine by the weak and fickle conduct of my brother. Alas! the only male descendant of that line which until now hath never known a traitor."

"But hast thou well considered, lady? There is danger in this act, danger even to thyself."

"My liege, that there is danger threatening all the patriots of Scotland, monarch or serf, male or female, I well know; yet in what does it threaten me more in this act, than in the mere acknowledgment of the Earl of Carrick as my sovereign?"

"It will excite the rage of Edward of England against thyself individually, lady; I know him well, only too well. All who join in giving countenance and aid to my inauguration will be proclaimed, hunted, placed under the ban of traitors, and, if unfortunately taken, will in all probability share the fate of Wallace." His voice became husky with strong emotion. "There is no exception in his sweeping tyranny; youth and age, noble and serf, of either sex, of either land, if they raise the sword for Bruce and freedom, will fall by the hangman's cord or headsman's axe; and I, alas! must look on and bear, for I have neither men nor power to avert such fate; and that hand which places on my head the crown, death, death, a cruel death, will be the doom of its patriot owner. Think, think on this, and oh, retract thy noble resolution, ere it be too late."

"Is she who gives the crown in greater danger, good my liege, than he who wears it?" demanded the countess, with a calm and quiet smile.

"Nay," he answered, smiling likewise for the moment, "but I were worse than traitor, did I shrink from Scotland in her need, and refuse her diadem, in fear, forsooth, of death at Edward's hands. No! I have held back too long, and now will I not turn back till Scotland's freedom is achieved, or Robert Bruce lies with the slain. Repentance for the past, hope, ambition for the future; a firm heart and iron frame, a steady arm and sober mood, to meet the present—I have these, sweet lady, to fit and nerve me for the task, but not such hast thou. I doubt not thy patriot soul; perchance 'twas thy lip that first awoke the slumbering fire within my own breast, and though a while forgotten, recalled, when again I looked on thee, after Falkirk's fatal battle, with the charge, the solemn charge of Wallace yet ringing in mine ears. Yet, lady, noble lady, tempt not the fearful fate which, shouldst thou fall into Edward's hands, I know too well will be thine own. I dare not promise sure defence from his o'erwhelming hosts: on every side they compass me. I see sorrow and death for all I love, all who swear fealty to me. I shall succeed in the end, for heaven, just heaven will favor the righteous cause; but trouble and anguish must be my lot ere then, and I would save those I can. Remain with us an thou wilt, gratefully I accept the homage so nobly and unhesitatingly tendered; but still I beseech thee, lady, expose not thy noble self to the blind wrath of Edward, as thou surely wilt, if from thy hand I receive my country's crown."

"My liege," answered the countess, in that same calm, quiet tone, "I have heard thee with a deep grateful sense of the noble feeling, the kindly care which dictates thy words; yet pardon me, if they fail to shake my resolution—a resolution not lightly formed, not the mere excitement of a patriotic moment, but one based on the principles of years, on the firm, solemn conviction, that in taking this sacred office on myself, the voice of the dead is obeyed, the memory of the dead, the noble dead, preserved from stain, inviolate and pure. Would my father have kept aloof in such an hour—refused to place on the brow of Scotland's patriot king the diadem of his forefathers—held back in fear of Edward? Oh! would that his iron hand and loyal heart were here instead of mine; gladly would I lay me down in his cold home and place him at thy side, might such things be: but as it is, my liege, I do beseech thee, cease to urge me. I have but a woman's frame, a woman's heart, and yet death hath no fear for me. Let Edward work his will, if heaven ordain I fall into his ruthless hands; death comes but once, 'tis but a momentary pang, and rest and bliss shall follow. My father's spirit breathes within me, and as he would, so let his daughter do. 'Tis not now a time to depart from ancient forms, my gracious sovereign, and there are those in Scotland who scarce would deem thee crowned, did not the blood of Fife perform that holy office."

"And this, then, noble lady, is thy firm resolve—I may not hope to change it?"

"'Tis firm as the ocean rock, my liege. I do not sue thee to permit my will; the blood of Macduff, which rushes in my veins, doth mark it as my right, and as my right I do demand it." She stood in her majestic beauty, proudly and firmly before him, and unconsciously the king acknowledged and revered the dauntless spirit that lovely form enshrined.

"Lady," he said, raising her hand with reverence to his lips, "do as thou wilt: a weaker spirit would have shrunk at once in terror from the very thought of such open defiance to King Edward. I should have known the mind that framed such daring purpose would never shrink from its fulfilment, however danger threatened; enough, we know thy faithfulness and worth, and where to seek for brave and noble counsel in the hour of need. And now, may it be our privilege to present thee to our queen, sweet lady? We shall rejoice to see thee ever near her person."

"I pray your grace excuse me for this night," answered the countess; "we have made some length

of way to-day, and, if it please you, I would seek rest. Agnes shall supply my place; Mary, thou wilt guard her, wilt thou not?"

"Nay, be mine the grateful task," said the king, gayly taking the maiden's hand, and, after a few words of courtesy, he quitted the chamber, followed by his sister.

There were sounds of mirth and revelry that night in the ancient halls of Scone, for King Robert, having taken upon himself the state and consequence of sovereignty, determined on encouraging the high spirits and excited joyousness of his gallant followers by all the amusements of chivalry which his confined and precarious situation permitted, and seldom was it that the dance and minstrelsy did not echo blithely in the royal suite for many hours of the evening, even when the day had brought with it anxiety and fatigue, and even intervals of despondency. There were many noble dames and some few youthful maidens in King Robert's court, animated by the same patriotic spirit which led their husbands and brothers to risk fortune and life in the service of their country: they preferred sharing and alleviating their dangers and anxieties, by thronging round the Bruce's wife, to the precarious calm and safety of their feudal castles; and light-heartedness and glee shed their bright gleams on these social hours, never clouded by the gloomy shades that darkened the political horizon of the Bruce's fortunes. Perchance this night there was a yet brighter radiance cast over the royal halls, there was a spirit of light and glory in every word and action of the youthful enthusiast, Nigel Bruce, that acted as with magic power on all around; known in the court of England but as a moody visionary boy, whose dreams were all too ethereal to guide him in this nether world, whose hand, however fitted to guide a pen, was all too weak to wield a sword; the change, or we should rather say the apparent change, perceived in him occasioned many an eye to gaze in silent wonderment, and, in the superstition of the time, argue well for the fortunes of one brother from the marvellous effect observable in the countenance and mood of the other.

The hopefulfulness of youth, its rosy visions, its smiling dreams, all sparkled in his blight blue eye, in the glad, free, ringing joyance of his deep rich voice, his cloudless smiles. And oh, who is there can resist the witchery of life's young hopes, who does not feel the warm blood run quicker through his veins, and bid his heart throb even as it hath throbbed in former days, and the gray hues of life melt away before the rosy glow of youth, even as the calm cold aspect of waning night is lost in the warmth and loveliness of the infant morn? And what was the magic acting on the enthusiast himself, that all traces of gloom and pensive thought were banished from his brow, that the full tide of poetry within his soul seemed thrilling on his lip, breathing in his simplest word, entrancing his whole being in joy? Scarce could he himself have defined its cause, such a multitude of strong emotions were busy at his heart. He saw not the dangers overhanging the path of the Bruce, he only saw and only felt him as his sovereign, as his brother, his friend, destined to be all that he had hoped, prayed, and believed he would be; willing to accept and return the affection he had so long felt, and give him that friendship and confidence for which he had yearned in vain so long. He saw his country free, independent, unshackled, glorious as of old; and there was a light and lovely being mingling in these stirring visions—when Scotland was free, what happiness would not be his own! Agnes, who flitted before him in that gay scene, the loveliest, dearest object there, clinging to him in her timidity, shrinking from the gaze of the warriors around, respectful as it was, feeling that all was strange, all save him to whom her young heart was vowed—if such exclusiveness was dear to him, if it were bliss to him to feel that, save her young brother, he alone had claim upon her notice and her smile, oh! what would it be when she indeed was all, all indivisibly his own? Was it marvel, then, his soul was full of the joy that beamed forth from his eye, and lip, and brow—that his faintest tone breathed gladness?

There was music and mirth in the royal halls: the shadow of care had passed before the full sunshine of hope; but within that palace wall, not many roods removed from the royal suite, was one heart struggling with its lone agony, striving for calm, for peace, for rest, to escape from the deep waters threatening to overwhelm it. Hour after hour beheld the Countess of Buchan in the same spot, well-nigh in the same attitude; the agonized dream of her youth had come upon her yet once again, the voice whose musical echoes had never faded from her ear, once more had sounded in its own deep thrilling tones, his hand had pressed her own, his eye had met hers, aye, and dwelt upon her with the unfeigned reverence and admiration which had marked its expression years before; and it was to him her soul had yearned in all the fervidness of loyalty, not to a stranger, as she had deemed him. Loyalty, patriotism, reverence her sovereign claimed, aye, and had received; but now how dare she encourage such emotions towards one it had been, aye, it was her duty to forget, to think of no more? Had her husband been fond, sought the noble heart which felt so bitterly his neglect, the gulf which now divided them might never have existed; and could she still the voice of that patriotism, that loyalty towards a free just monarch, which the dying words of a parent had so deeply inculcated, and which the sentiments of her own heart had increased in steadiness and strength? On what had that lone heart to rest, to subdue its tempest, to give it nerve and force, to rise pure in thought as in deed, unstained, unshaded in its nobleness, what but its own innate purity? Yet fearful was the storm that passed over, terrible the struggle which shook that bent form, as in lowliness and contrition, and agony of spirit, she knelt before the silver crucifix, and called upon heaven in its mercy to give peace and strength—fierce, fierce and terrible; but the agonized cry was heard, the stormy waves were stilled.

CHAPTER V.

Brightly and blithely dawned the 26th of March, 1306, for the loyal inhabitants of Scone. Few who might gaze on the olden city, and marked the flags and pennons waving gayly and proudly on every side; the rich tapestry flung over balconies or hung from the massive windows, in every street; the large branches of oak and laurel, festooned with gay ribands, that stood beside the entrance of every house which boasted any consequence; the busy citizens in goodly array, with their wives and families, bedecked to the best of their ability, all, as inspired by one spirit, hurrying in the direction of the abbey yard, joining the merry clamor of eager voices to the continued peal of every bell of which the old town could boast, sounding loud and joyously even above the roll of the drum or the shrill trumpet call;—those who marked these things might well believe Scotland was once again the same free land, which had hailed in the same town the coronation of Alexander the Third, some years before. Little would they deem that the foreign foeman still thronged her feudal holds and cottage homes, that they waited but the commands of their monarch, to pour down on all sides upon the daring individual who thus boldly assumed the state and solemn honor of a king, and, armed but by his own high heart and a handful of loyal followers, prepared to resist, defend, and *free*, or *die* for Scotland.

There was silence—deep, solemn, yet most eloquent silence, reigning in the abbey church of Scone. The sun shining in that full flood of glory we sometimes find in the infant spring, illumined as with golden lustre the long, narrow casements, falling thence in flickering brilliance on the pavement floor, its rays sometimes arrested, to revolve in heightened lustre from the glittering sword or the suit of half-mail of one or other of the noble knights assembled there. The rich plate of the abbey, all at least which had escaped the cupidity of Edward, was arranged with care upon the various altars; in the centre of the church was placed the abbot's oaken throne, which was to supply the place of the ancient stone, the coronation seat of the Scottish kings—no longer there, its absence felt by one and all within that church as the closing seal to Edward's infamy—the damning proof that as his slave, not as his sister kingdom, he sought to render Scotland. From the throne to the high altar, where the king was to receive the eucharist, a carpet of richly-brocaded Genoa velvet was laid down; a cushion of the same elegantly-wrought material marked the place beside the spot where he was to kneel. Priests, in their richest vestments, officiated at the high altar; six beautiful boys, bearing alternately a large waxen candle, and the golden censers filled with the richest incense, stood beside them, while opposite the altar and behind the throne, in an elevated gallery, were ranged the seventy choristers of the abbey, thirty of whom were youthful novices; behind them a massive screen or curtain of tapestry concealed the organ, and gave a yet more startling and thrilling effect to its rich deep tones, thus bursting, as it were, from spheres unseen.

The throne was already occupied by the patriot king, clothed in his robes of state; his inner dress was a doublet and vest of white velvet, slashed with cloth of silver; his stockings, fitting tight to the knee, were of the finest woven white silk, confined where they met the doublet with a broad band of silver; his shoes of white velvet, broidered with silver, in unison with his dress; a scarf of cloth of silver passed over his right shoulder, fastened there by a jewelled clasp, and, crossing his breast, secured his trusty sword to his left side; his head, of course, was bare, and his fair hair, parted carefully on his arched and noble brow, descended gracefully on either side; his countenance was perfectly calm, unexpressive of aught save of a deep sense of the solemn service in which he was engaged. There was not the faintest trace of either anxiety or exultation—naught that could shadow the brows of his followers, or diminish by one particle the love and veneration which in every heart were rapidly gaining absolute dominion.

On the right of the king stood the Abbot of Scone, the Archbishop of St. Andrew's, and Bishop of Glasgow, all of which venerable prelates had instantaneously and unhesitatingly declared for the Bruce; ranged on either side of the throne, according more to seniority than rank, were seated the brothers of the Bruce and the loyal barons who had joined his standard. Names there were already famous in the annals of patriotism—Fraser, Lennox, Athol, Hay—whose stalwart arms had so nobly struck for Wallace, whose steady minds had risen superior to the petty emotions of jealousy and envy which had actuated so many of similar rank. These were true patriots, and gladly and freely they once more rose for Scotland. Sir Christopher Seaton, brother-in-law to the Bruce, Somerville, Keith, St. Clair, the young Lord Douglas, and Thomas Randolph, the king's nephew, were the most noted of those now around the Bruce; yet on that eventful day not more than fourteen barons were mustered round their sovereign, exclusive of his four gallant brothers, who were in themselves a host. All these were attired with the care and gallantry their precarious situation permitted; half armor, concealed by flowing scarfs and graceful mantles, or suits of gayer seeming among the younger knights, for those of the barons' followers of gentle blood and chivalric training were also admitted within the church, forming a goodly show of gallant men. Behind them, on raised seats, which were divided from the body of the church by an open railing of ebony, sate the ladies of the court, the seat of the queen distinguished from the rest by its canopy and cushion of embroidered taffeta, and amongst those gentle beings fairest and loveliest shone the maiden of Buchan, as she sate in smiling happiness between the youthful daughter of the Bruce, the Princess Margory, and his niece, the Lady Isoline, children of ten and fourteen, who already claimed her as their companion and friend.

The color was bright on the soft cheek of Agnes, the smile laughed alike in her lip and eye; for ever and anon, from amidst the courtly crowd beneath, the deep blue orb of Nigel Bruce met hers, speaking in its passionate yet respectful gaze, all that could whisper joy and peace unto a heart, young, loving, and confiding, as that of Agnes. The evening previous he had detached the blue riband which confined her flowing curls, and it was with a feeling of pardonable pride she beheld it suspended from his neck, even in that hour, when his rich habiliments and the imposing

ceremony of the day marked him the brother of a king. Her brother, too, was at his side, gazing upon his sovereign with feelings, whose index, marked as it was on his brow, gave him the appearance of being older than he was. It was scarcely the excitement of a mere boy, who rejoiced in the state and dignity around him; the emotion of his mother had sunk upon his very soul, subduing the wild buoyancy of his spirit, and bidding him feel deeply and sadly the situation in which he stood. It seemed to him as if he had never thought before, and now that reflection had come upon him, it was fraught with a weight and gloom he could not remove and scarcely comprehend. He felt no power on earth could prevent his taking the only path which was open to the true patriot of Scotland, and in following that path he raised the standard of revolt, and enlisted his own followers against his father. Till the moment of action he had dreamed not of these things; but the deep anxieties, the contending feelings of his mother, which, despite her controlled demeanor, his heart perceived, could not but have their effect; and premature manhood was stealing fast upon his heart.

Upon the left of the king, and close beside his throne, stood the Countess of Buchan, attired in robes of the darkest crimson velvet, with a deep border of gold, which swept the ground, and long falling sleeves with a broad fringe; a thick cord of gold and tassels confined the robe around the waist, and thence fell reaching to her feet, and well-nigh concealing the inner dress of white silk, which was worn to permit the robes falling easily on either side, and thus forming a long train behind. Neither gem nor gold adorned her beautiful hair; a veil was twisted in its luxuriant tresses, and served the purpose of the matron's coif. She was pale and calm, but such was the usual expression of her countenance, and perhaps accorded better with the dignified majesty of her commanding figure than a greater play of feature. It was not the calmness of insensibility, of vacancy, it was the still reflection of a controlled and chastened soul, of one whose depth and might was known but to-herself.

The pealing anthem for a while had ceased, and it was as if that church was desolate, as if the very hearts that throbbed so quickly for their country and their king were hushed a while and stilled, that every word which passed between the sovereign and the primate should be heard. Kneeling before him, his hands placed between those of the archbishop, the king, in a clear and manly voice, received, as it were, the kingdom from his hands, and swore to govern according to the laws of his ancestors; to defend the liberties of his people alike from the foreign and the civil foe; to dispense justice; to devote life itself to restoring Scotland to her former station in the scale of kingdoms. Solemnly, energetically, he took the required vows; his cheek flushed, his eye glistened, and ere he rose he bent his brow upon his spread hands, as if his spirit supplicated strength, and the primate, standing over him, blessed him, in a loud voice, in the name of Him whose lowly minister he was.

A few minutes, and the king was again seated on his throne, and from the hands of the Bishop of Glasgow, the Countess of Buchan received the simple coronet of gold, which had been hastily made to supply the place of that which Edward had removed. It was a moment of intense interest: every eye was directed towards the king and the dauntless woman by his side, who, rather than the descendant of Malcolm Cean Mohr should demand in vain the service from the descendants of the brave Macduff, exposed herself to all the wrath of a fierce and cruel king, the fury of an incensed husband and brother, and in her own noble person represented that ancient and most loyal line. Were any other circumstance needed to enhance the excitement of the patriots of Scotland, they would have found it in this. As it was, a sudden, irrepressible burst of applause broke from many eager voices as the bishop placed the coronet in her hands, but one glance from those dark, eloquent eyes sufficed to hush it on the instant into stillness.

Simultaneously all within the church stood up, and gracefully and steadily, with a hand which trembled not, even to the observant and anxious eyes of her son, Isabella of Buchan placed the sacred symbol of royalty on the head of Scotland's king; and then arose, as with one voice, the wild enthusiastic shout of loyalty, which, bursting from all within the church, was echoed again and again from without, almost drowning the triumphant anthem which at the same moment sent its rich, hallowed tones through the building, and proclaimed Robert Bruce indeed a king.

Again and yet again the voice of triumph and of loyalty arose hundred-tongued, and sent its echo even to the English camp; and when it ceased, when slowly, and as it were reluctantly, it died away, it was a grand and glorious sight to see those stern and noble barons one by one approach their sovereign's throne and do him homage.

It was not always customary for the monarchs of those days to receive the feudal homage of their vassals the same hour of their coronation, it was in general a distinct and almost equally gorgeous ceremony; but in this case both the king and barons felt it better policy to unite them; the excitement attendant on the one ceremonial they felt would prevent the deficiency of numbers in the other being observed, and they acted wisely.

There was a dauntless firmness in each baron's look, in his manly carriage and unwavering step, as one by one he traversed the space between him and the throne, seeming to proclaim that in himself he held indeed a host. To adhere to the usual custom of paying homage to the suzerain bareheaded, barefooted, and unarmed, the embroidered slipper had been adopted by all instead of the iron boot; and as he knelt before the throne, the Earl of Lennox, for, first in rank, he first approached his sovereign, unbuckling his trusty sword, laid it, together with his dagger, at Robert's feet, and placing his clasped hands between those of the king, repeated, in a deep sonorous voice, the solemn vow—to live and die with him against all manner of men. Athol, Fraser, Seaton, Douglas, Hay, gladly and willingly followed his example; and it was curious to

mark the character of each man, proclaimed in his mien and hurried step.

The calm, controlled, and somewhat thoughtful manner of those grown wise in war, their bold spirits feeling to the inmost soul the whole extent of the risk they run, scarcely daring to anticipate the freedom of their country, the emancipation of their king from the heavy yoke that threatened him, and yet so firm in the oath they pledged, that had destruction yawned before them ere they reached the throne, they would have dared it rather than turned back—and then again those hot and eager youths, feeling, knowing but the excitement of the hour, believing but as they hoped, seeing but a king, a free and independent king, bounding from their seats to the monarch's feet, regardless of the solemn ceremonial in which they took a part, desirous only, in the words of their oath, to live and die for him—caused a brighter flush to mantle on King Robert's cheek, and his eyes to shine with new and radiant light. None knew better than himself the perils that encircled him, yet there was a momentary glow of exultation in his heart as he looked on the noble warriors, the faithful friends around him, and felt that they, even they, representatives of the oldest, the noblest houses in Scotland—men famed not alone for their gallant bearing in war, but their fidelity and wisdom, and unstained honor and virtue in peace—even they acknowledged him their king, and vowed him that allegiance which was never known to fail.

Alan of Buchan was the last of that small yet noble train who approached his sovereign. There was a hot flush of impetuous feeling on the boy's cheek, an indignant tear trembled in his dark flashing eye, and his voice, sweet, thrilling as it was, quivered with the vain effort to restrain his emotion.

"Sovereign of Scotland," he exclaimed, "descendant of that glorious line of kings to whom my ancestors have until this dark day vowed homage and allegiance; sovereign of all good and faithful men, on whose inmost souls the name of Scotland is so indelibly writ, that even in death it may there be found, refuse not thou my homage. I have but my sword, not e'en a name of which to boast, yet hear me swear," he raised his clasped hands towards heaven, "swear that for thee, for my country, for thee alone, will I draw it, alone shall my life be spent, my blood be shed. Reject me not because my name is Comyn, because I alone am here of that once loyal house. Oh! condemn me not; reject not untried a loyal heart and trusty sword."

"Reject thee," said King Robert, laying his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder; "reject thee, young soldier," he said, cheeringly: "in Alan of Buchan we see but the noble son of our right noble countrywoman, the Lady Isabella; we see in him but a worthy descendant of Macduff, the noble scion, though but by the mother's side, of the loyal house of Fife. Young as thou art, we ask of thee but the heart and sword which thou hast so earnestly proffered, nor can we, son of Isabella of Fife, doubt their honesty and truth; thou shalt earn a loyal name for thyself, and till then, as the brother in arms, the chosen friend of Nigel Bruce, all shall respect and trust thee. We confer knighthood on twenty of our youthful warriors seven days hence; prepare thyself to receive it with our brother: enough for us to know thou hast learned the art of chivalry at thy mother's hand."

Dazzled, bewildered by the benign manner, and yet more gracious words of his sovereign, the young heir of Buchan remained kneeling for a brief space, as if rooted to the ground, but the deep earnest voice of his mother, the kind greeting of Nigel Bruce, as he grasped his arm, and hailed him companion in arms, roused him at once, and he sprung to his feet; the despondency, shame, doubt, anxiety which like lead had weighed down his heart before, dissolved before the glad, buoyant spirit, the bright, free, glorious hopes, and dreams, and visions which are known to youth alone.

Stentorian and simultaneous was the eager shout that hailed the appearance of the newly-anointed king, as he paused a moment on the great stone staircase, leading from the principal doors of the abbey to the abbey yard. For miles round, particularly from those counties which were but thinly garrisoned by the English, the loyal Scots had poured at the first rumor of the Bruce's rising, and now a rejoicing multitude welcomed him with one voice, the execrations against their foes forgotten in this outpouring of the heart towards their native prince.

Inspired by this heartfelt greeting, the king advanced a few paces on the stone terrace, and raised his right hand, as if about to speak; on the instant every shout was hushed, and silence fell upon that eager multitude, as deep and voiceless as if some mighty magic chained them spell-bound where they stood, their very breathing hushed, fearful to lose one word.

Many an aged eye grew dim with tears, as it rested on the fair and graceful form, the beautifully expressive face of him, who, with eloquent fervor, referred to the ancient glory of their country; tears of joy, for they felt they looked upon the good genius of their land, that she was raised from her dejected stupor, to sleep a slave no more; and the middle-aged and the young, with deafening shouts and eager gestures, swore to give him the crown, the kingdom he demanded, free, unshackled as his ancestors had borne them, or die around him to a man; and blessings and prayers in woman's gentler voice mingled with the swelling cry, and little children caught the Bruce's name and bade "God bless him," and others, equally impetuous shouted "Bruce and freedom!"

"Love, obey, follow me, for Scotland's sake; noble or gentle, let all private feud be forgotten in this one great struggle for liberty or death. Thus," he concluded, "united and faithful, the name of Wallace on each lip, the weal of Scotland in each heart, her mountains our shield, her freedom our sword, shall we, can we fail? No! no! Scotland shall be free, or her green sod and mountain

flowers shall bloom upon our graves. I have no crown save that which Scotland gives, no kingdom save what your swords shall conquer, and your hearts bestow; with you I live and die."

In the midst of the shouts and unrestrained clamor succeeding this eloquent address, the fiery chargers of the king and his attendant barons and esquires were led to the foot of the staircase. And a fair and noble sight was the royal *cortège* as slowly it passed through the old town, with banners flying, lances gleaming, and the rich swell of triumphant music echoing on the air. Nobles and dames mingled indiscriminately together. Beautiful palfreys or well-trained glossy mules, richly caparisoned, gracefully guided by the dames and maidens, bore their part well amid the more fiery chargers of their companions. The queen rode at King Robert's left hand, the primate of Scotland at his right, Lennox, Seaton, and Hay thronged around the Countess of Buchan, eager to pay her that courteous homage which she now no longer refused, and willingly joined in their animated converse. The Lady Mary Campbell and her sister Lady Seaton found an equally gallant and willing escort, as did the other noble dames; but none ventured to dispute the possession of the maiden of Buchan with the gallant Nigel, who, riding close at her bridle rein, ever and anon whispered some magic words that called a blush to her cheek and a smile on her lip, their attention called off now and then by some wild jest or courteous word from the young Lord Douglas, whose post seemed in every part of the royal train; now galloping to the front, to caracole by the side of the queen, to accustom her, he said, to the sight of good horsemanship, then lingering beside the Countess of Buchan, to give some unexpected rejoinder to the graver maxims of Lennox. The Princess Margory, her cousins, the Lady Isoline Campbell and Alice and Christina Seaton, escorted by Alan of Buchan, Walter Fitz-Alan, Alexander Fraser, and many other young esquires, rejoicing in the task assigned them.

It was a gay and gorgeous sight, and beautiful the ringing laugh and silvery voice of youth. No dream of desponding dread shadowed their hearts, though danger and suffering, and defeat and death, were darkly gathering round them. Who, as he treads the elastic earth, fresh with the breeze of day, as he gazes on the cloudless blue of the circling sky, or the dazzling rays of the morning sun, as the hum of happy life is round him—who is there thinks of the silence, and darkness, and tempest that come in a few brief hours, on the shadowy pinions of night?

CHAPTER VI.

Some ten or twelve days after the momentous event recorded in our last chapter, King Edward's royal palace, at Winchester, was thronged at an unusually early hour by many noble knights and barons, bearing on their countenances symptoms of some new and unexpected excitement; and there was a dark boding gloom on the now contracted brow and altered features of England's king, as, weakened and well-nigh worn out by a lingering disease, he reclined on a well-cushioned couch, to receive the eagerly-offered homage of his loyal barons. He, who had been from earliest youth a warrior, with whose might and dauntless prowess there was not one, or prince, or noble, or English, or foreigner, could compete, whose strength of frame and energy of mind had ever borne him scathless and uninjured through scenes of fatigue, and danger, and blood, and death; whose sword had restored a kingdom to his father—had struggled for Palestine and her holy pilgrims—had given Wales to England, and again and again prostrated the hopes and energies of Scotland into the dust; even he, this mighty prince, lay prostrate now, unable to conquer or to struggle with disease—disease that attacked the slave, the lowest serf or yeoman of his land, and thus made manifest, how in the sight of that King of kings, from whom both might and weakness come, the prince and peasant are alike—the monarch and the slave!

The disease had been indeed in part subdued, but Edward could not close his eyes to the fact that he should never again be what he had been; that the strength which had enabled him to do and endure so much, the energy which had ever led him on to victory, the fire which had so often inspired his own heart, and urged on, as by magic power, his followers—that all these were gone from him, and forever. Ambition, indeed, yet burned within, strong, undying, mighty; aye, perhaps mightier than ever, as the power of satisfying that ambition glided from his grasp. He had rested, indeed, a brief while, secure in the fulfilment of his darling wish, that every rood of land composing the British Isles should be united under him as sole sovereign; he believed, and rejoiced in the belief, that with Wallace all hope or desire of resistance had departed. His disease had been at its height when Bruce departed from his court, and disabled him a while from composedly considering how that event would affect his interest in Scotland. As the violence of the disease subsided, however, he had leisure to contemplate and become anxious. Rumors, some extravagant, some probable, now floated about; and the sovereign looked anxiously to the high festival of Easter to bring all his barons around him, and by the absence or presence of the suspected, discover at once how far his suspicions and the floating rumors were correct.

Although the indisposition of the sovereign prevented the feasting, merry-making, and other customary marks of royal munificence, which ever attended the solemnization of Easter, yet it did not in any way interfere with the bounden duty of every earl and baron, knight and liegeman, and high ecclesiastics of the realm to present themselves before the monarch at such a time; Easter, Whitsuntide, and Christmas, being the seasons when every loyal subject of fit degree appeared attendant on his sovereign, without any summons so to do.

They had been seasons of peculiar interest since the dismemberment of Scotland, for Edward's

power was such, that seldom had the peers and other great officers of that land refused the tacit acknowledgment of England's supremacy by their non-appearance. Even in that which was deemed the rebellion of Wallace, the highest families, even the competitors for the crown, and all the knights and vassals in their interest, had swelled the train of the conqueror; but this Easter ten or twelve great barons and their followers were missing. The nobles had eagerly and anxiously scanned the countenances of each, and whispered suspicions and rumors, which one glance on their monarch's ruffled brow confirmed.

"So ho! my faithful lords and gallant knights," he exclaimed, after the preliminaries of courtesy between each noble and his sovereign had been more hastily than usual performed, speaking in a tone so unusually harsh and sarcastic, that the terms "faithful and gallant" seemed used but in mockery; "so ho! these are strange news we hear. Where be my lords of Carrick, Athol, Lennox, Hay? Where be the knights of Seaton, Somerville, Keith, and very many others we could name? Where be these proud lords, I say? Are none of ye well informed on these things? I ask ye where be they? Why are they not here?"

There was a pause, for none dared risk reply. Edward's voice had waxed louder and louder, his sallow cheek flushed with wrath, and he raised himself from his couch, as if irritability of thought had imparted strength to his frame.

"I ask ye, where be these truant lords? There be some of ye who *can* reply; aye, and by good St. Edward, reply ye shall. Gloucester, my lord of Gloucester, stand forth, I say," he continued, the thunderstorm drawing to that climax which made many tremble, lest its bolt should fall on the daring baron who rumor said was implicated in the flight of the Bruce, and who now stood, his perfect self-possession and calmness of mien and feature contrasting well with the fury of his sovereign.

"And darest thou front me with that bold, shameless brow, false traitor as thou art?" continued the king, as, with head erect and arms proudly folded in his mantle, Gloucester obeyed the king's impatient summons. "Traitor! I call thee traitor! aye, in the presence of thy country's noblest peers, I charge thee with a traitor's deed; deny it, if thou darest."

"Tis my sovereign speaks the word, else had it not been spoken with impunity," returned the noble, proudly and composedly, though his cheek burned and his eye flashed. "Yes, monarch of England, I dare deny the charge! Gloucester is no traitor!"

"How! dost thou brave me, minion? Darest thou deny the fact, that from thee, from thy traitorous hand, thy base connivance, Robert of Carrick, warned that we knew his treachery, fled from our power—that 'tis to thee, we owe the pleasant news we have but now received? Hast thou not given that rebel Scotland a head, a chief, in this fell traitor, and art thou not part and parcel of his guilt? Darest thou deny that from thee he received intelligence and means of flight? Baron of Gloucester, thou darest not add the stigma of falsity to thy already dishonored name!"

"Sovereign of England, my gracious liege and honored king," answered Gloucester, still apparently unmoved, and utterly regardless of the danger in which he stood, "dishonor is not further removed from thy royal name than it is from Gloucester's. I bear no stain of either falsity or treachery; that which thou hast laid to my charge regarding the Earl of Carrick, I shrink not, care not to acknowledge; yet, Edward of England, I am no traitor!"

"Ha! thou specious orator, reconcile the two an thou canst! Thou art a scholar of deep research and eloquence profound we have heard. Speak on, then, in heaven's name!" He flung himself back on his cushions as he spoke, for, despite his wrath, his suspicions, there was that in the calm, chivalric bearing of the earl that appealed not in vain to one who had so long been the soul of chivalry himself.

The tone in which his sovereign spoke was softened, though his words were bitter, and Gloucester at once relaxed from his proud and cold reserve; kneeling before him, he spoke with fervor and impassioned truth—

"Condemn me not unheard, my gracious sovereign," he said. "I speak not to a harsh and despotic king, who brings his faithful subjects to the block at the first whisper of evil or misguided conduct cast to their charge; were Edward such Gloucester would speak not, hope not for justice at his hands; but to thee, my liege, to thee, to whom all true knights may look up as to the minor of all that knight should be—the life and soul of chivalry—to thee, the noblest warrior, the truest knight that ever put lance in rest—to thee, I say, I am no traitor; and appeal but to the spirit of chivalry actuating thine own heart to acquit or condemn me, as it listeth. Hear me, my liege. Robert of Carrick and myself were sworn brothers from the first hour of our entrance together upon life, as pages, esquires, and finally, as knights, made such by thine own royal hand; brothers in arms, in dangers, in victories, in defeat; aye, and brothers—more than brothers—in mutual fidelity and love; to receive life, to be rescued from captivity at each other's hand, to become equal sharers of whatever honors might be granted to the one and not the other. Need my sovereign be reminded that such constitutes the ties of brothers in arms, and such brothers were Robert of Carrick and Gilbert of Gloucester. There came a rumor that the instigations of a base traitor had poisoned your grace's ear against one of these sworn brothers, threatening his liberty, if not his life; that which was revealed, its exact truth or falsehood, might Gloucester pause to list or weigh? My liege, thou knowest it could not be. A piece of money and a pair of spurs was all the hint, the warning, that he dared to give, and it was given, and its warning taken; and the imperative duty the laws of chivalry, of honor, friendship, all alike demanded done. The brother by the brother

saved! Was Gloucester, then, a traitor to his sovereign, good my liege?"

"Say first, my lord, how Gloucester now will reconcile these widely adverse duties, how comport himself, if duty to his liege and sovereign call on him to lift his sword against his brother?" demanded Edward, raising himself on his elbow, and looking on the kneeling nobleman with eyes which seemed to have recovered their flashing light to penetrate his soul. Wrath itself appeared to have subsided before this calm yet eloquent appeal, which in that age could scarcely have been resisted without affecting the honor of the knight to whom it was addressed.

An expression of suffering, amounting almost to anguish, took the place of energy and fervor on the noble countenance of Gloucester, and his voice, which had never once quivered or failed him in the height of Edward's wrath, now absolutely shook with the effort to master his emotion. Twice he essayed to speak ere words came; at length—

"With Robert of Carrick Gilbert of Gloucester was allied as brother, my liege," he said. "With Robert the rebel, Robert the would-be king, the daring opposer of my sovereign, Gloucester can have naught in common. My liege, as a knight and gentleman, I have done my duty fearlessly, openly; as fearlessly, as openly, as your grace's loyal liegeman, fief, and subject, in the camp and in the court, in victory or defeat, against all manner or ranks of men, be they friends or foes; to my secret heart I am thine, and thine alone. In proof of which submission, my royal liege, lest still in your grace's judgment Gloucester be not cleared from treachery, behold I resign alike my sword and coronet to your royal hands, never again to be resumed, save at my sovereign's bidding."

His voice became again firm ere he concluded, and with the same respectful deference yet manly pride which had marked his bearing throughout, he laid his sheathed sword and golden coronet at his sovereign's feet, and then rising steadily and unflinchingly, returned Edward's searching glance, and calmly awaited his decision.

"By St. Edward! Baron of Gloucester," he exclaimed, in his own tone of kingly courtesy, mingled with a species of admiration he cared not to conceal, "thou hast fairly challenged us to run a tilt with thee, not of sword and lance, but of all knightly and generous courtesy. I were no true knight to condemn, nor king to mistrust thee; yet, of a truth, the fruit of thy rash act might chafe a cooler mood than ours. Knowest thou Sir John Comyn is murdered—murdered by the arch traitor thou hast saved from our wrath?"

"I heard it, good my liege," calmly returned Gloucester. "Robert of Carrick was no temper to pass by injuries, aggravated, traitorous injuries, unavenged."

"And this is all thou sayest!" exclaimed Edward, his wrath once again gaining dominion. "Wouldst thou defend this base deed on plea, forsooth, that Comyn was a traitor? Traitor—and to whom?"

"To the man that trusted him, my liege; to him he falsely swore to second and to aid. To every law of knighthood and of honor I say he was a traitor, and deserved his fate."

"And this to thy sovereign, madman? To us, whose dignity and person have been insulted, lowered, trampled on! By all the saints, thou hast tempted us too far! What ho, there, guards! Am I indeed so old and witless," he muttered, sinking back again upon the couch from which he had started in the moment of excitement, "as so soon to forget a knightly nobleness, which in former days would have knitted my very soul to his? Bah! 'tis this fell disease that spoke, not Edward. Away with ye, sir guards, we want ye not," he added, imperatively, as they approached at his summons. "And thou, sir earl, take up thy sword, and hence from my sight a while;—answer not, but obey. I fear more for mine own honor than thou dost for thy head. We neither disarm nor restrain thee, for we trust thee still; but away with thee, for on our kingly faith, thou hast tried us sorely."

Gloucester flung himself on his knee beside his sovereign, his lips upon the royal hand, which, though scarcely yielded to him, was not withheld, and hastily resuming his sword and coronet, with a deep reverence, silently withdrew.

The king looked after him, admiration and fierce anger struggling for dominion alike on his countenance as in his heart, and then sternly and piercingly he scanned the noble crowd, who, hushed into a silence of terror as well as of extreme interest during the scene they had beheld, now seemed absolutely to shrink from the dark, flashing orbs of the king, as they rested on each successively, as if the accusation of *lip* would follow that of eye, and the charge of treason fall indiscriminately on all; but, exhausted from the passion to which he had given vent, Edward once more stretched himself on his cushions, and merely muttered—

"Deserved his fate—a traitor. Is Gloucester mad—or worse, disloyal? No; that open brow and fearless eye are truth and faithfulness alone. I will *not* doubt him; 'tis but his lingering love for that foul traitor, Bruce, which I were no true knight to hold in blame. But that murder, that base murder—insult alike to our authority, our realm—by every saint in heaven, it shall be fearfully avenged, and that madman rue the day he dared fling down the gauntlet of rebellion!" and as he spoke, his right hand instinctively grasped the hilt of his sword, and half drew it from its sheath.

"Madman, in very truth, my liege," said Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, who, high in favor with his sovereign, alone ventured to address him; "as your grace will believe, when I say not only hath he dared defy thee by the murder of Comyn, but has had the presumptuous folly to enact the farce of coronation, taking upon himself all the insignia of a king."

"How! what sayst thou, De Valence," returned Edward, again starting up, "coronation—king? By St. Edward! this passeth all credence. Whence hadst thou this witless news?"

"From sure authority, my liege, marvellous as they seem. These papers, if it please your grace to peruse, contain matters of import which demand most serious attention."

"Anon, anon, sir earl!" answered Edward, impatiently, as Pembroke, kneeling, laid the papers on a small table of ivory which stood at the monarch's side. "Tell me more of this strange farce; a king, ha! ha! Does the rebel think 'tis but to put a crown upon his head and a sceptre in his hand that makes the monarch—a king, forsooth. And who officiated at this right solemn mockery? 'Twas, doubtless, a goodly sight!"

"On my knightly faith, my liege, strangely, yet truly, 'twas a ceremony regally performed, and, save for numbers, regally attended."

"Thou darest not tell me so!" exclaimed the king, striking his clenched hand fiercely on the table. "I tell thee thou darest not; 'tis a false tale, a lie thrust upon thee to rouse thy spirit but to laugh at. De Valence, I tell thee 'tis a thing that cannot be! Scotland is laid too low, her energies are crushed; her best and bravest lying in no bloodless graves. Who is there to attend this puppet king, save the few we miss? who dared provoke our wrath by the countenance of such a deed? Who would dare tempt our fury by placing a crown on the rebel's head? I tell thee they have played thee false—it cannot be!"

"Thy valor hath done much, my gracious liege," returned Pembroke, "far more than ever king hath done before; but pardon me, your grace, the *people* of Scotland are not yet crushed, they lie apparently in peace, till a chief capable of guiding, lordly in rank and knightly in war, ariseth, and then they too stand forth. Yet what are they? they do but nominally swell the rebel's court: they do but *seem* a multitude, which needs but thy presence to disperse. He cannot, if he dare, resist thee."

"And wherefore should these tidings so disturb you grace?" interposed the Earl of Hereford, a brave, blunt soldier, like his own charger, snuffing the scent of war far off. "We have but to bridle on our harness, and we shall hear no more of solemn farces like to this. Give but the word, my sovereign, and these ignoble rebels shall be cut off to a man, by an army as numerous and well appointed as any that have yet followed your grace to victory; 'tis a pity they have but to encounter traitors and rebels, instead of knightly foes," continued the High Constable of England.

"Perchance Robert of Carrick deems the assumption of king will provoke your grace to combat even more than his traitorous rebellion, imagining, in his madness, the title of king may make ye equals," laughingly observed the Earl of Arundel; and remarks and opinions of similar import passed round, but Edward, who had snatched the papers as he ceased to speak, and was now deeply engrossed in their contents, neither replied to nor heeded them. Darker and darker grew the frown upon his brow; his tightly compressed lip, his heaving chest betraying the fearful passion that agitated him; but when he spoke, there was evidently a struggle for that dignified calmness which in general distinguished him, though ever and anon burst forth the undisguised voice of wrath.

"'Tis well, 'tis very well," he said. "These wild Scots would tempt us to the utmost, and they shall be satisfied. Ah! my lords of Buchan and Fife, give ye good morrow. What think ye of these doings amidst your countrymen, bethink ye they have done well?"

"Well, as relates to their own ruin, aye, very well, my liege; they act but as would every follower of the murderer Bruce," replied Buchan, harshly and sullenly.

"They are mad, stark mad, your highness; the loss of a little blood may bring them to their senses," rejoined the more volatile Fife.

"And is it thus ye think, base, villainous traitors as ye are, leagued with the rebel band in his coronation? My Lord of Chester, attach them of high treason."

"What means your grace?" exclaimed both noblemen at once, but in very different accents, "Of what are we charged, and who dare make this lying accusation?"

"Are ye indeed so ignorant?" replied the king, jibingly. "Know ye not that Isabella, Countess of Buchan, and representative, in the absence of her brother, of the earldom of Fife, hath so dared our displeasure as to place the crown on the rebel's head, and vow him homage?"

"Hath she indeed dared so to do? By heaven, she shall rue this!" burst wrathfully from Buchan, his swarthy countenance assuming a yet swarthier aspect. "My liege, I swear to thee, by the Holy Cross, I knew no more of this than did your grace. Thinkest thou I would aid and abet the cause of one not merely a rebel and a traitor, but the foul murderer of a Comyn—one at whose hands, by the sword's point, have I sworn to demand my kinsman, and avenge him?"

"And wherefore did Isabella of Buchan take upon herself this deed, my liege, but because the only male descendant of her house refused to give his countenance or aid to this false earl? Because Duncan of Fife was neither a rebel himself nor gave his aid to rebels, On the honor of a knight, my liege, I know naught of this foul deed."

"It may be, it may be," answered Edward, impatiently. "We will see to it, and condemn ye not unheard; but in times like these, when traitors and rebels walk abroad and insult us to our very

teeth, by St. Edward, our honor, our safety demands the committal of the suspected till they be cleared. Resign your swords to my Lord of Chester, and confine yourselves to your apartments. If ye be innocent, we will find means to repay you for the injustice we have done; if not, the axe and the block shall make short work. Begone!"

Black as a thunderbolt was the scowl that lowered over the brow of Buchan, as he sullenly unclasped his sword and gave it into the Lord Constable's hand; while with an action of careless recklessness the Earl of Fife followed his example, and they retired together, the one scowling defiance on all who crossed his path, the other jesting and laughing with each and all.

"I would not give my best falcon as pledge for the Countess of Buchan's well-doing, an she hath done this without her lord's connivance," whispered the Prince of Wales to one of his favorites, with many of whom he had been conversing, in a low voice, as if his father's wrathful accents were not particularly grateful to his ear.

"Nor would I pledge a hawk for her safety, if she fall into his grace's hands, whether with her lord's consent or no," replied the young nobleman, laughing. "Your royal father is fearfully incensed."

"Better destroy them root and branch at once," said the prince, who, like all weak minds, loved any extremity better than a protracted struggle. "Exterminate with fire and sword; ravage the land till there be neither food for man nor beast; let neither noble nor serf remain, and then, perchance, we shall hear no more of Scotland. On my faith, I am sick of the word."

"Not so the king, my royal lord," returned his companion. "See how eagerly he talks to my lords of Pembroke and Hereford. We shall have our sovereign yet again at our head."

And it was even as he said. The king, with that strong self-command which disease alone could in any way cause to fail, now conquering alike his bitter disappointment and the fury it engendered, turned his whole thought and energy towards obtaining the downfall of his insolent opponents at one stroke; and for that purpose, summoning around him the brave companions of former campaigns, and other officers of state, he retired with them to his private closet to deliberate more at length on the extraordinary news they had received, and the best means of nipping the rebellion in the bud.

CHAPTER VII.

The evening of this eventful day found the Scottish earls seated together in a small apartment of one of the buildings adjoining the royal palace, which in the solemn seasons we have enumerated was always crowded with guests, who were there feasted and maintained at the king's expense during the whole of their stay. Inconveniences in their private quarters were little heeded by the nobles, who seldom found themselves there, save for the purpose of a few hours sleep, and served but to enhance by contrast the lavish richness and luxury which surrounded them in the palace and presence of their king; but to the Earls of Buchan and Fife the inconveniences of their quarters very materially increased the irritability and annoyance of their present situation. Fife had stretched himself on two chairs, and leaning his elbows on the broad shelf formed by the small casement, cast many wistful glances on the street below, through which richly-attired gallants, both on foot and horseback, were continually passing. He was one of those frivolous little minds with whom the present is all in all, caring little for the past, and still less for the future. It was no marvel, therefore, that he preferred the utter abandonment of his distracted country for the luxury and ease attending the court and camp of Edward, to the great dangers and little recompense attending the toils and struggles of a patriot. The only emotion of any weight with him was the remembrance of and desire of avenging petty injuries, fancying and aggravating them when, in fact, none was intended.

Very different was the character of the Earl of Buchan; morose, fierce, his natural hardness of disposition unsoftened by one whisper of chivalry, although educated in the best school of knighthood, and continually the follower of King Edward, he adhered to him first, simply because his estates in England were far more to his taste than those in Scotland, towards which he felt no filial tie; and soon after his marriage, repugnance to his high-minded and richly-gifted countess, which ever seemed a reproach and slur upon himself, kept him still more aloof, satisfied that the close retirement in which she lived, the desert and rugged situation of his castle, would effectually debar her from using that influence he knew she possessed, and keep her wholly and solely his own; a strange kind of feeling, when, in reality, the wide contrast between them made her an object of dislike, only to be accounted for by the fact that a dark, suspicious, jealous temper was ever at work within him.

"Now, do but look at that fellow's doublet, Comyn. Look, how gay they pass below, and here am I, with my new, richly-broidered suit, with which I thought to brave it with the best of them—here am I, I say, pent up in stone walls like a caged goldfinch, 'stead of the entertainment I had pictured; 'tis enough to chafe the spirit of a saint."

"And canst thou think of such things now, thou sorry fool?" demanded Buchan, sternly, pausing in his hurried stride up and down the narrow precincts of the chamber; "hast thou no worthier subject for contemplation?"

"None, save thy dutiful wife's most dutiful conduct, Comyn, which, being the less agreeable of the two, I dismiss the first I owe her small thanks for playing the representative of my house; methinks, her imprisonment would better serve King Edward's cause and ours too."

"Aye, imprisonment—imprisonment for life," muttered the earl, slowly. "Let but King Edward restore me my good sword, and he may wreak his vengeance on her as he listeth. Not all the castles of Scotland, the arms of Scottish men, dare guard a wife against her husband; bitterly shall she rue this deed."

"And thy son, my gentle kinsman, what wilt thou do with him, bethink thee? Thou wilt find him as great a rebel as his mother; I have ever told thee thou wert a fool to leave him so long with his brainstruck mother."

"She hath not, she dared not bring him with her to the murderer of his kinsman—Duncan of Fife, I tell thee she dare not; but if she hath, why he is but a child, a mere boy, incapable of forming judgment one way or the other."

"Not so much a child as thou thinkest, my good lord; some sixteen years or so have made a stalwart warrior ere this. Be warned; send off a trusty messenger to the Tower of Buchan, and, without any time for warning, bring that boy as the hostage of thy good faith and loyalty to Edward; thou wilt thus cure him of his patriotic fancies, and render thine interest secure, and as thou desirest to reward thy dutiful partner, thou wilt do it effectually; for, trust me, that boy is the very apple of her eye, in her affections her very dotting-place."

"Jest not, Duncan, or by all the saints, thou wilt drive me mad!" wrathfully exclaimed Buchan. "It shall be as thou sayest; and more, I will gain the royal warrant for the deed—permission to this effect may shorten this cursed confinement for us both. I have forgotten the boy's age; his mother's high-sounding patriotism may have tintured him already. Thou smilest."

"At thy marvellous good faith in thy wife's *patriotism*, good kinsman—oh, well perchance, like charity, it covereth a multitude of sins."

"What meanest thou, my Lord of Fife?" demanded Buchan, shortly and abruptly, pausing in his walk to face his companion, his suspicious temper instantly aroused by Fife's peculiar tone. "What wouldst thou insinuate? Tamper not with me; thou knowest I am no subject for a jest."

"I have but to look on thee to know that, my most solemn-visaged brother. I neither insinuate nor tamper with your lordship. Simply and heartily I do but give thee joy for thy faith in female patriotism," answered Fife, carelessly, but with an expression of countenance that did not accord with his tone.

"What, in the fiend's name, then, has urged her to this mad act, if it be not what she and others as mad as she call patriotism?"

"May not a lurking affection for the Bruce have given incentive to love of country? Buchan, of a truth, thou art dull as a sword-blade when plunged in muddy water."

"Affection for the Bruce? Thou art mad as she is, Duncan. What the foul fiend, knows she of the Bruce? No, no! 'tis too wild a tale—when have they ever met?"

"More often than thou listeth, gentle kinsman," returned Fife, with just sufficient show of mystery to lash his companion into fury. "I could tell thee of a time when Robert of Carrick was domesticated with my immaculate sister, hunting with her, hawking with her, reading with her, making favorable impressions on every heart in Fife Castle save mine own."

"And she loved him!—she was loved," muttered Buchan; "and she vowed her troth to me, the foul-mouthed traitress! She loved him, saidst thou?"

"On my faith, I know not, Comyn. Rumors, I know, went abroad that it would have been better for the Lady Isabella's peace and honor if this gallant, fair-spoken knight had kept aloof."

"And then, her brother, carest not to speak these things, and in that reckless tone? By St. Swithin, ye are well matched," returned Buchan, with a short and bitter laugh of scorn.

"Faith, Comyn, I love mine own life and comfort too well to stand up the champion of woman's honor; besides, I vouch not for the truth of floating rumors. I tell thee but what comes across my brain; for its worth thou art the best judge."

"I were a fool to mine own interest to doubt thee now, little worth as are thy words in common," again muttered the incensed earl, resuming his hasty strides. "Patriotism! loyalty! ha, ha! high-sounding words, forsooth. And have they not met since then until now?" he demanded, stopping suddenly before his companion.

"Even so, fair kinsman. Whilst thou wert doing such loyal duty to Edward, after the battle of Falkirk, forgetting thou hadst a wife and castle to look after, Robert Earl of Carrick found a comfortable domicile within thy stone walls, and in the fair, sweet company of thine Isabella, my lord. No doubt, in all honorable and seemly intercourse; gallant devotion on the one side, and dignified courtesy on the other—nothing more, depend on't; still it seems but natural that the memory of a comely face and knightly form should prove incentives to loyalty and patriotism."

"The foul fiend take thy jesting!" exclaimed Buchan. "Natural, forsooth; aye, the same nature that bade me loathe the presence, aye, the very name of that deceiving traitress. And so that smooth-

faced villain Carrick found welcome in the castle of a Comyn the months we missed him from the court. Ha, ha! thou hast done me good service, Lord of Fife. I had not enough of injuries before to demand at the hand of Robert Bruce. And for Dame Isabella, may the fury of every fiend follow me, if I place her not in the hands of Edward, alive or dead! his wrath will save me the trouble of seeking further vengeance."

"Nay, thou art a very fool to be so chafed," coolly observed Fife. "Thou hast taken no care of thy wife, and therefore hast no right to demand strict account of her amusements in thy absence; and how do we know she is not as virtuous as the rest of them? I do but tell thee of these things to pass away the time. Ha! there goes the prince's Gascon favorite, by mine honor. Gaveston sports it bravely; look at his crimson mantle wadded with sables. He hath changed his garb since morning. Faith, he is a lucky dog! the prince's love may be valued at some thousand marks a year—worth possessing, by St. Michael!"

A muttered oath was all the reply which his companion vouchsafed, nor did the thunder-cloud upon his brow disperse that evening.

The careless recklessness of Fife had no power to lessen in the earl's mind the weight of the shameful charge he had brought against the countess. Buchan's dark, suspicious mind not alone received it, but cherished it, revelled in it, as giving him that which he had long desired, a good foundation for dislike and jealousy, a well-founded pretence for every species of annoyance and revenge. The Earl of Fife, who had, in fact, merely spoken, as he had said, to while away the time, and for the pleasure of seeing his brother-in-law enraged, thought as little of his words *after* as he had *before* they were uttered. A licentious follower of pleasure in every form himself, he imagined, as such thoughtless characters generally do, that everybody must be like him. From his weak and volatile mind, then, all remembrance of that evening's conversation faded as soon as it was spoken; but with the Earl of Buchan it remained brooding on itself, and filling his dark spirit with yet blacker fancies.

The confinement of the Scottish noblemen was not of long duration. Edward, whose temper, save when his ambition was concerned, was generally just and equitable, discovering, after an impartial examination, that they were in no ways connected with the affairs in the north, and feeling also it was his interest to conciliate the regard of all the Scottish nobles disaffected to Bruce, very soon restored them alike to their personal liberty and to his favor; his courteous apology for unjust suspicion, frankly acknowledging that the news from Scotland, combined with his irritating disease, had rendered him blind and suspicious, at once disarmed Fife of wrath. Buchan, perhaps, had not been so easily appeased had his mind been less darkly engrossed. His petition, that his son might be sent for, to be placed as a hostage in the hands of Edward, and thus saved from the authority of his mother, whom he represented as an artful, designing woman, possessed of dangerous influence, was acceded to on the instant, and the king's full confidence restored. It was easy to act upon Edward's mind, already incensed against Isabella of Buchan for her daring defiance of his power; and Buchan did work, till he felt perfectly satisfied that the wife he hated would be fully cared for without the very smallest trouble or interference on his part, save the obtaining possession of her person; that the vengeance he had vowed would be fully perfected, without any reproach or stigma cast upon his name.

Meantime the exertions of the King of England for the suppression of the rebels continued with unabated ardor. Orders were issued and proclaimed in every part of England for the gathering together one of the noblest and mightiest armies that had ever yet followed him to war. To render it still more splendidly impressive, and give fresh incentive to his subjects, whose warlike spirit he perhaps feared might be somewhat depressed by this constant call upon them for the reduction of a country ever rising in revolt, Edward caused proclamation to be severally made in every important town or county, "that all who were under the obligation to become knights, and possessed the necessary means, should appear at Westminster on the coming solemn season of Whitsuntide, where they should be furnished with every requisite, save and except the trappings for their horses, from the king's wardrobe, and be treated with all solemn honor and distinction as best befitted their rank, and the holy vows they took upon themselves."

A proclamation such as this, in the very heart of the chivalric era, was all-sufficient to engage every Englishman heart and soul in the service of his king; and ere the few weeks intervening between Easter and Whitsuntide were passed, Westminster and its environs presented a scene of martial magnificence and knightly splendor, which had never before been equalled. Three hundred noble youths, sons of earls, barons, and knights, speedily assembled at the place appointed, all attended according to their rank and pretensions; all hot and fiery spirits, eager to prove by their prompt attendance their desire to accept their sovereign's invitation. The splendor of their attire seemed to demand little increase from the bounty of the king, but nevertheless, fine linen garments, rich purple robes, and superb mantles woven with gold, were bestowed on each youthful candidate, thus strengthening the links which bound him to his chivalric sovereign, by the gratification of his vanity in addition to the envied honors of knighthood. As our tale relates more to Scottish than to English history, we may not linger longer on the affairs of South Britain than is absolutely necessary for the clear comprehension of the situation of her far less flourishing sister. Exciting therefore as was the scene enacted in Westminster, descriptive as it was of the spirit of the age, we are compelled to give it but a hasty glance, and pass on to events of greater moment.

Glorious, indeed, to an eyewitness, must have been the ceremony of admitting these noble and valiant youths into the solemn mysteries and chivalric honors of knighthood. On that day the

Prince of Wales was first dubbed a knight, and made Duke of Aquitaine; and so great was the pressure of the crowd, in their eagerness to witness the ceremonial in the abbey, where the prince hastened to confer his newly-received dignity on his companions, that three knights were killed, and several fainted from heat and exhaustion. Strong war-horses were compelled to drive back and divide the pressing crowds, ere the ceremony was allowed to proceed. A solemn banquet succeeded; and then it was that Edward, whose energy of mind appeared completely to have annihilated disease and weakness of frame, made that extraordinary vow, which it has puzzled both historian and antiquary satisfactorily to explain. The matter of the vow merely betrayed the indomitable spirit of the man, but the manner seemed strange even in that age. Two swans, decorated with golden nets and gilded reeds, were placed in solemn pomp before the king, and he, with imposing fervor, made a solemn vow to the Almighty and the swans, that he would go to Scotland, and, living or dead, avenge the murder of Comyn, and the broken faith of the traitorous Scots. Then, with that earnestness of voice and majesty of mien for which he was remarkable, he adjured his subjects, one and all, by the solemn fealty they had sworn to him, that if he should die on the journey, they would carry his body into Scotland, and never give it burial till the prince's dominion was established in that country. Eagerly and willingly the nobles gave the required pledge; and so much earnestness of purpose, so much martial spirit pervaded that gorgeous assembly, that once more did hope prevail in the monarch's breast, once more did he believe his ambitious yearnings would all be fulfilled, and Scotland, rebellious, haughty Scotland, lie crushed and broken at his feet. Once more his dark eye flashed, his proud lip curled with its wonted smiles; his warrior form, erect and firm as in former days, now spurned the couch of disease, and rode his war-horse with all the grace and ease of former years. A gallant army, under the command of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, had already been dispatched towards Scotland, bearing with it the messengers of the Earl of Buchan, armed both with their lord's commands and Edward's warrant for the detention of the young heir of Buchan, and to bring him with all honor to the head-quarters of the king. The name of Isabella of Buchan was subjoined to that of the Bruce, and together with all those concerned in his rising proclaimed as traitors and a price set upon their heads. This done, the king had been enabled to wait with greater tranquillity the assembling of his larger army, and after the ceremonials of Westminster, orders were issued for every earl and baron to proceed with their followers to Carlisle, which was named the head-quarters of the army, there to join their sovereign with his own immediate troops. The Scottish nobles Edward's usual policy retained in honorable posts about his person, not choosing to trust their fidelity beyond the reach of his own eye.

Obedient to these commands, all England speedily appeared in motion, the troops of every county moving as by one impulse to Carlisle. Yet there were some of England's noblest barons in whose breasts a species of admiration, even affection, was at work towards the very man they were now marching to destroy, and this was frequently the case in the ages of chivalry. Fickle as the character of Robert Bruce had appeared to be, there was that in it which had ever attracted, riveted the regard of many of the noble spirits in King Edward's court. The rash daring of his enterprise, the dangers which encircled him, were such as dazzled and fascinated the imagination of those knights in whom the true spirit of chivalry found rest. Pre-eminent amongst these was the noble Earl of Gloucester. His duty to his sovereign urged him to take the field; his attachment for the Bruce would have held him neuter, for the ties that bound brothers in arms were of no common or wavering nature. Brothers in blood had frequently found themselves opposed horse to horse, and lance to lance, on the same field, and no scruples of conscience, no pleadings of affection, had power to avert the unnatural strife; but not such was it with brothers in arms—a link strong as adamant, pure as their own sword-steel, bound their hearts as one; and rather, much rather would Gloucester have laid down his own life, than expose himself to the fearful risk of staining his sword with the blood of his friend. The deepest dejection took possession of his soul, which not all the confidence of his sovereign, the gentle, affectionate pleadings of his wife, could in any way assuage.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was the month of June, and the beautiful county of Perth smiled in all the richness and loveliness of early summer. Not yet had the signal of war floated on the pure springy breeze, not yet had the stains of blood desecrated the gladsome earth, although the army of De Valence was now within very few miles of Scone, which was still the head-quarters of the Scottish king. Aware of the very great disparity of numbers between his gallant followers and those of Pembroke, King Robert preferred entrenching himself in his present guarded situation, to meeting De Valence in the open field, although, more than once tempted to do so, and finding extreme difficulty in so curbing the dauntless spirit of his followers as to incline them more towards the defensive than the attack. Already had the fierce thunders of the Church been launched against him for the sin of murder committed in consecrated ground. Excommunication in all its horrors exposed him to death from any hand, that on any pretence of private hate or public weal might choose to strike; but already had there arisen spirits bold enough to dispute the awful mandates of the Pope, and the patriotic prelates who had before acknowledged and done homage to their sovereign, now neither wavered in their allegiance nor in any way sought to promulgate the sentence thundered against him. A calm smile had passed over the Bruce's noble features as the intelligence of the wrath of Rome was communicated to him.

"The judge and the avenger is in heaven, holy father," he said; "to His hands I commit my cause, conscious of deserving, as humbly awaiting, chastisement for that sin which none can reprobate and abhor more strongly than myself; if blood must flow for blood, His will be done. I ask but to free my country, to leave her in powerful yet righteous hands, and willingly I will depart, confident of mercy for my soul."

Fearful, however, that this sentence might dispirit his subjects, King Robert watched his opportunity of assembling and addressing them. In a brief, yet eloquent speech, he narrated the base, cold-blooded system of treachery of Comyn; how, when travelling to Scotland, firmly trusting in, and depending on, the good faith the traitor had so solemnly pledged, a brawl had arisen between his (Bruce's) followers and some men in the garb of Borderers, who were discovered to be emissaries of the Red Comyn, and how papers had been found on them, in which all that could expose the Bruce to the deadly wrath of Edward was revealed, and his very death advised as the only effectual means of quelling his efforts for the freedom of Scotland, and crushing the last hopes of her still remaining patriots. He told them how, on the natural indignation excited by this black treachery subsiding, he had met Sir John Comyn at Dumfries—how, knowing the fierce irascibility of his natural temper, he had willingly agreed that the interview Comyn demanded should take place in the church of the Minorite Friars, trusting that the sanctity of the place would be sufficient to restrain him.

"But who may answer for himself, my friends?" he continued, mournfully; "it needs not to dilate on that dark and stormy interview, suffice it that the traitor sought still to deceive, still to win me by his specious sophistry to reveal my plans, again to be betrayed, and that when I taunted him with his base, cowardly treachery, his black dishonor, words of wrath and hate, and blind deluded passion arose between us, and the spirit of evil at work within me urged my rash sword to strike. Subjects and friends, I plead no temptation as excuse, I make no defence; I deplore, I condemn the deed. If ye deem me worthy of death, if ye believe the sentence of our holy father in God, his holiness the Pope, be just, that it is wholly free from the machinations of England, who, deeming force of arms not sufficient, would hurl the wrath of heaven's viceregent on my devoted head, go, leave me to the fate it brings; your oath of allegiance is dissolved. I have yet faithful followers, to make one bold stand against the tyrant, and die for Scotland; but if ye absolve me, if ye will yet give me your hearts and swords, oh, fear me not, my countrymen, we may yet be free!"

Cries, tears, and blessings followed this wisely-spoken appeal, one universal shout reiterated their vows of allegiance; those who had felt terrified at the mandate of their spiritual father, now traced it not to his impartial judgment, but to the schemes of Edward, and instantly felt its weight and magnitude had faded into air. The unwavering loyalty of the Primate of Scotland, the Bishop of Glasgow, and the Abbot of Scone strengthened them alike in their belief and allegiance, and a band of young citizens were instantly provided with arms at the expense of the town, and the king entreated by a deputation of the principal magistrates to accept their services as a guard extraordinary, lest his life should be yet more endangered from private individuals, by the sentence under which he labored; and gratified by their devotedness, though his bold spirit spurned all Fear of secret assassination, their request was graciously accepted.

The ceremony of knighthood which the king had promised to confer on several of his young followers had been deferred until the present time, to admit of their preparing for their inauguration with all the solemn services of religion which the rites enjoined.

The 15th day of June was the time appointed, and Nigel Bruce and Alan of Buchan were to pass the night previous, in solemn prayer and vigil, in the abbey church of Scone. That the rules of chivalry should not be transgressed by his desire to confer some honor on the son of the Countess of Buchan, which would demonstrate the high esteem in which she was held by her sovereign, Alan had served the king, first as page and then as esquire, in the interval that had elapsed since his coronation, and now he beheld with ardor the near completion of the honor for which he pined. His spirit had been wrung well-nigh to agony, when amidst the list of the proscribed as traitors he beheld his mother's name; not so much at the dangers that would encircle her—for from those he might defend her—but that his father was still a follower of the unmanly tyrant, who would even war against a woman—his father should still calmly assist and serve the man who set a price upon his mother's head. Alas! poor boy, he little knew that father's heart.

It was evening, a still, oppressive evening, for though the sun yet shone brightly as he sunk in the west, a succession of black thunder-clouds, gradually rising higher and higher athwart the intense blue of the firmament, seemed to threaten that the wings of the tempest were already brooding on the dark bosom of night. The very flowers appeared to droop beneath the weight of the atmosphere; the trees moved not, the birds were silent, save when now and then a solitary note was heard, and then hushed, as if the little warbler shrunk back in his leafy nest, frightened at his own voice. Perchance it was the stillness of nature which had likewise affected the inmates of a retired chamber in the palace, for though they sate side by side, and their looks betrayed that the full communion of soul was not denied, few words were spoken. The maiden of Buchan bent over the frame which contained the blue satin scarf she was embroidering with the device of Bruce, in gold and gems, and it was Nigel Bruce who sate beside her, his deep, expressive eyes fixed upon her in such fervid, such eloquent love, that seldom was it she ventured to raise her glance to his. A slight shadow was on those sweet and gentle features, perceptible, perchance, to the eye of love alone; and it was this that, after enjoying that silent communion of the spirit, so dear to those who love, which bade Nigel fling his arm around that slender form, and ask—

"What is it, sweet one? why art thou sad?"

"Do not ask me, Nigel, for indeed I know not," she answered, simply, looking up a moment in his face, in that sweet touching confidence, which made him draw her closer to his protecting heart; "save that, perchance, the oppression of nature has extended to me, and filled my soul with unfounded fancies of evil. I ought to be very happy, Nigel, loved thus by *thee*," she hid her eyes upon his bosom; "received as thy promised bride, not alone by thy kind sisters, thy noble brothers, but—simple-hearted maiden as I am—deemed worthy of thee by good King Robert's self. Nigel, dearest Nigel, why, in an hour of joy like this, should dreams of evil come?"

"To whisper, my beloved, that not on earth may we look for the perfection of joy, the fulness of bliss; that while the mortal shell is round us joy is chained to pain, and granted us but to lift up the spirit to that heaven where pain is banished, bliss made perfect; dearest, 'tis but for this!" answered the young enthusiast, and the rich yet somewhat mournful tones of his voice thrilled to his listener's heart.

"Thou speakest as if thou, too, hadst experienced forebodings like to these, my Nigel," said Agnes, thoughtfully. "I deemed them but the foolishness of my weaker mind."

"Deem them not foolishness, beloved. There are minds, indeed, that know them not, but they are of that rude, coarse material which owns no thought, hath no hopes but those of earth and earthly things, insensible to that profundity of joy which makes us *feel* its *chain*: 'tis not to the lightly feeling such forebodings come."

"But thou—hast thou felt them, Nigel, dearest? hast thou listened to, *believed* their voice?"

"I have felt, I feel when I gaze on thee, sweet one, a joy so deep, so full, that I scarce dare trace it to an earthly cause," he said, slightly evading a direct answer. "I cannot look forward and, as it were, extend that deep joy to the future; but the fetter binding it to pain reminds me I am mortal, that not an earth may I demand find seek and hope to find its fulfilment."

She looked up in his face, with an expression both of bewilderment and fear, and her hand unconsciously closed on his arm, as thus to detain him to her side.

"Yes, my beloved," he added, with more animation, "it is not because I put not my trust in earth for unfading joy that we shall find not its sweet flowers below; that our paths on earth may be darkened, because the fulness of bliss is alone to be found in heaven. Mine own sweet Agnes, while darkness and strife, and blood and death, are thus at work around us, is it marvel we should sometimes dream of sorrow? Yet, oh yet, have we not both the same hope, the same God, the same home in heaven; and if our doom be to part on earth, shall we not, oh, shall we not meet in bliss? I say not such things will be, my best beloved; but better look thus upon the dim shadow sometimes resting on the rosy wings of joy, than ever dismiss it as the vain folly of a weakened mind."

He pressed his lips, which quivered, on the fair, beautiful brow then resting in irresistible sorrow on his bosom; but he did not attempt by words to check that maiden's sudden burst of tears. After a while, when he found his own emotion sufficiently restrained, soothingly and fondly he cheered her to composure, and drew from her the thoughts which had disturbed her when he first spoke.

"'Twas of my mother, Nigel, of my beloved, my noble mother that I thought; proscribed, hunted, set a price upon as a traitor. Can her children think on such indignity without emotion—and when I remember the great power of King Edward, who has done this—without fear for her fate?"

"Sweetest, fear not for her; her noble deed, her dauntless heroism has circled her with such a guard of gallant knights and warriors, that, in the hands of Edward, trust me, dearest, she shall never fall; and even if such should be, still, I say, fear not. Unpitying and cruel as Edward is, where his ambition is concerned, he is too true a knight, too noble in spirit to take a woman's blood; he is now fearfully enraged, and therefore has he done this. And as to indignity, 'tis shame to the proscriber not to the proscribed, my love!"

"There is one I fear yet more than Edward," continued the maiden, fearfully; "one that I should love more. Oh, Nigel, my very spirit shrinks from the image of my father. I have sought to love him, to dismiss the dark haunting visions which his name has ever brought before me. I saw him once, but once, and his stern terrible features and harsh voice so terrified my childish fancies, that I hid myself till he had departed, and I have never seen him since, and yet, oh yet, I fear him!"

"What is it that thou fearest, love?"

"I know not," she answered; "but if evil approach my mother, it will come from him, and so silently, so unsuspectedly, that none may avoid it. Nigel, he cannot love my mother! he is a foe to Bruce, a friend of the slaughtered Comyn, and will he not demand a stern account of the deed that she hath done? will he not seek vengeance? and oh, will he not, may he not in wrath part thee and me, and thus thy bodings be fulfilled?"

"Agnes, never! The mandate of man shall never part us; the power of man, unless my limbs be chained, shall never sever thee and me. He that hath never acted a father's part, can have no power on his child. Thou art mine, my beloved!—mine with thy mother's blessing; and mine thou shalt be—no earthly power shall part us. Death, death alone can break the links that bind us, and must be of God, though man may seem the cause. Be comforted, sweet love. Hark! they are

chiming vespers; I must be gone for the solemn vigil of to-night, and to-morrow thou shalt arm thine own true knight, mine Agnes, and deck me with that blue scarf, more precious even than the jewelled sword my sovereign brother gives. Farewell, for a brief, brief while; I go to watch and pray. Oh, let thy orisons attend me, and surely then my vigil shall be blest."

"Pray thou for me, my Nigel," whispered the trembling girl, as he clasped her in his arms, "that true as I may be, strength befitting thy promised bride may be mine own. Nigel, my beloved, indeed I need such prayer."

He whispered hope and comfort, and departed by the stone stairs which led from the gothic casement where they had been sitting, into the garden; he lingered to gather some delicate blue-bells which had just blown, and turned back to place them in the lap of Agnes. She eagerly raised them and pressed them to her lips, but either their fragile blossoms could not bear even her soft touch, or the heavy air had inwardly withered their bloom, for the blossoms fell from their stalks, and scattered their beautiful petals at her feet.

CHAPTER IX.

The hour of vespers had come and passed; the organ and choir had hushed their solemn sounds. The abbot and his attendant monks, the king who, with his train, had that evening joined the solemn service, all had departed, and but two inmates were left within the abbey church of Scone. Darkness and silence had assumed their undisturbed dominion, for the waxen tapers left burning on the altar lighted but a few yards round, leaving the nave and cloisters in impenetrable gloom. Some twenty or thirty yards east of the altar, elevated some paces from the ground, in its light and graceful shrine, stood an elegantly sculptured figure of the Virgin and Child. A silver lamp, whose pure flame was fed with aromatic incense, burned within the shrine and shed its soft light on a suit of glittering armor which was hanging on the shaft of a pillar close beside it. Directly behind the altar was a large oriel window of stained glass, representing subjects from Scripture. The window, with its various mullions and lights, formed one high pointed arch, marked by solid stone pillars on each side, the capitals of which traced the commencement of the arch. Another window, similar in character, though somewhat smaller in dimensions, lighted the west end of the church; and near it stood another shrine containing a figure of St. Stephen, lighted as was that of the Virgin and Child, and, like that, gleaming on a suit of armor, and on the figure of the youthful candidate for knighthood, whose task was to pass that night in prayer and vigil beside his armor, unarmed, saved by that panoply of proof which is the Christian's portion—faith, lowliness, and prayer.

No word passed between these pledged brothers in arms. Their watch was in opposite ends of the church, and save the dim, solemn light of the altar, darkness and immeasurable space appeared to stretch between them. Faintly and fitfully the moon had shone through one of the long, narrow windows of the aisles, shedding its cold spectral light for a brief space, then passing into darkness. Heavy masses of clouds sailed slowly in the heavens, dimly discernible through the unpainted panes; the oppression of the atmosphere increasing as the night approached her zenith, and ever and anon a low, long peal of distant thunder, each succeeding one becoming longer and louder than the last, and heralded by the blue flash of vivid lightning, announced the fury of the coming tempest.

The imaginations even as the feelings of the young men were already strongly excited, although their thoughts, perchance, were less akin than might have been expected. The form of his mother passed not from the mental vision of the young heir of Buchan: the tone of her voice, the unwonted tear which had fallen on his cheek when he had knelt before her that evening, ere he had departed to his post, craving her blessing on his vigil, her prayers for him—that tone, that tear, lingered on his memory, hallowing every dream of glory, every warrior hope that entered in his soul. Internally he vowed he would raise the banner of his race, and prove the loyalty, the patriotism, the glowing love of liberty which her counsels, her example had planted in his breast; and if the recollection of his mother's precarious situation as a proscribed traitor to Edward, and of his father's desertion of his country and her patriot king in his adherence to a tyrant—if these reflections came to damp the bright glowing views of others, they did but call the indignant blood to his cheek, and add greater firmness to his impatient step, for yet more powerfully did they awake his indignation against Edward. Till now he had looked upon him exclusively in the light of Scotland's foe—one against whom he with all true Scottish men must raise their swords, or live forever 'neath the brand of slaves and cowards; but now a personal cause of anger added fuel to the fire already burning in his breast. His mother was proscribed—a price set upon her head; and as if to fill the measure of his cup of bitterness to overflowing, his own father, he who should have been her protector, aided and abetted the cruel, pitiless Edward. Traitor! Isabella of Buchan a traitress! the noblest, purest, bravest amid Scotland's children. She who to him had ever seemed all that was pure and good, and noblest in woman; and most noble and patriot-hearted now, in the fulfilment of an office inherent in the House of Fife. Agitated beyond expression, quicker and quicker he strode up and down the precincts marked for his watch, the increasing tempest without seeming to assimilate strangely with the storm within. Silence would have irritated, would have chafed those restless smartings into very agony, but the wild war of the elements, while they roused his young spirit into yet stronger energy, removed its pain.

"It matters not," his train of thought continued, "while this brain can think, this heart can feel, this arm retain its strength, Isabella of Buchan needs no other guardian but her son. It is as if years had left their impress on my heart, as if I had grown in very truth to man, thinking with man's wisdom, fighting with man's strength. He that hath never given a father's love, hath never done a father's duty, hath no claim upon his child; but she, whose untiring devotion, whose faithful love hath watched over me, guarded, blessed from the first hour of my life, instilled within me the principles of life on earth and immortality in heaven—mother! mother! will not thy gentle virtues cling around thy boy, and save him even from a father's curse? Can I do else than devote the life thou gavest, to thee, and render back with my stronger arm, but not less firm soul, the care, protection, love thou hast bestowed on me? Mother, Virgin saint," he continued aloud, flinging himself before the shrine to which we have alluded, "hear, oh hear my prayer! Intercede for me above, that strength, prudence, wisdom may be granted me in the accomplishment of my knightly vows; that my mother, my own mother may be the first and dearest object of my heart: life, fame, and honor I dedicate to her. Spare me, bless me but for her; if danger, imprisonment be unavailingly her doom, let not my spirit waver, nor my strength flag, nor courage nor foresight fail, till she is rescued to liberty and life."

Wrapt in the deep earnest might of prayer, the boy remained kneeling, with clasped hands, and eyes fixed on the Virgin's sculptured face, his spirit inwardly communing, long, long after his impassioned vows had sunk in silence; the thunder yet rolled fearfully, and the blue lightning flashed and played around him with scarce a minute's intermission, but no emotion save that of a son and warrior took possession of his soul. He knew a terrific storm was raging round him, but it drew him not from earthly thoughts and earthly feelings, even while it raised his soul in prayer. Very different was the effect of this lonely vigil and awful night on the imaginative spirit of his companion.

It was not alone the spirit of chivalry which now burned in the noble heart of Nigel Bruce. He was a poet, and the glowing hues of poesie invested every emotion of his mind. He loved deeply, devotedly; and love, pure, faithful, hopeful love, appeared to have increased every feeling, whether of grief or joy, in intensity and depth. He felt too deeply to be free from that peculiar whispering within, known by the world as presentiment, and as such so often scorned and contemned as the mere offspring of weak, superstitious minds, when it is in reality one of those distinguishing marks of the higher, more ethereal temperament of genius.

Perchance it is the lively imagination of such minds, which in the very midst of joy can so vividly portray and realize pain, or it may be, indeed, the mysterious voice which links gifted man with a higher class of beings to whom futurity is revealed. Be this as it may, even while the youthful patriot beheld with a visioned eye the liberty of his country, and rejoiced in thus beholding, there ever came a dim and silent shadowing, a whispering voice, that he should indeed behold it, but not from earth. When the devoted brother and loyal subject pictured his sovereign in very truth a free and honored King, his throne surrounded by nobles and knights of his own free land, and many others, the enthusiast saw not himself amongst them, and yet he rejoiced in the faith such things would be. When the young and ardent lover sate by the side of his betrothed, gazing on her sweet face, and drinking in deeply the gushing tide of joy; when his spirit pictured yet dearer, lovelier, more assured bliss, when Agnes would be in very truth his own, still did that strange thrilling whisper come, and promise he should indeed experience such bliss, but not on earth; and yet he loved, aye, and rejoiced, and there came not one shadow on his bright, beautiful face, not one sad echo in the rich, deep tones of his melodious voice to betray such dim forebodings had found resting in his soul.

Already excited by his conversation with Agnes, the service in which he found himself engaged was not such as to tranquillize his spirit, or still his full heart's quivering throb. His imaginative soul had already flung its halo over the solemn rites which attended his inauguration as a knight. Even to less enthusiastic spirits there was a glow, a glory in this ceremony which seldom failed to awake the soul, and inspire it with high and noble sentiments. It was not therefore strange that these emotions should in the heart of Nigel Bruce obtain that ascendancy, which to sensitive minds must become pain. Had it been a night of calm and holy stillness, he would in all probability have felt its soothing effect; but as it was, every pulse throbbed and every nerve was strained 'neath his strong sense of the sublime. He could not be said to think, although he had struggled long and fiercely to compose his mind for those devotional exercises he deemed most fitted for the hour. Feeling alone possessed him, overwhelming, indefinable; he deemed it admiration, awe, adoration of Him at whose nod the mighty thunders rolled and the destructive lightnings flashed, but he could not define it such. He did not dream of earth, not even the form of Agnes flashed, as was its wont, before him; no, it was of scenes and sounds undreamed of in earth's philosophy he thought; and as he gazed on the impenetrable darkness, and then beheld it dispersed by the repeated lightning, his excited fancy almost believed that he should see it peopled by the spirits of the mighty dead which slept within those walls, and no particle of terror attended this belief. In the weak superstition of his age, Nigel Bruce had never shared, but firmly and steadfastly he believed, even in his calm and unexcited moments, that there was a link between the living and the dead; that the freed spirits of the one were permitted to hold commune with the other, not in visible shape, but in those thrilling whispers which the spirit knows, while yet it would deny them even to itself. It was the very age of superstition; religion itself was clothed in a veil of solemn mystery, which to minds constituted as Nigel's gave it a deeper, more impressive tone. Its ceremonies, its shrines, its fictions, all gave fresh zest to the imagination, and filled the heart of its votary with a species of devotion and excitement, which would now be considered as mere visionary madness, little in accordance with the true spirit of

piety or acceptable to the Most High, but which was then regarded as meritorious; and even as we look back upon the saints and heroes of the past, even now should not be condemned; for, according to the light bestowed, so is devotion demanded and accepted by the God of all.

Nigel Bruce had paused in his hasty walk, and leaning against the pillar round which his armor hung, fixed his eyes for a space on the large oriel window we have named, whose outline was but faintly discernible, save on the left side, which was dimly illumined by the silver lamp burning in the shrine of St. Stephen, close beside which the youthful warrior stood. The storm had suddenly sunk into an awful and almost portentous silence; and in that brief interval of stillness and gloom, Nigel felt his blood flow more calmly in his veins, his pulses stilled their starting throbs, and the young soldier crossed his arms on his breast, and bent his uncovered head upon them in silent yet earnest prayer.

The deep, solemn chime of the abbey-bell, echoing like a spirit-voice through the arched and silent church, roused him, and he looked up. At the same moment a strong and awfully brilliant flash of lightning darted through the window on which his eyes were fixed, followed by a mighty peal of thunder, longer and louder than any that had come before. For above a minute that blue flash lingered playing, it seemed, on steel, and a cold shuddering thrill crept through the frame of Nigel Bruce, sending the life-blood from his cheek back to his very heart, for either fancy had again assumed her sway, and more vividly than before, or his wild thoughts had found a shape and semblance. Within the arch formed by the high window stood or seemed to stand a tall and knightly form, clad from the gorget to the heel in polished steel; his head was bare, and long, dark hair shaded a face pale and shadowy indeed, but strikingly and eminently noble; there was a scarf across his breast, and on it Nigel recognized the cognizance of his own line, the crest and motto of the Bruce. It could not have been more than a minute that the blue lightning lingered there, yet to his excited spirit it was long enough to impress indelibly and startlingly every trace of that strange vision upon his heart. The face was turned to his, with a solemn yet sorrowful earnestness of expression, and the mailed hand raised on high, seemed pointing unto heaven. The flash passed and all was darkness, the more dense and impenetrable, from the vivid light which had preceded it; but Nigel stirred not, moved not, his every sense absorbed, not in the weakness of mortal terror, but in one overwhelming sensation of awe, which, while it oppressed the spirit well-nigh to pain, caused it to long with an almost sickening intensity for a longer and clearer view of that which had come and passed with the lightning flash. Again the vivid blaze dispersed the gloom, but no shadow met his fixed impassioned gaze. Vision or reality, the form was gone; there was no trace, no sign of that which had been. For several successive flashes Nigel remained gazing on the spot where the mailed form had stood, as if he felt it would, it must again appear; but as time sped, and he saw but space, the soul relaxed from its high-wrought mood, the blood, which had seemed stagnant in his veins, rushed back tumultuously through its varied channels, and Nigel Bruce prostrated himself before the altar, to wrestle with his perturbed spirit till it found calm in prayer.

A right noble and glorious scene did the great hall of the palace present the morning which followed this eventful night. The king, surrounded by his highest prelates and nobles, mingling indiscriminately with the high-born dames and maidens of his court, all splendidly attired, occupied the upper part of the hall, the rest of which was crowded both by his military followers and many of the good citizens of Scone, who flocked in great numbers to behold the august ceremony of the day. Two immense oaken doors at the south side of the hall were flung open, and through them was discerned the large space forming the palace yard, prepared as a tilting-ground, where the new-made knights were to prove their skill. The storm had given place to a soft breezy morning, the cool freshness of which appearing peculiarly grateful from the oppressiveness of the night; light downy clouds sailed over the blue expanse of heaven, tempering without clouding the brilliant rays of the sun. Every face was clothed with smiles, and the loud shouts which hailed the youthful candidates for knighthood, as they severally entered, told well the feeling with which the patriots of Scotland were regarded.

Some twenty youths received the envied honor at the hand of their sovereign this day, but our limits forbid a minute scrutiny of the bearing of any, however well deserving, save of the two whose vigils have already detained us so long. A yet longer and louder shout proclaimed the appearance of the youngest scion of the house of Bruce, and his companion. The daring patriotism of Isabella of Buchan had enshrined her in every heart, and so disposed all men towards her children, that the name of their traitorous father was forgotten.

Led by their godfathers, Nigel by his brother-in-law, Sir Christopher Seaton, and Alan by the Earl of Lennox, their swords, which had been blessed by the abbot at the altar, slung round their necks, they advanced up the hall. There was a glow on the cheek of the young Alan, in which pride and modesty were mingled; his step at first was unsteady, and his lip was seen to quiver from very bashfulness, as he first glanced round the hall and felt that every eye was turned towards him; but when that glance met his mother's fixed on him, and breathing that might of love which filled her heart, all boyish tremors fled, the calm, staid resolve of manhood took the place of the varying glow upon his cheek, the quivering lip became compressed and firm, and his step faltered not again.

The cheek of Nigel Bruce was pale, but there was firmness in the glance of his bright eye, and a smile unclouded in its joyance on his lip. The frivolous lightness of the courtier, the mad bravado of knight-errantry, which was not uncommon to the times, indeed, were not there. It was the quiet courage of the resolved warrior, the calm of a spirit at peace with itself, shedding its own high feeling and poetic glory over all around him.

On reaching the foot of King Robert's throne, both youths knelt and laid their sheathed swords at his feet. Their armor-bearers then approached, and the ceremony of clothing the candidates in steel commenced; the golden spur was fastened on the left foot of each by his respective godfather, while Athol, Hay, and other nobles advanced to do honor to the youths, by aiding in the ceremony. Nor was it warriors alone.

"Is this permitted, lady?" demanded the king, smiling, as the Countess of Buchan approached the martial group, and, aided by Lennox, fastened the polished cuirass on the form of her son. "Is it permitted for a matron to arm a youthful knight? Is there no maiden to do such inspiring office?"

"Yes, when the knight be one as this, my liege," she answered, in the same tone; "let a matron arm him, good my liege," she added, sadly—"let a mother's hand enwrap his boyish limbs in steel, a mother's blessing mark him thine and Scotland's, that those who watch his bearing in the battle-field may know who sent him there, may thrill his heart with memories of her who stands alone of her ancestral line, that though he bears the name of Comyn, the blood of Fife flows reddest in his veins."

"Arm him and welcome, noble lady," answered the king, and a buzz of approbation ran through the hall; "and may thy noble spirit and dauntless loyalty inspire him; we shall not need a trusty follower while such as he are round us. Yet, in very deed, my youthful knight must have a lady fair for whom he tilts to-day. Come hither, Isoline; thou lookest verily inclined to envy thy sweet friend her office, and nothing loth to have a loyal knight thyself. Come, come, my pretty one, no blushing now. Lennox, guide those tiny hands aright."

Laughing and blushing, Isoline, the daughter of Lady Campbell, a sister of the Bruce, a graceful child of some thirteen summers, advanced, nothing loth, to obey her royal uncle's summons, and an arch smile of real enjoyment irresistibly stole over the countenance of Alan, dispersing the emotion his mother's words produced.

"Nay, tremble not, sweet one," the king continued, in a lower and yet kinder tone, as he turned from the one youth to the other, and observed that Agnes, overpowered by emotion, had scarcely power to perform her part, despite the whispered words of encouraging affection Nigel murmured in her ear. Imaginative to a degree, which, by her quiet, subdued manners, was never suspected, the simple act of those early flowers withering in her grasp, fresh as they were from the hand of her betrothed, had weighed down her spirits as with an indefinable sense of pain, which she could not combat. The war of the elements, attending as it did the vigil of her lover, had not decreased these feelings, and the morning found her dispirited and shrinking in sensitiveness from the very scene she had anticipated with joy.

"It must not be with a trembling hand the betrothed of a Bruce arms her chosen knight, fair Agnes," continued the king, cheerfully. "She must inspire him with valor and confidence. Smile, then, gentlest and loveliest; we would have all smiles to-day."

And she did smile, but it was a smile of tears, gleaming on her beautiful face as a sunny beam through a glistening spray. One by one the cuirass and shoulder-pieces, the greaves and gauntlets, the gorget and brassards, the joints of which were so beautifully burnished that they shone as mirrors, and so flexible every limb had its free use, enveloped those manly forms. Their swords once again girt to their sides, and once more keeling, the king descended from his throne, and alternately dubbed them knight in the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George.

"Be faithful, brave, and hardy, youthful cavaliers," he said; "true to the country which claims ye, to the monarch ye have sworn to serve, to the knight from whose sword ye have received the honor ye have craved. Remember, 'tis not the tourney nor the tilted field in which ye will gain renown. For your country let your swords be drawn; against her foes reap laurels. Sir Nigel, 'tis thine to retain unsullied the name thou bearest, to let the Bruce be glorified in thee. And thou, Sir Alan, 'tis thine to *earn* a name—in very truth, to win thy golden spurs; to prove we do no unwise deed, forgetting thy early years, to do honor to thy mother's son."

Lightly and eagerly the new-made knights sprung to their feet, the very clang of their glittering armor ringing gratefully and rejoicingly in their ears. Their gallant steeds, barded and richly caparisoned, held by their esquires, stood neighing and pawing at the foot of the steps leading from the oaken doors.

Without touching the stirrup, both sprung at the same instant in their saddles; the helmet, with its long graceful plume, was quickly donned; the lance and shield received; the pennon adorning the iron head of each lowered a moment in honor to their sovereign, then waved gayly in air, and then each lance was laid in rest; a trumpet sounded, and onward darted the fiery youths thrice round the lists, displaying a skill and courage in horsemanship which was hailed with repeated shouts of applause. But on the tourney and the banquet which succeeded the ceremony we have described we may not linger, but pass rapidly on to a later period of the same evening.

Sir Nigel and his beautiful betrothed had withdrawn a while from the glittering scene around them; they had done their part in the graceful dance, and now they sought the comparative solitude and stillness of the flower-gemmed terrace, on which the ball-room opened, to speak unreservedly the thoughts which had filled each heart; perchance there were some yet veiled, for the vision of the preceding night, the strange, incongruous fancies it had engendered in the youthful warrior, a solemn vow had buried deep in his own soul, and not even to Agnes, to whom his heart was wont to be revealed, might such thoughts find words; and she shrunk in timidity from avowing the inquietude of her own simple heart, and thus it was that each, for the sake of

the other, spoke hopefully and cheerily, and gayly, until at length they were but conscious of mutual and devoted love—the darkening mists of the future lost in the radiance of the present sun.

A sudden pause in the inspiring music, the quick advance of all the different groups towards one particular spot, had failed perchance to interrupt the happy converse of the lovers, had not Sir Alan hastily approached them, exclaiming, as he did so—

"For the love of heaven! Nigel, forget Agnes for one moment, and come along with me. A messenger from Pembroke has just arrived, bearing a challenge, or something very like it, to his grace the king; and it may be we shall win our spurs sooner than we looked for this morning. The sight of Sir Henry Seymour makes the war trumpet sound in mine ears. Come, for truly there is something astir."

With Agnes still leaning on his arm, Nigel obeyed the summons of his impatient friend, and joined the group around the king. There was a quiet dignity in the attitude and aspect of Robert Bruce, or it might be the daring patriotism of his enterprise was appreciated by the gallant English knight; certain it was that, though Sir Henry's bearing had been somewhat haughty, his brow knit, and his head still covered, as he passed up the hall, by an irresistible impulse he doffed his helmet as he met the eagle glance of the Bruce, and bowed his head respectfully before him, an example instantly followed by his attendants.

"Sir Henry Seymour is welcome to our court," said the king, courteously; "welcome, whatever message he may bear. How fares it with the chivalric knight and worthy gentleman, Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke? Ye bring us a message from him, 'tis said. Needs it a private hearing, sir knight? if so, we are at your service; yet little is it Aymer de Valence can say to Scotland's king which Scotland may not hear."

"Pembroke is well, an please you, and sendeth greeting," replied the knight. "His message, sent as it is to the Bruce, is well fitted for the ears of his followers, therefore may it be spoken here. He sendeth all loving and knightly greeting unto him known until now as Robert Earl of Carrick, and bids him, an he would proclaim and prove the rights he hath assumed, come forth from the narrow precincts of a palace and town, which ill befit a warrior of such high renown, and give him battle in the Park of Methven, near at hand. He challenges him to meet him there, with nobles, knights, and yeomen, who proclaiming Robert Bruce their sovereign, cast down the gauntlet of defiance and rebellion against their rightful king and mine, his grace of England; he challenges thee, sir knight, or earl, or king, whichever name thou bearest, and dares thee to the field."

"And what if we accept not his daring challenge?" demanded King Robert, sternly, without permitting the expression of his countenance to satisfy in any way the many anxious glances fixed upon it.

"He will proclaim thee coward knight and traitor slave," boldly answered Sir Henry. "In camp or in hall, in lady's bower or tented field, he will proclaim thee recreant; one that took upon himself the state and pomp of royalty without the spirit to defend and prove it."

"Had he done so by our predecessor, Baliol, he had done well," returned the king, calmly. "Nobles, and knights, and gentlemen," he added, the lion spirit of his race kindling in his eye and cheek, "what say ye in accepting the bold challenge of this courtly earl? Do we not read your hearts as well as our own? Ye have chafed and fretted that we have retained ye so long inactive: in very truth your monarch's spirit chafed and fretted too. We will do battle with this knightly foe, and give him, in all chivalric and honorable courtesy, the meeting he desires."

One startling and energetic shout burst simultaneously from the warriors around, forming a wild and thrilling response to their sovereign's words. In vain they sought to restrain that outbreak of rejoicing, in respect to the royal presence; they had pined, they had yearned for action, and Sir Henry was too good a knight himself not to understand to the full the patriotic fervor and chivalrous spirit from which that shout had sprung. Proudly and joyfully the Bruce looked on his devoted adherents, and then addressed the English knight.

"Thou hast our answer, good Sir Henry," he said; "more thou couldst scarcely need. Commend us to your master, and take heed thou sayest all that thou hast heard and seen in answer to his challenge. In the Park of Methven, three days hence, he may expect the King of Scotland and his patriot troops with him, to do battle unto death. Edward, good brother, thou, Seaton, and the Lord of Douglas, conduct this worthy knight in all honor from the hall. Thou hast our answer."

The knight bowed low, but ere he retreated he spoke again. "I am charged with yet another matter, an it so please you," he said, evidently studying to avoid all royal titles, although the bearing of the king rendered his task rather more difficult than he could have imagined; "a matter of small import, truly, yet must it be spoken. 'Tis rumored that you have amid your household a child, a boy, whose father was a favored servant of my gracious liege and yours, King Edward. The Earl of Pembroke, in the name of his sovereign and of the child's father, bids me demand him of thee, as having, from his tender years and inexperience, no will nor voice in this matter, he having been brought here by his mother, who, saving your presence, had done better to have remembered her duty to her husband than encourage rebellion against her king."

"Keep to the import of thy message, nor give thy tongue such license, sir," interrupted the Bruce, sternly; and many an eye flashed, and many a hand sought his sword. "Sir Alan of Buchan, stand

forth and give thine own answer to this imperative demand; 'tis to thee, methinks, its import would refer. Thou hast wisdom and experience, if not years enough, to answer for thyself.

"Tell Aymer de Valence, would he seek me, he will find me by the side of my sovereign King Robert, in Methven Park, three days hence," boldly and quickly answered the young soldier, stepping forward from his post in the circle, and fronting the knight. "Tell him I am here of my own free will, to acknowledge Robert the Bruce as mine and Scotland's king; to defy the tyrant Edward, even to the death; tell him 'tis no child he seeks, but a knight and soldier, who will meet him on the field."

"It would seem we are under some mistake, young sir," replied Sir Henry, gazing with unfeigned admiration on the well-knit frame and glowing features of the youthful knight. "I speak of and demand the surrender of the son and heir of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, who was represented to me as a child of some ten or thirteen summers; 'tis with him, not with thee, my business treats."

"And 'tis the son—I know not how long *heir*—of John Comyn, Earl of Buchan, who speaks with thee, sir knight. It may well be, my very age, my very existence hath been forgotten by my father," he added, with a fierceness and bitterness little in accordance with his years, "aye, and would have been remembered no more, had not the late events recalled them; yet 'tis even so—and that thy memory prove not treacherous, there lies my gage. Foully and falsely hast thou spoken of Isabella of Buchan, and her honor is dear to her son as is his own. In Methven Park we *two* shall meet, sir knight, and the child, the puny stripling, who hath of his own nor voice nor will, will not fail thee, be thou sure."

Proudly, almost sternly, the boy fixed his flashing orbs on the English knight, and without removing his glance, strode to the side of his mother and drew her arm within his own. There was something in the accent, in the saddened yet resolute expression of his countenance, which forbade all rejoinder, not from Sir Henry alone, but even from his own friends. Seymour raised the gage, and with a meaning smile secured it in his helmet; then respectfully saluting the group around him, withdrew, attended as desired by the Bruce.

"Heed it not, my boy, my own noble boy!" said the Countess of Buchan, in those low, earnest, musical tones peculiarly her own; for she saw that there was a quivering in the lip, a sudden paleness in the cheek of her son, as he gazed up in her lace, when he thought they stood alone, which denoted internal emotion yet stronger than that which had inspired his previous words. "Their scorn, their contumely, I heed as little as the mountain rock the hailstones which fall upon its sides, in vain seeking to penetrate or wound. Nay, I could smile at them in very truth, were it not that compelled as I am to act alone, to throw aside as worthless and rejected those natural ties I had so joyed to wear, my heart seems closed to smiles; but for words as those, or yet harsher scorn, grieve not, my noble boy, they have no power to fret or hurt me."

"Yet to hear them speak in such tone of thee—thee, whose high soul and noble courage would shame a score of some who write themselves men!—thee, who with all a woman's loving heart, and guileless, unselfish, honorable mind, hath all a warrior's stern resolve, a patriot's noble purpose! Mother, mother, how may thy son brook scorn and falsity, and foul calumny cast upon thee?" and there was a choking suffocation in his throat, filling his eyes perforce with tears; and had it not been that manhood struggled for dominion, he would have flung himself upon his mother's breast and wept.

"As a soldier and a man, my son," she drew him closer to her as she spoke; "as one who, knowing and feeling the worth of the contemned one, is conscious that the foul tongues of evil men can do no ill, but fling back the shame upon themselves. Arouse thee, my beloved son. Alas! when I look on thee, on thy bright face, on those graceful limbs, so supple now in health and life, and feel to what my deed may have devoted thee, my child, my child, I need not slanderous tongues to grieve me!"

"And doth the Countess of Buchan repent that deed?" asked the rich sonorous voice of the Bruce, who, unobserved, had heard their converse. "Would she recall that which she hath done?"

"Sire, not so," she answered; "precious as is my child to this lone heart—inexpressibly dear and precious—yet if the liberty of his country demand me to resign him, the call shall be obeyed."

"Speak not thus, noble lady," returned the king, cheerily. "He is but *lent*, Scotland asks no more; and when heaven smiles on this poor country, smiles in liberty and peace, trust me, such devotedness will not have been in vain. Our youthful knight will lay many a wreath of laurel at his mother's feet, nor will there then be need to guard her name from scorn. See what new zest and spirit have irradiated the brows of our warlike guests; we had scarce deemed more needed than was there before, yet the visit of Sir Henry Seymour, bearing as it did a challenge to strife and blood, hath given fresh lightness to every step, new joyousness to every tone. Is not this as it should be?"

"Aye, as it *must* be, sire, while loyal hearts and patriot spirits form thy court. Nobly and gallantly was the answer given to Pembroke's challenge. Yet pardon me, sire, was it wise—was it well?"

"Its wisdom, lady, rests with its success in the hands of a higher power," answered the king, gravely, yet kindly. "Other than we did we could not do; rashly and presumptuously we would not have left our quarters. Not for the mere chase of, mad wish for glory would we have risked the precious lives of our few devoted friends, but challenged as we were, the soul of Bruce could not

have spoken other than he did; nor do we repent, nay, we rejoice that the stern duty of inaction is over. Thine eye tells me thou canst understand this, lady, therefore we say no more, save to beseech thee to inspire our consort with the necessity of this deed; she trembles for the issue of our daring. See how grave and sad she looks, so lately as she was all smiles."

The countess did not reply, but hastened to the side of the amiable, but yet too womanly Queen Margaret, and gently, but invisibly sought to soothe her fears; and she partially succeeded, for the queen ever seemed to feel herself a bolder and firmer character when in the presence and under the influence of Isabella of Buchan.

CHAPTER X.

It was a gallant, though, alas! but too small a force which, richly and bravely accoutred, with banners proudly flying, music sounding, superb chargers caparisoned for war, lances in rest, and spear and bill, sword and battle-axe, marched through the olden gates of Scone in a south-westward direction, early on the morning of the 25th of June, 1306. Many were the admiring eyes and yearning hearts which followed them, and if doubt and dread did mingle in the fervid aspirations raised for their welfare and success, they were not permitted to gain ascendancy so long as the cheering tones and happy smiles of every one of that patriot band lingered on the ear and sight. As yet there were but few of the nobles and knights with their men. The troops had been commanded to march leisurely forward, under charge of the esquires and gentlemen, who were mostly lieutenants or cornets to their leaders' respective bands of followers; and, if not overtaken before, to halt in a large meadow to the north of Perth, which lay in their way.

The knots of citizens, however, who had accompanied the army to the farthest environs of the town, had not dispersed to their several homes ere the quick, noisy clattering of a gallant troop of horse echoed along the street, and the king, surrounded by his highest nobles and bravest knights, galloped by, courteously returning the shouts and acclamations of delight which hailed him on every side. His vizor was purposely left up, and his noble countenance, beaming with animation and hope, seemed to inspire fresh hope and confidence in all that gazed. A white ostrich plume, secured to his helmet by a rich clasp of pearls and diamonds, fell over his left shoulder till it well-nigh mingled with the flowing mane of his charger, whose coal-black glossy hide was almost concealed beneath the armor which enveloped him, and the saddle-cloth of crimson velvet, whose golden fringe nearly swept the ground. King Robert was clothed in the same superb suit of polished steel armor, inlaid and curiously wrought with ingrained silver, in which we saw him at first; a crimson scarf secured his trusty sword to his side, and a short mantle of azure velvet, embroidered with the golden thistle of Scotland, and lined with the richest sable, was secured at his throat by a splendid collaret of gems. The costly materials of his dress, and, yet more, the easy and graceful seat upon his charger, his chivalric bearing, and the frank, noble expression of his countenance, made him, indeed, "look every inch a king," and might well of themselves have inspired and retained the devoted loyalty of his subjects, even had there been less of chivalry in his daring rising.

Edward Bruce was close beside his brother. With a figure and appearance equally martial and equally prepossessing, he wanted the quiet dignity, the self-possession of voice and feature which characterized the king. He had not the mind of Robert, and consequently the uppermost passion of the spirit was ever the one marked on his brow. On this morning he was all animated smiles, for war was alike his vocation and his pastime.

Thomas and Alexander Bruce were also there, both gallant men and well-trying warriors, and eager as Edward for close encounter with the foe. The Earls of Lennox and Athol, although perhaps in their secret souls they felt that the enterprise was rash, gave no evidence of reluctance in their noble bearing; indeed, had they been certain of marching to their death, they would not have turned from the side of Bruce. The broad banner of Scotland, whose ample folds waved in the morning breeze, had been intrusted to the young heir of Buchan, who, with the other young and new-made knights, eager and zealous to win their spurs, had formed a body guard around the banner, swearing to defend it to the last moment of their lives. Nigel Bruce was one of these; he rode close beside his brother in arms, and midst that animated group, those eager spirits throbbing for action, no heart beat quicker than his own. All was animated life, anticipated victory; the very heavens smiled as if they would shed no shadow on this patriot band.

It was scarcely two hours after noon when King Robert and his troops arrived at the post assigned—the park or wood of Methven; and believing that it was not till the succeeding day to which the challenge of Pembroke referred, he commanded his men to make every preparation for a night encampment. The English troops lay at about a quarter of a mile distant, on the side of a hill, which, as well as tree and furze would permit, commanded a view of the Bruce's movements. There were tents erected, horses picketed, and every appearance of quiet, confirming the Scotch in their idea of no engagement taking place till the morrow.

Aware of the great disparity of numbers, King Robert eagerly and anxiously examined his ground as to the best spot for awaiting the attack of the English. He fixed on a level green about half a mile square, guarded on two sides by a thick wood of trees, on the third and left by a deep running rivulet, and open on the fourth, encumbered only by short, thick bushes and little knots

of thorn, which the king welcomed, as impeding the progress and obstructing the evolutions of Pembroke's horse. The bushes which were scattered about on the ground he had chosen, he desired his men to clear away, and ere the sun neared his setting, all he wished was accomplished, and his plan of battle arranged. He well remembered the impenetrable phalanx of the unfortunate Wallace at the battle of Falkirk, and determined on exposing a steady front of spears in the same manner. Not having above thirty horse on whom he could depend, and well aware they would be but a handful against Pembroke's two hundred, he placed them in the rear as a reserve, in the centre of which waved the banner of Scotland. The remainder of his troops he determined on arranging in a compact crescent, the bow exposed to the English, the line stretching out against the wood. This was his intended line of battle, but, either from mistake or purposed treachery on the part of Pembroke, his plan was frustrated, and in addition to the great disparity of numbers he had to struggle with surprise.

The day had been extremely sultry, and trusting in full confidence to the honor of his opponent, and willing to give his men all needful rest, the king dismissed them from their ranks to refreshment and repose, leaving but very few to guard, himself retiring with his older officers to a tent prepared for his reception.

Arm in arm, and deep in converse, Nigel Bruce and Alan of Buchan wandered a little apart from their companions, preferring a hasty meal and the calm beauty of a lovely summer evening, accompanied by a refreshing breeze, to remaining beside the rude but welcome meal, and sharing the festivity which enlivened it.

"Thinkest thou not, Nigel, his grace trusts but too fully to the honor of these Englishmen?" asked Alan, somewhat abruptly, turning the conversation from the dearer topics of Agnes and her mother, which had before engrossed them.

"On my faith, if he judge of them by his own true, noble spirit, he judges them too well."

"Nay, thou art over-suspicious, friend Alan," answered Nigel, smiling. "What fearest thou?"

"I like not the absence of all guards, not so much for the safety of our own camp, but to keep sharp watch on the movements of our friends yonder. Nigel, there is some movement; they look not as they did an hour ago."

"Impossible, quite impossible, Alan; the English knights are too chivalric, too honorable, to advance on us to-night. If they have made a movement, 'tis but to repose."

"Nigel, if Pembroke feel inclined to take advantage of our unguarded situation, he will swear, as many have done before him, that a new day began with the twelve-chime bell of this morning, and be upon us ere we are aware; and I say again, there is movement, and warlike movement, too, in yonder army. Are tents deserted, and horses and men collected, for the simple purpose of retiring to rest? Come with me to yon mound, and see if I be not correct in my surmise."

Startled by Alan's earnest manner, despite his firm reliance on Pembroke's honor, Nigel made no further objection, but hastened with him to the eminence he named. It was only too true. Silently and guardedly the whole English army, extending much further towards Perth than was visible to the Scotch, had been formed in battle array, line after line stretching forth its glittering files, in too compact and animated array to admit of a doubt as to their intentions. The sun had completely sunk, and dim mists were spreading up higher and higher from the horizon, greatly aiding the treacherous movements of the English.

"By heavens, 'tis but too true!" burst impetuously from Nigel's lips, indignation expressed in every feature. "Base, treacherous cowards! Hie thee to the king—fly for thy life—give him warning, while I endeavor to form the lines. In vain, utterly in vain!" he muttered, as Alan with the speed of lightning darted down the slope. "They are formed—fresh, both man and horse—double, aye, more than treble our numbers; they will be upon us ere the order of battle can be formed, and defeat *now*—"

He would not give utterance to the dispiriting truth which closed that thought, but springing forward, dashed through fern and brake, and halted not till he stood in the centre of his companions, who, scattered in various attitudes on the grass, were giving vent, in snatches of song and joyous laughter, to the glee which filled their souls.

"Up! up!—the foe!" shouted Nigel, in tones so unlike the silvery accents which in general characterized him, that his companions started to their feet and grasped their swords, as roused by the sound of trumpet, "Pembroke is false: to arms—to your posts! Fitz-Alan—Douglas—sound an alarm, and, in heaven's name, aid me in getting the men under arms! Be calm, be steady; display no alarm, no confusion, and all may yet be well."

He was obeyed. The quick roll of the drum, the sharp, quick blast of the trumpet echoed and re-echoed at different sides of the encampment; the call to arms, in various stentorian tones, rung through the woodland glades, quickly banishing all other sounds. Every man sprung at once from his posture of repose, and gathered round their respective leaders; startled, confused, yet still in order, still animated, still confident, and yet more exasperated against their foe.

The appearance of their sovereign, unchanged in his composed and warlike mien, evincing perhaps yet more animation in his darkly flushing cheek, compressed lip, and sparkling eye; his voice still calm, though his commands were more than usually hurried; his appearance on every side, forming, arranging, encouraging, almost at the same instant—at one moment exciting their

indignation against the treachery of the foe, at others appealing to their love for their country, their homes, their wives, to their sworn loyalty to himself—inspired courage and confidence at the same instant as he allayed confusion; but despite every effort both of leader and men, it needed time to form in the compact order which the king had planned, and ere it was accomplished, nearer and nearer came the English, increasing their pace to a run as they approached, and finally charging in full and overwhelming career against the unprepared but gallant Scots. Still there was no wavering amid the Scottish troops; still they stood their ground, and forming, almost as they fought, in closer and firmer order, exposing the might and unflinching steadiness of desperate men, determined on liberty or death, to the greater number and better discipline of their foe. It mattered not that the fading light of day had given place to the darker shades of night, but dimly illumined by the rising moon—they struggled on, knowing as if by instinct friend from foe. And fearful was it to watch the mighty struggles from figures gleaming as gigantic shadows in the darkness; now and then came a deep smothered cry or bursting groan, wrung from the throes of death, or the wild, piercing scream from a slaughtered horse, but the tongues of life were silent; the clang of armor, the clash of steel, the heavy fall of man and horse, indeed came fitfully and fearfully on the night breeze, and even as the blue spectral flash of summer lightning did the bright swords rise and fall in the thick gloom.

"Back, back, dishonored knight! back, recreant traitor!" shouted James of Douglas; and his voice was heard above the roar of battle, and those near him saw him at the same instant spring from his charger, thrust back Pembroke and other knights who were thronging round him, and with unrivalled skill and swiftness aid a tall and well-known form to rise and spring on the horse he held for him. "Thinkest thou the sacred person of the King of Scotland is for such as thee? back, I say!" And he did force him, armed and on horseback as he was, many paces back, and Robert Bruce again galloped over the field, bareheaded indeed, for his helmet had fallen off in the strife, urging, inciting, leading on yet again to the charge. And it was in truth as if a superhuman strength and presence had been granted the patriot king that night, for there were veteran warriors there, alike English and Scotch, who paused even in the work of strife to gaze and tremble.

Again was he unhorsed, crushed by numbers—one moment more and he had fallen into the hands of his foes, and Scotland had lain a slave forever at the feet of England; but again was relief at hand, and the young Earl of Mar, dashing his horse between the prostrate monarch and his thronging enemies, laid the foremost, who was his own countryman, dead on the field, and remained fighting alone; his single arm dealing deadly blows on every side at the same moment until Robert had regained his feet, and, though wounded and well-nigh exhausted, turned in fury to the rescue of his preserver. It was too late; in an agony of spirit no pen can describe, he beheld his faithful and gallant nephew overpowered by numbers and led off a captive, and he stood by, fighting indeed like a lion, dealing death wherever his sword fell, but utterly unable to rescue or defend him. Again his men thronged round him, their rallying point, their inspiring hope, their guardian spirit; again he was on horseback, and still, still that fearful strife continued. Aided by the darkness, the Bruce in his secret soul yet encouraged one gleam of hope, yet dreamed of partial success, at least of avoiding that almost worse than death, a total and irremediable defeat. Alas, had the daylight suddenly illumined that scene, he would have felt, have seen that hope was void.

Gallantly, meanwhile, gallantly even as a warrior of a hundred fields, had the young heir of Buchan redeemed his pledge to his sovereign, and devoted sword and exposed life in his cause. The standard of Scotland had never touched the ground. Planting it firmly in the earth, he had for a while defended it nobly where he stood, curbing alike the high spirit of his prancing horse and his own intense longing to dash forward in the thickest of the fight. He saw his companions fall one by one, till he was well-nigh left alone. He heard confused cries, as of triumph; he beheld above twenty Englishmen dashing towards him, and he felt a few brief minutes and his precious charge might be waved in scorn as a trophy by the victors; the tide of battle had left him for an instant comparatively alone, and in that instant his plan was formed.

"Strike hard, and fear not!" he cried to an old retainer, who stirred not from his side; "divide this heavy staff, and I will yet protect my charge, and thou and I, Donald, will to King Robert's side; he needs all true men about him now."

Even as he spoke his command was understood and obeyed. One sweep of the stout Highlander's battle-axe severed full four feet of the heavy lance to which the standard was attached and enabled Alan without any inconvenience to grasp in his left hand the remainder, from which the folds still waved: grasping his sword firmly in his right, and giving his horse the rein, shouting, "Comyn, to the rescue!" he darted towards the side where the strife waxed hottest.

It was a cry which alike startled friends and foes, for that name was known to one party as so connected with devotee adherence to Edward, to the other so synonymous with treachery, that united as it was with "to the rescue," some there were who paused to see whence and from whom it came. The banner of Scotland quickly banished doubt as to which part; that youthful warrior belonged; knights and yeomen alike threw themselves in his path to obtain possession of so dear a prize. Followed by about ten stalwart men of his clan, the young knight gallantly cut his way through the greater number of his opponents, but a sudden gleam on the helmet of one of them caused him to halt suddenly.

"Ha! Sir Henry Seymour, we have met at length!" he shouted. "Thou bearest yet my gage—'tis well. I am here to redeem it."

"Give up that banner to a follower, then," returned Sir Henry, courteously, checking his horse in its full career, "for otherwise we meet at odds. Thou canst not redeem thy gage, and defend thy charge at the same moment."

"Give up my charge! Never, so help me heaven! Friend or foe shall claim it but with my life," returned Alan, proudly. "Come on, sir knight; I am here to defend the honor thou hast injured—the honor of one dearer than my own."

"Have then thy will, proud boy: thy blood be on thine own head," replied Seymour; but ere he spurred on to the charge, he called aloud, "let none come between us, none dare to interfere—'tis a quarrel touching none save ourselves," and Alan bowed his head, in courteous recognition of the strict observance of the rules of chivalry in his adversary, at the very moment that he closed with him in deadly strife; and such was war in the age of chivalry, and so strict were its rules, that even with the standard of Scotland in his hand, the person of the heir of Buchan was sacred to all save to his particular opponent.

It was a brief yet determined struggle. Their swords crossed and recrossed with such force and rapidity, that sparks of fire flashed from the blades; the aim of both appeared rather to unhorse and disarm than slay: Seymour, perhaps, from admiration of the boy's extraordinary bravery and daring, and Alan from a feeling of respect for the true chivalry of the English knight. The rush of battle for a minute unavoidably separated them. About four feet of the banner-staff yet remained uninjured, both in its stout wood and sharp iron head; with unparalleled swiftness, Alan partly furling the banner round the pike, and transferred it to his right hand, then grasping it firmly, and aiming full at Sir Henry's helm, backed his horse several paces to allow of a wider field, gave his steed the spur, and dashed forward quick as the wind. The manœuvre succeeded. Completely unprepared for this change alike in weapon and attack, still dazzled and slightly confused by the rush which had divided them, Sir Henry scarcely saw the youthful knight, till he felt his helmet transfixing by the lance, and the blow guided so well and true, that irresistibly it bore him from his horse, and he lay stunned and helpless, but not otherwise hurt, at the mercy of his foe. Recovering his weapon, Alan, aware that the great disparity of numbers rendered the securing English prisoners but a mere waste of time, contented himself by waving the standard high in air, and again shouting his war-cry, galloped impetuously on. Wounded he was, but he knew it not; the excitement, the inspiration of the moment was all he felt.

"To the king—to the king!" shouted Nigel Bruce, urging his horse to the side of Alan, and ably aiding him to strike down their rapidly increasing foes. "Hemmed in on all sides, he will fall beneath their thirsting swords. To the king—to the king! Yield he never will; and better he should not. On, on, for the love of life, of liberty, of Scotland!—on to the king!"

His impassioned words reached even hearts fainting 'neath exhaustion, failing in hope, for they knew they strove in vain; yet did that tone, those words rouse even them, and their flagging limbs grew strong for Robert's sake, and some yet reached the spot to fight and die around him; others—alas! the greater number—fell ere the envied goal was gained.

The sight of the royal standard drew, as Alan had hoped, the attention of some from the king, and gave him a few moments to rally. Again there was a moment of diversion in favor of the Scotch. The brothers of the Bruce and some others of his bravest knights were yet around him, seemingly uninjured, and each and all appeared endowed with the strength of two. The gigantic form of Edward Bruce, the whelming sweep of his enormous battle-axe, had cleared a partial space around the king, but still the foes hemmed in, reinforced even as they fell. About this time the moon, riding high in the heavens, had banished the mists which had enveloped her rising, and flung down a clear, silvery radiance over the whole field, disclosing for the first time to King Robert the exact situation in which he stood. Any further struggle, and defeat, imprisonment, death, all stared him in the face, and Scotland's liberty was lost, and forever. The agony of this conviction was known to none save to the sovereign's own heart, and to that Searcher of all, by whom its every throb was felt.

The wood behind him was still plunged in deep shadows, and he knew the Grampian Hills, with all their inaccessible paths and mountain fastnesses—known only to the true children of Scotland—could easily be reached, were the pursuit of the English eluded, which he believed could be easily accomplished, were they once enabled to retreat into the wood.

The consummate skill and prudence of the Bruce characterizing him as a general, even as his extraordinary daring and exhaustless courage marked the warrior, enabled him to effect this precarious and delicate movement, in the very sight of and almost surrounded by foes. Covering his troops, or rather the scattered remnant of troops, by exposing his own person to the enemy, the king was still the first object of attack, the desire of securing his person, or, at least, obtaining possession of his head, becoming more and more intense. But it seemed as though a protecting angel hovered round him: for he had been seen in every part of the field; wherever the struggle had been fiercest, he had been the centre; twice he had been unhorsed, and bareheaded almost from the commencement of the strife, yet there he was still, seemingly as firm in his saddle, as strong in frame, as unscathed in limb, as determined in purpose, as when he sent back his acceptance of Pembroke's challenge. Douglas, Fitz-Alan, Alexander and Nigel Bruce, and Alan of Buchan, still bearing the standard, were close around the king, and it was in this time of precaution, of less inspiring service, that the young Alan became conscious that he was either severely wounded, or that the strength he had taxed far beyond its natural powers was beginning to fail. Still mechanically he grasped the precious banner, and still he crossed his sword with every foe that came; but the quick eye of Nigel discerned there was a flagging of strength, and he

kept close beside him to aid and defend. The desired goal was just attained, the foes were decreasing in numbers, for they were scattered some distance from each other, determined on scouring the woods in search of fugitives, the horses of the king and his immediate followers were urged to quicken their pace, when an iron-headed quarrel, discharged from an arbalist, struck the royal charger, which, with a shrill cry of death, dropped instantly, and again was the king unhorsed. The delay occasioned in extricating him from the fallen animal was dangerous in the extreme; the greater part of his men were at some distance, for the king had ordered them, as soon as the unfrequented hollows of the wood were reached, to disperse, the better to elude their pursuers. Douglas, Alexander Bruce, and Fitz-Alan had galloped on, unconscious of the accident, and Nigel and Alan were alone near him. A minute sufficed for the latter to spring from his horse and aid the king to mount, and both entreated, conjured him to follow their companions, and leave them to cover his retreat. A while he refused, declaring he would abide with them: he would not so cowardly desert them.

"Leave you to death!" he cried; "my friends, my children; no, no! Urge me no more. If I may not save my country, I may *die* for her."

"Thou shalt not, so help me heaven!" answered Nigel, impetuously. "King, friend, brother, there is yet time. Hence, I do beseech thee, hence. Nay, an thou wilt not, I will e'en forget thou art my king, and force thee from this spot."

He snatched the reins of his brother's horse, and urging it with his own to their fullest speed, took the most unfrequented path, and dashing over every obstacle, through brake and briar, and over hedge and ditch, placed him in comparative safety.

And was Alan deserted? Did his brother in arms, in his anxiety to save the precious person of his royal brother, forget the tie that bound them, and leave him to die alone? A sickening sense of inability, of utter exhaustion, crept over the boy's sinking frame, inability even to drag his limbs towards the wood and conceal himself from his foes. Mechanically he at first stood grasping the now-tattered colors, as if his hand were nailed unto the staff, his foot rooted to the ground. There were many mingled cries, sending their shrill echoes on the night breeze; there were chargers scouring the plain; bodies of men passing and repassing within twenty yards of the spot where he stood, yet half hidden by the deep shadow of a large tree, for some minutes he was unobserved. An armed knight, with about twenty followers, were rushing by; they stopped, they recognized the banner; they saw the bowed and drooping figure who supported it, they dashed towards him. With a strong effort Alan roused himself from that lethargy of faintness. Nearer and nearer they came.

"Yield, or you die!" were the words borne to his ear, shrill, loud, fraught with death, and his spirit sprang up with the sound. He waved his sword above his head, and threw himself into a posture of defence; but ere they reached him, there was a sudden and rapid tramp of horse, and the voice of Nigel Bruce shouted—

"Mount, mount! God in heaven be thanked, I am here in time!"

Alan sprung into the saddle; he thought not to inquire how that charger had been found, nor knew he till some weeks after that Nigel had exposed his own person to imminent danger, to secure one of the many steeds flying masterless over the plain. On, on they went, and frequently the head of Alan drooped from very faintness to his saddle-bow, and Nigel feared to see him fall exhausted to the earth, but still they pursued their headlong way. Death was behind them, and the lives of all true and loyal Scotsmen were too precious to admit a pause.

The sun had risen when King Robert gazed round him on the remnant of his troops. It was a wild brake, amid surrounding rocks and mountains where they stood; a torrent threw itself headlong from a craggy steep, and made its way to the glen, tumbling and roaring and dashing over the black stones that opposed its way. The dark pine, the stunted fir, the weeping birch, and many another mountain tree, marked the natural fertility of the soil, although its aspect seemed wild and rude. It was to this spot the king had desired the fugitives to direct their several ways, and now he gazed upon all, all that were spared to him and Scotland from that disastrous night. In scattered groups they stood or sate; their swords fallen from their hands, their heads drooping on their breasts, with the mien of men whose last hope had been cast on a single die, and wrecked forever. And when King Robert thought of the faithful men who, when the sun had set the previous evening, had gathered round him in such devoted patriotism, such faithful love, and now beheld the few there were to meet his glance, to give him the sympathy, the hope he needed, scarcely could he summon energy sufficient to speak against hope, to rally the failing spirits of his remaining followers. Mar, Athol, Hay, Fraser, he knew were prisoners, and he knew, too, that in their cases that word was but synonymous with death. Lennox, his chosen friend, individually the dearest of all his followers, he too was not there, though none remembered his being taken; Randolph, his nephew, and about half of those gallant youths who not ten days previous had received and welcomed the honor of knighthood, in all the high hopes and buoyancy of youth and healthful life; more, many more than half the number of the stout yeomen, who had risen at his call to rescue their land from chains—where now were these? Was it wonder that the king had sunk upon a stone, and bent his head upon his hands? But speedily he rallied; he addressed each man by name; he spoke comfort, hope, not lessening the magnitude of his defeat, but still promising them liberty—still promising that yet would their homes be redeemed, their country free; aye, even were he compelled to wander months, nay, years in those mountain paths, with naught about him but the title of a king; still, while he had life, would he struggle on for Scotland; still did he feel, despite of blighted hope, of bitter disappointment, that to him was intrusted the

sacred task of her deliverance. Would he, might he sink and relax in his efforts and resign his purpose, because his first engagement was attended by defeat? had he done so, it was easy to have found death on the field. Had he listened to the voice of despair, he confessed, he would not have left that field alive.

"But I lived for my country, for ye, her children," he continued, his voice becoming impassioned in its fervor; "lived to redeem this night, to suffer on a while, to be your savior still. Will ye then desert me? will ye despond, because of one defeat—yield to despair, when Scotland yet calls aloud? No, no, it cannot be!" and roused by his earnest, his eloquent appeal, that devoted band sprung from their drooping posture, and kneeling at his feet, renewed their oaths of allegiance to him; the oath that bound them to seek liberty for Scotland. It was then, as one by one advanced, the king for the first time missed his brother Nigel and the heir of Buchan; amidst the overwhelming bitterness of thought which had engrossed him, he had for a brief while forgotten the precarious situation of Alan, and the determination of Nigel to seek and save, or die with him; but now the recollection of both rushed upon him, and the flush which his eloquence had summoned faded at once, and the sudden expression of anguish passing over his features roused the attention of all who stood near him.

"They must have fallen," he murmured, and for the first time, in a changed and hollow voice. "My brother, my brother, dearest, best! can it be that, in thy young beauty, thou, too, art taken from me?—and Alan, how can I tell his mother—how face her sorrow for her son?"

Time passed, and there was no sound; the visible anxiety of the king hushed into yet deeper stillness the voices hushed before. His meaning was speedily gathered from his broken words, and many mounted the craggy heights to mark if there might not yet be some signs of the missing ones. Time seemed to linger on his flight. The intervening rocks and bushes confined all sounds within a very narrow space; but at length a faint unintelligible noise broke on the stillness, it came nearer, nearer still, a moment more and the tread of horses' hoofs echoed amongst the rocks—a shout, a joyful shout proclaimed them friends. The king sprung to his feet. Another minute Nigel and Alan pressed around him; with the banner still in his hand, Alan knelt and laid it at his sovereign's feet.

"From thy hand I received it, to thee I restore it," he said, but his voice was scarcely articulate; he bowed his head to press Robert's extended hand to his lips, and sunk senseless at his feet.

CHAPTER XI.

Rumors of the fatal issue of the engagement at Methven speedily reached Scone, laden, of course, with, yet more disastrous tidings than had foundation in reality. King Robert, it was said, and all his nobles and knights—nay, his whole army—were cut off to a man; the king, if not taken prisoner, was left dead on the field, and all Scotland lay again crushed and enslaved at the feet of Edward. For four-and-twenty hours did the fair inhabitants of the palace labor under this belief, well-nigh stunned beneath the accumulation of misfortune. It was curious to remark the different forms in which affliction appeared in different characters, The queen, in loud sobs and repeated wailing, at one time deplored her own misery; at others, accused her husband of rashness and madness. Why had he not taken her advice and remained quiet? Why could he not have been contented with the favor of Edward and a proud, fair heritage? What good did he hope to get for himself by assuming the crown of so rude and barren a land as Scotland? Had she not told him he was but a summer king, that the winter would soon blight his prospects and nip his budding hopes; and had she not proved herself wiser even than he was himself? and then she would suddenly break off in these reproaches to declare that, if he were a prisoner, she would go to him; she would remain with him to the last; she would prove how much she idolized him—her own, her brave, her noble Robert. And vain was every effort on the part of her sisters-in-law and the Countess of Buchan, and other of her friends, to mitigate these successive bursts of sorrow. The Lady Seaton, of a stronger mind, yet struggled with despondency, yet strove to hope, to believe all was not as overwhelming as had been described; although, if rumor were indeed true, she had lost a husband and a son, the gallant young Earl of Mar, whom she had trained to all noble deeds and honorable thoughts, for he had been fatherless from infancy. Lady Mary could forget her own deep anxieties, her own fearful forebodings, silently and unobservedly to watch, to follow, to tend the Countess of Buchan, whose marble cheek and lip, and somewhat sterner expression of countenance than usual, alone betrayed the anxiety passing within, for words it found not. She could share with her the task of soothing, of cheering Agnes, whose young spirit lay crushed beneath this heavy blow. She did not complain, she did not murmur, but evidently struggled to emulate her mother's calmness, for she would bend over her frame and endeavor to continue her embroidery. But those who watched her, marked her frequent shudder, the convulsive sob, the tiny hands pressed closely together, and then upon her eyes, as if to still their smarting throbs; and Isoline, who sat in silence on a cushion at her feet, could catch such low whispered words as these—

"Nigel, Nigel, could I but know thy fate! Dead, dead!—could I not die with thee? Imprisoned, have I not a right to follow thee; to tend, to soothe thee? Any thing, oh, any thing, but this horrible suspense! Alan, my brother, thou too, so young, to die."

The morning of the second day brought other and less distressing rumors; all had not fallen, all

were not taken. There were tales of courage, of daring gallantry, of mighty struggles almost past belief; but what were they, even in that era of chivalry, to the heart sinking under apprehensions, the hopes just springing up amidst the wild chaos of thoughts to smile a moment, to be crushed 'neath suspense, uncertainty, the next? Still the eager tones of conjecture, the faintest-spoken whispers of renewed hope, were better than the dead stillness, the heavy hush of despair.

And the queen's apartments, in which at sunset all her friends had assembled, presented less decided sounds of mourning and of wail, than the previous day. Margaret was indeed still one minute plunged in tears and sobs, and the next hoping more, believing more than any one around her. Agnes had tacitly accompanied her mother and Lady Mary to the royal boudoir, but she had turned in very sickness of heart from all her companions, and remained standing in a deep recess formed by the high and narrow casement, alone, save Isoline, who still clung to her side, pale, motionless as the marble statue near her, whose unconscious repose she envied.

"Speak, Isabella, why will you not speak to me?" said the queen, fretfully. "My husband bade me look to thee for strength, for support under care and affliction like to this, yet thou keepest aloof from me; thou hast words of comfort, of cheering for all save me."

"Not so, royal lady, not so," she answered, as with a faint, scarcely perceptible smile, she advanced to the side of her royal mistress, and took her hand in hers. "I have spoken, I have urged, entreated, conjured thee to droop not; for thy husband's sake, to hope on, despite the terrible rumors abroad. I have besought thee to seek firmness for his sake; but thou didst but tell me, Isabella, Isabella, thou canst not feel as I do, he is naught to thee but thy king; to me, what is he not? king, hero, husband—all, my only all; and I have desisted, lady, for I deemed my words offended, my counsel unadvised, and looked on but as cold and foolish."

"Nay, did I say all this to thee? Isabella, forgive me, for indeed, indeed, I knew it not," replied Margaret, her previous fretfulness subsiding into a softened and less painful burst of weeping. "He is in truth, my all, my heart's dearest, best, and without him, oh! what am I? even a cipher, a reed, useless to myself, to my child, as to all others. I am not like thee, Isabella—would, would I were; I should be more worthy of my Robert's love, and consequently dearer to his heart. I can be but a burden to him now."

"Hush, hush! would he not chide thee for such words, my Margaret?" returned the countess, soothingly, and in a much lower voice, speaking as she would to a younger sister. "Had he not deemed thee worthy, would he have made thee his? oh, no, believe it not; he is too true, too honorable for such thought."

"He loved me, because he saw I loved," whispered the queen, perceiving that her companions had left her well-nigh alone with the countess, and following, as was her custom, every impulse of her fond but ill-regulated heart. "I had not even strength to conceal that—that truth which any other would have died rather than reveal. He saw it and his noble spirit was touched; and he has been all, all, aye, more than I could have dreamed, to me—so loving and so true."

"Then why fancy thyself a burden, not a joy to him, sweet friend?" demanded Isabella of Buchan, the rich accents of her voice even softer and sweeter than usual, for there was something in the clinging confidence of the queen it was impossible not to love.

"I did not, I could not, for he cherished me so fondly till this sudden rising—this time, when his desperate enterprise demands energy and firmness, even from the humblest female, how much more from the Bruce's wife! and his manner is not changed towards me, nor his love. I know he loves me, cherishes me, as he ever did; but he must pity my weakness, my want of nerve; when he compares me to himself, he must look on me with almost contempt. For now it is, now that clearer than ever his character stands forth in such glorious majesty, such moderation, such a daring yet self-governed spirit, that I feel how utterly unworthy I am of him, how little capable to give that spirit, that mind the reflection it must demand; and when my weak fears prevail, my weak fancies speak only of danger and defeat, how can he bear with me? Must I not become, if I am not now, a burden?"

"No, dearest Margaret," replied the countess, instantly. "The mind that can so well *appreciate* the virtues of her husband will never permit herself, through weakness and want of nerve, to become a burden to him. Thou hast but to struggle with these imaginary terrors, to endeavor to encourage, instead of to dispirit, and he will love and cherish thee even more than hadst thou never been unnerved."

"Let him but be restored to me, and I will do all this. I will make myself more worthy of his love; but, oh, Isabella, while I speak this, perhaps he is lost to me forever; I may never see his face, never hear that tone of love again!" and a fresh flood of weeping concluded her words.

"Nay, but thou wilt—I know thou wilt," answered the countess, cheerfully. "Trust me, sweet friend, though defeat may attend him a while, though he may pass through trial and suffering ere the goal be gained, Robert Bruce will eventually deliver his country—will be her king, her savior—will raise her in the scale of nations, to a level even with the highest, noblest, most deserving. He is not lost to thee; trial will but prove his worth unto his countrymen even more than would success."

"And how knowest thou these things, my Isabella?" demanded Margaret, looking up in her face, with a half-playful, half-sorrowful smile. "Hast thou the gift of prophecy?"

"Prophecy!" repeated the countess, sadly. "Alas! 'tis but the character of Robert which hath inspired my brighter vision. Had I the gift of prophecy, my fond heart would not start and quiver thus, when it vainly strives to know the fate of my only son. I, too, have anxiety, lady, though it find not words."

"Thou hast, thou hast, indeed; and yet I, weak, selfish as I am, think only of myself. Stay by me, Isabella; oh, do not leave me, I am stronger by thy side."

It was growing darker and darker, and the hopes that, ere night fell, new and more trustworthy intelligence of the movements of the fugitives would be received were becoming fainter and fainter on every heart. Voices were hushed to silence, or spoke only in whispers. Half an hour passed thus, when the listless suffering on the lovely face of Agnes was observed by Isoline to change to an expression of intense attention.

"Hearest thou no step?" she said, in a low, piercing whisper, and laying a cold and trembling hand on Isoline's arm. "It is, it is his—it is Nigel's; he has not fallen—he is spared!" and she started up, a bright flush on her cheek, her hands pressed convulsively on her heart.

"Nay, Agnes, there is no sound, 'tis but a fancy," but even while she spoke, a rapid step was heard along the corridor, and a shadow darkened the doorway—but was that Nigel? There was no plume, no proud crest on his helmet; its vizor was still closely barred, and a surcoat of coarse black stuff was thrown over his armor, without any decoration to display or betray the rank of the wearer. A faint cry of alarm broke from the queen and many of her friends, but with one bound Agnes sprang to the intruder, whose arms were open to receive her, and wildly uttering "Nigel!" fainted on his bosom.

"And didst thou know me even thus, beloved?" he murmured, rapidly unclasping his helmet and dashing it from him, to imprint repeated kisses on her cheek. "Wake, Agnes, best beloved, my own sweet love; what hadst thou heard that thou art thus? Oh, wake, smile, speak to me: 'tis thine own Nigel calls."

And vainly, till that face smiled again on him in consciousness, would the anxious inmates of that room have sought and received intelligence, had he not been followed by Lord Douglas, Fitz-Alan, and others, their armor and rank concealed as was Nigel's, who gave the required information as eagerly as it was desired.

"Robert—my king, my husband—where is he—why is he not here?" reiterated Margaret, vainly seeking to distinguish his figure amid the others, obscured as they were by the rapidly-increasing darkness. "Why is he not with ye—why is he not here?"

"And he is here, Meg; here to chide thy love as less penetrating, less able to read disguise or concealment than our gentle Agnes there. Nay, weep not, dearest; my hopes are as strong, my purpose as unchanged, my trust in heaven as fervent as it was when I went forth to battle. Trial and suffering must be mine a while, I have called it on my own head; but still, oh, still thy Robert shall deliver Scotland—shall cast aside her chains."

The deep, manly voice of the king acted like magic on the depressed spirits of those around him; and though there was grief, bitter, bitter grief to tell, though many a heart's last lingering hopes were crushed 'neath that fell certainty, which they thought to have pictured during the hours of suspense, and deemed themselves strengthened to endure, yet still 'twas a grief that found vent in tears—grief that admitted of soothing, of sympathy—grief time might heal, not the harrowing agony of grief half told—hopes rising to be crushed.

Still did the Countess of Buchan cling to the massive arm of the chair which Margaret had left, utterly powerless, wholly incapacitated from asking the question on which her very life seemed to depend. Not even the insensibility of her Agnes had had the power to rouse her from the stupor of anxiety which had spread over her, sharpening every faculty and feeling indeed, but rooting her to the spot. Her boy, her Alan, he was not amongst those warriors; she heard not the beloved accents of his voice; she saw not his boyish form—darkness could not deceive her. Disguise would not prevent him, were he amongst his companions, from seeking her embrace. One word would end that anguish, would speak the worst, end it—had he fallen!

The king looked round the group anxiously and inquiringly.

"The Countess of Buchan?" he said; "where is our noble friend? she surely hath a voice to welcome her king, even though he return to her defeated."

"Sire, I am here," she said, but with difficulty; and Robert, as if he understood it, could read all she was enduring, hastened towards her, and took both her cold hands in his.

"I give thee joy," he said, in accents that reassured her on the instant. "Nobly, gallantly, hath thy patriot boy proved himself thy son; well and faithfully hath he won his spurs, and raised the honor of his mother's olden line. He bade me greet thee with all loving duty, and say he did but regret his wounds that they prevented his attending me, and throwing himself at his mother's feet."

"He is wounded, then, my liege?" Robert felt her hands tremble in his hold.

"It were cruel to deceive thee, lady—desperately but not dangerously wounded. On the honor of a true knight, there is naught to alarm, though something, perchance, to regret; for he pines and

grieves that it may be yet a while ere he recover sufficient strength to don his armor. It is not loss of blood, but far more exhaustion, from the superhuman exertions that he made. Edward and Alexander are with him; the one a faithful guard, in himself a host, the other no unskilful leech: trust me, noble lady, there is naught to fear."

He spoke, evidently to give her time to recover the sudden revulsion of feeling which his penetrating eye discovered had nearly overpowered her, and he succeeded; ere he ceased, that quivering of frame and lip had passed, and Isabella of Buchan again stood calm and firm, enabled to inquire all particulars of her child, and then join in the council held as to the best plan to be adopted with regard to the safety of the queen and her companions.

In Scone, it was evident, they could not remain, for already the towns and villages around, which had all declared for the Bruce, were hurrying in the greatest terror to humble themselves before Pembroke, and entreat his interference in their favor with his sovereign. There was little hope, even if Scone remained faithful to his interests, that she would be enabled to defend herself from the attacks of the English; and it would be equally certain, that if the wife of Bruce, and the wives and daughters of so many of his loyal followers remained within her walls, to obtain possession of their persons would become Pembroke's first object. It remained to decide whether they would accompany their sovereign to his mountain fastnesses and expose themselves to all the privations and hardships which would inevitably attend a wandering life, or that they should depart under a safe escort to Norway, whose monarch was friendly to the interests of Scotland. This latter scheme the king very strongly advised, representing in vivid colors the misery they might have to endure if they adhered to him; the continual danger of their falling into the hands of Edward, and even could they elude this, how was it possible their delicate frames, accustomed as they were to luxury and repose, could sustain the rude fare, the roofless homes, the continued wandering amid the crags and floods and deserts of the mountains. He spoke eloquently and feelingly, and there was a brief silence when he concluded. Margaret had thrown her arms round her husband, and buried her face on his bosom; her child clung to her father's knee, and laid her soft cheek caressingly by his. Isabella of Buchan, standing a little aloof, remained silent indeed, but no one who gazed on her could doubt her determination or believe she wavered. Agnes was standing in the same recess she had formerly occupied, but how different was the expression of her features. The arm of Nigel was twined round her, his head bent down to hers in deep and earnest commune; he was pleading against his own will and feelings it seemed, and though he strove to answer every argument, to persuade her it was far better she should seek safety in a foreign land, her determination more firmly expressed than could have been supposed from her yielding disposition, to abide with him, in weal or in woe, to share his wanderings, his home, be it roofless on the mountain, or within palace walls; that she was a Highland girl, accustomed to mountain paths and woody glens, nerved to hardship and toil—this determination, we say, contrary as it was to his eloquent pleadings, certainly afforded Nigel no pain, and might his beaming features be taken as reply, it was fraught with unmingled pleasure. In a much shorter time than we have taken to describe this, however, the queen had raised her head, and looking up in her husband's face with an expression of devotedness, which gave her countenance a charm it had never had before, fervently exclaimed—

"Robert, come woe or weal, I will abide with thee; her husband's side is the best protection for a wife; and if wandering and suffering be his portion, who will soothe and cheer as the wife of his love? My spirit is but cowardly, my will but weak; but by thee I may gain the strength which in foreign lands could never be my own. Imaginary terrors, fancied horrors would be worse, oh, how much worse than reality! and when we met again I should be still less worthy of thy love. No, Robert, no! urge me not, plead to me no more. My friends may do as they will, but Margaret abides with thee."

"And who is there will pause, will hesitate, when their queen hath spoken thus?" continued the Countess of Buchan in a tone that to Margaret's ear whispered approval and encouragement. "Surely, there is none here whose love for their country is so weak, their loyalty to their sovereign of such little worth, that at the first defeat, the first disappointment, they would fly over seas for safety, and contentedly leave the graves of their fathers, the hearths of their ancestors, the homes of their childhood to be desecrated by the chains of a foreign tyrant, by the footsteps of his hirelings? Oh, do not let us waver! Let us prove that though the arm of woman is weaker than that of man, her spirit is as firm, her heart as true; and that privation, and suffering, and hardship encountered amid the mountains of our land, the natural fastnesses of Scotland, in company with our rightful king, our husbands, our children—all, all, aye, death itself, were preferable to exile and separation. 'Tis woman's part to gild, to bless, and make a home, and still, still we may do this, though our ancestral homes be in the hands of Edward. Scotland has still her sheltering breast for all her children; and shall we desert her now?"

"No, no, no!" echoed from every side, enthusiasm kindling with her words. "Better privation and danger in Scotland, than safety and comfort elsewhere."

Nor was this the mere decision of the moment, founded on its enthusiasm. The next morning found them equally firm, equally determined; even the weak and timid Margaret rose in that hour of trial superior to herself, and preparations were rapidly made for their departure. Nor were the prelates of Scotland, who had remained at Scone during the king's engagement, backward in encouraging and blessing their decision. His duties prevented the Abbot of Scone accompanying them; but it was with deep regret he remained behind, not from any fear of the English, for a warrior spirit lurked beneath those episcopal robes, but from his deep reverence for the enterprise, and love for the person of King Robert. He acceded to the necessity of remaining in

his abbey with the better grace, as he fondly hoped to preserve the citizens in the good faith and loyalty they had so nobly demonstrated. The Archbishop of St. Andrew's and the Bishop of Glasgow determined on following their sovereign to the death; and the spirit of Robert, wounded as it had been, felt healed and soothed, and inspired afresh, as the consciousness of his power over some true and faithful hearts, of every grade and rank of either sex, became yet more strongly proved in this hour of depression. He ceased to speak of seeking refuge for his fair companions in another land, their determination to abide with him, and their husbands and sons, was too heartfelt, too unwavering, to allow of a hope to change it; and he well knew that their presence, instead of increasing the cares and anxieties of his followers, would rather lessen, them, by shedding a spirit of chivalry even over the weary wanderings he knew must be their portion for a while, by gilding with the light of happier days the hours of darkness that might surround them.

CHAPTER XII.

The queen and her companions were conveyed in detachments from the palace and town of Scone, the Bruce believing, with justice, they would thus attract less notice, and be better able to reach the mountains in safety. The Countess of Buchan, her friend Lady Mary, Agnes, and Isoline, attended by Sir Nigel, were the first to depart, for though she spoke it not, deep anxiety was on the mother's heart for the fate of her boy. They mostly left Scone at different hours of the night; and the second day from the king's arrival, the palace was untenanted, all signs of the gallant court, which for a brief space had shed such lustre, such rays of hope on the old town, were gone, and sorrowfully and dispiritedly the burghers and citizens went about their several occupations, for their hearts yet throbbed in loyalty and patriotism, though hope they deemed was wholly at an end. Still they burned with indignation at every intelligence of new desertions to Edward, and though the power of Pembroke compelled them to bend unwillingly to the yoke, it was as a bow too tightly strung, which would snap rather than use its strength in the cause of Edward.

A few weeks' good nursing from his mother and sister, attended as it was by the kindness and warm friendship of the sovereign he adored, and the constant care of Nigel, speedily restored the heir of Buchan, if not entirely to his usual strength, at least with sufficient to enable him to accompany the royal wanderers wherever they pitched their tent, and by degrees join in the adventurous excursions of his young companions to supply them with provender, for on success in hunting entirely depended their subsistence.

It was in itself a strange romance, the life they led. Frequently the blue sky was their only covering, the purple heath their only bed; nor would the king fare better than his followers. Eagerly, indeed, the young men ever exerted themselves to form tents or booths of brushwood, branches of trees, curiously and tastefully interwoven with the wild flowers that so luxuriantly adorned the rocks, for the accommodation of the faithful companions who preferred this precarious existence with them, to comfort, safety, and luxury in a foreign land. Nature, indeed, lavishly supplied them with beautiful materials, and where the will was good, exertion proved but a new enjoyment. Couches and cushions of the softest moss formed alike seats and places of repose; by degrees almost a village of these primitive dwellings would start into being, in the centre of some wild rocks, which formed natural barriers around them, watered, perhaps, by some pleasant brook rippling and gushing by in wild, yet soothing music, gemmed by its varied flowers.

Here would be the rendezvous for some few weeks; here would Margaret and her companions rest a while from their fatiguing wanderings; and could they have thought but of the present, they would have been completely happy. Here would their faithful knights return laden with the spoils of the chase, or with some gay tale of danger dared, encountered, and conquered; here would the song send its full tone amid the responding echoes. The harp and muse of Nigel gave a refinement and delicacy to these meetings, marking them, indeed, the days of chivalry and poetry. Even Edward Bruce, the stern, harsh, dark, passionate warrior, even he felt the magic of the hour, and now that the courage of Nigel had been proved, gave willing ear, and would be among the first to bid him wake his harp, and soothe the troubled visions of the hour; and Robert, who saw so much of his own soul reflected in his young brother, mingled as it was with yet more impassioned fervor, more beautiful, more endearing qualities, for Nigel had needed not trial to purify his soul, and mark him out a patriot. Robert, in very truth, loved him, and often would share with him his midnight couch, his nightly watchings, that he might confide to that young heart the despondency, the hopelessness, that to none other might be spoken, none other might suspect—the secret fear that his crime would be visited on his unhappy country, and he forbidden to secure her freedom even by the sacrifice of his life.

"If it be so, it must be so; then be thou her savior, her deliverer, my Nigel," he would often urge; "droop not because I may have departed; struggle on, do as thy soul prompts, and success will, nay, must attend thee; for thou art pure and spotless, and well deserving of all the glory, the blessedness, that will attend the sovereign of our country freed from chains; thou art, in truth, deserving of all this, but I—"

"Peace, peace, my brother!" would be Nigel's answer; "thou, only thou shalt deliver our country, shall be her free, her patriot king! Have we not often marked the glorious sun struggling with the

black masses of clouds which surround and obscure his rising, struggling, and in vain, to penetrate their murky folds, and deluge the world with light, shining a brief moment, and then immersed in darkness, until, as he nears the western horizon, the heaviest clouds flee before him, the spotless azure spreadeth its beautiful expanse, the brilliant rays dart on every side, warming and cheering the whole earth with reviving beams, and finally sinking to his rest in a flood of splendor, more dazzling, more imposing than ever attends his departure when his dawn hath been one of joy. Such is thy career, my brother; such will be thy glorious fate. Oh, droop not even to me—to thyself! Hope on, strive on, and thou shalt succeed!"

"Would I had thy hopeful spirit, my Nigel, an it pictured and believed things as these!" mournfully would the Bruce reply, and clasp the young warrior to his heart; but it was only Nigel's ear that heard these whispers of despondency, only Nigel's eye which could penetrate the inmost folds of that royal heart. Not even to his wife—his Margaret, whose faithfulness in these hours of adversity had drawn her yet closer to her husband—did he breathe aught save encouragement and hope; and to his followers he was the same as he had been from the first, resolute, unwavering; triumphing over every obstacle; cheering the faint-hearted; encouraging the desponding; smiling with his young followers, ever on the alert to provide amusement for them, to approve, guide, instruct; gallantly and kindly to smooth the path for his female companions, joining in every accommodation for them, even giving his manual labor with the lowest of his followers, if his aid would lessen fatigue, or more quickly enhance comfort. And often and often in the little encampment we have described, when night fell, and warrior and dame would assemble, in various picturesque groups, on the grassy mound, the king, seated in the midst of them, would read aloud, and divert even the most wearied frame and careworn mind by the stirring scenes and chivalric feelings his MSS. recorded. The talent of deciphering manuscripts, indeed of reading any thing, was one seldom attained or even sought for in the age of which we treat; the sword and spear were alike the recreation and the business of the nobles. Reading and writing were in general confined to monks, and the other clergy; but Robert, even as his brother Nigel, possessed both these accomplishments, although to the former their value never seemed so fully known as in his wanderings. His readings were diversified by rude narratives or tales, which he demanded in return from his companions, and many a hearty laugh would resound from the woodland glades, at the characteristic humor with which these demands were complied with: the dance, too, would diversify these meetings. A night of repose might perhaps succeed, to be disturbed at its close by a cause for alarm, and those pleasant resting-places must be abandoned, the happy party be divided, and scattered far and wide, to encounter fatigue, danger, perchance even death, ere they met again.

Yet still they drooped not, murmured not. No voice was ever heard to wish the king's advice had been taken, and they had sought refuge in Norway. Not even Margaret breathed one sigh, dropped one tear, in her husband's presence, although many were the times that she would have sunk from exhaustion, had not Isabella of Buchan been near as her guardian angel to revive, encourage, infuse a portion of her own spirit in the weaker heart, which so confidently clung to her. The youngest and most timid maiden, the oldest and most ailing man, still maintained the same patriotic spirit and resolute devotion which had upheld them at first. "The Bruce and Scotland" were the words imprinted on their souls, endowed with a power to awake the sinking heart, and rouse the fainting frame.

To Agnes and Nigel, it was shrewdly suspected, these wanderings in the centre of magnificent nature, their hearts open to each other, revelling in the scenes around them, were seasons of unalloyed enjoyment, happiness more perfect than the state and restraint of a court. Precarious, indeed, it was, but even in moments of danger they were not parted; for Nigel was ever the escort of the Countess of Buchan, and danger by his side lost half its terror to Agnes. He left her side but to return to it covered with laurels, unharmed, uninjured, even in the midst of foes; and so frequently did this occur, that the fond, confiding spirit of the young Agnes folded itself around the belief that he bore a charmed life; that evil and death could not injure one so faultless and beloved. Their love grew stronger with each passing week; for nature, beautiful nature, is surely the field of that interchange of thought, for that silent commune of soul so dear to those that love. The simplest flower, the gushing brooks, the frowning hills, the varied hues attending the rising and the setting of the sun, all were turned to poetry when the lips of Nigel spoke to the ears of love. The mind of Agnes expanded before these rich communings. She was so young, so guileless, her character moulded itself on his. She learned yet more to comprehend, to appreciate the nobility of his soul, to cling yet closer to him, as the consciousness of the rich treasure she possessed in his love became more and more unfolded to her view. The natural fearfulness of her disposition gave way, and the firmness, the enthusiasm of purpose, took possession of her heart, secretly and silently, indeed; for to all, save to herself, she was the same gentle, timid, clinging girl that she had ever been.

So passed the summer months; but as winter approached, and the prospects of the king remained as apparently hopeless and gloomy as they were on his first taking refuge in the mountains, it was soon pretty evident that some other plan must be resorted to; for strong as the resolution might be, the delicate frames of his female companions, already suffering from the privations to which they had been exposed, could not sustain the intense cold and heavy snows peculiar to the mountain region. Gallantly as the king had borne himself in every encounter with the English and Anglo-Scots, sustaining with unexampled heroism repeated defeats and blighted hopes, driven from one mountainous district by the fierce opposition of its inhabitants, from another by a cessation of supplies, till famine absolutely threatened, closely followed by its grim attendant, disease, all his efforts to collect and inspire his countrymen with his own spirit, his own hope,

were utterly and entirely fruitless, for his enemies appeared to increase around him, the autumn found him as far, if not further, from the successful termination of his desires than he had been at first.

All Scotland lay at the feet of his foe. John of Lorn, maternally related to the slain Red Comyn, had collected his forces to the number of a thousand, and effectually blockaded his progress through the district of Breadalbane, to which he had retreated from a superior body of English, driving him to a narrow pass in the mountains, where the Bruce's cavalry had no power to be of service; and had it not been for the king's extraordinary exertions in guarding the rear, and there checking the desperate fury of the assailants, and interrupting their headlong pursuit of the fugitives, by a strength, activity, and prudence, that in these days would seem incredible, the patriots must have been cut off to a man. Here it was that the family of Lorn obtained possession of that brooch of Bruce, which even to this day is preserved as a relic, and lauded as a triumph, proving how nearly their redoubted enemy had fallen into their hands. Similar struggles had marked his progress through the mountains ever since the defeat of Methven; but vain was every effort of his foes to obtain possession of his person, destroy his energy, and thus frustrate his purpose. Perth, Inverness, Argyle, and Aberdeen had alternately been the scene of his wanderings. The middle of autumn found him with about a hundred followers, amongst whom were the Countess of Buchan and her son, amid the mountains which divide Kincardine from the southwest boundary of Aberdeen. The remainder of his officers and men, divided into small bands, each with some of their female companions under their especial charge, were scattered over the different districts, as better adapted to concealment and rest.

It was that part of the year when day gives place to night so suddenly, that the sober calm of twilight even appears denied to us. The streams rushed by, turbid and swollen from the heavy autumnal rains. A rude wind had robbed most of the trees of their foliage; the sere and withered leaves, indeed, yet remained on the boughs, beautiful even in their decay, but the slightest breath would carry them away from their resting-places, and the mountain passes were incumbered, and often slippery from the fallen leaves. The mountains looked frowning and bare, the pine and fir bent and rocked in their craggy cradles, and the wind moaned through their dark branches sadly and painfully. The sun had, indeed, shone fitfully through the day, but still the scene was one of melancholy desolation, and the heart of the Countess of Buchan, bold and firm in general, could not successfully resist the influence of Nature's sadness. She sat comparatively alone; a covering had, indeed, been thrown over some thick poles, which interwove with brushwood, and with a seat and couch of heather, which was still in flower, formed a rude tent, and was destined for her repose; but until night's dark mantle was fully unfurled, she had preferred the natural seat of a jutting crag, sheltered from the wind by an overhanging rock and some spreading firs. Her companions were scattered in different directions in search of food, as was their wont. Some ten or fifteen men had been left with her, and they were dispersed about the mountain collecting firewood, and a supply of heath and moss for the night encampment; within hail, indeed, but scarcely within sight, for the space where the countess sate commanded little more than protruding crags and stunted trees, and mountains lifting their dark, bare brows to the starless sky.

It was not fear which had usurped dominion in the Lady Isabella's heart, it was that heavy, sluggish, indefinable weight which sometimes clogs the spirit we know not wherefore, until some event following quick upon it forces us, even against our will, to believe it the overhanging shadow of the future which had darkened the present. She was sad, very sad, yet she could not, as was ever her custom, bring that sadness to judgment, and impartially examining and determining its cause, remove it if possible, or banish it resolutely from her thoughts.

An impulse indefinable, yet impossible to be resisted, had caused her to intrust her Agnes to the care of Lady Mary and Nigel, and compelled her to follow her son, who had been the chosen companion of the king. Rigidly, sternly, she had questioned her own heart as to the motives of this decision. It was nothing new her accompanying her son, for she had invariably done so; but it was something unusual her being separated from the queen, and though her heart told her that her motives were so upright, so pure, they could have borne the sternest scrutiny, there was naught which the most rigid mentor could condemn, yet a feeling that evil would come of this was amongst the many others which weighed on her heart. She could not tell wherefore, yet she wished it had been otherwise, wished the honor of being selected as the king's companion had fallen on other than her son, for separate herself from him she could not. One cause of this despondency might have been traced to the natural sinking of the spirit when it finds itself alone, with time for its own fancies, after a long period of exertion, and that mental excitement which, unseen to all outward observers, preys upon itself. Memory had awakened dreams and visions she had long looked upon as dead; it did but picture brightly, beautifully, joyously what might have been, and disturbed the tranquil sadness which was usual to her now; disturb it as with phantasmagoria dancing on the brain, yet it was a struggle hard and fierce to banish them again. As one sweet fancy sunk another rose, even as gleams of moonlight on the waves which rise and fall with every breeze. Fancy and reason strove for dominion, but the latter conquered. What could be now the past, save as a vision of the night; the present, a stern reality with all its duties—duties not alone to others, but to herself. These were the things on which her thoughts must dwell; these must banish all which might have been and they did; and Isabella of Buchan came through that fiery ordeal unscathed, uninjured in her self-esteem, conscious that not in one thought did she wrong her husband, in not one dream did she wrong the gentle heart of the queen which so clung to her; in not the wildest flight of fancy did she look on Robert as aught save as the deliverer of his country, the king of all true Scottish men.

She rose up from that weakness of suffering, strengthened in her resolve to use every energy in the queen's service in supporting, encouraging, endeavoring so to work on her appreciation of her husband's character, as to render her yet more worthy of his love. She had ever sought to remain beside the queen, ever contrived they should be of the same party; that her mind was ever on the stretch, on the excitement, could not be denied, but she knew not how great its extent till the call for exertion was comparatively over, and she found herself, she scarcely understood how, the only female companion of her sovereign, the situation she had most dreaded, most determined to avoid. While engaged in the performance of her arduous task, the schooling her own heart and devoting herself to Robert's wife, virtue seemed to have had its own reward, for a new spirit had entwined her whole being—excitement, internal as it was, had given a glow to thought and action; but in her present solitude the reaction of spirit fell upon her as a dull, sluggish weight of lead. She had suffered, too, from both privation and fatigue, and she was aware her strength was failing, and this perhaps was another cause of her depression; but be that as it may, darkness closed round her unobserved, and when startled by some sudden sound, she raised her head from her hands, she could scarcely discern one object from another in the density of gloom. "Surely night has come suddenly upon us," she said, half aloud; "it is strange they have not yet returned," and rising, she was about seeking the tent prepared for her, when a rude grasp was laid on her arm, and a harsh, unknown voice uttered, in suppressed accents—

"Not so fast, fair mistress, not so fast! My way does not lie in that direction, and, with your leave, my way is yours."

"How, man! fellow, detain me at your peril!" answered the countess, sternly, permitting no trace of terror to falter in her voice, although a drawn sword gleamed by her side, and a gigantic form fully armed had grasped her arm. "Unhand me, or I will summon those that will force thee. I am not alone, and bethink thee, insult to me will pass not with impunity."

The man laughed scornfully. "Boldly answered, fair one," he said; "of a truth thou art a brave one. I grieve such an office should descend upon me as the detention of so stout a heart; yet even so. In King Edward's name, you are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner, and wherefore?" demanded the countess believing that calmness would be a better protection than any symptoms of fear. "You are mistaken, good friend, I knew not Edward warred with women."

"Prove my mistake, fair mistress, and I will crave your pardon," replied the man, "We have certain intelligence that a party of Scottish rebels, their quondam king perhaps among them, are hidden in these mountains. Give us trusty news of their movements, show us their track, and Edward will hold you in high favor, and grant liberty and rich presents in excuse of his servant's too great vigilance. Hearest thou, what is the track of these rebels—what their movements?"

"Thou art a sorry fool, Murdock," retorted another voice, ere the countess could reply, and hastily glancing around, she beheld herself surrounded by armed men; "a sorry fool, an thou wastest the precious darkness thus. Is not one rank rebel sufficient, think you, to satisfy our lord? he will get intelligence enough out of her, be sure. Isabella of Buchan is not fool enough to hold parley with such as we, rely on't."

A suppressed exclamation of exultation answered the utterance of that name, and without further parley the arms of the countess were strongly pinioned, and with the quickness of thought the man who had first spoken raised her in his arms, and bore her through the thickest brushwood and wildest crags in quite the contrary direction to the encampment; their movements accelerated by the fact that, ere her arms were confined, the countess, with admirable presence of mind, had raised to her lips a silver whistle attached to her girdle, and blown a shrill, distinct blast. A moment sufficed to rudely tear it from her hand, and hurry her off as we have said; and when that call was answered, which it was as soon as the men scattered on the mountain sufficiently recognized the sound, they flung down their tools and sprung to the side whence it came, but there was no sign, no trace of her they sought; they scoured with lighted torches every mossy path or craggy slope, but in vain; places of concealment were too numerous, the darkness too intense, save just the space illumined by the torch, to permit success. The trampling of horses announced the return of the king and his companions, ere their search was concluded; his bugle summoned the stragglers, and speedily the loss of the countess was ascertained, their fruitless search narrated, and anxiety and alarm spread over the minds of all. The agony of the youthful Alan surpassed description, even the efforts of his sovereign failed to calm him. Nor was the Bruce himself much less agitated.

"She did wrong, she did wrong," he said, "to leave herself so long unguarded; yet who was there to commit this outrage? There is some treachery here, which we must sift; we must not leave our noble countrywoman in the hands of these marauders. Trust me, Alan, we shall recover her yet."

But the night promised ill for the fulfilment of this trust. Many hours passed in an utterly fruitless search, and about one hour before midnight a thick fog increased the dense gloom, and even prevented all assistance from the torches, for not ten yards before them was distinguishable. Dispirited and disappointed, the king and his companions threw themselves around the watchfires, in gloomy meditation, starting at the smallest sound, and determined to renew their search with the first gleam of dawn; the hurried pace of Alan, as he strode up and down, for he could not rest, alone disturbing the stillness all around.

CHAPTER XIII.

It was already two hours after midnight when a hurried tread, distinct from Alan's restless pacing, disturbed the watchers, and occasioned many to raise themselves on their elbows and listen.

It came nearer and nearer, and very soon a young lad, recognized as Sir Alan's page, was discerned, springing from crag to crag in breathless haste, and finally threw himself at his sovereign's feet.

"It is not too late—up, up, and save her!" were the only words he had power to gasp, panting painfully for the breath of which speed had deprived him. His hair and dress were heavy with the damp occasioned by the fog, and his whole appearance denoting no common agitation.

"Where?" "How?" "What knowest thou?" "Speak out." "What ailest thee, boy?" were the eager words uttered at once by all, and the king and others sprung to their feet, while Alan laid a heavy hand on the boy's shoulder, and glared on him in silence; the lad's glance fell beneath his, and he sobbed forth—

"Mercy, mercy! my thoughtlessness has done this, yet I guessed not, dreamed not this ill would follow. But oh, do not wait for my tale now; up, up, and save her ere it be too late!"

"And how may we trust thee now, an this is the effect of former treachery?" demanded Robert, with a sternness that seemed to awe the terrified boy into composure.

"I am not treacherous, sire. No, no! I would have exposed my throat to your grace's sword rather than do a traitor's deed: trust me, oh, trust me, and follow without delay!"

"Speak first, and clearly," answered Alan, fiercely; "even for my mother's sake the sacred person of the King of Scotland shall not be risked by a craven's word. Speak, an thou wouldst bid me trust thee—speak, I charge thee."

"He is right—he is right; let him explain this mystery ere we follow," echoed round; and thus urged, the boy's tale was hurriedly told.

It was simply this. Some days previous, when wandering alone about the rocks, he had met a woodman, whom he recognized as one of the retainers of Buchan, and, as such, believed him as loyal and faithful to King Robert's interest as himself and others in the countess's train. The man had artfully evaded all young Malcolm's expression of astonishment and inquiries as to why Donald MacAlpine, whom he well knew to be one of the stoutest and most sturdy men-at-arms which the clan possessed, should have taken to so peaceful an employment as cutting wood, and skilfully drew from the boy much information concerning the movements of the party to whom he belonged. Malcolm freely spoke of Sir Alan and the Countess of Buchan, dilating with no little pleasure on his young master having received knighthood at the hand of his king, and all the honors and delights which accompanied it. Aware, however, of the dangers which environed the Bruce, he spoke of him more cautiously, and the more Donald sought to discover if the king were near at hand, the more carefully did Malcolm conceal that he was, telling the woodman if he wished to know all particulars, he had better turn his sickle into a spear, his cap into a helmet, and strike a good blow for Scotland and King Robert. This the man refused to do, alleging he loved his own sturdy person and independent freedom too well to run his neck into such a noose; that King Robert might do very well for a while, but eventually he must fall into King Edward's hands. Malcolm angrily denied this, and they parted, not the best friends imaginable. On reviewing all that had passed, the boy reproached himself incessantly for having said too much, and was continually tormented by an indefinable fear that some evil would follow. This fear kept him by the side of the countess, instead of, as was his wont, following Sir Alan to the chase. The increasing darkness had concealed her from him, but he was the first to distinguish her whistle. He had reached the spot time enough to recognize the supposed woodman in the second speaker, and to feel with painful acuteness his boyish thoughtlessness had brought this evil on a mistress, to serve whom he would willingly have laid down his life. Resistance he knew, on his part, was utterly useless, and therefore he determined to follow their track, and thus bring accurate intelligence to the king. The minds of the men preoccupied by the thought of their distinguished prisoner, and the thickening gloom, aided his resolution. Happening to have a quantity of thick flax in his pocket, the boy, with admirable foresight, fastened it to different shrubs and stones as he passed, and thus secured his safe return; a precaution very necessary, as from the windings and declivities, and in parts well-nigh impregnable hollows, into which he followed the men, his return in time would have been utterly frustrated.

The gathering mist had occasioned a halt, and a consultation as to whether they could reach the encampment to which they belonged, or whether it would not be better to halt till dawn. They had decided in favor of the latter, fearing, did they continue marching, they might lose their track, and perhaps fall in with the foe. He had waited, he said, till he saw them making such evident preparations for a halt of some hours, that he felt certain they would not remove till daylight. It was a difficult and precarious path, he said, yet he was quite sure he could lead fifteen or twenty men easily to the spot, and, taken by surprise, nothing would prevent the recovery of the countess: less than two hours would take them there.

This tale was told in less time than we have taken to transcribe it, and not twenty minutes after Malcolm's first appearance, the king and Sir Alan, with fifteen tried followers, departed on their

expedition. There had been some attempt to dissuade the king from venturing his own person where further treachery might yet lurk, but the attempt was vain.

"She has perilled her life for me," was his sole answer, "and were there any real peril, mine would be hazarded for her; but there is none—'tis but a child's work we are about to do, not even glory enough to call for envy."

The fog had sufficiently cleared to permit of their distinguishing the route marked out by Malcolm, but not enough to betray their advance, even had there been scouts set to watch the pass. Not a word passed between them. Rapidly, stealthily they advanced, and about three in the morning stood within sight of their foes, though still unseen themselves. There was little appearance of caution: two large fires had been kindled, round one of which ten or twelve men were stretched their full length, still armed indeed, and their hands clasping their unsheathed swords, but their senses fast locked in slumber. Near the other, her arms and feet pinioned, Alan, with a heart beating almost audibly with indignation, recognized his mother. Two men, armed with clubs, walked up and down beside her, and seven others were grouped in various attitudes at her feet, most of them fast asleep. It was evident that they had no idea of surprise, and that their only fear was associated with the escape of their prisoner.

"They are little more than man to man," said the Bruce; "therefore is there no need for further surprise than will attend the blast of your bugle, Sir Alan. Sound the reveillé, and on to the rescue."

He was obeyed, and the slumberers, with suppressed oaths, started to their feet, glancing around them a brief minute in inquiring astonishment as to whence the sound came. It was speedily explained: man after man sprang through the thicket, and rushed upon the foes, several of whom, gathering themselves around their prisoner, seemed determined that her liberty should not be attained with her life, more than once causing the swords of the Bruce's followers to turn aside in their rapid descent, lest they should injure her they sought to save. Like a young lion Alan fought, ably seconded by the king, whose gigantic efforts clearing his path, at length enabled himself and Alan to stand uninjured beside the countess, and thus obtain possession of her person, and guard her from the injury to which her captors voluntarily exposed her. There was at first no attempt at flight, although the Bruce's men carried all before them; the men fell where they stood, till only five remained, and these, after a moment's hesitation, turned and fled. A shrill cry from Malcolm had turned the king's and Alan's attention in another direction, and it was well they did so. Determined on foiling the efforts of his foes, Donald MacAlpine, who was supposed to be among the fallen, had stealthily approached the spot where the countess, overcome with excessive faintness, still reclined, then noiselessly rising, his sword was descending on her unguarded head, when Alan, aroused by Malcolm's voice, turned upon him and dashed his weapon from his grasp, at the same minute that the Bruce's sword pierced the traitor's heart: he sprang in the air with a loud yell of agony, and fell, nearly crushing the countess with his weight.

It was the voice of Alan which aroused that fainting heart. It was in the bosom of her son those tearful eyes were hid, after one startled and bewildered gaze on the countenance of her sovereign, who had been leaning over her in unfeigned anxiety. A thicket of thorn, mingled with crags, divided her from the unseemly signs of the late affray; but though there was naught to renew alarm, it was with a cold shudder she had clung to her son, as if even her firm, bold spirit had given way. Gently, cheerfully the king addressed her, and she evidently struggled to regain composure; but her powers of body were evidently so prostrated, that her friends felt rest of some kind she must have, ere she could regain sufficient strength to accompany them on their wanderings. She had received three or four wounds in the mêlée, which though slight, the loss of blood that had followed materially increased her weakness, and the king anxiously summoned his friends around him to deliberate on the best measures to pursue.

Amongst them were two of Sir Alan's retainers, old and faithful Scottish men, coeval with his grandfather, the late Earl of Buchan. Devoted alike to the countess, the king, and their country, they eagerly listened to all that was passing, declaring that rather than leave the Lady Isabella in a situation of such danger as the present, they would take it by turns to carry her in their arms to the encampment. The king listened with a benevolent smile.

"Is there no hut or house, or hunting-lodge to which we could convey your lady," he asked, "where she might find quieter shelter and greater rest than hitherto? An ye knew of such, it would be the wiser plan to seek it at break of day."

A hunting-lodge, belonging to the Earls of Buchan, there was, or ought to be, the old men said, near the head of the Tay, just at the entrance of Athol Forest. It had not been used since their old master's days; he had been very partial to it when a boy, and was continually there; it had most likely fallen into decay from disuse, as they believed the present earl did not even know of its existence, but that was all the better, as it would be a still more safe and secure retreat for the countess, and they were sure, when once out of the hollows and intricacies of their present halting-place, they could easily discover the path to it.

And how long did they think it would be, the king inquired, before their lady could be taken to it? the sooner, they must perceive as well as himself, the better for her comfort. He was relieved when they declared that two days, or at the very utmost three, would bring them there, if, as the old men earnestly entreated he would, they retraced their steps to the encampment as soon as daylight was sufficiently strong for them clearly to distinguish their path. This was unanimously resolved on, and the few intervening hours were spent by the countess in calm repose.

Conscious that filial affection watched over her, the sleep of the countess tranquillized her sufficiently to commence the return to the encampment with less painful evidences of exhaustion. A rude litter waited for her, in which she could recline when the pass allowed its safe passage, and which could be easily borne by the bearers when the intricacies of the path prevented all egress save by pedestrianism. It had been hurriedly made by her devoted adherents, and soothed and gratified, her usual energy seemed for the moment to return. By nine o'clock forenoon all traces of the Bruce and his party had departed from the glen, the last gleam of their armor was lost in the winding path, and then it was that a man, who had lain concealed in a thicket from the moment of the affray, hearing all that had passed, unseen himself, now slowly, cautiously raised himself on his knees, gazed carefully round him, then with a quicker but as silent motion sprung to his feet, and raised his hands in an action of triumph.

"*He is* amongst them, then," he muttered, "the traitor Bruce himself. This is well. The countess, her son, find the would-be king—ha! ha! My fortune's made!" and he bounded away in quite a contrary direction to that taken by the Bruce.

The old retainers of Buchan were correct in their surmises. The evening of the second day succeeding the event we have narrated brought them to the hunting-lodge. It was indeed very old, and parts had fallen almost to ruins, but there were still three or four rooms remaining, whose compact walls and well-closed roofs rendered them a warm and welcome refuge for the Countess of Buchan, whose strenuous exertions the two preceding days had ended, as was expected, by exhaustion more painful and overpowering than before.

The exertions of her friends—for the Bruce and his followers with one consent had permitted their wanderings to be guided by the old men—speedily rendered the apartments habitable. Large fires were soon blazing on the spacious hearths, and ere night fell, all appearance of damp and discomfort had vanished. The frugal supper was that night a jovial meal; the very look of a cheerful blaze beneath a walled roof was reviving to the wanderers; the jest passed round, the wine-cup sparkled to the health of the countess, and many a fervent aspiration echoed round for the speedy restoration of her strength; for truly she was the beloved, the venerated of all, alike from her sovereign to his lowest follower.

"Trust my experience, my young knight," had been the Bruce's address to Alan ere they parted for the night. "A few days' complete repose will quite restore your valued parent and my most honored friend. This hunting-lodge shall be our place of rendezvous for a time, till she is sufficiently restored to accompany us southward. You are satisfied, are you not, with the diligence of our scouts?"

"Perfectly, your highness," was Alan's reply; for well-trying and intelligent men had been sent in every direction to discover, if possible, to what party of the enemy the captors of the Lady Isabella belonged, and to note well the movements and appearance, not only of any martial force, but of the country people themselves. They had executed their mission as well as the intricate passes and concealed hollows of the mountains permitted, and brought back the welcome intelligence, that for miles round the country was perfectly clear, and to all appearance peaceful. The hunting-lodge, too, was so completely hidden by dark woods of pine and overhanging crags, that even had there been foes prowling about the mountains, they might pass within twenty yards of its vicinity and yet fail to discover it. The very path leading to the bottom of the hollow in which it stood was concealed at the entrance by thick shrubs and an arch of rock, which had either fallen naturally into that shape, or been formed by the architects of the lodge. It seemed barely possible that the retreat could be discovered, except by the basest treachery, and therefore the king and Sir Alan felt perfectly at rest regarding the safety of the countess, even though they could only leave with her a guard of some twenty or thirty men.

So much was she refreshed the following morning, that the hopes of her son brightened, and with that filial devotion so peculiarly his characteristic, he easily obtained leave of absence from his sovereign, to remain by the couch of his mother for at least that day, instead of accompanying him, as was his wont, in the expeditions of the day. The countess combated this decision, but in vain. Alan was resolved. He was convinced, he said, her former capture, and all its ill consequences, would not have taken place had he been by her side; and even were she not now exposed to such indignity, she would be lonely and sad without him, and stay, in consequence, he would. The king and his officers approved of the youth's resolution, and reluctantly Isabella yielded.

About two hours before noon the Bruce and his companions departed, desiring Sir Alan not to expect their return till near midnight, as they intended penetrating a part of the country which had not yet been explored; they might be a few hours sooner, but they scarcely expected it. It was afterwards remembered that a peculiar expression of sadness overclouded the countenance of the countess, as for a moment she fixed her speaking eyes on the king's face when he cheerfully bade her farewell, and said, in a low emphatic voice—

"Farewell, sire! It may be the hour of meeting is longer deferred than we either of us now believe. Fain would I beseech your grace to grant me one boon, make me but one promise ere you depart."

"Any boon, any promise that our faithful friend and subject can demand, is granted ere 'tis asked," answered the king, without a moment's pause, though startled alike at the expression of her features and the sadness of her voice. "Gladly would we give any pledge that could in any way bespeak our warm sense of thy true merit, lady, therefore speak, and fear not."

"'Tis simply this, sire," she said, and her voice was still mournful, despite her every effort to prevent its being so. "Should unforeseen evil befall me, captivity, danger of death, or aught undreamed of now, give me your royal word as a knight and king, that you will not peril your sacred person, and with it the weal and liberty of our unhappy country, for my sake, but leave me to my fate; 'tis a strange and fanciful boon, yet, gracious sovereign, refuse it not. I mean not treachery such as we have encountered, where your grace's noble gallantry rescued me with little peril to yourself. No; I mean other and greater danger; where I well know that rather than leave me exposed to the wrath of my husband and Edward of England, you would risk your own precious life, and with it the liberty of Scotland. Grant me this boon, my liege, and perchance this heavy weight upon my spirit will pass and leave me free."

"Nay, 'tis such a strange and unknighly promise, lady, how may I pledge my word to its fulfilment?" answered Robert, gravely and sadly. "You bid me pledge mine honor to a deed that will stain my name with an everlasting infamy, that even the liberty of Scotland will not wash away. How may I do this thing? You press me sorely, lady. Even for thee, good and faithful as thou art, how may I hurt my knightly fame?"

"Sire, thou wilt not," she returned, still more entreatingly; "thy brilliant fame, thy noble name, will never—can never, receive a stain. I do but ask a promise whose fulfilment may never be demanded. I do but bid thee remember thou art not only a knight, a noble, a king, but one by whom the preservation, the independence of our country can alone be achieved—one on whose safety and freedom depends the welfare of a nation, the unchained glory of her sons. Were death thy portion, Scotland lies a slave forever at the feet of England, and therefore is it I do beseech thee, King of Scotland, make me this pledge. I know thy noble spirit well, and I know thy too chivalric honor would blind thee to a sense of danger, to a sense of country, duty, glory, of all save the rescue of one who, though she be faithful to thee and to her country, is but as a drop of water in the ocean, compared to other claims. My liege, thy word is already in part pledged," she continued, more proudly. "Any pledge or promise I might demand is granted ere it is asked, your highness deigned to say; thou canst not retract it now."

"And wherefore shouldst thou, royal brother?" cheerily interrupted Alexander Bruce. "The Lady Isabella asks not unreasonably; she does but suggest *what may be*, although that may be is, as we all know, next to impossible, particularly now when nature has fortified this pleasant lodge even as would a garrison of some hundred men. Come, be not so churlish in thy favors, good my liege; give her the pledge she demands, and be sure its fulfilment will never be required."

"Could I but think so," he replied, still gravely. "Lady, I do entreat thee, tell me wherefore thou demandest this strange boon; fearest thou evil—drest thou aught of danger hovering near? If so, as there is a God in heaven, I will not go forth to-day!"

"Pardon me, gracious sovereign," answered Isabella, evasively; "I ask it, because since the late adventure there has been a weight upon my spirit as if I, impotent, of little consequence as I am, yet even I might be the means of hurling down evil on thy head, and through thee on Scotland; and, therefore, until thy promise to the effect I have specified is given, I cannot, I will not rest—even though, as Lord Alexander justly believes, its fulfilment will never be required. Evil here, my liege, trust me, cannot be; therefore go forth in confidence. I fear not to await your return, e'en should I linger here alone. Grant but my boon."

"Nay, an it must be, lady, I promise all thou demandest," answered Bruce, more cheerfully, for her words reassured him; "but, by mine honor, thou hast asked neither well nor kindly. Remember, my pledge is passed but for real danger, and that only for Scotland's sake, not for mine own; and now farewell, lady. I trust, ere we meet again, these depressing fancies will have left thee."

"They have well-nigh departed now, my liege; 'twas simply for thee and Scotland these heavy bodings oppressed me. My son," she added, after a brief pause, "I would your highness could prevail on him to accompany you to-day. Wherefore should he stay with me?"

"Wherefore not rather, lady?" replied the king, smiling. "I may not leave thee to thine own thoughts to weave fresh boons like to the last. No, no! our young knight must guard thee till we meet again," and with these words he departed. They did not, however, deter the countess from resuming her persuasions to Alan to accompany his sovereign, but without success. Isabella of Buchan had, however, in this instance departed from her usual strict adherence to the truth, she did not feel so secure that no evil would befall her in the absence of the Bruce, as she had endeavored to make him believe.

Some words she had caught during her brief captivity caused her, she scarcely knew why, to believe that the Earl of Buchan himself was in the neighborhood; nay, that the very party which had captured her were members of the army under his command. She had gathered, too, that it was a very much larger force than the king's, and therefore it was that she had made no objection to Robert's wish that she should rest some few days in the hunting-lodge. She knew that, however her failing strength might detain and harass their movements, Bruce and his followers would never consent to leave her, unless, as in the present case, under a comparatively comfortable roof and well-concealed shelter; and she knew, too, that however she might struggle to accompany them in their wanderings, the struggle in her present exhausted state would be utterly in vain, and lingering for her might expose her sovereign to a renewal of the ills with which he had already striven so nobly, and perchance to yet more irreparable misfortune. The information of the scouts had partially reassured her, at least to the fact that no immediate

danger was to be apprehended, and for a while she indulged the hope that safety might be found in this hidden spot until the peril passed. She had full confidence in the fidelity of the old retainers who had guided them to the spot, and sought to feel satisfied that its vicinity was unknown to the earl, her husband; but, whether from the restlessness of a slight degree of fever, or from that nervous state of mind attendant on worn-out strength, ere the Bruce departed the same foreboding came on her again, and all her desire was the absence of her sovereign and his followers, to have some hold upon his almost too exalted sense of chivalry, which would prevent any rash act of daring on his part; and this, as we have seen, she obtained.

Could she but have prevailed on her son to accompany them, she would calmly and resignedly have awaited her fate, whatever it might be; but the horror of beholding him a prisoner in the hands of his father—that father perhaps so enraged at the boy's daring opposition to his will and political opinions, that he would give him up at once to the wrath of Edward—was a picture of anguish from which her mind revolted in such intense suffering, she could not rest. She strove with the fancy; she sought to rouse every energy, to feel secure in her present resting-place. But who can resist the influence of feelings such as these? What mother's heart cannot enter into the emotions of Isabella of Buchan, as she gazed on her noble boy, improved as he was in manliness and beauty, and with the dread anticipation of evil, believing only absence could protect him; that perchance the very love which kept him by her side would expose him to danger, imprisonment, and death? She did not speak her fears, but Alan vainly sought to soothe that unwonted restlessness. She had endeavored to secure the Bruce's safety by the aid of Malcolm, the young page, by whose instrumentality she had been both captured and released. Taking advantage of Sir Alan's absence, she had called the boy to her side, and made him promise that, at the first manifest sign of danger, he would make his escape, which, by his extreme agility and address, would easily be achieved, seek the king, and give him exact information of the numbers, strength, and situation of the foes, reminding him, at the same time, of his solemn pledge. She made him promise the profoundest secrecy, and adjured him at all hazards to save the king.

The boy, affected by the solemnity of her manner, promised faithfully to observe her minutest sign, and on the re-entrance of Sir Alan departed, to marvel wherefore his lady should so have spoken, and examine the localities around, as to the best means of concealment and escape.

The hours waned, and night fell, as is usual in October, some five hours after noon, the gloom perhaps greatly increased by the deep shades in which their place of concealment lay. Sir Alan roused the fire to a cheerful blaze, and lighting a torch of pine-wood, placed it in an iron bracket projecting from the wall, and amused himself by polishing his arms, and talking in that joyous tone his mother so loved, on every subject that his affection fancied might interest and amuse her. He was wholly unarmed, except his sword, which, secured to his waist by a crimson sash, he never laid aside; and fair and graceful to his mother's eye did he look in his simple doublet of Lincoln-green, cut and slashed with ruby velvet, his dark curls clustering round his bare throat, and his bright face beaming in all the animation of youth and health, spiritualized by the deeper feelings of his soul; and she, too, was still beautiful, though her frame was slighter, her features more attenuated than when we first beheld her. He had insisted on her reclining on the couch, and drawn from her otherwise painful thoughts by his animated sallies, smiles circled her pale lip, and her sorrows were a while forgotten.

An hour, perhaps rather more, elapsed, and found the mother and son still as we have described, There had been no sound without, but about that period many heavy footsteps might have been distinguished, cautiously, it seemed, advancing. Alan started up and listened; the impatient neigh of a charger was heard, and then voices suppressed, yet, as he fancied, familiar.

"King Robert returned already!" he exclaimed; "they must have had an unusually successful chase. I must e'en seek them and inquire."

"Alan! my child!" He started at the voice, it was so unlike his mother's. She had risen and flung her arm around him with a pressure so convulsive, he looked at her with terror. There was no time to answer; a sudden noise usurped the place of the previous stillness—a struggle—a heavy fall; the door was flung rudely open, and an armed man stood upon the threshold, his vizor up, but even had it not been, the heart of the countess too truly told her she gazed upon her husband!

CHAPTER XIV.

A brief pause followed the entrance of this unexpected visitor. Standing upon the threshold, his dark brow knit, his eyes fixed on his prisoners, the Earl of Buchan stood a few minutes immovable. Alan saw but a mail-clad warrior, more fierce and brutal in appearance than the generality of their foes, and felt, with all that heart-sinking despondency natural to youth, that they were betrayed, that resistance was in vain, for heavier and louder grew the tramp of horse and man, and the narrow passage, discernible through the open door, was filled with steel-clad forms, their drawn swords glancing in the torchlight, their dark brows gleaming in ill-concealed triumph. Alan was still a boy in years, despite his experience as a warrior, and in the first agony of this discovery, the first dream of chains and captivity, when his young spirit revelled in the thought of freedom, and joyed as a bird in the fresh air of mount and stream, weaving bright hopes, not exile or wandering could remove, his impulse had been to dash his useless sword in

anguish to the earth, and weep; but the sight of his mother checked that internal weakness. He felt her convulsive clasp; he beheld the expression on her features,—how unlike their wont—terror, suffering, whose *entire* cause he vainly endeavored to define, and he roused himself for her. And she, did she see more than her son? She *knew* that face, and as she gazed, she felt hope had departed; she beheld naught but a long, endless vista of anguish; yet she felt not for herself, she thought but of her child. And the earl, can we define his exulting mood?—it was the malice, the triumph of a fiend.

"Who and what art thou?" demanded Alan, fiercely, laying his right hand on his sword, and with the left firmly clasping his mother's waist. "What bold knight and honorable chevalier art thou, thus seeking by stealth the retreat of a wanderer, and overpowering by numbers and treachery men, who on the field thou and such as thou had never dared to meet?"

The earl laughed; that bitter, biting laugh of contempt and triumph so difficult to bear.

"Thou hast a worthy tongue, my pretty springald," said he; "canst thou use thy sword as bravely? Who and what am I? ask of the lady thou hast so caressingly encircled with thine arm, perchance she can give thee information."

Alan started, a cold thrill passed through his frame, as the real cause of his mother's terror flashed on his mind; her lips, parched and quivering, parted as to speak, but there was no sound.

"Mother," he said, "mother, speak to thy son. Why, why art thou thus? it is not the dread of imprisonment, of death. No, no; they have no terrors for such as thee. Who is this man?"

Engrossed in his own agitation, Alan had not heard the muttered exclamation which burst from Buchan's lips with his first words, for great was the earl's surprise as he looked on his son; the impression he was still a child had remained on his mind despite all reports to the contrary, but no softer feeling obtained dominion.

"Who and what am I?" he continued, after a brief pause. "Wouldst thou know, Alan of Buchan? Even a faithful knight, soldier, and subject of his Royal Highness Edward, king of England and Scotland, and consequently thy foe; the insulted and dishonored husband of the woman thou callest mother, and consequently thy father, young man. Ha! have I spoken home? Thy sword, thy sword; acknowledge thy disloyalty to thy father and king, and for thee all may yet be well."

"Never!" answered Alan, proudly, the earl's concluding words rousing the spirit which the knowledge of beholding his father and the emotion of his mother seemed to have crushed. "Never, Lord of Buchan! for father I cannot call thee. Thou mayest force me to resign my sword, thou mayest bring me to the block, but acknowledge allegiance to a foreign tyrant, who hath no claims on Scotland or her sons, save those of hate and detestation, that thou canst never do, even if thy sword be pointed at my heart."

"Boy!" burst from the earl's lips, in accents of irrepressible rage, but he checked himself; "thou hast learned a goodly lesson of disobedience and daring, of a truth, and I should tender grateful thanks to thy most worthy, most efficient and virtuous teacher," he added, in his own bitterly sarcastic tone. "The Lady Isabella deems, perchance, she has done her duty to her husband in placing a crown on the head of his hereditary and hated foe, and leading his son in the same path of rebellion and disloyalty, and giving his service to the murderer of his kinsman."

"Earl of Buchan, I have done my duty alike to my country and my son," replied the countess, her high spirit roused by the taunts of her husband. "According to the dictates of my conscience, mine honor as a Scottish woman, the mother of a Scottish warrior, I have done my duty, and neither imprisonment, nor torture, nor death will bid me retract those principles, or waver in my acknowledgment of Scotland and her king. Pardon me, my lord; but there is no rebellion in resisting the infringement of a tyrant, no disloyalty in raising the standard against Edward, for there is no treason when there is no lawful authority; and by what right is Edward of England king of Scotland? Lord of Buchan, I have done my duty. As my father taught *me* I have taught my child!"

"Regarding, of course, madam, all which that child's father would have taught him, particularly that most Christian virtue returning good for evil, as in the fact of revenging the death of a kinsman with the gift of a crown. Oh! thou hast done well, most intrinsically well."

"I own no relationship with a traitor," burst impetuously from Alan. "Sir John Comyn was honored in his death, for the sword of the Bruce was too worthy a weapon for the black heart of a traitor. Lord of Buchan, we are in thy power, it is enough. Hadst thou wished thy son to imbibe thy peculiar principles, to forget his country and her lights, it had been better perchance hadst thou remembered thou hadst a child—a son. Had the duty of a father been performed, perchance I had not now forgotten mine as a son! As it is, we stand as strangers and as foes. Against thee in truth I will not raise my sword; but further, we are severed and forever!" He crossed his arms proudly on his bosom, and returned the dark, scowling glance of his father with a flashing eye, and a mien as firm and nobler than his own.

"It is well, young man; I thank you for my freedom," returned the earl, between his teeth. "As my son, I might stand between thee and Edward's wrath; as a stranger and my foe, why, whatever his sentence be—the axe and block without doubt—let it work, it will move me little."

"Heed not his rash words, in mercy, heed them not!" exclaimed the countess, her voice of agony contrasting strangely with its former proud reserve. "Neglected, forgotten him as thou hast, yet,

Lord of Buchan, he is still thy son. Oh, in mercy, expose him not to the deadly wrath of Edward! thou canst save him, thou canst give him freedom. It is I—I who am the attainted traitor, not my child. Give me up to Edward, and he will heed not, ask not for thy son. It is I who have offended him and thee, not my child. Art thou not a Scottish noble, descendant of a house as purely loyal and devoted to their country as mine own—art thou not indeed this man, and yet hath Edward, the deadly foe of thy race, thy land, thy countrymen, more exalted claims than thine own blood? No, no, it cannot be! thou wilt relent, thou wilt have mercy; let him be but free, and do with me even what thou wilt!"

"Free! go free!" repeated the earl, with a hoarse laugh, ere Alan could interfere. "Let him go free, forsooth, when he tells me he is my foe, and will go hence and join my bitterest enemies the moment he is free. Go free! and who art thou who askest this boon? Hast thou such claims upon me, that for thy pleasure I should give freedom to thy son?"

"My lord, my lord, 'tis for thine own sake, for his, thy child as well as mine, I do beseech, implore thy mercy? draw not the curse of heaven on thy heart by exposing him to death. Thou wilt know and feel him as indeed thy child when he lies bleeding before thee, when thine own hand hath forged the death-bolt, and then, then it will be too late; thou wilt yearn for his voice in vain. Oh! is it not sufficient triumph to have in thy power the wife who hath dared thy authority, who hath joined the patriot band, and so drawn down on her the vengeance of Edward? The price of a traitor is set upon her head. My lord, my lord, is not one victim enough—will not my capture insure thee reward and honor in the court of Edward? Then do with me what thou wilt—chains, torture, death; but my child, my brave boy—oh, if thou hast one spark of mercy in thy heart, let him go!"

"Mother," hoarsely murmured Alan, as he strove to raise her from her suppliant posture, "mother, this shall not be! look upon that face and know thou pleadest in vain. I will not accept my freedom at such a price; thy knee, thy supplications unto a heart of stone, for me! No, no; mother, dear mother, we will die together!"

"Thou shalt not, thou shalt not, my beloved, my beautiful! thy death will be on my head, though it come from a father's hand. I will plead, I will be heard! My lord, my lord," she continued, wrought to a pitch of agonized feeling, no heart save that to which she pleaded could have heard unmoved, "I ask but his freedom, the freedom of a boy, a child—and of whom do I ask it?—of his father, his own father! Speak to me, answer me; thou canst not be so lost to the voice, the feelings of nature. For the sake of the mother who loved, the father who blessed *thee*, whose blessing hallowed our union and smiled on our infant boy, have mercy on me, on thyself—let him, oh, let him be free!"

"Mercy on thee, thou false and perjured woman!" the earl burst forth, the cold sarcastic expression with which he had at first listened to her impassioned entreaties giving way to the fearful index of ungoverned rage; "on thee, thou false traitress, not alone to thy husband's principles but to his honor! Do I not know thee, minion—do I not know the motives of thy conduct in leaving thy husband's castle for the court of Bruce? Patriotism, forsooth—patriotism, ha! the patriotism that had vent in giving and receiving love from him; it was so easy to do homage to him in public as thy king. Oh, most rare and immaculate specimen of female loyalty and virtue, I know thee well!"

"Man!" answered the countess, springing from her knee, and standing before him with a mien and countenance of such majestic dignity, that for a brief moment it awed even him, and her bewildered son gazed at her with emotions of awe, struggling with surprise.

"Ha! faithless minion, thou bravest it well," continued Buchan, determined on evincing no faltering in his purpose, "but thou bravest it in vain; dishonored thou art, and hast been, aye, from the time thy minion Robert visited thee in Buchan Tower, and lingered with thee the months he had disappeared from Edward's court. Would Isabella of Buchan have rendered homage to any other bold usurper, save her minion Robert? Would the murder of a Comyn have passed unavenged by her had the murderer been other than her gallant Bruce? Would Isabella of Buchan be here, the only female in the Bruce's train—for I know that he is with thee—were loyalty and patriotism her only motive? Woman, I know thee! I know that thou didst love him, ere that false hand and falser heart were given to me; thy lips spoke perfidy when they vowed allegiance at the altar; and shall I have mercy on thy son, for such as thee? Mercy! ha, have I silenced thy eloquence now?"

"Silenced, false, blasphemous villain!" vociferated Alan, every other feeling lost in the whirlwind of passion, and springing on the earl, with his drawn sword. "'Tis thou who art the false and faithless—thou who art lost to every feeling of honor and of truth. Thy words are false as hell, from whence they spring!"

"Alan, by the love thou bearest me, I charge thee put up thy sword—it is thy father!" exclaimed, the countess, commandingly, and speaking the last word in a tone that thrilled to the boy's heart. He checked himself in his full career; he snapped his drawn sword in twain, he cast it passionately from him, and uttering, convulsively, "Oh God, oh God, my father!" flung himself in agony on the ground. With arms folded and the smile of a demon on his lip the earl had awaited his attack, but there was disappointment within, for his foul charge had failed in its intended effect. Prouder, colder, more commandingly erect had become the mein of the countess as he spoke, till she even appeared to increase in stature; her flashing eyes had never moved from his face, till his fell beneath them; her lip had curled, his cheek had flushed: powerful indeed became

the contrast between the accused and the accuser.

"Arise, my son," she said, "arise and look upon thy mother; her brow even as her heart is unstained with shame; she fears not to meet the glance of her child. Look up, my boy; I speak these words to *thee*, not to that bold, bad man, who hath dared unite the name of a daughter of Fife with shame. He hath no word either of exculpation, denial, or assent from me. But to thee, my child, my young, my innocent child, thee, whose ear, when removed from me, they may strive to poison with false tales, woven with such skill that hadst thou not thy mother's word, should win thee to belief—to thee I say, look on me, Alan—is this a brow of guilt?"

"No, no, no, I will not look on thee, my mother! I need not to gaze on thee to know the horrid falsity of the charge," answered Alan, flinging his arms passionately around his mother. "Did I never see thee more, never list that voice again, and did all the fiends of hell come around me with their lies, I would not hear, much less believe such charge. No, no! oh God, 'tis my father, speaks it! Father—and my hand is powerless to avenge."

"I need not vengeance, my beloved; grieve not, weep not that thy hand is chained, and may not defend thy mother's stainless name; I need it not. My heart is known unto my God, my innocence to thee; his blessing rest with thee, my beautiful, and give thee strength for all thou mayest endure."

She bent down to kiss his brow, which was damp with the dew of intense anguish. He started up, he gave one long look on her calm and noble face, and then he flung himself in her arms, and sobbed like a child on her bosom. It was a fearful moment for that woman heart; had she been alone with her child, both nerve and spirit must have given way, but fortunately, perhaps, for the preservation of her fortitude, the Earl of Buchan was still the witness of that scene, triumphing in the sufferings he had caused. The countess did indeed fold her boy convulsively to her breast, but she did not bend her head on his, as Nature prompted; it was still erect; her mien majestic still, and but a slight quivering in her beautiful lip betrayed emotion.

"Be firm; be thy noble self," she said. "Forget not thou art a knight and soldier amid the patriots of Scotland. And now a while, farewell."

She extricated herself with some difficulty from his embrace; she paused not to gaze again upon the posture of overwhelming despondency in which he had sunk, but with a step quick and firm advanced to the door.

"Whither goest thou, madam?" demanded the earl fiercely. "Bold as thou art, it is well to know thou art a prisoner, accused of high treason against King Edward."

"I need not your lordship's voice to give me such information," she answered, proudly. "Methinks these armed followers are all-sufficient evidence. Guard me, aye, confine me with fetters an thou wilt, but in thy presence thou canst not force me to abide."

"Bid a last farewell to thy son, then, proud minion," he replied, with fiendish malignity; "for an ye part now, it is forever. Ye see him not again."

"Then be it so," she rejoined; "we shall meet where falsehood and malignant hate can never harm us more," and with a gesture of dignity, more irritating to the earl than the fiercest demonstration of passion, she passed the threshold. A sign from Buchan surrounded her with guards, and by them she was conducted to a smaller apartment, which was first carefully examined as to any concealed means of escape, and then she was left alone, a strong guard stationed at the door.

The first few minutes after the disappearance of the countess were passed by her husband in rapidly striding up and down the room, by her son, in the same posture of mute and motionless anguish in which she had left him. There is no need to define that suffering, his peculiar situation is all-sufficient to explain it. Hurriedly securing the door from all intruders, the earl at length approached his son.

"Wouldst thou be free?" he said, abruptly. "Methinks thou art young enough still to love liberty better than chains, and perchance death. Speak, I tell thee; wouldst thou be free?"

"Free!" answered Alan, raising his head, with flashing eye and burning cheek; "would I be free? Ask of the chained lion, the caged bird, and they will tell thee the greenwood and forest glade are better, dearer, even though the chain were gemmed, the prison gilded. Would I be free? Thou knowest that I would."

"Swear, then, that thou wilt quit Scotland, and vow fealty to Edward; that never more will thy sword be raised save against the contemned and hated Bruce. Be faithful but to me and to King Edward, and thou shalt be free."

"Never!" answered Alan, proudly. "Earl of Buchan, I accept no conditions with my freedom; I will not be free, if only on this base condition. Turn recreant and traitor to my country and my king! resign the precious privilege of *dying*, if I may not *live*, for Scotland—I tell thee, never! Urge me no more."

"Nay, thou art but a boy, a foolish boy," continued the earl, struggling to speak persuadingly, "incapable of judging that which is right and best. I tell thee, I will give thee not freedom alone, but honor, station, wealth; I will acknowledge thee as my well-beloved son and heir; I will forget

all that is past; nay, not e'en thy will or actions will I restrain; I will bind thee by no vow; thou shalt take no part with Edward; I will interfere not with thy peculiar politics; e'en what thou wilt thou shalt do, aye, and have—and all this but on one condition, so slight and simple that thou art worse than fool an thou refusest."

"Speak on," muttered Alan, without raising his head. "I hear."

"Give me but information of the movements of him thou callest king," replied Buchan, in a low yet emphatically distinct voice; "give me but a hint as to where we may meet him in combat—in all honorable and knightly combat, thou knowest that I mean—give me but information such as this, and thou art free, unshackled, in condition as in limb."

"In other words, *betray him*," replied Alan, starting up. "Purchase my freedom with the price of his! mine, of nothing worth, aye, less than nothing, redeemed by his! Oh, shame, shame on thee, my lord! Well mayest thou offer me freedom of action as in will on such condition. Of little heed to Edward were the resistance of all Scotland, were Robert in his power. Honor, station, wealth!—oh, knowest thou the human heart so little as to believe these can exist with black treachery and fell remorse? Once and forever, I tell thee thine offers are in vain. Were death in one scale, and free, unshackled liberty in the other, and thou badest me choose between, I would not so stain my soul. Death, death itself were welcome, aye, worse than death—confinement, chains. I would hug them to my heart as precious boons, rather than live and walk the earth a traitor."

"Beware!" muttered the earl; "tempt me not too far, rash boy. I would not do thee ill; I would have pity on thy erring youth, remembering the evil counsels, the base heart which hath guided thee."

"Do thou beware!" retorted Alan, fiercely. "Speak not such foul words to me. Father, as I know thou art in blood, there are ties far stronger which bind me to my mother—ties, neglect, forgetfulness, indifference as thine can never know. Pity, aye, mercy's self, I scorn them, for I need them not."

"Ha! sayest thou so; then I swear thou shalt not have them!" exclaimed the earl, rage again obtaining the ascendant. "I would have saved thee; I would have given thee freedom, though I needed not the condition that I offered. Thinkest thou I do not know that the traitor Bruce and his followers will return hither, and fall into the net prepared? thinkest thou I know not he is with thee, aye, that he would not have left his patriot countess thus slightly guarded, an he hoped not to return himself? He cannot escape me—the murder of Sir John Comyn will be avenged."

"He shall, he will escape thee, proud earl," undauntedly returned Alan. "The savior of his wretched country will not be forced to bow before such as thee; he will be saved out of the net prepared—harassed, chased, encompassed as he is. I tell thee, Earl of Buchan, he will escape thee yet."

"Then, by heaven, thy head shall fall for his!" fiercely replied the earl. "If he return not, he has been forewarned, prepared, and I, fool as I was, have thought not of this danger. Look to it, proud boy, if the Bruce return not forty-eight hours hence, and thou art still silent, thou diest."

He held up his clenched hand in a threatening attitude, but Alan neither moved nor spoke, firmly returning the earl's infuriated gaze till the door closed on his father's retreating form. He heard the bolts drawn, the heavy tramp of the guard, and then he threw himself on the couch, and buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XV.

While these fearful scenes were passing in the hunting-lodge, Malcolm, the young page already mentioned, had contrived to elude the vigilance of the earl's numerous followers, and reach the brow of the hollow in perfect safety. Endowed with a sense and spirit above his years, and inspired by his devoted attachment to the countess and Sir Alan, the boy did not merely think of his own personal security, and of the simple act of warning the king against the treachery which awaited his return, but, with an eye and mind well practised in intelligent observation, he scanned the numbers, character, and peculiar situation of the foes which had so unexpectedly come upon them. Being peculiarly small and light in figure, and completely clothed in a dark green tunic and hose, which was scarcely discernible from the trees and shrubs around, he stole, in and out every brake and hollow, clambering lightly and noiselessly over crags, hanging like a broken branch from stunted trees, leaping with the elasticity of a youthful fawn over stream and shrub, and thus obtained a true and exact idea of the matter he desired. The boy's heart did indeed sink as he felt rescue would be utterly impossible; that in one direction the English force extended nearly a mile, guarding every avenue, every hollow in the forest, till it seemed next to impossible King Robert could escape, even if forewarned. Wherever he turned his steps the enemy appeared to lurk, but he wavered not in his purpose. Aware of the direction which the king would take in returning, Malcolm slackened not his speed until some three hours after he had quitted the hollow, and he stood before his sovereign well-nigh too exhausted for the utterance of his tale.

The first impulse of the king and his true-hearted followers was to dare all danger, and rescue

the countess and her brave son at the expense of their lives; but Malcolm, flinging himself at the feet of Robert, adjured him, in the name of the countess, to remember and act upon the vow he had so solemnly pledged at parting. He earnestly and emphatically repeated the last injunctions of his lady, her deep anguish that the king, the savior of Scotland, should hazard all for her and her child—better they should die than Robert; but these entreaties were but anguish to the noble spirit who heard, aye, and felt their truth, though abide by them he could not. Again and again he questioned and cross-questioned as to their numbers and their strength, but Malcolm never wavered from his first account; clearly and concisely he gave every required information, and with bleeding hearts that little band of patriots felt they dared not hope to rescue and to conquer. Yet tacitly to assent to necessity, to retreat without one blow, to leave their faithful companions to death, without one stroke for vengeance at least, if not for relief, this should not be.

"We will see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears, at least, my friends," King Robert said. "Is there one among ye would retreat, from, the narrative of a child, true as it may be? Remember the pass in Argyle; if necessary, your sovereign can protect your retreat now as then, and we shall at least feel we have struggled to rescue, striven for the mastery, even if it be in vain. Were my death, aye, the death of Scotland the forfeit, I could not so stain my knightly fame by such retreat. Let but the morning dawn, and we will ourselves mark the strength of our foes."

There was not one dissenting voice, rash as his determination might appear. The extraordinary skill and courage of their sovereign, displayed in so many instances during their perilous wanderings, were too fresh in their memories to permit of one doubt, one fear, even had he led them on to certain death. To throw themselves from their tired chargers, to give them food, to lie down themselves for a brief repose on the turf, that they might be strengthened and cheered for the work of the morning, all this did not occupy much time; and if their slumbers were brief and troubled, it did not prevent their rising with, alacrity at the first peep of day to polish their arms, look to the sharpening of their swords and spears, share the rude huntsman's meal, and mount and ride with the first signal of their king.

But bold and brave as were these true-hearted men, successful as, comparatively speaking, they were in the numberless skirmishes which took place that day, darkness overtook them, with increase of glory indeed, but no nearer the accomplishment of their object than they had been in the morning.

With bitter sorrow King Robert had perceived the full confirmation of the page's words. The early close of the night attendant on the autumn season was also unfavorable to his views; the events of the day had fully convinced him that many an ambush was set in his path, that his personal safety was wholly incompatible with a night attack, and therefore he was compelled to remain on the defensive in one spot, which was fortunately barricaded and concealed by Nature, during the many long and weary hours forming an October night. Yet still the following day beheld him struggling on, in the face alike of disappointment, defeat, and danger the most imminent; still seeking the same object, still hoping against hope, and retreating only because the welfare of his country, of her unfortunate children, depended upon him; bands more and more numerous pressed upon him, coming from every side, that scarcely was one skilfully eluded ere he had to struggle against another. Nothing but the most consummate skill, the most patient courage, and coolest address could have extricated him from the fearful dangers which encompassed him. Again did his followers believe he bore a charmed life, for not only did he deal destruction, unhurt himself, but after three days almost incessant fighting and fatigue, he had brought them to a place of safety, with but the loss of five-and-twenty men.

But though painfully conscious that further efforts for the rescue of his friends were completely useless, King Robert could not rest satisfied without some more accurate knowledge of their fate, and after some hurried yet anxious consultation. Sir James Douglas, with that daring which so marked his simplest action, declared that at all risks he would seek some tidings that would end their anxiety. In the disguise of a peasant he would be secure from all discovery, he said; and he had not the slightest fear as to the success of the adventure. Five others started up as he spoke entreating permission to take the same disguise and accompany him. It was granted; King Robert advising them, however, to adopt a diversity of costume, and keep each one apart as they approached inhabited districts, as their numbers might excite suspicion, even though the actual disguise was complete. With arms concealed beneath their various disguises, they departed that same evening, engaging to meet the king at the base of Ben-Cruchan, some miles more south than their present trysting. It was an anxious parting, and yet more when they were actually gone; for the high spirit and vein of humor which characterized the young Lord Douglas had power to cheer his friends even in the most painful moments. King Robert, indeed, exerted himself, but this last stroke had been a heavy one; knowing so well the character of Edward, he trembled both for the countess and her noble son, perhaps less for the latter than the former, for he hoped and believed the Earl of Buchan, if indeed he were their captor, would at least have some mercy on his son, but for the countess he knew that there was no hope. The character, the sentiments of the earl had been noticed by the Bruce when both were at the court of Edward, and he felt and knew that any excuse to rid him of a wife whose virtues were obnoxious to him would be acted on with joy. And here, perhaps, it may be well to say a few words as to the real nature of King Robert's sentiments towards Isabella of Buchan, as from the anxiety her detention occasioned they may be so easily misunderstood.

We have performed our task but ill if our readers have imagined aught but the most purely noble, most chivalric sentiments actuated the heart of the king. Whatever might have been the nature of those sentiments in earlier days, since his marriage with the daughter of the Earl of Mar they had

never entered his soul.

He had always believed the Lady Isabella's union with Lord John Comyn was one of choice, not of necessity, nor did his visit to her after the battle of Falkirk recall any former feeling. His mind had been under the heavy pressure of that self-reproach which the impressive words of Wallace had first awakened; the wretched state of his country, the tyranny of Edward, occupied the mind of the man in which the emotions of the boy had merged. He was, too, a husband and a father; and he was, as his fond wife so trustingly believed, too nobly honorable to entertain one thought to her dishonor. He looked on Isabella of Buchan as one indeed demanding his utmost esteem and gratitude, his most faithful friendship, and he secretly vowed that she should have it; but these emotions took not their coloring from the past, they were excited simply by her high-minded devotion to the cause of her country, her unshrinking patriotism, her noble qualities, alike as a mother, subject, friend. He felt but as one noble spirit ever feels for a kindred essence, heightened perhaps by the dissimilarity of sex, but aught of love, even in its faintest shadow, aught of dishonorable feelings towards her or his own wife never entered his wildest dream. It was the recollection of her unwavering loyalty, of the supporting kindness she had ever shown his queen, which occasioned his bitter sorrow at her detention by the foe; it was the dread that the cruel wrath of Edward would indeed condemn her to death for the active part she had taken in his coronation; the conviction, so agonizing to a mind like his, that he had no power to rescue and avenge; the fearful foreboding that thus would all his faithful friends fall from him—this, only this, would be the reward of all who served and loved him; and even while still, with undaunted firmness, cheering the spirits of his adherents, speaking hope to them, his own inward soul was tortured with doubts as to the wisdom of his resistance, lingering regrets for the fate of those of his friends already lost to him, and painful fears for the final doom of those who yet remained.

It was in such moments of despondency that remorse, too, ever gained dominion, and heightened his inward struggles. Robert's hand was not framed for blood; his whole soul revolted from the bitter remembrance of that fatal act of passion which had stained his first rising. He would have given worlds, if he had had them, to have recalled that deed. Busy fancy represented a hundred ways of punishing treachery other than that which his fury had adopted; and this remembrance ever increased the anguish with which he regarded the fate of his friends. His lot was indeed as yet one of unexampled suffering, borne by heroism as great as unequalled but the lustre of the latter too frequently dazzles the mind, and prevents the full meed of glory being obtained. His heroism is known to all, his sufferings to but a few; but perhaps it was the latter yet more than the former which gave to Scotland the glory and honor she acquired in his reign. Heroism is scarce separable from ambition, but to mere ambition, the voice of suffering is seldom heard. Heroism dazzles the crowd, suffering purifies the man. If Robert the Bruce were ambitious, the passion in him assumed a nobler and better form; yet we can scarcely call that ambition which sought but the delivery of Scotland from chains, but the regaining an ancient heritage, and sought no more. It was patriotism hallowed by suffering, purified by adversity; patriotism the noblest, purest which ever entered the heart of man.

King Robert and his handful of followers not only reached their trysting-place themselves, but were joined by the queen, and many of her female companions and their attendant warriors, ere Lord James of Douglas returned; three of his companions had straggled in, one by one, with various accounts, but none so satisfactory as the king desired, and he believed with justice, that Douglas lingered to bring, if not satisfactory (for that, alas! could not be) yet accurate intelligence. If aught could have comforted Agnes in these moments of agonized suspense, it would have been not alone the redoubled affection of her Nigel, but the soothing kindness, the love and sympathy of a father, which was lavished on her by King Robert; nay, each of those rude warriors softened in address and tone, as they looked on and spoke to that fair, fragile being, whom they feared now stood alone. She did not weep when other eyes than those of Nigel, or the Lady Campbell, or the gentle Isoline were on her, but that deadly pallor, that quivering lip, and heavy eye spoke all that she endured.

A large cavern, divided by Nature into many compartments, was now the temporary shelter of the king and his friends. It was situated at the base of Ben-Cruchan, which, though at the entrance of the territories of Lorn, was now comparatively secure, the foe imagining the Bruce still amidst the mountains of Aberdeenshire.

The evening meal was spread; a huge fire blazing in the stony cavity removed all appearance of damp or discomfort, and shed a warm, ruddy light on the groups within. It was a rude home for the King of Scotland and his court, yet neither murmuring nor despondency was marked on the bold brows of the warriors, or the gentler and paler features of their faithful companions; their frames, indeed, showed the effect of wandering and anxiety; many an eye which had been bright was sunken, many a blooming cheek was paled; but the lip yet smiled, the voice had yet its gleesome tones to soothe and cheer their warrior friends; the eager wish to prepare the couch and dress the simple meal, to perform those many little offices of love and kindness so peculiarly a woman's, and engaged in with a zest, a skill which was intuitive, for there had been a time, and one not far distant, when those high-born females little dreamed such household deeds would be their occupation.

Brightly and beautifully shone forth conjugal and filial love in those wandering hours; the wife, the child, the sister bound themselves yet closer to the warrior husband, father, brother, which claimed them his. Yet sweet, most sweet as were those acts of love, there were anxious and loving hearts which felt that soon, too soon, they must part from them, they must persuade those gentle ones to accede to a temporary separation—they could not, they would not expose them to

the snows and killing frosts of a Scottish winter.

Anxiety, deep anxiety was on the heart of King Robert, becoming more painful with each glance he fixed on Agnes, who was sitting apart with Nigel, her aching head resting on his shoulder, but he strove to return the caresses of his daughter, to repay with fond smiles the exertions of his wife. Sir Niel Campbell (who, after many painful trials, had rejoined the king) and others strove to disperse the silently gathering gloom by jest and song, till the cavern walls re-echoed with their soldier mirth. Harshly and mournfully it fell on the ear and heart of the maiden of Buchan, but she would not have it stilled.

"No, no; do thou speak to me, Nigel, and I shall only list to thee. Why should the noble efforts of these brave men—for I know even to them mirth is now an effort—be chilled and checked, because my sick heart beats not in unison? Oh, when will Lord James return?"

Nigel sought to soothe, to speak hope, but though his words fell like balm on the bleeding heart he held to his, it was the rich melody of their voice, not the matter of their meaning.

The hour of rest was fast approaching, when the well-known signal was heard without, and the young Lord Douglas, with his two companions, were hastily and eagerly admitted within the cave. Their looks denoted great fatigue, and the eager eyes which scanned their countenances read little to hope, yet much, much, alas! to fear.

"Thou hast so far succeeded as to obtain the intelligence we need," was the king's instant greeting, as he released his favorite young follower from his embrace; "that I can read, but further, I fear me, thou hast little to communicate which we shall love to hear."

"My tidings are ill indeed, your highness; aggravated and most undreamed-of ill. But, perchance," and the young man hesitated, for his eye caught the pallid face of Agnes, who had irresistibly drawn closer to the circle about the king, and fixed her eyes on him with an expression almost wild in its agony, "perchance they had better first meet your grace's private ear."

"No, no!" reiterated Agnes, springing forward, and clinging convulsively to his arm. "It is only me thou fearest, I know; I know thou wouldst spare me, but do not, do not. I can bear all, every thing, save this horrible suspense; speak out, let me but know all, and then I can teach my soul to bear it. Oh, do not hesitate, do not pause; in mercy, tell me—oh, tell me all!"

Thus adjured, but feeling most painfully the suffering his tale would produce, Douglas struggled with his own emotion, and repeated all the information he had obtained. Guardedly as he spoke, evidently as he endeavored to prepare the mind of Agnes, and thus soften its woe, his tale was yet such as to harrow up the hearts of all his hearers, how much more the frail and gentle being to whom it more immediately related; yet she stood calm, pale, indeed, and quivering, but with a desperate effort conquering the weakness of her nature, and bearing that deep woe as the daughter of her mother, the betrothed of Nigel Bruce.

The young lord's information was simply this. On nearing the hunting-lodge, which was his first object, he found it very nearly deserted, but a few stragglers, amounting perhaps to fifty in number of the followers of Buchan, remaining behind, with orders to follow their master to Dunkeld without delay. Mingling with these as a countryman of the more northern counties, eager to obtain every species of intelligence respecting the movements of the English and the hunted Bruce, whom he pretended to condemn and vilify after the fashion of the Anglo-Scots, and feeling perfectly secure not only in the disguise he had assumed, but in the peculiar accent and intonation of the north-country peasant, which he could assume at pleasure, he made himself a welcome guest, and with scarcely any trouble received much of the information he desired. He was told of the first capture and rescue of the Countess of Buchan; that it was through one of the men left for dead on the scene of the skirmish the earl had received such exact information concerning the movements and intended destination of the Bruce; that immediately on receiving this intelligence he had gathered all his force, amounting to five hundred men, and dividing them into different bands, sent skilful guides with each, and was thus enabled to surround the lodge, and command five different avenues of the forest, without interruption or discovery. He learned, too, that a stormy interview had taken place between the earl, his wife, and son, the particulars of which, however, had not transpired; that the earl's rage had been terrific when he found the night passed, and the Bruce had not fallen into the snare laid for him; and he had sworn a fearful oath, that if the countess would not betray him into his power, her son should die; that both mother and son had stood this awful trial without shrinking; that no word either to betray their king or implore life and mercy had been wrung from them. Incensed beyond all measure, Buchan had sent on the countess with a numerous guard, his men believed, either to Dunkeld or Perth, in both of which towns there was a strong garrison of English, and lingered yet another day and night in the hope of dragging some intelligence from the lips of Alan, or persuading him into acting the spy upon the actions and movements of the Bruce. He succeeded in neither; and the men continued to state, with shuddering horror, which even their rude natures could not suppress, that they believed the son had actually fallen a victim to his father's rage—that he had actually been murdered. Numerous reports to that effect had been circulated on all sides, and though they had watched narrowly, they had seen nothing to contradict it. The body of the unfortunate boy had been cast into a deep well, heaps of rubbish flung over it, and the well built up. This they knew as a positive certainty, for they had seen it.

Douglas heard this tale with an intensity of horror, of loathing, which at first deprived him almost of every other feeling; but when he could withdraw himself from the horrible idea, a species of

disbelief took possession of him. It was impossible such utter depravity, such fearful insensibility to the claims of nature could exist in the breast of any man; it was a tale forged to inflict fresh agony on the mother's heart, and he determined on discovering, if possible, the truth. He pretended entirely to disbelieve it; declared it was not possible; that the earl had practised on their credulity, and would laugh at them afterwards; and contrived so well, that three or four declared he should be convinced with his own eyes, and set about pulling down the slight brickwork which covered the well. This was what Douglas wanted, and he eagerly lent them a helping hand.

A body there was indeed, in form and in clothing so exactly that of the unhappy Alan, that, even though the face was so marred it could not be recognized, the young earl could doubt no longer; the young, the brave, the beautiful, and true, had fallen a victim to his own patriot loyalty, and by a father's hand. The deep suffering this certainly occasioned was regarded by his companions as sulkiness for having been proved wrong in his judgment; they jeered and laughed at him accordingly, and harshly as these sounds reverberated in his heart, they were welcome, as enabling him still more easily to continue his disguise.

He accompanied them to Dunkeld, and found the earl had proceeded with his wife as prisoner to the castle of Stirling, there to deliver her over to the Earl of Hereford, through whom to be sent on to Edward. Determined on seeing her, if possible, Douglas resolved on daring the danger, and venturing even to the very stronghold of his foes. The horror which this unnatural act of the earl had excited in the minds of his men, he found had extended even over those in Dunkeld, and through them he learned that, directly on reaching the town, the earl had sought the countess, brutally communicated the death of her son, and placed in her hands the raven curls as all which remained of him, some of which were dabbled in blood; that she had remained apparently unmoved while in his presence, but the moment he left her had sunk into a succession of the most fearful fainting fits, in one of which she had been removed to Stirling.

Withdrawing himself from his companions, under pretence of returning to his home in the north, having, he said, loitered too long, Douglas concealed himself for some days in the abbey of Scone, the holy inmates of which still retained their loyalty and patriotism, notwithstanding their revered abbot, unable to remain longer inactive, had donned the warrior's dress, and departed to join and fight with his king. Assuming the cowl and robes of one of the lay brothers, and removing the red wig and beard he had adopted with his former costume, the young lord took the staff in his hand, and with difficulty bringing his hasty pace to a level with the sober step and grave demeanor of a reverend monk, reached Stirling just as the cavalcade, with the litter intended for the captive countess, had assembled before the castle gate. Agitated almost beyond the power of control, Douglas made his way through the gathering crowds, and stood unquestioned close beside the litter. He did not wait long. Respectfully supported by the Earl of Hereford himself, the Countess of Buchan, with a firm, unflinching step, approached the litter. The hood was thrown back, and Douglas could read the effects of withering agony on the marble stillness of those beautiful features, though to all else they spoke but firm and calm resolve; there was not a vestige of color on cheek or lip or brow; and though her figure was as commanding, as majestic as heretofore, there was a fearful attenuation about it, speaking volumes to Lord James's heart. Hereford placed her in the litter, and with a respectful salutation turned away to give some necessary orders to his men. Bold in his disguise, Douglas bent over the countess, and spoke in a low, feigned voice those words of comfort and of peace suited to his assumed character; but feigned as it was, the countess recognized him on that instant; a convulsive shudder passed through her every limb, contracting her features with very agony.

"My child—my Alan!" she whispered, harrowing his very soul beneath that voice's thrilling woe. "Douglas, hast thou heard?—yes, yes; I can read it in thine awe-struck face. This, this is all I have left of him," and she partly drew from her bosom the clustering ringlets he recognized at once; "yet, wherefore should I mourn him: he is happy. Bid his memory be honored among ye; and oh, tell the sovereign for whom he fell, better a death like this than treachery and shame."

She had paused as fearing observation, but perceiving the attention of all more fixed on the glittering cavalcade than on herself, she placed one of those glossy curls in the young earl's hand, and continued—

"Give this to my poor Agnes, with her mother's blessing, and bid her take comfort, bid her not weep and mourn for me. A prison, even death is preferable now to life, for she is cared for. I trust her to Sir Nigel's love; I know that he will tend her as a brother till a happier hour makes her all his own. Commend me to my sovereign, and tell him, might I choose my path again, despite its anguish, 'twould be that which I have trod. And now farewell, young lord, I bless thee for this meeting."

"*Dominus vobiscum mea filia, et vale,*" responded the supposed monk, in a loud voice, for he had only time to assure the countess by a look of deep sympathy of his willingness to execute her simplest wish, and hide the ringlet in his bosom, ere Hereford turned towards him, with a gaze of stern inquiry. Aply concealing alike his emotion and the expression of his countenance, Douglas evaded discovery, and even obtained permission to follow the litter to the environs of the town. He did so, but the countess addressed him not again; and it was with a heart-sinking despondency he had turned to the mountains, when the cavalcade disappeared from his view. He retained his monkish garb till he entered the mountain district, where he fell in with his two companions, and they proceeded, as we have seen, to the quarters of their king.

A pause of horror followed his narrative, told more forcibly and briefly by the lips of Douglas than

through the cooler medium of the historian's pen. Stunned, overwhelmed, as if incapable of movement or speech, though sense remained, Agnes stood insensible, even to the voice of Nigel, whose soothing accents strove to whisper peace; but when Douglas placed in her cold hand the raven curls she knew so well, when tenderly yet earnestly he repeated her mother's words, the poor girl repeatedly pressed the hair to her parched lips, and laid it in her bosom; and then perceiving the sad and anxious face of her beloved, she passed her hand hurriedly over her brow, and burying her head on his breast, sense was preserved by an agony of tears.

It was long, long ere this aggravated wretchedness was calmed, though the love of many, the devotion of one were ever round her to strengthen and console. Sympathy, the most heartfelt, reigned in every bosom. Of the many misfortunes which had befallen this patriot band, this seemed, if not really the severest, more fraught with horror than any which had come before; the youth, the gallant bearing, the endearing qualities of the heir of Buchan stood forth with vivid clearness in the memories of all, and there were times when they felt it could not be, it was too fearful; and then again, the too certain evidence of the fact, witnessed as it had been by one of such tried truth as James of Douglas, brought conviction too clearly home, and the sternest warrior, who would have faced his own captivity and death unmoved, felt no shame in the dimness which gathered in his eye for the fearful fate of the murdered boy.

In King Robert's breast these emotions obtained yet more powerful dominion; again did remorse distract him, and there were moments of darkness, when his spirit questioned the justice of the Creator. Why was not his crime visited on his own head? Why did the guiltless and unstained fall thus around him, and he remain unharmed? and it needed all the eloquence of Nigel, the pious reasonings of the Abbot of Scone, to convince him that, dark and inscrutable as the decrees of Omnipotence sometimes seemed, in his case they were as clear as the wisdom from which they sprung. By chastisement he was purified; he was not yet fit to receive the reward of the righteous waiting on death. Destined to be the savior of his unhappy country, the remorse which bowed down his naturally haughty spirit was more acceptable in the sight of his God, more beneficial to his own soul, than the one act of devotedness included in a brave man's death. Robert struggled with his despondency, with his soul's deep grief, known as it was but to himself, his confessor, and his young brother; he felt its encouragement would unnerve him for his destined task. Other imperative matters now pressed round him, and by presenting fresh and increased danger, roused his energies once more to their wonted action.

The winter had set in with unexampled severity, overwhelming snow-storms filled up the rude paths of the mountains, till egress and ingress appeared impossible. The Earl of Athol himself, who had been the inseparable companion of the Bruce in all his wanderings, now spoke of retiring, and passing the winter within stone walls, urging his sovereign with earnest eloquence to take refuge in Ireland till the spring, when they would reassemble under arms, and perhaps take the tyrant Edward once more by surprise.

Bruce knew the veteran nobleman too well to attribute this advice to any motive save deep interest in his safety. He saw, too, that it was utterly impossible for them to remain as they then were, without serious evils alike to his female and male companions; the common soldiers, steady and firm as they still continued in loyalty, yet were continually dispersing, promising to reassemble in the spring, but declaring that it was useless to think of struggling against the English, when the very elements were at war against them. With a sad foreboding, Robert saw, and communicated to his devoted wife the necessity of their separation. He felt that it was right and best, and therefore he resisted all her tearful entreaties still to linger by his side; her child was suffering, for her tender years could not bear up against the cold and the want of proper nourishment, and yet even that claim seemed less to the mother's heart than the vision of her husband enduring increase of hardship alone. Her acquiescence was indeed at length obtained, but dimmed by many very bitter tears.

A hasty consultation with his few remaining friends speedily decided the Bruce's plans. The castle of Kildrummie, a strong fortress situated at the head of the Don, in Aberdeenshire, yet remained to him, and thither, under the escort of his brother Nigel and three hundred men, the king determined to send his wife and child, and the other ladies of his court. Himself, his three brothers, Edward, Alexander, and Thomas, Douglas, Sir Niel Campbell, and his remaining two hundred followers, resolved on cautiously making their way southward across Loch Lomond, and proceed thence to the coast of Ireland, there to await the spring. In pursuance of this plan, Sir Niel Campbell was dispatched without delay to conciliate Angus, Lord of the Isles, to whom Cantire then belonged. Knowing he was unfriendly to his near neighbors, the Lords of Lorn, the king trusted he should find in him a powerful ally. To appeal yet more strongly to the chivalric hospitality which characterized the chieftain, Sir Niel consented that his wife and daughter Isoline should accompany him. Lady Campbell had too lately undergone the grief and anxiety attendant on the supposed loss of her husband to consent to another parting. Even the king, her brother, sought not to dissuade her; but all persuasions to induce Agnes to accompany them were vain; bitter as the pang of separation was to her already aching heart—for Lady Campbell and Isoline were both most dear to her—she steadily resolved to remain with the queen and her attendants, and thus share the fate of her betrothed.

"Did not my mother commend me to thy care? Did she not bid thee tend me as a brother until happier hours, and shall I seek other guardianship than thine, my Nigel?" were her whispered words, and Nigel could not answer them. So pure, so unselfish was her love, that though he felt his happiness would have departed with her presence, could he have commanded words he would have implored her to seek the hospitality of the Lord of the Isles as a securer home than

Kildrummie. Those forebodings already alluded to had returned with darker weight from the hour his separation from his brother was resolved on. He evinced no sign of his inward thoughts, he uttered no word of dissent, for the trust reposed in him by his sovereign was indeed as precious as it was honorable; but there was a mournful expression on his beautiful countenance—when unobserved, it would rest upon his brother—that Agnes could not define, although it filled her spirit with incomprehensible alarm, and urged her yet more to abide by his side.

The dreaded day arrived at length, and agonized was indeed that parting. Cheerfully the king looked, and hopefully he spoke, but it had no power to calm the whelming tide of sorrow in which his wife clung to his embrace. Again and again she returned to that faithful heart which bore so fondly, so forbearingly, with all her faults and weaknesses; and Margory, although she could not comprehend the extent of sorrow experienced by her mother, wept bitterly at her side. Nor were they the only sufferers. Some indeed were fortunate enough to have relatives amid the band which accompanied them to Kildrummie, but by far the greater number clung to the necks of brothers, fathers, husbands, whose faithful and loving companions they had been so long—clung to them and wept, as if a long dim vista of sorrow and separation stretched before them. Danger, indeed, was around them, and the very fact of their being thus compelled to divide, appeared to heighten the perils, and tacitly acknowledge them as too great to be endured.

With pain and difficulty the iron-souled warriors at length tore themselves from the embrace of those they held most dear. The knights and their followers had closed round the litters, and commenced their march. No clarion sent its shrill blast on the mountain echoes, no inspiring drum reverberated through the glens—all was mournfully still; as the rudest soldier revered the grief he beheld, and shrunk from disturbing it by a sound.

King Robert stood alone, on the spot where Sir Christopher Seaton had borne from him his wife and child. His eyes still watched their litter; his thoughts still lingered with them alone; full of affection, anxiety, sadness, they were engrossed, but not defined. He was aroused by the sudden appearance of his younger brother, who, bareheaded, threw himself at his feet, and, in a voice strangely husky, murmured—

"My sovereign, my brother, bless me, oh, bless me, ere we part!"

"My blessing—the blessing of one they deem accursed; and to thee, good, noble, stainless as thou art! Nigel, Nigel, do not mock me thus," answered the king, bitterness struggling with the deepest melancholy, as he laid his hand, which strangely trembled, on the young man's lowered head. "Alas! bring I not evil and misery and death on all who love me? What, what may my blessing bring to thee?"

"Joy, bright joy in the hour of mirth and comfort; oh, untold-of comfort in the time of sorrow, imprisonment, death! My brother, my brother, oh, refuse it not; thou knowest not, thou canst not know how Nigel loves thee!"

Robert gazed at him till every thought, every feeling was lost in the sudden sensation of dread lest ill should come to him; it had overtaken one as fair in promise, as beloved, and yet younger; and oh, if death selected the best, the loveliest, the dearest, would it next fall on him? The thought was such absolute agony, that the previous suffering of that hour was lost before it.

"Bless thee—oh, may God in heaven bless thee, my brave, my noble Nigel!" he exclaimed, with a burst of emotion, perfectly appalling in one generally so controlled, and raising him, he strained him convulsively to his heart. "Yet why should we part?" he added, after a long pause; "why did I fix on thee for this office—are there not others? Nigel, Nigel, say but the word, and thou shalt rest with me: danger, privation, exile we have borne, and may still share together. Why should I send thee from me, dearest, most beloved of all who call me brother?"

"Why?" answered Nigel, raising his glistening eyes from his brother's shoulder, "why, dear Robert? because thine eye could read my heart and trust it; because thou knewest I would watch over those who bear thy name, who are dear to thee, even as thy noble self. Oh, do not repent thee of thy choice; 'tis hard to bear alone danger, so long encountered hand in hand, yet as thou hast decided let it be. Thy words have soothed my yearning heart, which craved to list thy voice once more; and now then, my noble liege and brother, farewell. Think on thy Nigel's words; even when misery is round thee thou shalt, thou shalt be blessed. Think on them, my Robert, and then when joy and liberty and conquest crown thee, oh, forget not Nigel."

He threw his arms around him, imprinted a fervent kiss on his cheek, and was out of sight ere the king by sign or word could arrest his progress. One hasty bound forward Robert indeed made, but a dimness stole over his sight, and for one brief minute he sunk down on the grass, and when he lifted his head again, there were burning tears upon his cheek.

CHAPTER XVI.

The hardships and dangers attendant on King Robert's progress southward, mingled as they were with the very spirit of romance, are so well known to every reader of Scottish history that they must be excluded from our pages, although a tale of chivalry would seem the very place for their insertion.

The life of no hero, no sovereign, no general, presents us with a parallel to the lone and dreary passage of Loch Lomond. We hear of an ancient and a modern Hannibal crossing the snowy Alps, but it was at the head of triumphant armies; it was carrying war and victory into an enemy's land, and there was glory in the danger—the glory and pride of successful ambition. But there was greater and truer heroism in the spirit which struggled on when the broad, deep waters of Loch Lomond lay between them and comparative safety; when 'mid falling snow and howling winds he cheered his drooping and exhausted followers by reading aloud a spirit-stirring romance, to which they listened enrapt and charmed, little imagining their own situation was one of far greater peril, of more exciting romance than any which the volume so vividly described. A leaky boat, which scarcely allowed three men to cross in safety, was their only means of conveyance, and a day and night passed ere the two hundred followers of the Bruce assembled on the opposite side. The cheerful blast of his bugle, which sounded to form them in bands before him on the beach, was answered by one whose unexpected appearance occasioned such joy to the heart of the king, that the exertions both of body and mind of the last few hours were forgotten. It was the Earl of Lennox, who since the fatal battle of Methven had been numbered amongst the dead, and lamented by his royal master with grief as deep as the joy was exceeding which greeted him again. Mutual was the tale of suffering each had to relate, few and faint the hopes and prospects to communicate, but so many were the friends the patriots had lost, that the reappearance of the venerable nobleman infused a new and brighter spirit amid the almost despairing men.

That the Earl of Lennox had found a kind and hospitable home in the dominions of the Lord of the Isles, and received welcome and favor from the chieftain himself, was justly a subject of rejoicing to the fugitive king. Guided by him, the intricacies of their path were smoothed, and they reached their destination in a much shorter time than would otherwise have been the case. Sir Niel Campbell had performed his mission well, and kindness and truth so long unknown, now eagerly opened their hearths and hearts to the patriot king. Scorning alike the Scottish and English authority, Angus, Lord of the Isles, had formed an independent sovereignty, and now felt pride in receiving in his territories the only sovereign he had felt inclination to revere. The daring heroism, the unshaken spirit of the Bruce, were akin to his own wild, and reckless courage, and had there been no actual claim and right in Robert's pretensions to the crown, Angus would still have declared that he, and he alone, was the sovereign worthy to assume it. All, then, of state and dignity which he could assemble round him were proffered to the king, and had there been less generosity, less chivalric honor in his character King Robert might have passed the winter months in comparative security and comfort.

Angus indeed spoke daringly and slightly of the English force, and had his inmost soul been read, would have joyed had they ventured to attack him, that he might show his skill and bravery in resisting and defending against their united force the sovereign who had confided in his gallantry and honor; but Robert knew better than the rude chieftain the devastating warfare which characterized Edward's efforts at subjection, and his whole soul shrunk from exposing Angus and his true-hearted followers to the utter ruin which, if he were once known to be amongst them, would inevitably ensue. At once to secure his personal concealment, and yet to withdraw from Cantire without in any way offending the high spirit of the island chieftain, Bruce resolved on making the little island of Rathlin the winter refuge of himself and his two hundred followers.

Inhabited by the MacDonalDs, who were of course subject to their general chief, though divided from him by the channel, Bruce was still under the generous protection of his friend, and therefore Angus could bring forward no objection to the proposal, save the miserable poverty, the many discomforts of the barren islet, and entreat with all his natural eloquence that King Robert would still remain in the peninsula. The arguments of the king, however, prevailed. A small fleet, better manned than built, was instantly made ready for his service, and Angus himself conveyed the king in his own galley to his destined residence. The aspect of the island, the savage appearance and manner of its inhabitants were indeed such as to strike despondingly and painfully on the hearts of any less inured to suffering than King Robert and his devoted adherents. To them it was welcome, for they justly felt the eye of Edward could scarcely reach them there. It was a painful alternative to warrior spirits such as theirs that the safety of their country depended on their inaction and concealment; yet as their king, their patriot king, was still amongst them, there was much, much to hope and cherish still. That their gentler friends and relatives were, they hoped and believed, in a place of safety, was a matter of rejoicing, though neither entreaty nor command could persuade the Lady Campbell and her daughter Isoline to accept the proffered hospitality of the island chieftain. It was nothing to them that they were the only females 'mid that warrior train, that many hardships were around them still. Neither Sir Kiel nor the king could resist their pleadings, and ere the sun of spring had shed its influence on the heart of man as well as the hardened earth, there were many who mourned that a separation had taken place, who wished that fatigue and anxiety had still been met together.

Many weeks before King Robert retreated to the island of Rathlin, Sir Nigel Bruce had conducted his precious charge in safety to the castle of Kildrummie, whose feeble garrison gladly flung open their gates to receive them.

It was a strong fortress situated on a circular mount, overhanging the river Don, which at that point ever rushed darkly and stormily along; the mount, though not steep, was full two miles in circumference, from base to brow occupied by the castle, which was erected in that massive yet irregular form peculiar to the architecture of the middle ages. A deep, broad moat or fosse, constantly supplied by the river, defended the castle wall, which ran round the mound,

irregularly indeed, for there were indentations and sharp angles, occasioned by the uneven ground, each of which was guarded by a strong turret or tower, rising from the wall. The wall itself was some four-and-twenty feet in height, and nine in thickness, consequently the spaces between the turrets on the top of the wall formed broad level platforms, which in case of a siege were generally kept strongly guarded. Facing the east, and commanding a view of the river and adjacent country, stood the barbican gate and drawbridge, which latter was further defended by strong oaken doors and an iron portcullis, forming the great gate of the castle wall, and the principal entrance into the fortress. Two towers of immense strength, united by a narrow, dimly-lighted passage, guarded this gate, and on these depended the grate or portcullis, which was lowered or raised by internal machinery. Within the castle wall was the outer ballium or court, containing some small, low-roofed dwellings, the residence of many feudal retainers of the baron. A rude church or chapel was also within this court, holding a communication with the keep or principal part of the castle by means of a passage in the third wall, which divided the ballium from the inner court. In very large castles there were in general a second fosse, wall, gate, and towers guarding the keep, and thus making a complete division between it and the ballium; but the original owners of Kildrummie, less rich and powerful suzerains than their equals in South Britain, were probably contented with merely a stout wall to divide their own sovereign residence from their more plebeian followers. The keep itself, constructed like all other similar buildings of the age, was a massive tower, covering but a small square, and four or five stories high. There were attempts at luxury in the chambers within, but to modern taste the Norman luxury was little better than rudeness; and certainly though the cushions were soft and richly embroidered, the arras in some of the apartments splendid specimens of needlework, and the beautifully carved and often inlaid oaken walls of others, gave evidence of both taste and talent, yet the dim light seemed to shed a gloom and heaviness over the whole range of rooms and passages, which no skill of workmanship or richness of material could remove. The windows were invariably small, and very long and narrow, and set in walls of such huge thickness, that the sun had barely power even in his summer splendor, to penetrate the dusky panes. In this keep was the great hall of audience, and for the banquet, at the upper end of which the dais was invariably found, and dark and loathsome dungeons formed its basement.

The roof of Kildrummie keep was flatter than the generality of Norman castles, its four angles being surmounted more by the appearance than the reality of turrets; but one rose from the centre, round, and pierced by loopholes, turreted at the top, and commanding an extensive view of the adjoining country: from this tower the banner of the baron always waved, and its non-appearance excited some indignation in the breast of Nigel Bruce, for his warrior spirit had no sympathy with that timorous excuse, that did it wave at such a time it might excite the attention of the English, whereas did it elevate no symbol of defiance its garrison might pass unquestioned.

"Up with the banner of Scotland and the Bruce!" were the first commands of Sir Nigel, as he stood within the ballium, surrounded by his charge and followers. "Shall we, pledged as we are to our country and king, even seem to stand neutral and conceal our colors, as ashamed of them? Shall this be?"

He was answered by a simultaneous rush towards the keep, and at his word the folds of the broad banner waved exultingly from the tower, its appearance hailed by a loud shout from those beneath, and by a bright and momentary gleam of sunshine flashing through the heavy clouds.

"Ha! see ye, my friends, even heaven smiles on us," exclaimed the young knight triumphantly, and smiling cheerily on his fair friends, as with gay words and graceful action he marshalled them into the keep. It was while doing so, that Agnes marked the figure of an old yet majestic-looking man, whose eyes, still bright and flashing, though his white hair denoted extreme old age, were fixed immovably on the face and form of Nigel. It was a peculiar glance, strained, eager, and yet mournful, holding her attention so fascinated that she paused in her onward way, and pointed him out to Nigel.

"I know him not, love," he said, in answer to her inquiry. "I should deem him minstrel by his garb, or seer, or both perchance, as is sometimes the case, conjoined. I will speak with him when my present grateful task is done."

But it was the next morning ere he had the opportunity of doing so, for much devolved on the young seneschal. He had to visit the outworks, the stores, the offices, to give multitudinous orders, and receive various intelligences, to review the present garrison and his own followers, and assign to each his post; and though ably aided by Sir Christopher Seaton and other of his officers, all this occupied much time. The outworks he found in excellent condition; the barbican, of massive stone, seemed well enabled to resist attack, should it be made; the machinery of the drawbridge was in good order, and enabled to be drawn up or let down at a moment's warning. The stores and granaries, which were contained in the towers on the castle wall, were very amply provided, though Nigel, taking advantage of the present peaceful temper of the country, dispatched trusty messengers without delay for further supplies. That this fortress, almost the only one remaining to his brother, would remain unmolested, Nigel did not for one moment believe, but he did hope that, in case of a siege, if amply provided with stores, it might hold out till the intense cold of the season and climate would turn the besiegers from their purpose; at all events, the advancing winter would be more favorable to the besieged than the besiegers, and though the garrison was comparatively small, the place itself was of such great strength as to guarantee the indulgence of his hopes. That the original garrison were too timorous and wavering for him to place much dependence on them he readily perceived, but he trusted much to the beneficial influence which his own steady, true-hearted followers might be enabled to

infuse.

Nigel was young, brave, and animated by every feeling which inspires courage and hope in the buoyant heart of youth. The gloom which had oppressed him in parting with his brother, and indeed had partially clouded his spirit during their rapid journey, vanished before the duties and responsibilities which thronged round him, now that he felt himself the guard and seneschal of the castle intrusted to his charge; now that new duties devolved on him, duties particularly dear to a young and gallant spirit like his own; duties, too, that bound him closer and closer with the gentle being in whose welfare and happiness his own were shrined. It was with a bright smile, then, and animated brow he joined his Agnes early the following morning, in a stroll through a small woody inclosure dignified by the name of garden, which occupied part of the inner court. The old minstrel who had so attracted the attention of Agnes was there before them. He stood against a projecting buttress, his arms folded, his eyes fixed, it seemed on vacancy, and evidently not aware he was approached till Nigel spoke.

"Good morrow, father. I thought we had been the earliest to greet this fresh and frosty air, save those on guard, yet you are before us. Nay, wherefore doff thy cap, good father? The air is somewhat too frosty for thy silvered head."

"I cannot doff it to a nobler, gentle youth," answered the old man, courteously, "save to my sovereign's self; and as his representative, I pay willing homage to his brother."

"Ha! dost thou know me, father? And was it because I am King Robert's brother thine eyes so rested on me yester morn, mournfully, methought, as if the joy with which I hailed the gleam of sunshine smiling on our banner had little echo in thy breast?"

"Not that, not that," answered the old man, tremulous; "I scarce remarked it, for my thoughts were in that future which is sometimes given me to read. I saw thee, noble youth, but 'twas not here. Dim visions come across my waking hours; it is not well to note them," and he turned away as if he might not meet those eager eyes.

"Not here! yet I was at his side, good father," and Agnes laid her fair hand on the old man's arm.

"Thou wert, thou wert, my child. Beautiful, beautiful!" he half whispered, as he laid his hand dreamily on those golden curls, and looked on her face; "yet hath sorrow touched thee, maiden. Thy morn of life hath been o'erclouded; its shadow lingers yet."

"Too truly speakest thou, father," replied Nigel, drawing Agnes closer to his heart, for tears were starting in her eyes; "yet will not love soon chase that sorrow? Thou who canst penetrate the future, seer of the Bruce's line, tell me, shall she not be mine?"

The old man looked on them both, and then his eyes became fixed on vacancy; long and painfully once or twice he passed his hand across his high, pale brow.

"Vain, vain," he said, sadly; "but one vision comes to mine aching sight, and there she seems thine own. She is thine own—but I know not how that will be. Ask me no more; the dream is passing. 'Tis a sad and fearful gift. Others may triumph in the power, but for me 'tis sad, 'tis very sad."

"Sad! nay, is it not joy, the anticipating joy," answered Nigel, with animation, "to look on a beloved one, and mark, amid the clouds of distance, glory, and honor, and love entwining on, his path? to look through shades of present sorrow, and discern the sunbeam afar off—is there not joy in this?"

"Aye, gentle youth; but now, oh, now is there aught in Scotland to whisper these bright things? There was rejoicing, find glory, and triumph around the patriot Wallace. Scotland sprung from her sluggish sleep, and gave back her echo to his inspiring call. I looked upon the hero's beaming brow, I met the sparkle of his brilliant eye, I bowed before the native majesty of his god-like form, but there was no joy for me. Dark masses of clouds closed round the present sunshine; the present fled like a mist before them, and they oped, and then—there was still Wallace; but oh! how did I see him? the scaffold, the cord, the mocking crowds, the steel-clad guards—all, all, even as he fell. My children! my children! was there joy in this?"

There was a thrilling pathos in the old man's voice that touched the very heart of his listeners. Agnes clung closer to the arm of her betrothed, and looked up tearfully in his face; his cheek was very pale, and his lip slightly quivered. There was evidently a desire to speak, to utter some inquiry, but he looked on that sweet face upturned to his, and the unspoken words died in an inarticulate murmur on his lips.

"My brother," he said, at length, and with some difficulty, though it was evident from the expression of his countenance this was not the question he had meant to ask, "my noble brother, will thy glorious struggles, thy persevering valor, end in this? No, no, it cannot be. Prophet and seer, hast thou e'er gazed on him—him, the hope, the joy, the glory of the line of Bruce? Hast thou gazed on him, and was there no joy there?"

"Yes!" answered the old man, starting from his posture of despondency, and raising his hands with animated fervor, while his cheek flushed, and his eyes, fixed on distance, sparkled with all the fire of youth. "Yes! I have gazed upon that face, and in present and in future it is glorious still. Thick mists have risen round him, well-nigh concealing him within their murky folds, but still, still as a star penetrating through cloud, and mist, and space, till it sees its own bright semblance in

the ocean depths, so has that brow, circled by its diadem of freedom, gleamed back upon mine aching sight, and I have seen and known there is joy for Bruce and Scotland yet!"

"Then is there joy for all true Scottish men, good father, and so will we chase all sadness from our brows and hearts," replied Nigel, lightly. "Come, tell us of the past, and not the future, while we stroll; thou hast traditions, hast thou not, to while away an hour?"

"Nay, my young lord," replied the seer, "hast thou not enough in the present, embodied as it is in this fair maiden's dreaming eye and loving heart? The minstrel's harp and ancient lore are for the evening hour, not for a time and companion such as this," and with an audible blessing he turned away, leaving them to their stroll together.

It was not, however, without an effort Nigel could take advantage of his absence, and make good use of moments so blissful to hearts that love. There was something in the old man's mournful tone and glance when it rested upon him, that answered strangely and sadly to the spirit-voice breathing in his own bold breast. It seemed to touch that chord indefinitely, yet felt by the vibration of every nerve which followed. He roused himself, however, and ere they joined the morning meal, there was a brighter smile on the lip and heart of Agnes than had rested there for many a long day.

For a few weeks there was peace both within and without the castle of Kildrummie. The relief, the shelter which its walls afforded to the wearied and exhausted wanderers was at first felt and enjoyed alone. Many of the frailer sex were far too exhausted and disabled by a variety of sufferings, to be sensible of any thing but that greater comforts than had been theirs for many painful months were now possessed; but when their strength became partially restored, when these comforts became sufficiently familiar to admit of other thoughts, the queen's fortitude began to waver. It was not the mere impulse of the moment which caused her to urge her accompanying her husband, on the plea of becoming more and more unworthy of his love if separated from him. Margaret of Mar was not born for a heroine; more especially to act on such a stormy stage as Scotland. Full of kindly feeling, of affection, confidence, gentleness, one that would have drooped and died had her doom been to pass through life unloved, her yielding mind took its tone and coloring from those with whom she most intimately associated; not indeed from the rude and evil, for from those she intuitively shrunk. Beneath her husband's influence, cradled in his love, her spirit received and cherished the *reflection* of his strength; of itself, she too truly felt it had none; and consequently when that beloved one was far away, the reflection passed from her mind even as the gleam of his armor from the mirror on which it glanced, and Margaret was weak and timorous again. She had thought, and hoped, and prayed, her unfeigned admiration of Isabella of Buchan, her meek and beautiful appreciation of those qualities and candid acknowledgment that such was the character most adapted to her warrior husband, would bring more steadiness and courage to her own woman breast. Alas! the fearful fate which had overtaken the heroic countess came with such a shock to the weaker soul of Margaret, that if she had obtained any increase of courage, it was at once annihilated, and the desponding fancy entered her mind that if evil reached one so noble, so steadfast in thought and in action, how might she hope to escape; and now, when weakened and depressed alike by bodily and mental suffering, such fancies obtained so much possession of her that she became more and more restless. The exertions of Sir Nigel and his companions, even of her own friends, failed in rousing or infusing strength. Sometimes it was vague conjectures as to the fate of her husband, the dread that he had fallen into the hands of his foes—a catastrophe which not only herself but many stronger minds imagined could scarcely be avoided. She would dwell on these fancies till suspense became intolerable; and then, if these were partially calmed, came personal fears: the belief that if attacked the castle could not muster force enough for defence; suspicions of treachery in the garrison, and other symptoms of the wavering nature of her mind, till Sir Nigel felt too truly that if danger did come she would not stay to meet it. Her wishes ever turned to the sanctuary of St. Duthac in the domains of the Earl of Ross, believing the sanctity of the place would be more effectual protection than the strongest castle and bravest force. In vain Sir Nigel remonstrated, nay, assured her that the fidelity of the Lord of Ross was impugned; that he doubted his flattering overtures; that he was known to be in correspondence with England. But he spoke in vain—the queen persisted in trusting him; that he had ever been a friend of her father and brother the Earls of Mar, and he would be faithful to her interests now. Her opinion weighed with many of the ladies of her court, even amongst those who were not affected with her fears. At such times Agnes never spoke, but there was a calm, quiet determination in her expression that convinced the Lady Seaton, who alone had leisure to observe her, that her resolution was already taken and unalterable.

All that could be done to calm, the queen's perturbed spirits by way of amusement Sir Nigel did; but his task was not an easy one, and the rumor which about this time reached him that the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster, with a very large force, were rapidly advancing towards Aberdeenshire, did not lessen its difficulties. He sought to keep the information as long as possible from all his female charge, although the appearance of many terrified villagers flying from their homes to the protection of the castle hardly enabled him to do so, and confirmed without doubt the truth of what he had heard. Nigel felt the moment of peril was approaching, and he nerved both mind and frame to meet it. The weak terrors of the queen and some of her train increased with every rumor, and, despite every persuasion of Sir Nigel, Seaton, and other brave and well-tried warriors, she rested not till a negotiation was entered into with the Earl of Ross to grant them a safe conduct through his lands, and permission to enter the sanctuary of St. Duthac.

Perplexed with many sad thoughts, Nigel Bruce was one day slowly traversing a long gallery leading to some uninhabited chambers in the west wing of the building; it was of different architecture, and ruder, heavier aspect than the remainder of the castle. Tradition said that those rooms had been the original building inhabited by an ancestor of the line of Bruce, and the remainder had been gradually added to them; that some dark deed of blood had been there committed, and consequently they were generally kept locked, none of the vassals in the castle choosing to run the risk of meeting the spirits which they declared abode there. We have before said that Nigel was not superstitious, though his mind being of a cast which, adopting and embodying the ideal, he was likely to be supposed such. The particulars of the tradition he had never heard, and consequently it was always with a smile of disbelief he listened to the oft-repeated injunction not to walk at dusk in the western turret. This warning came across him now, but his mind was far otherwise engrossed, too much so indeed for him even to give more than a casual glance to the rude portraits which hung on either side the gallery.

He mistrusted the Earl of Ross, and there came a fear upon his noble spirit that, in permitting the departure of the queen and her attendants, he might be liable to the censure of his sovereign, that he was failing in his trust; yet how was he to act, how put a restraint upon his charge? Had he indeed believed that the defence of the castle would be successful, that he should be enabled to force the besiegers to raise the siege, he might perhaps have felt justified in restraining the queen—but he did not feel this. He had observed there were many discontented and seditious spirits in the castle, not indeed in the three hundred of his immediate followers; but what were they compared to the immense force now pouring over the country, and whose goal he knew was Kildrummy? The increase of inmates also, from the number of small villages which had emptied their inhabitants into his walls till he was compelled to prevent further ingress, must inevitably diminish his stores, and when once blockaded, to replenish them would be impossible. No personal fears, no weakness of purpose entered the high soul of Nigel Bruce amid these painful cogitations. He well knew no shade of dishonor *could* fall on him; he thought not one moment of his own fate, although if the castle were taken he knew death awaited him, either by the besieger's sword or the hangman's cord, for he would make no condition; he thought only that this was well-nigh the last castle in his brother's keeping, which, if lost, would in the present depressed state of his affairs be indeed a fatal blow, and a still greater triumph to England.

These thoughts naturally engrossed his mind to the exclusion of all imaginative whisperings, and therefore was it that he drew back the bolt of a door which closed the passage, without any of those peculiar feelings that at a less anxious time might have possessed him; for souls less gifted than that of Nigel Bruce can seldom enter a spot hallowed by tradition without the electric thrill which so strangely unites the present with the past.

It was a chamber of moderate dimensions to which the oaken door admitted him, hung with coarse and faded tapestry, which, disturbed by the wind, disclosed an opening into another passage, through which he pursued his way. In the apartment on which the dark and narrow passage ended, however, his steps were irresistibly arrested. It was panelled with black-oak, of which the floor also was composed, giving the whole an aspect calculated to infect the most thoughtless spirit with gloom. Two high and very narrow windows, the small panes of which were quite incrustated with dust, were the only conductors of light, with the exception of a loophole—for it could scarcely be dignified by the name of casement—on the western side. Through this loophole the red light of a declining winter sun sent its rays, which were caught and stayed on what seemed at the distance an antique picture-frame. Wondering to perceive a picture out of its place in the gallery, Nigel hastily advanced towards it, pausing, however, on his way to examine, with some surprise, one of the planks in the floor, which, instead of the beautiful black polish which age had rather heightened than marred in the rest, was rough and white, with all the appearance of having been hewn and scraped by some sharp instrument.

It is curious to mark how trifling a thing will sometimes connect, arrange, and render clear as day to the mind all that has before been vague, imperfect, and indistinct. It is like the touch of lightning on an electric chain, link after link starts up till we see the illumined whole. We have said Nigel had never heard the particulars of the tradition; but he looked on that misshapen plank, and in an instant a tale of blood and terror weaved itself in his mind; in that room the deed, whatever it was, had been done, and from that plank the sanguine evidence of murder had been with difficulty erased. A cold shuddering passed over him, and he turned instinctively away, and strode hastily to examine the frame which had attracted him. It did contain a picture—we should rather say a portrait—for it comprised but one figure, the half-length of a youthful warrior, clad in steel, save the beautifully-formed head, which was covered only by his own luxuriant raven curls. In a better light it could not have been placed, particularly in the evening; the rays, condensed and softened, seemed to gather up their power into one focus, and throw such an almost supernatural glow on the half face, give such an extraordinary appearance of life to the whole figure, that a casual visitant to that chamber might well fancy it was no picture but reality on which he gazed. But no such emotion was at work in the bosom of Nigel Bruce, though his first glance upon that face occasioned an almost convulsive start, and then a gaze of such intense, such almost fearful interest, that he stood as if fascinated by some overpowering spell. His features, worked with internal emotions, flushed and paled alternately. It was no weak-minded terror which bound him there, no mood in which a step or sound could chill and startle, for so wrapt was he in his own strange dreams that he heard not a slow and measured step approach him; he did not even start when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and the melodious voice of the seer caused him to turn slowly around.

"The warnings thou hast heard have no power on thee, young lord," he said, slightly smiling, "or I should not see thee here at this hour alone. Yet thou wert strangely wrapt."

"Knowest thou aught of *him*, good father?" answered Nigel, in a voice that to his own ears sounded hoarse and unnatural, and turning his glance once again to the portrait. "My thoughts are busy with that face and yon tale-telling plank; there are wild, feverish, incongruous dreams within me, and I would have them solved. Thou of all others art best fitted to the task, for amid the records of the past, where thou hast loved to linger, thou hast surely found the tradition of this tower. I shame not to confess there is in my heart a deep yearning to learn the truth. Wherefore, when thy harp and song have so pleasantly whiled the evening hours, did not this tale find voice, good father?"

"Alas! my son, 'tis too fraught with horror, too sad for gentle ears. A few stern, rugged words will best repeat it. I love not to linger on the theme; listen then now, and it shall be told thee."

"In the reign of Malcolm the Second, the districts now called Aberdeen and Forfar were possessed, and had been so, so tradition saith, since Kenneth MacAlpine, by the Lords of Brus or Bris, a family originally from the North. They were largely and nobly connected, particularly with Norway and Gaul. It is generally supposed the first possessions in Scotland held in fief by the line of Bruce can be traced back only to the time of David I., in the person of Robert de Bruce, an Anglo-Norman baron, whose father came over to England with the Conqueror. The cause of this supposition my tale will presently explain.

"Haco Brus or Bris was the Lord of Aberdeen in the reign of Malcolm the Second. He spent many years abroad; indeed, was supposed to have married and settled there, when, to the surprise of his vassals, he suddenly returned unmarried, and soon after uniting himself with a beautiful and accomplished girl, nearly related to the blood-royal of Scotland, settled quietly in this tower, which was the stronghold of his possessions. Years passed; the only child of the baron, a son, born in the first year of his marriage, grew up in strength and beauty, the idol not only of his mother, but of his father, a man stern and cold in seeming, even morose, but with passions fearful alike in their influence and extent. Your eye glances to that pictured face, he was not the baron's son of whom I speak. The affections, nay, the very passions of the baron were centered in this boy. It is supposed pride and ambition were their origin, for he looked, through his near connection with the sovereign, for further aggrandizement for himself. There were some who declared ambition was not the master-passion, that a deeper, sterner, fiercer emotion dwelt within. Whether they spoke thus from the sequel, I know not, but that sequel proved their truth.

"There was a gathering of all the knightly and noble in King Malcolm's court, not perchance for trials at arms resembling the tournaments of the present day, but very similar in their motive and bearing, though ruder and more dangerous. The wreath of glory and victory was ever given by the gentle hand of beauty. Bright eyes and lovely forms presided at the sports even as now, and the king and his highest nobles joined in the revels.

"The wife of the Baron of Brus and his son, now a fine boy of thirteen, were of course amongst the royal guests. Though matron grace and dignified demeanor had taken the place of the blushing charms of early girlhood, the Lady Helen Brus was still very beautiful, and as the niece of the king and wife of such a distinguished baron, commanded and received universal homage. Among the combatants was a youthful knight, of an exterior and bearing so much more polished and graceful than the sons of the soil or their more northern visitors, that he was instantly recognized as coming from Gaul, then as now the most polished kingdom of the south. Delighted with his bravery, his modesty, and most chivalric bearing, the king treated him with most distinguished honor, invited him to his palace, spoke with him as friend with friend on the kingdoms of Normandy and France, to the former of which he was subject. There was a mystery, too, about the young knight, which heightened the interest he excited; he bore no device on his shield, no cognizance whatever to mark his name and birth and his countenance, beautiful as it was, often when in repose expressed sadness and care unusual to his years, for he was still very young, though in reply to the king's solicitations that he would choose one of Scotland's fairest maidens (her dower should be princely), and make the Scottish court his home, he had smilingly avowed that he was already a husband and father.

"The notice of the king, of course, inspired the nobles with similar feelings of hospitality. Attention and kindness were lavished on the stranger from all, and nothing was talked of but the nameless knight. The Lord of Brus, who had been absent on a mission to a distant court during the continuance of the martial games, was on his return presented by the king himself to the young warrior. It is said that both were so much moved by this meeting, that all present were mystified still more. The baron, with that deep subtlety for which he was remarkable, recovered himself the first, and accounted for his emotion to the satisfaction of his hearers, though not apparently to that of the stranger, who, though his cheek was blanched, still kept his bright searching eyes upon him, till the baron's quailed 'neath his gaze. The hundred tongues of rumor chose to speak of relationship, that there was a likeness between them, yet I know not how that could be. There is no impress of the fiendish passion at work in the baron's soul on those bright, beautiful features."

"Ha! Is it of him you speak?" involuntarily escaped from Nigel, as the old man for a moment paused; "of him? Methought yon portrait was of an ancestor of Bruce, or wherefore is it here?"

"Be patient, good my son. My narrative wanders, for my lips shrink from its tale. That the baron and the knight met, not in warlike joust but in peaceful converse, and at the request of the latter,

is known, but on what passed in that interview even tradition is silent, it can only be imagined by the sequel; they appeared, however, less reserved than at first. The baron treated him with the same distinction as his fellow-nobles, and the stranger's manner towards him was even more respectful than the mere difference of age appeared to demand. Important business with the Lord of Brus was alleged as the cause of his accepting that nobleman's invitation to the tower of Kildrummie, in preference to others earlier given and more eagerly enforced. They departed together, the knight accompanied but by two of his followers, and the baron leaving the greater number of his in attendance on his wife and child, who, for some frivolous reason, he left with the court. It was a strange thing for him to do, men said, as he had never before been known to lose sight of his boy even for a day. For some days all seemed peace and hospitality within the tower. The stranger was too noble himself, and too kindly disposed towards all his fellow-creatures, to suspect aught of treachery, or he might have remarked the retainers of the baron were changed; that ruder forms and darker visages than at first were gathering around him. How the baron might have intended to make use of them—almost all robbers and murderers by trade—cannot be known, though it may be suspected. In this room the last interview between them took place, and here, on this silent witness of the deed, the hand of the father was bathed in the blood of the son!"

"God in heaven!" burst from Nigel's parched lips, as he sprang up. "The son—how could that be? how known?"

"Fearfully, most fearfully!" shudderingly answered the old man; "through the dying ravings of the maniac Lord of Brus himself. Had not heaven, in its all-seeing justice, thus revealed it, the crime would ever have remained concealed. His bandit hirelings were at hand to remove and bury, many fathoms deep in moat and earth, all traces of the deed. One of the unfortunate knight's followers was supposed to have shared the fate of his master, and to the other, who escaped almost miraculously, you owe the preservation of your royal line.

"But there was one witness of the deed neither time nor the most cunning art could efface. The blood lay in a pool on the oaken floor, and the voice of tradition whispers that day after day it was supernaturally renewed; that vain were the efforts to absorb it, it ever seemed moist and red; and that to remove the plank and re-floor the apartment was attempted again and again in vain. However this may be, it is evident that *erasing it* was attended with extreme difficulty; that the blood had penetrated well-nigh through the immense thickness of the wood."

Nigel stooped down over the crumbling fragment; years, aye, centuries had rolled away, yet there it still stood, arrested it seemed even in its decay, not permitted to crumble into dust, but to remain an everlasting monument of crime and its retribution. After a brief pause Nigel resumed his seat, and pushing the hair from his brow, which was damp with some untold emotion, signed to the old man to proceed.

"That the stranger warrior returned not to Malcolm's court, and had failed in his promises to various friends, was a matter of disappointment, and for a time, of conjecture to the king and his court. That his followers, in obedience, it was said, to their master's signet, set off instantly to join him either in England or Normandy, for both of which places they had received directions, satisfied the greater number. If others suspected foul play, it was speedily hushed up; for the baron was too powerful, too closely related to the throne, and justice then too weak in Scotland to permit accusation or hope for conviction. Time passed, and the only change observable in the baron was, that he became more gloomy, more abstracted, wrapt up, as it were, in one dark remembrance, one all-engrossing thought. Towards his wife he was changed—harsh, cold, bitterly sarcastic; as if her caresses had turned to gall. Her gentle spirit sunk beneath the withering blight, and he was heard to laugh, the mocking laugh of a fiend, as he followed her to the grave; her child, indeed, he still idolized, but it was a fearful affection, and a just heaven permitted not its continuance. The child, to whom many had looked as likely to ascend the Scottish throne, from the failure of all direct heirs, the beautiful and innocent child of a most guilty father, faded like a lovely flower before him, so softly, so gradually, that there came no suspicion of death till the cold hand was on his heart, and he lay lifeless before him who had plunged his soul in deadliest crime through that child to aggrandize himself. Then was it that remorse, torturing before, took the form of partial madness, and there was not one who had power to restrain, or guide, or soothe.

"Then it was the fearful tale was told, freezing the blood, not so much with the wild madness of the tone, but that the words were too collected, too stamped with truth, to admit of aught like doubt. The couch of the baron was, at his own command, placed here, where we now stand, covering the spot where his first-born fell, and that portrait, obtained from Normandy, hung where it now is, ever in his sight. The dark tale which those wild ravings revealed was simply this:

"He had married, as was suspected, during his wanderings, but soon tired of the yoke, more particularly as his wife possessed a spirit proud and haughty as his own, and all efforts to mould her to his will were useless, he plunged anew into his reckless career. He had never loved his wife, marrying her simply because it suited his convenience, and brought him increase of wealth and station; and her ill-disguised abhorrence of many of his actions, her beautiful adherence to virtue, however tempted, occasioned all former feelings to concentrate in hatred the most deadly. More than one attempt to rid himself of her by poison she had discovered and frustrated, and at last removed herself and her child, under a feigned name, to Normandy, and ably eluded all pursuit and inquiry.

"The baron's search continued some time, in the hope of silencing her forever, as he feared she might prove a dangerous enemy, but failing in his wishes, he travelled some time over different countries, returned at length to Scotland, and acted as we have seen. The young knight had been informed of his birthright by his mother, at her death, which took place two years before he made his appearance in Scotland; that she had concealed from him the fearful character of his father, being unable so completely to divest herself of all feeling towards the father of her child, as to make him an object of aversion to his son. She had long told him his real name, and urged him to demand from his father an acknowledgment of his being heir to the proud barony of the Bruce. His likeness to herself was so strong, that she knew it must carry conviction to his father; but to make his identity still more certain, she furnished him with certain jewels and papers, none but herself could produce. She had done this in the presence of two faithful witnesses, the father and brother of her son's betrothed bride, high lords of Normandy, the former of which made it a condition annexed to his consent to the marriage, that as soon as possible afterwards he should urge and claim his rights. Sir Walter, of course, willingly complied; they were married by the name of Brus, and their child so baptized. A war, which retained Sir Walter in arms with his sovereign, prevented his seeking Scotland till his boy was a year old, and then for his sake, far more than for his own, the young father determined on asserting his birthright, his child should not be nameless, as he had been; but to spare his unknown parent all public mortification, he joined the martial games without any cognizance or bearing on his shield.

"Terrible were the ravings in which the baron alluded to the interview he had had with his murdered child; the angelic mildness and generosity of the youthful warrior; that, amid all his firmness never to depart from his claim—as it was not alone himself but his child he would irreparably injure—he never wavered in his respectful deference to his parent. He quitted the court in the belief that the baron sought Kildrummie to collect the necessary papers for substantiating his claim; but ere he died, it appeared his eyes were opened. The fierce passions of the baron had been too long restrained in the last interview; they burst even his politic control, and he had flung the papers received from, the hand of his too-confiding son on the blazing hearth, and with dreadful oaths swore that if he would not instantly retract his claim, and bind himself by the most sacred promise never to breathe the foul tale again, death should be its silent keeper. He would not bring his own head low, and avow that he had dishonored a scion of the blood-royal.

"Appalled far more at the dark, fiendish passions he beheld than the threat held out to himself, Sir Walter stood silent a while, and then mildly demanded to be heard; that if so much public mortification to his parent would attend the pursuance of his claims at the present time, he would consent to forego them, on condition of his father's solemnly promising on his deathbed to reveal the truth, and do him tardy justice then, but forego them altogether he would not, were his life the forfeit. The calm firmness of his tone, it is supposed, lashed his father into greater madness, and thus the dark deed was done.

"That the baron several times endeavored to possess himself of the infant child of Sir Walter, also came to light in his dying moments; that he had determined to exterminate root and branch, fearful he should still possess some clue to his birth; he had frantically avowed, but in his last hour, he would have given all his amassed treasure, his greatness, his power, but for one little moment of assurance that his grandson lived. He left him all his possessions, his lordship, his name, but as there were none came forth to claim, they of necessity passed to the crown."

"But the child, the son of Sir Walter—if from him our line descends, he must have lived to manhood—why did not he demand his rights?"

"He lived, aye, and had a goodly progeny; but the fearful tale of his father's fate related to him again and again by the faithful Edric, who had fled from his master's murdered corse to watch over the safety of that master's child, and warn all who had the charge of him of the fiend in human shape who would probably seek the boy's life as he had his father's, caused him to shun the idea of his Scottish possessions with a loathing horror which he could not conquer; they were associated with the loss of both his parents, for his father's murder killed his devoted mother. He was contented to feel himself Norman in possessions as well as in name. He received lands and honors from the Dukes of Normandy, and at the advanced age of seventy and five, accompanied Duke William to England. The third generation from him obtained anew Scottish possessions, and gradually Kildrummie and its feudal tenures returned to its original lords; but the tower had been altered and enlarged, and except the tradition of these chambers, the fearful fate of the second of the line has faded from the minds of his descendants, unless casually or supernaturally recalled."

"Ha! supernaturally, sayest thou?" interrupted Nigel, in a tone so peculiar it almost startled his companion. "Are there those who assert they have seen his semblance—good, gifted, beautiful as thou hast described him? why not at once deem him the guardian spirit of our house?"

"And there are those who deem him so, young lord," answered the seer. "It is said that until the Lords of Bruce again obtained possession of these lands, in the visions of the night the form of the murdered warrior, clad as in yon portrait, save with the addition of a scarf across his breast bearing the crest and cognizance of the Bruce, appeared once in his lifetime to each lineal descendant. Such visitations are said to have ceased, and he is now only seen by those destined like himself to an early and bloody death, cut off in the prime of manhood, nobleness, and joy."

"And where—sleeping or waking?" demanded the young nobleman, in a low, deep tone, laying his hand on the minstrel's arm, and looking fixedly on his now strangely agitated face.

"Sleeping or waking? it hath been both," he answered, and his voice faltered. "If it be in the front of the war, amid the press, the crush, the glory of the battle, he hath come, circled with bright forms and brighter dreams, to the sleeping warrior on the eve of his last fight; if"—and his voice grew lower and huskier yet—"if by the red hand of the foe, by the captive's chain and headsman's axe, as the noble Wallace, there have been those who say—I vouch not for its truth—he hath been seen in the vigils of the night on the eve of knighthood, when the young, aspiring warrior hath watched and prayed beside his arms. Boy! boy! why dost thou look upon me thus?"

"Because thine eye hath read my doom," he said, in a firm, sweet tone; "and if there be aught of truth in thy tale, thou knowest, feelest I have seen him. God of mercy, the captive's chain, the headsman's axe! Yet 'tis Thy will, and for my country—let it come."

CHAPTER XVII.

"Thou art idle, maiden; wherefore not gather thy robes and other gear together, as thy companions? Knowest thou not in twenty-four hours we shall be, heaven willing, safely sheltered under the holy wing of St. Duthac?" was Queen Margaret's address to Agnes, about a week after the conversation we have recorded. There were many signs of confusion and tokens of removal in her scanty train, but the maiden of Buchan stood apart, offering assistance when needed, but making no arrangements for herself.

"I seek not such holy keeping, may it please you, madam," she replied. "I do not quit this castle."

"How!" exclaimed Margaret. "Art thou mad?"

"In what, royal madam?"

"Or hath love blinded thee, girl? Knowest thou not Hereford and Lancaster are advancing as rapidly as their iron-clad force permits, and in less than seven days the castle must be besieged in form?"

"I know it, madam."

"And thou wilt brave it, maiden?—dare a danger that may be avoided? Is thy life of so little worth, or if not thy life, thy liberty?"

"When a life is wrapt up in one—when there is none on earth save that one to whom that life is of any worth, wherefore should I seek safety save by his side? Royal madam, I am not mad nor blind; but desolate as I am,—nay, were I not 'twould be the same—I covet to share Sir Nigel's fate; the blow that strikes him shall lay me at his side, be it in prison or in death. My safety is with him; and were the danger ten times as great as that which threatens now, I'd share it with him still."

"Nay, thou art but a loving fool, Agnes. Be advised, seek safety in the sanctuary; peril cannot reach us there."

"Save by the treachery of the dark-browed earl who grants that shelter. Nay, pardon me, madam; thou lovest not to list that theme, believing him as honorable and faithful as thyself. God grant he prove so! If," she added, with a faint smile, "if it be such mad folly to cling to a beloved one in danger as in joy, in adversity as in triumph, forgive me, royal lady, but thy maidens have learned that tale of thee."

"And would to God I could teach them thus again!" exclaimed the queen, tears coursing down her cheeks. "Oh, Agnes, Agnes, were Robert here, not death itself should part us. For my child's sake, for his, I go hence for safety. Could my resting, nay, my death benefit him, Agnes, I would meet it, weak as thou deemest me."

"Nay, nay, I doubt it not, my queen," answered Agnes, soothingly, "It is best thou shouldst find some place of repose till this struggle be past. If it end in victory, it will be joy to hail thee once again within its walls; if otherwise, better thy safety should be cared for."

"But for thee, my child, is it not unmaidenly for thee to linger here?"

"It would be, royal madam," and a bright vivid flush glowed on her pale cheeks, "but for the protection of the Lady Seaton, who will not leave her husband."

"I may not blame her, after mine own words," said the queen, sorrowfully; "yet she is one I could have wished beside me. Ha! that trumpet. Merciful heaven! is it the foe?" and trembling with alarm, she dispatched attendant after attendant to know the cause.

The English force was known to be so near that many a warrior-heart beat quicker at any unusual blast, and it was not marvel the queen's terrors should very often affect her attendants. Agnes alone, amid the maiden train, ever retained a calm self-possession; strange in one who, till the last eventful year, had seemed such a very child. Her mother trembled lest the turmoils and confusion of her country should ever approach her or those she loved; how might she, timid, nay; often fearful, weak, and yielding, as the flower on the heath, how might she encounter storm, and grief, and care? Had her mother's eye been on her now, and could have followed her in yet

deeper trials, that mother scarce had known her child.

She it was whose coolness enabled her easily to recognize and explain the trumpet's blast. It was an officer with an escort from the Lord of Ross, informing the queen that, from late intelligence respecting the movements of the English, he deemed it better they should not defer their departure from the castle another night.

On the receipt of this message all was increased hurry and confusion in the apartments of the queen. The advice was to be followed on the instant, and ere sunset the litters and mules, and other accommodation for the travellers, waited their pleasure in the outer court.

It was with a mien of princely dignity, a countenance grave and thoughtful, with which the youthful seneschal attended the travellers to the great gate of the castle. In after years the expression of his features flashed again and again upon those who looked upon him them. Calmly he bade his sister-in-law farewell, and bade her, should she be the first to see his brother, tell him that it was at her own free will and pleasure she thus departed; that neither advice nor persuasion on his part had been used; she had of her own will released him from his sacred charge; and if ill came of it, to free his memory from blame.

"Trust me, Nigel; oh, surely you may trust me! You will not part from me in anger at my wilfulness?" entreated Margaret, as clinging to his arm, she retained him a few minutes ere he placed her in the litter.

"In anger, my sweet sister, nay, thou wrongest me!" he said, a bright smile dispersing a moment the pensive cast of his features. "In sorrow, perchance, for I love not him to whose care thou hast committed thyself; yet if ill await this castle, and thou wert with me, 'twould enhance its bitterness. No, tis better thou shouldst go; though I would it were not to the Lord of Ross."

"And wherefore?" demanded the deep stern voice of the officer beside him.

"Because I doubt him, Archibald Macfarlane," sternly replied the young nobleman, fixing his flashing eyes upon him; "and thou mayst so inform him an thou wilt. An I do him wrong, let him deliver the Queen of Scotland and her attendants in safety to King Robert, in the forthcoming spring, and Nigel Bruce will crave forgiveness for the wrong that he hath done him; nay, let his conduct give my doubts the lie, and I will even thank him, sir."

Turning on his heel, he conducted the queen to her litter, and bade a graceful farewell to all her fair companions, bidding good angels speed them on their way. The heavy gates were thrown back, the portcullis raised and the drawbridge lowered, and amid a parting cheer from the men-at-arms drawn up in the court in military homage to their queen, the cavalcade departed, attended only by the men of Ross, for the number of the garrison was too limited to admit of their attendance anywhere, save within and on the walls.

With folded arms and an anxious brow, Sir Nigel stood beside the gate, marking the progress of the train; a gentle voice aroused him. It playfully said, "Come to the highest turret, Nigel, there thou wilt trace their path as long as light remains." He started, for Agnes was at his side. He drew her arm within his own, briefly gave the command to close the gate and make all secure, and turned with her in the direction of the keep.

"Have I done right," he said, as, when they had reached a more retired path, he folded his arm caressingly around her, and drew her closer to him, "to list thy pleadings, dearest, to grant thy boon? oh, if *they* go to safety, why did I listen to thee and permit thee to remain?"

"Nay, there is equal safety within these walls, Nigel. Be assured, thine Agnes hath neither regret nor doubt when thou art by her side," she answered, still playfully. "I love not the sanctuaries they go to seek; the stout hearts and trusty blades of warriors like thee and thine, my Nigel, are better and truer safeguards."

"Alas! Agnes, I fear me not in cases such as these. I am not wont to be desponding, but from the small number of true men which garrison this castle, I care not to acknowledge I had loved better to meet my foe on open ground. Here I can scarce know friend from foe; traitors may be around me, nay, in my very confidence, and I know it not."

"Art thou not infected with Queen Margaret's suspicions, Nigel? Why ponder on such uneasy dreams?"

"Because, my best love, I am a better adept in the perusal of men's countenances and manners than many, and there are signs of lowering discontent and gloomy cowardice, arguing ill for unity of measures, on which our safety greatly rests. Yet my fancies may be wrong, and at all hazards my duty shall be done. The issue is in the hands of a higher power; we cannot do wrong in committing ourselves to Him, for thou knowest He giveth not the battle to the strong, and right and justice we have on Scotland's side."

Agnes looked on his face, and she saw, though he spoke cheerfully, his thoughts echoed not his words. She would not express her own anxiety, but led him gently to explain to her his plan of defence, and prepare her for all she might have to encounter.

Five days passed, and all within and without the walls remained the same; the sixth was the Sabbath, and the greater part of the officers and garrison were assembled in the chapel, where divine service was regularly read by the Abbot of Scone, whom we should perhaps before have

mentioned as having, at the king's especial request, accompanied the queen and her attendants to Kildrummie. It was a solemn yet stirring sight, that little edifice, filled as it was with steel-clad warriors and rude and dusky forms, now bending in one prayer before their God. The proud, the lowly, the faithless, and the true, the honorable and the base, the warrior, whose whole soul burned and throbbed but for his country and his king, the coward, whose only thought was how he could obtain life for himself and save the dread of war by the surrender of the castle—one and all knelt there, the workings of those diverse hearts known but to Him before whom they bent. Strangely and mournfully did that little group of delicate females gleam forth amidst the darker and harsher forms around, as a knot of fragile flowers blooming alone, and unsheltered amidst some rude old forest trees, safe in their own lowliness from the approaching tempest, but liable to be overwhelmed in the fall of their companions, whom yet they would not leave. As calmly as in his own abbey the venerable abbot read the holy service, and administered the rites of religion to all who sought. It was in the deep silence of individual prayer which preceded the chanting of the conclusion of the service that a shrill, peculiar blast of a trumpet was heard. On the instant it was recognized as the bugle of the warder stationed on the centre turret of the keep, as the blast which told the foe was at length in sight. Once, twice, thrice it sounded, at irregular intervals, even as Nigel had commanded; the notes were caught up by the warders on the walls, and repeated again and again. A sudden cry of "The foe!" broke from the soldiers scattered round, and again all was silence. There had been a movement, almost a confusion in some parts of the church, but the officers and those who had followed them from the mountains neither looted up nor stirred. The imperative gesture of the abbot commanded and retained order and silence, the service proceeded; there might have been some faltering in the tones of the choir, but the swelling notes of the organ concealed the deficiency.

The eye of Agnes voluntarily sought her betrothed. His head was still bent down in earnest prayer, but she had not looked long before she saw him raise it, and lift up his clasped hands in the evident passionate fervor of his prayer. So beautiful, so gloriously beautiful was that countenance thus breathing prayer, so little seemed that soul of earth, that tears started to the eyes of Agnes, and the paleness of strong emotion over-spread the cheek, eye, and the quivering lip, which the war and death-speaking trumpet had had no power to disturb.

"Let me abide by him, merciful Father, in weal or in woe; oh, part us not!" she prayed again and yet again, and the bright smile which now encircled his lips—for he had caught her glance—seemed an answer to her prayer.

It was a beautiful, though perhaps to many of the inmates of Kildrummie a terrible sight, which from the roof of the turret now presented itself to their view. The English force lay before them, presenting many a solid phalanx of steel, many a glancing wood of spears. Nor were these all; the various engines used in sieges at this time, battering-rams, and others, whose technical names are unfortunately lost to us, but used to fling stones of immense weight to an almost incredible distance; arbalists, and the incomparable archer, who carried as many lives as arrows in his belt; wagons, heavily laden, with all things necessary for a close and numerous encampment—all these could be plainly distinguished in rapid advance towards the castle, marking their path through the country by the smoke of the hamlets they had burned. Many and eager voices resounded in various parts of the castle; numbers had thronged to the tower, with their own eyes to mark the approach of the enemy, and to report all they had seen to their companions below, triumphantly or despondingly, according to the temper of their minds. Sir Nigel Bruce and Sir Christopher Seaton, with others of the superior officers, stood a little apart, conversing eagerly and animatedly, and finally separating, with an eager grasp of the hand, to perform the duties intrusted to each.

"Ha! Christine, and thou, fair maiden," exclaimed Sir Christopher, gayly, as on turning he encountered his wife and Agnes arm-in-arm. "By mine honor, this is bravely done; ye will not wait in your tiring-bower till your knights seek ye, but come for information yourselves. Well, 'tis a goodly company, is't not? as gallant a show as ever mustered, by my troth. Those English warriors tacitly do us honor, and proclaim our worth by the numbers of gallant men they bring against us. We shall return the compliment some day, and pay them similar homage."

His wife smiled at his jest, and even felt reassured, for it was not the jest of a mind ill at ease, it was the same bluff, soldier spirit she had always loved.

"And, Nigel, what thinkest thou?"

"Think, dearest?" he said, answering far more the appealing look of Agnes than her words; "think? that we shall do well, aye, nobly well; they muster not half the force they led me to expect. The very sight of them has braced me with new spirit, and put to ignominious flight the doubts and dreams I told thee had tormented me."

Movement and bustle now pervaded every part of the castle, but all was conducted with an order and military skill that spoke well for the officers to whom it was intrusted. The walls were manned; pickaxes and levers, for the purposes of hurling down stones on the besiegers, collected and arranged on the walls; arms polished, and so arranged that the hand might grasp them at a minute's warning, were brought from the armory to every court and tower; the granaries and storehouses were visited, and placed under trustworthy guards. A band of picked men, under an experienced officer, threw themselves into the barbican, determined to defend it to the last. Sir Nigel and Sir Christopher visited every part of the outworks, displaying the most unceasing care, encouraged the doubting, roused the timid, and cheered and inspired the boldest with new confidence, new hope; but one feeling appeared to predominate—liberty and Scotland seemed

the watchword of one and all.

Onward, like a mighty river, rolled the English force; nearer and nearer, till the middle of the second day saw them encamped within a quarter of a mile from the palisades and outworks raised on either side of the barbican. Obtaining easy possession of the river—for Sir Nigel, aware of the great disparity of numbers, had not even attempted its defence—they formed three distinct bodies round the walls, the strongest and noblest setting down before the barbican, as the principal point of attack. Numerous as they had appeared in the distance, well provided with all that could forward their success, it was not till closer seen all their strength could be discovered; but there was no change in the hopes and gallant feelings of the Scottish officers and their men-at-arms, though, could hearts have been read, the timidity, the doubts, the anxious wishes to make favorable peace with the English had in some of the original garrison alarmingly increased.

Before, however, any recourse was made to arms, an English herald, properly supported, demanded and obtained admission within the gates, on a mission from the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster, to Sir Christopher Seaton, Sir Nigel Bruce, and others of command. They were summoned to deliver up the castle and themselves to their liege lord and sovereign, King Edward; to submit to his mercy, and grace should be shown to them, and safe conduct granted to all those who, taking refuge within the walls and adopting a position of defence, proclaimed themselves rebels and abettors of rebellion; that they should have freedom to return to their homes uninjured, not only in their persons but in their belongings; and this should be on the instant the gates were thrown open, and the banner of England had taken the place of that of Scotland now floating from their keep.

"Tell thy master, thou smooth-tongued knave," burst angrily from the lips of Sir Christopher Seaton, as he half rose from his seat and clenched his mailed hand at the speaker, and then hastily checking himself, added, in a lower tone, "Answer him, Nigel; thou hast eloquence at thy command, I have none, save at my sword's point, and my temper is somewhat too hot to list such words, courteous though they may be."

"Tell your master, sir herald," continued Nigel, rising as his colleague flung himself back on his seat, and though his voice was sternly calm, his manner was still courteous, "tell them they may spare themselves the trouble, and their followers the danger, of all further negotiation. We are Scottish men and Scottish subjects, and consequently to all the offers of England we are as if we heard not. Neither rebels nor abettors of rebels, we neither acknowledge the necessity of submitting ourselves to a tyrant's mercy, nor desire the advantage of his offered grace. Return, sir herald; we scorn the conditions proposed. We are here for Scotland and for Scotland's king, and for them we know both how to live and how to die."

His words were echoed by all around him, and there was a sharp clang of steel, as if each man half drew his eager sword, which spoke yet truer than mere words. Dark brows and features stern were bent upon the herald as he left their presence, and animated council followed his departure.

No new movement followed the return of the herald. For some days no decisive operation was observable in the English force; and when they did attack the outworks, it was as if more to pass the time than with any serious intent. It was a period of fearful suspense to the besieged. Their storehouses were scarcely sufficiently provided to hold out for any great length of time, and they almost imagined that to reduce them to extremities by famine was the intention of the besiegers. The greatest danger, if encountered hand to hand in the *mêlée*, was welcome, but the very idea of a slow, lingering fate, with the enemy before them, mocking their misery, was terrible to the bravest. A daring sally into the very thickest of the enemy's camp, headed by Nigel and his own immediate followers, carrying all before them, and when by numbers compelled to retreat, bearing both booty and prisoners with them, roused the English from their confident supposition that the besieged would soon be obliged to capitulate, and urged them into action. The ire of the haughty English blazed up at what seemed such daring insolence in their petty foe. Decisive measures were resorted to on the instant, and increased bustle appeared to pervade both besiegers and besieged.

"Pity thou art already a knight, Nigel!" bluffly exclaimed Seaton, springing into his saddle by torchlight the following morning, as with a gallant band he was about dashing over the drawbridge, to second the defenders of the barbican and palisades. "How shall we reward thee, my boy? Thou hast brought the foe to bay. Hark! they are there before me," and he spurred on to the very centre of the *mêlée*.

Sir Nigel was not long after him. The enemy was driven back with fearful loss. Scaling-ladders were thrown down; the archers on the walls, better accustomed to their ground, marking their foes by the torches they carried, but concealed themselves by the darkness, dealt destruction with as unerring hand as their more famous English brethren. Shouts and cries rose on either side; the English bore back before the sweeping stroke of Nigel Bruce as before the scythe of death. For the brief space of an hour the strife lasted, and still victory was on the side of the Scots—glorious victory, purchased with scarce the loss of ten men. The English fled back to their camp, leaving many wounded and dead on the field, and some prisoners in the hands of the Scots. Ineffectual efforts were made to harass the Scots, as with a daring coolness seldom equalled, they repaired the outworks, and planted fresh palisades to supply those which had fallen in the strife, in the very face of the English, many of them coolly detaching the arrows which, shot at too great distance, could not penetrate the thick lining of their buff coats, and scornfully flinging them back. Several sharp skirmishes took place that day, both under the walls

and at a little distance from them; but in all the Scots were victorious, and when night fell all was joy and triumph in the castle; shame, confusion, and fury in the English camp.

For several days this continued. If at any time the English, by superiority of numbers, were victorious, they were sure to be taken by surprise by an impetuous sally from the besieged, and beaten back with loss, and so sudden and concealed were the movements of Nigel and Seaton, that though the besiegers lay closer and closer round the castle, the moment of their setting forth on their daring expeditions could never be discovered.

"Said I not we should do well, right well, sweet Agnes," exclaimed Nigel, one night, on his return from an unusually successful sally, "and are not my words true? Hast thou looked forth on the field to-day, and seen how gloriously it went? Oh, to resign this castle to my brother's hands unscathed, even as he intrusted it; to hold it for him, threatened as it is!"

He smiled gayly as he spoke, for the consciousness of power was upon him—power to *will* and *do*, to win and to retain—that most blessed consciousness, whether it bless a hero's breast or poet's soul, a maiden's heart or scholar's dream, this checkered world can know.

"I did look forth, my Nigel, for I could not rest; yet ask me not to tell thee how the battle went," she added, with a faint flush, as she looked up in his noble face, beaming as it was with every feeling dear to the heart that loved, "for I traced but the course of one charger, saw but the waving of one plume."

"And thou didst not fear the besiegers' arrows, my beloved? Didst stand in the shelter I contrived? Thou must not risk danger, dearest; better not list the urgings of thy noble spirit than be aught exposed."

"There was no danger, Nigel, at least there seemed none," she said. "I felt no fear, for I looked on thee."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Had the gallant defenders of Kildrummie Castle been conscious that the at first dilatory and then uncertain measures of their foes originated in the fact that the Earls of Hereford and Lancaster were not themselves yet on the field, and that they had with them a vast addition to their forces, they would not perhaps have rested so securely on the hopes which their unexpected success very naturally engendered. Attack on one side they knew they could resist; their only dread had been that, from the numbers of the English, the angle towers, each of which covered a postern, might be attacked at once, and thus discover the real weakness of their forces. The obstinate struggle for the barbican, the strongest point of the castle, had been welcomed with joy by the Scotch, for there they could overlook every movement of the besiegers. Some wonder it did cause that such renowned knights as the earls were known to be, should not endeavor to throw them off their guard by a division of attack; but this wonder could not take from the triumph of success.

It was from no want of observation the absence of the two earls remained undiscovered by the besieged. Engaged on a secret expedition, whose object will be seen in the sequel, they had commanded the message demanding surrender to be given in their names, their pavilions to be pitched in sight of the castle as if they were already there, their banners to wave above them, esquires and pages to be in attendance, and their war-cries to be shouted, as was the custom when they led on in person. The numerous knights, clothed in bright armor from head to heel ever traversing the field, assisted the illusion, and the Scotch never once suspected the truth.

Imagining a very brief struggle would deliver the castle into their hands, even if its garrison were mad enough to refuse compliance with King Edward's terms, the earls had not hurried themselves on their expedition, and a fortnight after the siege had begun, were reposing themselves very cavalierly in the stronghold of an Anglo-Scottish baron, some thirty miles southward of the scene of action.

It was the hour of supper, a rude repast of venison, interspersed with horn and silver flagons filled with the strong liquors of the day, and served up in a rude hall, of which the low round arches in the roof, the massive walls without buttresses, and windows running small outside, but spreading as to become much larger within, all denoted the Saxon architecture unsoftened by any of the Norman improvements.

The earls and their host, with some attendant knights, sat as usual round the dais or raised part of the hall, their table distinguished it may be by some gold as well as silver vessels, and a greater variety of liquor, particularly hypocras and claret of the day, the one formed of wine and honey, the other of wine and spices; by the sannel and wastel cakes, but certainly not by the superior refinement of the more solid food. The huge silver saltcellar alone divided the table of the baron from that of his dependants, yet the distinction of sitting above and below the salt was as great as the division between the master and servant of the present day; the jest, the loud laugh seasoned the viands placed before them, and the hearty draught from the welcome flagon. Nor was the baron's own table much quieter; remarks on the state of the country, speculations as to the hiding-place of King Robert, and when they should receive tidings of the surrender of

Kildrummie, formed topics of conversation alternately with discussions on the excellence of the wines, the flavor of the venison, the difference between English and Scottish cookery, and such like matters, important in the days of our ancestors as in our own.

"You have ridden long enough to-day, good my lords, to make a hearty charge on your suppers; a long journey and a tough battle, commend me to them for helps to the appetite," said the Scottish baron, joyously inviting them by his own example to eat on and spare not.

"Commend me to the latter, an ye will," answered Hereford, on whose brow a cloud of something like distaste had spread; "but by mine honor, I love not the business of the last week. I have brought it to a close, however, and praise the saints for it."

"Bah! thou art over-squeamish, Hereford. Edward would give us the second best jewel in his chaplet for the rich prize we have sent him," resumed Lancaster.

"Reserving the first, of course, for the traitor Bruce himself," interposed their host. "Ah! such a captive were in truth worth an earldom."

"Then, by my troth, the traitor's wife is worth a barony," returned Lancaster, laughing; "and her fair bevy of attendants, amongst whom are the wives, daughters, and sisters of many a rebel, thinkest thou not we shall be high in Edward's favor for them, too? I tell thee we might have fought many a good fight, and not have done him such good service."

"It may be, it may be," answered Hereford, impatiently, "had it been at the sword's point, had they been prisoners by force of arms, I would have joyed too, and felt it was good service; but such rank treachery, decoyed, entrapped by that foul prince of lies, the Lord of Ross—faugh! I could have rammed his treachery back into his throat."

"And done the king, perchance, good service too," rejoined Lancaster, still excessively amused, "for I have no faith in a traitor, however he may serve us a while; yet thou art not over-wise, good friend, to let such trifles chafe thee thus. Trust me, Edward will think more of the captives than the capture."

"There was a time he would not," answered the earl, mournfully; "a time, when Edward would have held it foul scorn to war with women, and worse than scorn to obtain their persons by treachery, as now."

"Aye, but he has changed, and we must change too, would we please him," said the baron; "such notions might have done in former days, but they are too high-flown for the present time, my good lord. I marvel they should have lingered so long with thee."

A frown gathered on Hereford's broad and noble brow, but remembering the forbearance due to his host, he checked an angry reply. "The king *has* changed," he said, "darkly and painfully changed; ambition has warped the noblest, knightliest heart which ever beat for chivalry."

"Hush, ere thou speakest treason, Sir Earl; give me not the pain of draining another flagon of this sparkling hypocras to gain strength for thine arrest, good friend," exclaimed Lancaster, laying the flat of his sword on the earl's shoulder.

Hereford half smiled. "Thou art too happy in thy light-hearted mirth for me to say aught that would so disturb it," he said; "yet I say, and will say again, would to heaven, I had been before the gates of Kildrummie, and left to thee all the honor and glory, an thou wilt, of this capture."

"Honor and glory, thou bitter piece of satire!" rejoined Lancaster, holding up a large golden flagon, to hide his face from the earl. "Unhappy me, were this all the glory I could win. I will wipe away the stain, if stain there be, at Kildrummie, an it be not surrendered ere we reach it."

"The stain is with the base traitor Ross, not with thee or me," answered Hereford; "'tis that I abhor the nature of such expeditions, that I loathe, aye, loathe communication with such as he, and that—if it can be—that worse traitor Buchan, that makes me rejoice I have naught before me now but as fair a field as a siege may be. Would to God, this devastating and most cruel war were over, I do say! on a fair field it may be borne, but not to war with women and children, as has been my fate."

"Aye, by the way, this is not the first fair prize thou hast sent to Edward; the Countess of Buchan was a rare jewel for our coveting monarch—somewhat more than possession, there was room for vengeance there. Bore she her captivity more queenly than the sobbing and weeping Margaret?"

The question was reiterated by most of the knights around the dais, but Hereford evidently shrunk from the inquiry.

"Speak not of it, I charge ye," he said. "There is no room for jesting on grief as hers; majestic and glorious she was, but if the reported tale be true, her every thought, her every feeling was, as I even then imagined, swallowed up in one tearless and stern but all-engrossing anguish."

"The reported tale! meanest thou the fate of her son?" asked one of the knights.

"If it be true!" resumed another; "believest thou, my lord, there is aught of hope to prove it false?"

"More likely to be true than false," added Lancaster; "I can believe any thing of that dark scowling villain Buchan—even the murder of his child."

"I believe it *not*," answered Hereford; "bad as that man is, hard in heart as in temper, he has too much policy to act thus, even if he had no feelings of nature rising to prevent it. No, no; I would wager the ruby brooch in my helmet that boy lives, and his father will make use of him to forward his own interests yet."

"But why then forge this tale?" demanded their host; "how may that serve his purpose?"

"Easily enough, with regard to the vengeance we all know he vowed to wreak on his unhappy wife. What deeper misery could he inflict upon her than the belief her boy was murdered? and as for its effect on Edward, trust a Comyn to make his own way clear."

"But what do with the boy meanwhile?"

"Keep him under lock and key; chained up, may be, as a dog in a kennel, till he has broken his high spirit, and moulds him to the tool he wills," answered Hereford, "or at least till his mother is out of his path."

"Ha! thinkest thou the king will demand such sweeping vengeance? He surely will not sentence a woman to death."

"Had I thought so, had I only dreamed so," replied Hereford, with almost startling sternness, "as there is a God above us, I would have risked the charge of treason and refused to give her up! But no, my lords, no; changed as Edward is, he would not, he dared not use his power thus. I meant but imprisonment, when I said out of the boy's path—more he will not do; but even such I love not. Bold as it was to crown the rebel Bruce, the deed sprung from a noble heart, and noble deeds should meet with noble judgment."

A bugle sounded twice or thrice sharply without, and occasioning some bustle at the lower part of the hall, interrupted for a brief space the converse of the lords. A few minutes after, the seneschal, attended by two or three higher servants, returned, marshalling in due form two young men in the garb of esquires, followed by some fifteen or twenty men-at-arms.

"Ha! Fitz-Ernest and Hugo; well met, and ye bring us good tidings from Kildrummie," exclaimed both the English earls at once, as cap in hand the esquires slowly walked up the hall, and did obeisance to their masters.

"Yet your steps are somewhat laggard, as they bring us news of victory. By my troth, were it not utterly impossible, I could deem ye had been worsted in the strife," continued the impatient Lancaster, while the cooler and more sagacious Hereford scanned the countenances of the esquires in silence. "Yet and ye come not to tell of victory, why have ye come at all?"

"To beseech your lordship's speedy return, to the camp," replied Fitz-Ernest, after a moment's hesitation, his cheek still flushed from his master's words. "There is division of purpose and action in the camp, and an ye not return and head the attack your noble selves, I fear me there is little hope of victory."

"Peace, fool! is there such skill and wisdom needed? Division in purpose and action! Quarrelling, methinks, had better be turned against the enemy than against yourselves. Hugo, do thou speak; in plain terms, wherefore come ye?"

"In plain terms, then, good my lord, as yet we have had the worst of it," answered the esquire, bluntly. "The Scotch fight like very devils, attacking us instead of waiting for our attack, penetrating into the very centre of our camp, one knows not how or whence, bearing off prisoners and booty in our very teeth."

"Prisoners—booty—worsted! Thou durst not tell me so!" exclaimed Lancaster, furiously, as he started up and half drew his sword.

"Peace, peace, I pray thee, good friend, peace," continued Hereford, laying his hand on Lancaster's shoulder, with a force which compelled him to resume his seat. "Let us at least hear and understand their mission. Speak out, Hugo, and briefly—what has befallen?"

In a few straightforward words his esquire gave all the information which was needed, interrupted only now and then by a brief interrogation from Hereford, and some impatient starts and muttering from his colleague. The success of the Scots, described in a former page, had continued, despite the action of the mangonels and other engines which the massive walls appeared to hold in defiance. So watchful and skilful were the besieged, that the greatest havoc had been made amongst the men employed in working the engines, and not yet had even the palisades and barbican been successfully stormed.

"Have they tried any weaker point?" Hereford asked, and the answer was, that it was on this very matter division had spread amongst the knights, some insisting on carrying the barbican as the most important point, and others advising and declaring their only hope of success lay in a divided attack on two of the weaker sides at once.

"The fools, the sorry fools!" burst again from Lancaster. "They deserve to be worsted for their inordinate pride and folly; all wanted to lead, and none would follow. Give you good e'en, my lord," he added, turning hastily to his host; "I'll to the courtyard and muster forth my men. Fitz-Ernest, thou shalt speak on as we go," and drawing his furred mantle around him, he strode rapidly yet haughtily from the hall. Hereford only waited to learn all from Hugo, to hold a brief consultation with some of his attendant knights, and he too, despite the entreaties of his host to

tarry with him at least till morning, left the banquet to don his armor.

"Silence and speed carry all before them, my good lord," he said, courteously. "In such a case, though I fear no eventual evil, they must not be neglected. I would change the mode of attack on these Scotch, ere they are even aware their foes are reinforced."

"Eventual evil, of a truth, there need not be, my lord," interposed his esquire, "even should no force of arms prevail. I have heard there are some within the walls who need but a golden bribe to do the work for us."

"Peace!" said the nobleman, sternly. "I loathe the very word betray—spoken or intended. Shame, shame on thee to speak it, and yet more shame to imagine it needed! Art thou of Norman birth, and deemest a handful of Scotch like these will bid us raise the siege and tamely depart?—yet better so than gained by treachery."

Hugo and the Scottish baron alike shrunk back from the reproving look of Hereford, and both silently followed him to the courtyard. Already it was a scene of bustling animation: trumpets were sounding and drums rolling; torches flashing through the darkness on the mailed coats of the knights and on gleaming weapons; and the heavy tramp of near two hundred horse, hastily accoutred and led from the stable, mingled with the hoarse winds of winter, howling tempestuously around. The reserve which Hereford had retained to guard the prisoners so treacherously delivered over to him, was composed of the noblest amidst his army, almost all mounted chevaliers; and, therefore, though he might not add much actual force to the besiegers, the military skill and experience which that little troop included argued ill for the besieged. Some of the heaviest engines he had kept back also, particularly a tower some four or five stories high, so constructed that it could be rolled to the walls, and its inmates ascend unscathed by the weapons of their defenders. Not imagining it would be needed, he had not sent it on with the main body, but now he commanded twelve of the strongest horses to be yoked to it, and on went the unwieldy engine, rumbling and staggering on its ill-formed wheels. Lancaster, whose impatience no advice could ever control, dashed on with the first troop, leaving his cooler comrade to look to the yoking of the engines and the marshalling the men, and with his own immediate attendants bringing up the rear, a task for which Hereford's self-command as well fitted him as his daring gallantry to head the foremost charge.

"Ye will have a rough journey, my good lord; yet an ye deem it best, farewell and heaven speed ye," was the parting greeting of the baron, as he stood beside the impatient charger of the earl.

"The rougher the better," was that nobleman's reply; "the noise of the wind will conceal our movements better than a calmer night. Farewell, and thanks—a soldier's thanks, my lord, poor yet honest—for thy right noble welcome."

He bent his head courteously, set spurs to his steed, and dashed over the drawbridge as the last of his men disappeared through the outer gate. The Scottish nobleman looked after him with many mingled feelings.

"As noble a warrior as ever breathed," he muttered; "it were honor to serve under him, yet an he wants me not I will not join him. I love not the Bruce, yet uncalled, unneeded, I will not raise sword against my countrymen," and with slow, and equal steps he returned to the hall.

Hereford was correct in his surmises. The pitchy darkness of a winter night would scarcely have sufficed to hide the movements attendant on the sudden arrival of a large body of men in the English camp, had not the hoarse artillery of the wind, moaning, sweeping, and then rushing o'er the hills with a crashing sound like thunder, completely smothered every other sound, and if at intervals of quiet unusual sounds did attract the ears of those eager watchers on the Scottish walls, the utter impossibility of kindling torches or fires in either camp frustrated every effort of discovery. Hoarser and wilder grew the whirlwind with the waning hours, till even the steel-clad men-at-arms stationed on the walls moved before it, and were compelled to crouch down till its violence had passed. Favored by the elements, Hereford proceeded to execute his measures, heedless alike of the joyful surprise his sudden appearance occasioned, and of the tale of division and discord which Hugo and Fitz-Ernest had reported as destroying the unity of the camp. Briefly and sternly refusing audience to each who pressed forward, eager to exculpate himself at the expense of his companions, he desired his esquire to proclaim a general amnesty to all who allowed themselves to have been in error, and would henceforth implicitly obey his commands; he returned to his pavilion, with the Earl of Lancaster, summoning around him the veterans of the army, and a brief consultation was held. They informed him the greatest mischief had been occasioned by the injuries done to the engines, which had been brought to play against the walls. Stones of immense weight had been hurled upon them, materially injuring their works, and attended with such fatal slaughter to the men who worked them, that even the bravest shrunk back appalled; that the advice of the senior officers had been to hold back until these engines were repaired, merely keeping strict guard against unexpected sallies on the part of the Scotch, as this would not only give them time to recruit their strength, but in all probability throw the besieged off their guard. Not above half of the army, however, agreed with this counsel; the younger and less wary spurned it as cowardice and folly, and rushing on to the attack, ill-formed and ill-conducted, had ever been beaten back with immense loss; defeat, however, instead of teaching prudence, lashed them into greater fury, which sometimes turned upon each other.

Hereford listened calmly, yet with deep attention, now and then indeed turning his expressive eyes towards his colleague, as if entreating him to observe that the mischief which had befallen

them proceeded greatly from impetuosity and imprudence, and beseeching his forbearance. Nor was Lancaster regardless of this silent appeal; conscious of his equality with Hereford in bravery and nobleness, he disdained not to acknowledge his inferiority to him in that greater coolness, which in a siege is so much needed, and grasping his hand with generous fervor, bade him speak, advise, command, and he would find no one in the camp more ready to be counselled and to obey than Lancaster. To tear down those rebel colors and raise those of England in their stead, was all he asked.

"And fear not that task shall be other than thine own, my gallant friend," was Hereford's instant reply, his features kindling at Lancaster's words more than they had done yet; and then again quickly resuming his calm unimpassioned exterior, he inquired if the mangonels and other engines were again fit for use. There were several that could instantly be put in action was the reply. Had the numbers of fighting men within the castle been ascertained? They had, a veteran answered, from a prisoner, who had appeared so willing to give information, that his captors imagined there were very many malcontents within the walls. Of stalwart fighting men there were scarcely more than three hundred; others there were, of whose number was the prisoner, who fought because their companions' swords would else have been at their throats, but that they would be glad enough to be made prisoners, to escape the horrors of the siege.

"I am sorry for it," was the earl's sole rejoinder, "there will be less glory in the conquest."

"And this Sir Nigel Bruce, whoe'er he be, hath to combat against fearful odds," remarked Lancaster; "and these Scotch-men, by my troth, seem touched by the hoof of the arch-deceiver—treachery from the earl to the peasant. Hast noticed how this scion of the Bruce bears himself?—right gallantly, 'tis said."

"As a very devil, my lord," impetuously answered a knight; "in the walls or out of them, there's no standing before him. He sweeps down his foes, line after line, as cards blown before the wind; he is at the head of every charge, the last of each retreat. But yesternight there were those who marked him covering the retreat of his men absolutely alone; his sword struck down two at every sweep, till his passage was cleared; he darted on—the drawbridge trembled in its grooves—for he had given the command to raise it, despite his own danger—his charger, mad as himself, sprang forward, and like a lightning flash, both disappeared within the portcullis as the bridge uprose."

"Gallantly done!" exclaimed Lancaster, who had listened to this recital almost breathlessly. "By St. George, a foe worthy to meet and struggle with! But who is he—what is he?"

"Knowest thou not?" said Hereford, surprised; "the brother, youngest brother I have heard, of this same daring Earl of Carrick who has so troubled our sovereign."

"Nigel, the brother of Robert! What, the scribe, the poet, the dreamer of Edward's court? a poor youth, with naught but his beauty to recommend him. By all good angels, this metamorphosis soundeth strangely! art sure 'tis the same, the very same?"

"I have heard so," was Hereford's quiet reply, and continuing his more important queries with the veterans around, while Lancaster, his gayer spirit roused by this account of Nigel, demanded every minute particular concerning him, that he might seek him hand to hand.

"Steel armor inlaid with silver—blue scarf across his breast, embroidered with his cognizance in gold—blue plume, which no English sword hath ever soiled—humph! that's reserved for me—charger white as the snow on the ground—sits his steed as man and horse were one. Well, gloriously well, there will be no lack of glory here!" he said, joyously, as one by one he slowly enumerated the symbols by which he might recognize his foe. So expeditiously had Hereford conducted his well-arranged plans, that when his council was over, it still wanted two hours to dawn, and these Hereford commanded the men who had accompanied him to pass in repose.

But he himself partook not of this repose, passing the remainder of the darkness in carefully reviewing the forces which were still fresh and prepared for the onset, in examining the nature of the engines, and finally, still aided by the noise of the howling winds, marshalled them in formidable array in very front of the barbican, the heavy mist thrown onward by the blasts effectually concealing their near approach. To Lancaster the command of this party was intrusted; Hereford reserving to himself the desirable yet delicate task of surveying the ground, confident that the attack on the barbican would demand the whole strength and attention of the besieged, and thus effectually cover his movements.

His plan succeeded. A fearful shout, seconded by a tremendous discharge of huge stones, some of which rattled against the massive walls in vain, others flying across the moat and crushing some of the men on the inner wall, were the first terrific sounds which unexpectedly greeted the aroused attention of the Scotch. The armor of their foes flashing through the mist, the furious charge of the knights up to the very gates of the barbican, seemingly in sterner and more compact array than of late had been their wont, the immense body which followed them, appearing in that dim light more numerous than reality, struck a momentary chill on the Scottish garrison; but the unwonted emotion was speedily dissipated by the instant and unhesitating sally of Sir Christopher Seaton and his brave companions. The impetuosity of their charge, the suddenness of their appearance, despite their great disparity of numbers, caused the English a moment to bear back, and kept them in full play until Nigel and his men-at-arms, rushing over the lowered drawbridge, joined in the strife. A brief, very brief interval of fighting convinced both the Scottish leaders that a master-spirit now headed their foes; that they were struggling at infinitely greater odds than before; that unity of purpose, greater sagacity, and military skill were

now at work against them, they scarce knew wherefore, for they recognized the same war-cry, the same banners; there were the same gallant show of knights, for in the desperate *mêlée* it was scarcely possible to distinguish the noble form of Lancaster from his fellows, although marking the azure plume, which even then waved high above all others, though round it the work of death ever waxed hottest; the efforts of the English earl were all bent to meet its gallant wearer hand to hand, but the press of war still held them apart, though both seemed in every part of the field. It was a desperate struggle man to man; the clash of swords became one strange continuous mass of sound, instead of the fearful distinctness which had marked their work before. Shouts and cries mingled fearfully with the sharper clang, the heavy fall of man and horse, the creaking of the engines, the wild shrieks of the victims within the walls mangled by the stones, or from the survivors who witnessed their fall—all formed a din as terrific to hear, as dreadful to behold. With even more than their wonted bravery the Scotch fought, but with less success. The charge of the English was no longer the impetuous fury of a few hot-headed young men, more eager to *despite* their cooler advisers, than gain any permanent good for themselves. Now, as one man fell another stepped forward in his place, and though the slaughter might have been equal, nay, greater on the side of the besiegers than the besieged, by one it was scarcely felt, by the other the death of each man was even as the loss of a host. Still, still they struggled on, the English obtaining possession of the palisades, though the immense strength of the barbican itself, defended as it was by the strenuous efforts of the Scotch, still resisted all attack: bravely, nobly, the besieged retreated within their walls, pellmell their foes dashed after them, and terrific was the combat on the drawbridge, which groaned and creaked beneath the heavy tramp of man and horse. Many, wrestling in the fierceness of mortal strife, fell together in the moat, and encumbered with heavy armor, sunk in each other's arms, in the grim clasp of death.

Then it was Lancaster met hand to hand the gallant foe he sought, covering the retreat of his men, who were bearing Sir Christopher Seaton, desperately wounded, to the castle. Sir Nigel stood well-nigh alone on the bridge; his bright armor, his foaming charger bore evident marks of the fray, but still he rode his steed firmly and unbent, his plume yet waved untouched by the foeman's sword. Nearer and nearer pressed forward the English earl, signing to his men to secure without wounding his gallant foe; round him they closely gathered, but Nigel evinced no sign either of trepidation or anger, fearlessly, gallantly, he returned the earl's impetuous charge, backing his steed slowly as he did so, and keeping his full front to his foe. On, on pressed Lancaster, even to the postern; a bound, a shout, and scarcely was he aware that his sword had ceased to cross with Nigel's, before he was startled by the heavy fall of the portcullis, effectually dividing them, and utterly frustrating further pursuit. A cry of rage, of disappointment broke from the English, as they were compelled to turn and rejoin their friends.

The strife still continued within and without the barbican, and ended without much advantage on either side. The palisades and outward barriers had indeed fallen into the hands of the English, which was the first serious loss yet sustained by the besieged; from the barbican they had gallantly and successfully driven their foe, but that trifling success was so counterbalanced by the serious loss of life amid the garrison which it included, that both Nigel and Sir Christopher felt the next attack must deliver it into the hands of the besiegers. Their loss of men was in reality scarcely a third of the number which had fallen among the English, yet to them that loss was of infinitely more consequence than to the foe. Bitter and painful emotions filled the noble spirit of Nigel, as he gazed on the diminished number of his men, and met the ill-suppressed groans and lamentations of those who had, at the first alarm of the English, sought shelter and protection in the castle; their ill-suppressed entreaties that he would struggle no longer against such odds grated harshly and ominously on his ear; but sternly he turned from them to the men-at-arms, and in their steadfast bravery and joyous acclamations found some degree of hope.

Yet ere the day closed the besieged felt too truly their dreams of triumph, of final success, little short of a miracle would realize. Their fancy that some new and mightier spirit of generalship was at work within the English camp was confirmed. Two distinct bodies were observed at work on the eastern and southern sides of the mount, the one evidently employed in turning aside the bed of the river, which on that side flowed instead of the moat beneath the wall, the other in endeavoring to fill up the moat by a causeway, so as to admit of an easy access to the outer wall. The progress they had made in their work the first day, while the attention of the Scotch had been confined to the attack on the barbican, was all-sufficient evidence of their intent; and with bitter sorrow Sir Nigel and his brother-in-law felt that their only means of any efficient defence lay in resigning the long-contested barbican to the besiegers. An important point it certainly was, but still to retain it the walls overlooking the more silent efforts of the English must be left comparatively unguarded, and they might obtain an almost uninterrupted and scarce-contested passage within the walls, while the whole strength and attention of the besieged were employed, as had already been the case, on a point that they had scarce a hope eventually to retain. With deep and bitter sorrow the alternative was proposed and carried in a hurried council of war, and so well acted upon, that, despite the extreme watchfulness of the English, men, treasure, arms, and artillery, all that the strong towers contained, were conveyed at dead of night over the drawbridge into the castle, and the following morning, Lancaster, in utter astonishment, took possession of the deserted fort.

Perhaps to both parties this resolution was alike a disappointment and restraint. The English felt there was no glory in their prize, they had not obtained possession through their own prowess and skill; and now that the siege had become so much closer, and this point of communication was entirely stopped, the hand-to-hand combat, the glorious *mêlée*, the press of war, which to both parties had been an excitement, and little more than warlike recreation, had of course

entirely ceased, but Hereford heeded not the disappointment of his men; his plans were progressing as he had desired, even though his workmen were greatly harassed by the continued discharge of arrows and immense stones from the walls.

The desertion of the barbican was an all-convincing proof of the very small number of the garrison; and though the immense thickness and solidity of the walls bespoke time, patience, and control, the English earl never wavered from his purpose, and by his firmness, his personal gallantry, his readily-bestowed approbation on all who demanded it, he contrived to keep his more impatient followers steadily to their task; while Nigel, to prevent the spirits of his men from sinking, would frequently lead them forth at night, and by a sudden attack annoy and often cut off many of the men stationed within the barbican. The drawbridge was the precarious ground of many a midnight strife, till the daring gallantry of Nigel Bruce became the theme of every tongue; a gallantry equalled only by the consummate skill which he displayed, in retreating within his entrenchments frequently without the loss of a single man either as killed or wounded. Often would Sir Christopher Seaton, whose wounds still bound him a most unwilling prisoner to his couch, entreat him to avoid such rash exposures of his life, but Nigel only answered him with a smile and an assurance he bore a charmed life, which the sword of the foe could not touch.

The siege had now lasted six weeks, and the position of both parties continued much as we have seen, save that the bed of the river had now begun to appear, promising a free passage to the English on the eastern side, and on the south a broad causeway had stretched itself over the moat, on which the towers for defending the ascent of the walls, mangonels and other engines, were already safely bestowed, and all promised fair to the besiegers, whose numerous forces scarcely appeared to have suffered any diminution, although in reality some hundreds had fallen; while on the side of the besieged, although the walls were still most gallantly manned, and the first efforts of the English to scale the walls had been rendered ineffectual by huge stones hurled down upon them, still a look of greater care was observable on the brows of both officers and men; and provisions had now begun to be doled out by weight and measure, for though the granaries still possessed stores sufficient for some weeks longer, the apparent determination of the English to permit no relaxation in their close attack, demanded increase of caution on the part of the besieged.

About this time an event occurred, which, though comparatively trifling in itself, when the lives of so many were concerned, was fraught in effect with fatal consequences to all the inmates of Kildrummie. The conversation of the next chapter, however, will better explain it, and to it we refer our readers.

CHAPTER XIX

In a circular apartment of the lower floor in Kildrummie keep, its stone floor but ill covered with rushes, and the walls hung with the darkest and rudest arras, Sir Christopher Seaton reclined on a rough couch, in earnest converse with his brother-in-law, Nigel. Lady Seaton was also within the chamber, at some little distance from the knights, engaged in preparing lint and healing ointments, with the aid of an attendant, for the wounded, and ready at the first call to rise and attend them, as she had done unremittingly during the continuance of the siege. The countenances of both warriors were slightly changed from the last time we beheld them. The severity of his wounds had shed a cast almost of age on the noble features of Seaton, but care and deep regret had mingled with that pallor; and perhaps on the face of Nigel, which three short weeks before had beamed forth such radiant hope, the change was more painful. He had escaped with but slight flesh wounds, but disappointment and anxiety were now vividly impressed on his features; the smooth brow would unconsciously wrinkle in deep and unexpressed thought; the lip, to which love, joy, and hope alone had once seemed natural, now often compressed, and his eye flashed, till his whole countenance seemed stern, not with the sternness of a tyrannical, changed and chafing mood—no, 'twas the sternness most fearful to behold in youth, of thought, deep, bitter, whelming thought; and sterner even than it had been yet was the expression on his features as he spoke this day with Seaton.

"He must die," were the words which broke a long and anxious pause, and fell in deep yet emphatic tones from the lips of Seaton; "yes, die! Perchance the example may best arrest the spreading contagion of treachery around us."

"I know not, I fear not; yet as thou sayest he must die," replied Nigel, speaking as in deep thought; "would that the noble enemy, who thus scorned to benefit by the offered treason, had done on him the work of death himself. I love not the necessity nor the deed."

"Yet it must be, Nigel. Is there aught else save death, the death of a traitor, which can sufficiently chastise a crime like this? Well was it the knave craved speech of Hereford himself. I marvel whether the majesty of England had resisted a like temptation."

"Seaton, he would not," answered the young man. "I knew him, aye, studied him in his own court, and though I doubt not there was a time when chivalry was strongest in the breast of Edward, it was before ambition's fatal poison had corroded his heart. Now he would deem all things honorable in the art of war, aye, even the delivery of a castle through the treachery of a knave."

"And he hath more in yon host to think with him than with the noble Hereford," resumed Sir Christopher; "yet this is but idle parley, and concerneth but little our present task. In what temper do our men receive the tidings of this foul treason?"

"Our own brave fellows call aloud for vengeance on the traitor; nay, had I not rescued him from their hands, they would have torn him limb from limb in their rage. But there are others, Seaton—alas! the more numerous body now—and they speak not, but with moody brows and gloomy mutterings prowl up and down the courts."

"Aye, the coward hearts," answered Seaton, "their good wishes went with him, and but low-breathed curses follow our efforts for their freedom. Yes, it must be, if it be but as a warning unto others. See to it, Nigel; an hour before the set of sun he dies."

A brief pause followed his words, whose low sternness of tone betrayed far more than the syllables themselves. Both warriors remained a while plunged in moody thought, which Seaton was the first to break.

"And how went the last attack and defence?" he asked; "they told me, bravely."

"Aye, so bravely, that could we but reinforce our fighting men, aided as we are by impenetrable walls, we might dream still of conquest; they have gained little as yet, despite their nearer approach. Hand to hand we have indeed struggled on the walls, and hurled back our foremost foes in their own intrenchments. Our huge fragments of rocks have dealt destruction on one of their towers, crushing all who manned it beneath the ruins."

"And I lie here when such brave work is going on beside me, even as a bedridden monk or coward layman, when my whole soul is in the fight," said the knight, bitterly, and half springing from his couch. "When will these open wounds—to the foul fiend with them and those who gave them!—when will they let me mount and ride again as best befits a warrior? Better slain at once than lie here a burden, not a help—taking from those whose gallant efforts need it more the food we may not have for long. I will not thus be chained; I'll to the action, be my life the forfeit!"

He sprung up, and for a moment stood upon his feet, but with a low groan of pain instantly fell back, the dew of weakness gathering on his brow. Lady Seaton was at his side on the instant to bathe his temples and his hands, yet without one reproachful word, for she knew the anguish it was to his brave heart to lie thus disabled, when every loyal hand was needed for his country.

"Nigel, I would that I might join thee. Remember, 'tis no mean game we play; we hold not out as marauding chieftains against a lawful king; we struggle not in defence of petty rights, of doubtful privileges. 'Tis for Scotland, for King Robert still we strive. Did this castle hold out, aye, compel the foe to raise the siege, much, much would be done for Scotland. Others would do as we have done; many, whose strongholds rest in English hands, would rise and expel the foe. Had we but reinforcements of men and stores, all might still be well."

"Aye," answered Nigel, bitterly, "but with all Scotland crushed 'neath English chains, her king and his bold patriots fugitives and exiles, ourselves the only Scottish force in arms, the only Scottish castle which resists the tyrant, how may this be, whence may come increase of force, of store? Seaton Seaton, thine are bright dreams—would that they were real."

"Wouldst thou then give up at once, and strive no more? It cannot be."

"Never!" answered his companion, passionately. "Ere English feet shall cross these courts and English colors wave above these towers, the blood of the defenders must flow beneath their steps. They gain not a yard of earth save at the bright sword's point; not a rood of grass unstained by Scottish blood. Give up! not till my arm can wield no sword, my voice no more shout 'Forward for the Bruce!'"

"Then we will hope on, dream on, Nigel, and despair not," replied Seaton, in the same earnest tone. "We know not yet what may be, and, improbable as it seems now, succors may yet arrive. How long doth last the truce?"

"For eighteen hours, two of which have passed."

"Didst thou demand it?"

"No," replied Nigel. "It was proffered by the earl, as needed for a strict examination of the traitor Evan Roy, and accepted in the spirit with which it was offered."

"Thou didst well; and the foul traitor—where hast thou lodged him?"

"In the western turret, strongly guarded. I would not seek thy counsel until I had examined and knew the truth."

"And thine own judgment?"

"Was as thine. It is an ill necessity, yet it must be."

"Didst pronounce his sentence?"

Nigel answered in the affirmative.

"And how was it received?"

"In the same sullen silence on the part of the criminal as he had borne during his examination. Methought a low murmur of discontent escaped from some within the hall, but it was drowned in the shout of approbation from the men-at-arms, and the execrations they lavished on the traitor as they bore him away, so I heeded it not."

"But thou wilt heed it," said a sweet voice beside him, and Agnes, who had just entered the chamber, laid her hand on his arm and looked beseechingly in his face. "Dearest Nigel, I come a pleader."

"And for whom, my beloved?" he asked, his countenance changing into its own soft beautiful expression as he gazed on her, "What can mine Agnes ask that Nigel may not grant?"

"Nay, I am no pleader for myself," she said; "I come on the part of a wretched wife and aged mother, beseeching the gift of life."

"And for a traitor, Agnes?"

"I think of him but as a husband and son, dearest Nigel," she said, more timidly, for his voice was stern. "They tell me he is condemned to death, and his wretched wife and mother besought my influence with thee; and indeed it needed little entreaty, for when death is so busy around us, when in this fearful war we see the best and bravest of our friends fall victims every day, oh, I would beseech you to spare life when it may be. Dearest, dearest Nigel, have mercy on this wretched man; traitor as he is, oh, do not take his life—do not let thy lips sentence him to death. Wilt thou not be merciful?"

"If the death of one man will preserve the lives of many, how may that one be spared?" said Sir Nigel, folding the sweet pleader closer to him, though his features spoke no relaxation of his purpose. "Sweet Agnes, do not ask this, give me not the bitter pain of refusing aught to thee. Thou knowest not all the mischief and misery which pardon to a traitor such as this will do; thou listenest only to thy kind heart and the sad pleadings of those who love this man. Now listen to me, beloved, and judge thyself. Did I believe a pardon would bring back the traitor to a sense of duty, to a consciousness of his great crime—did I believe giving life to him would deter others from the same guilt, I should scarce wait even for thy sweet pleading to give him both liberty and life; but I know him better than thou, mine Agnes. He is one of those dark, discontented, rebellious spirits, that never rest in stirring up others to be like them; who would employ even the life I gave him to my own destruction, and that of the brave and faithful soldiers with me."

"But send him hence, dearest Nigel," still entreated Agnes. "Give him life, but send him from the castle; will not this remove the danger of his influence with others?"

"And give him field and scope to betray us yet again, sweet one. It were indeed scorning the honorable counsel of Hereford to act thus; for trust me, Agnes, there are not many amid our foes would resist temptation as he hath done."

"Yet would not keeping him close prisoner serve thee as well as death, Nigel? Bethink thee, would it not spare the ill of taking life?"

"Dearest, no," he answered. "There are many, alas! too many within these walls who need an example of terror to keep them to their duty. They will see that treachery avails not with the noble Hereford, and that, discovered by me, it hath no escape from death. If this man be, as I imagine, in league with other contentious spirits—for he could scarce hope to betray the castle into the hands of the English without some aid within—his fate may strike such terror into other traitor hearts that their designs will be abandoned. Trust me, dearest, I do not do this deed of justice without deep regret; I grieve for the necessity even as the deed, and yet it must be; and bitter as it is to refuse thee aught, indeed I cannot grant thy boon."

"Yet hear me once more, Nigel. Simple and ignorant as I am, I cannot answer such arguments as thine; yet may it not be that this deed of justice, even while it strikes terror, may also excite the desire for revenge, and situated as we are were it not better to avoid all such bitterness, such heart-burnings amongst the people?"

"We must brave it, dearest," answered Nigel, firmly, "The direct line of justice and of duty may not be turned aside for such fears as these."

"Nor do I think they have foundation," continued Sir Christopher Seaton. "Thou hast pleaded well and kindly, gentle maiden, yet gladly as we would do aught to pleasure thee, this that thou hast asked, alas! must not be. The crime itself demands punishment, and even could we pardon that, duty to our country, our king, ourselves, calls loudly for his death, lest his foul treachery should spread."

The eyes of the maiden filled with tears.

"Then my last hope is over," she said, sadly. "I looked to thy influence, Sir Christopher, to plead for me, even if mine own supplications should fail; and thou judgest even as Nigel, not as my heart could wish."

"We judge as men and soldiers, gentle maiden; as men who, charged with a most solemn responsibility, dare listen to naught save the voice of justice, however loudly mercy pleads."

"And didst thou think, mine Agnes, if thy pleading was of no avail, the entreaty of others could move me?" whispered Nigel, in a voice which, though tender, was reproachful. "Dearest and best,

oh, thou knowest not the pang it is to refuse thee even this, and to feel my words have filled those eyes with tears. Say thou wilt not deem me cruel, abiding by justice when there is room for mercy?"

"I know thee better than to judge thee thus," answered Agnes, tearfully; "the voice of duty must have spoken loudly to urge thee to this decision, and I may not dispute it; yet would that death could be averted. There was madness in that woman's eyes," and she shuddered as she spoke.

"Of whom speakest thou, love?" Nigel asked, and Seaton looked the question.

"Of his wife," she replied. "She came to me distracted, and used such dreadful words, menaces and threats they seemed; but his mother, more composed, assured me they meant nothing, they were but the ravings of distress, and yet I fear to look on her again without his pardon."

"And thou shalt not, my beloved; these are not scenes and words for such as thee. Rest here with Christine and good Sir Christopher; to tend and cheer a wounded knight is a fitter task for thee, sweet one, than thus to plead a traitor's cause."

Pressing his lips upon her brow as he spoke, he placed her gently on a settle by Sir Christopher; then crossing the apartment, he paused a moment to whisper to Lady Seaton.

"Look to her, my dear sister; she has been terrified, though she would conceal it. Let her not leave thee till this fatal duty is accomplished."

Lady Seaton assured him of her compliance, and he left the apartment.

He had scarcely quitted the postern before he himself encountered Jean Roy, a woman who, even in her mildest moments, evinced very little appearance of sanity, and who now, from her furious and distracting gestures, seemed wrought up to no ordinary pitch of madness. She kept hovering round him, uttering menaces and entreaties in one and the same breath, declaring one moment that her husband was no traitor, and had only done what every true-hearted Scotsman ought to do, if he would save himself and those he loved from destruction; the next, piteously acknowledging his crime, and wildly beseeching mercy. For a while Nigel endeavored, calmly and soothingly, to reason with her, but it was of no avail: louder and fiercer became her curses and imprecations; beseeching heaven to hurl down all its maledictions upon him and the woman he loved, and refuse him mercy when he most needed it. Perceiving her violence becoming more and more outrageous, Nigel placed her in charge of two of his men-at-arms, desiring them to treat her kindly, but not to lose sight of her, and keep her as far as possible from the scene about to be enacted. She was dragged away, struggling furiously, and Nigel felt his heart sink heavier within him. It was not that he wavered in his opinion, that he believed, situated as he was, it was better to spare the traitor's life than excite to a flame the already aroused and angered populace. He thought indeed terror might do much; but whether it was the entreating words of Agnes, or the state of the unhappy Jean, there had come upon him a dim sense of impending ill; an impression that the act of justice about to be performed would bring matters to a crisis, and the ruin of the garrison be consummated, ere he was aware it had begun. The shadow of the future appeared to have enfolded him, but still he wavered not. The hours sped: his preparations were completed, and at the time appointed by Seaton, with as much of awful solemnity as circumstances would admit, the soul of the traitor was launched into eternity. Men, women, and children had gathered round the temporary scaffold; every one within the castle, save the maimed and wounded, thronged to that centre court, and cheers and shouts, and groans and curses, mingled strangely on the air.

Clad in complete steel, but bareheaded, Sir Nigel Bruce had witnessed the act of justice his voice had pronounced, and, after a brief pause, he stood forward on the scaffold, and in a deep, rich voice addressed the multitude ere they separated. Eloquently, forcibly, he spoke of the guilt, the foul guilt of treachery, now when Scotland demanded all men to join together hand and heart as one—now when the foe was at their gates; when, if united, they might yet bid defiance to the tyrant, who, if they were defeated, would hold them slaves. He addressed them as Scottish men and freemen, as soldiers, husbands, and fathers, as children of the brave, who welcomed death with joy, rather than life in slavery and degradation; and when his words elicited a shout of exultation and applause from the greater number, he turned his eye on the group of malcontents, and sternly and terribly bade them beware of a fate similar to that which they had just witnessed; for the gallant Earl of Hereford, he said, would deal with all Scottish traitors as with Evan Roy, and once known as traitors within the castle walls, he need not speak their doom, for they had witnessed it; and then changing his tone, frankly and beseechingly he conjured them to awake from the dull, sluggish sleep of indifference and fear, to put forth their energies as men, as warriors; their country, their king, their families, called on them, and would they not hear? He bade them arise, awake to their duty, and all that had been should never be recalled. He spoke with a brief yet mighty eloquence that seemed to carry conviction with it. Many a stern face and darkened brow relaxed, and there was hope in many a patriot breast as that group dispersed, and all was once more martial bustle on the walls.

"Well and wisely hast thou spoken, my son," said the aged Abbot of Scone, who had attended the criminal's last moments, and now, with Nigel, sought the keep. "Thy words have moved those rebellious spirits, have calmed the rising tempest even as oil flung on the troubled waves; thine eloquence was even as an angel voice 'mid muttering fiends. Yet thou art still sad, still anxious. My son, this should not be."

"It *must* be, father," answered the young man. "I have looked beyond that oily surface and see

naught save darker storms and fiercer tempests; those spirits need somewhat more than a mere voice. Father, reproach me not as mistrusting the gracious heaven in whose keeping lie our earthly fates. I know the battle is not to the strong, 'tis with the united, the faithful, and those men are neither. My words have stirred them for the moment, as a pebble flung 'mid the troubled waters—a few brief instants and all trace is passed, we see naught but the blackened wave. But speak not of these things; my trust is higher than earth, and let man work his will."

Another week passed, and the fierce struggle continued, alternating success, one day with the besiegers, the next with the besieged. The scene of action was now principally on the walls—a fearful field, for there was no retreat—and often the combatants, entwined in a deadly struggle, fell together into the moat. Still there were no signs of wavering on either side, still did the massive walls give no sign of yielding to the tremendous and continued discharge of heavy stones, that against battlements less strongly constructed must long ere this have dealt destruction and inevitable mischief to the besieged. One tower, commanding the causeway across the moat and its adjoining platform on the wall, had indeed been taken by the English, and was to them a decided advantage, but still their further progress even to the next tower was lingering and dubious, and it appeared evident to both parties that, from the utter impossibility of the Scotch obtaining supplies of provision and men, success must finally attend the English; they would succeed more by the effects of famine than by their swords.

It was, as we have said, seven days after the execution of the traitor Roy. A truce for twelve hours had been concluded with the English, at the request of Sir Nigel Bruce, and safe conduct granted by the Earl of Hereford to those men, women, and children of the adjoining villages who chose even at this hour to leave the castle, but few, a very few took advantage of this permission, and these were mostly the widows and children of those who had fallen in the siege; a fact which caused some surprise, as the officers and men-at-arms imagined it would have been eagerly seized upon by all those contentious spirits who had appeared so desirous of a league with England. A quiet smile slightly curled the lips of Nigel as this information was reported to him—a smile as of a mind prepared for and not surprised at what he heard; but when left alone, the smile was gone, he folded his arms on his breast, his head was slightly bent forward, but had there been any present to have remarked him, they would have seen his features move and work with the intensity of internal emotion. Some mighty struggle he was enduring; something there was passing at his very heart, for when recalled from that trance by the heavy bell of the adjoining church chiming the hour of five, and he looked up, there were large drops of moisture on his brow, and his beautiful eye seemed for the moment strained and blood-shot. He paced the chamber slowly and pensively till there was no outward mark of agitation, and then he sought for Agnes.

She was alone in an upper chamber of the keep, looking out from the narrow casement on a scene of hill and vale, and water, which, though still wintry from the total absence of leaf and flower, was yet calm and beautiful in the declining sun, and undisturbed by the fearful scenes and sounds which met the glance and ear on every other side, seemed even as a paradise of peace. It had been one of those mild, soft days of February, still more rare in Scotland than in England, and on the heart and sinking frame of Agnes its influence had fallen, till, almost unconsciously, she wept. The step of Nigel caused her hastily to dash these tears aside, and as he stood by her and silently folded his arm around her, she looked up in his face with a smile. He sought to return it, but the sight of such emotion, trifling as it was, caused his heart to sink with indescribable fear; his lip quivered, as utterly to prevent the words he sought to speak, and as he clasped her to his bosom and bent his head on hers, a low yet instantly suppressed moan burst from him.

"Nigel, dearest Nigel, what has chanced? Oh, speak to me!" she exclaimed, clasping his hand in both hers, and gazing wildly in his face. "Thou art wounded or ill, or wearied unto death. Oh, let me undo this heavy armor, dearest; seek but a brief interval of rest. Speak to me, I know thou art not well."

"It is but folly, my beloved, a momentary pang that weakness caused. Indeed, thy fears are causeless; I am well, quite well," he answered, struggling with himself, and subduing with an effort his emotion. "Mine own Agnes, thou wilt not doubt me; look not upon me so tearfully, 'tis passed, 'tis over now."

"And thou wilt not tell me that which caused it, Nigel? Hast thou aught of suffering which thou fearest to tell thine Agnes? Oh! do not fear it; weak, childlike as I am, my soul will find strength for it."

"And thou shalt know all, all in a brief while," he said, her sweet pleading voice rendering the task of calmness more difficult. "Yet tell me first thy thoughts, my love. Methought thy gaze was on yon peaceful landscape as I entered, and yet thine eyes were dimmed with tears."

"And yet I know not wherefore," she replied, "save the yearnings for peace were stronger, deeper than they should be, and I pictured a cot where love might dwell in yon calm valley, and wished that this fierce strife was o'er."

"'Tis in truth no scene for thee, mine own. I know, I feel thou pinest for freedom, for the fresh, pure, stainless air of the mountain, the valley's holy calm; thine ear is sick with the fell sounds that burst upon it; thine eye must turn in loathing from this fierce strife. Agnes, mine own Agnes, is it not so? would it not be happiness, aye, heaven's own bliss, to seek some peaceful home far, far away from this?"

He spoke hurriedly and more passionately than was his wont, but Agnes only answered—

"With thee, Nigel, it were bliss indeed."

"With me," he said; "and couldst thou not be happy were I not at thy side? Listen to me, beloved," and his voice became as solemnly earnest as it had previously been hurried. "I sought thee, armed I thought with fortitude sufficient for the task; sought thee, to beseech, implore thee to seek safety and peace for a brief while apart from me, till these fearful scenes are passed. Start not, and oh, do not look upon me thus. I know all that strength of nerve, of soul, which bids thee care not for the dangers round thee. I know that where I am thy loving spirit feels no fear; but oh, Agnes, for my sake, if not for thine own, consent to fly ere it be too late; consent to seek safety far from this fatal tower. Let me not feel that on thee, on thee, far dearer than my life, destruction, and misery, and suffering in a thousand fearful shapes may fall. Let me but feel thee safe, far from this terrible scene, and then, come what will, it can have no pang."

"And thee," murmured the startled girl, on whose ear the words of Nigel had fallen as with scarce half their meaning, "thee, wouldst thou bid me leave thee, to strive on, suffer on, and oh, merciful heaven! perchance fall *alone*? Nigel, Nigel, how may this be? are we not one, only one, and how may I dwell in safety without thee—how mayest thou suffer without me?"

"Dearest and best!" he answered, passionately, "oh, that we were indeed one; that the voice of heaven had bound us one, long, long ere this! and yet—no, no, 'tis better thus," and again he struggled with emotion, and spoke calmly. "Agnes, beloved, precious as thou art in these hours of anxiety, dear, dearer than ever, in thy clinging, changeless love, yet tempt me not selfishly to retain thee by my side, when liberty, and life, and joy await thee beyond these fated walls. Thy path is secured; all that can assist, can accelerate thy flight waits but thy approval. The dress of a minstrel boy is procured, and will completely conceal and guard thee through the English camp. Our faithful friend, the minstrel seer, will be thy guide, and lead thee to a home of peace and safety, until my brother's happier fortune dawns; he will guard and love thee for thine own and for my sake. Speak to me, beloved; thou knowest this good old man, and I so trust him that I have no fear for thee. Oh, do not pause, and ere this truce be over let me, let me feel that thou art safe and free, and may in time be happy."

"In time," she repeated slowly, as if to herself, and then, rousing herself from that stupor of emotion, looked up with a countenance on which a sudden glow had spread. "And why hast thou so suddenly resolved on this?" she asked, calmly; "why shouldst thou fear for me more now than hitherto, dearest Nigel? Hath not the danger always been the same, and yet thou ne'er hast breathed of parting? are not thy hopes the same—what hath chanced unknown to me, that thou speakest and lookest thus? tell me, ere thou urgest more."

"I will tell thee what I fear, my love," he answered, reassured by her firmness; "much that is seen not, guessed not by my comrades. They were satisfied that my appeal had had its effect, and the execution of Evan Roy was attended with no disturbance, no ill will amongst those supposed to be of his party—nay, that terror did its work, and all ideas of treachery which might have been before encouraged were dismissed. I, too, believed this, Agnes, for a while; but a few brief hours were sufficient to prove the utter fallacy of the dream. Some secret conspiracy is, I am convinced, carrying on within these very walls. I know and feel this, and yet so cautious, so secret are their movements, whatever they may be, that I cannot guard against them. There are, as thou knowest, fewer true fighting men amongst us than any other class, and these are needed to man the walls and guard against the foe without; they may not be spared to watch as spies their comrades—nay, I dare not even breathe such thoughts, lest their bold hearts should faint and fail, and they too demand surrender ere evil come upon us from within. What will be that evil I know not, and therefore cannot guard against it. I dare not employ these men upon the walls, I dare not bring them out against the foe, for so bitterly do I mistrust them, I should fear even then they would betray us. I only know that evil awaits us, and therefore, my beloved, I do beseech thee, tarry not till it be upon us; depart while thy path is free."

"Yet if they sought safety and peace, if they tire of this warfare," she replied, disregarding his last words, "wherefore not depart to-day, when egress was permitted; bethink thee, dearest Nigel, is not this proof thy fears are ill founded, and that no further ill hangs over us than that which threatens from without?"

"Alas! no," he said, "it but confirms my suspicions; I obtained this safe conduct expressly to nullify or confirm them. Had they departed as I wished, all would have been well; but they linger, and I can feel their plans are maturing, and therefore they will not depart. Oh, Agnes," he continued, bitterly, "my very soul is crushed beneath this weight of unexpressed anxiety and care. Had I but to contend with our English foe, but to fight a good and honorable fight, to struggle on, conscious that to the last gasp the brave inmates of this fortress would follow me, and Edward would find naught on which to wreak his vengeance but the dead bodies of his foes, my task were easy as 'twere glorious; but to be conscious of secret brooding evil each morn that rises, each night that falls, to dread what yet I know not, to see, perchance, my brave fellows whelmed, chained, through a base treachery impossible to guard against—oh! Agnes, 'tis this I fear."

"Yet have they not seemed more willing, more active in their assigned tasks since the execution of their comrade," continued Agnes, with all a woman's gentle artifice, still seeking to impart hope, even when she felt that none remained; "may it not be that, in reality, they repent them of former traitorous designs, and remain behind to aid thee to the last? Thou sayest that palpable

proof of this brooding evil thou canst not find, then do not heed its voice. Let no fear of me, of my safety, add its pang; mine own Nigel, indeed I fear them not."

"I know that all I urge will naught avail with thee, beloved," he answered, somewhat less agitated. "I know thy gentle love is all too deep, too pure, too strong, to share my fears for thee, and oh, I bless thee, bless thee for the sweet solace of that faithful love! yet, yet, I may not listen to thy wishes. All that thou sayest is but confirmation of the brooding evil; they are active, willing, but to hide their dark designs. Yet even were there not this evil to dread, no dream of treachery, still, still, I would send thee hence, sweet one. Famine and blood, and chains, and death—oh, no, no! thou must not stay for these."

"And whither wouldst thou send me, Nigel, and for what?" she asked, still calmly, though her quivering lip denoted that self-possession was fast failing. "Why?"

"Whither? to safety, freedom, peace, my best beloved!" he answered, fervently; "for what? that happier, brighter days may beam for thee, that thou mayest live to bless and be a blessing; dearest, best, cling not to a withered stem, thou mayest be happy yet."

"And wilt thou join me, if I seek this home of safety, Nigel?" she laid her hand on his arm, and fixed her eyes unflinchingly upon his face. He could not meet that glance, a cold shudder passed over his frame ere he could reply.

"Mine own Agnes," and even then he paused, for his quivering lip could not give utterance to his thoughts, and a minute rolled in that deep stillness, and still those anxious eyes moved not from his face. At length voice returned, and it was sad yet deeply solemn, "Our lives rest not in our own hands," he said; "and who when they part may look to meet again? Beloved, if life be spared, canst doubt that I will join thee? yet, situated as I am, governor of a castle about to fall, a patriot, and a Bruce, brother to the noble spirit who wears our country's crown, and has dared to fling down defiance to a tyrant, Agnes, mine own Agnes, how may I dream of life? I would send thee hence ere that fatal moment come; I would spare thee this deep woe. I would bid thee live, beloved, live till years had shed sweet peace upon thy heart, and thou wert happy once again."

There was a moment's pause; the features of Agnes had become convulsed with agony as Nigel spoke, and her hands had closed with fearful pressure on his arm, but his last words, spoken in his own rich, thrilling voice, called back the stagnant blood.

"No, no; I will not leave thee!" she sobbed forth, as from the sudden failing of strength in every limb she sunk kneeling at his feet. "Nigel, Nigel, I will not leave thee; in life or in death I will abide by thee. Force me not from thee; seek not to tempt me by the tale of safety, freedom, peace; thou knowest not the depth, the might of woman's love, if thou thinkest things like these can weigh aught with her, even if chains and death stood frowningly beside. I will not leave thee; whom have I beside thee, for whom else wouldst thou call on me to live? Alone, alone, utterly alone, save *thee*! Wilt thou bid me hence, and leave thee to meet thy fate alone—thee, to whom my mother gave me—thee, without whom my very life is naught? Nigel, oh, despise me not for these wild words, unmaidenly as they sound; oh, let me speak them, or my heart will break!"

"Despise thee for these blessed words!" Nigel answered, passionately, as he raised her from the ground, and clasped her to his heart. "Oh, thou knowest not the bliss they give; yet, yet would I speak of parting, implore thee still to leave me, aye, though in that parting my very heart-strings snap. Agnes, how may I bear to see thee in the power of the foe, perchance insulted, persecuted, tortured with the ribald admiration of the rude crowd, and feel I have no power to save thee, no claim to bind thee to my side. What are the mere chains of love in such an hour, abiding by me, as thou mightst, till our last hope is over, and English colors wave above this fortress—then, dearest, oh, must we not, shall we not be rudely parted?"

"No, no! Who shall dare to part us?" she said, as she clung sobbing to his breast. "Who shall dare to do this thing, and say I may not tend thee, follow thee, even until death?"

"Who? our captors, dearest. Thinkest thou they will heed thy tender love, thine anguish? will they have hearts for aught save for thy loveliness, sweet one? Think, think of terrors like to this, and oh, still wilt thou refuse to fly?"

"But thy sister, the Lady Seaton, Nigel, doth she not stay, doth she not brave these perils?" asked Agnes, shuddering at her lover's words, yet clinging to him still. "If she escapes such evil, why, oh, why may not I?"

"She is Seaton's wife, sweet one, bound to him by the voice of heaven, by the holiest of ties; the noble knights who head our foes will protect her in all honorable keeping; but for thee, Agnes, even if the ills I dread be as naught, there is yet one I have dared not name, lest it should pain thee, yet one that is most probable as 'tis most fearful; thou canst not hide thy name, and as a daughter of Buchan, oh, will they not give thee to a father's keeping?"

"The murderer of my brother—my mother's jailer! Oh, Nigel, Nigel, to look on him were more than death!" she wildly exclaimed. "Yet, yet once known as Agnes of Buchan, this will, this must be; but leave thee now, leave thee to a tyrant's doom, if indeed, indeed thou fallest in his hands—leave thee, when faithful love and woman's tenderness are more than ever needed—leave thee for a fear like this, no, no, I will not. Nigel, I will rest with thee. Speak not, answer not; give us one short moment, and then—oh, all the ills may be averted by one brief word—and I, oh, can I speak it?" She paused in fearful agitation, and every limb shook as if she must have fallen; the

blood rushed up to cheek, and brow, and neck, as, fixing her beautiful eyes on Nigel's face, she said, in a low yet thrilling voice, "Let the voice of heaven hallow the vows we have so often spoken, Nigel. Give me a right, a sacred right to bear thy name, to be thine own, at the altar's foot, by the holy abbot's blessing. Let us pledge our troth, and then let what will come, no man can part us. I am thine, only thine!"

Without waiting for a reply, she buried her face in his bosom, and Nigel could feel her heart throb as if 'twould burst its bounds, her frame quiver as if the torrent of blood, checked and stayed to give strength for the effort, now rushed back with such overwhelming force through its varied channels as to threaten life itself.

"Agnes, my own noble, self-devoted love! oh, how may I answer thee?" he cried, tears of strong emotion coursing down his cheek—tears, and the warrior felt no shame. "How have I been deserving of love like this—how may I repay it? how bless thee for such words? Mine own, mine own! this would indeed guard thee from the most dreaded ills; yet how may I link that self-devoted heart to one whose thread of life is well-nigh spun? how may I make thee mine, when a few brief weeks of misery and horror must part us, and on earth, forever?"

"No, no; thou knowest not all a wife may do, my Nigel," she said, as she raised her head from his bosom, and faintly smiled, though her frame still shook; "how she may plead even with a tyrant, and find mercy; or if this fail, how she may open iron gates and break through bonds, till freedom may be found. Oh, no, we shall not wed to part, beloved; but live and yet be happy, doubt it not; and then, oh, then forget the words that joined us, made us one, had birth from other lips than thine;—thou wilt forget, forgive this, Nigel?"

"Forget—forgive! that to thy pure, unselfish soul I owe the bliss which e'en at this hour I feel," he answered, passionately kissing the beautiful brow upturned to his; "forget words that have proved—had I needed proof—how purely, nobly, faithfully I am beloved; how utterly, how wholly thou hast forgotten all of self for me! No, no! were thy words proved true, might I indeed live blessed with thee the life allotted man, each year, each month I would recall this hour, and bless thee for its love. But oh, it may not be!" and his voice so suddenly lost its impassioned fervor, that the breast of Agnes filled with new alarm. "Dearest, best! thou must not dream of life, of happiness with me. I may not mock thee with such blessed, but, alas! delusive hopes; my doom hath gone forth, revealed when I knew it not, confirmed by that visioned seer but few short weeks ago. Agnes, my noble Agnes, wherefore shouldst thou wed with death? I know that I must die!"

The solemn earnestness of his words chased the still lingering glow from the lips and cheek of the maiden, and a cold shiver passed through her frame, but still she clung to him, and said—

"It matters not; my maiden love, my maiden troth is pledged to thee—in life or in death I am thine alone. I will not leave thee," she said, firmly and calmly. "Nigel, if it be indeed as thou sayest, that affliction, and—and all thou hast spoken, must befall thee, the more need is there for the sustaining and the soothing comfort of a woman's love. Fear not for me, weak as I may have seemed, there is yet a spirit in me worthy of thy love. I will not unman thee for all thou mayest encounter. No, even if I follow thee to—to death, it shall be as a Bruce's wife. Ask not how I will contrive to abide by thee undiscovered, when, if it must be, the foe is triumphant; it will take time, and we have none to lose. Thou hast promised to forget all I have urged, all, save my love for thee; then, oh, fear me not, doubt me not, thine Agnes will not fail thee!"

Nigel gazed at her almost with surprise; she was no longer the gentle timid being who but a few minutes since had clung weeping to his bosom as a child. She was indeed very pale, and on her features was the stillness of marble; but she stood erect and unfaltering in her innocent loveliness, sustained by that mighty spirit which dwelt within. An emotion of deep reverence took possession of that warrior heart, and unable to resist the impulse, he bent his knee before her.

"Then let it be so," he said, solemnly, but oh, how fervently. "I will not torture mine own heart and thine by conjuring thee to fly; and now, here, at thy feet, Agnes, noble, generous being, let me swear solemnly, sacredly swear, that should life be preserved to me longer than I now dream of, should I indeed be spared to lavish on thee all a husband's love and care, never, never shalt thou have cause to regret this day! to mourn thy faithful love was shown as it hath been—to weep the hour that, in the midst of danger, and darkness, and woe, hath joined our earthly fates, and made us one. And now," he continued, rising and folding her once more in his arms, "wilt thou meet me at the altar ere the truce concludes? 'tis but a brief while, a very brief while, my love; yet if it can be, I know thou wilt not shrink."

"I will not," she answered. "The hour thou namest I will meet thee. Lady Seaton," she added, slightly faltering, and the vivid blush rose to her temples, "I would see her, speak with her; yet—"

"She shall come to thee, mine own, prepared to love and hail thee sister, as she hath long done. She will not blame thee dearest; she loves, hath loved too faithfully herself. Fear not, I will leave naught for thee to tell that can bid that cheek glow as it doth now. She, too, will bless thee for thy love."

He imprinted a fervent kiss on her cheek, and hastily left her. Agnes remained standing as he had left her for several minutes, her hands tightly clasped, her whole soul speaking in her beautiful features, and then she sunk on her knees before a rudely-carved image of the Virgin and child, and prayed long and fervently. She did not weep, her spirit had been too painfully excited for such relief, but so wrapt was she in devotion, she knew not that Lady Seaton, with a countenance

beaming in admiration and love, stood beside her, till she spoke.

"Rouse thee, my gentle one," she said, tenderly, as she twined her arm caressingly around her; "I may not let thee linger longer even here, for time passes only too quickly, and I shall have but little time to attire my beautiful bride for the altar. Nigel hath been telling such a tale of woman's love, that my good lord hath vowed, despite his weakness and his wounds, none else shall lead thee to the altar, and give thee to my brother, save himself. I knew that not even Nigel's influence would bid thee leave us, dearest," she continued, as Agnes hid her face in her bosom, "but I dreamed not such a spirit dwelt within this childlike heart, sweet one; thy lot must surely be for joy!"

CHAPTER XX.

It was something past the hour of nine, when Agnes, leaning on the arm of Sir Christopher Seaton, and followed by Lady Seaton and two young girls, their attendants, entered the church, and walked, with an unfaltering step and firm though modest mien, up to the altar, beside which Nigel already stood. She was robed entirely in white, without the smallest ornament save the emerald clasp which secured, and the beautiful pearl embroidery which adorned her girdle. Her mantle was of white silk, its little hood thrown back, disclosing a rich lining of the white fox fur. Lady Seaton had simply arranged her hair in its own beautiful curls, and not a flower or gem peeped through them; a silver bodkin secured the veil, which was just sufficiently transparent to permit her betrothed to look upon her features, and feel that, pale and still as they were, they evinced no change in her generous purpose. He, too, was pale, for he felt those rites yet more impressively holy than he had deemed them, even when his dreams had pictured them peculiarly and solemnly holy; for he looked not to a continuance of life and happiness, he felt not that ceremony set its seal upon joy, and bound it, as far as mortality might hope, forever on their hearts. He was conscious only of the deep unutterable fulness of that gentle being's love, of the bright, beautiful lustre with which it shone upon his path. The emotion of his young and ardent breast was perhaps almost too holy, too condensed, to be termed joy; but it was one so powerful, so blessed, that all of earth and earthly care was lost before it. The fears and doubts which he had so lately felt, for the time completely faded from his memory. That there were foes without and yet darker foes within he might have known perhaps, but at that moment they did not occupy a fleeting thought. He had changed his dress for one of richness suited to his rank, and though at the advice of his friends he still retained the breastplate and some other parts of his armor, his doublet of azure velvet, cut and slashed with white satin, and his long, flowing mantle lined with sable, and so richly decorated with silver stars that its color could scarcely be distinguished, removed all appearance of a martial costume, and well became the graceful figure they adorned; two of the oldest knights and four other officers, all gayly attired as the hurry of the moment would permit, had at his own request attended him to the altar.

Much surprise this sudden intention had indeed caused, but it was an excitement, a change from the dull routine of the siege, and consequently welcomed with joy, many indeed believing Sir Nigel had requested the truce for the purpose. Sir Christopher, too, though pale and gaunt, and compelled to use the support of a cane in walking, was observed to look upon his youthful charge with all his former hilarity of mien, chastened by a kindly tenderness, which seemed indeed that of the father whom he personated; and Lady Seaton had donned a richer garb than was her wont, and stood encouragingly beside the bride. About twenty men-at-arms, their armor and weapons hastily burnished, that no unseemly soil should mar the peaceful nature of the ceremony by recalling thoughts of war, were ranged on either side. The church was lighted, dimly in the nave and aisles, but softly and somewhat with a holy radiance where the youthful couple knelt, from the large waxen tapers burning in their silver stands upon the altar.

The Abbot of Scone was at his post, attended by the domestic chaplain of Kildrummie; there was a strange mixture of admiration and anxiety on the old man's face, but Agnes saw it not; she saw nothing save him at whose side she knelt.

Nigel, even in the agitation of mind in which he had quitted Agnes—an agitation scarcely conquered in hastily informing his sister and her husband of all that had passed between them, and imploring their countenance and aid—yet made it his first care strictly to make the round of the walls, to notice all that might be passing within the courts, and see that the men-at-arms were at their posts. In consequence of the truce, for the conclusion of which it still wanted some little time, there were fewer men on the walls than usual, their commanders having desired them to take advantage of this brief cessation of hostilities and seek refreshment and rest. A trumpet was to sound at the hour of ten, half an hour before the truce concluded, to summon them again to their posts. The men most acute in penetration, most firm and steady in purpose, Nigel selected as sentries along the walls; the post of each being one of the round towers we have mentioned, the remaining spaces were consequently clear. Night had already fallen, and anxiously observing the movements on the walls; endeavoring to discover whether the various little groups of men and women in the ballium meant any thing more than usual, Sir Nigel did not notice various piles or stacks of straw and wood which were raised against the wall in many parts where the shadows lay darkest, and some also against the other granaries which were contained in low, wooden buildings projecting from the wall. Neither he nor his friends, nor even the men-at-arms, noticed them, or if they did, imagined them in the darkness to be but the stones and

other weights generally collected there, and used to supply the engines on the walls.

With the exception of the sentries and the men employed by Nigel, all the garrison had assembled in the hall of the keep for their evening meal, the recollection of whose frugality they determined to banish by the jest and song; there were in consequence none about the courts, and therefore that dark forms were continually hovering about beneath the deep shadows of the walls, increasing the size of the stacks, remained wholly undiscovered.

Agnes had entered the church by a covered passage, which united the keep to its inner wall, and thence by a gallery through the wall itself, dimly lighted by loopholes, to the edifice, whose southern side was formed by this same wall. It was therefore, though in reality situated within the ballium or outer court, nearer by many hundred yards to the dwelling of the baron than to the castle walls, its granaries, towers, etc. This outward ballium indeed was a very large space, giving the appearance of a closely-built village or town, from the number of low wooden and thatched-roofed dwellings, which on either side of the large open space before the great gate were congregated together. This account may, we fear at such a moment, seem somewhat out of place, but events in the sequel compel us to be thus particular. A space about half a mile square surrounded the church, and this position, when visited, by Sir Nigel at nine o'clock, was quiet and deserted; indeed there was very much less confusion and other evidences of disquiet within the dwellings than was now usual, and this circumstance perhaps heightened the calm which, as we have said, had settled on Sir Nigel's mind.

There was silence within that little sacred edifice, the silence of emotion; for not one could gaze upon that young fair girl, could think of that devoted spirit, which at such a time preferred to unite her fate with a beloved one than seek safety and freedom in flight, without being conscious of a strange swelling of the heart and unwonted moisture in the eye; and there was that in the expression of the beautiful features of Nigel Bruce none could remark unmoved. He was so young, so gifted, so strangely uniting the gift of the sage, the poet, with the glorious achievements of the most perfect knight, that he had bound himself alike to every heart, however varied their dispositions, however opposite their tastes; and there was not one, from the holy Abbot of Scone to the lowest and rudest of the men-at-arms, who would not willingly, aye, joyfully have laid down life for his, have gladly accepted chains to give him freedom.

The deep, sonorous voice of the abbot audibly faltered as he commenced the sacred service, and looked on the fair beings kneeling, in the beauty and freshness of their youth, before him. Accustomed, however, to control every human emotion, he speedily recovered himself, and uninterruptedly the ceremony continued. Modestly, yet with a voice that never faltered, Agnes made the required responses; and so deep was the stillness that reigned around not a word was lost, but, sweetly and clearly as a silver clarion, it sunk on every ear and thrilled to every heart; to his who knelt beside her, as if each tone revealed yet more the devoted love which led her there. Towards the conclusion of the service, and just as every one within the church knelt in general prayer, a faint, yet suffocating odor, borne on what appeared a light mist, was distinguished, and occasioned some slight surprise; by the group around the altar, however, it was unnoticed; and the men-at-arms, on looking towards the narrow windows and perceiving nothing but the intense darkness of the night, hushed the rising exclamation, and continued in devotion. Two of the knights, too, were observed to glance somewhat uneasily around, still nothing was perceivable but the light wreaths of vapor penetrating through the northern aisle, and dissolving ere long the arches of the roof. Almost unconsciously they listened, and became aware of some sounds in the distance, but so faint and indefinable as to permit them to rest in the belief that it must be the men-at-arms hurrying from the keep to the walls, although they were certain the trumpet had not yet sounded. Determined not to heed such vague sounds, they looked again to the altar. The abbot had laid a trembling hand on either low-bent head, and was emphatically pronouncing his blessing on their vows, calling on heaven in its mercy to bless and keep them, and spare them to each other for a long and happy life; or if it must be that a union commenced in danger should end in sorrow, to keep them still, and fit them for a union in eternity. His words were few but earnest, and for the first time the lip of Agnes was observed to quiver—they were *ONE*. Agnes was clasped to the heart of her husband; she heard him call her his own—his wife—that man should never part them more. The voice of congratulation woke around her, but ere either could gaze around to look their thanks, or clasp the eagerly proffered hand, a cry of alarm, of horror, ran through the building. A red, lurid light, impossible to be mistaken, illumined every window, as from a fearful conflagration without; darkness had fled before it. On all sides it was light—light the most horrible, the most awful, though perchance the most fascinating the eye can behold; fearful shouts and cries, and the rush of many feet, mingled with the now easily distinguished roar of the devouring element, burst confusedly on the ear. A minute sufficed to fling open the door of the church for knights and men-at-arms to rush forth in one indiscriminate mass. Sir Christopher would have followed them, utterly regardless of his inability, had not his wife clung to him imploringly, and effectually restrained him. The abbot, grasping the silver crosier by his side, with a swift, yet still majestic stride, made his way through the church, and vanished by the widely opened door. Agnes and Sir Nigel stood comparatively alone; not a cry, not a word passed her lips; every feature was wrapped in one absorbing look upon her husband. He had clasped his hands convulsively together, his brow was knit, his lip compressed, his eye fixed and rigid, though it gazed on vacancy.

"It hath fallen, it hath fallen!" he muttered. "Fool, fool that I was never to dream of this! Friends, followers, all I hold most dear, swallowed up in this fell swoop! God of mercy, how may it be born! And thou, thou," he added, in increased agony, roused from that stupor by the wild shouts

of "Sir Nigel, Sir Nigel! where is he? why does he tarry in such an hour?" that rung shrilly on the air. "Agnes, mine own, it is not too late even now to fly. Ha! son of Dermid, in good tune thou art here; save her, in mercy save her! I know not when, or how, or where we may meet again; I may not tarry here." He clasped her in his arms, imprinted an impassioned kiss on her now death-like cheek, placed her at once in the arms of the seer (who, robed as a minstrel, had stood concealed behind a projecting pillar during the ceremony, and now approached), and darted wildly from the church. What a scene met his gaze! All the buildings within the ballium, with the sole exception of the church, were in one vivid blaze of fire; the old dry wood and thatch of which they were composed, kindling with a mere spark. The wind blew the flames in the direction of the principal wall, which was already ignited from the heaps of combustibles that had been raised within for the purpose; although it was likely that, from its extreme thickness and strength, the fire had there done but partial evil, had not the conflagration within the court spread faster and nearer every moment, and from the blazing rafters and large masses of thatch caught by the wind and hurled on the very wall, done greater and more irreparable mischief than the combustibles themselves. Up, up, seeming to the very heavens, the lurid flames ascended, blazing and roaring, and lighting the whole scene as with the glare of day. Fantastic wreaths of red fire danced in the air against the pitchy blackness of the heavens, rising and falling in such graceful, yet terrible shapes, that the very eye felt riveted in admiration, while the heart quailed with horror. Backwards and forwards gleamed the forms of men in the dusky glare; and oaths and cries, and the clang of swords, and the shrieks of women, terrified by the destruction they had not a little assisted to ignite—the sudden rush of horses bursting from their stables, and flying here and there, scared by the unusual sight and horrid sounds—the hissing streams of water which, thrown from huge buckets on the flames, seemed but to excite them to greater fury instead of lessening their devouring way—the crackling of straw and wood, as of the roar of a hundred furnaces—these were the varied sounds and sights that burst upon the eye and ear of Nigel, as, richly attired as he was, his drawn sword in his hand, his fair hair thrown back from his uncovered brow and head, he stood in the very centre of the scene. One glance sufficed to perceive that the rage of the men-at-arms was turned on their treacherous countrymen; that the work of war raged even then—the swords of Scotsmen were raised against each other. Even women fell in that fierce slaughter, for the demon of revenge was at work, and sought but blood. In vain the holy abbot, heedless that one sudden gust and his flowing garments must inevitably catch fire, uplifted his crosier, and called on them to forbear. In vain the officers rushed amidst the infuriated men, bidding them keep their weapons and their lives for the foe, who in such a moment would assuredly be upon them; in vain they commanded, exhorted, implored; but on a sudden, the voice of Sir Nigel Bruce was heard above the tumult, loud, stern, commanding. His form was seen hurrying from group to group, turning back with his own sword the weapons of his men, giving life even to those who had wrought this woe; and there was a sudden hush, a sudden pause.

"Peace, peace!" he cried. "Would ye all share the madness of these men? They have hurled down destruction, let them reap it; let them live to thrive and fatten in their chains; let them feel the yoke they pine for. For us, my friends and fellow-soldiers, let us not meet our glorious fate with the blood of Scotsmen on our swords. We have striven for our country; we have striven gloriously, faithfully, and now we have but to die for her. Ha! do I speak in vain? Again—back, coward! wouldst thou slay a woman?" and, with a sudden bound, he stood beside one of the soldiers, who was in the act of plunging his dagger in the breast of a kneeling and struggling female. One moment sufficed to wrench the dagger from his grasp, and release the woman from his hold.

"It is ill done, your lordship; it is the fiend, the arch-fiend that has planned it all," loudly exclaimed the man. "She has been heard to mutter threats of vengeance, and blood and fire against thee, and all belonging to thee. Let her not go free, my lord; thou mayest repent it still."

"Repent giving a woman life?—bah! Thou art a fool, though a faithful one," answered Sir Nigel; but even he started as he recognized the features of Jean Roy. She gave him no time to restrain her, however; for, sliding from his hold, she bounded several paces from him, singing, as she did so, "Repent, ye shall repent! Where is thy buxom bride? Jean Roy will see to her safety. A bonny courtship ye shall have!" Tossing up her arms wildly, she vanished as she spoke; seeming in that light in very truth more like a fiend than woman. A chill sunk on the heart of Nigel, but, "No, no," he said, internally, as again he sought the spot where confusion and horror waxed thickest; "Dermid will care for Agnes, and guard her. I will not think of that mad woman's words." Yet even as he rushed onwards, giving directions, commands, lending his aid to every effort made for extinguishing the fire, a prayer for his wife was uttered in his heart.

The fire continued its rapid progress, buttress after buttress, tower after tower caught on the walls, causing the conflagration to continue, even when, by the most strenuous efforts, it had been partially extinguished amongst the dwellings of the court. The wind blowing from the north fortunately preserved the keep, inner wall, and even the church, uninjured, save that the scorched and blackened sides of the latter gave evidence of the close vicinity of the flames, and how narrowly it had escaped. With saddened hearts, the noble defenders of Scotland's last remaining bulwark, beheld their impregnable wall, the scene of such dauntless valor, such unconquered struggles, against which the whole force of their mighty foes had been of no avail—that wall crumbling into dust and ashes in their very sight, opening a broad passage to the English foe. Yet still there was no evidence that to yield were preferable than to die; still, though well-nigh exhausted with their herculean efforts to quench the flames, there was no cessation, no pause, although the very height of the wall prevented success, for they had not the facilities

afforded by the engines of the present day. Sir Nigel, his knights, nay, the venerable abbot himself, seconded every effort of the men. It seemed as if little more could add to the horror of the scene, and yet the shouts of "The granaries, the granaries—merciful heaven, all is consumed!" came with such appalling consciousness on every ear, that for a brief while, the stoutest arm hung powerless, the firmest spirit quailed. Famine stood suddenly before them as a gaunt, terrific spectre, whose cold hand it seemed had grasped their very hearts. Nobles and men, knights and soldiers, alike stood paralyzed, gazing at each other with a blank, dim, unutterable despair. The shrill blast of many trumpets, the roll of heavy drums, broke that deep stillness. "The foe! the foe!" was echoed round, fiercely, yet rejoicingly. "They are upon us—they brave the flames—well done! Now firm and steady; to your arms—stand close. Sound trumpets—the defiance, the Bruce and Scotland!" and sharply and clearly, as if but just arrayed for battle, as if naught had chanced to bend those gallant spirits to the earth, the Scottish clarions sent back their answering blast, and the men gathered in compact array around their gallant leader.

"My horse—my horse!" shouted Nigel Bruce, as he sprung from rank to rank of the little phalanx, urging, commanding, entreating them to make one last stand, and fall as befitted Scottish patriots. The keep and inner ballium was still their own as a place of retreat, however short a period it might remain so. A brave defence, a glorious death would still do much for Scotland.

Shouts, cheers, blessings on his name awoke in answer, as unflinching, as bravely as those of the advancing foes. Prancing, neighing, rearing, the superb charger was at length brought to the dauntless leader.

"Not thus, my lord; in heaven's name, do not mount thus, unarmed, bareheaded as thou art!" exclaimed several voices, and two or three of his esquires crowded round him. "Retire but for a brief space within the church."

"And turn my back upon my foes, Hubert; not for worlds! No, no; bring me the greaves, gauntlets, and helmet here, if thou wilt, and an they give me time, I will arm me in their very teeth. Haste ye, my friends, if ye will have it so; for myself these garments would serve me well enough;" but ere he ceased to speak they had flown to obey, and returned ere a dozen more of the English had made their way across the crumbling wall. Coolly, composedly, Nigel threw aside his mantle and doublet, and permitted his esquires to assist in arming him, speaking at the same time in a tone so utterly unconcerned, that ere their task was finished, his coolness had extended unto them. He had allowed some few of the English to make an unmolested way; his own men were drawn up in close lines against the inner wall, so deep in shadow that they were at first unobserved by the English. He could perceive by the still, clear light of the flames, troop after troop of the besiegers were marching forward in the direction both of the causeway and the river; several were plunging in the moat, sword in hand, and attack threatened on every side. He waited no longer; springing on his charger, with a movement so sudden and unexpected, the helmet fell from his esquire's hand, and waving his sword above his undefended head, he shouted aloud his war-cry, and dashed on, followed by his men, to the spot where a large body of his foes already stood.

Desperately they struggled, most gallantly they fought; man after man of the English fell before them. On, on they struggled; a path seemed cleared before them; the English were bearing back, despite their continued reinforcements from the troops, that so thronged the causeway it appeared but one mass of men. But other shouts rent the air. The besiegers now poured in on every side; wherever that gallant body turned they were met by English. On, on they came, fresh from some hours of repose, buoyed up by the certainty of conquest; unnumbered swords and spears, and coats of mail, gleaming in that lurid light; on came the fiery steeds, urged by the spur and rein, till through the very flames they bore their masters; on through the waters of the moat, up the scorching ruins, and with a sound as of thunder, clearing with a single bound all obstacles into the very court. It was a fearful sight; that little patriot band, hemmed in on every side, yet struggling to the last, clearing a free passage through men and horse, and glancing swords and closing multitudes, nearing the church, slowly, yet surely, forming in yet closer order as they advanced; there, there they stood, as a single bark amid the troubled waves, cleaving them asunder, but to close again in fatal fury on her track.

In vain, amid that furious strife, did the Earl of Lancaster seek out the azure plume and golden helmet that marked the foe he still desired to meet; there was indeed a face, beautiful and glorious even in that moment, ever in the very thickest of the fight, alike the front, the centre, the rear-guard of his men; there was indeed that stately form, sitting his noble charger as if horse and man were one; and that unhelmed brow, that beautifully formed head, with its long curls streaming in the night wind, which towered unharmed, unbent, above his foes; and where that was, the last hope of his country had gathered. The open door of the church was gained, and there the Scottish patriots made a stand, defended in their rear by the building. A brief and desperate struggle partially cleared their foes, and ere those in the rear could press forward, the besieged had disappeared, and the heavy doors were closed. The sudden pause of astonishment amidst the assailants was speedily dispelled by the heavy blows of axes and hatchets, the sudden shout "To the wall! to the wall!" while several ran to plant scaling-ladders and mount the inner barrier, left unhappily unguarded from the diminished numbers of the Scotch; there, however, their progress was impeded, for the space which that wall inclosed being scarce half the size of the ballium, and the barrier itself uninjured, they were repulsed with loss from within. The church-doors meanwhile had given way, and permitted ingress to the assailants, but the door leading to the passage through the inner wall, and by which in reality the Scotch had effected their retreat, was carefully closed and barred within, and had so completely the same appearance

as the wall of the church in which it stood, that the English gazed round them fairly puzzled and amazed.

This movement, however, on the part of the besieged occasioned a brief cessation of hostilities on both sides. The flames had subsided, except here and there, where the passing wind fanned the red-hot embers anew into life, and caused a flickering radiance to pass athwart the pitchy darkness of the night, and over the bustling scene on either side the ruins.

There was no moon, and Hereford imagined the hours of darkness might be better employed in active measures for resuming the attack by dawn than continuing it then. Much, very much had been gained: a very brief struggle more he knew must now decide it, and he hoped, though against his better judgment, that the garrison, would surrender without further loss of blood. Terms he could not propose, none at least that could prevail on the brave commanders to give up with life, and so great was the admiration Nigel's conduct had occasioned, that this true son of chivalry ardently wished he would eventually fall in combat rather than be consigned to the fearful fate which he knew would be inflicted on him by the commands of Edward. Commands to the troops without were forwarded by trusty esquires; the wounded conveyed to the camp, and their places supplied by fresh forces, who, with the joyous sound of trumpet and drum, marched over by torchlight into the ballium, so long the coveted object of their attack.

Sir Nigel meanwhile had desired his exhausted men to lie down in their arms, ready to start up at the faintest appearance of renewed hostility, and utterly worn out, they most willingly obeyed. But the young knight himself neither shared nor sought for that repose; he stood against a buttress on the walls, leaning on a tall spear, and gazing at once upon his wearied followers, and keeping a strict watch on the movements of his foes. A tall form, clothed in complete armor, suddenly stood beside him; he started.

"Seaton!" he said; "thou here, and in armor?"

"Aye," answered the knight, his voice from very weakness sounding hollow in his helmet. "Aye, to make one last stand, and, if it may be, die as I have lived for Scotland. I have strength to strike one last blow, for last it will be—all is lost!"

A low groan broke from Nigel's lips, but he made no further answer than the utterance of one word—"Agnes!"

"Is safe, I trust," rejoined the knight. "The son of Dermid, in whose arms I last saw her, knoweth many a secret path and hidden passage, and can make his way wherever his will may lead."

"How! thinkest thou he will preserve her, save her even now from the foe?"

"Aye, perchance conceal her till the castle be dismantled. But what do they now? See, a herald and white flag," he added, abruptly, as by the light of several torches a trumpeter, banner-bearer, herald, and five men-at-arms were discerned approaching the walls.

"What would ye? Halt, and answer," demanded Sir Nigel, recalled on the instant to his sterner duties, and advancing, spear in hand, to the utmost verge of the wall.

"We demand speech of Sir Nigel Bruce and Sir Christopher Seaton, governors of this castle," was the brief reply.

"Speak on, then, we are before ye, ready to list your say. What would your lords?"

"Give ye not admittance within the wall?" inquired the herald; "'tis somewhat strange parleying without."

"No!" answered Nigel, briefly and sternly; "speak on, and quickly. We doubt not the honor of the noble Earl of Hereford—it hath been too gloriously proved; but we are here to list your mission. What would ye?"

"That ye surrender this fortress by to-morrow's dawn, and strive no longer with the destiny against you. Ye have neither men nor stores, and in all good and chivalric feeling, the noble Earls of Hereford and Lancaster call on ye to surrender without further loss of blood."

"And if we do this?" demanded Nigel.

"They promise all honorable treatment and lenient captivity to the leaders of the rebels, until the pleasure of his grace the king be known; protection to all females; liberty to those whose rank demands not their detention; and for the common soldiers, on the delivery of their arms and upper garments, and their taking a solemn oath that within seven days they will leave Scotland never to return, liberty and life shall be mercifully extended unto one and all."

"And if we do *not* this?"

"Your blood be upon your own rebellious heads! Sacking and pillage must take their course."

"Ye have heard," were the sole words that passed the lips of Nigel, turning to his men, who, roused by the first sound of the trumpet, had started from their slumbers, and falling in a semicircle round him and Sir Christopher, listened with intense eagerness to the herald's words. "Ye have heard. Speak, then—your answer; yours shall be ours."

"Death! death! death!" was the universally reiterated shout. "We will struggle to the death. Our

king and country shall not say we deserted them because we feared to die; or surrendered on terms of shame as these! No; let the foe come on! we will die, if we may not live, still patriots of Scotland! King Robert will avenge us! God save the Bruce!"

Again, and yet again they bade God bless him; and startingly and thrillingly was the united voice of that desperate, devoted band borne on the wings of night to the very furthest tents of their foes. Calmly Sir Nigel turned again to the herald.

"Thou hast Scotland's answer," he said; "'tis in such men as these her glorious spirit lives! they will fall not unavenged. Commend us to your masters; we await them with the dawn," and, turning on his heel, he reassumed the posture of thought as if he had never been aroused.

The dawn uprose, the attack was renewed with increased vigor, and defended with the same calm, determined spirit which had been ever shown; the patriots fell where they fought, leaving fearful traces of their desperate courage in the numbers of English that surrounded each. It was now before the principal entrance to the keep they made their final stand, and horrible was the loss of life, fierce and deadly the strife, ere that entrance was forced, and the shrieks of women and children within proclaimed the triumph of the foe. Then came a shout, loud ringing, joyous, echoed and re-echoed by the blast of the trumpets both within and without, and the proud banner of Scotland was hurled contemptuously to the earth, and the flag of England floated in its place. Many a dying eye, unclosed by those sudden sounds, looked on that emblem of defeat and moved not in life again; others sprung up to their feet with wild shrieks of defiance, and fell back, powerless, in death.

Sir Christopher Seaton, whose exhausted frame could barely sustain the weight of his armor, had been taken in the first charge, fighting bravely, but falling from exhaustion to the earth. And where was Nigel?—hemmed in on all sides, yet seemingly unwounded, unconquered still, his face indeed was deadly pale, and there were moments when his strokes flagged as from an utter failing of strength; but if, on observing this, his foes pressed closer, strength appeared to return, and still, still he struggled on. He sought for death; he felt that he dared his destiny, but death shunned him; he strove with his destiny in vain. Not thus might he fall, the young, the generous, the gifted. On foot, his armor hacked and stained with blood, not yet had the word "yield" been shouted in his ear.

"Back, back! leave me this glorious prize!" shouted Lancaster, spurring on his charger through the crowd, and leaping from him the instant he neared the spot where Nigel stood. "Take heed of my gallant horse, I need him not—I shall not need him now. Ha! bareheaded too; well, so shall it be with me—hand to hand, foot to foot. Turn, noble Nigel, we are well-nigh equals now, and none shall come between us." He hastily unclasped his helmet, threw it from his brow, and stood in the attitude of defence.

One moment Sir Nigel paused; his closing foes had fallen from him at the words of their leader; he hesitated one brief instant as to whether indeed he should struggle more, or deliver up his sword to the generous earl, when the shout of triumph from the topmost turret, proclaiming the raising of the banner, fell upon his ear, and nerved him to the onset.

"Noble and generous!" he exclaimed, as their swords crossed. "Might I choose my fate, I would fall by thy knightly sword."

As stupefied with wonder at the skill, the extraordinary velocity and power of the combatants, the men-at-arms stood round, without making one movement to leave the spot; and fearful indeed was that deadly strife; equal they seemed in stature, in the use of their weapons, in every mystery of the sword; the eye ached with the rapid flashing of the blades, the ear tired of the sharp, unwavering clash, but still they quailed not, moved not from the spot where the combat had commenced.

How long this fearful struggle would have continued, or who would finally be victor, was undecided still, when suddenly the wild mocking laugh of madness sounded in the very ear of Nigel, and a voice shouted aloud, "Fight on, my bonny lord; see, see, how I care for your winsome bride," and the maniac form of Jean Roy rushed by through the thickest ranks of the men, swift, swift as the lightning track. A veil of silver tissue floated from her shoulder, and she seemed to be bearing something in her arms, but what, the rapidity of her way precluded all discovery. The fierce soldiers shrunk away from her, as if appalled by her gaunt, spectral look, or too much scared by her sudden appearance to attempt detaining her. The eye of Nigel involuntarily turned from his foe to follow her; he recognized the veil, and fancy did the rest. He saw her near a part of the wall which was tottering beneath the engines of the English; there was a wild shriek in other tones than hers, the wall fell, burying the maniac in its ruins. A mist came over the senses of the young knight, strength suddenly fled his arm, he stepped back as to recover himself, but slipped and fell, the violence of the fall dashing his sword many yards in air. "I yield me true prisoner, rescue or no rescue," he said, in a tone so startling in its agony that the rudest heart beside him shrunk within itself appalled, and for a minute Lancaster checked the words upon his lips.

"Nay, nay, yield not in such tone, my gallant foe!" he said, with eager courtesy, and with his own hand aiding him to rise. "Would that I were the majesty of England, I should deem myself debased did I hold such gallantry in durance. Of a truth, thou hast robbed me of my conquest, fair sir, for it was no skill of mine which brought thee to the ground. I may thank that shrieking mad woman, perchance, for the preservation of my laurels."

"I give you thanks for your courtesy, my lord," replied Sir Nigel, striving to recover himself; "but I pray you pardon me, if I beseech you let that falling mass be cleared at once, and note if that unhappy woman breathes. Methought," he added, in stronger agitation, "she carried something in her arms."

"She did," answered many voices; "some child or girl, who was struggling, though the head was muffled up as if to prevent all sounds."

"See to it, and bring us news of what you find," said Lancaster, hastily, for the same ghastly expression passed over the countenance of his prisoner as had startled him at first. "Thou art not well, my good lord?" he continued kindly.

"Nay, I am well, my lord; but I will go with you," replied the young knight, slowly, as if collecting strength ere he could speak. "I am wearied with the turmoil of the last twelve hours' fighting against fire and sword at once; I would fain see the noble Hereford, and with his permission rest me a brief while."

Lancaster made no further comment, and the two knights, who but a few minutes before had been engaged in deadly strife, now made their way together through the heaps of the dying and the dead, through many a group of rude soldiery, who scowled on Nigel with no friendly eye, for they only recognized him as the destroyer of hundreds of their countrymen, not the chivalric champion who had won the enthusiastic admiration of their leaders, and soon found themselves in the castle-hall, in the presence of the Earl of Hereford, who was surrounded by his noblest officers, Sir Christopher and Lady Seaton, and some few other Scottish prisoners, most of whom were badly wounded. He advanced to meet Sir Nigel, courteously, though gravely.

"It grieves me," he said, "to receive as a prisoner a knight of such high renown and such chivalric bearing as Sir Nigel Bruce; I would he had kept those rare qualities for the sovereign to whom they were naturally due, and who would have known how to have appreciated and honor them, rather than shed such lustre on so weak a cause."

"Does your lordship regard the freedom of an oppressed country so weak a cause?" replied Nigel, the hot blood mounting to his cheek; "the rising in defence of a rightful king, in lieu of slavishly adhering to one, who, though so powerful, all good men, aye, even all good Englishmen, must look on, in his claims to Scotland, as an ambitious usurper. My lord, my lord, the spirit of Hereford spoke not in those words; but I forgive them, for I have much for which to proffer thanks unto the noble Hereford, much, that his knightly soul scorned treachery and gave us a fair field. Durance is but a melancholy prospect, yet an it must be I would not nobler captors."

"Nor would I forfeit the esteem in which you hold me, gallant sir," replied the earl, "and therefore do I pray you, command my services in aught that can pleasure you, and an it interfere not with my duty to my sovereign, I shall be proud to give them. Speak, I pray you."

"Nay, I can ask naught which the Earl of Hereford hath not granted of himself," said Sir Nigel. "I would beseech you to extend protection to all the females of this unhappy castle; to part not my sister from her lord, for, as you see, his wounds and weakness call for woman's care; to grant the leech's aid to those who need it; and if there be some unhappy men of my faithful troop remaining, I would beseech you show mercy unto them, and let them go free—they can work no further ill to Edward; they can fight no more for Scotland, for she lieth chained; they have no head and therefore no means of resistance—I beseech you give them freedom unshackled by conditions."

"It shall be, it shall be," replied Hereford, hastily, and evidently moved; "but for thyself, young sir, thyself, can we do naught for thee?"

"Nothing," answered the young man, calmly. "I need little more on earth, for neither my youth, my birth, nor what it pleaseth thee to term my gallantry, will save me from the sweeping axe of Edward. I would beseech thee to let my death atone for all, and redeem my noble friends; but I ask it not, for I know in this thou hast no power; and yet, though I ask nothing now," he added, after a brief pause, and in a lower voice, as to be heard only by Hereford, "ere we march to England I may have a boon to crave—protection, liberty for a beloved one, whose fate as yet I know not." He spoke almost inarticulately, for again it seemed the horrid words and maniac laugh of Jean Roy resounded in his ears. There was that in the look and manner of the English earl inviting confidence: a moment the tortured young man longed to pour all into his ear, to conjure him to find Agnes, and give her to his arms; the next he refrained, for her words, "Ask not how I will contrive to abide by thee undiscovered by the foe," suddenly flashed on his memory, with the conviction that if she were indeed still in life, and he acknowledged her his wife, Hereford would feel himself compelled to keep her under restraint, as he did Lady Seaton and the wives of other noble Scotsmen. His lip trembled, but fortunately for the preservation of his composure, Hereford's attention was called from him by the eager entrance of several other officers, who all crowded round him, alike in congratulation, and waiting his commands, and perceiving he was agitated, the earl turned from him with a courteous bow. Eagerly he seized that moment to spring to the side of his sister, to whisper the impatient inquiry, "Agnes, where is Agnes?" To feel his heart a moment throb high, and then sink again by her reply, that she had not seen her since he had placed her in the arms of the seer; that in the fearful confusion which followed, she had looked for her in vain, examined all her accustomed haunts, but discovered no traces of her, save the silver tissue veil. There was, however, some hope in that; Jean Roy, misled by the glittering article, and seeing it perchance in the hands of another, might have been

deceived in her prey. Nay, he welcomed the uncertainty of suspense; there was something so fearful, so horrible in the idea that his own faithful Agnes was among those blackened and mangled bodies, which Lancaster informed him had been discovered beneath the ruins, something so sickening, so revolting, he could not take advantage of the earl's offer to examine them himself, though, Lancaster added, it would not be of much use, for he challenged their dearest friends to recognize them. He could not believe such was her fate. Dermid had not been seen since the fatal conclusion of their marriage; he knew his fidelity, his interest in both Agnes and himself, and he could not, he would not believe the maniac had decoyed her from his care. But where was she?—where, in such a moment, could he have conveyed her?—what would be her final fate?—how would she rejoin him? were questions ever thronging on his heart and brain, struggling with doubts, with the horrible suspicion still clinging to that shriek which had sounded as the ruins fell. Darker and more forebodingly oppressive grew these conflicting thoughts, as day after day passed, and still she came not, nor were there any tidings of the seer.

A very brief interval sufficed for the English earls to conclude their arrangements at Kildrummie, and prepare to march southward, Berwick being the frontier town to which the Scottish prisoners were usually conveyed. Their loss had been greater than at any other similar siege; more than a third of their large army had fallen, several others were wounded, and not much above a third remained who were fitted to continue in arms. It was a fearful proof of the desperate valor of the besieged, but both earls felt it would so exasperate their sovereign against the Scottish commanders, as to remove the slightest hope of mercy. The ruins were with some labor cleared away, the remains of the outer wall levelled with the earth, except the tower communicating with the drawbridge and barbican, which could be easily repaired. The inner wall Hereford likewise commanded to be restored; the keep he turned into a hospital for the wounded, leaving with them a sufficient garrison to defend the castle, in case of renewed incursions of the Scottish patriots, a case, in the present state of the country, not very probable. True to his promise, these men-at-arms who survived, and whose wounds permitted their removal, Hereford set at liberty, not above ten in number; dispirited, heart-broken, he felt indeed there was no need to impose conditions on them. Those of the traitors who remained, endeavored by cringing humility, to gain the favor of the English; but finding themselves shunned and despised, for the commonest English soldier was of a nature too noble to bear with aught of treachery, they dispersed over the country, finding little in its miserable condition to impart enjoyment to the lives they had enacted so base a part to preserve. It may be well to state, ere we entirely leave the subject, that the execution of Evan Roy exciting every evil passion in their already rebellious hearts, had determined them to conspire for a signal revenge, the ravings of Jean Roy and the desperate counsels of her mother-in-law urging them to the catastrophe we have related; the murder of Nigel had been first planned, but dismissed as likely to be discovered and thwarted, and bring vengeance on their own heads instead of his. Before the execution of their comrade and head of the conspiracy, they had only been desirous of shunning the horrors of a prolonged siege; but afterwards, revenge became stronger than mere personal safety, and therefore was it they refused to take advantage of the safe conduct demanded by Nigel, and granted, as we have said.

The Scottish prisoners were removed from the castle a few hours after its capitulation, and placed in honorable restraint, in separate pavilions. Lancaster, whose romantic admiration for his antagonist had not been in the least diminished by Sir Nigel's bearing in captivity and the lofty tone of the young knight's society and conversation, which he frequently courted, absolutely made him shrink from heading the force which was to conduct him a prisoner to England, for he well knew those very qualities, calling forth every spark of chivalry in his own bosom, would be only so many incitements to Edward for his instant execution. He therefore demanded that the superintending the works of the garrison and keeping a strict watch upon the movements of the adjoining country should devolve on him, and Hereford, as the older and wiser, should conduct his prisoners to the border, and report the events of the siege to his sovereign. His colleague acceded, and the eighth day from the triumph of the besiegers was fixed on to commence their march.

It was on the evening of the seventh day that the Earl of Hereford, then engaged in earnest council with Lancaster, on subjects relating to their military charge, was informed that an old man and a boy so earnestly entreated speech with him, that they had even moved the iron heart of Hugo de l'Orme, the earl's esquire, who himself craved audience for them.

"They must bear some marvellous charm about them, an they have worked upon thee, De l'Orme," said his master, smiling. "In good sooth, let them enter."

Yet there was nothing very striking in their appearance when they came. The old man indeed was of a tall, almost majestic figure, and it was only the snowy whiteness of his hair and flowing beard that betrayed his age, for his eye was still bright, his form unbent. He was attired as a minstrel, his viol slung across his breast, a garb which obtained for its possessor free entrance alike into camp and castle, hall and bower, to all parties, to all lands, friendly or hostile, as it might be. His companion was a slight boy, seemingly little more than thirteen or fourteen, with small, exquisitely delicate features; his complexion either dark or sunburnt; his eyes were bent down, and their long, very dark lashes rested on his cheek, but when raised, their beautiful blue seemed so little in accordance with the brunette skin, that the sun might be deemed more at fault than Nature; his hair, of the darkest brown, clustered closely round his throat in short thick curls; his garb was that of a page, but more rude than the general habiliments of those usually petted members of noble establishments, and favored both Hereford and Lancaster's belief that he was either the son or grandson of his companion.

"Ye are welcome, fair sirs," was the elder earl's kindly salutation, when his esquire had retired. "Who and what are ye, and what crave ye with me?"

"We are Scotsmen, an it so please you, noble lords," replied the old man; "followers and retainers of the house of Bruce, more particularly of him so lately fallen into your power."

"Then, by mine honor, my good friends, ye had done wiser to benefit by the liberty I promised and gave to those of his followers who escaped this devastating siege. Wherefore are ye here?"

"In the name of this poor child, to beseech a boon, my noble lord; for me, my calling permitteth my going where I list, unquestioned, unrestrained, and if I ask permission to abide with ye, Scotsman and follower of the Bruce as I am, I know ye will not say me nay."

"I would not, an ye besought such a boon, old man," answered the earl; "yet I would advise thee to tempt not thy fate, for even thy minstrel garb, an thou braggest of thy service to the Bruce, I cannot promise to be thy safeguard in Edward's court, whither I give ye notice I wend my way to-morrow's dawn. For this child, what wouldst thou—hath he no voice, no power of his own to speak?"

The aged minstrel looked at his charge, whose eyes were still bent on the floor; the heaving of his doublet denoted some internal emotion, but ere the old man could answer for him, he had made a few hasty steps forward, and bent his knee before Hereford.

"'Tis a simple boon I crave, my lord," he said, in a voice so peculiarly sweet, that it seemed to impart new beauty to his features; "a very simple boon, yet my lips tremble to ask it, for thou mayest deem it more weighty than it seemeth to me, and thou alone canst grant it."

"Speak it, fair child, whate'er it be," replied the earl, reassuringly, and laying his hand caressingly on the boy's head. "Thou art, methinks, over young to crave a boon we may not grant; too young, although a Scotsman, for Hereford to treat thee aught but kindly. What wouldst thou?"

"Permission to tend on my young lord, Sir Nigel Bruce," answered the boy, more firmly, and for the first time fixing the full gaze of his beautiful eyes on the earl's face. "Oh, my lord, what is there in that simple boon to bid thee knit thy brow as if it must not be?" he added, more agitated. "The noble Hereford cannot fear a child; or, if he doubted me, he cannot doubt the honor of his prisoner, an honor pure, unsullied as his own."

"Thou speakest not as the child thou seemest," replied Hereford, musingly; "and yet I know not, misery makes sager of us long ere the rose of youth hath faded. For this, thy boon, I know not how it may be granted; it is not usual to permit other than English attendants on our Scottish prisoners. Since Sir Niel Campbell's escape through the agency of his Scottish attendant, it hath been most strictly prohibited."

"Oh, do not, do not say me nay!" entreated the boy; "I ask but to share his imprisonment, to be with him, serve him, tend him. I ask no more liberty than is granted unto him; the rudest, coarsest fare, a little straw, or the bare ground beside his couch. I can do naught to give him freedom, and if I could, were there an open path before him—did I beseech him on my knees to fly—if he hath surrendered, as I have heard, to thee, rescue or no rescue, he would scorn my counsel, and abide thy prisoner still. Oh, no, no! I swear to thee I will do naught that can make thee regret thou hast granted an orphan's prayer."

"And who art thou that pleadeth thus?" inquired the earl, moved alike by the thrilling sweetness of his voice and the earnestness of his manner. "Thou must have some wondrous interest in him to prefer imprisonment with him to all the joys which liberty can give."

"And I have interest," answered the boy, fervently; "the interest of gratitude, and faithfulness, and love. An orphan, miserably an orphan—alone upon the wide earth—he hath protected, cherished, aye, and honored me with his confidence and love. He tended me in sorrow, and I would pour back into his noble heart all the love, the devotion he hath excited in mine. Little can I do, alas! naught but love and serve; yet, yet, I know he would not reject even this—he would let me love him still!"

"Grant the poor boy his boon," whispered Lancaster, hurriedly; "of a truth he moveth even me."

"Thine heart is of right true mettle, my child," said his colleague, even tenderly. "Yet bethink thee all thou must endure if I grant thy boon; not while with me, for there would be a foul blot upon my escutcheon did so noble a knight as Sir Nigel Bruce receive aught save respect and honor at my hands. But in this business I am but a tool, an agent; when once within the boundaries of Edward's court, Sir Nigel is no longer my prisoner; I must resign him to my sovereign; and then, I dare not give thee hope of gentle treatment either for thyself or him."

"I will brave it," answered the boy, calmly; "danger, aye, death in his service, were preferable to my personal liberty, with the torture of the thought upon me, that I shrunk from his side when fidelity and love were most needed."

"But that very faithfulness, that very love, my child, will make thy fate the harder; the scaffold and the axe, if not the cord," he added, in a low, stifled tone, "I fear me, will be his doom, despite his youth, his gallantry—all that would make *me* save him. Thou turnest pale at the bare mention of such things, how couldst thou bear to witness them?"

"Better than to think of them; to sit me down in idle safety and feel that he hath gone forth to this

horrible doom, and I have done naught to soothe and tend him on his way," replied the boy, firmly, though his very lip blanched at Hereford's words. "But must these things be? Is Edward so inexorable?"

"Aye, unto all who thwart him now," said the earl; "there is no hope for any of the race of Bruce. Be advised, then, gentle boy, retain thy freedom while thou mayest."

"No, no!" he answered, passionately, "Oh, do not seek to fright me from my purpose; do not think aught of me, save but to grant my boon, and oh, I will bless thee, pray for thee to my dying hour! thou wilt, I know thou wilt."

"I were no father could I refuse thee, my poor child," he replied, with earnest tenderness. "Alas! I fear me thou hast asked but increase of misery, yet be it as thou list. And yet," he added, after a brief pause, during which the boy had sprung from his knee, with an inarticulate cry of joy, and flung himself into the minstrel's arms, "Sir Nigel hath resolutely refused the attendance of any of his former followers, who would willingly have attended him to England. Hast thou so much influence, thinkest thou, to change his purpose in thy favor?"

"I know not," answered the boy, timidly; "yet an it please your noble lordship to permit my pleading mine own cause without witness, I may prevail, as I have done before."

"Be it so, then," replied the earl. "And now, ere we part, I would bid thee remember I have trusted thee; I have granted that to thee, without *condition*, with perfect liberty of action, which to others could only have been granted on their surrendering themselves, rescue or no rescue, even as thy master. I have done this, trusting to that noble faithfulness, the candor and honesty of youth, which hath breathed forth in all that thou hast said. Let me not repent it. And now, Hugo de l'Orme," he called aloud, but Lancaster himself declared his intention of conducting the boy to Sir Nigel's tent, and the esquire was consequently dismissed; but ere they departed, the boy turned once more to the aged minstrel.

"And thou—whither goest thou?" he said, in low yet thrilling tones. "My more than father, thou hast seen thy child's earnest wish fulfilled; that for which thou didst conduct me hither is accomplished; yet ere I say farewell, tell me—oh, tell me, whither goest thou?"

"I know not," answered the old man, struggling with unexpressed emotion; "yet think not of me, my child, I shall be free, be safe, untouched by aught of personal ill, while young and lovely ones, for whom it would be bliss to die, are crushed and bleeding in their spring; the mountains, and rocks, and woods, yet unstained with blood, call on me to return, and be at rest within their caves. The love I bear to thee and him thou seekest hath yet a louder voice to bid me follow ye. I know not whither I shall go, yet an my vision telleth that thou needst my aid, I shall not be far from thee. Farewell, my child; and ye, true-hearted lords, the blessing of an aged man repay ye for the kindly deed this day that ye have done." He pressed the boy in his arms, reverentially saluted the earls, and passed from the tent as he spoke.

A few words passed between the warriors, and then Lancaster desired the page to follow him. In silence they proceeded through the camp, avoiding the more bustling parts, where the soldiery were evidently busied in preparing for the morrow's march, and inclining towards the wooded bank of the river. The eye of the Earl of Lancaster had scarcely moved from the page during his interview with Hereford, though the boy, engrossed in his own feelings, had failed to remark it. He now glanced rapidly and searchingly round him, and perceiving the ground perfectly clear, not a soldier visible, he suddenly paused in his hasty stride, and laying his hand heavily on the boy's shoulder, said, in a deep, impressive voice, "I know not who or what thou art, but I love thy master, and know that he is ill at ease, not from captivity, but from uncertainty as to the fate of one beloved. If it be, as I suspect, in thy power entirely to remove this uneasiness, be cautioned, and whoever thou mayest be, let not one in this camp, from the noble Earl of Hereford himself to the lowest soldier, suspect thou art other than thou seemest—a faithful page. The rage of Edward is deadly, and all who bear the name of Bruce, be it male or female, will suffer from that wrath. Tell this to thy lord. I ask not his confidence nor thine, nay, I would refuse it were it offered—I would know no more than my own thoughts, but I honor him, aye, and from my very heart I honor thee! Hush! not a word in answer; my speech is rude, but my heart is true; and now a few steps more and we are there," and without waiting for reply he turned suddenly, and the page found himself in the very centre of the camp, near the entrance of a small pavilion, before which two sentinels were stationed, fully armed, and pacing up and down their stated posts; the pennon of Hereford floated from the centre staff, above the drapery, marking the tent and all its appurtenances peculiarly the earl's. The watchword was exchanged, and the sentinels lowered their arms on recognizing one of their leaders.

"Let this boy have egress and ingress from and to this tent, unquestioned and unmolested," he said; "he has the Earl of Hereford's permission, nay, commands, to wait on Sir Nigel Bruce. His business lieth principally with him; but if he hath need to quit his side, he is to pass free. Report this to your comrades." The soldiers bowed in respectful acquiescence. "For thee, young man, this toy will give thee free passage where thou listeth, none shall molest thee; and now, farewell—God speed thee." He unclasped a ruby brooch, curiously set in antique gold, from his collar, and placed it in the boy's hand.

"Dost thou not enter?" asked the page, in a voice that quivered, and the light of the torches falling full on his face disclosed to Lancaster a look of such voiceless gratitude, it haunted him for many a long day.

"No," he said, half smiling, and in a lower voice; "hast thou forgotten thy cause was to be pleaded without witness? I have not, if thou hast. I will see thy noble master ere he depart, not now; thou wilt, I trust me, take him better comfort than I could."

He lifted the hangings as he spoke, and the boy passed in, his heart beating well-nigh to suffocation as he did so. It was in a small compartment leading to the principal chamber of the tent he found himself at first, and Sir Nigel was not there. With a fleet, yet noiseless movement, he drew aside the massive curtain, let it fall again behind him, and stood unperceived in the presence of him he sought.

The brow of Sir Nigel rested on his hand, his attitude was as one bowed and drooping 'neath despondency; the light of the taper fell full upon his head, bringing it out in beautiful profile. It was not his capture alone which had made him thus, the boy felt and knew; the complicated evils which attended his king and country in his imprisonment were yet not sufficient to crush that spirit to the earth. It was some other anxiety, some yet nearer woe; there had been many strange rumors afloat, both of Sir Nigel's bridal and the supposed fate of that bride, and the boy, though he knew them false, aye, and that the victim of Jean Roy was a young attendant of Agnes, who had been collecting together the trinkets of her mistress, to save them from the pillage which would attend the conquest of the English, and had been thus mistaken by the maniac—the boy, we say, though he knew this, had, instead of denying it, encouraged the report, and therefore was at no loss to discover his master's woe. He advanced, knelt down, and in a trembling, husky voice, addressed him. "My lord—Sir Nigel."

The young knight started, and looked at the intruder, evidently without recognizing him. "What wouldst thou?" he said, in a tone somewhat stern. "Who art thou, thus boldly intruding on my privacy? Begone, I need thee not!"

"The Earl of Hereford hath permitted me to tend thee, follow thee," answered the page in the same subdued voice. "My gracious lord, do not thou refuse me."

"Tend me—follow me! whither—to the scaffold? Seek some other master, my good boy. I know thee not, and can serve thee little, and need no earthly aid. An thou seekest noble service, go follow Hereford; he is a generous and knightly lord."

"But I am Scotch, my lord, and would rather follow thee to death than Hereford to victory."

"Poor child, poor child!" repeated Nigel, sadly. "I should know thee, methinks, an thou wouldst follow me so faithfully, and yet I do not. What claim have I upon thy love?"

"Dost thou *not* know me, Nigel?" The boy spoke in his own peculiarly sweet and most thrilling voice, and raising his head, fixed his full glance upon the knight.

A wild cry burst from Nigel's lips, he sprang up, gazed once again, and in another moment the page and knight had sprung into each other's arms; the arms of the former were twined round the warrior's neck, and Sir Nigel had bent down his lordly head; burning tears and impassioned kisses were mingled on the soft cheek that leaned against his breast.

CHAPTER XXI.

The ancient town of Berwick-upon-Tweed, associated as it is with Scottish and English history from the time these two kingdoms had a name, presented a somewhat different aspect in the year 1307 to that of the present day. The key to both countries, it was ever a scene of struggle, unless the sister kingdoms chanced to be at peace, an event in the middle ages of rare occurrence, and whoever was its fortunate possessor was undeniably considered as the greater power. Since the death of Alexander it had been captured no less than three times by Edward in 1296, by Wallace the succeeding year, and recaptured by the English the following spring. To Edward, consequently, it now belonged, and many and fearful had been the sanguinary executions its walls had beheld. Its streets had been deluged with noble Scottish blood; its prisons filled with the nobles of Scotland; even high-minded women, who by their countenance and faithfulness had given a yet higher tone to patriotism and valor, were said to be there immured. It might have been termed not alone the key, but the dungeon and grave of Scotland; and many a noble spirit which had never quailed in the battle's front, shrunk back appalled as it neared those dismal walls.

In the time of Edward, the fortifications, though merely consisting of a deep moat and wooden palisades, instead of the stone wall still remaining, inclosed a much larger space than the modern town. A magnificent castle, with its "mounts, rampiers, and flankers," its towers, walls, and courts, crowned an easy ascent overhanging the Tweed, and was at this period peopled by a powerful garrison, filled with immense stores, both of arms, artillery, and provisions, and many unhappy prisoners, who from their lonely turrets could look beyond the silver Tweed on their own beautiful land, their hearts burning with the vain desire to free her from her chains. Both square and round towers guarded the palisades and moat surrounding the town, which presented a goodly collection of churches, hospitals, dwelling-houses, stores, and monastic buildings; from all of which crowds were continually passing and repassing on their several ways, and forming altogether a motley assemblage of knights, nobles, men-at-arms, archers, the various orders of

monks, the busy leech from the hospital, the peaceful burgher, the bustling storekeeper, and artisan, noble dames and pretty maidens—all in the picturesque costumes of the day, jostling one another, unconscious of the curious effect they each assisted to produce, and ever and anon came the trampling of fiery steeds. It was a rich, thriving, bustling town, always presenting curious scenes of activity, at present apparently under some excitement, which the gay knights and their followers tended not a little to increase.

The popular excitement had, strange to say, been confined for an unusually long time to one subject. Orders had been received from King Edward for the erection of an extraordinary cage or tower, curiously worked in stone and iron, on the very highest turret of the castle, visible to every eye, of a circular form, with pyramidal points, supporting gilded balls, giving it the appearance, when completed, of a huge coronet or crown. It was barred and cross-barr'd with iron on all sides, effectually preventing egress from within, but exposing its inmate, whoever that might be, to every passer-by. The impatient king had commanded several of the artisans employed in its erection to be thrown into prison, because it was not completed fast enough to please him; but, despite his wrath and impatience, the work of fashioning the iron, wood, and stone, as he required, occasioned them to proceed but slowly, and it was now, three months after the royal order had been given, only just completed, and firmly fixed on the principal turret of the castle. Day after day the people flocked to gaze and marvel for whom it could be intended, and when it would be occupied; their thoughts only turned from it by the intelligence that the Earl of Hereford, with some Scottish prisoners of high rank, was within four-and-twenty hours' march of the town, and was there to deliver up his captives to the seneschal of the castle, the Earl of Berwick. At the same time rumors were afloat, that the prisoner for whom that cage had been erected was, under a strong guard, advancing from Carlisle, and likely to encounter Hereford at the castle gates.

The popular excitement increased threefold; the whole town seemed under the influence of a restless fever, utterly preventing the continuance of their usual avocations, or permitting them to rest quiet in their houses. Crowds filled the streets, and pressed and fumed to obtain places by the great gates and open squares of the castle, through which both parties must pass. That wind, rain, and sunshine alternately ruled the day, was a matter of small importance; nor did it signify that English soldiers were returning victorious, with Scottish prisoners, being a thing now of most common occurrence. Before the day was over, however, they found anticipation for once had been less marvellous than reality, and stranger things were seen and heard than they had dreamed of.

From sunrise till noon they waited and watched, and waxed impatient in vain. About that time trumpets and drums were heard from the south, and there was a general rush towards the bridge, and hearts beat high in expectancy of they knew not what, as a gallant band of English archers and men-at-arms, headed by some few knights, were discovered slowly and solemnly advancing from the Carlisle road. Where, and who was the prisoner? A person of some consequence, of dangerous influence it must be, else why had the king made such extraordinary provision for confinement? There were not wanting suggestions and guesses, and wondrous fancies; for as yet there was such a close guard in the centre of the cavalcade, that the very person of the prisoner could not be distinguished. Nay, there were some who ventured to hint and believe it might be the excommunicated Earl of Carrick himself. It was most likely, for whom else could the cage, so exactly like a crown, be intended? and there were many who vaunted the wise policy of Edward, at having hit on such an expedient for lowering his rival's pride. Others, indeed, declared the idea was all nonsense; it was not likely he would incur such expense, king as he was, merely to mortify a traitor he had sworn to put to death. The argument waxed loud and warm. Meanwhile the cavalcade had crossed the bridge, been received through the south gate, and in the same slow and solemn pomp proceeded through the town.

"By all the saints, it is only a woman!" was the information shouted by an eager spectator, who had clambered above the heads of his fellows to obtain the first and most coveted view. His words were echoed in blank amazement.

"Aye, clothed in white like a penitent, with her black hair streaming all over her shoulders, without any covering on her head at all, and nothing but a thin, torn sandal on her bare feet; and the knights look black as thunder, as if they like not the business they are engaged in."

It was even so. There was an expression on the face of the officers impossible to be misunderstood; frowningly, darkly, they obeyed their sovereign's mandate, simply because they dared not disobey; but there was not one among them who would not rather have sought the most deadly front of battle than thus conduct a woman, aye, and a most noble one, unto her prison. The very men, rude, stern, as they mostly were, shared this feeling; they guarded her with lowered heads and knitted brows; and if either officer or man-at-arms had to address her, it was with an involuntary yet genuine movement and manner of respect that little accorded with their present relative position. The crowds looked first at the cavalcade and marvelled, then at the prisoner, and they did not marvel more.

Clad as she was, in white, flowing garments, very similar to those worn by penitents, her head wholly undefended from cold or rain even by a veil; her long, luxuriant, jet-black hair, in which as yet, despite of care and woe, no silver thread had mingled, falling round her from her noble brow, which shone forth from its shade white as snow, and displaying that most perfect face, which anguish had only chiselled into paler, purer marble; it could not rob it of its beauty, that beauty which is the holy emanation of the soul, *that* lingered still with power to awe the rudest heart, to

bow the proudest in voluntary respect.

The sovereign of England had commanded this solemn procession and its degrading accompaniments to humble, to crush to dust, the woman who had dared defy his power, but it was himself alone he humbled. As she walked there, surrounded by guards, by gazing hundreds, on foot, and but protected from the flinty ground by a thin sandal, her step was as firm and unflinching, her attitude, her bearing as dignified, as calmly, imposingly majestic as when, in the midst of Scotland's patriots, she had placed the crown on the Bruce's head. Edward sought to debase her, but she was not debased; to compel her to regret the part that she had acted, but she gloried in it still; to acknowledge his power—but in all he failed.

Calmly and majestically the Countess of Buchan proceeded on her way, neither looking to the right or left, nor evincing by the slightest variation of countenance her consciousness of the many hundreds gazing on, or that they annoyed or disturbed her; her spirit was wrapt in itself. We should assert falsehood did we say she did not suffer; she did, but it was a mother's agony heightened by a patriot's grief. She believed her son, who had been in truth the idol of her mourning heart, had indeed fallen. Her Agnes was not amongst the queen's train, of whose captivity she had been made aware, though not allowed speech with them. Where was *she*—what would be her fate? She only knew her as a lovely, fragile flower, liable to be crushed under the first storm; and pictured her, rudely severed from Nigel, perchance in the hands of some lawless spoiler, and heart-broken, dying. Shuddering with anguish, she thought not of her own fate—she thought but of her children, of her country; and if King Robert did enter these visions, it was simply as her sovereign, as one whose patriotism would yet achieve the liberty of Scotland; but there was a dimness even o'er that dream, for the figure of her noble boy was gone, naught but a blank—dull, shapeless—occupied that spot in the vision of the future, which once his light had filled.

The castle-yard was at length gained, and a half and some change in the line of march ensued; the officers and men formed in a compact crescent, leaving the countess, a herald, trumpeters, and some of the highest knights, in front. So intense was the interest of the crowd at this moment, that they did not heed the rapid advance of a gallant body of horse and foot from the north, except to rail at the pressure they occasioned in forcing their way through. They gained the castle-yard at length, and there halted, and fell back in utter astonishment at the scene they witnessed.

The herald had drawn a parchment from his belt, and made a step forward as if to speak. The knights, in sullen silence, leant upon their sheathed swords, without even glancing at their prisoner, who appeared far the most composed and dignified of all present, and, after a brief pause, words to this effect were distinguished by the crowd.

"To our loyal and loving subjects of both North and South Britain, Edward, by the grace of God, King of England, Wales, France, and Scotland, greeting. Whereas Isabella, born of Fife, and late of Buchan, which latter she hath, by foul dishonor and utter disregard of marriage vows, now forfeited, hath done traitorously and disloyally alike to her sovereign lord the king, and to her gracious lord and husband, John, Earl of Buchan, whom, for his fidelity, we hold in good favor. As she hath not struck by the sword, so she shall not perish by the sword; but for her lawless conspiracy, she shall be shut up in a stone and iron chamber, circular as the crown she gave, in this proclaiming to both countries her everlasting infamy. And this we do in mercy; for, whereas she deserveth death, we do remit the same, and give her time to repent her of her heinous crime.

"Given at our palace of Carlisle, this twenty-third day of February, in the year of our Lord and Saviour, one thousand three hundred and seven. God save the King!"

But the loyal ejaculation was not echoed, nay, the herald himself had read the proclamation, as if every word had been forced from him, and the eyes of every knight and soldier had been fixed upon the ground, as if shame rested on them rather than on their prisoner. A dead silence for a few minutes followed, broken only by some faint cries of "God save King Edward, and down with all traitors!" which seemed raised more to drown the groans which involuntarily burst forth, than as the echo of the heart. They dared not evince the faintest sign of disapproval, for they stood on precarious ground; a groan even might be punished by their irritable king as treachery; but there was one present who cared little for this charge. Scarcely had the words passed the herald's lips, before a young man, whose bare head and lack of all weapons would have proclaimed him one of the Earl of Hereford's prisoners, had not the attention of all been turned from him by the one engrossing object, now snatching a sword from a soldier near him, sprung from his horse, and violently attacking the herald, exclaimed, in a voice of thunder—

"Liar and slave! thinkest thou there is none near to give the lie to thy foul slanders—none to defend the fair fame, the stainless honor of this much-abused lady? Dastard and coward, fit mouthpiece of a dishonored and blasphemous tyrant! go tell him, his prisoner—aye, Nigel Bruce—thrusts back his foul lies into his very teeth. Ha! coward and slave, wouldst thou shun me?"

A scene of indescribable confusion now ensued. The herald, a man not much in love with war, stood cowering and trembling before his adversary, seeking to cover himself with his weapon, but, from his trembling hold, ineffectually. The stature of the youthful Scotsman appeared towering, as he stood over him with his uplifted sword, refusing to strike a defenceless man, but holding him with a gripe of iron; his cheek flushed crimson, his nostrils distended, for his soul was moved with a mightier, darker passion than had ever stirred its depths before. The soldiers of both parties, joined, too, by some from the castle—for a party headed by the Earl of Berwick

himself had attended to give countenance to the proclamation—rushed forward, but involuntarily fell back, awed for the moment by the mighty spirit of one man; the knights, roused from their sullen posture, looked much as if they would, if they dared, have left the herald to his fate. Hereford and Berwick at the same instant spurred forward their steeds, the one exclaiming, "Madman, let go your hold—you are tempting your own fate! Nigel, for the love of heaven! for the sake of those that love you, be not so rash!" the other thundering forth, "Cut down the traitor, an he will not loose his hold. Forward, cowardly knaves! will ye hear your king insulted, and not revenge it?—forward, I say! fear ye a single man?"

And numbers, spurred on by his words, dashed forward to obey him, but fearlessly Sir Nigel Bruce retained his hold with his left hand, and with his right grasped tighter his sword, and stood, with the fierce undaunted port of a lion lashed into fury, gazing on his foes; but ere he had crossed with the foremost weapons, a slight lad burst through the gathering crowd, and with a piercing shriek threw himself at his master's feet, and grasping his knees, seemed by his pleading looks, for his words were inaudible, imploring him to desist from his rashness. At the same moment another form pressed through the soldiers, her look, her mien compelling them involuntarily to open their ranks and give her passage. The sword of Nigel was in the act of falling on a second foe, the first lay at his feet, when his arm was caught in its descent, and Isabella of Buchan stood at his side.

"Forbear!" she said, in those rich impressive tones that ever forced obedience. "Nigel Bruce, brother of my sovereign, friend of my son, forbear! strike not one blow for me. Mine honor needs no defence by those that love me; my country will acquit me; the words of England's monarch, angered at a woman's defiance of his power, affect me not! Noble Nigel, excite not further wrath against thyself by this vain struggle for my sake; put up thy sword, ere it is forced from thee. Let go thy hold; this man is but an instrument, why wreak thy wrath on him? Must I speak, implore in vain? Nay, then, I do command thee!"

And those who gazed on her, as she drew that stately form to its full height, as they heard those accents of imperative command, scarce marvelled that Edward should dread her influence, woman as she was. Despite the increasing wrath on the Earl of Berwick's brow, the men waited to see the effect of these words. There was still an expression of ill-controlled passion on Nigel's features. He waited one moment when she ceased to speak, then slowly and deliberately shook the herald by the collar, and hurled him from his hold; snapped his sword in twain, and flinging it from him, folded his arms on his breast, and calmly uttering, "Pardon me, noble lady, mine honor were impugned had I suffered that dastardly villain to pass hence unpunished—let Edward act as he lists, it matters little now," waited with impenetrable resolve the rage he had provoked.

"Nigel, Nigel, rash, impetuous boy, what hast thou done?" exclaimed the countess, losing all mien and accent of command in the terror with which she clung round him, as if to protect him from all ill, in the tone and look of maternal tenderness with which she addressed him. "Why, why must it be my ill fate to hurl down increase of misery and danger on all whom I love?"

"Speak not so, noble lady, in mercy do not!" he whispered in reply; "keep that undaunted spirit shown but now, I can better bear it than this voice of anguish. And thou," he added, laying his hand on the shoulder of the boy, who still clung to his knees, as if fascinated there by speechless terror, and gazed alternately on him and the countess with eyes glazed almost in madness, "up, up; this is no place for thee. What can they do with me but slay—let them come on—better, far better than a scaffold!" but the boy moved not, Nigel spoke in vain.

The fate he dared seemed indeed threatening. Wrought well-nigh to phrensy at this daring insult to his sovereign, in whose acts of cruelty and oppression he could far better sympathize than in his more knightly qualities, the Earl of Berwick loudly and fiercely called on his soldiers to advance and cut down the traitor, to bring the heaviest fetters and bear him to the lowest dungeon. The men, roused from their stupor of amaze, rushed on impetuously to obey him; their naked swords already gleamed round Nigel; the Countess of Buchan was torn from his side, her own especial guards closing darkly around her; but vainly did they seek to unclasp the convulsive grasp of the boy from Nigel, he neither shrieked nor spake, but he remained in that one posture, rigid as stone.

"Fiends! monsters! would ye, dare ye touch a boy, a child as this!" shouted Nigel, struggling with herculean strength to free himself from the rude grasp of the soldiers, as he beheld the sharp steel pointed at the breast of the boy, to compel him to unloose his hold. "Villains, cowards! bear back and let me speak with him," and nerved to madness by the violence of his emotions, he suddenly wrenched himself away, the rapidity of the movement throwing one of the men to the earth, and bent over the boy; again they rushed forward, they closed upon him, they tore away the lad by force of numbers, and flung him senseless on the earth; they sought to bear away their prisoner, but at that moment Hereford, who had been parleying loudly and wrathfully with Berwick, spurred his charger in the very midst of them, and compelled them to bear back.

"Back, back!" he exclaimed, making a path for himself with his drawn sword; "how dare ye thrust yourselves betwixt me and my lawful prisoner, captive of my sword and power? what right have ye to dare detain him? Let go your hold, none but the men whose prowess gained this gallant prize shall guard him till my sovereign's will be known. Back, back, I say!"

"Traitor!" retorted Berwick, "he is no longer your prisoner. An insult offered to King Edward, in the loyal citadel of Berwick, in my very presence, his representative as I stand, shall meet with fit retribution. He hath insulted his sovereign by act and word, and I attach him of high treason and

will enforce my charge. Forward, I say!"

"And I say back!" shouted the Earl of Hereford; "I tell thee, proud earl, he is my prisoner, and mine alone. Thou mayest vaunt thy loyalty, thy representation of majesty, as thou listeth, mine hath been proved at the good sword's point, and Edward will deem me no traitor because I protect a captive, who hath surrendered himself a knight to a knight, rescue or no rescue, from this unseemly violence. I bandy no more words with such as thee; back! the first man that dares lay hold on him I chastise with my sword."

"Thou shalt repent this!" muttered Berwick, with a suppressed yet terrible oath, but he dared proceed no further.

A signal from their leader brought up all Hereford's men, who, in compact order and perfect silence, surrounded their prisoner. Sternly the earl called for a pair of handcuffs, and with his own hands fastened them on his captive. "It grieves me," he said, "to see a brave man thus manacled, but thine own mad act hath brought it on thyself. And now, my Lord of Berwick, an it please thee to proceed, we demand admission to thy citadel in King Edward's name. Bring up the other prisoners."

Concealing his wrath with difficulty, the Earl of Berwick and his attendants dashed forward over the drawbridge into the castle at full speed, closing the gates and lowering the portcullis after them. After a brief space, the portcullis was again raised, the gates flung wide apart, and the men-at-arms were discerned lining either side, in all due form and homage to the officers of their sovereign. During the wrathful words passing between the two earls, the attention of the crowd had been given alternately to them and to the Countess of Buchan, who had utterly forgotten her own precarious situation in anxiety for Nigel, and in pity for the unfortunate child, who had been hurled by the soldiers close to the spot where she stood.

"Do not leave him there, he will be trampled on," she said, imploringly, to the officers beside her. "He can do no harm, poor child, Scotch though he be. A little water, only bring me a little water, and he will speedily recover."

All she desired was done, the boy was tenderly raised and brought within the circle of her guards, and laid on the ground at her feet. She knelt down beside him, chafed his cold hands within her own, and moistened his lips and brow with water. After a while his scattered senses returned, he started up in a sitting posture, and gazed in wild inquiry around him, uttering a few inarticulate words, and then saying aloud, "Sir Nigel, my lord, my—my—master, where is he? oh! let me go to him; why am I here?"

"Thou shalt go to him, poor boy, as soon as thy strength returns; an they have let thee follow him from Scotland, surely they will not part ye now," said the countess soothingly, and her voice seemed to rouse the lad into more consciousness. He gazed long in her face, with an expression which at that time she could not define, but which startled and affected her, and she put her arm round him and kissed his brow. A convulsive almost agonized sob broke from the boy's breast, and caused his slight frame to shake as with an ague, then suddenly he knelt before her, and, in accents barely articulate, murmured—

"Bless me, oh bless me!" while another word seemed struggling for utterance, but checked with an effort which caused it to die on his lips in indistinct murmurs.

"Bless thee, poor child! from my very heart I do, if the blessing of one sorrowing and afflicted as myself can in aught avail thee. For thy faithfulness to thy master, I bless thee, for it speaketh well for thee, and that face would bid me love and bless thee for thyself, I know not wherefore. Good angels keep and bless thee, gentle boy, thou hast Isabella's prayers, and may they give thee peace."

"Pray for me, aye, pray for me," repeated the boy, in the same murmured tones. He clasped her hands in both his, he pressed them again and again to his lips, repeated sobs burst from his laboring breast, and then he sprung up, darted away, and stood at Sir Nigel's side, just as the Earl of Hereford had commanded his men to wheel a little to the right, to permit the Countess of Buchan, her guards and officers, free passage over the drawbridge, and first entrance within the fortress.

The brow of this noble son of chivalry darkened as, sitting motionless on his tall steed, his gaze rested on the noble woman whom it had originally been his painful charge to deliver over to his sovereign. He had not dreamed of a vengeance such as this. He could not have believed a change so dark as this had fallen on the character of a sovereign whom he still loved, still sought to admire and revere, and his spirit sunk 'neath the sorrow this conviction caused. Almost involuntarily, as the procession slowly proceeded, and the countess passed within three paces of his horse's head, he bent his lordly brow in silent homage; she saw it and returned it, more effected by the unfeigned commiseration on that warrior's face, than at aught which had occurred to shame and humble her that morning.

A brief pause took place in the movements of the officers and their prisoners, when they reached the great hall of the castle. For a brief minute Lady Seaton and the Countess of Buchan had met, had clasped hands, in sad, yet eager greeting. "My child, mine Agnes?" had been by the latter hurriedly whispered, and the answer, "Safe, I trust, safe," just permitted to reach her ear, when roughly and fiercely the Earl of Berwick summoned the Lady of Buchan to proceed to the chamber appointed for her use. Those simple words had, however, removed a load of anxiety

from her mind, for they appeared to confirm what she had sometimes permitted herself to hope, that Agnes had shared King Robert's exile, under the care of Lady Campbell; prevailed on to do so, perchance, by the entreaties of Nigel, who in all probability had deemed that course, though one of hardship, less perilous than remaining with him. She hoped indeed against her better judgment, for though she knew not the depth, the might of her daughter's feelings, she knew it must have been a terrible trial so to part, and she absolutely shuddered when she thought of the whelming blow it would be to that young heart when the fate of her betrothed was ascertained.

Lady Seaton had spoken as she believed. No communication had been permitted between the prisoners on their way to England; indeed, from Sir Christopher's wounded and exhausted state, he had travelled more leisurely in a litter, always in the rear of the earl's detachment, and occupied by her close attendance upon him, his wife had scarcely been aware of the young page ever in attendance on her brother, or deemed him, if she did observe him, a retainer of Hereford's own. There was so much of fearful peril and misery hovering over her in her husband's fate, that it was not much wonder her thoughts lingered there more than on Agnes, and that she was contented to believe as she had spoken, that she at least was safe.

Night fell on the town of Berwick. Silence and darkness had come on her brooding wings; the varied excitement of the day was now but a matter of wondering commune round the many blazing hearths, where the busy crowds of the morning had now gathered. Night came, with her closing pall, her softened memories, her sleeping visions, and sad waking dreams. She had come, alike to the mourned and mourner, the conqueror and his captive, the happy and the wretched. She had found the Earl of Berwick pacing up and down his stately chamber, his curtained couch unsought, devising schemes to lower the haughty pride of the gallant warrior whom he yet feared. She had looked softly within the room where that warrior lay, and found him, too, sleepless, but not from the same dark dreams. He grieved for his sovereign, for the fate of one noble spirit shrined in a woman's form, and restless and fevered, turned again and again within his mind how he might save from a yet darker doom the gallant youth his arms had conquered. And not alone on them did night look down. She sent her sweet, reviving influence, on the rays of a bright liquid star, through the narrow casement which gave light to the rude unfurnished chamber where Sir Nigel Bruce and his attendant lay. They had not torn that poor faithful child from his side. Hereford's last commands had been that they should not part them, and there they now lay; and sleep, balmy sleep had for them descended on the wings of night, hovering over that humble pallet of straw, when from the curtained couch of power, the downy bed of luxury, she fled. There they lay; but it was the boy who lay on the pallet of straw, his head pillowed by the arm of the knight, who sat on a wooden settle at his side. He had watched for a brief space those troubled slumbers, but as they grew calmer and calmer, he had pressed one light kiss on the soft yielding cheek, and then leant his head on his breast, and he too slept—even in sleep tending one beloved.

And in the dark, close sleeping-chamber within the prison cage of the noble Countess of Buchan, night too looked pityingly. Sleep indeed was not there; it had come and gone, for in a troubled slumber a dream had come of Agnes, and she had woken to think upon her child, and pray for her; and as she prayed, she thought of her promise to the poor boy who had so strangely moved her. She could not trace how one thought had sprung from the other, nor why in the darkness his features so suddenly flashed before her; but so it was. His face seemed to gleam upon her with the same strange, indefinable expression which, even at the time, had startled her; and then a sudden flash appeared to illumine that darkness of bewilderment. She started up from her reclining posture; she pressed both hands on her throbbing eyeballs; a wild, sickening yearning took possession of her whole soul; and then she felt, in its full bitterness, she was a chained and guarded prisoner and the deep anguish of her spirit found vent in the convulsive cry—

"Fool, fool that I was—my child! my child!"

CHAPTER XXII.

Leaving the goodly town of Berwick and its busy citizens, its castle and its prisoners, for a brief space, we must now transport our readers to a pleasant chamber overlooking the Eden, in the castle of Carlisle, now a royal residence; a fact which, from its numerous noble inmates, its concourse of pages, esquires, guards, and various other retainers of a royal establishment, the constant ingress and egress of richly-attired courtiers, the somewhat bustling, yet deferential aspect of the scene, a very cursory glance would have been all-sufficient to prove.

It had been with a full determination to set all obstacles, even disease itself, at defiance, King Edward, some months before, had quitted Winchester, and directed his march towards the North, vowing vengeance on the rebellious and disaffected Scots, and swearing death alone should prevent the complete and terrible extermination of the traitors. He had proceeded in this spirit to Carlisle, disregarding the threatening violence of disease, so sustained by the spirit of disappointed ambition within as scarcely to be conscious of an almost prostrating increase of weakness and exhaustion. He had determined to make a halt of some weeks at Carlisle, to wait the effect of the large armies he had sent forward to overrun Scotland, and to receive intelligence of the measures they had already taken. Here, then, disease, as if enraged that he should have borne up so long, that his spirit had mastered even her, convened the whole powers of suffering,

and compelled him not alone to acknowledge, but to writhe beneath her sway. His whole frame was shaken; intolerable pains took possession of him, and though the virulence of the complaint was at length so far abated as to permit him a short continuance of life, he could never sit his horse again, or even hope to carry on in his own person his plans for the total reduction of Scotland. But as his frame weakened, as he became the victim of almost continual pain, all the darker and fiercer passions of his nature gained yet more fearful ascendancy. The change had been some time gathering, but within the last twelve months its effects were such, that his noblest, most devoted knights, blind as their affection for his person rendered them, could scarce recognize in the bloodthirsty, ambitious tyrant they now beheld their gallant, generous, humane, and most chivalric sovereign, who had won golden opinions from all sorts and conditions of men; who had performed the duties of a son and husband so as to fix the eyes of all Europe on him in admiration; who had swayed the sceptre of his mighty kingdom with such a powerful and fearless hand, it had been long since England had acquired such weight in the scale of kingdoms. Wise, moderate, merciful even in strict justice as he had been, could it be that ambition had wrought such change; that disease had banished every feeling from his breast, save this one dark, fiend-like passion, for the furtherance of which, or in revenge of its disappointment, noble blood flowed like water—the brave, the good, the young, the old, the noble and his follower, alike fell before the axe or the cord of the executioner? Could it indeed be that Edward, once such a perfect, glorious scion of chivalry, had now shut up his heart against its every whisper, lest it should interfere with his brooding visions of revenge; forgot each feeling, lest he should involuntarily sympathize with the noble and knightly spirit of the patriots of Scotland, whom he had sworn to crush? Alas! it was even so; ruthless and tyrannical, the nobles he had once favored, once loved, now became odious to him, for their presence made him painfully conscious of the change within himself; and he now associated but with spirits dark, fierce, cruel as his own—men he would once have shunned, have banished from his court, as utterly unworthy of his favor.

It was, then, in a royally-furnished chamber, pleasantly overlooking the river Eden and the adjoining country, that about a week after the events narrated in the preceding chapter, King Edward reclined. His couch was softly and luxuriously cushioned, and not a little art had been expended in the endeavor to lighten his sufferings, and enable him to rest at ease. The repeated contraction of his countenance, however, betrayed how impotent was even luxury when brought in contact with disease. The richly-furred and wadded crimson velvet robe could not conceal the attenuation of his once peculiarly fine and noble form; his great length of limb, which had gained him, and handed down to posterity, the inelegant surname of Longshanks, rendered his appearance yet more gaunt and meagre; while his features, which once, from the benignity and nobleness of his character, had been eminently handsome, now pale, thin, and pointed, seemed to express but the one passion of his soul—its gratification of revenge. His expansive brow was now contracted and stern, rendered more so perhaps by the lack of hair about the temples; he wore a black velvet cap, circled coronet-wise with large diamonds from which a white feather drooped to his shoulder. There was a slight, scarcely visible, sneer resting on his features that morning, called forth perhaps by his internal scorn of the noble with whom he had deigned a secret conference; but the Earl of Buchan had done him good service, had ably forwarded his revenge, and he would not therefore listen to that still voice of scorn.

"Soh! she is secure, and your desires on that head accomplished, sir earl," he said, in continuance of some subject they had been discussing. "Thou hast done us good service, and by mine honor, it would seem we have done your lordship the same."

"Aye," muttered the earl, whose dark features had not grown a whit more amiable since we last beheld him; "aye, we are both avenged."

"How, sir I darest thou place thyself on a par with me?" angrily retorted Edward; "thinkest thou the sovereign of England can have aught in common with such as thee? Isabella of Buchan, or of Fife, an thou likest that better, is debased, imprisoned, because she hath dared insult our person, defy our authority, to act treasonably and mischievously, and sow dissension and rebellion amid our Scottish subjects—for this she is chastised; an it gratify your matrimonial revenge, I am glad on't; but Edward of England brooks no equality with Comyn of Buchan, though it be but equality in revenge."

Buchan bent his knee, and humbly apologized.

"Well, well, let it be; thou hast served us too faithfully to be quarrelled with, for perchance unintentional irreverence. The imposition of her child's murder, when he lives and is well, is the coinage of thine own brain, sir earl, and thou must reconcile it to thine own conscience. We hold ourselves exempt from all such peculiar mercy, for we scarce see its wisdom." There was a slight bitterness in Edward's tone.

"Wisdom, my sovereign liege, deemest thou there is no wisdom in revenge?" and the brow of the earl grew dark with passion, as he spoke. "Have I naught to punish, naught to avenge in this foul traitress—naught, that her black treachery has extended to my son, my heir, even to his tender years? I would not have her death; no, let her live and feed on the belief that her example, her counsels have killed her own child; that had it not been for her, he might have lived, been prosperous, aye, and happy now. Is there no wisdom in such revenge? and if there be none, save that which my own heart feels, I could give your grace another and a better reason for this proceeding."

"Speak it, in St. George's name," replied the king; "of a truth thou art of most clear conception in all schemes of vengeance. I might have thought long enough, ere I could have lighted on such as

this. What more?"

"Simply, your grace, that by encouraging a little while the report of his death, his friends in Scotland will forget that he ever existed, and make no effort for his rescue; which belief, wild and unfounded as it is, I imagine supports him in his strenuous determination to live and die a traitor to your highness. I have no hatred to the boy; nay, an he would let me, could love and be proud of him, now his mother cannot cross my path, and would gladly see him devoted, as myself, to the interests of your grace. Nor do I despair of this; he is very young, and his character cannot be entirely formed. He will tire in time of dark and solitary confinement, and gladly accept any conditions I may offer."

"Gives he any proof as yet of this yielding mood?"

"By mine honor, no, your highness; he is firm and steadfast as the ocean rock."

"Then wherefore thinkest thou he will change in time?"

"Because as yet, my gracious liege, the foul, treacherous principles of his mother have not ceased to work. An entire cessation of intercourse between them will show him his mistake at last, and this could never be, did she know he lived. Imprisoned, guarded as she is, she would yet find some means of communication with him, and all my efforts would be of no avail. Let a year roll by, and I will stake my right hand that Alan of Buchan becomes as firm a supporter and follower of King Edward as ever his father was. Is the boy more than mortal, and does your grace think life, liberty, riches, honors, will not weigh against perpetual imprisonment and daily thoughts of death?"

So spoke the Earl of Buchan, judging, as most men, others by himself, utterly unable to comprehend the high, glorious, self-devoted, patriotic spirit of his noble son. He persevered in his course of fiend-like cruelty, excusing it to his own conscience, if he had any, by the belief it would end but in his son's good—an end, indeed, he seldom thought of attaining; but there was something in the idea of a son, an heir, and one so prepossessing in appearance as Alan of Buchan, that touched his pride, the only point on which his flinty heart was vulnerable.

"So thou thinkest, sir earl?" resumed the king, who perhaps in his own secret soul did not entirely think with him. "Meanwhile the stripling may laugh thy parental care to scorn, by escaping from iron chains and stone walls, and seeking out the arch rebel Bruce, make up at the sword's point for lost time. Beware, sir earl, an he be taken again thus in arms against us, even thy loyal services will not save his head!"

"I should not even ask your grace's clemency," replied the earl, his features assuming a fearful expression as he spoke. "An he thus turned traitor again to his father's house, spurning mine and your grace's favor, to join the base murderer of his kinsman, he shall be no more to me than others, whose treason hath cost their heads; but I have no fear of this. He cannot escape, guarded as he is, by alike the most ruthless and the most faithful of my followers; and while there, if all else fail, I will publish that he lives, but so poison the ears of his rebel Scottish friends against him, he will not, dare not join them, and in his own despite, will be compelled to act as befitting his father's son. Trust me, my liege. To thy royal clemency I owe his life; be it my duty, then, to instil into him other principles than those which actuated him before."

"But your own character, my lord, meanwhile, care ye naught for the stain supposed to rest upon it? Thy plans sound wise, and we thank thee for thy loyalty; but we would not ye burdened your name with a deed not its own, an ye cared for the world's applause."

"Not a whit, not a whit, your highness; countenanced by your grace's favor, absolved in your opinion from the barbarity others charge me with, I care not for them, I have been too long mine own conscience-keeper to heed the whispers of the world," he added, his dark brows knitting closer as he spoke.

Edward smiled grimly. "Be it so, then," he said; "my Lord of Buchan, we understand each other. An that boy escapes and rejoins the traitors, and is taken, his head answers for it. An ye succeed in making him loyal as yourself, as eager a pursuer of the murderous traitor, Bruce, we will give thee the palm for policy and wisdom in our court, ourself not excepted. And now another question; it was reported Isabella of Buchan joined the rebel's court with her *two* children. Who and where is the second? we have heard but of one."

"A puny, spiritless wench, as I have heard, my liege; one little likely to affect your highness, and not worth the seeking."

"Nay, an she hath her mother's influence, we differ from thee, sir earl, and would rather see her within the walls of our court than in the traitor's train. I remember not her name amid those taken with the Bruce's wife. Hast inquired aught concerning her?"

"Not I, your grace," carelessly replied the earl; "of a truth, I had weightier thoughts than the detention or interest of a simple wench, who, if her mother has taught to forget me as her father, is not worth my remembering as a child."

"I give you joy of your most fatherly indifference, sir earl," answered the king, with an ill-suppressed sneer. "It would concern you little if she takes unto herself a husband midst your foes; the rebel Robert hath goodly brothers, and the feud between thy house and theirs may but impart a double enjoyment to the union."

The earl started, as if an adder had stung him. "She dare not do this thing," he said, fiercely; "she will not—she dare not. A thousand curses light upon her head even if she dreams it!"

"Nay, waste not thy breath in curses, good my lord, but up an prevent the very possibility of such a thing, an it move thee so deeply. I say not it is, but some such floating rumor has reached my ears, I can scarce trace how, save through the medium of our numerous prisoners."

"But how obtain information—where seek her? I pray you pardon me, your grace, but there are a thousand furies in the thought!" and scarcely could the consciousness of the royal presence restrain the rage which gathered on the swarthy features of the earl from finding vent in words.

"Nay, nay, my lord, let not your marvellous wisdom and sage indifference be so speedily at fault. An she be not in Margaret Bruce's train, that goodly dame may give thee some information. Seek her, and may be thou wilt learn more of this wench than thou hast since her birth. In pity to this sudden interest, we grant thee permission to visit these partners of treason in their respective convents, and learn what thou canst; an she be within thy reach, be advised, and find her a husband thyself, the best find most speedy means of eradicating her mother's counsels."

Buchan's reply was arrested on his lips by the entrance of the royal chamberlain, announcing that the Earl of Berwick had arrived in all haste from Berwick, and earnestly besought a few minutes' audience with his sovereign.

"Berwick!" repeated Edward, half raising himself in his surprise from his reclining posture. "Berwick! what the foul fiend brings him from his post at such a time? Bid him enter; haste, I charge thee."

His impatient command was speedily obeyed, The Earl of Berwick was close on the heels of the chamberlain, and now appeared, his lowly obeisance not concealing from the quick eye of his master that wrath, black as a thunder-cloud, was resting on his brow.

"How now," said the king, "what means this unseemly gear, sir earl? thou must have neither rested spur nor slackened rein, methinks, an thy garb tell truth; and wherefore seekest thou our presence in such fiery haste? Wouldst thou be private? My Lord of Buchan, thou hadst best follow our counsel ere thy interest cools."

"Nay, your grace, bid not yon noble earl depart to grant me hearing; I would speak before him, aye, and the whole court, were it needed. 'Tis but to lay the sword and mantle, with which your highness invested me as governor of the citadel of Berwick, at your grace's feet, and beseech you to accept my resignation of the same." With well-affected humility the Earl of Berwick unclasped his jewelled mantle, and kneeling down, laid it with his sheathed sword at King Edward's feet, remaining on his knee.

"Art craven, fool, or traitor?" demanded Edward, when his astonishment permitted words. "What means this? Speak out, and instantly; we are not wont to be thus trifled with. My Lord of Berwick, wherefore dost thou do this?"

"Not because I am a craven, good my liege," replied the nobleman, still on his knee, "for had I been so, King Edward's penetration would have discovered it ere he intrusted me with so great a charge—nor because I am a witless fool, unconscious of the high honor I thus tamely resign—and not because I am a traitor, gracious sovereign, for 'tis from insult and interruption in the arrest of a blasphemous traitor I am here."

"Insult—interruption!" fiercely exclaimed the king, starting up. "Who has dared—who loves his life so little as to do this? But speak on, speak on, we listen."

"Pardon me, your highness, I came to tender my resignation, not an accusation," resumed the wily earl, cautiously lashing his sovereign into fury, aware that it was much easier to gain what he wished in such moods than as he found him now. "I came but to beseech your highness to resume that which your own royal hands had given me. My authority trampled upon, my loyalty insulted, my zeal in your grace's service derided, my very men compelled, perforce of arms, to disobey me, and this by one high in your grace's estimation, nay, connected with your royal self. Surely, my gracious liege, I do but right in resigning the high honor your highness bestowed. I can have little merit to retain it, and such things be."

"But they shall not be, sir. As there is a God above us, they shall not be!" exclaimed the king, in towering wrath, and striking his hand on a small table of crystal near him with such violence as to shiver it to pieces. "By heaven and hell! they shall repent this, be it mine own son who hath been thus insolent. Speak out, I tell thee, as thou lovest thy life, speak out; drive me not mad by this cautiously-worded tale. Who hath dared trample on authority mine own hand and seal hath given—who is the traitor? Speak out, I charge thee!" and strengthened by his own passion, the king sate upright on his couch, clenching his hand till the blood sprung, and fixing his dark, fiery eyes on the earl. It was the mood he had tried for, and now artfully and speciously, with many additions, he narrated all that had passed the preceding day in the castle-yard of Berwick. Fiercer and fiercer waxed the wrath of the king.

"Fling him in the lowest dungeon, load him with the heaviest fetters hands can forge!" were the words first distinguished, when passion permitted articulation. "The villain, the black-faced traitor! it is not enough he hath dared raise arms against me, but he must beard me to the very teeth, defy me in my very palace, throw scorn upon me, maltreat an officer of mine own person! Is there no punishment but death for this foul insolence! As there is a God in heaven, he shall feel

my vengeance ere he reach the scaffold—feel it, aye, till death be but too welcome!" He sunk back, exhausted by his own violence; but not a minute passed ere again he burst forth. "And Hereford, the traitor Hereford, he dared defend him! dared assault thee in the pursuance of thy duty, the audacious insolent! Doth he think, forsooth, his work in Scotland will exempt him from the punishment of insolence, of treason? as an aider and abettor of treachery he shares its guilt, and shall know whom he hath insulted. Back to thy citadel, my Lord of Berwick, see to the strict incarceration of this foul branch of treachery, aye, and look well about ye, lest any seditious citizen or soldier hath, by look or word, given aught of encouragement, or failed in due respect to our proclamation. An Hereford abet the traitor, others may be but too willing to do the like. By heaven, they shall share his fate! Bid Hereford hither on the instant, say naught of having been beforehand with him; I would list the insolent's own tale. Rest thee a brief while, my lord, and our great seal shall insure thee prompt obedience. Bid Sir Edmund Stanley attend us, my Lord of Buchan. I need scarce warn a Comyn to be secret on what has passed; I would not have the foul insolence cast into our teeth as yet proclaimed. Begone, both of ye; we would be a brief space alone."

The deadly pallor which had usurped the flush of fury on the monarch's cheek afforded such strong evidence of a sharp renewal of his internal pains, that both noblemen hesitated to obey. The damp of agony stood upon his forehead a moment in large drops, then absolutely poured down his cheeks, while his gaunt frame shook with the effort to suppress the groan which his throes wrung from him. Seizing a cordial near him, Buchan presented it on his knee, but Edward only waved them both away, angrily and impatiently pointing to the door. He loved not the weakness of an appalling disease to be witnessed by his courtiers. When utterly incapacitated from either the appearance or functions of the sovereign, he chose to be alone, his pride scarcely brooking even the cares of his young and beautiful wife, or the yet wiser and truer affection of his daughters. The effects of this interview will be seen in a future chapter.

CHAPTER XXIII.

There was an expression of both sorrow and care on the fine and winning features of the Princess Joan, Countess of Gloucester, as she sat busied in embroidery in an apartment of Carlisle Castle, often pausing to rest her head upon her hand, and glance out of the broad casement near which she sat, not in admiration of the placid scene which stretched beyond, but in the mere forgetfulness of uneasy thought. Long the favorite daughter of King Edward, perchance because her character more resembled that of her mother, Queen Eleanor, than did either of her sisters, she had till lately possessed unbounded influence over him. Not only his affection but his pride was gratified in her, for he saw much of his own wisdom, penetration, and high sense of honor reflected upon her, far more forcibly than in his weak and yielding son. But lately, the change which had so painfully darkened the character and actions of her father had extended even to her. Her affection for a long time blinded her to this painful truth, but by slow degrees it became too evident to be mistaken, and she had wept many bitter tears, less perhaps for herself than for her father, whom she had almost idolized. His knightly qualities, his wisdom, the good he had done his country, all were treasured up by her and rejoiced in with never-failing delight. His reputation, his popularity, were dear to her, even as her noble husband's. She had not only loved, she had revered him as some superior being who had come but to do good, to leave behind him through succeeding ages an untarnished name, enshrined in such love, England would be long ere she spoke it without tears. And now, alas! she had outlived such dreams; her reverence, lingering still, had been impaired by deeds of blood her pride in him crushed; naught but a daughter's love remaining, which did but more strongly impress upon her heart the fatal change. And now the last blow was given; he shunned her, scarcely ever summoned her to his presence, permitted the wife of a day to tend him in his sufferings, rather than the daughter of his former love, one hallowed by the memories of her mother, the beloved and faithful partner of his youth.

It was not, however, these thoughts which entirely engrossed her now not undivided sorrows. Her sister Elizabeth, the Countess of Hereford, had just left her, plunged in the deepest distress, from the extraordinary fact that her husband, summoned seemingly in all amity by the king, had been arrested by the Lord Marshal of England as an aider and abettor of treason, and was now in strict confinement within the castle; not permitted to embrace his wife and children, whom he had not seen since his arrival from Scotland, where he had so gallantly assisted the cause of Edward, and whence he had but just returned in triumph. No other cause was assigned saving having given countenance to treason and *lèze majesté*, but that the irritation of the king had prohibited all hope of present pardon;—she, Lady Hereford, though his own daughter, having been refused admission to his presence. Both the Earl and Countess of Gloucester had anxiously striven to comfort the anxious wife, conquering their own fears to assure her that hers were groundless; that though from some mysterious cause at present irritated, as they knew too well a trifle made him now, Hereford was too good and loyal a subject for the king to proceed to extremities, whatever might have been his fault. Rumors of the confusion at Berwick had indeed reached Carlisle, and it was to have them confirmed or denied, or connected with some appearance of veracity, the Earl of Gloucester had quitted the royal sisters, determining to use his influence with his sovereign, even to dare his wrath, for the release of Hereford, whose good services in Scotland deserved a somewhat different recompense. Lady Hereford, too anxious and dispirited to remain long in one place, soon departed to seek the youthful Margaret of France,

her father's beautiful wife, and beseech her influence with him, either for the pardon of her husband, or at least communication with him.

It was these sad thoughts which engrossed the Princess Joan, and they lingered too on Hereford's prisoner, the brave, and noble Nigel, for both to her husband and herself he had been in his boyhood an object not only of interest but of love. His beauty, his extraordinary talents, had irresistibly attracted them; and yet scarcely could they now believe the youthful knight, with whose extraordinary valor not only Scotland but England rung, could be that same enthusiast boy. That he had been taken, was now a prisoner in Berwick Castle, on whom sentence of death sooner or later would be passed, brought conviction but too sadly to their hearts, and made them feel yet more bitterly their influence with Edward was of no account.

"Hast thou succeeded, Gilbert? Oh, say that poor Elizabeth may at least be permitted access to her husband," was the countess's eager salutation to her husband, as he silently approached her. He shook his head sorrowfully.

"Alas! not even this. Edward is inexorable, possessed by I know not what spirit of opposition and wrath, furiously angered against Hereford, to the utter forgetfulness of all his gallant deeds in Scotland."

"But wherefore? What can have chanced in this brief period to occasion this? but a few days since he spoke of Hereford as most loyal and deserving."

"Aye, that was on the news of Kildrummie's surrender; now forgotten, from anger at a deed which but a few years back he would have been the first to have admired. That rash madman, Nigel Bruce, hath not only trebly sealed his own fate, but hurled down this mishap on his captor," and briefly he narrated all he had learned.

"It was, indeed, a rash action, Gilbert; yet was it altogether unnatural? Alas, no! the boy had had no spark of chivalry or patriotism about him, had he stood tamely by; and Gloucester," she added, with bitter tears, "years back would my father have given cause for this—would he thus have treated an unhappy woman, thus have added insult to misery, for an act which, shown to other than his rival, he would have honored, aye, not alone the deed, but the doer of it? If we, his own children, feel shamed and indignant at this cruelty, oh, what must be the feelings of her countrymen, her friends?"

"Then thou believest not the foul slander attached to the Countess of Buchan, my Joan?"

"Believe it!" she answered, indignantly; "who that has looked on that noble woman's face can give it the smallest credence? No, Gilbert, no. 'Tis published by those base spirits so utterly incapable of honor, knighthood, and patriotism themselves, that they cannot conceive these qualities in others, particularly in a female breast, and therefore assign it to motives black as the hearts which thought them; and even if it were true, is a kingly conqueror inflicting justice for treason against himself, to assign other motives for that justice? Doth he not lower himself—his own cause?"

"Alas, yes!" replied her husband, sorrowfully; "he hath done his character more injury by this last act than any which preceded. Though men might wish less blood were shed, yet still, traitors taken in arms against his person justice must condemn; but a woman, a sad and grieving woman—but do not weep thus, my gentle wife," he added, tenderly.

"Can a daughter of Edward do other than weep, my husband? Oh, if I loved him not, if my very spirit did not cling round him so closely that the fibres of both seem entwined, and his deeds of wrath, of exacting justice, fall on me as if I had done them, and overwhelm me with their shame, their remorse, then indeed I might not weep; but as it is, do not chide me, Gilbert, for weep I must."

"Thou art too noble-hearted, Joan," he said, kindly, as he circled her waist with his arm, "only too noble-hearted for these fearful times. 'Tis but too sad a proof of the change in thy royal father, that he shuns thy presence now even as he once loved it."

A confusion in the passage and ante-room disturbed their converse, and Gloucester turned towards the door to inquire the cause.

"'Tis but a troublesome boy, demanding access to her highness the countess, my lord," was the reply. "I have asked his name and business, questions he deigns not, forsooth, to answer, and looks so wild and distracted, that I scarce think it accords with my duty to afford him admittance. He is no fit recipient of my lady's bounty, good my lord; trust me, he will but fright her."

"I have no such fear, my good Baldwin," said the princess, as, on hearing her name, she came forward to the centre of the chamber; "thou knowest my presence is granted to all who seek it, an this poor child seems so wild, he is the fitter object of my care. They are using violence methinks; give him entrance instantly."

The attendant departed, and returned in a very brief space, followed by a lad, whose torn and muddy garments, haggard features, and dishevelled hair indeed verified the description given. He glanced wildly round him a moment, and then flinging himself at the feet of the princess, clasped her robe and struggled to say something, of which the words "mercy, protection," were alone audible.

"Mercy, my poor child! what mercy dost thou crave? Protection I may give thee, but how may I show thee mercy?"

"Grant me but a few moments, lady, let me but speak with thee alone. I bear a message which I may not deliver to other ears save thine," said or rather gasped the boy, for he breathed with difficulty, either from exhaustion or emotion.

"Alone!" replied the countess, somewhat surprised. "Leave us, Baldwin," she added, after a moment's pause. "I am privately engaged for the next hour, denied to all, save his grace the king." He withdrew, with a respectful bow. "And now, speak, poor child, what wouldst thou? Nay, I hear nothing which my husband may not hear," she said, as the eyes of her visitor gazed fearfully on the earl, who was looking at him with surprise.

"Thy husband, lady—the Earl of Gloucester? oh, it was to him too I came; the brother-in-arms of my sovereign, one that showed kindness to—to Sir Nigel in his youth, ye will not, ye will not forsake him now?"

Few and well-nigh inarticulate as were those broken words, they betrayed much which at once excited interest in both the earl and countess, and told the reason of the lad's earnest entreaty to see them alone.

"Forsake him!" exclaimed the earl, after carefully examining that the door was closed; "would to heaven I could serve him, free him! that there was but one slender link to lay hold of, to prove him innocent and give him life, I would do it, did it put my own head in jeopardy."

"And is there none, none?" burst wildly from the boy's lips, as he sprung from his knees, and grasped convulsively the earl's arm. "Oh, what has he done that they should slay him? why do they call him guilty? He was not Edward's subject, he owed him no homage, no service, he has but fought to free his country, and is there guilt in this? oh, no, no, save him, in mercy save him!"

"Thou knowest not what thou askest, boy, how wholly, utterly impossible it is to save him. He hath hurled down increase of anger on his own head by his daring insult of King Edward's herald; had there been hope before there is none now."

A piercing cry escaped the boy, and he would have fallen had he not been supported by the countess; he looked at her pitying face, and again threw himself at her feet.

"Canst *thou* not, wilt *thou* not save him?" he cried; "art thou not the daughter of Edward, his favorite, his dearly beloved, and will he not list to thee—will he not hear thy pleadings? Oh, seek him, kneel to him as I to thee, implore his mercy—life, life, only the gift of life; sentence him to exile, perpetual exile, what he will, only let him live: he is too young, too good, too beautiful to die. Oh! do not look as if this could not be. He has told me how you both loved him, not that I should seek ye. It is not at his request I come; no, no, no, he spurns life, if it be granted on conditions. But they have torn me from him, they have borne him to the lowest dungeon, they have loaded him with fetters, put him to the torture. I would have clung to him still, but they spurned me, trampled on me, cast me forth—to die, if I may not save him! Wilt thou not have mercy, princess? daughter of Edward, oh, save him, save him!"

It is impossible in the above incoherent words to convey to the reader even a faint idea of the agonized wildness with which they were spoken; the impression of unutterable misery they gave to those who listened to them, and marked their reflection in the face of the speaker.

"Fetters—the lowest dungeon—torture," repeated Gloucester, pacing up and down with disordered steps. "Can these things be? merciful heaven, how low hath England fallen! Boy, boy, can it be thou speakest truth?"

"As there is a God above, it is truth!" he answered, passionately. "Oh, canst thou not save him from this? is there no justice, no mercy? Rise—no, no; wherefore should I rise?" he continued, clinging convulsively to the knees of the princess, as she soothingly sought to raise him. "I will kneel here till thou hast promised to plead for him with thy royal father, promised to use thine influence for his life. Oh, canst thou once have loved him and yet hesitate for this?"

"I do not, I would not hesitate, unhappy boy," replied the princess, tenderly. "God in heaven knows, were there the slenderest chance of saving him, I would kneel at my father's feet till pardon was obtained, but angered as he is now it would irritate him yet more. Alas! alas! poor child, they told thee wrong who bade thee come to Joan for influence with Edward; I have none now, less than any of his court," and the large tears fell from the eyes of the princess on the boy's upturned face.

"Then let me plead for him; give me access to Edward. Oh, I will so beseech, conjure him, he cannot, he will not say me nay. Oh, if his heart be not of steel, he will have mercy on our wretchedness; he will pardon, he will spare my husband!"

The sob with which that last word was spoken shook that slight frame, till it bowed to the very ground, and the supporting arm of the countess alone preserved her from falling.

"Thy husband!—Gracious heaven! who and what art thou?" exclaimed the earl, springing towards her, at the same instant that his wife raised her in her arras, and laid her on a couch beside them, watching with the soothing tenderness of a sister, till voice and strength returned.

"Alas! I feared there was more in this deep agony than we might see," she said; "but I imagined

not, dared not imagine aught like this. Poor unhappy sufferer, the saints be praised thou hast come to me! thy husband's life I may not save, but I can give protection, tenderness to thee—aye weep, weep, there is life, reason in those tears."

The gentle voice of sympathy, of kindness, had come upon that overcharged heart, and broke the icy agony which had closed it to the relief of tears. Mind and frame were utterly exhausted, and Agnes buried her face in the hands of the princess, which she had clasped convulsively within both hers, and wept, till the wildness of agony indeed departed, but not the horrible consciousness of the anguish yet to come. Gradually her whole tale was imparted: from the resolution to follow her betrothed even to England, and cling to him to the last; the fatal conclusion of that rite which had made them one; the anxiety and suffering which had marked the days spent in effecting a complete disguise, ere she could venture near him and obtain Hereford's consent to her attending him as a page; the risks and hardships which had attended their journey to Berwick, till even a prison seemed a relief and rest; and then the sudden change, that a few days previous, the Earl of Berwick had entered Sir Nigel's prison, at the head of five or ten ruffians, had loaded him with fetters, conveyed him to the lowest and filthiest dungeon, and there had administered the torture, she knew not wherefore. Her shriek of agony had betrayed that she had followed them, and she was rudely and forcibly dragged from him, and thrust from the fortress. Her brain had reeled, her senses a brief while forsaken her, and when she recovered, her only distinct thought was to find her way to Carlisle, and there obtain access to the Earl and Countess of Gloucester, of whom her husband had spoken much during their journey to England, not with any wish or hope of obtaining mercy through their influence, but simply as the friends of former years; he had spoken of them to while away the tedious hours of their journey, and besought her, if she should be parted from him on their arrival at Berwick, to seek them, and implore their protection till her strength was restored. Of herself, however, in thus seeking them, she had thought not; the only idea, the only thought clearly connected in her mind was to beseech their influence with Edward in obtaining her husband's pardon. Misery and anxiety, in a hundred unlooked-for shapes, had already shown the fallacy of those dreams which in the hour of peril had strengthened her, and caused her to fancy that when once his wife she not only might abide by him, but that she might in some manner obtain his liberation. She did not, indeed, lament her fate was joined to his—lament! she could not picture herself other than she was, by her husband's side, but she felt, how bitterly felt, she had no power to avert his fate. Despair was upon her, cold, black, clinging despair, and she clung to the vain dream of imploring Edward's mercy, feeling at the same moment it was but the *ignis fatui* to her heart—urging lighting, impelling her on, but to sink in pitchy darkness when approached.

Gradually and painfully this narrative of anguish was drawn from her lips, often unconnectedly, often incoherently, but the earl and countess heard enough, to fill their hearts alike with pity and respect for the deep, unselfish love unconsciously revealed. She had told, too, her maiden name, had conjured them to conceal her from the power of her father, at whose very name she shuddered; and both those noble hearts shared her anxiety, sympathized in her anguish; and speedily she felt, if there could be comfort in such deep wretchedness, she had told her tale to those ready and willing, and able to bestow it.

The following day the barons sat in judgment on Sir Nigel Bruce, and Gloucester was obliged to join them. It was useless, both he and the princess felt, to implore the king's mercy till sentence was passed; alas! it was useless at any time, but it must have been a colder and harder heart than the Princess Joan's to look upon the face of Agnes, and yet determine on not even making one effort in his favor. At first the unhappy girl besought the earl to permit her accompanying him back to Berwick, to attend her husband on his trial; but on his proving it would but be uselessly harrowing the feelings of both, for it would not enable her to go back with him to prison, that it would be better for her to remain under the protection of the countess, endeavoring to regain strength for whatever she might have to encounter, either to accompany him to exile, if grace were indeed granted, or to return to her friends in Scotland, she yielded mournfully, deriving some faint degree of comfort in the earl's assurance that she should rejoin her husband as soon as possible, and the countess's promise that if she wished it, she should herself be witness of her interview with Edward. It was indeed poor comfort, but her mind was well-nigh wearied out with sorrow, as if incapable of bearing more, and she acquiesced from very exhaustion.

The desire that she herself should conjure the mercy of Edward had been negatived even to her anxious heart by the assurance of both the earl and the princess, that instead of doing good to her husband's cause she would but sign her own doom, perchance be consigned to the power of her father, and be compelled to relinquish the poor consolation of being with her husband to the last. It was better she should retain the disguise she had assumed, adopting merely in addition the dress of one of the princess's own pages, a measure which would save her from all observation in the palace, and give her admittance to Sir Nigel, perchance, when as his own attendant it would be denied.

The idea of rejoining her husband would have reconciled Agnes to any thing that might have been proposed, and kneeling at the feet of her protectress, she struggled to speak her willingness and blessing on her goodness, but her tongue was parched, her lips were mute, and the princess turned away, for her gentle spirit could not read unmoved the silent thankfulness of that young and breaking heart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It would be useless to linger on the trial of Nigel Bruce, in itself a mockery of justice, as were all those which had proceeded, and all that followed it. The native nobility of Scotland were no subjects of the King of England; they owed him homage, perchance, for lands held in England, but on flocking to the standard of the Bruce these had at once been voluntarily forfeited, and they fought but as Scottish men determined to throw off the yoke of a tyrant whose arms had overrun a land to which he had no claim. They fought for the freedom of a country, for their own liberty, and therefore were no traitors; but these facts availed not with the ruthless sovereign, to whom opposition was treason. The mockery of justice proceeded, it gave a deeper impression, a graver solemnity to their execution, and therefore for not one of his prisoners was the ceremony dispensed with. Sir Christopher Seaton had been conveyed to the Tower, with his wife, under pretence of there waiting till his wounds were cured, to abide his trial, and in that awful hour Sir Nigel stood alone. Yet he was undaunted, for he feared not death even at the hangman's hand; his spirit was at peace, for he was innocent of sin; unbowed, for he was no traitor—he was a patriot warrior still. Pale he was, indeed, ashy pale, but it told a tale of intense bodily anguish. They had put him to the torture, to force from his lips the place of his brother's retreat, that being the only pretence on which the rage of Edward and the malice of Berwick could rest for the infliction of their cruelty. They could drag naught from his lips; they could not crush that exalted soul, or compel it to utter more than a faint, scarcely articulate groan, as proof that he suffered, that the beautiful frame was well-nigh shattered unto death. And now he stood upright, unshrinking; and there were hearts amid those peers inwardly grieving at their fell task, gazing on him with unfeigned admiration; while others gloried that another obstacle to their sovereign's schemes of ambition would be removed, finding, perchance, in his youth, beauty, and noble bearing, from their contrast with themselves, but fresh incentives to the doom of death, and determining, even as they sate and scowled on him, to aggravate the bitterness of that doom with all the ignominy that cruelty could devise.

He had listened in stern silence to the indictment, and evinced no sign of emotion even when, in the virulence of some witnesses against him, the most degrading epithets were lavished on himself, his family, and friends. Only once had his eye flashed fire and his cheek burned, and his right hand unconsciously sought where his weapon should have hung, when his noble brother was termed a ribald assassin, an excommunicated murderer; but quickly he checked that natural emotion, and remained collected as before. He was silent till the usual question was asked, "If he had any thing to say why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon him?" and then he made a step forward, looked boldly and sternly around him, and spoke, in a rich, musical voice, the following brief, though emphatic words:

"Ye ask me if I could say aught why sentence of death should not be pronounced. Nobles of England, in denying the charge of treason with which ye have indicted me, I have said enough. Before ye, aye, before your sovereign, I have done nothing to merit death, save that death which a conqueror bestows on his captive, when he deems him too powerful to live. The death of a traitor I protest against; for to the King of England I am no subject, and in consequence no traitor! I have but done that which every true and honorable man must justify, and in justifying respect. I have sought with my whole heart the liberty of my country, the interest of my lawful sovereign, and will die asserting the honor and justice of my cause, even as I have lived. I plead not for mercy, for were it offered, on condition of doing homage unto Edward, I would refuse it, and choose death; protesting to the last that Robert Bruce, and he alone, is rightful king of Scotland. My lords, in condemning me to death as a captive taken in war, ye may be justified by the law of battles, I dispute not the justice of your doom; but an ye sentence me as traitor, I do deny the charge, and say my condemnation is unjust and foul, and ye are perjured in its utterance. I have said. Now let your work proceed."

He folded his arms on his breast, and awaited in unbroken silence his doom. A brief pause had followed his words. The Earl of Gloucester, who, from his rank and near connection with the king, occupied one of the seats of honor at the upper end of the large hall, and had, during the trial, vainly sought to catch the prisoner's eye, now reclined back on his seat, his brow resting on his hand, his features completely concealed by the dark drapery of his cloak. In that position he remained, not only during the pause, but while the fatal sentence was pronounced.

"By the laws of your country, and the sentence of your peers," so it ran, "you, Nigel Bruce, by manifold acts of rebellion, disaffection, and raising up arms against your lawful king, Edward, the sovereign of England and Scotland, and all the realms, castles, and lordships thereto pertaining, are proved guilty of high treason and *lèse majesté*, and are thereby condemned to be divested of all symbols of nobility and knighthood, which you have disgraced; to be dragged on a hurdle to the common gibbet, and there hung by the neck till you are dead; your head to be cut off; your body quartered and exposed at the principal towns as a warning to the disaffected and the traitorous of all ranks in either nation, and this is to be done at whatsoever time the good pleasure of our sovereign lord the king may please to appoint. God save King Edward, and so perish all his foes!"

Not a muscle of the prisoner's face had moved during the utterance of this awful sentence. He had glanced fearlessly around him to the last, his eye resting on the figure of the Earl of Gloucester with an expression of pitying commiseration for a moment, as if he felt for him, for his deep regret in his country's shame, infinitely more than for himself. Proudly erect he held himself, as they led him in solemn pomp from the great hall of the castle, across the court to the

dungeons of the condemned, gazing calmly and unflinchingly on the axe, which carried with its edge towards him proclaimed him condemned, though his doom was more ignominious than the axe bestowed. There was a time when he had shrunk from the anticipated agony of a degradation so complete as this—but not now; his spirit was already lifted up above the honors and humiliations of earth. But one dream of this world remained—one sad, sweet dream clung to his heart, and bound it with silver chains below. Where was that gentle being? He fondly hoped she had sought the friends of his boyhood, as he had implored her, should they be parted; he strove to realize comfort in the thought they would protect and save her the agony of a final parting; but he strove in vain. One wild yearning possessed him, to gaze upon her face, to fold her to his heart once, but once again: it was the last lingering remnant of mortality; he had not another thought of life but this, and this grew stronger as its hope seemed vain. But there was one near to give him comfort, when he expected it not.

Wrapped so closely in his dark, shrouding mantle that naught but the drooping feather of his cap could be distinguished, the Earl of Gloucester drew near the prisoner, and as he paused, ere the gates and bars of the prison entrance could be drawn back, whispered hurriedly yet emphatically —

"A loved one is safe and shall be so. Would to God I could do more!"

Suppressing with extreme difficulty a start of relief and surprise, the young nobleman glanced once on Gloucester's face, pressed his hands together, and answered, in the same tone—

"God in heaven bless thee! I would see her once, only once more, if it can be without danger to her; it is life's last link, I cannot snap it—parted thus." They hurried him through the entrance with the last word lingering on his lips, and before Gloucester could make even a sign of reply.

Early in the evening of the same day, King Edward was reclining on his couch, in the chamber we have before described, and, surrounded by some few of his favorite noblemen, appeared so animated by a new cause of excitement as to be almost unconscious of the internal pains which even at that moment were more than usually intense. His courtiers looked on unconcernedly while, literally shaking with disease and weakness, he coolly and deliberately traced those letters which gave a base and ignominious death to one of the best, the noblest, loveliest spirits that ever walked the earth, and signed the doom of misery and madness to another; and yet no avenging hand stretched forth between him and his victim, no pang was on his heart to bid him pause, be merciful, and spare. Oh, what would this earth be were it all in all, and what were life if ending in the grave? Faith, thou art the crystal key opening to the spirit the glorious vision of immortality, bidding the trusting heart, when sick and weary of the dark deeds and ruthless spoilers of this lovely earth, rest on thy downy wings, and seek for peace and comfort there.

"Who waits?" demanded the king, as his pen ceased in its task.

"Sir Stephen Fitzjohn, my liege, sent by the Earl of Berwick with the warrant, for which he waits."

"He need wait no longer then, for it is there. Two hours before noon the traitor dies; we give him grace till then, that our good subjects of Berwick may take warning by his fate, and our bird in the cage witness the end of the gallant so devoted to her cause. Bid the knight begone, my Lord of Arundel; he hath too long waited our pleasure. Ha! whom have we here? who craves admittance thus loudly?" he added, observing, as the earl lifted the hangings to depart, some bustle in the ante-room. "Who is it so boldly demanding speech with us?"

"Her Highness the Princess Joan, Countess of Gloucester, please you, my liege," replied the chamberlain; "she will not take denial."

"Is it so hard a thing for a daughter to gain admittance to a father, even though he be a sovereign?" interrupted the princess, who, attended only by a single page bearing her train, advanced within the chamber, her firm and graceful deportment causing the lords to fall back on either side, and give her passage, though the expression of their monarch's countenance denoted the visit was unwelcome.

"Humbly and earnestly I do beseech your grace's pardon for this over-bold intrusion," she said, bending one knee before him; "but indeed my business could not be delayed. My liege and father, grant me but a few brief minutes. Oh, for the sake of one that loved us both, the sainted one now gone to heaven, for the memory of whom thou didst once bless me with fonder love than thou gavest to my sisters, because my features bore her stamp, my king, my father, pardon me and let me speak!"

"Speak on," muttered the king, passing his hand over his features, and turning slightly from her, if there were emotion, to conceal it. "Thou hast, in truth, been over-bold, yet as thou art here, speak on. What wouldst thou?"

"A boon, a mighty boon, most gracious father; one only thou canst grant, one that in former years thou wouldst have loved me for the asking, and blessed me by fulfilment," she said, as she continued to kneel; and by her beseeching voice and visible emotion effectually confining the attention of the courtiers, now assembled in a knot at the farther end of the apartment, and preventing their noticing the deportment of the page who had accompanied her; he was leaning against a marble pillar which supported the canopy raised over the king's couch, his head bent on his breast, the short, thick curls which fell over his forehead concealing his features; his hands,

too, crossed on his breast, convulsively clenched the sleeves of his doublet, as if to restrain the trembling which, had any one been sufficiently near, or even imagined him worthy of a distant glance, must have been observable pervading his whole frame.

"A boon," repeated the king, as the princess paused, almost breathless with her own emotion; "a mighty boon! What can the Countess of Gloucester have to ask of me, that it moves her thus? Are we grown so terrible that even our own children tremble ere they speak? What is this mighty boon? we grant not without hearing."

"'Tis the boon of life, my liege, of life thou canst bestow. Oh, while in this world thou rulest, viceregent of the King of kings on high, combining like Him justice and mercy, in the government of his creatures, oh! like, Him, let mercy predominate over justice; deprive not of life, in the bloom, the loveliness of youth! Be merciful, my father, oh, be merciful! forgive as thou wouldst be forgiven—grant me the life I crave!"

Urged on by emotion, the princess had scarcely heard the suppressed interjection of the king which her first words had occasioned, and she scarcely saw the withering sternness which gathered on his brow.

"Thou hast in truth learnt oratory, most sapient daughter," he said, bitterly; "thou pleadest well and flowingly, yet thou hast said not for whom thou bearest this marvellous interest—it can scarce be for a traitor? Methinks the enemies of Edward should be even such unto his children."

"Yet 'tis for one of these mistaken men I plead, most gracious sovereign," resumed Joan, intimidated not by his sarcasm. "Oh, my father, the conqueror's triumph consists not in the number of rebellious heads that fall before him—not in the blood that overflows his way; magnanimity, mercy, will conquer yet more than his victorious sword. Traitor as he seem, have mercy on Nigel Bruce; oh, give—"

"Mercy on a Bruce! May the thunder of heaven blast me when I show it!" burst furiously from Edward's lips, as he started upon his couch and gazed on his suppliant child with eyes that seemed absolutely to blaze in wrath. "Mercy on a branch of that house which has dared defy me, dared to insult my power, trample on my authority, upraised the standard of rebellion, and cost me the lives of thousands of my faithful subjects! Mercy on him, the daring traitor, who, even in his chains, has flung redoubled insult and treason into our very teeth! Mercy—may the God of heaven deny me all mercy when I show it unto him!"

"Oh, no, no, my father! My father, in mercy speak not such terrible words!" implored the princess, clinging to his robe. "Call not the wrath of heaven on thy head; think of his youth, the temptations that have beset him, the difficult task to remain faithful when all other of his house turned astray. Mistaken as he hath been, as he is, have mercy. Compel him to prove, to feel, to acknowledge thou art not the tyrant he hath been taught to deem thee; exile, imprisonment, all—any thing, but death. Oh, do not turn from me; be thyself, the good, the magnanimous Edward of former days, have mercy on thy foe!"

"I tell thee, never! by every saint in heaven, I tell thee, never!" shouted the king. "I will hear no more; begone, lest I deem my own child part and parcel of the treasons formed against me. Trouble me not with these vain prayers. I will not pardon, I have sworn it; begone, and learn thy station better than to plead for traitors. Thy husband braved me once; beware, lest in these pleadings I hear *his* voice again. I tell him and thee that ere to-morrow's noon be passed the soul of Nigel Bruce shall stand in judgment; not another day, not another hour he lives to blast me with the memory of his treason. The warrant hath been signed, and is on its way to Berwick, to give his body to the hangman and his soul to Satan—his death is sealed."

"Oh, no, no, no!" shrieked a voice of sudden anguish, startling all who heard, and even Edward, by its piteous tones, and the form of a page suddenly fell prostrate before the monarch. "Mercy, mercy! for the love of God, have mercy!" he struggled to articulate, but there was no sound save a long and piercing shriek, and the boy lay senseless on the ground.

"Ha! by St. George, bearest thou me with traitors in my very palace, before my very eyes?" exclaimed the angry monarch, as his astonished courtiers gathered round. "Put him in ward; away with him, I say!"

"Pardon me, your highness, but this is needless," interposed the princess, with a calm majesty, that subdued even the irritation of her father, and undauntedly waving back the courtiers, although perfectly sensible of the imminent danger in which she was placed. "If there be blame, let it be visited on me; this poor child has been ill and weakly from many causes, terrified, almost maddened, by sounds, and sights of blood. I deemed him perfectly recovered, or he had not attended me here. I pray your grace permit his removal to my apartments."

The king laid a heavy hand on his daughter's arm as she stood beside him, and fixed a gaze on her face that would have terrified any less noble spirit into a betrayal of the truth; but firm in her own integrity, in her own generous purpose, she calmly and inquiringly returned his gaze.

"Go to, thou art a noble wench, though an over-bold and presuming one," he said, in a much mollified tone, for there was that in the dauntless behavior of his daughter which found an echo in his heart even now, deadened as it was to aught of gentle feeling, and he was glad of this interruption to entreaties which, resolved not to grant, had lashed him into fury, while her presence made him feel strangely ashamed. "Do as thou wilt with thine own attendants; but be

advised, tempt not thine own safety again; thou hast tried us sore with thy ill-advised entreaties, but we forgive thee, on condition they are never again renewed. Speak not, we charge thee. What ho! Sir Edmund Stanley," he called aloud, and the chamberlain appeared at the summons. "Here, let this boy be carefully raised and borne according to the pleasure of his mistress. See, too, that the Countess of Gloucester be conducted with due respect to her apartments. Begone!" he added, sternly, as the eyes of Joan still seemed to beseech mercy; "I will hear no more—the traitor dies!"

CHAPTER XXV.

The shades of advancing night had already appeared to have enwrapped the earth some hours, when Nigel Bruce was startled from an uneasy slumber by the creaking sounds of bolts and bars announcing the entrance of some one within the dungeon. The name of his beloved, his devoted Agnes, trembled on his lips, but fearful of betraying her to unfriendly ears, he checked himself, and started up, exclaiming, "Who comes?" No answer was vouchsafed, but the dim light of a lamp, placed by the intruder on the floor, disclosed a figure wrapped from head to foot in the shrouding mantle of the time, not tall, but appearing a stout muscular person, banishing on the instant Nigel's scarcely-formed hope that it was the only one he longed to see.

"What wouldst thou?" he said, after a brief pause. "Doth Edward practise midnight murder? Speak, who art thou?"

"Midnight murder, thou boasting fool; I love thee not well enough to cheat the hangman of his prey," replied a harsh and grating voice, which, even without the removal of the cloak, would have revealed to Nigel's astonished ears the Earl of Buchan. "Ha! I have startled thee—thou didst not know the deadly enemy of thy accursed race!"

"I know thee now, my Lord of Buchan," replied the young man, calmly; "yet know I not wherefore thou art here, save to triumph over the fallen fortunes of thy foe; if so, scorn on—I care not. A few brief hours, and all of earth and earthly feeling is at rest."

"To triumph—scorn! I had scarce travelled for petty satisfaction such as that, when to-morrow sees thee in the hangman's hands, the scorn of thousands! Hath Buchan no other work with thee, thinkest thou? dost thou affirm thou knowest naught for which he hath good cause to seek thee?"

"Earl of Buchan, I dare affirm it," answered Nigel, proudly; "I know of naught to call for words or tones as these, save, perchance, that the love and deep respect in which I hold thine injured countess, my friendship for thy murdered son, hath widened yet more the breach between thy house and mine—it may be so; yet deem not, cruel as thou art, I will deny feelings in which I glory, at thy bidding. An thou comest to reproach me with these things, rail on, they affect me as little as thy scorn."

"Hadst thou said love for her they call my daughter, thou hadst been nearer the mark," retorted the earl, fury rapidly gaining possession of heart and voice; "but thou art too wise, too politic for that."

"Aye," retorted Nigel, after a fearful struggle with himself, "aye, thou mayest well add love for Agnes of Buchan, as well as friendship for her brother. Thinkest thou I would deny it—hide it? little dost thou know its thrilling, its inspiring power; little canst thou know how I glory in it, cherish, linger on it still. But wherefore speak thus to thee, thou man of wickedness and blood. I love thy pure and spotless child, rejoice that thou didst so desert, so utterly neglect her, that thou couldst no more leave a shadow on her innocent heart than a cloud upon her way. I love her, glory in that love, and what is it to thee?"

"What is it to me? that a child of the house of Comyn dare hold commune with a Bruce; that thou hast dared to love a daughter of my house, aye, to retain her by thy side a willing mistress, when all others of her sex forsook thee—what is it to me? Did not to-morrow give thee to a traitor's doom, thy blood should answer thee; but as it is, villain and slave, give her to me—where is her hiding-place? speak, or the torture shall wring it from thee."

"Thinkest thou such threats will in aught avail thee?" calmly replied Nigel. "Thou knowest not the Bruce. Agnes is no longer a Comyn, no longer a subject to thy guardianship. The voice of God, the rites at the altar's foot, have broken every link, save that which binds her to her husband. She is mine, before God and man is mine—mine own faithful and lawful wife!"

"Thou liest, false villain!" furiously retorted Buchan. "The church shall undo these bonds, shall give her back to the father she has thus insulted. She shall repent, repent with tears of blood, her desertion of her race. Canst thou protect her in death, thou fool—canst thou still cherish and save her, thinkest thou, when the hangman hath done his work?"

"Aye, even then she will be cherished, loved for Nigel's sake, and for her own; there will be faithful friends around her to protect her from thee still, tyrant! Thou canst not break the bonds that bind us; thou hast done no father's part. Forsaken and forgotten, thy children owe thee no duty, no obedience; thou canst bring forward no plea to persecute thy child. In life and in death she is mine, mine alone; the power and authority thou hast spurned so long can no longer be assumed; the love, the obedience thou didst never heed, nay, trampled on, hath been transferred to one who glories in them both. She is in safety—slay, torture as thou wilt, I tell thee no more."

Fettered, unarmed, firm, undauntedly erect, stood Nigel Bruce, gazing with curling lip and flashing eyes upon his foe. The foam had gathered on the earl's lip, his hand, clenching his sword, had trembled with passion as Nigel spoke, He sought to suppress that rage, to remember a public execution would revenge him infinitely more than a blow of his sword, but he had been too long unused to control; lashed into ungovernable fury by the demeanor of Nigel, even more than by his words, the sword flashed from its scabbard, was raised, and fell—but not upon his foe, for the Earl of Gloucester suddenly stood between them.

"Art thou mad, or tired of life, my Lord of Buchan?" he said. "Knowest thou not thou art amenable to the law, an thou thus deprivest justice of her victim? Shame, shame, my lord; I deemed thee not a midnight murderer."

"Darest thou so speak to me?" replied Buchan, fiercely; "by every fiend in hell, thou shalt answer this! Begone, and meddle not with that which concerneth thee nothing."

"It doth concern me, proud earl," replied Gloucester, standing immediately before Nigel, whose emotion at observing the page by whom he was accompanied, though momentary, must otherwise have been observed. "The person of the prisoner is sacred to the laws of his country, the mandate of his sovereign; on thy life thou darest not injure him—thou knowest that thou darest not. Do thou begone, ere I summon those who, at the mere mention of assault on one condemned, will keep thee in ward till thou canst wreak thy vengeance on naught but clay; begone, I say!"

"I will not," sullenly answered the earl, unwillingly conscious of the truth of his words; "I will not, till he hath answered me. Once more," he added, turning to Nigel with a demoniac scowl, "where is she whom thou hast dared to call thy wife? answer me, or as there is a hell beneath us, the torture shall wring it from thee!"

"In safety, where thine arm shall never reach her," haughtily answered the young nobleman. "Torture! what wilt thou torture—the senseless clay? Hence—I defy thee! Death will protect me from thy lawless power; death will set his seal upon me ere we meet again."

The earl muttered a deep and terrible oath, and then he strode away, coming in such violent contact against the slight and almost paralyzed form of Gloucester's page as he stood in the doorway, as nearly to throw him to the ground. Nigel sprung forward, but was held back with a grasp of iron by the Earl of Gloucester, nor did he relinquish his hold till Buchan had passed through the doorway, till the heavy hinges had firmly closed again, and the step of the departing earl had entirely faded in distance.

"Now, then, we are safe," he said; "thank heaven!" but his words were scarcely heard, for the page had bounded within the extended arms of Nigel, had clung so closely to his heart, he could feel nothing, see nothing, save that slender form; could hear nothing but those deep, agonized sobs, which are so terrible when unaccompanied by the relief of tears. For a while Nigel could not speak—he could not utter aught of comfort, for he felt it not; that moment was the bitterness of death.

"Torture! did he not speak of torture? will he not come again?" were the words that at length fell, shudderingly, from the lips of Agnes. "Nigel, Nigel, if it must be, give me up; he cannot inflict aught more of misery now."

"Fear not, lady; he dare not," hastily rejoined Gloucester. "The torture dare not be administered without consent of Edward, and that now cannot be obtained; he will not have sufficient—" time, he was going to say, but checked himself; for the agonized look of Agnes told him his meaning was more than sufficiently understood. "Nigel," he added, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder, "Nigel, my noble, gallant friend—for so I will call thee, though I sat in judgment on thee, aye, and tacitly acquiesced in thy sentence—shrink not, oh, shrink not now! I saw not a quiver on thy lip, a pallor on thy cheek, nay, nor faltering in thy step, when they read a doom at which I have marked the bravest blench; oh, let not, that noble spirit fail thee now!"

"Gloucester, it shall not!" he said, with suddenly regained firmness, as supporting Agnes with his right arm he convulsively wrung the hand of his friend with the other. "It was but the sight of this beloved one, the thought—no matter, it is over. Agnes, my beloved, my own, oh, look on me; speak, tell me all that hath befallen thee since they tore thee from me, and filled my soul with darker dread for thee than for myself. To see thee with this noble earl is enough to know how heavy a burden of gratitude I owe him, which thou, sweetest, must discharge. Yet speak to me, beloved; tell me all, all."

Emulating his calmness, remembering even at that moment her promise not to unman him in the moment of trial by vain repinings, Agnes complied with his request. Her tale was frequently interrupted by those terrible sobs, which seemed to threaten annihilation; but Nigel could gather from it so much of tenderness and care on the part of the princess, that the deepest gratitude filled his heart, and spoke in his impassioned words.

"Tell her, oh, tell her, if the prayers of the dying can in aught avail her, the blessedness of heaven shall be hers even upon earth!" he exclaimed, gazing up in the earl's face with eyes that spoke his soul. "Oh, I knew her not, when in former years I did but return her kindness with silence and reserve; I saw in her little more than the daughter of Edward. Tell her, on my knees I beseech her pardon for that wrong; in my last prayers I shall breathe her name."

"And wherefore didst thou go with her?" he continued, on Agnes narrating the scene between the princess and the king. "Alas! my gentle one, hadst thou not endured enough, that thou wouldst harrow up thy soul by hearing the confirmation of my doom from the tyrant's own ruthless lips—didst dream of pardon? dearest, no, thou couldst not."

"Nigel, Nigel, I did, even at that moment, though they told me thou wert condemned, that nothing could save thee; though the princess besought me almost on her knees to spare myself this useless trial, I would not listen to her. I would not believe that all was hopeless; I dreamed still, still of pardon, that Edward would listen to his noble child, would forgive, and I thought, even if she failed, I would so plead he must have mercy, he would listen to me and grant my prayer. I did dream of pardon, but it was vain, vain! Nigel, Nigel, why did my voice fail, my eye grow dim? I might have won thy pardon yet."

"Beloved, thou couldst not," he answered, mournfully. "Mine own sweet Agnes, take comfort, 'tis but a brief farewell; we shall meet where war and blood and death can never enter more."

"I know it, Oh, I know it," she sobbed; "but to part thus, to lose thee, and by such a death, oh, it is horrible, most horrible!"

"Nay, look not on it thus, beloved; there is no shame even in this death, if there be no shame in him who dies."

"Shame!" she repeated; "couldst think I could couple aught of shame with thee, my own? even this dark fate is noble when borne by such as thee."

Nigel held her closer to his heart, and for his sole answer pressed a quivering kiss upon her cheek. Gloucester, who had been in earnest commune with the sentinel without the door, now returned, and informed him that the soldier, who was well known to him and who much disliked his present watch, had willingly consented that the page (whom Gloucester had represented as a former attendant of Sir Nigel's, though now transferred to his service) should remain with his former master, on condition that the earl would come for him before the priests and others who were to attend him to the scaffold entered the dungeon, as this departure from the regular prison discipline, shown as it was to one against whom the king was unusually irritated, might cost him his head. Gloucester had promised faithfully, and he offered them the melancholy option of parting now, or a few sad hours hence.

"Let me, do let me stay; Nigel, my husband, send me not from thee now!" exclaimed Agnes, sinking at his feet and clasping his knees. "I will not weep, nor moan, nor in aught afflict thee. Nigel, dearest Nigel, I will not leave thee now."

"But is it wise, is it well, my best beloved? think, if in the deep anguish of to-morrow thy disguise be penetrated, thy sex discovered, and thy cruel father claim thee, dragging thee even from the protection of the princess—oh, the bitterness of death were doubled then! Thou thinkest but of me, mine own, but thy safety, thy future peace is all now left for me."

"Safety, peace—oh, do not, do not mock me, Nigel—where are they for poor Agnes, save in her husband's grave? What is life now, that thou shouldst seek to guard it? no, no, I will abide by thee, thou shalt not send me hence."

"But to-morrow, lady, to-morrow," interposed Gloucester, with deep commiseration. "I would not, from any selfish fear, shorten by one minute the few sad hours ye may yet pass together, but bethink ye, I dare not promise to shield thee from the horrors of to-morrow, for I cannot. Fearful scenes and sounds may pass before thee; thou mayest come in contact with men from whom thou wilt shrink in horror, and though thine own safety be of little worth, remember the betrayal of thy sex and rank may hurl down the royal vengeance on the head of thy protectress, daughter of Edward though she be. Canst thou be firm—wilt thou, canst thou await the morrow?"

"Yes," answered Agnes, the wildness of her former accents subsiding into almost solemnity; "the safety of thy noble countess shall not be hazarded through me. Leave me with my husband, add but this last mercy to the many thou hast showered on me, and the blessing of God will rest on thee and thy noble wife forever."

She raised his hand to her lips, and Gloucester, much affected, placed hers in her husband's, and wrung them convulsively together. "We shall meet again," was all he trusted his voice to utter, and departed.

The hours waned, each one finding no change in the position of those loving ones. The arm of Agnes twined around the neck of her beloved, her brow leaned against his bosom, her left hand clasped his right, and his left arm, though fettered, could yet fold that slender waist, could yet draw her closer to him, with an almost unconscious pressure; his lips repeatedly pressed that pale brow, which only moved from its position to lift up her eyes at his entreaty in his face, and he would look on those features, lovely still, despite their attenuation and deep sorrow, gaze at them with an expression that, spite of his words of consoling love, betrayed that the dream of earth yet lingered; he could not close his eyes on her without a thrill of agony, sharper than the pang of death. But the enthusiast and the patriot spoke not at that hour only of himself, or that dearer self, the only being he had loved. He spoke of his country, aye, and less deplored the chains which bound her then, than with that prophetic spirit sometimes granted to the departing, dilated on her future glory. He conjured Agnes, for his sake, to struggle on and live; to seek his brother and tell him that, save herself, Nigel's last thought, last prayer was his; that standing on

the brink of eternity, the mists of the present had rolled away, he saw but the future—Scotland free, and Robert her beloved and mighty king.

"Bid him not mourn for Nigel," he said; "bid him not waver from his glorious purpose, because so many of his loved and noble friends must fall—their blood is their country's ransom; tell him, had I a hundred lives, I would have laid them down for him and for my country as gladly, as unhesitatingly as the one I now resign; and tell him, dearest, how I loved him to the last, how the recollection of his last farewell, his fervent blessing lingered with me to the end, giving me strength to strive for him and die, as becomes his brother; tell him I glory in my death—it has no shame, no terror, for it is for him and Scotland. Wilt thou remember all this, sweet love? wilt thou speak to him these words?"

"Trust me I will, all, all that thou hast said; they are written here," placing her hand on her heart, "here, and they will not leave me, even if all else fail."

"And thou wilt say to him, mine own, that Nigel besought his love, his tenderness for thee," he continued, losing the enthusiasm of the patriot in the tenderness of the husband; "tell him I look to him in part to discharge the debt of love, of gratitude I owe to thee; to guard thee, cherish thee as his own child. Alas! alas! I speak as if thou must reach him, and yet, beset with danger, misery, as thou art, how may this be?"

"Fear not for me; it shall be, my husband. I will do thy bidding, I will seek my king," she said, for when comfort failed for him, she sought to give it. "Hast forgotten Dermid's words? He would be near me when I needed him, and he will be, my beloved, I doubt him not."

"Could I but think so, could I but know that he would be near to shield thee, oh, life's last care would be at an end, said Nigel, earnestly; and then for some time that silence, more eloquent, more fraught with feeling in such an hour than the most impassioned words, fell on them both. When again he spoke, it was on a yet more holy theme; the thoughts, the dreams of heaven, which from boyhood had been his, now found vent in words and tones, which thrilled to the inmost spirit of his listener, and lingered there, when all other sense had fled. He had lived in an era of darkness. Revelation in its doctrines belonged to the priests alone; faith and obedience demanded by the voice of man alone, were all permitted to the laity, and spirits like Nigel's consequently formed a natural religion, in which they lived and breathed, hallowing the rites which they practised, giving scope and glory to their faith. He pictured the world, on whose threshold he now stood, pictured it, not with a bold unhallowed hand, but as the completion, the consummation of all those dim whisperings of joy, and hope, and wisdom, which had engrossed him below—the perfection of that beauty, that loveliness, in the material and immaterial, he had yearned for in vain on earth.

"And this world of incomparable unshadowed loveliness awaits me," he said, the superstition of the age mingling for the moment with thoughts which seemed to mark him a century beyond his compeers; "purchased by that single moment of suffering called death. It is mine, my beloved, and shall be thine; and oh, when we meet there, how trivial will seem the dark woes and boding cares of earth! I have told thee the vision of my vigil, Agnes, my beloved; again I have seen that blessed spirit, aye, and there was no more sadness on his pale brow, naught, naught of earth—spiritualized, etherealized. He hovered over my sleep, and with a smile beckoned me to the glorious world he inhabits; he seemed to call me, to await me, and then the shrouding clouds on which he lay closed thicker and thicker round him, till naught but his celestial features beamed on me. Agnes, dearest, best, think of me thus, as blessed eternally, unchangeably, as awaiting thee to share that blessedness, not as one lost to thee, beloved; and peace, aye, joy e'en yet shall smile for thee."

"Nigel, Nigel, are there such things for the desolate, the lone?" murmured Agnes, raising her pale brow and looking despairingly in his face. "Oh, I will think on thee, picture thee in thy thrice-glorified home, but it will be with all of mortal clinging to me still, and the wild yearnings to come to thee will banish all of peace. Speak not such words to thy poor weak Agnes, my beloved. I will struggle on to bear thy message to my sovereign; there lies my path when thou art gone, darkness envelops it when that goal is gained—I have no future now, save that which gives me back to thee."

He could not answer, and then again there was silence, broken only by the low voice of prayer. They knelt together on the cold stones, he raised her cold hands with his in supplication; he prayed for mercy, pardon for himself, for comfort, strength for her; he prayed for his country and her king, her chained and sorrowing sons, and the soft, liquid star of morning, gloaming forth through heavy masses of murky clouds directly on them as they knelt, appeared an angel's answer. The dawn broke; bluer and bluer became the small and heavily-barred casement, clearer and clearer grew the damp walls of the dungeons, and morning, in its sunshine and gladness, laughed along the earth. Closer and closer did Agnes cling to that noble heart, but she spoke no word. "He tarries long—merciful heaven, grant he be not detained too late!" she heard her husband murmur, as to himself, as time waned and Gloucester came not, and she guessed his thoughts.

"I care not," she answered, in a voice so hollow he shuddered; "I will go with thee, even to the scaffold."

But Gloucester, true to his promise, came at length; he was evidently anxious and disturbed, and a few hurried words told how the Earl of Berwick had detained him in idle converse, as if

determined to prevent any private interview with the prisoner; even now the officers and priests were advancing to the dungeons, their steps already reverberated through the passages, and struck on the heart of Agnes as a bolt of ice. "I had much, much I wished to say, but even had I time, what boots it now? Nigel, worthy brother of him I so dearly loved, aye, even now would die to serve, fear not for the treasure thou leavest to my care; as there is a God above us, I will guard her as my sister! They come—farewell, thou noble heart, thou wilt leave many a foe to mourn thee!" The voice of the earl quivered with emotion. Nigel convulsively pressed his extended hand, and then he folded Agnes in his arms; he kissed her lips, her brow, her cheek, he parted those clustering curls to look again and yet again upon her face—pale, rigid as sculptured marble. She uttered no sound, she made no movement, but consciousness had not departed; the words of Gloucester on the previous night rung in her ears, demanding control, and mechanically she let her arms unloose their convulsive grasp of Nigel, and permitted the earl gently to lead her to the door, but ere it opened, she turned again to look on Nigel. He stood, his hands clasped in that convulsive pressure of agony, his every feature working with the mighty effort at control with the last struggle of the mortal shell. With one faint yet thrilling cry she bounded back, she threw herself upon his swelling bosom, her lips met his in one last lingering kiss, and Gloucester tore her from his arms. They passed the threshold, another minute and the officers, and guard, and priest stood within the dungeon, and a harsh, rude voice bade the confessor haste to shrive the prisoner, for the hour of execution was at hand.

Bearing the slight form of the supposed page in his arms, Gloucester hastily threaded the passages leading from the dungeon to the postern by which he had intended to depart. His plan had been to rejoin his attendants and turn his back upon the city of Berwick ere the execution could take place; a plan which, from his detention, he already found was futile. The postern was closed and secured, and he was compelled to retrace his steps to a gate he had wished most particularly to avoid, knowing that it opened on a part of the court which, from its commanding a view of the scaffold, he justly feared would be crowded. He had paused but to speak one word of encouragement to Agnes, who, with a calmness appalling from the rigidity of feature which accompanied it, now stood at his side; he bade her only hold by his cloak, and he hoped speedily to lead her to a place of safety. She heard him and made a sign of obedience. They passed the gate unquestioned, traversed an inner court, and made for the great entrance of the castle; there, unhappily, their progress was impeded. The scaffold, by order of Edward, had been erected on the summit of a small green ascent exactly opposite the prison of the Countess of Buchan, and extending in a direct line about half a quarter of a mile to the right of the castle gates, which had been flung wide open, that all the inhabitants of Berwick might witness the death of a traitor. Already the courts and every vacant space was crowded. A sea of human heads was alone visible, nay, the very buttresses and some pinnacles of the castle, which admitted any footing, although of the most precarious kind, had been appropriated. The youth, the extraordinary beauty, and daring conduct of the prisoner had excited an unusual sensation in the town, and the desire to mark how such a spirit would meet his fate became irresistibly intense. Already it seemed as if there could be no space for more, yet numbers were still pouring in, not only most completely frustrating the intentions of the Earl of Gloucester, but forcing him, by the pressure of multitudes, with them towards the scaffold. In vain he struggled to free himself a passage; in vain he haughtily declared his rank and bade the presumptuous serfs give way. Some, indeed, fell back, but uselessly, for the crowds behind pushed on those before, and there was no retreating, no possible means of escaping from that sight of horror which Gloucester had designed so completely to avoid. In the agony of disappointment, not a little mixed with terror as to its effects, he looked on his companion. There was not a particle of change upon her countenance; lips, cheek, brow, were indeed bloodless as marble, and as coldly still; her eyes were fascinated on the scaffold, and they moved not, quivered not. Even when the figure of an aged minstrel, in the garb of Scotland, suddenly stood between them and the dread object of their gaze, their expression changed not; she placed her hand in his, she spoke his name to her conductor, but it was as if a statue was suddenly endowed with voice and motion, so cold was the touch of that hand, so sepulchral was that voice; she motioned him aside with a gesture that compelled obedience, and again she looked upon the scaffold. The earl welcomed the old man gladly, for the tale of Agnes had already prepared him to receive him, and to rely on his care to convey her back to Scotland. Engrossed with his anxiety for her, and whenever that permitted him, speaking earnestly to the old man, Gloucester remained wholly unconscious of the close vicinity of one he was at that moment most desirous to avoid.

The Earl of Buchan, in the moment of ungovernable rage, had indeed flung himself on horseback and galloped from the castle the preceding night, intending to seek the king, and petition that the execution might be deferred till the torture had dragged the retreat of Agnes from Nigel's lips. The cool air of night, however, had had the effect of so far dissipating the fumes of passion, as to convince him that it would be well-nigh impossible to reach Carlisle, obtain an interview with Edward at such an unseasonable hour, and return to Berwick in sufficient time for the execution of his diabolical scheme. He let the reins fall on his horse's neck, to ponder, and finally made up his mind it was better to let things take their course, and the sentence of the prisoner proceed without interruption; a determination hastened by the thought that should he die under the torture, all the ignominy and misery of a public execution would be eluded. The night was very dark and misty, the road in some parts passing through woods and morasses, and the earl, too much engrossed with his own dark thoughts to attend to his path, lost the track and wandered round and round, instead of going forward. This heightened not the amiability of his previous mood; but until dawn his efforts to retrace his steps or even discover where he was were useless. The morning, however, enabled him to reach Berwick, which he did just as the crowds were

pouring into the castle-yard, and the heavy toll of the bell announced the commencement of that fatal tragedy. He hastily dismounted and mingled with the populace, they bore him onward through another postern to that by which the other crowds had impelled Gloucester. Finding the space before them already occupied, these two human streams, of course, met and conjoined in the centre; and the two earls stood side by side. Gloucester, as we have said, wholly unconscious of a fiend, revelling in his being thus hemmed in on all sides, and compelled to witness the execution of his friend. He watched him closely as he spoke with the minstrel, but tried in vain to distinguish what they said. He looked on the page too, and with some degree of wonder, though he believed it only mortal terror which made him look thus, natural in so young a child; but afterwards that look was only too fatally recalled.

Sleepless and sad had been that long night to another inmate of Berwick Castle, as well as to Nigel and his Agnes. It was not till the dawn had broken that the Countess of Buchan had sunk into a deep though troubled slumber, for it was not till then the confused sounds of the workmen employed in erecting the scaffold had ceased. She knew not for whom it was upraised, what noble friend and gallant patriot would there be sacrificed. She would not, could not believe it was for Nigel; for when his name arose in her thoughts, it was shudderingly repelled, and with him came the thought of her child—where, oh, where was she?—what would be her fate? The tolling of the bell awoke her from the brief trance of utter unconsciousness into which, from exhaustion, she had fallen. She glanced once beneath her. The crowds, the executioner at his post, the guard already round the scaffold, too truly told the hour was at hand, and though her heart turned sick with apprehension, and she felt as if to know the worst were preferable to the hour of suspense, she could not look again, and she would have sought the inner chamber, and endeavor to close both ears and eyes to all that was passing without, when the Earl of Berwick suddenly entered, and harshly commanded her to stir not from the cage.

"It is your sovereign's will, madam, that you witness the fate of the traitor so daring in your cause," he said, as with a stern grasp he forced her to the grating and retained his hold upon her arm; "that you may behold in his deserved fate the type of that which will at length befall the yet blacker traitor of his name. It is fitting so loyal a patriot as thyself should look on a patriot's fate, and profit thereby."

"Aye, learn how a patriot can die—how, when his life may no more benefit his country and his kin, he may serve them in his death," calmly and proudly she answered. "It is well; perchance, when my turn cometh, I may thank thy master for the lesson now rudely forced upon me. The hour will come when the blood that he now so unjustly sheds shall shriek aloud for vengeance. On me let him work his will—I fear him not."

"Be silent, minion! I listen not to thy foul treason," said the earl, hoarse with suppressed passion at the little effect his sovereign's mandate produced, when he had hoped to have enforced it midst sobs and tears; and she was silent, for her eye had caught one face amidst the crowd that fascinated its gaze, and sent back the blood, which had seemed to stagnate when the idea that it was indeed Nigel now about to suffer had been thus rudely thrust upon her—sent it with such sudden revulsion through its varied channels, that it was only with a desperate struggle she retained her outward calmness, and then she stood, to the eye of Berwick, proud, dignified, collected, seemingly so cold, that he doubted whether aught of feeling could remain, or marvelled if the mandate of Edward had indeed power to inflict aught of pain. But within—oh, the veriest tyrant must have shuddered, could he have known the torture there; she saw, she recognized her child; she read naught but madness in that chiselled gaze; she saw at a glance there was no escaping from beholding, to the dreadful end, the fate of her beloved; before, behind, on every side, the crowds pressed round, yet from the slightly elevated position of the scaffold, failing to conceal it from her gaze. The Earl of Gloucester she perceived close at her side, as if protecting her; but if indeed she was under his care, how came she on such a spot, at such a time?—did he know her sex, or only looked on her as a favored page of Nigel's, and as such protected? Yet would not the anguish of that hour betray her not alone to him, but to that dark and cruel man whom she also marked beside her, and who, did he once know her, would demand the right of a father, to give her to his care? and oh, how would that right be exercised! would the murderer of his son, his heir, have pity on a daughter? But it would be a vain effort to picture the deep anguish of that mother's heart, as in that dread moment she looked upon her child, knowing, feeling *her* might of grief, as if it had been her own; well-nigh suffocated with the wild yearning to fold her to her maternal bosom, to bid her weep there, to seek to comfort, to soothe, by mingling her tears with hers, to protect, to hide her misery from all save her mother's eye—to feel this till every pulse throbbled as to threaten her with death, and yet to breathe no word, to give no sign that such things were, lest she should endanger that precious one yet more. She dared not breathe one question of the many crowding on her heart, she could but gaze and feel. She had thought, when, they told her that her boy was dead, that she had caused his death, there was little more of misery fate could weave, but at that moment even Alan was forgotten. It was her own wretchedness she had had then to bear, for he was at rest; but now it was the anguish of that dearer self, her sole remaining child—and oh, a mother's heart can better bear its individual woes than those that crash a daughter to the earth.

A sudden rush amidst the crowd, where a movement could take place, the heavy roll of muffled drums, and the yet deeper, more wailing toll of the funeral bell, announced that the prisoner had left the dungeon, and irresistibly the gaze of the countess turned from her child to seek him; perchance it was well, for the preservation of her composure, that the intervening crowd

prevented her beholding him till he stood upon the scaffold, for hardly could she have borne unmoved the sight of that noble and gallant form—beloved alike as the friend of her son, the betrothed of her daughter, the brother of her king—degraded of all insignia of rank, chained to the hurdle, and dragged as the commonest, the vilest criminal, exposed to the mocking gaze of thousands, to the place of execution. She saw him not thus, and therefore she knew not wherefore the features of Agnes had become yet more rigid, bore yet more the semblance of chiselled marble. He stood at length upon the scaffold, as calmly majestic in his bearing as if he had borne no insult, suffered no indignity. His beautiful hair had been arranged with care on either side his face, and still fell in its long, rich curls, about his throat; and so beautiful, so holy was the expression of his perfect features, that the assembled crowds hushed their very breath in admiration and in awe; it seemed as if the heaven, on whose threshold he stood, had already fixed its impress on his brow. Every eye was upon him, and all perceived that holy calmness was for one brief minute disturbed; but none, save three of those who marked it, knew or even guessed the cause. The countess had watched his glance, as at first composedly it had wandered over the multitude beneath and around him, and she saw it rest on that one face, which, in its sculptured misery, stood alone amidst thousands, and she alone perceived the start of agony that sight occasioned, but speedily even that emotion passed; he looked from that loved face up to the heaven on which his hopes were fixed, in whose care for her he trusted—and that look was prayer. She saw him as he knelt in prayer, undisturbed by the clang of instruments still kept up around him; she saw him rise, and then a deadly sickness crept over her every limb, a thick mist obscured her sight, sense seemed on the point of deserting her, when it was recalled by a sound of horror—a shriek so wild, so long, so thrilling, the rudest spirit midst those multitudes shrunk back appalled, and crossed themselves in terror. On one ear it fell with a sense of agony almost equal to that from whence it came; the mother recognized the voice, and feeling, sight, hearing, as by an electric spell, returned. She looked forth again, and though her eye caught the noble form of Nigel Bruce yet quivering in the air, she shrunk not, she sickened not, for its gaze sought her child; she had disappeared from the place she had occupied. She saw the Earl of Gloucester making a rapid way through the dispersing crowds, a sudden gust blew aside his wrapping-cloak, the face of her child was exposed to her view, there was a look of death upon her brow; and if the Earl of Berwick had lingered to note whether indeed this scene of horror would pass unnoticed, unfelt by his prisoner, he was gratified at length, for Isabella of Buchan lay senseless on her prison floor.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"And she is in safety, Gilbert?" inquired the Princess Joan, the evening of the day following the execution, lifting her eyes, swimming in tears, to her husband's face. They were sitting alone in their private apartments, secured from all intruders by a page stationed in the ante-room; and the earl had been relating some important particulars of the preceding day.

"I trust in heaven she is, and some miles ere now on her road to Scotland," was his answer. "I fear for nothing save for the beautiful mind that fragile shell contains; alas! my Joan, I fear me that has gone forever!"

"Better, oh better, then, that fainting-fit had indeed been death," she said, "that the thread of life had snapped than twisted thus in madness. Yet thou sayest her purpose seemed firm, her intellect clear, in her intense desire to reach Scotland. Would this be, thinkest thou, were they disordered?"

"I think yes; for hadst thou seen, as I, the expression of countenance, the unearthly calmness with which this desire was enforced, the constant, though unconscious, repetition of words as these, 'to the king, to the king, my path lies there, he bade me seek him; perchance he will be there to meet me,' thou too wouldst feel that, when that goal is gained, her husband's message given, sense must fail or life itself depart. But once for a few brief minutes I saw that calmness partly fail, and I indulged in one faint hope she would be relieved by tears. She saw old Dermid gaze on her and weep; she clung to his neck, her features worked convulsively, and her voice was choked and broken, as she said, We must not tarry, Dermid, we must not wait to weep and moan; I must seek King Robert while I can. There is a fire on my brain and heart, which will soon scorch up all memory but one; I must not wait till it has reached *his* words, and burned them up too—oh, let us on at once;' but the old man's kindly words had not the effect I hoped, she only shook her head, and then, as if the horrible recollection of the past flashed back, a convulsive shuddering passed through her frame, and when she raised her face from her hand its marble rigidity had returned."

"Alas! alas! poor sufferer," exclaimed the princess, in heartfelt sorrow; "I fear indeed, if such things be, there is little hope of reason. I would thou hadst conveyed her here, perchance the soothing and sympathy of one of her own sex had averted this evil."

"T doubt, my kind Joan," replied her husband; "thy words had such beneficial power before, because hope had still possession of her breast, she hoped to the very last, aye, even when she so madly went with thee to Edward; now that is over; hope is crushed, when despair has risen. Thou couldst not have soothed; it would have been but wringing thy too kind heart, and exposing her to other and heightened evils." The princess looked up inquiringly. "Knowest thou not Buchan hath discovered that his daughter remained with Nigel Bruce, as his engaged bride, at

Kildrummie, and is even now seeking her retreat, vowing she shall repent with tears of blood her connection with a Bruce?"

"I did not indeed; how came this?"

"How, I know not, save that it was reported Buchan had left the court, on a mission to the convent where the Countess of Carrick and her attendants are immured, and in all probability learnt this important fact from them. I only know that at the instant I entered the prisoner's dungeon, Buchan was demanding, at the sword's point, the place of her retreat, incited to the deadliest fury at Nigel's daring avowal that Agnes was his wife."

"Merciful heaven! and Agnes, what did she?"

"I know not, for I dared not, absolutely dared not look upon her face. Her husband's self-control saved her, for he stood and answered as calmly and collectedly as if indeed she were in the safety he declared; her father brushed by, nay, well-nigh stumbled over her, as he furiously quitted the dungeon, glared full at her, but knew her not. But I dared not again bring her here, it was in too close vicinity with the king and her cruel father, for her present state of mind must have betrayed every disguise."

"And thinkest thou he could have the heart to injure her, separated as she is by death from the husband of her love?"

"Aye, persecute her as he hath his wife and son. Joan, I would rather lose my own right hand than that unhappy girl should fall into her father's power. Confinement, indeed, though it would add but little real misery to her present lot, yet I feel that with her present wild yearnings to rejoin the Bruce, to fulfil to the very utmost her husband's will, it would increase tenfold the darkness round her; the very dread of her father would unhinge the last remaining link of intellect."

Joan shuddered. "God in mercy forefend such ill!" she said, fervently; "I would I could have seen her once again, for she has strangely twined herself about my heart; but thou hast judged wisely, my Gilbert, her safety is too precious to be thus idly risked; and this old man, canst thou so trust him—will he guide her tenderly and well?"

"Aye, I would stake my life upon his truth; he is the seer and minstrel of the house of Bruce, and that would be all-sufficient to guarantee his unwavering fidelity and skill. He has wandered on foot from Scotland, to look on his beloved master once again; to watch over, as a guardian spirit, the fate of that master's devoted wife, and he will do this, I doubt not, and discover Carrick's place of retreat, were it at the utmost boundaries of the earth. I only dread pursuit."

"Pursuit! and by whom?"

"By her father. Men said he was close beside me during that horrible hour, though I saw him not; if he observed her, traced to her lips that maddening shriek, it would excite his curiosity quite sufficiently for him to trace my steps, and discovery were then inevitable."

"But did he do this—hast seen him since?"

"No, he has avoided me; but still, for her sake, I fear him. I know not how or when, but there are boding whispers within me that all will not be well. Now I would have news from thee. Is Hereford released?"

"Yes; coupled with the condition that he enters not my father's presence until Easter. He is deeply and justly hurt; but more grieved at the change in his sovereign than angered at the treatment of himself."

"No marvel; for if ever there were a perfect son of chivalry, one most feelingly alive to its smallest point of honor, it is Humphrey Bohun."

So spoke Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, unconscious that he himself had equal right to a character so exalted; that both Scottish and English historians would emulate each other in handing his name down to posterity, surrounded by that lucid halo of real worth, on which the eye turns again and again to rest for relief from the darker minds and ruder hearts which formed the multitude of the age in which he lived. The duties of friendship were performed in his preservation of the person, and constant and bold defence of the character of the Bruce; the duties of a subject, in dying on the battle-field in service for his king.

The boding prognostics of the Earl of Gloucester were verified ere that day closed. While still in earnest converse with his countess, a messenger came from the king, demanding their instant presence in his closet. The summons was so unusual, that in itself it was alarming, nor did the sight of the Earl of Buchan in close conference with the monarch decrease their fears. As soon as a cessation of his pains permitted the exertion, Buchan had been sent for by the king; the issue of his inquiries after his daughter demanded, and all narrated; his interview with Sir Nigel dwelt upon with all the rancor of hate. Edward had listened without making any observation; a twinkle of his still bright eye, an expression about the lips alone betraying that he not only heard but was forming his own conclusions from the tale.

"And you have no clue, no thought of her retreat?" he asked, at length, abruptly, when the earl ceased.

"Not the very faintest, your grace. Had not that interfering Gloucester come between me and my

foe, I had forced it from him at the sharp sword's point."

"Gloucester—humph!" muttered the king. "Yet an so bloody was thy purpose, my good lord, his interference did thee no ill. How was the earl accompanied—was he alone?"

"If I remember rightly, alone, your grace. No, by my faith, there was a page with him!"

"A page—ha! and what manner of man was he?"

"Man! your highness, say rather a puny stripling, with far more of the woman about him than the man."

"Ha!" again uttered the king; "looked he so weakly—did thy fury permit such keen remark?"

"Not at that time, your highness; but he was, with Gloucester, compelled to witness the execution of this black traitor, and he looked white, statue-like, and uttered a shriek, forsooth, likely to scare back the villain's soul even as it took flight. Gloucester cared for the dainty brat, as if he had been a son of your highness, not a page in his household, for he lifted him up in his arms, and bore him out of the crowd."

"Humph!" said Edward again, in a tone likely to have excited curiosity in any mind less obtuse on such matters than that of the Scottish earl. "And thou sayest," he added, after some few minutes pause, "this daring traitor, so lately a man, would tell thee no more than that thy daughter was his wife, and in safety—out of thy reach?"

Buchan answered in the affirmative.

"And thou hast not the most distant idea where he hath concealed her?"

"None, your highness."

"Then I will tell thee, sir earl; and if thou dost not feel inclined to dash out thine own brains with vexation at letting thy prey so slip out of thy grasp, thou art not the man I took thee for," and Edward fixed his eyes on his startled companion with a glance at once keen and malicious.

"The white and statue-looking page, with more of woman about him than the man, was the *wife* of this rank villain, Sir Nigel Bruce, and thy daughter, my Lord of Buchan. The Earl of Gloucester may, perchance, tell thee more."

The earl started from his seat with an oath, which the presence of majesty itself could not restrain. The dulness of his brain was dissolved as by a flash of lightning; the ghastly appearance, the maddening shriek, the death-like faint, all of which he had witnessed in Gloucester's supposed page, nay, the very disturbed and anxious look of the earl himself, gave truth and life to Edward's words, and he struck his clenched fist against his brow, and strode up and down the royal closet, in a condition as frantically disturbed as the monarch could possibly have desired; and then, hastily and almost incoherently, besought the king's aid in sifting the matter to the very bottom, and obtaining repossession of his daughter, entreating leave of absence to seek out Gloucester and tax him with the fact.

Edward, whose fury against the house of Bruce—whether man, woman, or child, noble or serf, belonging to them—had been somewhat soothed by the ignominious execution of Nigel, had felt almost as much amused as angered at the earl's tale, and enjoyed the idea of a man, whom in his inmost heart he most thoroughly despised, having been so completely outwitted, and for the time so foiled. The feud between the Comyn and the Bruce was nothing to him, except where it forwarded his own interests. He had incited Buchan to inquire about his daughter, simply because the occupation would remove that earl out of his way for a short time, and perhaps, if the rumor of her engagement with one of the brothers of the Bruce were true, set another engine at work to discover the place of their concealment. The moment Buchan informed him it was to Nigel she had been engaged, with Nigel last seen, his acute penetration recalled the page who had accompanied the princess when she supplicated mercy, and had he heard no more, would have pointed there for the solution of the mystery. Incensed he was and deeply, at the fraud practised upon him at the Karl and Countess of Gloucester daring to harbor, nay, protect and conceal the wife of a traitor; but his anger was subdued in part by the belief that now it was almost impossible she could escape the wardance of her father, and *his* vengeance would be more than sufficient to satisfy him; nay, when he recalled the face and the voice, it was so like madness and death, and he was, moreover, so convinced that now her husband was dead she could do him no manner of harm, that he inwardly and almost unconsciously hoped she might eventually escape her father's power, although he composedly promised the earl to exercise his authority, and give him the royal warrant for the search and committal of her person wherever she might be. Anger, that Gloucester and his wife should so have dared his sovereign power, was now the prevailing feeling, and therefore was it he commanded their presence, determined to question them himself, rather than through the still enraged Buchan.

Calmly and collectedly the noble pair received alike the displeasure of their sovereign and the ill-concealed fury of Buchan. They neither denied the charge against them nor equivocated in their motives for their conduct; alarmed they were, indeed, for the unhappy Agnes; but as denial and concealment were now alike impossible, and could avail her nothing, they boldly, nay, proudly acknowledged that which they had done, and openly rejoiced it had been theirs to give one gleam of comfort to the dying Nigel, by extending protection to his wife.

"And are ye not traitors—bold, presuming traitors—deserving the chastisement of such, hearing me thus in my very palace?" wrathfully exclaimed Edward. "Know ye not both are liable to the charge of treason, aye, treason—and fear ye to brave us thus?"

"My liege, we are no traitors, amenable to no such charge," calmly answered Gloucester; "far, far more truly, faithfully, devotedly your grace's subjects than many of those who had shrunk from an act as this. That in so doing we were likely to incur your royal displeasure, we acknowledge with deep regret and sorrow, and I take it no shame thus on my knee to beseech your highness's indulgence for the fault; but if you deem it worthy of chastisement, we are ready to submit to it, denying, however, all graver charge, than that of failing in proper deference to your grace."

"All other charge! By St. Edward, is not that enough?" answered the king, but in a mollified tone. "And thou, minion, thou whom we deemed the very paragon of integrity and honor, hast thou aught to say? Did not thy lips frame falsehood, and thy bold looks confirm it?"

"My father, my noble father, pardon me that in this I erred," answered Joan, kneeling by his side, and, despite his efforts to prevent it, clasping his hand and covering it with kisses; "yet I spoke no falsehood, uttered naught which was not truth. She *was* ill and weakly; she was well-nigh maddened from scenes and sounds of blood. I had besought her not to attend me, but a wife's agony could not be restrained, and if we had refused her the protection she so wildly craved, had discovered her person to your highness, would it have availed thee aught? a being young, scarce past her childhood—miserable, maddened well-nigh to death, her life wrapt up in her husband's, which was forfeited to thee."

"The wife of a traitor, the offspring of a traitress, connected on every side with treason, and canst ask if her detention would have availed us aught? Joan, Joan, thy defence is but a weak one," answered the king, sternly, but he called her "Joan," and that simple word thrilled to her heart as the voice of former years, and her father felt a sudden gush of tears fall on the hand he had not withdrawn, and vainly he struggled against the softening feelings those tears had brought. It was strange that, angered as he really was, the better feelings of Edward should in such a moment have so completely gained the ascendancy. Perhaps he was not proof against the contrast before him, presented in the persons of Buchan and Gloucester; the base villainy of the one, the exalted nobility of the other, alike shone forth the clearer from their unusually close contact. In general, Edward was wont to deem these softening emotions foolish weaknesses, which he would banish by shunning the society of all those who could call them forth. Their candid acknowledgment of having deserved his displeasure, and submission to his will, however, so soothed his self-love, his fondness for absolute power, that he permitted them to have vent with but little restraint. Agnes might have been the wife of a traitor, but he was out of Edward's way; the daughter of a traitress, but she was equally powerless; linked with treason, but too much crushed by her own misery to be sensible of aught else. Surely she was too insignificant for him to persevere in wrath, and alienate by unmerited severity yet more the hearts which at such moments he felt he valued, despite his every effort to the contrary.

So powerfully was he worked upon, that had it not been for the ill-restrained fury of Buchan, it was possible the subject would have been in the end peaceably dismissed; but on that earl's reminding him of his royal word, the king commanded Gloucester to deliver up his charge to her rightful guardian, and all the past should be forgiven. The earl quietly and respectfully replied he could not, for he knew not where she was. Wrath gathered on Edward's brow, and Buchan laid his hand on his sword; but neither the royal commands nor Buchan's muttered threats and oaths of vengeance could elicit from Gloucester more than that she had set off to return to Scotland with an aged man, not three hours after the execution had taken place. He had purposely avoided all inquiries as to their intended route, and therefore not any cross-questioning on the part of the king caused him to waver in the smallest point from his original tale, or afforded any evidence that he knew more than he said.

"Get thee to Sir Edward Cunningham, my Lord of Buchan, and bid him draw up a warrant for the detention and committal of these two persons wherever they may be," the king said, "and away with thee, and a trusty troop, with all speed to Berwick. Make inquiries of all who at that particular hour passed the gates, and be assured thou wilt find some clue. Take men enough to scour the country in all directions; provide them with an exact description of the prisoners they seek, and tarry not, and thou wilt yet gain thy prize; living or dead, we resign all our right over her person to thee, and give thee power, as her father, to do with her what may please thee best. Away with thee, my lord, and heaven speed thee!"

"My liege and father, oh, why hast thou done this?" exclaimed the princess, imploringly, as, with a low obeisance to the king and a gesture of triumph at the Earl of Gloucester, Buchan departed. "Hath she not borne misery enough!"

"Nay, we do but our duty to our subjects in aiding fathers to repress rebellious children," replied the king. "Of a truth, fair dame of Gloucester, thy principles of filial duty seem somewhat as loose and light as those which counselled abetting, protecting, and concealing the partner of a traitor. Wouldst have us refuse Buchan's most fatherly desire? Surely thou wouldst not part him from his child?"

"Forever and forever!" exclaimed the princess, fervently. "Great God in heaven, that such a being should call that monster father, and owe him the duty of a child! But, oh, thou dost but jest, my father; in mercy recall that warrant—expose her not to wretchedness as this!"

"Peace," replied the king, sternly. "As thou valuest thine own and thy husband's liberty and life, breathe not another syllable, speak not another word for her, or double misery shall be her portion. We have shown enough of mercy in demanding no further punishment for that which ye have done, than that for ten days ye remain prisoners in your own apartments. Answer not; we will have no more of this."

The Earl of Buchan, meanwhile, had made no delay in gaining the necessary aids to his plan. Ere two hours passed, he was on his road to Berwick, backed with a stout body of his own retainers, and bearing a commission to the Earl of Berwick to provide him with as many more as he desired. He went first to the hostelry near the outskirts of the town, where he remembered Gloucester had borne the supposed page. There he obtained much desirable information, an exact description of the dress, features, and appearance of both the page and his companion; of the former, indeed, he recollected all-sufficient, even had the description been less exact. The old minstrel had attracted the attention of many within the hostel, and consequently enabled Buchan to obtain information from various sources, all of which agreed so well that he felt sure of success.

Backed by the warrant of Edward, he went to the civil authorities of the town, obtained four or five technically drawn-up descriptions of the prisoners, and intrusted them to the different officers, who, with bands of fifty men, he commanded to search every nook and corner of the country round Berwick, in various directions. He himself discovering they had passed through the Scotch gate and appeared directing their course in a westerly direction, took with him one hundred men, and followed that track, buoyed up by the hope not only of gaining possession of his daughter, but perhaps of falling in with the retreat even of the detested Bruce, against whom he had solemnly recorded a vow never to let the sword rest in the scabbard till he had revenged the murder of his kinsman, the Red Comyn. Some words caught by a curious listener, passing between the page and minstrel, and eagerly reported to him, convinced him it was Robert Bruce they sought, and urged him to continue the search with threefold vigor.

Slowly and sadly meanwhile had the hours of their weary pilgrimage passed for the poor wanderers, and little did they imagine, as they threaded the most intricate paths of the borders of Scotland, that they were objects of persecution and pursuit. Though the bodily strength of Agnes had well-nigh waned, though the burning cheek and wandering, too brightly flashing eye denoted how fearfully did fever rage internally, she would not pause save when absolutely compelled. She could neither sleep nor eat: her only cry was, "To the king—bring me but to King Robert while I may yet speak!" her only consciousness, that she had a mission to perform, that she was intrusted with a message from the dead; all else was a void, dark, shapeless, in which thought framed no image; mind, not a wish. Insensibility it was not, alas! no, that void was woe, all woe, which folded up heart and brain as with a cloak of fire, scorching up thought, memory, hope—all that could recall the past, vivify the present, or vision forth the future. She breathed indeed and spoke, and clung to that aged man with all the clinging helplessness of her sex, but scarce could she be said to live; all that was real of life had twined round her husband's soul, and with it fled.

The old man felt not his advanced age, the consciousness of the many dangers hovering on their way; his whole thought was for her, to bring her to the soothing care and protection of the king, and then he cared not how soon his sand run out. When wandering in the districts of Annandale and Carrick, before he had arrived at Berwick, he had learned the secret but most important intelligence that King Robert had passed the winter off the coast of Ireland, and was supposed to be only waiting a favorable opportunity to return to Scotland, and once more upraise his standard. This news had been most religiously and strictly preserved a secret amid the few faithful adherents of the Bruce, who perhaps spoke yet more as they hoped than as a fact well founded.

For some days their way had been more fatiguing than dangerous, for though the country was overrun with English, a minstrel and a page were objects far too insignificant, in the present state of excitement, to meet with either detention or notice. Not a week had passed, however, before rumors of Buchan's parties reached the old man's ears, and filled him with anxiety and dread. The feverish restlessness of Agnes to advance yet quicker on their way, precluded all idea of halting, save in woods and caverns, till the danger had passed. Without informing her of all he had heard, and the danger he apprehended, he endeavored to avoid all towns and villages; but the heavy rains which had set in rendered their path through the country yet more precarious and uncertain, and often compelled him most unwillingly to seek other and better shelter. At Strathaven he became conscious that their dress and appearance were strictly scrutinized, and some remarks that he distinguished convinced him that Buchan had either passed through that town, or was lingering in its neighborhood still. Turning sick with apprehension, the old man hastily retraced his steps to the hostel, where he had left Agnes, and found her, for the first time since their departure, sunk into a kind of sleep or stupor from exhaustion, from which he could not bear to arouse her. Watching her for some little time in silence, his attention was attracted by whispering voices, only separated from him by a thin partition. They recounted and compared one by one the dress and peculiar characteristics of himself and his companion, seeming to compare it with a written list. Then followed an argument as to whether it would not be better to arrest their progress at once, or send on to the Earl of Buchan, who was at a castle only five miles distant. How it was determined Dermid knew not, for the voices faded in the distance; but he had heard enough, and it seemed indeed as if detention and restraint were at length at hand. What to do he knew not. Night had now some hours advanced, and to attempt leaving the hostel at such an unseasonable hour would be of itself sufficient to confirm suspicion. All seemed at rest

within the establishment; there was no sound to announce that a messenger had been dispatched to the earl, and he determined to await as calmly as might be the dawn.

The first streak of light, however, was scarce visible in the east before, openly and loudly, so as to elude all appearance of flight, he declared his intention of pursuing his journey, as the weather had already detained them too long. He called on the hostess to receive her reckoning, commanded the mules to be saddled, all of which was done, to his surprise, without comment or question, and they departed unrestrained; the old man too much overjoyed at this unexpected escape to note that they were followed by two Englishmen, the one on horseback, the other on foot. Anxiety indeed had still possession of him, for he could not reconcile the words he had overheard with their quiet departure; but as the day passed, and they plunged thicker and thicker in the woods of Carrick, and there was no sign of pursuit, or even of a human form, he hailed with joy a solitary house, and believed the danger passed.

The inmates received them with the utmost hospitality; the order for their detention had evidently not reached them, and Dermid determined on waiting quietly there till the exhausted strength of his companion should be recruited, and permit them to proceed. An hour and more passed in cheerful converse with the aged couple who owned the house, and who, with the exception of one or two servants, were its sole inhabitants. The tales of the minstrel were called for and received with a glee which seemed to make all his listeners feel young again. Agnes alone sate apart; her delicate frame and evident exhaustion concealing deeper sufferings from her hosts, who vied with each other in seeking to alleviate her fatigue and give bodily comfort, if they could offer no other consolation. Leaning back in a large settle in the chimney corner, she had seemed unconscious of the cheerful sociability around her, when suddenly she arose, and advancing to Dermid, laid a trembling hand on his arm. He looked up surprised.

"Hist!" she murmured, throwing back the hair from her damp brow. "Hear ye no sound?"

All listened for a time in vain.

"Again," she said; "'tis nearer, more distinct. Who comes with a troop of soldiers here?"

It was indeed the heavy trampling of many horse, at first so distant as scarcely to be distinguished, save by ears anxious and startled as old Dermid's; but nearer and nearer they came, till even the inmates of the house all huddled, together in alarm. Agnes remained standing, her hand on Dermid's arm, her head thrown back, her features bearing an expression scarce to be defined. The horses' hoofs, mingled with the clang of armor, rung sharp and clear on the stones of the courtyard. They halted: the pommel of a sword was struck against the oaken door, and a night's lodging courteously demanded. The terror of the owners of the house subsided, for the voice they heard was Scotch.

The door was thrown open, the request granted, with the same hospitality as had been extended to the minstrel and the page. On the instant there was a confused sound of warriors dismounting, of horses eager for stabling and forage; and one tall and stately figure, clad from head to foot in mail, entered the house, and removing his helmet, addressed some words of courteous greeting and acknowledgment to its inmates. A loud exclamation burst from the minstrel's lips; but Agnes uttered no sound, she made one bound forward, and dropped senseless at the warrior's feet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

It was on a cool evening, near the end of September, 1311, that a troop, consisting of about thirty horse, and as many on foot, were leisurely traversing the mountain passes between the counties of Dumfries and Lanark. Their arms were well burnished; their buff coats and half-armor in good trim; their banner waved proudly from its staff, as bright and gay as if it had not even neared a scene of strife; and there was an air of hilarity and gallantry about them that argued well for success, if about to commence an expedition, or if returning, told with equal emphasis they had been successful. That the latter was the case was speedily evident, from the gay converse passing between them; their allusions to some late gallant achievement of their patriot sovereign; their joyous comparisons between good King Robert and his weak opponent, Edward II. of England, marvelling how so wavering and indolent a son could have sprung from so brave and determined a sire; for, Scotsmen as they were, they were now FREE, and could thus afford to allow the "hammer" of their country some knightly qualities, despite the stern and cruel tyranny which to them had ever marked his conduct. They spoke in laughing scorn of the second Edward's efforts to lay his father's yoke anew upon their necks; they said a just heaven had interfered and urged him to waste the decisive moment of action in indolence and folly, in the flatteries of his favorite, to the utter exclusion of those wiser lords, whose counsels, if followed on the instant, might have shaken even the wise and patriot Bruce. Yet they were so devoted to their sovereign, they idolized him alike as a warrior and a man too deeply, to allow that to the weak and vacillating conduct of Edward they owed the preservation of their country. It was easy to perceive by the springy step, the flashing eye, the ringing, tone with which that magic name, the Bruce, was spoken, how deeply it was written on the heart; the joy it was to recall his deeds, and feel it was through him that they were free! Their converse easily betrayed them to be one of those well-ordered though straggling parties into which King Robert's invading armies generally dispersed at his command, when returning to their own fastnesses, after a successful expedition to the

English border.

The laugh and jest resounded, as we have said, amongst both officers and men; but their leader, who was riding about a stone's throw ahead, gave no evidence of sharing their mirth. He was clad from head to foot in chain armor, of a hue so dark as to be mistaken for black, and from his wearing a surcoat of the same color, unenlivened by any device, gave him altogether a somewhat sombre appearance, although it could not detract in the smallest degree from the peculiar gracefulness and easy dignity of his form, which was remarkable both on horseback and on foot. He was evidently very tall, and by his firm seat in the saddle, had been early accustomed to equestrian exercises; but his limbs were slight almost to delicacy, and though completely ensheathed in mail, there was an appearance of extreme youth about him, that perhaps rendered the absence of all gayety the more striking. Yet on the battle-field he gave no evidence of inexperience as a warrior, no sign that he was merely a scholar in the art of war; there only did men believe he must be older than he seemed; there only his wonted depression gave place to an energy, a fire, second to none amongst the Scottish patriots, not even to the Bruce himself; then only was the naturally melancholy music of his voice lost in accents of thrilling power, of imperative command, and the oldest warriors followed him as if under the influence of some spell. But of his appearance on the field we must elsewhere speak. He now led his men through the mountain defiles mechanically, as if buried in meditation, and that meditation not of the most pleasing nature. His vizor was closed, but short clustering curls, of a raven blackness, escaped beneath the helmet, and almost concealed the white linen and finely embroidered collar which lay over his gorget, and was secured in front by a ruby clasp; a thick plume of black feathers floated from his helmet, rivalling in color the mane of his gallant charger, which pawed the ground, and held his head aloft as if proud of the charge he bore. A shield was slung round the warrior's neck, and its device and motto seemed in melancholy accordance with the rest of his attire. On a field argent lay the branch of a tree proper, blasted and jagged, with the words "*Ni nom ni paren, je suis seul*," rudely engraved in Norman French beneath; his helmet bore no crest, nor did his war-cry on the field, "Amiot for the Bruce and freedom," offer any clue to the curious as to his history, for that there was some history attached to him all chose to believe, though the age was too full of excitement to allow much of wonderment or curiosity to be expended upon him. His golden spurs gave sufficient evidence that he was a knight; his prowess on the field proclaimed whoever had given him that honor had not bestowed it on the undeserving. His deeds of daring, unequalled even in that age, obtained him favor in the eyes of every soldier; and if there were some in the court and camp of Bruce who were not quite satisfied, and loved not the mystery which surrounded him, it mattered not, Sir Amiot of the Branch, or the Lonely Chevalier, as he was generally called, went on his way unquestioned.

"Said not Sir Edward Bruce he would meet us hereabouts at set of sun?" were the first words spoken by the knight, as, on issuing from the mountains, they found themselves on a broad plain to the east of Lanark, bearing sad tokens of a devastating war, in the ruined and blackened huts which were the only vestiges of human habitations near. The answer was in the affirmative; and the knight, after glancing in the direction of the sun, which wanted about an hour to its setting, commanded a halt, and desired that, while waiting the arrival of their comrades, they should take their evening meal.

On the instant the joyous sounds of dismounting, leading horses to picquet, unclasping helmets, throwing aside the more easily displaced portions of their armor, shields, and spears, took the place of the steady tramp and well-ordered march. Flinging themselves in various attitudes on the greensward, provender was speedily laid before them, and rare wines and other choice liquors, fruits of their late campaign, passed gayly round. An esquire had, at the knight's sign, assisted him to remove his helmet, shield, and gauntlets; but though this removal displayed a beautifully formed head, thickly covered with dark hair, his features were still concealed by a species of black mask, the mouth, chin, and eyes being alone visible, and therefore his identity was effectually hidden. The mouth and chin were both small and delicately formed; the slight appearance of beard and moustache seeming to denote his age as some one-and-twenty years. His eyes, glancing through the opening in the mask, were large and very dark, often flashing brightly, when his outward bearing was so calm and quiet as to afford little evidence of emotion. Some there were, indeed, who believed the eye the truer index of the man than aught else about him, and to fancy there was far more in that sad and lonely knight than was revealed.

It was evident, however, that to the men now with him his remaining so closely masked was no subject of surprise, that they regarded it as an ordinary thing, which in consequence had lost its strangeness. They were eager and respectful in their manner towards him, offering to raise him a seat of turf at some little distance from their noisy comrades; but acknowledging their attention with kindness and courtesy, he refused it, and rousing himself with some difficulty from his desponding thoughts, threw himself on the sward beside his men, and joined in their mirth and jest.

"Hast thou naught to tell to while away this tedious hour, good Murdoch?" he asked, after a while, addressing a gray-headed veteran.

"Aye, aye, a tale, a tale; thou hast seen more of the Bruce than all of us together," repeated many eager voices, "and knowest yet more of his deeds than we do; a tale an thou wilt, but of no other hero than the Bruce."

"The Bruce!" echoed the veteran; "see ye not his deeds yourselves, need ye more of them?" but there was a sly twinkle in his eye that betrayed his love to speak was as great as his comrades to

hear him. "Have ye not heard, aye, and many of you seen his adventures and escapes in Carrick, hunted even as he was by bloodhounds; his guarding that mountain pass, one man against sixty, aye, absolutely alone against the Galwegian host of men and bloodhounds; Glen Fruin, Loudun Hill, Aberdeen; the harrying of Buchan; charging the treacherous foe, when they had to bear him from his litter to his horse, aye, and support him there; springing up from his couch of pain, and suffering, and depression, agonizing to witness, to hurl vengeance on the fell traitors; aye, and he did it, and brought back health to his own heart and frame; and Forfar, Lorn, Dunstaffnage—know ye not all these things? Nay, have ye not seen, shared in them all—what would ye more?"

"The harrying of Buchan, tell us of that," loudly exclaimed many voices; while some others shouted, "the landing of the Bruce—tell us of his landing, and the spirit fire at Turnberry Head; the strange woman that addressed him."

"Now which am I to tell, good my masters?" laughingly answered the old man, when the tumult in a degree subsided. "A part of one, and part of the other, and leave ye to work out the rest yourselves; truly, a pleasant occupation. Say, shall it be thus? yet stay, what says Sir Amiot?"

"As you will, my friends," answered the knight, cheerily; "but decide quickly, or we shall hear neither. I am for the tale of Buchan," there was a peculiarly thrilling emphasis in his tone as he pronounced the word, "for I was not in Scotland at the time, and have heard but disjointed rumors of the expedition."

The veteran looked round on his eager comrades with an air of satisfaction, then clearing his voice, and drawing more to the centre of the group; "Your worship knows," he began, addressing Sir Amiot, who, stretched at full length on the sward, had fixed his eyes upon him, though their eagle glance was partly shaded by his hand, "that our good King Robert the Bruce, determined on the reduction of the north of his kingdom, advanced thereto in the spring of 1308, accompanied by his brother, Lord Edward, that right noble gentleman the Earl of Lennox, Sir Gilbert Hay, Sir Robert Boyd, and others, with a goodly show of men and arms, for his successes at Glen Fruin and Loudun Hill had brought him a vast accession of loyal subjects. And they were needed, your worship, of a truth, for the traitorous Comyns had almost entire possession of the castles and forts of the north, and thence were wont to pour down their ravaging hordes upon the true Scotsmen, and menace the king, till he scarcely knew which side to turn to first. Your worship coming, I have heard, from the low country, can scarcely know all the haunts and lurking-places for treason the highlands of our country present; how hordes of traitors may be trained and armed in these remote districts, without the smallest suspicion being attached to them till it is well-nigh too late, and the mischief is done. Well, to drive out these black villains, to free his kingdom, not alone from the yoke of an English Edward, but a Scottish Comyn, good King Robert was resolved—and even as he resolved he did. Inverness, the citadel of treason and disloyalty, fell before him; her defences, and walls, and turrets, and towers, all dismantled and levelled, so as to prevent all further harborage of treason; her garrison marched out, the ringleaders sent into secure quarters, and all who hastened to offer homage and swear fidelity, received with a courtesy and majesty which I dare to say did more for the cause of our true king than a Comyn could ever do against it. Other castles followed the fate of Inverness, till at length the north, even as the south, acknowledged the Bruce, not alone as their king, but as their deliverer and savior.

"It was while rejoicing over these glorious successes, the lords and knights about the person of their sovereign began to note with great alarm that his strength seemed waning, his brow often knit as with inward pain, his eye would grow dim, and his limbs fail him, without a moment's warning; and that extreme depression would steal over his manly spirit even in the very moment of success. They watched in alarm, but silently; and when they saw the renewed earnestness and activity with which, on hearing of the approach of Comyn of Buchan, Sir John de Mowbray, and that worst of traitors, his own nephew, Sir David of Brechin, he rallied his forces, advanced to meet them, and compelled them to retreat confusedly to Aberdeen, they hoped they had been deceived, and all was well.

"But the fell disease gained ground; at first he could not guide his charger's reins, and then he could not mount at all; his voice failed, his sight passed; they were compelled to lay him in a litter, and bear him in the midst of them, and they felt as if the void left by their sovereign's absence from their head was filled with the dim shadow of death. Nobly and gallantly did Lord Edward endeavor to remedy this fatal evil; Lennox, Hay, even the two Frasers, who had so lately joined the king, seemed as if paralyzed by this new grief, and hung over the Bruce's litter as if their strength waned with his. Sternly, nay, at such a moment it seemed almost harshly, Lord Edward rebuked this weakness, and, conducting them to Slenath, formed some strong entrenchments, of which the Bruce's pavilion was the centre, intending there to wait his brother's recovery. Ah, my masters, if ye were not with good King Robert then, ye have escaped the bitterest trial. Ye know not what it was to behold him—the savior of his country, the darling of his people, the noblest knight and bravest warrior who ever girded on a sword—lie there, so pale, so faint, with scarce a voice or passing sigh to say he breathed. The hand which grasped the weal of Scotland, the arm that held her shield, lay nerveless as the dead; the brain which thought so well and wisely for his fettered land, lay powerless and still; the thrilling voice was hushed, the flashing eye was closed. The foes were close around him, and true friends in tears and woe beside his couch, were all alike unknown. Ah! then was the time for warrior's tears, for men of iron frame and rugged mood to soften into woman's woe, and weep. Men term Lord Edward Bruce so harsh and stern, one whom naught of grief for others or himself can move; they saw him not as I have. It was mine to watch my sovereign, when others sought their rest; and I have seen that rugged chieftain stand beside his brother's couch alone, unmarked, and struggle with his

spirit till his brow hath knit, his lip become convulsed, and then as if 'twere vain, all vain, sink on his knee, clasp his sovereign's hand, and bow his head and weep. 'Tis passed and over now, kind heaven be praised! yet I cannot recall that scene, unbind the folds of memory, unmoved."

The old man passed his rough hand across his eyes, and for a brief moment paused; his comrades, themselves affected, sought not to disturb him, and quickly he resumed.

"Days passed, and still King Robert gave no sign of amendment, except, indeed, there were intervals when his eyes wandered to the countenances of his leaders, as if he knew them, and would fain have addressed them as his wont. Then it was our men were annoyed by an incessant discharge from Buchan's archers, which, though they could do perhaps no great evil, yet wounded many of our men, and roused Lord Edward's spirit to resent the insult. His determination to leave the entrenchments and retreat to Strathbogie, appeared at first an act of such unparalleled daring as to startle all his brother leaders, and they hesitated; but there never was any long resisting Sir Edward's plans; he bears a spell no spirit with a spark of gallantry about him can resist. The retreat was in consequence determined on, to the great glee of our men, who were tired of inaction, and imagined they should feel their sovereign's sufferings less if engaged hand to hand with, the foe, in his service, than watching him as they had lately done, and dreading yet greater evils.

"Ye have heard of this daring retreat, my friends; it was in the mouth of every Scotsman, aye, and of Englishman too, for King Robert himself never accomplished a deed of greater skill. The king's litter was placed in the centre of a square, which presented on either side such an impenetrable fence of spears and shields, that though Buchan and De Mowbray mustered more than double our number, they never ventured an attack, and a retreat, apparently threatening total destruction, from its varied dangers, was accomplished without the loss of a single man. At Strathbogie we halted but a short space, for finding no obstruction in our path, we hastened southward, in the direction of Inverury; there we pitched the tent for the king, and, taking advantage of a natural fortification, dispersed our men around it, still in a compact square. Soon after this had been accomplished, news was received that our foes were concentrating their numerous forces at Old Meldrum, scarcely two miles from us, and consequently we must hold ourselves in constant readiness to receive their attack.

"Well, the news that the enemy was so near us might not perhaps have been particularly pleasing, had they not been more than balanced by the conviction—far more precious than a large reinforcement, for in itself it was a host—the king was recovering. Yes, scarcely as we dared hope, much less believe it, the disease, which had fairly baffled all the leech's art, which had hung over our idolized monarch so long, at length showed symptoms of giving way, and there was as great rejoicing in the camp as if neither danger nor misfortune could assail us more; a new spirit sparkled in every eye, as if the awakening lustre in the Bruce's glance, the still faint, yet thrilling accents of a voice we had feared was hushed forever, had lighted on every heart, and kindled anew their slumbering fire. One day, Lord Edward, the Earl of Lennox, and a gallant party, were absent scouring the country about half a mile round our entrenchments, and in consequence, one side of our square was more than usually open, but we did not think it signified, for there wore no tidings of the enemy; well, this day the king had called me to him, and bade me relate the particulars of the retreat, which I was proud enough to do, my masters, and which of you would not be, speaking as I did with our gallant sovereign as friend with friend?"

"Aye, and does he not make us all feel this?" burst simultaneously from many voices; "does he not speak, and treat us all as if we were his friends, and not his subjects only? Thine was a proud task, good Murdoch, but which of us has good King Robert not addressed with kindly words and proffered hand?"

"Right! right!" joyously responded the old man; "still I say that hour was one of the proudest in my life, and an eventful one too for Scotland ere it closed. King Robert heard me with flashing eye and kindling cheek, and his voice, as he burst forth in high praise and love for his daring brother, sounded almost as strong and thrilling as was its wont in health; just then a struggle was heard without the tent, a scuffle, as of a skirmish, confused voices, clashing of weapons, and war-cries. Up started the king, with eagle glance and eager tone. 'My arms,' he cried, 'bring me my arms! Ha hear ye that?' and sure enough, 'St. David for De Brechin, and down with the Bruce!' resounded so close, that it seemed as if but the curtain separated the traitor from his kinsman and his king. Never saw I the Bruce so fearfully aroused, the rage of the lion was upon him. 'Hear ye that?' he repeated, as, despite my remonstrances, and these of the officers who rushed into the tent, he sprang from the couch, and, with the rapidity of light, assumed his long-neglected armor. 'The traitorous villain! would he beard me to my teeth? By the heaven above us, he shall rue this insolence! Bring me my charger. Beaten off, say ye? I doubt it not, my gallant friends; but it is now the Bruce's turn, his kindred traitors are not far off, and we would try their mettle now. Nay, restrain me not, these folk will work a cure for me—there, I am a man again!' and as he stood upright, sheathed in his glittering mail, his drawn sword in his gauntleted hand, a wild shout of irrepressible joy burst from us all, and, caught up by the soldiers without the tent, echoed and re-echoed through the camp. The sudden appearance of the Bruce's charger, caparisoned for battle, standing before his master's tent, the drums rolling for the muster, the lightning speed with which Sir Edward Bruce, Lennox, and Hay, after dispersing De Brechin's troop, as dust on the plain, galloped to the royal pavilion, themselves equally at a loss to understand the bustle there, all prepared the men-at-arms for what was to come. Eagerly did the gallant knights remonstrate with their sovereign, conjure him to follow the battle in his litter,

rather than attempt to mount his charger; they besought him to think what his life, his safety was to them, and not so rashly risk it. Lord Edward did entreat him to reserve his strength till there was more need; the field was then clear, the foes had not appeared; but all in vain their eloquence, the king combated it all. 'We will go seek them, brother,' cheerily answered the king; 'we will go tell them insult to the Bruce passes not unanswered. On, on, gallant knights, our men wax impatient.' Hastening from the tent, he stood one moment in the sight of all his men: removing his helmet, he smiled a gladsome greeting. Oh, what a shout rung forth from those iron ranks! There was that noble face, pale, attenuated indeed, but beaming on them in all its wonted animation, confidence, and love; there was that majestic form towering again in its princely dignity, seeming the nobler from being so long unseen. Again and again that shout arose, till the wild birds rose screaming over our heads, in untuned, yet exciting chorus. Nor did the fact that the king, strengthened as he was by his own glorious soul, had in reality not bodily force enough to mount his horse without support, take from the enthusiasm of his men, nay, it was heightened and excited to the wildest pitch. 'For Scotland and freedom!' shouted the king, as for one moment he rose in his stirrups and waved his bright blade above his head. 'For Bruce and Scotland!' swelled the answering shout. We formed, we gathered in compact array around our leaders, loudly clashed our swords against our shields; we marched a brief while slowly and majestically along the plain; we neared the foe, who, with its multitude in terrible array, awaited our coming; we saw, we hurled defiance in a shout which rent the very air. Quicker and yet quicker we advanced; on, on—we scoured the dusty plain, we pressed, we flew, we rushed upon the foe; the Bruce was at our head, and with him victory. We burst through their ranks; we compelled them, at the sword's point, to turn and fight even to the death; we followed them foot to foot, and hand to hand, disputing every inch of ground; they sought to retreat, to fly—but no! Five miles of Scottish ground, five good broad miles, was that battle-field; the enemy lay dead in heaps upon the field, the remainder fled."

"And the king!" exclaimed the knight of the mask, half springing up in the excitement the old man's tale had aroused. "How bore he this day's wondrous deed—was not his strength exhausted anew?"

"Aye, what of the king?" repeated many of the soldiers, who had held their very breath while the veteran spoke, and clenched their swords, as if they were joining in the strife he so energetically described.

"The king, my masters," replied Murdoch, "why, if it could be, he looked yet more the mighty warrior at the close than at the commencement of the work. We had seen him the first in the charge, in the pursuit; we had marked his white plume waving above all others, where the strife waxed hottest; and when we gathered round him, when the fight was done, he was seated on the ground in truth, and there was the dew of extreme fatigue on his brow—he had flung aside his helmet—and his cheek was hotly flushed, and his voice, as he thanked us for our gallant conduct, and bade us return thanks to heaven for this great victory, was somewhat quivering; but for all that, my masters, he looked still the warrior and the king, and his voice grew firmer and louder as he bade us have no fears for him. He dismissed us with our hearts as full of joy and love for him as of triumph on our humbled foes."

"No doubt," responded many voices; "but Buchan, Mowbray, De Brechin—what came of them—were they left on the field?"

"They fled, loving their lives better than their honor; they fled, like cowards as they were. The two first slackened not their speed till they stood on English ground. De Brechin, ye know, held out Angus as long as he could, and was finally made captive."

"Aye, and treated with far greater lenity than the villain deserved. He will never be a Randolph."

"A Randolph! Not a footboy in Randolph's train but is more Randolph than he. But thou sayest Buchan slackened not rein till he reached English ground; he lingered long enough for yet blacker treachery, if rumor speaks aright. Was it not said the king's life was attempted by his orders, and by one of the Comyn's own followers?"

"Ha!" escaped Sir Amiot's lips. "Say they this?" but he evidently had spoken involuntarily, for the momentary agitation which had accompanied the words was instantly and forcibly suppressed.

"Aye, your worship, and it is true," replied the veteran "It was two nights after the battle. All the camp was at rest; I was occupied as usual, by my honored watch in my sovereign's tent. The king was sleeping soundly, and a strange drowsiness appeared creeping over me too, confusing all my thoughts. At first I imagined the wind was agitating a certain corner of the tent, and my eyes, half asleep and half wakeful, became fascinated upon it; presently, what seemed a bale of carpets, only doubled up in an extraordinary small space, appeared within the drapery. It moved; my senses were instantly aroused. Slowly and cautiously the bale grew taller, then the unfolding carpet fell, and a short, well-knit, muscular form appeared. He was clothed in those padded jerkins and hose, plaited with steel, which are usual to those of his rank; the steel, however, this night was covered with thin, black stuff, evidently to assist concealment. He looked cautiously around him. I had creeped noiselessly, and on all fours, within the shadow of the king's couch, where I could observe the villain's movements myself unseen. I saw a gleam of triumph twinkle in his eye, so sure he seemed of his intended victim. He advanced; his dagger flashed above the Bruce. With one bound, one shout, I sprang on the murderous wretch, wrenched the dagger from his grasp, and dashed him to the earth. He struggled, but in vain; the king started from that deep slumber, one moment gazed around him bewildered, the next was on his feet, and by my side.

The soldiers rushed into the tent, and confusion for the moment waxed loud and warm; but the king quelled it with a word. The villain was raised, pinioned, brought before the Bruce, who sternly demanded what was his intent, and who was his employer. Awhile the miscreant paused, but then, as if spell-bound by the flashing orb upon him, confessed the whole, aye, and more; that his master, the Earl of Buchan, had sworn a deep and deadly oath to relax not in his hot pursuit till the life-blood of the Bruce had avenged the death of the Red Comyn, and that, though he had escaped now, he must fall at length, for the whole race of Comyn had joined hands upon their chieftain's oath. The brow of the king grew dark, terrible wrath beamed from his eyes, and it seemed for the moment as if he would deliver up the murderous villain into the hands that yearned to tear him piecemeal. There was a struggle, brief yet terrible, then he spoke, and calmly, yet with a bitter stinging scorn.

"And this is Buchan's oath,' he said. 'Ha! doth he not bravely, my friends, to fly the battle-field, to shun us there, that hireling hands may do a deed he dares not? For this poor fool, what shall we do with him?'

"Death, death—torture and death! what else befits the sacrilegious traitor?' burst from many voices, pressing forward to seize and bear him from the tent; but the king signed them to forbear, and oh, what a smile took the place of his previous scorn!

"And I say neither torture nor death, my friends,' he tried. 'What, are we sunk so low, as to revenge this insult on a mere tool, the instrument of a villainous master? No, no! let him go free, and tell his lord how little the Bruce heeds him; that guarded as he is by a free people's love, were the race of Comyn as powerful and numerous as England's self, their oath would avail them nothing. Let the poor fool go free!'

"A deep wild murmur ran through the now crowded tent, and so mingled were the tones of applause and execration, we knew not which the most prevailed.

"And shall there be no vengeance for this dastard deed?' at length the deep, full voice of Lord Edward Bruce arose, distinct above the rest. 'Shall the Bruce sit tamely down to await the working of the villain oath, and bid its tools go free, filling the whole land with well-trained murderers? Shall Buchan pass scathless, to weave yet darker, more atrocious schemes?'

"Brother, no,' frankly rejoined the king. 'We will make free to go and visit our friends in Buchan, and there, an thou wilt, thou shalt pay them in coin for their kindly intents and deeds towards us; but for this poor fool, again I say, let him go free. Misery and death, God wot, we are compelled to for our country's sake, let us spare where but our own person is endangered.'

"And they let him free, my masters, unwise as it seemed to us; none could gainsay our sovereign's words. Sullen to the last, the only symptom of gratitude he vouchsafed was to mutter forth, in answer to the Bruce's warning words to hie him to his comrades in Buchan, and bid them, an they feared fire and devastation, to fly without delay, 'Aye, only thus mayest thou hope to exterminate the traitors; pity none, spare none. The whole district of Buchan is peopled by the Comyn, bound by this oath of blood,' and thus he departed."

"And spoke he truth?" demanded Sir Amiot, hoarsely, and with an agitation that, had others more suspicious been with him, must have been remarked, although forcibly and painfully suppressed; "spoke he truth? Methought the district of Buchan had only within the last century belonged to the Comyn, and that the descendants of the Countess Margaret's vassals still kept apart, loving not the intermixture of another clan. Said they not it was on this account the Countess of Buchan had exercised such influence, and herself beaded a gallant troop at the first rising of the Bruce? an the villain spoke truth, whence came this change?"

"Why, for that matter, your worship, it is easy enough explained," answered Murdoch, "and, trust me, King Robert set inquiries enough afloat ere he commenced his scheme of retaliation. Had there been one of the Lady Isabella's own followers there, one who, in her name, claimed his protection, he would have given it; not a hair of their heads would have been injured; but there were none of these, your worship. The few of the original clan which had not joined him were scattered all over the country, mingling with other loyal clans; their own master had hunted them away, when he came down to his own districts, just before the capture of his wife and son. He filled the Tower of Buchan with his own creatures, scattered the Comyns all over the land, with express commands to attack, hunt, or resist all of the name of Bruce to the last ebb of their existence. He left amongst them officers and knights as traitorous, and spirits well-nigh as evil as his own, and they obeyed him to the letter, for amongst the most inveterate, the most treacherous, and most dishonorable persecutors of the Bruce stood first and foremost the Comyns of Buchan. Ah! the land was changed from the time when the noble countess held sway there, and so they felt to their cost.

"It was a grand yet fearful sight, those low hanging woods and glens all in one flame; the spring had been particularly dry and windy, and the branches caught almost with a spark, and crackled and sparkled, and blazed, and roared, till for miles round we could see and hear the work of devastation. Aye, the coward earl little knew what was passing in his territories, while he congratulated himself on his safe flight into England. It was a just vengeance, a deserved though terrible retaliation, and the king felt it as such, my masters. He had borne with the villains as long as he could, and would have borne with them still, had he not truly felt nothing would quench their enmity, and in consequence secure Scotland's peace and safety, but their utter extermination, and all the time he regretted it, I know, for there was a terrible look of sternness

and determination about him while the work lasted; he never relaxed into a smile, he never uttered a jovial word, and we followed him, our own wild spirits awed into unwonted silence. There was not a vestige of natural or human life in the district—all was one mass of black, discolored ashes, utter ruin and appalling devastation. Not a tower of Buchan remains."

"All—sayest thou all?" said Sir Amiot, suddenly, yet slowly, and with difficulty. "Left not the Bruce one to bear his standard, and thus mark his power?"

"Has not your worship remarked that such is never the Bruce's policy? Three years ago, he had not force enough to fortify the castles he took from the English, and leaving them standing did but offer safe harbors for the foe, so it was ever his custom to dismantle, as utterly to prevent their reestablishment; and if he did this with the castles of his own friends, who all, as the Douglas saith, 'love better to hear the lark sing than the mouse squeak,' it was not likely he would spare Buchan's. But there was one castle, I remember, cost him a bitter struggle to demolish. It was the central fortress of the district, distinguished, I believe, by the name of 'the Tower of Buchan,' and had been the residence of that right noble lady, the Countess Isabella and her children. Nay, from what I overheard his grace say to Lord Edward, it had formerly given him shelter and right noble hospitality, and a dearer, more precious remembrance still to his noble heart—it had been for many months the happy home of his brother, Sir Nigel, and we know what magic power all associated with *him* has upon the king; and had it not been for the expostulations of Lord Edward, his rough yet earnest entreaty, methinks that fortress had been standing yet. That sternness, terrible to behold, for it ever tells of some mighty inward passions conquered, again gathered on our sovereign's brow, but he turned his charger's head, and left to Lord Edward the destruction of the fortress, and he made quick work of it; you will scarce find two stones together of its walls."

"He counselled right," echoed many voices, the eagerness with which they had listened, and now spoke, effectually turning their attention from their mysterious leader, who at old Murdoch's last words had with difficulty prevented the utterance of a deep groan, and then, as if startled at his own emotion, sprung up from his reclining posture, and joined his voice to those of his men. "He counselled, and did rightly," they repeated; "it would have been an ill deed to spare a traitor's den for such softening thoughts. Could we but free the Countess Isabella, she would not want a home in Buchan—nay, the further from her cruel husband's territories the better and for her children—the one, poor innocent, is cared for, and the other—"

"Aye, my masters, and trust me, that other was in our sovereign's heart as forcibly as the memories he spoke. That which we know now concerning him was then undreamed of; it was only faintly rumored that Lord Douglas had been deceived, and Alan of Buchan had not fallen by a father's hand, or at least by his orders; that he was in life, in close confinement; my old ears did catch something of this import from the king, as he spoke with his brother."

"What import?" asked Sir Amiot, hoarsely.

"Only, your worship, that, for the sake of the young heir of Buchan, he wished that such total devastation could have been spared; if he were really in life, as rumor said, it was hard to act as if he were forgotten by his friends."

"And what was Sir Edward's reply?"

"First, that he doubted the rumor altogether; secondly, that if he did return to the king, his loss might be more than made up; and thirdly, that it was more than probable that, young as he was, if he really did live, the arts of his father would prevail, and he would purchase his freedom by homage and fidelity to England."

"Ha! said he so—and the king?"

"Did not then think with him, nay, declared he would stake his right hand that the boy, young as he was, had too much of his mother's noble spirit for such a deed. It was well the stake was not accepted, for, by St. Andrew, as the tale now goes, King Robert would have lost."

"As the tale now goes, thou unbelieving skeptic," replied one of his comrades, laughing; "has not the gallant been seen, recognized—is he not known as one of King Edward's minions, and lords it bravely? But hark! there are chargers pricking over the plain. Hurrah! Sir Edward and Lord James," and on came a large body of troopers and infantry even as he spoke.

Up started Sir Amiot's men in eager readiness to greet and join; their armor and weapons they had laid aside were resumed, and ere their comrades reached them all were in readiness. Sir Amiot, attended by his esquires and a page, galloped forward, and the two knights, perceiving his advance, spurred on before their men, and hasty and cordial greetings were exchanged. We should perhaps note that Sir Amiot's manner slightly differed in his salutation of the two knights. To Lord Edward Bruce he was eager, frank, cordial, as that knight himself; to the other, whom one glance proclaimed as the renowned James Lord Douglas, there was an appearance of pride or reserve, and it seemed an effort to speak with him at all. Douglas perhaps did not perceive this, or was accustomed to it, for it seemed to affect him little; and Lord Edward's bluff address prevented all manifestation of difference between his colleagues, even if there existed any.

"Ready to mount and ride; why that's well," he cried. "We are beyond our time, but it is little reck, we need but spur the faster, which our men seem all inclined to do. What news? why, none since we parted, save that his grace has resolved on the siege of Perth without further delay."

"Nay, but that is news, so please you," replied Sir Amiot. "When I parted from his grace, there was no talk of it."

"There was talk of it, but no certainty; for our royal brother kept his own counsel, and spoke not of this much-desired event till his way lay clear before him. There have been some turbulent spirits in the camp—your humble servant, this black lord, and Randolph amongst them—who in truth conspired to let his grace know no peace by night or day till this object was attained; but our prudent monarch gave us little heed till his wiser brain arranged the matters we but burned to execute."

"And what, think you, fixed this resolve?"

"Simply that for a time we are clear of English thieves and Norman rogues, and can march northward, and sit down before Perth without fear of being called southward again. Edward will have enow on his hands to keep his own frontiers from invasion; 'twill be some time ere he see the extent of our vengeance, and meanwhile our drift is gained."

"Aye, it were a sin and crying shame to let Perth remain longer in English hands," rejoined Douglas; "strongly garrisoned it may be; but what matter?"

"What matter! why, 'tis great matter," replied Sir Edward, joyously. "What glory were it to sit down before a place and take it at first charge? No, give me good fighting, tough assault, and brave defence. Think you I would have so urged the king, did I not scent a glorious struggle before the walls? Strongly garrisoned! I would not give one link of this gold chain for it, were it not. But a truce to this idle parley; we must make some miles ere nightfall. Sir Knight of the Branch, do your men need further rest? if not, give the word, and let them fall in with their comrades, and on."

"Whither?" demanded Sir Amiot, as he gave the required orders. "Where meet we the king?"

"In the Glen of Auchterader, south of the Erne. Lady Campbell and Isoline await us there, with the troops left as their guard at Dumbarton. So you perceive our friend Lord Douglas here hath double cause to use the spur; times like these afford little leisure for wooing, and such love-stricken gallants as himself must e'en make the most of them."

"And trust me for doing so," laughingly rejoined Douglas. "Scoff' at me as you will, Edward, your time will come."

"Not it," answered the warrior; "glory is my mistress. I love better to clasp my true steel than the softest and fairest hand in Christendom; to caress my noble steed and twine my hand thus in his flowing mane, and feel that he bears me gallantly and proudly wherever my spirit lists, than to press sweet kisses on a rosy lip, imprisoned by a woman's smile."

"Nay, shame on thee!" replied Douglas, still jestingly. "Thou a true knight, and speak thus; were there not other work to do, I would e'en run a tilt with thee, to compel thee to forswear thy foul treason against the fair."

"Better spend thy leisure in wooing Isoline; trust me, she will not be won ere wooed. How now, Sir Knight of the Branch, has the fiend melancholy taken possession of thee again? give her a thrust with thy lance, good friend, and unseat her. Come, soul of fire as thou art in battle, why dost thou mope in ashes in peace? Thou speakest neither for nor against these matters of love; wilt woo or scorn the little god?"

"Perchance both, perchance neither," replied the knight, and his voice sounded sadly, though he evidently sought to speak in jest. He had fallen back from the side of Douglas during the previous conversation, but the flashing eye denoted that it had passed not unremarked. He now rode up to the side of Lord Edward, keeping a good spear's length from Lord James, and their converse turning on martial subjects, became more general. Their march being performed without any incident of note, we will, instead of following them, take a brief retrospective glance on those historical events which had so completely and gloriously turned the fate of Scotland and her patriots, in those five years which the thread of our narrative compels us to leave a blank.

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