THROUGH FLOOD AND FIRE

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Title: Through Flood and Fire
Date of first publication: 1925
Author: Robert William McKenna (1874-1930)
Date first posted: July 4, 2023
Date last updated: July 4, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20230704

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FLOWER O' THE HEATHER
BRACKEN AND THISTLEDOWN
THE ADVENTURE OF DEATH
THE ADVENTURE OF LIFE

THROUGH FLOOD AND FIRE

BY

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LONDON
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

First Edition 1925

Made and Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

TO
MY WIFE

Through Flood and Fire

CHAPTER I

The hunted man raised his head cautiously and peered over the earthen dyke at the edge of the wood. No dragoon was in sight. His ears, pricked to a lively attention, heard no voices, nor the muffled sound of galloping hoofs on the grass. He lowered his head and lay gasping for breath, the blood drumming in his ears.

This respite was welcome, for the chase had been stern. He lived it through again in thought. But for the grace of God, his own swift heels, and his knowledge of the country he would have been taken. And, for him, capture meant death. Dalyell, the merciless, the "Muscovy beast," and his grey dragoons were on his track. He knew they had been searching for him for days. More than once they had almost stumbled upon him unwittingly, but to-day they had found him. Found him to lose him: for, when in the grey of the morning they had spread themselves in a circle round the vast heather-lined cup of the hills where he was hiding, he had eluded them and broken through their cordon. Was it for nothing that a low-lying cloud of mist had lingered on the hill of Skeoch? Was it mist—or a corner of the plaid of God let down to shelter a fugitive? He had heard auld Sandy pray, "Hap them about with the plaid of Thy love," and Sandy was a saint far ben in knowledge of the Almighty and His ways.

The mist had been his salvation. He had crawled beneath the cloud unseen, and so reached the edge of the hollow; and then—away! Fast as his youth and strength could carry him he had rushed down the hill-side, leaping the boulders, plunging through bracken-beds, sliding down steep brae-faces, choosing the hardest path for a mounted man to follow. He had heard the hue-and-cry, the loud oaths, the crack of guns, and the whistle and ping of balls as they sang through the air, only to strike the earth behind him, for he was out of range before the nearest dragoon could take aim and give fire to his matchlock.

But though out of range, he was not out of sight, and once he had left the hills he was at a disadvantage, for on the level the sturdy horses of the dragoons, spurred till their flanks bled, would soon overtake him. Above the

whistling of his breath he could hear the thud of galloping hoofs, drawing nearer and still more near. A prayer flew up from his heart, and he wheeled suddenly, remembering the Muckle Bog. If he could reach it he might be saved. Hotfoot he ran, hope speeding his steps.

Suddenly the earth beneath his feet was sodden; safety was in sight; he was on the edge of the bog; no horseman could follow him, over its treacherous face. For a hunted man, with Death on his heels, the hazard was worth while. He leaped from tussock to tussock, fearful that each new step might betray him. But some Power outside himself guided his feet that they slipped not. Behind him the air was heavy with confused shouting and loud curses. He knew what was happening. In the heat of the chase some of the dragoons had not drawn rein in time, and their horses, plunging into the morass, had sunk to their girths. To save them would be a heavy task. That meant delay, and delay in the pursuit meant hope for the fugitive.

Soon he was far out across the bog, and well out of range of fire. He paused, and turned, for he had chanced on a large boulder that gave him a firm foothold. The baffled dragoons were clustered together on the edge of the morass, lending what aid they could to their foundered companions. Some of them saw him turn, and hurled wild oaths at him.

He stayed for a moment to take breath, then turned again, and with greater caution continued his perilous journey. Twice before, at his leisure, against such a moment as this he had essayed the passage, and his experience helped him now. The ground was firm beneath his feet again: the bog lay behind him! He looked back at the dragoons. Some of them were still busy with the foundered horses, others were galloping along the edge of the bog, intent on getting round it. He thought quickly. The detour was a long one, for the marshy ground stretched far, and ere they could circle it he would be out of sight.

So, with fresh hope urging him, he broke into a trot and breasted the low hill before him. Once over its crest he was out of sight of his pursuers, but he did not slacken speed till the Muckle Bog lay miles behind him. And now he was hidden in the wood, safe at least for a little while. Perhaps, baffled, the dragoons would abandon the chase. He did not know; but an hour would tell, and if his hiding-place remained undiscovered he could betake himself to the shelter of the hills under cover of the dark.

He started suddenly at the clamorous chatter of a blackbird which resented his presence. Smiling at his own alarm, he turned over and lay with every muscle relaxed on the soft bed of last year’s leaves. After his wild race

this was rest indeed. Sleep assailed him, but he beat the temptress off. To sleep there might mean death, and life was sweet—sweeter in this hour of danger than ever before. He had so much to live for! He slipped a hand inside his coat and withdrew a little packet of letters. Dear Margaret! What would she think of him now—a Covenanter—a hunted man? Would she understand, or would she write him down a rebel, and blot him out of her memory? These things she might do, but she could not rob him of his sweet memories of her.

He lay dreaming for a little while, then he raised himself and looked over the dyke again. There were no dragoons to be seen. He waited, listening long, sweeping the rolling uplands with eager eyes. Then, sure in his heart that he was safe, he rose and stole deeper into the wood.

Less than a mile away, beyond a low hill, his back propped against a warm boulder, sat a barefoot ragged boy. He was making a whistle out of a hazel wand, and, with protruded tongue and gleaming eyes, was so set upon his ploy that he did not see the dragoons till they were close upon him. He had a wholesome fear of authority, whether it was represented by minister, beadle, or soldier, and, dropping his whistle, he sprang up and took to his heels. Some of the troopers gave chase, and ere long they had ridden him down, and bore him, whimpering and struggling, before their commander. Dalyell glowered down upon him from his horse, as he stood, a forlorn figure, with the grim hand of a soldier on the scruff of his neck. The boy protested shrilly:

"I wasna daein' naething."

"Say 'sir' to your betters, ye young rascal," grunted his captor as he thrust his knee savagely between the boy's shoulders.

Dalyell looked him up and down coldly, noticing everything. Then he spoke:

"Wha slit yer lug for ye?"

"Please, sir, the beadle nailed ma lug tae the kirk door for stealing eggs."

"Served ye richt, ye young rapscallion," he growled. "Now, listen to me. Would ye like yer other lug nailed as weel—or would ye prefer the thumbikins?"

Beneath the grime on his face the boy turned pale; but he answered stoutly:

"No, sir! I've dune naething wrang."

“That’s as may be,” said Dalyell. “Let him see them, Sergeant.”

The sergeant produced the thumbscrews from his pocket and, seizing the boy by the wrist, thrust one of his thumbs into the socket.

“Gently now, Sergeant,” said Dalyell, “juist gi’e him a wee taste to let him ken what he’ll get if he tells ony lees.”

The sergeant gave the screw a sharp turn, and the boy shrieked in agony, dancing wildly on one foot, his other drawn up convulsively, the toes clutching the air as though they were fingers.

“Take them off, Sergeant,” said Dalyell.

The sergeant relaxed the screw, and the boy drew out his thumb quickly and thrust it into his mouth.

“Now, young Slit-lug, that will learn you what’s waiting for you if you dinna tell the truth,” laughed Dalyell. “Ha’e you seen ocht o’ a young man in these pairts the day?”

The boy hesitated, looking nervously at Dalyell and then at the sergeant.

“Answer Sir Thomas,” said the sergeant, gripping the lad’s wrist again.

The boy gave a little shiver, and the tears started to his eyes, but he brushed them away with his free hand.

“He’s a dour ane,” said Dalyell. “Gi’e him a proper nip this time, Sergeant.”

The boy turned pale and his lips trembled. “Let me be,” he cried piteously. “I’ll tell ye. Maybe an ‘oor sin,’ I saw a young man rinnin’ like a hare across the fields.”

“That’s better,” said Dalyell. “Whaur did he gang?”

The boy hesitated again. He had heard tales of the cruelty of the dragoons; he had already tasted, in small measure, one of their medicines for the dumb; but he shrank from delivering a fugitive into their hands. He looked defiantly at Dalyell. The sergeant shook the thumbscrews menacingly. The boy’s courage failed. After all, a Covenanter was nothing to him, though he had heard his Grannie speak well of them.

“I saw him hide in the Lang Wood ayont the brae,” he stammered, and fell to tears.

“Ho, ho!” said Dalyell. “The fox has ta’en cover! We’ll bolt him.”

He gave a brusque order. The sergeant seized the boy and swung him up on his horse, then mounted behind him, and the cavalcade broke into a trot.

Deep in the wood the hunted man lay resting—stretched on his back—his bonnet half over his eyes. So still he lay he might have been asleep, but his ears were alert as those of a hunted stag, and suddenly, with a chill of dread, he heard the sharp jingle of a bridle-chain and the snort of a horse.

He rose quickly, and from behind a beech tree looked anxiously in the direction from which the sounds had come. Dragoons were moving in single file along the edge of the wood. His hands clenched as he turned and looked towards the other side. There were shadowy moving forms there as well. His hiding-place had been discovered, his fondly imagined safety was a delusion. He thought quickly. Dragoons on either side—and shortly there would be seekers on foot ranging every recess of the wood. He was in desperate case; but his courage did not fail him. Stealthily he dodged from tree to tree, looking now to right, now to left, measuring the degree of his encompassment. In the heart of the wood it was easier to see than to be seen, and he knew that as yet he was unobserved. He must reach the end of the wood ere escape in that direction was cut off. The colour and the thickness of the tree-trunks favoured him. He walked warily, crouching low, hope wrestling with fear in his heart. Some thirty paces from the end of the wood the trees became sparser, but the undergrowth of bushes was heavier, and he rested there for a moment. So far as he could tell, he was still ahead of the file of dragoons on either side, and the end of the wood was unguarded.

On hands and knees he wormed his way onward; then, putting all to the hazard, he sprang erect, darted forward, broke cover, and raced over the springy turf. A yell, and quick in its wake the crack of a gun, proclaimed his discovery. The shot went wide. His feet seemed barely to touch the ground, so quickly he ran. Behind him thundered a straggling column of mounted men, urging their horses with spurs and savage cries. Before him—yes! there it was, the brown band of the river!

He reached the bank and, swerving, raced down stream. Soon he was among the rocks, leaping from point to point. The thunder of the waterfall boomed in his ears. Abreast of it, he sprang up with a giant leap and clutched an overhanging branch. His dangling feet found an uncertain rest on a spur of rock that jutted through the column of falling water. His hands released the branch and, as though his foothold had betrayed him, he disappeared, engulfed by the brown torrent that hurled itself into the foaming cauldron below.

Foremost of the pursuers galloped Lieutenant Adair, so set upon the capture of his man that he failed to sense his own danger, for near the waterfall the rocky bed of the river out-cropped into the surrounding earth, so that the ground was shaggy with black ridges half hidden by bushy overgrowth. Unwitting, he did not slacken speed, and his rowelled horse saw its peril too late. It plunged wildly; a fetlock snapped, and the horse crashed forward, sweeping over the crags that hemmed the gorge into the pool beneath. In a sweat of fear, its rider threw himself off as his horse stumbled, but as he fell his head struck a boulder and he lay stunned, the blood streaming over his face from a ragged cut on his scalp. Warned by his officer's disaster, the dragoon behind him rose in his stirrups and, throwing all his weight backwards upon the reins, pulled his tortured horse on to its haunches on the very edge of the dangerous ground.

Then the thunder of the waterfall was mingled with the cries and clamour of baffled men. Leaping from their saddles, the troopers crowded round the edge of the cauldron and looked down. Below them they saw a torment of drumly water, one edge lashed into foam by the flood that hurled itself from above. Half in and half out of the pool lay the horse—ominously still—its head twisted, its neck broken. But there was no sign of the hunted Covenanter—nothing but a sodden knitted bonnet that spun lazily round near the farther edge of the pool.

Muttering an oath, the sergeant clambered back to report to Dalyell, who, still mounted, waited sphinx-like at the edge of the dangerous ground. His eyes were on Captain Murdoch, who was kneeling beside the fallen lieutenant, seeking to stanch his wound.

He heard the sergeant in grim silence. Then an oath burst from the shaggy hair that hid his mouth.

"Scatter, and search the water lower down. The spate maun ha'e swept him away. Ye'll find his corp in ane o' the pools."

With ready eagerness, like hounds scenting an otter, the dragoons fell to their task, some nosing under the bushes that hung over the stream below the fall, others, knee-deep in water, peering with straining eyes into the depths of every likely pool.

Meantime the boy with the slit in his ear sat in a heap where the sergeant had flung him when he leaped from his horse. He was too afraid to move, but his courage began to return when he saw that, in the quest of a bigger quarry, the sergeant and the dragoons had forgotten him. He rose cautiously

to his feet and dodged beneath a bush, then, seeing that no one gave heed, he scuttered off like a frightened rabbit, his bare feet twinkling over the grass.

He did not pause till the river and the soldiers were far behind him: then he sat down under a tree and looked at his throbbing thumb. It was dusky purple, like a ripening sloe. He sucked it comfortingly. In spite of the pain it was worth having. It meant a scone from his Grannie, maybe with butter on it, if he told his tale skilfully enough, and the hero-worship, for at least a week, of every boy in Irongray. A sight of it would be worth at least three "bools"—or, maybe, six "paips." In imagination he waxed rich—and, sucking his thumb, took to his heels again.

Meantime the search of the river continued. The soldiers pursued it relentlessly for nearly a mile below the waterfall. But no trace of the fugitive was found, save his sodden bonnet and a little packet of letters tied with a blue ribbon, which a trooper found floating in a quiet pool some distance below the fall.

At last Dalyell called his men back.

"A bad day's work, Murdoch," he growled. "A packet of Covenanting love-letters is a puir set-off against a promising officer like Adair as guid as deid, and a horse wi' a broken neck."

"Our luck is out to-day, sir," answered Murdoch. "But at least the man is dead."

"Nae doot," answered Dalyell, "and by this time his body is weel on its way to the Nith, for the water's heavy."

"A pestilent rebel the less, sir."

"Ay! but he's had a cleaner death than I would ha'e gi'en him. Had Alan Troquair fallen into my hands, I would ha'e made sic an ensample o' him as would ha'e deterred ony mair laird's sons frae throwing in their lot wi' the rebels"—and the yellow eyes of the "Muscovy beast," threaded with broken veins, gleamed cruelly.

He dug his shoeless heels into his horse's flanks, and, drawing up beside Captain Murdoch, thrust the packet of letters into his hand.

"Read them wi' care, Murdoch. They may tell us something." Then, leaning over, he whispered:

"Let the men rest here an' tak' their rations. Meantime order four o' them tae carry young Adair tae Knowe. They'll tak' guid care o' him there."

Murdoch saluted.

“Then billet the men at some o’ the fairms roon aboot. If they’re loyal folk, they’ll no’ mind; if they’re rebels, it will pit the fear o’ God in them, for ye can gi’e them a free hand. An’ then come on yersel’ tae Knowe. We’ll bide the nicht there. The Laird is a hospitable man, wi’ a guid table, a weel-plenished cellar, an’ a bonnie dochter,” and the yellow eyes twinkled under the shaggy eyebrows.

CHAPTER II

The soft dusk gathered and fell round the turrets of the House of Knowe.

Within, David Lansburgh, the Laird, sat at the head of the board in the oak-beamed dining hall. His was the face of a thinker, furrowed, handsome, with high, broad forehead. He was a man of sudden silences and strange fits of reticence. At rest, his wide-set, blue-grey eyes looked listless; alert, some living spirit came into them, peering eagerly through them like a captive through the grating of his prison. Dalyell, a man of action, but shrewd in reading men, had said of him, "Lansburgh lives inside his heid."

At his right sat Dalyell, gruff by nature and unkempt by choice. No scissors had trimmed his locks—no razor had passed across his cheeks since the headsman's axe had fallen on the neck of Charles the First. It was a strange vow, faithfully kept. His stony eyes—hard as granite beneath their beetling brows—his stern lips—scarce seen through the thicket of hair about them—bespoke his brutal nature. Cruel he was—a loud-voiced, overbearing soldier—yet shrewd withal, nor lacking in acrid humour.

The Laird looked proudly down the table past the bowl of yellow daffodils at its centre to his motherless daughter, Margaret, his only child, come lately home from France. The candlelight threw little shadows on her oval face, her graceful neck, and her masses of red-gold hair. The Laird's eyes gleamed: so had her mother looked; just such a dimple had laughed on her mother's cheek; so had her mother's lips curved when she smiled lang syne, twenty-three years ago, when he brought her home to Knowe. She was listening, with brown eyes alight and lips half-parted, to Claverhouse, whose pale face, with its petulant lips and its beauty that was more a woman's than a man's, was turned eagerly towards her. The Laird watched them for a moment; then his eyes lost their gleam; he was living inside his head, among his memories. A gruff word from Dalyell broke in upon his reverie.

"Your pardon, Sir Thomas. I did not catch what you said," and the Laird bowed.

"Juist the auld story, Laird. I'm teaching Murdoch here how to break the rebels."

The Laird looked at the lean, weathered face of Captain Murdoch with a question in his eyes: "And the method?" he said.

“There’s but ae method, Lansburgh,” answered Dalyell—“the iron hand.”

The Laird tapped the shining table quietly with his fingers. He spoke slowly:

“None can doubt my loyalty, Sir Thomas, but I sometimes wonder if you are using the right means.”

Sir Thomas laughed loudly. “Hear to the Laird, Graham! He misdoubts our methods.”

Claverhouse turned his handsome head and looked at Dalyell.

“The methods are hardly ours, Sir Thomas. We are men under authority, you and I. We take our orders, and I trust we do our duty to God and the King.”

Dalyell lifted his glass and drank deeply. As he set his goblet down, he drew the back of a hairy hand across his mouth.

“If I can satisfy the King an’ his counsellors, Claver’se, I’m weel content.”

Claver’se toyed with one of his shining ringlets and nodded his head.

The Laird looked into the distance. Then, speaking almost as one in a dream, he said:

“I’ve read deeply and I’ve thought muckle, Sir Thomas, of the history of mankind, and time has often proved kings and their counsellors to be wrong.”

Dalyell swung his head round and stared at his host. There was a puzzled look in his eyes, and an angry note in his voice. He let his hand fall heavily on the Laird’s shoulder.

“Lansburgh,” he said, “I ken you for a true man; but ye’re talking like a traitor. The King can dae nae wrang.”

“I am loyal to the core, Sir Thomas; but a man must think if he would live.”

Dalyell laughed. “I have lived lang mysel’; but I’ve never felt the need o’ thinkin’—action is guid enough for me.”

“And for me,” said Claver’se, turning from Margaret for a moment. “Thought is a heady liquor. It is wrong thinking that has turned leal men into

Covenanters. They claim the right of private judgment, and drift into rebellion."

Dalyell beamed upon him. "Ye're talking like a lawyer, Claver'se, but I agree wi' ye. Here's tae oor success!" and he threw back his head and drank again. As he set down his glass he muttered under his breath, "Dour fanatics: we'll smash them yet!"

The Laird retreated behind his eyes into the secret places of his mind.

Dalyell helped himself to a nut, which he cracked with his powerful teeth, and as he separated the shell from the kernel he looked across the table at Claver'se, who, a smile on his face, was holding Mistress Margaret captive under the spell of his eyes and the wit and gaiety of his talk. He was laying violent siege to her heart. Ever since her homecoming he had been a frequent visitor at Knowe—his mind set on winning her. The girl's face was radiant; she was fair as a flower—even Dalyell, hard man of the world, admitted as much. But the sight of her youth and beauty provoked him to another explosion. He nudged his host roughly with his elbow.

"Lansburgh," he said, "the rising generation is not as we were—when a young man thocht as his father thocht before him, was loyal to his father's loyalties, and was proud to be so. Nowadays a' the young are wiser than their fathers. That's what feeds the rebellion; the young will gang their ain gait."

A merry laugh tinkled through the room, and all eyes were turned on Mistress Margaret.

"I would cross a sword with you there, Sir Thomas," she said. "There is no virtue in unthinking loyalty to tradition. The world must progress, and it progresses on the feet of the young."

The gruff old soldier drew himself up in his chair. A challenge from such a quarter was unexpected. He stroked his chin through the grey thicket of his beard, and spoke harshly:

"Progress, Mistress Margaret! I hate the word, and a' it means. The auld ways are guid enough for me. Nae doot the Gadarene swine thought they were making great progress when the de'il took them helter-skelter doon the brae intae the sea."

The girl tossed her head ("most uncommon prettily," thought Claverhouse, who was watching her), and with an upward tilt of her dimpled chin made answer:

“You are out of love with youth, Sir Thomas, and when a man comes to that he fears progress.”

Sir Thomas laughed. “Hear till your daughter, Lansburgh. She talks like a philosopher. Is this what she has brought out o’ France?”

The Laird came back from behind his eyes. He looked fondly at his daughter.

“I fear, Sir Thomas, Margaret is of an independent mind. But she is loyal to her old father.”

Dalyell cleared his throat.

“Independence o’ mind is often the father o’ wrong thinking and the mother o’ wrong-doing,” he cried.

A quick retort sprang to Margaret’s lips, but Dalyell did not give her a chance to reply. He held up his hand and spoke loudly:

“Tak’ a case, Lansburgh! What about Alan Troquair, the son of a loyal father, and a mother abune a’ suspicion—the heir o’ a well-plenished laird? What has independence o’ mind done for him?”

“I have heard, Sir Thomas, that he has thrown in his lot with the Covenanters,” said the Laird, “and has taken to the hills.”

“Ye heard truly, Lansburgh. He did take to the hills, and we set a heavy price on his head; for this rallying o’ a laird’s son, and a young man greatly beloved in the countryside, to the Cause o’ the Covenant has put new heart in the rebels.”

“That I can understand, Sir Thomas. Where Alan leads, many will gladly follow.”

“Weel, weel!—he’ll lead nae mair,” and Dalyell shut his mouth firmly.

The brown eyes of Mistress Margaret dilated suddenly. The colour swept out of her face for a moment, only to come back in a flood suffusing brow and cheeks and neck. All eyes were on Dalyell, so that none saw her confusion.

“What!” exclaimed Lansburgh. “Has he been shot down?”

“We hunted him this morning. He led us a fine dance, and we nearly got him; but he made a fause step, and went owre the Linn o’ Cluden to his destruction. By this time his body is weel on its way to the Solway.”

The Laird shook his head sadly and sighed. Claver'se fingered his ringlets daintily and, when he had set them to his liking, refilled his glass. "Another rebel the less, Sir Thomas," he said.

Had he looked at Mistress Margaret then, he would have seen her gazing past the yellow daffodils at Dalyell with a world of pain in her eyes. A moment ago she had been so happy. She knew that Claver'se loved her, else there was no meaning in the eloquent tenderness of his eyes, the urgent whispering of his lips, and that a soldier so high-mettled should love her filled her with happy pride. But into this sunny hour had burst this thunderbolt—Alan Troquair was dead! She was caught in the meshes of an old loyalty. Her hands were clenched in her lap: that was the outward sign of the agony in her heart; but she bore herself so bravely that none beside her knew her suffering. Her father's voice brought a moment of relief.

"A blow to his father and mother: a blow to all who knew him. But better to die by accident than to be shot as a rebel."

"Maybe—maybe, Lansburgh. But what an ensample I could ha'e made o' him! His death, as I should ha'e planned it, would ha'e stricken terror into a thousand."

Margaret leaned forward suddenly. Though her lips trembled a little, her voice was firm.

"Sir Thomas," she said, "Alan Troquair and I were boy and girl together. I was aghast when I learned he had turned rebel, but I grieve to hear of his death. Surely, if he had to die, you do not grudge him a death so clean."

Dalyell turned towards her, masking the cruelty in his eyes by the suavity of his voice.

"Your pardon, Mistress Margaret. I am but a rough soldier. I was wrong to speak o' sic things in your sweet presence. Your ears are mair fit for tales o' love than of the harsh happenings of the field."

Claverhouse laughed. "Have you turned courtier, Sir Thomas? You speak as one."

"I lack your graces, Claver'se," replied Dalyell, "and I'm owre auld to learn." He laughed gruffly and, turning to Captain Murdoch, whispered something.

For answer Murdoch produced a little packet tied with blue ribbon, and handed it to Dalyell. Sir Thomas poised it in the palm of his hand.

“Mistress Margaret, even among the peat-hags we sometimes stumble on romance. We chanced on these letters the day. What’s in them, Murdoch? I bade you read them.”

“There is no treason, Sir Thomas. Nothing but little tendernesses, such as a girl might write to her sweetheart.”

Sir Thomas laughed, and patted Murdoch on the shoulder.

“You speak as ane that kens, Alec. So a Covenanting maid writes love-letters like other lasses?”

“It would seem so,” answered Murdoch.

“And what is her name?” asked Dalyell.

“The letters bear no name, Sir Thomas. They are signed ‘Your Sweeting’ or ‘Little Brown Squirrel.’ ”

Sir Thomas threw back his great head and roared with glee. Murdoch and Claverhouse joined in his laughter. The Laird, coming quickly from behind his eyes, a little uncertain as to the occasion of the mirth, smiled somewhat vaguely. But Mistress Margaret sat quiet, her chin raised proudly, a spark of anger in her eyes.

“As a woman,” she said, “I take it unkindly that any gentleman should laugh at a maid’s love messages—even though she be a Covenanter,” she added slowly.

Claver’se turned quickly towards her, and laid a hand upon hers.

“Forgive us, Mistress Margaret. We have done wrong.”

Dalyell leaned both elbows on the table:

“I’ve said it before, an’ it hardly needs repeating, being self-evident—I’m a rough auld soldier. I have no court manners, so I’ll ask ye of yer charity to forgi’e me. But that some glum-faced, flat-fitted, psalm-singing Covenanting wench should ca’ hersel’ a ‘little brown squirrel’—he-he! ho-ho!”—and the sentence ended in another outburst of laughter which nearly choked him. When the explosion was over, and Dalyell had recovered his breath, he turned to Murdoch.

“Ye’ve read every word o’ them, Murdoch, and there’s nae treason in them?”

“Every word, sir, and there is no treason in them.”

“Then, Mistress Margaret, I make ye a present o’ the bundle to dae wi’ as ye like.”

Sir Thomas rose and, bowing to Margaret, placed the letters in her hand. She took them and curtsied low.

“I thank you,” she said simply.

She did not sit down again, but gazed at the little packet for a moment, toying with the ribbon. Then she spoke:

“The hour is late, gentlemen! Let me leave you to your wine.”

She walked with quiet dignity to the fireplace, and Claver’se, watching her, thought so a queen might walk. She slipped the letters from their ribbon and dropped them one by one on the glowing logs in the brazier, resting one hand on the carved oak mantel as though to steady herself. Claverhouse, looking at her with yearning eyes, saw her face, half in shadow, half in light, touched with the roses of the dancing flames; saw the shadows on her graceful neck and the curve of her pretty arm, and his heart beat faster.

When the last letter was consumed, she stood for a moment gazing dreamily into the embers as though they had robbed her of something very precious, then she turned and walked towards the door. The men rose in their places. Beside her father’s chair she paused to kiss him. He kissed her on both cheeks before he let her go. Then at the door she turned and, curtsying low, said:

“I bid you all good night!”

Claverhouse held the door open for her, and once again she curtsied. He bowed low before her, sweeping his right arm across his heart, and as he raised his head he saw between her fingers, wound like a ring about them, the blue ribbon that had bound the letters.

Then she passed out, and he closed the door behind her, and as he returned to his place, he felt that the room had been emptied of a warmth and sweetness that had filled it. Dalyell’s rough tongue, loosened in coarse and drunken jests, grated upon him. He had no stomach for such ribaldry, and less heart. He stretched his legs under the table and, throwing his head back, fixed his eyes on the ceiling. He thought of Margaret—her beauty, her gay and challenging laugh, her thousand sweetnesses. But, be it said, there came into his thoughts something of the earth, for he was earthy. To all her graces he added the broad and rolling acres that would some day be hers, and he thought her of all women most desirable.

Margaret made her way slowly to her room in the east turret. There she found waiting for her Elspeth, the faithful nurse of her childhood—a loyal servant to the house of Knowe, who loved its every stone, but an avowed and fearless Covenanter. And as the old woman brushed the shimmering masses of hair that poured over her mistress's shoulders she talked, and in her homely chatter Margaret found ease for the torment in her heart.

"So ye like yer ain land the best, Mistress Margaret?"

"Love it, Elspeth! Many a time in France my heart has hungered for the grey-purple of the hills of home, or for the flaming glory of a bush of broom, and my ears have ached for the cooing of the cushie-doo that makes the woods all tremulous, and the friendly chatter of the wee brown burns. I missed them all; but most of all I missed the kindly faces of my ain dear folk at Knowe."

"Ye're a leal-hearted lass, Mistress Margaret. I thocht France was far bonnier than Scotland. Mary Stuart, the wanton, a sair misguided woman, liked France the best. But maybe she was a puir judge baith o' countries and men—for she misliket Maister John Knox."

Margaret laughed softly. "Ah, but Elspeth," she said, "she had never been to Knowe—never been taught the true doctrine by my old Elspeth"—and the girl raised her arms and took her nurse's withered face in her hands.

"Hoots, lassie!—ye haver. But I'm glad ye like yer ain land the best." She sighed deeply. "It's passing through the fire, lassie, for it has pleased the Lord tae try it sorely. But, thank God, there's a remnant—umphm—there's a remnant that will not bow the knee to Baal, and for the sake o' that remnant it may yet please the Lord tae deliver it."

For a moment there was silence, broken only by the crackling of a log in the fire. Then suddenly, eerily, somewhere in the wood outside an owl hooted three times, then once again.

The nurse looked quickly at her mistress. She sat apparently unhearing, with eyes fixed on the fire. Quickly and noiselessly the old woman picked up one of the lighted candles from the dressing-table, and, separating the dark curtains over the window, let its light shine through for an instant. Then, almost stealthily, she replaced it, with an eye on her mistress, who continued to gaze into the fire in a reverie.

"If ye need me nae mair, Mistress Margaret, I'll leave ye," she said.

"You may go, Elspeth! Good night!"

“Guid nicht, and God bless ye, ma bonnie bairn!”

And, when the door was shut, Margaret buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER III

Sunk deep in unconsciousness, Dalyell's wounded henchman, Lieutenant Adair, lay on a low bed in a room at the bottom of the west tower. Stretched on his back, with pallid face and damp forehead streaked with clotted blood, his jaw sagging, his muscles relaxed, his breathing slow and shallow, he looked like one on the brink of death.

Beside his bed sat a broad-shouldered, heavy-jowled man, whose bullet head bristled with rust-coloured wiry hair. His tanned face was clean-shaven, so that one could see the droop at the corner of his thin lips. A dour man to all outward seeming, yet his blue eyes, in which lurked a whimsical twinkle, gave the lie to the stern sadness of his mouth.

Willie Stott, the smith of Irongray, was a man well versed in the ailments of man and beast. His fame as a leech was great throughout the parish and twenty miles around. It was he who, when a murrain fell upon the cattle at Barncleuch, saved many of them from death, and who, when the guidman of Drumclyer, gored by a bull, was in such desperate case that the minister prayed with him, which, as his wife said, was a "gey bad sign," succeeded with strange potions and more mysterious salves in restoring him to health. He had been summoned to Knowe to exercise his skill upon the wounded soldier; and, as he sat by the bed, he held between his freckled and hairy hands a bowl of blood which he had drawn from the patient's arm. He looked at the blood with his head cocked a little to one side, and as he set down the bowl he nodded and muttered, "Umphm—nae inflammation the noo, but as like as no' it'll come. Ay!" He tightened the bandage at the bend of his patient's elbow. As he did so he addressed himself, for he was a man given to introspection and self-judgment.

"William Stott," he said, "ye're nae better nor a murderer. Ye were sair tempted when the bluid was rinnin' sae bonnie juist tae let it rin. Half a pint mair wad hae feenished him! Umphm! there was murder in yer hert, William; but by the grace of God ye had strength, tae say nocht o' sense, tae clap a thoomb on the vein ere it was owre late. But there was murder in yer hert, William, as you an' God weel ken." He raised his voice, as though his inner self were protesting against such aspersions and had to be beaten down with angry words. "Ay! it's yersel' I'm speaking tae, William! Ye needna try tae excuse yersel' by sayin' the man's a black-herted persecutor. An' juist twa days back, whan ye were shoein' yon sodger's horse, ye were tempted

tae drive a nail intae the quick an' cripple the puir beast. William, I'm fair scunnered at ye. Tae lame a horse yon gait wad prove ye a puir Christian an' a waur smith."

The murmur of this self-judgment was interrupted by Elspeth, who opened the door stealthily, closed it silently behind her, and shot the bolt.

The smith turned on his stool. "I've bluided him a guid pint, Elspeth; there's nae inflammation."

Elspeth looked at the unconscious soldier and, placing a finger on her lips, whispered, "Can he hear ocht?"

The smith pursed his lips, his face assuming a deeper melancholy.

"He's as deaf as Criffel, an' as blin' as a deid bat."

Elspeth smiled her relief, but she still spoke in a whisper.

"Did ye hear the hoolet, Wullie?"

"Ay, a wee while back. What o't?"

"Yon was nae hoolet, Wullie. It was Maister Alan Troquair."

Willie turned to look at his patient, then swung round and faced Elspeth.

"Hoo ken ye that, wumman?"

The nurse did not reply, but stole on tiptoe to the outer door, which opened on the garden. She slipped back the bar and swung the door gently inwards, hiding herself behind it. The smith had risen to his feet; there was a puzzled look on his face. Elspeth, looking at him over her shoulder, laid a finger on her lips, and signalled to him to be seated. There was a long, hushed pause. The blue eyes of the smith were fixed wonderingly on the open door, when suddenly there was a faint crunch as of gravel under foot, and from the darkness there stole into the dim-lit room a tall young man, dark and lithe, with hair bedraggled, and clinging wet clothes. Elspeth shut the door quickly and, turning, stared at the newcomer with eyes wide, mouth agape, and hands upraised.

"Losh keep us, Maister Alan, what's come tae ye?" she exclaimed.

The smith spoke derisively. "That's a proper wumman's question, Elspeth. Can ye no' see wi' yer ain e'en that Maister Alan has been in the water?"

A quick smile broke on the young man's tired face, lighting up his deep blue eyes, but before he spoke he looked inquiringly at the injured soldier.

“He’s in a deep swound. He can hear nocht, Maister Alan,” said the smith, “so ye can speak safely.”

“Dalyell and his dragoons nearly got me to-day, but, by a miracle, I escaped,” said Alan simply.

Elspeth nodded her head. “Ay, it’s true what the Buik says: ‘The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: He shall preserve thy soul.’ I min’ weel a graun discoorse frae Maister Welsh on them very words.”

“Haud yer wheesht, Elspeth,” said the smith gruffly. “If ye start bletherin’ aboot Maister Welsh’s sermons there’ll be nae end tae it. We’ve got tae think o’ Maister Alan here. He’s in danger.”

“After the hazards of the day this is like a city of refuge,” said Alan. He walked towards the fire and held his hands open to its warmth. As the light fell on his face Elspeth saw the weariness of it, and sighed. She busied herself beside him, setting a pan of milk on the peats.

The smith jerked his thumb towards the unconscious soldier. “Ane o’ Dalyell’s men!” he said. “He got an unco’ coup amang the rocks, an’ broke his heid.”

Alan turned and looked closely at the soldier. “He seems in worse case than I am,” he said, and then, looking from Elspeth to the smith, he added, “You humble me. I have not yet learned to love my enemies.”

The smith smiled with his eyes, but his mouth drooped lugubriously. “That’s no’ true o’ Wullie Stott. He had black murder in his hert the nicht, and noo that I think o’t, it was mair the fear o’ Dalyell than o’ God that kept him frae it.”

Elspeth shrugged her shoulders, and taking the pan from the fire filled a cup and handed it to Alan. “It’ll warm ye,” she said; and then, turning almost angrily upon the smith, she exclaimed, “Wullie Stott, ye’re haverin’ an’ wastin’ time. Think o’ Maister Alan.”

“Sir,” said the smith, called back from his self-examination to the urgent moment by Elspeth’s words, “ye’re in awfu’ danger. Dalyell, Claver’se, an’ Murdoch are quartered in this very hoose.”

The news struck Alan like a blow and he started suddenly, but he was a youth of fine mettle and recovered his nerve on the instant. There was no tremor in his voice, and he was altogether his own man as he answered with a smile:

“If the hill of Skeoch is not big enough for Sir Thomas Dalyell and Alan Troquair at the same time, Knowe is too wee. So I’d better be looking for safer quarters,” and he stepped back from the fire.

The smith laid a pleading hand on his arm.

“Maister Alan,” he said, “ye maunna gang back tae the hills the noo. If ye’ll honour my but-an’-ben wi yer presence, I’ll dry ye an’ warm ye an’ feed ye, an’ ye can get back tae the hills ere the scraich o’ day.” There was an urgency of entreaty in his tones that came from an honest and warm heart.

As Alan thanked him there was a sudden babble of voices in the passage that led to the room.

“They’re comin’ here,” whispered Elspeth, awe in her eyes.

The loud and raucous voice of Dalyell rose angrily: “It’s no chancy, Laird.”

The smith laid a hand on Alan’s shoulder, and leading him quickly to the outer door, thrust him through. “Wait for me behin’ the lilac bush,” he whispered.

Elspeth stole on tiptoe to the inner door and noiselessly undid the bar. As she did so she heard Dalyell protesting:

“Ye tell me this wumman is a Covenanter, and she’s nursing ane o’ my officers. I never heard the like, Laird. She’ll be chokin’ him in his sleep.”

The Laird’s answer came in firm tones: “I’ll answer for Elspeth, Sir Thomas. She’s an honest woman, and a faithful servant. You need have no fear.”

Elspeth heard Dalyell’s angry grunt as she stepped back from the door, which was thrown open suddenly, and there entered Dalyell and the Laird, with Claver’se and Murdoch behind them. The smith had picked up the bowl of blood and was studying it earnestly as they came in. He started suddenly, as though the visitors had taken him unawares. Then shaking his head gravely, he said:

“I’ve bluided him a guid pint, Sir Thomas, but he’s still in a deep swound.”

Dalyell made no answer, but, Claver’se by his side, drew near the bed and studied the injured man.

“He looks deathly,” said Claver’se.

Dalyell nodded his head. “A guid horse gone; a guid lieutenant at the point o’ death, an’ a’ for a rantin’ Covenanter. Thank God he’s drooned!”

“He’s fell bad, Sir Thomas,” interrupted the smith, piqued that his skilled opinion had not been asked, “but I’ve seen them waur. There’s nae inflammation—that’s in his favour; he’s young, an’ I jaloose his skull’s gey thick, so he stauns a chance; an’ if it can be dune, me an’ Elspeth there will pull him through.”

“I’ve heard yer skill weel spoken o’, William,” said Dalyell, “but mair wi’ horses than men.”

“Thenk ye, Sir Thomas. A man that can cure a horse is nae fule wi’ a man. Ye can trust me tae dae ma best.”

“And I can vouch for Elspeth,” said the Laird.

Dalyell drew back from the bed and stood for a moment with his back to the fire. From their deep sockets, above his wine-flushed cheeks, his eyes searched every corner of the room, then they fixed themselves grimly on Elspeth, who was standing at the foot of the bed with her hands folded over her white apron.

“Come here, wumman,” he said sternly.

Elspeth dropped a curtsy and came forward.

Dalyell glared at her. “The curate o’ Irongray tells me ye’re a Covenanter—an’ the Laird disna deny it. Is it true, wumman?”

Elspeth looked at Dalyell with fearless eyes.

“I’m prood tae be numbered wi’ the faithfu’,” she said.

Dalyell stamped his foot. “The faithfu’!” he roared. “The rebels, I tell ye! What for are ye ane o’ them?”

“I am a Covenanter,” she said firmly, “because the Covenants are richt an’ true, an’ declare the will o’ God for Scotland.”

“Hear till her, Claver’se,” shouted Dalyell. “Wumman, dae ye ken what I could dae tae ye? I could droon ye in the Cluden; I could burn ye, as they burn witches; I could roll ye doon the hill o’ Skeoch in a barrel fu’ o’ spikes. Dae ye hear what I’m tellin’ ye?”

Claver’se stood aloof by the fire, a melancholy look in his eyes, his chin propped in his left hand, his right hand supporting his left elbow. This scene was distasteful to him. It was unseemly for Dalyell to conduct himself thus

towards a servant of his host! He took a step forward, about to lay a hand on Dalyell's arm, when Elspeth spoke.

"Ye couldna' sae muckle as singe a hair o' ma heid, Sir Thomas, if it werena the Lord's will."

The "Muscovy beast" clawed at the air in drunken rage, and gnashed at Elspeth with his teeth.

"Dae ye ken wha ye're speakin' tae, wumman?" he shouted.

"Ay, weel I dae. I'm speakin' tae a puir sinner like masel' sadly wantin' grace."

Claver'se gasped. Would Dalyell leap upon the woman and strangle her before them? It was not beyond him! But the unexpected happened. Dalyell's drink-sodden brain saw humour where none was intended, and the hoary old ruffian threw back his head and roared with laughter.

Claver'se, the Laird, and Murdoch looked at him amazed.

"Did ye hear her, Claver'se?" he cried. "He-he-he! ho-ho-ho! the finest compliment I've had for mony a day. Tam Dalyell—that's me—admitted tae the britherhood o' the saints, by a Covenanter. 'A puir sinner like masel',' she said. 'Like masel',' she said: nae better, nae waur. Fegs, wumman, I like ye."

The Laird slipped his arm through Dalyell's. "The hour is late, Sir Thomas, and I know you must be up betimes. Let me take you to your chamber."

Claver'se took his other arm. "The Laird speaks wisely," he said. "Let us go."

Dalyell submitted with a good grace, his drunken mind still beguiled by the jest. As Elspeth stood aside to let him pass he made a mock bow to her. "Guid nicht, fellow-sinner," he said.

Murdoch was the last to leave the room, and when the sound of retreating footsteps had died away down the passage, the blacksmith shut the door and barred it. As he turned to Elspeth he wiped the sweat from his brow. "Ye're a brave wumman, Elspeth," he said. "Gi'e's yer haun."

Elspeth shrugged her shoulders and shook hands with him. "Ye'd better be seein' tae Maister Alan," she said. "Tak' guid care o' him. This is nae time for haverin'."

A moment or two later the smith joined Alan behind the lilac bush at the bottom of the garden, and together they wormed their way through the privet hedge into a little copse of trees. Through this they stole in silence into a field beyond, and then Willie, laying a hand on Alan's arm, said quietly:

"They think ye're drooned, sir. Hoo did ye cheat them?"

Alan laughed softly, but he spoke with deep earnestness.

"I escaped by the grace of God, Wullie."

"Umphm," said the smith, "nae doot, Maister Alan, for it's only by the grace o' God that ony man is saved. But ye said in the hoose yonder that ye escaped by a miracle, an', meanin' nae offence, I canna believe that the Almichty went oot o' His wey tae save a newcomer tae the Cause like yersel' by a miracle. If it had been Maister Welsh, or Auld Sandy, He micht hae dune it; but hardly for the likes o' you, Maister Alan, laird's son though ye be."

He took a firmer grip of his companion's arm as he asked:

"As a maitter o' practical fact, hoo did ye get awa' frae them?"

In the darkness Willie could not see the laughter in Alan's eyes.

"The Cluden's in spate, Willie, and the water is coming owre the linn in a flood, but, as ye weel ken, an elbow of rock juts through the fall and breaks it. It breaks it unequally: on one side is a crashing torrent that would knock a man senseless, on the other there is no more than a thick curtain of spray. So I dropped into the pool near the edge, and with two strong strokes broke through the spray, and dragged myself up into the cave that, as you know, lies in the rock behind the waterfall. I bided there till I judged it was dark, and I came out by the way I went in, and here I am."

"Wonderfu'—wonderfu'," murmured the smith. "Ay!—I unnerstaun'—the grace o' God, a knowledge o' the countryside, and common sense—a graun combination, sir, but no' a miracle. It's as weel for you that Dalyell an' his men have nayther grace, nor dae they ken the country. Umphm!—that's so."

They spoke no more till they reached the smith's cottage, which stood at the down-going of the brae towards the sleeping village. They had kept in the shadows and had seen no one, but no sooner was the door closed behind them than a crouching figure rose, seemingly out of the earth, and stole on tiptoe to the cottage window. The shutters within thwarted his vision; but he laid an ear to the window and listened. He heard some one stir the fire, heard

the clatter of dishes, and by and by a voice, that was not the smith's, reading aloud. Then there was silence again—and after that the smith spoke:

"What dae ye think, Maister Alan? Did the Maister think ony the waur o' Nicodemus because he had a puir hert, an' daurna declare himsel' in the broad daylicht, but went sneakin' tae Him in the darkness?"

The answer was spoken so softly that the listener could not catch it; but he heard the smith's response:

"Ay! I sometimes say tae masel', 'William,' says I, 'ye're a coward. If ye winna own the Maister for a' men tae see, hoo think ye He'll own you on the Great Day. William! ye're a worm, and no man, and but for the grace of God ye'll land in yon place whaur the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched. Umphm!—I'm tellin' ye, William!' "

A sound as of some one approaching the door startled the unseen listener. He lowered his head and, crouching, stole round the side of the house into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

About ten of the clock next morning the smith stood again by his patient's bed. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he ran a skilled eye over the still unconscious man.

"What dae ye think o' him, Wullie?" asked Elspeth at his elbow.

"That he deserves a' he's gotten for persecutin' the Chosen! Pass me the bowl; I maun bluid him again."

When the operation was over, and he had examined the blood with a critical eye and many weighty nods of his head, he set the bowl on the window-sill. "I'll drap in again the nicht, Elspeth—he's daein' fine. Losh, wumman, I'd nearly forgotten!" he exclaimed, with a hand on the bar of the door, "I've a letter here frae Maister Alan."

"Maister Alan—the bonnie lad!" exclaimed Elspeth. "Did ye tak' guid care o' him, Wullie?"

"Ay—the very best! I fed him an' warmed him, and sent him off tae the hills afore the sun was up, wi' enough provender for a week."

"But did ye dry his claes, Wullie?" asked the practical Elspeth.

"Dae ye think I'm a fule, wumman?" asked Willie testily. "Ilka steek on his back was as dry as a bane afore he left. Noo,—what ha'e I dune wi' that letter?" He rummaged in sundry pockets and scratched his head. "Och ay—what am I thinkin' aboot? It's doon my stocking-leg." He drew it from its hiding-place and handed it to Elspeth "It's a maist partickler letter for Mistress Margaret, Elspeth. Maister Alan pledged me tae mak' sure ye got it. He kens ye'll see she gets it."

Elspeth took the letter and hid it in her gown. "Ay!—Maister Alan—God bless him—kens he can trust me."

When the smith had gone Elspeth made her way into the garden. She found her young mistress on the seat beneath the copper beech. A piece of embroidery lay in her lap, but her nimble fingers were not busy with it. She sat with folded hands, her thoughts far away, pursuing memories that were at once a torment and a joy. The night had served her ill. She had lain sleepless till dawn, her mind a vortex of conflicting emotions. And when at last slumber had come to her weary eyes, it had been broken rudely by the sound

of horses on the gravel, and of Dalyell's loud voice proclaiming, as he and Captain Murdoch took their departure, "Brocks, tods an' Covenanters are a' alike. Ye can hunt them best in the mornin'."

She had been unable to recapture her sleep thus broken. She could not understand herself. After all, her little romance with Alan was a thing of the past; a mere day-dream; a boy-and-girl friendship, transmuted into something akin to love by a tender moment or two and the exchange of a few letters. Alan had dropped out of her life—almost out of her memory—with her departure to France more than three years ago, and since her homecoming Claver'se had laid siege to her heart, and had won a warm place in her affection. Yet the news of Alan's death, coming to her so suddenly, had fanned into a lively flame a spark that, she unknowing, still smouldered in her breast. For a maid's first love is a holy and enduring fire. Dear Alan—surely it was not unmaidenly to call him that in the secret of her own heart. He, more faithful than herself, had kept her letters; and they had come to her again so strangely—none knowing they were hers. They came as a message from the dead, cast, as it were, by his dying hand towards her, crying, "I have not forgotten."

Elspeth stood before her and looked into her troubled face. She saw the sorrow in her deep brown eyes, and she spoke softly, like a mother to a troubled child.

"There's dule in yer bonnie e'en, Mistress Margaret. What ails ye?"

The girl drew a lace kerchief from her bosom and crushed it between her fingers aimlessly. She raised her head a little defiantly, a little proudly—then her pride forsook her suddenly. She was no longer a haughty lady fit to mate with a proud cavalier like my lord Claverhouse—she was only a girl with a heart surcharged.

"I am foolish," she said, "very foolish; but Alan Troquair and I were friends in the long ago, and my heart is sore because he is dead. I should be disloyal to friendship were it otherwise."

Elspeth sat down by her mistress and seized her hand. "Wha telt ye he was deid, lassie? It's a' lees," she whispered. "Maister Alan's alive. I saw him wi' my ain e'en last nicht. The Lord delivered him frae the evil men that were compassing his death."

The girl sprang to her feet, her cheeks aglow, her lips parted.

"Elspeth," she cried, "is it true? Yes, it is true. I read it in your honest face. Thank God! Thank God!" and she sank on to the seat again and hid her

face for a moment.

"Ay—as true as the Buik, lassie—an' it canna lee. But for proof, here's a letter for ye," and she thrust the missive into the girl's eager hand, and with that understanding which is the inborn gift of beautiful souls, she left her mistress and went back to the house.

Mistress Margaret rose and walked to the farther end of the garden. Under the apple trees, laden with pink and white blossom, and murmurous with many bees, she read the letter. It was a simple little note, written shakily, as with a tired hand, but the "Dear Margaret" with which it opened brought a glow to her heart. It was a matter-of-fact letter, with no soft whisperings of love—little more than a welcome home, and a plea for understanding.

> "Dear Margaret,"—it read—"I have learned of your homecoming and would send you a word of welcome. Knowe will be itself again since you are come home, and all who love you will rejoice.
>
> "You may have heard—if not, let me tell you—that I have thrown in my lot with the Covenanters. I could none other—conscience leading me. This has meant estrangement from all I love—father, mother, home, and kinsfolk, and now I am a hunted man with a price on my head. Mayhap you will think me a rebel, and disloyal; but, Margaret, in the things of the soul there is a greater loyalty than loyalty to the King. I have not made my choice lightly, but now my mind is set; come weal or woe, I have embraced the Cause. I would you were on our side; but if that may not be, and our lives must remain for ever apart, think kindly of me sometimes, as I do of you often.
>
> "Alan."

Standing with bowed head under the apple trees, she read and re-read the letter. Her heart throbbed, a gentle warmth stole over her, the murmur of the bees was as the music of distant bells. Yet her emotions were confused—annoyance jostling pleasure, and pleasure giving place to pain. "A price on my head": the words stabbed her; they meant that Alan was in danger; "a greater loyalty than loyalty to the King"—treasonable words that vexed and stung; "think kindly—as I do of you often"—words sweet with comfort that touched her, as though a warm and perfumed breeze of spring caressed her.

“Dear Margaret”—her eyes grew dim as she read the words again. Then she folded the letter, and, hiding it in her bosom, began to pace the garden walk.

Alan, dear, adventurous, hot-headed Alan; always an enthusiast, always wilful, always, yes—pig-headed! Many a time she had told him so in the old days. And now his pig-headedness, his enthusiasm, had betrayed him into disloyalty. Oh, she could read his heart! She knew him better than he did himself: Alan—always interpreting his enthusiasms as convictions; always ready to espouse the cause of the downtrodden; always charitable, and ready to see righteousness where there was nothing but wrong.

Oh, if she had only been at Knowe instead of in far-away France, and the old friendship had lasted, this would never have happened. Her woman’s wit would have pricked the bubble of his sophistries; she could have shown him that what he called the leading of his conscience was nothing more than the dictation of his conceit, and that the setting of his mind was only his pig-headedness called by a prettier name. Why were men like that? They might be strong in body, but they were poor, feckless creatures, lacking a woman’s wit. And now there was a price on his head! How stupid it was to risk his life for a mere whim of conscience—no, a whiff of conceit. If she could have an hour with him she could bring him back to reason, and wean him from this new, absurd, and traitorous allegiance.

She was still pacing up and down the walk when the sound of steps behind her made her turn. Claverhouse was coming towards her, feathered hat in hand, his fine dark ringlets glistening, his head carried proudly, a smile on his face. Her woman’s eye appraised him—handsome, dashing, every inch a soldier, a man of courage and sense, not one to be deflected from loyalty by a mere whim. In a moment he was beside her, bowing over her hand, which he raised to his lips.

“I bid you good morrow, Mistress Margaret,” he said.

Together they walked to the seat beneath the beech tree, and, with a little impatient gesture which bespoke her troubled mind, Margaret swept her hat, which she had left on the bench, on to the grass. As she seated herself, Claverhouse looked at her ardently, lovingly. The sunlight stealing through the dark leaves above her fell on her hair, rippling it with light and shade; a thousand shadows from the quivering foliage over her played on her simple gown. This country maiden was sweeter far than all the court ladies he had ever seen.

She motioned to him to be seated, but he continued to stand before her, swinging his plumed hat a little nervously. At last he spoke.

“Mistress Margaret,” he said, “I have come to bid you adieu; but there is something else I would say as well. I have spoken to your father, and I am come to speak to you with his sanction.”

A cold hand seemed to close on the girl’s heart for a moment as she bowed her head and waited.

Claverhouse lowered his voice and continued:

“You may have marked, Mistress Margaret, that since your homecoming I have ridden over from Dumfries more often than mere duty demanded. To speak the truth, my warrant does not yet run on this side of the Nith, so my visits to Irongray and to Knowe have not been connected with my office. Something sweeter than duty has called me, Mistress Margaret; I have come because of you.” He paused a moment, and Margaret, raising her head, replied:

“You do a country maiden great honour, sir.”

“Margaret,” and he spoke her name caressingly, “I am but a simple soldier, with nothing but a soldier’s fortune to offer you, but mine is a true heart, and I have, greatly daring, learned to love you.”

Margaret lowered her eyes, but did not speak; then she folded both hands quickly over her breast as though to still the tumult in her heart.

Claverhouse threw out both arms towards her yearningly. His voice was very tender:

“Margaret, my lady Margaret, I love you. Will you honour me by accepting my heart, my hand, and what of fortune God may send me?”

A blackbird in the apple trees piped his happy madrigal; a little wandering wind whispered among the foliage overhead. Then there was a long silence, and at last Margaret lifted her face, tinged with the soft pink of a wild rose, and looked half shyly at her lover. She saw the lambent fire in his dark eyes, and the eagerness, the hunger that haunted them, and, seeing, was afraid. She paused a moment ere she answered. And as a tiny drop of dew may mirror a landscape, so a little moment may catch the reflection of a thousand happy days; and in that moment, which gathered up all the enchanted past, she heard a ringing boyish voice calling, “Little brown squirrel,” saw an eager face and two deep blue eyes lit by a quick and sunny smile—saw a hunted man, in hiding, with a price on his head. He was hot-headed and wrong, but to give up all for an ideal was a splendid thing! A glow filled her heart; she was proud of his wrong-headedness, and she knew that it was not this handsome, courtly soldier that she loved, but Alan, her

own dear Alan. He might never want her, their lives might never touch again; but he needed her, even though, proud in his own strength, he might not know it. Something higher than her reason—more spiritual, stronger—moved her. This offer flattered her; but—and she spoke:

"My lord Claverhouse," she said tremulously, "this honour, this high honour takes me at unawares and humbles me. That a soldier so brave should deign to love me fills me with pride, but touches me with awe. Lord Claverhouse, I am not worthy to be your wife; I am neither worthy nor"—and the words came haltingly, as though she would fain recall them—"do I love you enough."

"But, Margaret," pleaded Claverhouse, as he took one of her hands in his and pressed it tenderly, "your love will grow. My love will kindle it, will set it alight as the train of powder the magazine."

The girl shook her head. "My lord, you cannot see into my heart. No man can read a maid's heart; mayhap no maid can read her own aright; but I do not love you enough, and I cannot take what I cannot return." Her voice trembled; she looked at Claver'se with shining eyes, and he, seeing in their depths something he could not understand, bowed low before her.

"Then I shall bid you adieu, Mistress Margaret. If you cannot return my love, mayhap you will not deny me your friendship."

"You will always be welcome at Knowe," said Margaret, as she rose and held out her hand. Claverhouse took it and touched it gently with his lips, then turned and walked briskly away.

A little wearily, Margaret sank down on the seat again. A wagtail, with quick and dainty steps, flirted across the grass before her; the blackbird called merrily from the apple trees. But she heeded none of these things. Her heart was in a tumult; there was a fever in her blood—all the pain of the world seemed to have gathered in her breast. A moment ago she was so sure of herself. Now she was uncertain. Had she done right? Was she true to herself, or was she mistaking pity for love? And Alan, madcap Alan—would he ever know what she had done for his sake?—and, knowing, would he care? Was a man's love like a woman's?—an enduring flame—or was it something that a puff of wind could blow to pieces like a flower? Had Alan ever loved her, or was she nothing more to him than a friend? Would a revealing moment come to him, as it had to her, and show him that he could not live without her?

So she questioned, probing her mind, harrowing her soul, until uncertainty withered into doubt and doubt crumpled into despair.

She took Alan's letter from its hiding-place and, tearing it into little shreds, scattered it to the winds. It fell upon the green turf, and lay like blown petals, which she gazed at with tear-dimmed eyes. So changing was her mood that, if she could, she would have gathered the fragments up and made the letter whole again. But now they were the sport of the wind; and the blackbird in the apple tree piped merrily on.

CHAPTER V

As the blacksmith had assured Elspeth, Alan Troquair had set out for the hills before daybreak. But he said nothing as to the manner of his going, and it is doubtful if Elspeth, had she met him, would have penetrated his disguise. It was a young man, tall, alert, and quick of movement, who had entered the smith's cottage under cover of the dark. It was an old broken-down "gangrel body" who, just before the dawn, stole forth heartened by a firm handgrip and a whispered "God-speed."

Ragged, unkempt, his lined and grimy face bristling with coarse grey hair, a patch over his right eye, his left sleeve swinging empty as though he had lost an arm, his bare feet and legs caked with mud, he looked, as the smith had assured him, "nae better nor a tatie-bogle." Over his shoulder he bore a bundle slung in the crook of a strong ash stick. It held the shoes and clothing he had discarded for the old rags with which the smith had supplied him, and in its centre was a little store of food.

He hobbled slowly along the road, with eyes and ears alert, but, when he had satisfied himself that no one was about, he left the beaten path and, taking to the fields, broke into a run. Before the sun was up he had found a hiding-place, where he deposited his bundle of clothing and food, storing a little for his coming needs among the rags of his coat. Then leaning on his stick he walked slowly till he came to the Long Wood, where, but yesterday, he had nearly come to disaster, and crawling under some of the low bushes near its edge, he pillowed his head upon a heap of leaves and was soon asleep. He was sorely in need of rest, for in the smith's cottage he had been able to snatch only enough sleep to make him aware of his utter weariness.

When he woke the sun was high in the heavens. He stretched his free arm upwards and yawned, then, turning over, he rose. A pair of startled rabbits that had been feeding on the tender young grass near him scuttered off with bobbing tails: a wood-pigeon flew from a tree close by on noisy wings. Being wise in the lore of the countryside, he knew that these things betokened the inviolate sanctity of the wood—there was no man in it but himself. Still, he did not throw caution to the winds. The events of yesterday were too fresh in his mind for that. He looked carefully in every direction, then, confident that he was quite alone and unobserved, he began to walk slowly through the wood with face bent anxiously towards the earth. Had there been any watchers to observe him, they might have suspected that he

was searching for hidden treasure, with such care did he peer and pry, turning over dead leaves with his stick, groping with eyes and hands hither and thither among the trees and in the undergrowth.

For more than an hour he searched: all through the wood, and down to the edge of the waterfall, and back again, but all without avail. He stood on the edge of the linn and watched the water hurl itself into the cauldron beneath. If the little packet of letters which he sought had fallen there it must long since have been swept away. That friendly bundle had meant so much to him in the hours of his loneliness that its loss filled him with a sense of desolation. Had he known its fate, had he been able to guess that it had come to the hands of Margaret so strangely, infusing into her heart a ferment that had quickened her love for him, his grief would have given place to joy. But the knowledge was hidden from him, and he sighed. Catching himself in the act, he upbraided himself. "Fool!" he said, "the maid cares naught for you. Why should she, gaberlunzie-man? You are a homeless, hunted man and, in her eyes, a rebel." It was a cheerless thought for a man in love, but it fired his blood, for he squared his jaw, straightened his back and, with resolution in every line of his face, turned away from the waterfall.

He had a big task before him, and one beset by danger. If he stood idly dreaming, it would remain undone. A bold idea had seized him as he had sat with the smith in his cottage, and, unwittingly, it was Willie Stott who had suggested it.

He had looked Alan up and down with a whimsical smile, and then surprised him by saying:

"There's mair than ae advantage in being deid, an' yet preserving a corporeal existence."

He smacked his lips over the last few words and repeated them: "Umphm—a corporeal existence."

Alan looked up suddenly. His face betrayed his puzzled mind. "You speak in riddles, Willie. I cannot follow you."

The smith chuckled. "An' you college-bred, Maister Alan! What I mean is, that ye're supposed by Dalyell and the rest o' them tae be deid, but here ye are, solid flesh and blood."

"I see," said Alan quietly.

"Weel, there's mair in it than appears. Alan Troquair being so tae speak deid, what's tae hinner him slippin' awa quately oot o' the district under a disguise?"

“There is nothing to hinder him,” answered Alan, “but a sense of duty. I do not boast, Willie, but I have set my hand to the plough and I am not withdrawing it. Here in Irongray, where I am known, I can do more for the Cause than anywhere else, and it would be cowardice to slip away.”

The smith shook his head. “Naebody that kens ye, Maister Alan, would ca’ ye a coward; that’s a word mair applicable tae sic as me. It wouldna’ be cowardice, but juist discretion, tae say nocht o’ common sense; an’ naebody would blame ye.”

Alan laughed. “You maunna tempt me, Willie; my work lies here.”

The smith shrugged his shoulders, and proceeded to chide himself. “Wullie Stott,” he said, “ye’re makin’ straicht for hell fire. Ye’ve nae guts yersel’; an’ when ye meet a man that’s got ony ye try tae make him as thowless as yersel’. Ye’re nae better than Judas.” He spat contemptuously into the peat fire.

It was then an idea was born in Alan’s mind. Though he dared not affront his conscience by choosing this opportunity to escape from the neighbourhood, he might make use of his chance in another way. Up in the hills there were men, like himself in hiding, who had been driven to flee their homes because, being honest, they could not exercise duress on their consciences and subscribe to Tests or swear oaths they could not, at their soul’s peril, keep. Their wives and children were left behind in the little scattered farmsteads and cottages which once had owned them master. They dared not revisit their homes, for with cunning malignity the persecutors were wont to set a watch, so that, if the good man, drawn by his love for those he had left behind, should venture back, he might be caught in the trap prepared for him. Alan knew how this cruel separation tortured the hill men; and he could imagine, since his was a sensitive soul, how many a lonely woman wept herself to sleep as she wondered how her man was faring—what moss-hag sheltered him, what cave of the earth hid him; or was he dead—butchered among the hills—his blood on the heather, his white face turned up to the starry sky?

“I shall not run away, Willie,” he said, “but I might use my supposed death for a better end,” and he explained what was in his mind.

The smith rubbed his hands together.

“Ye’ve got a guid hert, Maister Alan. I’ll disguise ye so that yer ain mither, or even Dalyell himsel’, wi’ his hawk’s een, wouldna ken ye.”

"With luck I might succeed in taking tidings of their men to the guidwives of Shawhead and Gateside and Peasecairn and Lochans. If you can disguise me as a gangrel-body I might be able to pass the watching soldiery without question. They are not likely to challenge a beggar."

"Ay—I've routh o' auld clouts; an' enough clippins o' horsehair tae gie ye a stubbly beard. I'll mak' a proper sicht o' ye," said the smith cheerfully, as he began to rummage in a press in the wall.

It was in this wise and for this end that Alan Troquair became a gaberlunzie-man.

Leaving the river behind him he took to the open road, which was little more than a sledge-track, for as yet the wheeled cart was a rarity, and the farm folk brought their crops from the fields to their steadings, or from their steadings to market, in rough sledges, which were more often drawn by oxen than by horses. But he did not always keep to the beaten track, for he found the fields afforded easier going to his bare feet. For an old broken-down man he made amazing speed, especially when he could shelter himself behind a dyke or hedge and take to his fleet heels. He had need to hurry, for the distance he had to cover was great, but as he drew near a house caution descended upon him, and he would hirple slowly up to the door and knock timidly, as though, being a poor gangrel-body, he feared a rebuff. When the good wife appeared, sometimes with awe on her face, as though a knock at the door were the harbinger of doom, sometimes with wrath on her tongue, as she had no substance to waste on beggars, he would lay two fingers on his lips and whisper a single word. With a quick and furtive glance to right and left the woman would stand aside and sign to him to enter; and the ragged tramp was made welcome—bidden to sit by the peat fire and regaled with buttermilk and homely fare.

And into eager ears, when certain that no one overheard, he would tell his story: how James Rankin, or John Gibson, or William McGhie was safe and well, and how he had seen him but a few days ago, and would, if so it pleased God, see him again that very night. His heart became the treasury of many tender messages, as the wallet that the guidwife of Shawhead had pressed upon him became the storehouse of much excellent provender, which he was bidden to give by each of the women to her own man. No one asked him who he was; they looked into his deep blue eyes and saw he was a man to be trusted. It was better for them, and better for him, that they should know him only as a "puir gaberlunzie-man," so that, if questioned, they could truthfully say he was a stranger to them. He was a stranger, but they who show kindness to a stranger sometimes entertain an angel. And it

was as an angel they thought of him, when he had gone, leaving sunshine behind him, and women with singing hearts whose eyes knew the bitterness of tears.

Fortune favoured him beyond his hopes. He had been able to reach Shawhead and Gateside and Peasecairn without molestation, and he had not encountered a single trooper. No doubt he had been espied by more than one vigilant soldier on guard in some hidden nook near each of these farms; but so perfect was his disguise that neither going nor coming was he challenged.

Heartened by his success he set out boldly for Lochans. So cheerful was his spirit that more than once he found himself whistling blithely, but always he stopped on the instant when he discovered his indiscretion, and remembered that such gaiety was not in keeping with his part as a broken-down beggarman. Still, it was hard to be silent when the larks above him were so jubilant, and the thrushes and blackbirds piped and trilled so merrily in bush and tree.

It was late in the day when he drew near his goal, the little farm-town that had been the home of Shadrach Melville. Shadrach was a small farmer —a pillar of the Covenant, stout in principle, unbendable. There was a heavy price on his head, and by way of extracting some part of it, the soldiery had descended on his farm and ravished it like locusts. All his sheep and cattle had been driven away; the plenishings of his home had been plundered or destroyed, yet the shell of his home was left—his dauntless wife holding it —so that, if her man should ever come back, he might find her waiting by his own fireside.

As Alan drew near the house, he came suddenly upon four soldiers who sat playing cards in the bield of a whin-bush. They looked up from their game as they heard him approach and, by way of disarming their suspicion, he halted beside them and passed the time of day. They returned his greeting somewhat brusquely and resumed their game, while he stood for a moment watching them. The “bank”—a soldier’s bonnet thrown on the grass—held a goodly collection of bawbees. As the cards were being dealt for another round, the gaberlunzie-man held out a claw-like hand, and with an eye on the coins mumbled: “Ha’e ye nocht for an auld dune man?”

Two of the troopers cursed him soundly and bade him begone. The dealer, set on his task, paid no heed, but the fourth soldier, on whom fortune had been smiling, plunged a hand into his pouch and tossed him a penny. Alan picked it up with an effort, as though he were dog-weary, and looked at the coin closely, then he spat upon it, as he knew was the beggar’s custom,

and hid it among his rags. “It’s a guid ane,” he muttered through clenched teeth, and looking at the giver he added, “Ye’ve a kind hert, young man. May Life aye deal ye a hand o’ trumps an’ gi’e ye sense tae play them. Guid day,” and with that he hirpled wearily, with bent back and downcast head, on towards the house.

His boldness had carried him through, and the soldiers went on with their game without wasting a thought upon him.

His knock on the door was answered by a ringing “Come in,” as though the speaker had nothing to fear, and he entered the low-roofed kitchen. He found Jean Melville, a young and sonsie woman with sloe-like eyes and sun-bronzed cheeks, seated beside the peat fire, her first-born in her lap. So occupied was she with the child that, beyond a passing glance at the beggar who had entered, she paid no attention to him for a moment, but continued her romp with her son. And Alan watched with wistful eyes that idyll of the hearth, a young mother at play with her babe. The child lay on his back, two pink feet raised in the air, his face dimpling with laughter, as his mother made little darts at him with her head, and thrust a tickling finger playfully against his ribs, making him wriggle and crow with delight.

At last Jean turned, and her quick eyes told her that the man who stood watching her was no common beggar. A whispered word from him, and an illuminating glance, and she bade him sit on the settle, and soon they were talking earnestly.

At length Alan rose to go. He was charged with many messages for Shadrach, which he promised he would not forget. Then, bidding Jean farewell and with a last half-shy tickle for the frisking child, he hirpled back along the road he had come. Of set purpose he did not deviate from his path to avoid the card-playing soldiers, who were still at their game. Then, when he deemed he was out of their sight, he quickened his pace, for he was far from the trysting-place, high on the shoulder of Skeoch, where the hillmen were due to gather when the dark fell.

But danger yet lay before him, and he stumbled into it when he least expected it. Along the road came two dragoons on foot. Alan knew that if he quitted the path to avoid them he might become suspect, so he walked steadily, but slowly, towards them. When he came abreast of them the wallet on his shoulders caught their eyes and awakened their greed. Freebooters by nature, their thieving instincts had been stimulated by the licence to plunder which, all too often, they received from their officers, and they were ready to rob even a beggar. With an oath one of them made a grab at the wallet.

Alan knew that if he resisted too vigorously he would reveal himself as something else than he appeared, so he struggled but feebly, complaining the while with a querulous voice. The wallet was jerked out of his hands by one of the soldiers, while the other, laying a rough hand on the back of Alan's neck, kicked him savagely and sent him sprawling into the ditch by the roadside. Then his assailants took to their heels and ran, laughing boisterously.

Alan sat up in the ditch and cast an angry glance after the retreating soldiers. He squared his jaw. "The Book lays it down that I should turn the other cheek to the smiter, but it does not say that I must not thrash him first. Gaberlunzie-man, in spite of your rags, dinna forget you are a Troquair, and no man kicks a Troquair save at his peril." As he thought thus, he slipped his left arm from under his shirt and thrust it into his empty sleeve, then he tore the patch from his eye and, springing up, ran after the soldiers. Round the bend of the road he came upon them. One of them was seated, his hand thrust deep in the wallet; the other, who had kicked him, stood over him, watching. Leaping forward on tiptoe with fists clenched, he rushed at the standing soldier, who turned too late to ward off the lightning blow. Alan's right fist shot out like a bolt and crashed into the man's face. The soldier reeled backwards. His arms flew wide, his chin went up, and as he staggered Alan's left fist caught him full on the jawpoint and sent him flying on his back, senseless.

Gaping with amazement the other soldier threw down the wallet and, springing to his feet, rushed upon Alan. Alan evaded his clutching hands and aimed a blow at him. But this man was a doughtier opponent and sprang on guard, and in a moment the gaberlunzie-man found himself engaged in the toughest fight he had ever tackled. The soldier rained hefty blows upon him that more than once broke through Alan's defence and made him reel. For a time Alan fought wildly, then, realizing that all depended upon coolness and courage, he mastered himself and thought quickly. There was brawn enough in the soldier's blows, but little brain behind them, and in a flash it dawned upon Alan that he might effect by strategy what he could not accomplish by strength of arm. So, as though driven back, he danced away on tiptoe,—then he turned suddenly as though about to flee. The soldier lurched after him and, quick as thought, Alan swung round again to face him, and drove his right fist hard under his ear. The feint had succeeded, and the blow sent the dragoon down like a stricken ox. The gaberlunzie-man stood over his fallen foe for a moment, half expecting him to rise. But the soldier lay inert as a sack of meal, so Alan snatched up his wallet and fled headlong.

It was long ere the two dragoons sat up and looked at each other ruefully. Their first salutation was an astonished oath muttered in one breath. Sandy, the last to go down, laid his hand gingerly upon his swollen ear, and spoke lugubriously:

"In hell's name what was yon?"

Jock spat out a mouthful of blood and picked a broken fragment of tooth from a battered lip:

"Beelzebub his nanesel or I'm a liar," he answered with emphasis.

"Guidsakes!" exclaimed Sandy as he staggered to his feet, only to fall in a heap again. "Dae ye mean auld Nick?"

"The very same," said Jock.

With an effort Sandy raised himself once more and stood erect, but unsteadily.

"Then for Saint Michael's sake let us awa ere he comes back."

Jock rose, and reeled and clutched Sandy's arm, and for a moment the two stood close together supporting each other uncertainly. Then, arm in arm, with muttered curses, they took the road.

Alan ran for nearly a mile before he rested for breath. Then sitting down by the roadside with his back against an ash tree, he rubbed his bruised knuckles gently. He smiled as he said to himself:

"Gaberlunzie-man, it is well for you that some part of your college training was picked up in the Grassmarket. The Humanities have stood you in little stead; for troublous days like these your own good nieves are better friends than all the learning in the world."

He looked up at the sky. The sun was far in the west; the peace of evening brooded on the earth. From afar came the cawing of many rooks, and overhead a lark sang valiantly, while near at hand a cluster of black swifts, pursuing each other in a whirling dance, threaded the maze, sometimes dropping like stones towards the earth, then wheeling with shrill cries and gliding upward aslant on the tip of a wing.

He watched them till his throbbing heart had quietened and his breath came no longer in gasps, then he rose and, leaving the road, turned his face toward the hills. He had not gone far before he saw an old man on hands and knees digging in the earth with a dagger-shaped knife. He paused for a moment to study him, then went boldly forward and addressed him. The

man raised his head and looked at Alan, then, without returning his greeting, went on with his work.

Loosening the earth with his knife, and pulling steadily upon its leaves, he presently released the root of a dandelion from the soil. Then he looked up again at Alan. “By the looks o’ ye, gaberlunzie-man, ye’re never likely tae suffer frae a surfeit o’ guid feedin’—but if ye ever should, an’ ye get a curmurrin in yer wame, dinna forget there’s nocht like taraxacum,” and he tapped the dandelion root with the flat of his blade.

“Belike ye are an apothecary,” said Alan.

“I am; that very same—Samuel McMuldrow, by the grace o’ God apothecary tae a’ the nobility an’ gentry o’ Dumfries, wi’ a shop at the Vennel Port.” He shook the clinging earth from the dandelion root, and put it in a wallet that lay beside him. “I’m juist gatherin’ a few simples.”

Alan took a step towards him, and looked quickly round him; then he whispered: “Dae ye no ken me, Sam’l?”

The apothecary looked at him piercingly and shook his head. “Ye ha’e the better o’ me,” he said.

“I am Alan Troquair,” said Alan.

The old man sank back till he was sitting on his heels and looked at him incredulously. “I’ll need mair than yer mere affirmation afore I swallow that ane,” he said.

Alan slipped the black patch from over his eye, and smiled; then whispered a few words earnestly.

The apothecary raised himself to his feet.

“By the same token, Maister Alan,” he said, “ye maun be wha ye claim tae be; but yer ain mither wouldna ken ye.”

“Go on with your digging, Sam’l,” said Alan. “It’s safer so. We may be observed.”

The apothecary nodded his head and fell to work on another dandelion plant, and, as though he were assisting, Alan dropped on his knees beside him. They talked in whispers, mysteriously, and earnestly.

Had Dalyell himself been close at hand to overhear, he could not have made head or tail of the conversation.

“It was ill tae get, being but little kent; but for your sake, an’ the Cause, I got it,” said the apothecary.

There was a little spate of questions from Alan.

“In a bottle; in water, Maister Alan . . .”

“Ay—in the hidie-hole we settled on. . . .”

“The men are haudin’ firm, sir? . . . Thank God—the Cause is safe . . .”

“Ye’ll tak’ care, Maister Alan. It’s kittle stuff . . .”

It was with a light heart that Alan left the apothecary, still busy with his roots, and made for the hiding-place where he had secreted his clothing. He divested himself of his rags and, donning his own garments, shouldered his wallet again and hurried on. At a little mountain stream he paused and washed the stubble of grey hair from his face, and when he rose from his knees the last trace of age had fallen from him: he was the “young laird” again.

CHAPTER VI

The purple dusk was falling on the hills, softening their dourness, wrapping them in beauty and mystery. Now and then the silence was broken by the eerie wail of a whaup. From the valley there floated up the sound of a dog's bark—infrequent, faint, but homely. Had there been a spy upon the hills with vision more than human he might have seen, here and there, a clump of heather stir with a sudden movement as a man stole from beneath it. It was the hour when the wild things of the earth are free to roam abroad, it was the hour when the hillmen, the hunted companions of the fox, the brock, and the moorbird might leave their sanctuaries unmolested.

In a hollow, high on Skeoch, sheltered by steep heather-clad banks, four men had already gathered. One of them, a weather-beaten, swarthy fellow, with a nose like a hawk's beak and restless dark eyes, sat on a boulder. Across his knees lay a cutlass, and from his big ears two heavy rings depended. He was talking boastfully, and somewhat noisily, in little jerky sentences to the three men who stood before him.

"If ye've never sailed the seas, ye ken nocht o' life. . . . Five-and-twenty years was I in bondage to Satan, a hard-sweerin', hard-drinkin', blasphemious sinner. . . . Then I becam' a miracle o' Grace. . . . Ay, I'm tellin' ye," and he nodded his head with emphasis as though his listeners doubted him. "We were runnin' a cargo o' contraband frae France to the coast o' Ayrshire, as we'd dune mony a time afore. But a tempest fell upon us and drove us helpless frae Ailsa Craig to Bennan Point, and hurled us on the rocks. . . . An' juist as the ship broke her back the voice o' the Lord spoke out o' the clouds . . . 'Andra McGarva,' says He, 'I've watched ye wallowing in sin these mony years. But I'll answer your mother's prayers. From this day thou shalt no longer be called Andra McGarva, but thou shalt be called "The Brand," for I will pluck thee from the burning.' . . . Ay, them's His very words. . . . I heard them as plain as a bosun's pipe. . . . And He was true tae His promise. Of the crew I alone was saved. . . . I'm no tellin' ye a word o' a lee! An' so, when I cam' tae masel', I made a pact wi' God. Ye have ca'ed me 'The Brand,' says I. I'll be a burnin' an' a shinin' light a' the days o' my life!"

He lifted his cutlass and made a swinging blow at the heather.

The men beside him said nothing. Like all men whose lives have been spent among the hills and moors and the wide spaces of the earth, they were

little given to speech. They could keep silence eloquently, and they did so now. They had heard "The Brand" tell his story many times before, for it was always on his lips and, being men of reverent mind, they resented this jabbering sailor's easy familiarity with God. There were none of them prepared to challenge the miracle; but in their hearts each felt that if a like experience had befallen him he would have made less boast of it.

Undismayed by their silence "The Brand" lifted his voice again. He had risen to his feet, and stood, cutlass in hand, as though about to strike an enemy.

"There's me, and Paul; twa miracles o' Grace, saved, nae doot, for a like purpose."

One of the listeners shrugged his shoulders and exclaimed bitterly:

"Andra McGarva, that ca's yersel' 'The Brand,' ye're a vainglorious man an' a boaster tae speak o' yersel' in the same breath wi' Paul."

"An' what for should I no?" asked the blustering sailor.

The answer came swiftly, hissed through the teeth:

"Because Paul had a heid on his shoulders fu' o' sense, while yours hauds nocht but win'."

"The Brand" sprang forward as though to attack the speaker; but the other two men seized him and held him back, and one of them wrenched his weapon from him.

"This is nae time for quarrelin'," said Shadrach Melville. "We are brithers in affliction; let britherly love continue."

The sailor ceased to struggle, and laughed. "I've been the de'il's henchman sae mony years, Shadrach, that it's hard tae be deaf whan he whispers in ma lug."

"But that's a' behin' ye noo," said Shadrach coaxingly. "What saith the Buik?—'If thy brother offend thee——' "

"The Brand" broke in before he could finish: "Ay!—ay! That's it. Before I was ca'ed by my new name, nocht but bluid wad ha'e avenged sic an insult. But I can forgi'e, I can forgi'e!"—and, his captors releasing him, he reclaimed his weapon and sat down on the boulder again. But the hillman who had provoked him wandered off into the gathering darkness.

Left with only two to hear him, the sailor was silent for a time, then he made another cut at the heather, and exclaimed:

"There's owre mony lukewarm among us. What saith the Lord? 'Behold, because ye are neither cold nor hot I will spew thee out of my mouth!' "

He spat contemptuously.

"The Cause will never win the day sae long as the half-herted are admitted tae the britherhood. What saith the Lord again?—' Come out from among them.' Wi' me it's everything or naething!"

William McGhie, the hillman who had not yet spoken, shook his head sadly. "It's a sair fecht for some o' them; a sair fecht, an' the way is no made plain; but the Lord can read the hert, an' understands."

"The Brand" babbled on: "Noo, tak' Wullie Stott!"

"What aboot him?" asked Shadrach quickly, who, knowing the blacksmith well, was quick to defend him.

"A shallow man, feared tae declare himsel'! 'Come out from among them,' saith the Lord. But Wullie Stott bides in comfort doon in the clachan yonder, while better men sleep cauld and wet on the hills. An' yet he pretends he's ane o' us. As like as no he'll be here the nicht. He kens a' the secrets; he may turn traitor yet."

Shadrach, by nature a quiet and peaceable man, clenched his fists in sudden anger. He took a menacing step towards the sailor, then he controlled himself, but he spoke fiercely:

"For a' yer boastin' it's a black, unsanctified hert that hides in yer breist. Wullie Stott is true as steel. In the day o' trouble I'd suner stand shoulder tae shoulder wi' him than wi' a hunner sic 'Brands' as you."

"The Brand" laughed—an ugly, sinister chuckle.

"Bide a wee," he said, "but dinna forget I warned ye!"

Shadrach sprang towards him, his hands ready to grip the babbler by the throat, but at that moment half a dozen figures loomed suddenly out of the dusk. The hillmen were gathering; their coming made Shadrach pause, and as he paused his anger ebbed. But ere he turned to greet the new-comers he muttered to "The Brand" through his clenched teeth: "But for the grace o' God I'd make ye eat yer venomous words!"

A sudden new interest seized the group with the coming of Alan. He came down the slope into the hollow with firm, elastic steps. The hillmen greeted him warmly, though with a certain respectful deference, and he returned the greetings heartily, with a cheery word for this one, a strong

handgrip for another, and a gay and confident smile for them all. His advent was a surprise to some of the men who had heard how he had been pursued only a day ago. Rumours had come to them in their scattered hiding-places that he had been drowned while attempting to escape, and more than one of them, when the first greetings were over, gripped his hand again to assure themselves that he was solid flesh and blood, and not a wraith, returned to revisit old familiar scenes.

But "The Brand" sat apart, cutlass on knee, looking moodily before him. The coming of Alan had diverted all attention from himself, and he was filled with envy. Had Alan known the black thoughts that filled his heart he might not have greeted him so light-heartedly. He caught sight of the sailor alone and, with hand outstretched, advanced towards him. "A good e'en to you, Skipper!" he cried, and catching a glimpse of the naked cutlass he added with a laugh, "Thirsting for blood as ever, old Tarry-breeks!"

The sailor rose to his feet.

"A good e'en tae you, Maister Alan; but, by your leave, I'm Skipper and Tarry-breeks nae longer; I am 'The Brand'—and the weapon in my hand is the sword of the Lord," and he made a cut in the air. He spoke haughtily.

With quick intuition Alan saw that he was in no mood for pleasantry, so he said quietly: "Ay! and if you are ever called on to wield your weapon for the Cause I know you'll wield it worthily."

"The Brand's" dark humour melted into sudden cordiality. He plucked Alan's sleeve and whispered tensely: "If there had been eleven guid men an' true sic as me in the Gairden yon nicht, the treachery o' Judas would ha'e come tae nocht."

The fierce boast startled Alan, leaving him speechless. Willie Stott, who was standing near at hand, heard the words and caught his breath. He turned on his heel and shrugged his shoulders. Alan did not reply. Instead he rejoined the little group, and one by one he called the good men of Shawhead and Gateside and Peasecairn apart and gave to each the message he had gathered for him. In cheery words he told each how his wife fared, how she looked, what she had asked and said, and as he spoke he brought a glint of warmth and light into these shadowed lives. And as each of the fortunate ones rejoined his companions there was joy in his eyes, and a happier, heartier note in his voice. They talked quietly together, exchanging their precious bits of news and, looking towards the young laird, whispered: "A braw lad—a rale guid-herted gentleman."

He kept the message for Melville of Lochans till the last, and held him long in conversation. “My Jean—my puir Jean,” said Melville, when he heard that a guard of soldiers had the house under their constant watch.

“But she’s brave and uncomplaining, and, save for your absence, happy,” said Alan, “and she bade me tell you that every night she has placed a candle in the window in the hope that if you were near you might see it.”

“I ken, I ken,” said Melville. “Many a nicht, lying up amang the heather, I’ve watched for that wee lowe breaking through the dark; an’ I kent that a’ was weel wi’ my bonnie lass. An’ the licht has aye burned brichtest whan my hert has been maist dooncast. Eh! Maister Alan, it’s wunnerfu’ hoo far a licht will cairry, an’ what it can dae for a man’s soul when the love o’ a wumman lies behind it.”

Melville went silent suddenly, as though ashamed of his emotion.

“And I was to tell you, Shadrach—your wife said I might forget all else, but I must tell you this: the bairn’s daein’ fine—and has cut four teeth. And,” added Alan, “they’re as sharp as a chisel; the wee rascal tried them on my finger.”

There was a gulping sound in Melville’s throat.

“God bless the wee lad,” he said, and stole back to the other men.

As Alan followed him he was intercepted by Willie Stott.

“Maister Alan,” he said, “I had tae come up the nicht. Thank God ye’ve come tae nae hairm. Did ye dae a’ ye intended?”

“I did, Willie, thanks to your disguise.”

“Weel, Maister Alan, I’m sair perplexed lest ye should ask me tae tak’ the prayer the nicht, for whan it comes tae prayin’ oot lood, my knees gang dither dither, my tongue gangs dry, an’ I canna get haud o’ a word. I fear it’s a sign o’ an awfu’ declension frae grace—but I canna dae it. I think I could face Lag or Claver’se or Dalyell an’ their musket-men wi’ a brave face an’ a heid held high, but whan it coomes tae prayin’ oot lood, I’ve nae mair courage than a greetin’ wean.”

Alan laughed quietly as he patted Willie on the shoulder. “Willie,” he said, “it is maybe a sign o’ grace. For my own sake, I hope so—for I ken your feeling. I aye feel it myself; so we’ll pass you over to-night.”

“Man, Maister Alan,” said the smith earnestly, “ye’ve ta’en an awfu’ wecht off my min’, an’ I’m mair than thankfu’. I’ll dae ocht for you or the

Cause—aye, even beard auld Lag himsel' if ye ask me. An' as for the prayer, ye can ca' on Joe Blair wi' safety. I cam owre the hills wi' him, an' I could see he was fair hotchin' tae be prayin'. He likes daein' it, an' he's got a spate o' words. He'll pray for an oor if ye'll let him."

"God forbid!" said Alan, with a merry laugh. "Joe is not the only one who has failed to learn that the good words, 'Pray without ceasing,' do not mean 'Pray without stopping.' "

The anxious blacksmith laughed. "Man, Maister Alan, if Joe heard ye say that he wad think ye were blasphemious. But I ken what ye mean: that's a guid ane!" And he laughed again.

Together they rejoined the others, and when one of their number had been chosen to act as a guard, and had stolen away to a point from which he could command the likeliest way by which intruders might come, the Covenanters fell to the task before them. They were no malign plotters devising some crafty scheme of revenge upon their persecutors; they were humble, devout men seeking means to keep their souls steeled and their faith high in the darkest hours of their lives. They were met for mutual friendship, the exchange of the comforting word, the encouragement to be derived from worship together, but in addition they had a noble task in hand. A few weeks later the hill on which they were gathered was to witness a great and solemn happening: that Simple Feast of Love, first kept in an upper room in Jerusalem, was to be kept again, for their souls' strengthening, on the heather-clad side of Skeoch; and they had come together to decide how the faithful for many a mile around were to be apprised of the occasion.

They sat, with heads bent forward, talking quietly, each ready to undertake the most hazardous enterprise. And all was concord, save for one ugly interruption by "The Brand." With cutlass still on his knees he leaned forward suddenly and asked: "What o' the tokens?"

Alan turned and looked towards Willie Stott.

"I believe," he said, "you are well forward wi' their preparation, Willie."

The blacksmith nodded his head. "There are mair than three thoosan' ready. Maister Welsh said he thocht fowre thoosan' wad be enough. I'll no fail him."

"The Brand" spluttered furiously: he looked at the blacksmith venomously.

"An' are these passports tae the Table being made by a man that shods horses for the dragoons?"

There was a sudden outcry from more than one of the men. The blacksmith was beloved by them all: most of them knew his difficulties; all of them felt for him.

Alan held up his hand. If he had looked at Willie, he would have seen that both fists were clenched and that there was murder in his eyes. Shadrach Melville, sitting beside the smith, gripped him firmly by the arm. Then Alan spoke:

"Brand!" he said severely, "you do Stott a wrong. No man among us has a warmer heart for the Cause."

There was a murmur of approbation; and one of the men protested stoutly: "It's no them that boasts maist that ha'e the cleanest hands. If 'The Brand' will lay doon his whinger I'll learn him tae despise Wullie Stott!"

There was a babble of many voices: men who, a moment ago, were devout and peaceable were suddenly on fire with wrath, so lightly does the old Adam sleep even in the bosoms of the elect!

But with masterly tact Alan handled the situation so that the danger of a set-to between the armed "Brand" and some of the hotter-headed of the hillmen was averted. And having succeeded in stilling the wilder passions, he called his men back to the memory of who and what they were by giving out a psalm.

"Ere we part," he said, "let us sing the 46th Psalm: and after the singing maybe Joe Blair will raise a word of prayer. A *word*, Joe; not a volume," he added meaningly: and Willie Stott found his wrath melting into sudden laughter and had to turn his face aside lest Shadrach Melville should think him lacking in reverence.

They sang, with unmusical voices, drawlingly, holding on to the last word in every line as though loth to let it escape from their lips. "The Brand" sang loudest of all, somewhat defiantly. Then when the psalm was sung they rose to their feet and, doffing their bonnets, bowed their heads.

Blair, a devout soul, prayed fervently and fluently with many groans, as one in travail of spirit, but he had not wrestled long ere there was a sudden interruption. A low whistle startled the worshippers, all of whom raised their heads quickly and looked keenly to the airt whence the sound had come. In a moment two figures were seen approaching, and "The Brand" leaped forward to meet them, with cutlass swung across his shoulder. But he had no need to use his weapon: the new-comers were friends. One of them was the man who had been acting as sentinel; the other was an old man, big of

stature, bearded, with shrewd, kindly eyes and a face that bore in its many deep-ploughed furrows the evidences of a life of suffering and hardness. The hillmen recognized him at once. A sibilant whisper ran among them: “It’s auld Sandy hissel’,” and one or two of them, with a finer sense of reverence, said: “It’s godly Maister Peden!”

He was greeted warmly. He laid a large and heavy hand on Alan’s shoulder and spoke to him earnestly, almost under his breath. Then he turned to the expectant throng and said:

“It is laid upon me to speak to you.”

The hillmen fell back, and seated themselves in a circle about him, waiting for his words as for the utterance of a man inspired.

The old man took off his bonnet and in a rugged voice exclaimed:

“The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him, and He will show them His Covenant. Where is the Kirk of God in Scotland at this day? It is not among the princes of the Church, nor yet in any building made with hands. It is wherever a praying young man or young woman is at a dykeside in Scotland: it is wherever a saint from his heather bed, his darksome cave or some lonely cleugh or glen, raises his heart to Heaven. That’s where the Kirk is!”

He swept his little audience with his eyes.

“This puir land of ours is in sore travail: but there awaits her a bonnie bairn-time, and joy cometh in the morning.”

He sighed, and his voice lost its rugged note and became almost tender.

“As in a glass I see happy days for Scotland, when the wilderness shall flourish and blossom as a rose. But some of us shall be taken ere that day dawns. Some of you, ere then, will dye the heather with your blood for the glorious Cause you have espoused: yet be of good cheer. It is your blood that will water the roots of the roses; your blood that will make them spring up to gladden the desolate places. So let not your hearts be troubled! Your Master sends no man to war at his own charges.”

He stopped suddenly, then raising his right hand he gave the company his blessing and, urged by that restless spirit that possessed him, without a word of farewell, strode away into the darkness.

Then the hillmen began to separate, each to seek his own hiding-place, but ere they went they bade Alan farewell.

"The Brand" was among the first to go. As he climbed up the slope he was overtaken by Willie Stott who, laying a hand on his shoulder, arrested him. He turned round quickly and faced the smith.

"It's you!" he exclaimed with a note of contempt.

"Ay, it's me!" said Willie firmly. "An' I juist want tae whisper a word in yer lug, Andra McGarva, that ca's yersel' 'The Brand.' "

"Say on," said "The Brand" defiantly, but he gripped his cutlass firmly.

"It's this," said Willie. "If the hill o' Skeoch were no a holy spot dyed wi' the bluid o' saints, I'd gledly show ye here an' noo whilk o' us has got the cleaner hands and the better nieves. But I wadna defile a sacred place wi' sic black bluid as yours. Hooever, I'm aye at the smiddy, an' at yer service, an' if ye'll leave that whinger o' yours behin' ye, and juist come doon tae see me ony day at yer ain convenience, it'll be a great obleegement."

Having delivered his challenge the blacksmith turned and left the astonished "Brand," who stood for a moment irresolutely, cutting the heather with his cutlass, then spat contemptuously and hurried away.

Down in the hollow none were left but Alan and Shadrach Melville, who had hung back so that he might be the last to bid the young laird farewell. His heart was very warm towards Alan who, at risk to himself, had brought him news of his wife and child. He gripped the young man's hand firmly.

"Maister Alan," he said, "I'm sairly exercised: but you, being college-bred, are sure tae ken. If it were a horse or a calf I wad ken myself, but, being a bairn, I'm at a loss. Is fowre the richt number o' teeth for an eicht-months-auld bairn?"

Alan smiled. Only his fear of hurting Shadrach's feelings saved him from laughing aloud. Then he answered:

"At college they filled our heads with more philosophy than common sense, and they told me nothing about bairns' teeth. But Jean was pleased with four, and she is like tae ken, so you may take it that all is well."

"Ah—Jean! My bonnie lass!" murmured Shadrach as he turned and stole away among the shadows of the hills. The homeless, hunted man was happy—happy with the joy and pride of fatherhood, happy in the love of a brave and loyal wife. He cared naught for the persecutors at that hour: all his world was centred in a little, lonely thatched cottage from whose window a light shone—where a proud and bonnie mother sat with a little lad cuddled against her breast.

And Alan, touched to the heart, stood in the moonlight for a moment with a dimness before his eyes thinking of the mystery of human love, and Margaret.

CHAPTER VII

The moon had set, and the night was at its darkest. At the edge of a clump of oak trees, some two miles from the Kirk of Irongray, stood a horse and its rider. The rider whispered a word to his steed and vaulted lightly into the saddle, where he sat motionless, erect, as though he and his horse were one. Had Willie Stott been there to pass judgment he would have declared the horse a noble creature, with its clean, sinewy legs, its strong back, its high well-bred withers, its arched neck, its lean flanks. Yet it is doubtful if the smith would have dared to come close enough to appraise the points of the animal, for horse and rider made an uncanny spectacle. A luminous exhalation surrounded the horse's head: ghostly little lights danced along its flanks like fire-flies: its hoofs, half hidden by the grass, were glowing with pale-blue flames. The fearsomeness of the horse was matched by the appearance of the rider. His hands, resting lightly on the reins, shone with a glimmering light, his face and the casque on his head gleamed with an unearthly radiance. Of a truth, an awesome spectre to be met with in the darkness: devil or ghost, who could tell? There were twenty soldiers of the King, still damp with cold sweat, still trying to restrain their chattering teeth, who, half an hour ago, had been wakened from their sleep by this uncanny apparition. Bivouacked in the ruins of a roofless barn, they were heavy with slumber, to which their evening potations had inclined them, when they were startled to sudden wakefulness by an eldritch cry and the sound of a gun.

The terrified sentry had rushed among them, his smoking weapon falling from his hand as he yelled: "The de'il! The de'il!—Auld Nick himsel'!—Save me!"—and, terror speeding him, he had dashed headlong over the recumbent figures among the straw and disappeared into the darkness of the field beyond. Several of the soldiers sprang to their feet and, with a courage that was more a habit of discipline than the outcome of real stoutness of heart, rushed to the doorway through which the sentry had flung himself. The bravest of them quailed at the sight that met his eyes. Less than ten paces away stood the ghostly horse with its awful rider. With yells of fear and curses, the dragoons dashed helter-skelter out of the barn and hid themselves here, there and everywhere that they could find a bush to cover them, a tree-trunk to screen them, a boulder to shield them. Some of them ran till they dropped and lay gasping almost at the point of death. Others, by no means the bravest, found shelter close at hand and lay trembling; for each

was seized by sudden dread that the devil, his master, had come to claim him and drag him straightway to the bottom of his fiery pit.

The rider urged his horse with his knees, and rode into the barn. There was not a soul left within it. He laughed aloud, and, in the darkness, the cowering soldiers who were near enough to hear trembled afresh—for the laugh was a wild cachinnation, such as might echo through the grim caverns of hell. It chilled the marrow of Fergus McKeown, who had hidden near the barn. He was of "the auld religion," and tremblingly he crossed himself and called on the Mother of God to save him, vowing to forsake all secret and open sins for the rest of his days if only he were spared to see again the kindly light of morning. Then the spectral horse and rider came forth; and those who were near enough saw the flash of a lambent sword in his hand. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, the apparition vanished, swallowed by the earth or the darkness.

Half an hour later the spectral horse and rider stood by the oak trees. There was no one near to say whence they had come, whether they had sprung from the ground, or taken shape from the ambient air. With a gentle pressure on the reins and a whispered word the rider urged his steed, and in a moment they were cantering over the springy turf. By and by they came to the road, and the rider drew rein. He seemed uncertain which direction to take, but his hesitation was momentary, and soon he urged his horse to the gallop. As he sped along he passed an infrequent cottage wrapped in slumbrous darkness, but he did not stop to strike terror into the hearts of the sleepers within. Nor did he slacken speed till he heard the sound of laughter shattering the silence of the night.

The horse pricked its ears and stood stock-still: the rider leaned forward with head on one side. For a moment all was quiet, then, suddenly another bellow of mirth broke the stillness, and the rider, putting his mount to the walk, moved slowly along the road. He had not gone far ere he heard the sound of voices. Though he could not see them, he judged that a small body of men, probably soldiers, was coming towards him: and lest they should spy him before the moment was ripe, he turned aside and drew up under cover of a giant beech tree. His horse stood motionless, as though turned to stone. The voices drew nearer, and soon the rider could discern a huddle of men walking uncertainly along the narrow road. He waited till they were almost abreast of him, then he dug his heels into his horse's flanks, and the animal sprang forward. It wheeled and faced the soldiers, and as its rider's sword flashed from its sheath and gleamed in the darkness, it reared and pawed the air with glimmering hoofs. It was a sight that might well have

stricken dread into the bravest; but, hag-ridden by superstitious fears of devil and warlock as these men were, the spectre appalled them. For an instant they stood petrified, their blood turned to ice, then, with shaking limbs and gasping breath, they scattered and ran for their lives. And as is the way of men, even the basest, in their extremity they called on high Heaven to save them. But they did not wait for the aid they invoked. Terrified, they plunged through the darkness trembling, falling headlong—struggling to their feet again—cursing in one breath, praying in the next—fleeing precipitately, sure that the devil himself was close on their heels.

But the ghostly rider did not trouble to pursue them. He had other things on hand, for he had seen that when the soldiers fled they had left two men behind them. Leaping from his horse, sword in hand, he advanced upon them; but the men made no attempt to run away. Instead the older of them lifted his voice to heaven and prayed aloud. His words were tremulous, and came in little jerks, as though his teeth were chattering and his tongue were cleaving to the roof of his mouth; but he was, by every token, a man of courage and faith, and in this dire hour he was casting himself and his companion upon the Eternal Mercy.

Without a word the ghostly rider laid a gleaming hand upon the two men and found that they were bound together, with their arms tied behind their backs. Quickly he severed their bonds and, springing back, leaped on his horse and galloped away. It was a moment ere the captives realized that they were free, and that their deliverer had disappeared. Then the older of them spoke. Bonnet in hand, he turned his face to the clouded sky.

"Doon on yer knees, Shadrach," he cried. "What was I tellin' ye?—The arm of the Lord is not shortened."

And Sandy Peden and Shadrach Melville knelt together in the ruts of the uneven road and gave thanks for their deliverance.

They were four sorry and chap-fallen soldiers who appeared before Captain Murdoch next morning to give an account of the doings of the night. He listened to their disjointed and terrified tale with amazement; then, to extract order from chaos and get a grip of the facts, if facts they were and not drunken imaginings, he questioned them.

"Do I understand you?" he said. "You seized Shadrach Melville in his own house?"

"Ay, sir," answered the spokesman. "As ye ken, we were watchin' Lochans in the hope of catchin' him."

“Did you see him enter?”

“No, sir—nane o’ us did, an’ we canna tell hoo he got past us, unless it was that the nicht was sae mirk.”

Murdoch snorted. “If the four of you had been on the alert you would have seen him, darkness or no. What made you think he was in the house?”

“We jaloused something was happening when the caunle was ta’en frae the window long afore its time.”

“What candle?” asked Murdoch sternly.

“A caunle that his wife has been lichting ilka nicht since her man took tae the hills.”

“I see,” said Murdoch, nodding his head. “Well?”

“So we slipped up tae see what was toward, an’ when we keeked through a crack in the door there was Shadrach and his wife, wi’ the caunle in her haun, standin’ wi’ an airm roon each ither, lookin’ at the bairn in the cradle.”

“And then?” said Murdoch.

“So wi’ a rush we burst in the door, weel-steekit though it was, an’ though he focht like a lion we had oor man in a trice.”

The speaker paused and looked at his companions. Murdoch swept them with his eyes. “Is that as it happened?” he asked, and in one breath they answered: “That’s the wey o’t, sir!”

“And what next?” asked Murdoch.

“Weel, we thocht it safer tae make for Irongray wi’ oor prisoner, for at a lonely place like Lochans a rescue micht ha’e been attempted, an’ there were only fowre o’ us.”

Murdoch nodded approvingly.

“And on the way you caught old Peden—was that it?” he asked.

“Ay, sir. He as guid as walked richt into oor airms.”

“And then?” asked Murdoch.

“We tied their hands behin’ their backs, an’ lashed them elbow to elbow—an’, guardin’ them weel, we set oot again.”

“I see,” said Murdoch. “And this ghost you saw—what of that?”

The spokesman moistened his lips nervously, and looked at his companions. There was a look of awe on the face of each.

"It was nae ghaist, sir," gasped the spokesman. "It was the de'il himsel'."

Murdoch looked critically at the four men before him. He saw fear on their faces.

"Did you all see this—this—spectre?" he asked.

"Ay, sir," they answered, and at the memory some of them began to tremble, and one turned ashen pale.

"And what like was it?" asked Murdoch.

"It was like—it was like," stammered the spokesman, "naething earthly. It was Auld Nick himsel': he burst oot o' the grun' amaist below oor very feet, on the back o' a coal-black charger, wi' flames belchin' frae its nostrils. An' its e'en were like live peat-coals—an' its heid was like the lichtenin', and its hoofs were shod wi' fire, an' there were wings o' fire on its flanks." He gasped for breath, and twitched his fingers nervously.

Murdoch, searching the faces before him with piercing eyes, saw fear on every one. Even the memory of what they had seen unmanned them. He waited a moment till they should recover themselves, drumming the while on the table with his fingers, and then he said quietly, in a voice unmoved:

"And what of the rider?"

"The de'il, sir!" exclaimed the spokesman. "I daurna look in his face."

Murdoch laughed loudly. "That's true, I'll warrant. You were nae doubt feared he would recognize you as ane o' his long-lost bairns. Get on——!"

Their officer's pleasantry was lost on the men, who were still too awestruck to see in their experience any occasion for merriment. But the spokesman took the bit in his teeth and bolted through his story breathlessly.

"The de'il," he cried. "He had a bleezing helmet stuck on his horns—his face an' hauns were in a lowe, and the smoke o' his breath was like a brimstane fire. He rushed on us wi' a flamin' sword, an' though like guid sodgers we stood oor grun' "—and the speaker looked at his comrades for confirmation—"we ha'e nae weapons for fechtin' the de'il. But it wasna us he wanted. It was the Covenanters. Wi' an eldritch yell he laid hauns on them, an' the earth opened beneath his feet, an' wi' Sandy Peden an' Shadrach Melville scraichin' for mercy, he dragged them baith doon intae

the bottomless pit." The spokesman stopped suddenly and swallowed nervously.

"I see," said Murdoch, as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. "How much had you to drink last night?"

The four men started. Was their story to be written down as nothing more than a drunkard's dream? They knew their captain was wrong. With their own eyes they had seen the de'il. They were as certain of that as of their existence.

"Nocht but cauld water, sir," protested the spokesman, and turning to his companions he cried: "Is it a lee I'm tellin'?"

"It's the gospel truth, Captain," they answered, looking fixedly at their officer.

For a moment Murdoch sat irresolute. Then he turned to the sergeant.

"Place these men under arrest till I lay their story before the Colonel."

The sergeant saluted and marched his prisoners off. When he returned he found Captain Murdoch pacing restlessly up and down.

"A strange story, Sergeant," he said. "Think you they were drunk?"

"No, sir," answered the sergeant. "I believe every word they said. There's queer stories aboot that the de'il was seen elsewhere in Irongray last nicht."

"Oh!" exclaimed Murdoch, his wonder deepening: "I'm more than puzzled," and then he laughed. "At any rate, Sir Thomas will be pleased to know that Auld Nick prefers Covenanters to dragoons for his recruits."

A few minutes later he made his report to Sir Thomas.

Sir Thomas heard him to the end, then, throwing back his head, he roared with laughter.

"Ho-ho-ho!—he-he-he!" he cried hilariously. "I never kent afore that the de'il had a sense of humour."

Murdoch looked puzzled. "I cannot follow you, sir," he said.

Dalyell laughed again.

"It's bad eneuch, Alec, tae be damned: but if for a joke the de'il sets Auld Sandy on tae preach tae the puir devils their lives wull no be worth

leevin'. There's a sayin' that hell's the place for company: but no noo, Alec, no noo—if Auld Nick is fillin' it wi' Covenantin' ranters."

Murdoch was not in the mood to appreciate his chief's coarse humour. He frowned slightly as he asked: "What do you make of the men's story, sir?"

Dalyell leaned forward quickly:

"Drunk, I'll warrant. Drunk!—and blue deevilled. Hae them tied up, and see that they get four dozen apiece, weel laid on. That'll teach them to keep a close grip o' their prisoners for the future. Forbye it will put the fear o' God in them: by every token they've got the fear o' the de'il already——" and the old martinet laughed boisterously.

Two nights later Shadrach Melville foregathered with Alan Troquair on the slopes of Skeoch. He had a strange story to tell. Alan heard him with rapt attention.

"I couldna help it, Maister Alan; but efter ye telt me aboot Jean an' the bairn my hert ached that sair that, at ony cost, I had tae see them. So in the dark I stole awa doon tae Lochans. Naebody saw me: naebody challenged me: an' what a welcome I had frae my puir lonely lass!" He paused for a moment and drew the back of his hand over his eyes. "An' juist as we stood by the wee lad's cradle, wi' herts owre fu' for words, the door was burst in,' an' I was seized. The sodgers tore me awa, an' wouldna as muckle as let me kiss the wean; but the Lord had mercy on me, an' delivered me frae their hands. But that was no juist then. That was efter they cam on Maister Peden an' made a prisoner o' him tae: an' prood I was, Maister Alan, tae be bound in the same bonds wi' sic a saint as auld Sandy. Weel, on the road tae Irongray, suddenly an angel descended frae heaven, scattered oor enemies in terror, struck oor bonds frae us, and set us baith free."

"A strange deliverance!" said Alan quietly.

Shadrach looked up at the starry sky with a rapt expression on his face. He clasped his hands and spoke in an ecstasy.

"He cam oot o' the clouds like a whirlwind on a horse clothed with the sun and shod with fire: his face was as the moon, and in his hand was a flaming sword. The men o' Belial fled before his radiance, for nane but the just daur stand before the angels, Maister Alan. He struck oor bonds frae us—an' we fell on oor knees giving praise an' thanks—and straightway the angel vanished frae oor sight."

Alan plucked a handful of heather and stripped the little beadlike blossoms idly from their stems. “It is a wonderful story, Shadrach,” he said. “Does Jean know you are free?”

Shadrach laughed quietly. “Ay—fine she kens. I ran a’ the wey back tae Lochans juist tae haud her in my airms again and kiss her an’ the bairn afore I made for the hills.”

Alan smiled quickly. “For a man with a price on his head, Shadrach, you dare too much!”

Shadrach laid a firm hand on Alan’s arm.

“Maister Alan,” he said earnestly, “ye ken nocht o’ love.”

CHAPTER VIII

As surely as night follows day, a calm succeeds to every storm. That is the eternal order of things, written from the beginning. So it was with Margaret. The fierce turmoil that had torn her so cruelly when, scarce knowing what she did, she destroyed Alan's letter was followed by a quiet sense of peace. Her heart was glad; it held its own secret: she loved Alan.

Yet sometimes for a moment her confidence was disturbed. As she walked in the garden of a morning, the shrill call of the blackbird, the heavy scent of the hawthorn, or the sight of a white petal blown like a fragment of torn paper across the lawn would stir a slumbering memory that was half sweetness, half pain.

And of a night, when she looked through the window at the silvery stars, a thought of Alan would stab her like a sword. Dear Alan!—what fastness of the hills hid him now? Was he asleep—the sentinel stars watching over him?

Though lifted by her love above the ordinary things of life, she did not bid farewell to her common sense. Alan was in danger: a rebel: a man proscribed! Was he the victim of a foolish enthusiasm, or had he chosen to embrace a cause that might, after all, be the right one? Being the daughter of a loyal house, she had never given much thought to the Covenanters, but Alan's defection, Alan's danger, demanded that she should examine the matter seriously. She put her first timid inquiry to Elspeth, as that good soul brushed her hair.

"Why are you a Covenanter, Elspeth?" she asked.

The old woman's reply was instant:

"Because, lassie, the Covenants are according tae the Word o' God."

Margaret saw that no help was to be had from one so certain of the Divine ordination of the cause she had espoused, so she changed the subject by asking for the injured officer.

"Oh, he's daein' fine noo. Nearly oot o' danger, I think."

"That's a triumph for Willie Stott's skill, and for your good care, Elspeth."

Elspeth shrugged her shoulders.

“Wullie thinks sae, for he’s got an unco idea o’ himsel’; but if ye ask me, Mistress Margaret, it’s the Lord’s daein’, for I prayed for the lad.”

“You, a Covenanter, prayed for the recovery of a dragoon, Elspeth! It says much for your charity.”

“Weel, I couldna help it! I thocht he was some mither’s bairn; and if he were tae dee he would dee in his sins; while, if he got better, grace micht yet work in him, an’ mak’ a guid man o’ him: an’ my prayers are being answered.”

“And what does Willie say, Elspeth?”

“Och, like a’ the men, he’s ready tae tak’ the credit! Nae doot if the puir lad were tae dee, Wullie would cast the blame on Providence. I ken him!”

Ere she fell asleep that night Margaret came to a decision. Her father would be able to help her. His judgments were fair: he weighed all questions with an even mind. She would ask him, and when she had heard his opinion she would be better able to decide what was her duty. If Alan were wrong and misguided, she must find means of reaching him, and try to save him from himself. It would never do to let him die for a foolish whim. To let him die!—the thought laid a palsying hand on her heart, and a little shiver stole over her. He must not die!—he must live! He was her man—inalienably hers; she must save him. And, at the thought, the tears that were gathering in her eyes were driven back.

Next day she sought her father in the library. As she entered quietly, she found him standing with a hand behind his back, a finger between the pages of a book, gazing through the long window over the rolling acres of Knowe. More than once before she had found him thus. As she crossed the room she heard him sigh as he thought aloud. “No!” he muttered; “it would be unfair to the lass,” and he sighed again.

She was so used to this habit of his communing with himself that she had ceased to wonder, so, slipping on tiptoe behind him, she put her hands playfully over his eyes. The Laird started somewhat violently as one taken unawares, then laughed. “Ah, Margaret, Margaret! your mother’s hands, my child—your mother’s hands,” and he drew them down and, turning, kissed his daughter. She slipped her arm through his, and stood beside him, gazing at the green fields, starred with the silver of daisies and the gold of buttercups, that spread away towards the purple hills at whose feet a cluster of broom and whin-bushes flaunted their blossom like a wave of flame.

With a little tender pressure on her father's arm, she called him from his reverie and led him to his chair. Then, standing before him, winsome in her simple gown, she said:

"Father, are the Covenanters wrong?"

The Laird looked at her quickly; his dreamy eyes were suddenly awake.

"My child, you ask a hard question, not to be answered in a word. Who am I to judge the consciences of other men?"

"But, father," said Margaret earnestly, "I wish to know. What lies behind it all? Why is this poor country so divided, with ruthless soldiers driving good men into hiding, or hunting them like wild beasts among the hills?"

The Laird looked at his daughter, and read in her eyes an earnestness that was not to be set aside by empty phrases.

"Sit down, my child," he said quietly, "and I will tell you a story."

Margaret seated herself on the arm of her father's chair and leaned her head on his shoulder. Then she held up a finger solemnly as though warning herself, and said, "An' wee Margaret will be a good bairn, and listen and never say cheep."

The playful words stirred a memory, and to her father she became again a little motherless lass creeping into the shelter of his arms to be told a story ere Elspeth came to tuck her safe in bed.

The dream-look filled his eyes as he talked. He was seeing the events of close on fifty years unfold before him like a roll of parchment as, step by step, he traced the story of the Covenanters. Margaret listened spellbound. So this was what the Covenant meant: no mere rebellion against the King, but loyalty to a bond to which both King and people had put their hands; loyalty to a cause which they believed to be God's cause; fealty to their own souls, in that they demanded liberty to worship God in their own way.

For nearly an hour her father spoke, and then with a sigh he said, "And there the matter rests, Margaret. God knows how it will end."

Margaret rose to her feet; her eyes were gleaming.

"You tell me the King signed the Covenants, father! Did I hear you right?"

"Yes, my child; in the Parish Church of Scone, on Ne'ersday, sixteen hundred and fifty-one, but when he chose to turn his back upon them he claimed that he had signed under duress."

Margaret laughed. “To change one’s mind is the prerogative of women, father. Did God give it to kings as well?”

Her father smiled. “It is treason to repeat the words; but Elspeth, good soul, once said, ‘It’s a puir man, far less a king, that will be false to his conscience, even under duress. The Covenanters ha’e kept tae the bond through flood an’ fire. I ha’e nae opinion o’ the King for his lack o’ backbane!’ ”

“Brave Elspeth!” said Margaret; “she is no respecter of persons.”

The far-off look came into the Laird’s eyes again. “It behoves all men who have the weal of their country at heart to uphold the King and his counsellors, otherwise rule and order crash into chaos. But I wonder!—I wonder! No just cause was ever helped by such grievous wrongs as the Covenanters have suffered; and, as I read the Will of God, He never meant authority to become cruelty, and power a tyranny.”

With the sure vision of a woman, Margaret had interpreted her father’s mind, as he had spoken, more accurately than he knew it himself. She looked at him earnestly.

“I have listened to you, father; and, if you ask me, I would adjudge you a Covenanter. Your heart is on their side.”

“A Covenanter! I!” exclaimed the Laird, starting to his feet. “No—never! Mayhap my horror at the wrongs the hillmen have suffered has deceived you. I am a loyal man. I have put my name to ‘the Test.’ ” He hid behind his eyes again and murmured, “If I were a Covenanter, Knowe would be forfeit.”

“Is that the cost?” asked Margaret solemnly.

“Ay! that would be the cost, and more, lassie. Knowe, every acre, every inch of which I love! I could not do it. Knowe is your heritage.”

He went to the window, and gazed at the laughing fields that stretched before him. Margaret laid a hand on his shoulder.

“You have told me, father, and your voice rang in the telling, of Covenanters who had given all, even life itself, for the Cause. Your blood flows in my veins, and as you spoke that blood tingled with pride, for deep calleth unto deep, father, beyond our will or ken. I know not yet which side is right, but if my conscience told me the King was wrong, not even Knowe, which I love with a love as strong as yours, would hold me back from espousing the Cause of the Covenant.”

“Margaret—Margaret!” cried her father, pain in his voice. “You know not what you say,” and he turned from the window abruptly and began to pace the room.

She stood by the window and waited. By and by her father came back to her side. “Foolish words, my child,” he said. “You are young yet, and youth is ready to give all—even life itself—with spendthrift hands for the sake of an idea. So young men have put their lives to the hazard for love, for patriotism, sometimes for the sake of mere adventure. But wisdom comes with age, and age clings to what it has—ay, even to life, when life is useless to it.”

Margaret did not reply. She was thinking of Alan, youth on his side, “ready to give all—even life itself—for the sake of an idea.” How truly her father had spoken!

The Laird laid a hand upon her head and stroked it gently. “My child,” he said, “these be troublous times, full of difficulty for us all. You are young, and youth should be happy. Trouble your pretty head no more with these perplexities,” and by way of dismissing her he turned to his bookshelves and took down a leather-bound tome.

But Margaret was not satisfied, and day and night she continued to exercise her mind with the problem that confronted her. She had looked for help from her father, but had not received it. And though her woman’s wit told her that beyond his acknowledgment his heart was with the Covenanters, while his lips were for the King, he had given her no clear leading. She spoke to him no more upon the matter, but when they met at meals she chatted blithely, with a gaiety that was sometimes forced, but which never failed to call his hermit mind out of the cave behind his eyes. Had she known it, his heart was as ill at ease as her own. And hers was on the rack night and day. In the darkness it ached for Alan, so that she laid a hand upon her breast and tried to still its pain; and in the light it cried for him in the whistle of every bird, the tremulous stirring of every leaf, the murmur of every bee. She began to be consumed by a great desire. At all hazards she must see Alan. He dare not come to her, save at great peril, and she would not expose one hair of his head to danger. She must, therefore, go to him, and to all seeming that was impossible, for she knew not where to find him.

In this strait she thought of Elspeth. Elspeth had given her his letter. Did Elspeth know his hiding-place? It might be so: or, if she did not, she might

know some one who could find him, for in all likelihood all the Covenanters were in league with each other for mutual service.

When love is the motive that urges a woman to action, she will brook no delay, nor can any obstacle thwart her. Through some channel which she would not divulge Elspeth undertook to convey a letter from her mistress to Alan. Two anxious days passed, and on the third came the answer—so much to Margaret's liking that in the quiet of her room she pressed the letter to her lips and hid it in her bosom.

So it came to pass that she went to keep a tryst with the man she loved. The night before she lay awake for hours, turning over in her mind what she should say and what she should wear. She would fain have gone to her lover dressed in her prettiest gown, but at the last moment her woman's wit urged caution, and she chose a simple brown kirtle, short enough to let her walk with ease, and a close-fitting bodice of old gold with slashed sleeves that ended in a little froth of lace at her elbows. Yet, when she studied herself in the glass, she was not displeased. The colour of her gown matched with the hue of her hair and the brown of her eyes, and she smiled happily as she thought of the old sweet name, "little brown squirrel." And, best of all, her dress would harmonize with the brown and purple of the hills, and be little kenspeckle.

She turned from the glass, and, opening a cupboard, took from it a long walking-stick with a curiously fashioned silver head. Holding it in both hands she pressed a spring and withdrew a long shining rapier. She laid the sheath aside and looked at the weapon critically. Then, springing erect, with heels together, she seized it near the point with her left hand and bent it in a bow. The blade sang through the vibrant air when she released its point, thrilling like a living thing ere it came to rest, held at arm's length in her firm right hand. She smiled as she returned the blade to its sheath; but not before she had read with pride the scroll of Andrea Ferrara graven near its hilt. It was a precious possession—a trophy won by her skill in the fencing school at Amiens. Thus equipped, ready, as she prided herself, for all emergencies, she took the road.

It was a fair June day. The sun was well past the zenith, marching above her across a blue sky with billowy white clouds at his feet, and in the lift the larks were making melody. It was a day for lovers, and for a lover's tryst.

If Margaret had looked back she might have seen the stalwart figure of the smith following her. It was by no mere chance that he had happened to be lying behind a whin-bush that afternoon, with a watchful eye on the gate

of Knowe. He knew the day and place of the tryst and, out of affectionate loyalty to Alan, he had appointed himself the guardian of Margaret. So he followed warily—near enough to be within hail if danger threatened, but far enough off to be unobtrusive. And farther off still, unknown to the smith, unknown to Margaret, sneaked a ragged lean figure. He went stealthily, choosing cover with cunning skill, dodging from shelter to shelter, but still pursuing relentlessly, like a stoat on a rabbit's trail.

By and by Margaret left the road and began to make her way up the slope of the foothills. As she did so she remembered, and the memory was like a waft of perfume blown in her face by the soft June wind, that the trysting-place Alan had chosen meant something to her already. Years ago—how long it seemed since—Alan and she, boy and girl together, had found themselves there in one of their happy rambles. That little nook in the lap of the hills where the burn lingered so dreamily, and the wild thyme spilled its sweetness into the warm air, was an enchanted place. She remembered how, as they had sat together, a spell had touched them, and they were silent—silent so long that a sense of loneliness stole over her, and she crept nearer to Alan till her arm touched his. It was then he had looked at her, with a light in his eyes, and, stooping, kissed her hand; it was then that a strange ache had seized her heart, and she had longed to throw her arms about his neck and kiss him on the lips. From such unmaidenliness she had taken refuge in flight, her lover pursuing, unwitting in a boy's dull way of why she fled; and she ready to die for shame lest he should guess.

As she picked her steps with the quick briskness of healthy youth over the broken ground, she wondered if Alan had chosen the trysting-place because he, too, remembered that enchanted hour. Would she dare to ask him? She loved him! Looking into her heart, she knew she loved not Claverhouse, but this headstrong, self-willed rebel. For love's sake, to save him from death, she must wean him from this new allegiance. She was armed with many arguments that would bring him to a better mind; and, at the last, if they failed, there was the love she bore him. If she declared herself, Alan must surrender if he loved her. And as she thought thus, the blood swept up from her heart, suffusing face and neck. She dared not do that! Love was holy, and it would be disloyalty to Love to make it an argument.

Far behind her, almost out of sight, Willie Stott slackened his pace, for he was gaining upon her. He shook his head, and spoke to the wind: "Women are queer cattle! The nearer she gets tae her lad, the slower she gangs. A man would rin." And Alan, concealed, looking over the lip of his

hiding-place, all ardent for her coming, saw her hesitate, and thinking, man-like, she was uncertain of the way, sprang up and ran to meet her. The blacksmith saw him and, throwing himself down behind a rock, resolutely turned his back and began to whistle softly. He had too fine a soul to wish to spy on Love. He looked back along the way he had come, but he did not see, crouching in a hollow a hundred yards away, the lean and sinister figure that had been dogging his footsteps all the afternoon.

CHAPTER IX

As Alan ran towards Margaret his ardour gave place to constraint, and as she continued to mount the hill her confidence began to wane and yield to diffidence. Each had imagined it would be an easy thing to meet again, and pick up the broken thread of their friendship where the years had severed it. But in the maze of time broken threads often become entangled, and four years had passed, big with fate, since the silken bond had been sundered. The years stood between them like a barrier, so that when they met their greeting was shy and almost cold. As they continued to climb towards the trysting-place they spoke but little, and it was not until they were seated in the hollow by the burn which Margaret remembered so well, and which only last night had made melody in her dreams, that their reserve began to melt.

By this time Willie Stott had slipped round unseen and was now posted high on the hill-side above them. He could not see, he did not wish to see, Alan and Margaret in their sheltered retreat, but his watchful eyes swept the hill-side, ready to warn them, if need be, of coming danger. Far below he saw a man running downhill. He was not a dragoon, and, satisfied that he was merely some gangrel-body, he gave him no further thought.

The brown burn laughed and chuckled over the stones, and a little playful wind bent the stalks of the bluebells by its brink so that the flowers peeped at their faces in the stream. Alan and Margaret sat and looked at each other. He was seeing the changes the years had wrought in her; comparing her, feature by feature, with that winsome picture he had cherished in his memory.

Yes!—she was the “little brown squirrel” still, but more beautiful, and more adorable because she seemed more remote. The tiny vagrant curls on her forehead were the same, her lovely hair had the same fine lustre, her eyes as of old were brown pools lit by the sunlight, her lips were still a Cupid’s bow, the same delicious dimples nestled on chin and cheek.

Yes!—she was all and more than he had ever imagined her to be—dear Margaret! And suddenly remorse bit his heart. Why had he let her come? The tryst was of her seeking, but of his making; but no good could come of it—nothing but regret and pain. He had hungered to see her after the long lapse of years, and when the chance offered he had seized it with no thought of the issue. And now the issue loomed menacingly over him. He dare not imperil her happiness by allowing her to involve her life with his. Within an

hour they must part for ever; and what that parting would mean for him he knew, for her he could only imagine. Deep in his soul he upbraided himself; his selfishness had made him cruel to the woman whom, above all others, he would have protected from pain. He must harden his heart, and by no sign or token must he let her know how he loved her. That would make the parting easier—for her.

And as Alan studied Margaret she was examining him with the half-blind eyes of love. He had changed. His face was worn and aged, but his deep blue eyes were the same, honest, fearless, kind. His fine-cut features and his mobile mouth were unchanged, save that his lips were set in a firmer mould. And he was thin, shabby, a little unkempt. A sense of pity filled her; he had suffered. She raised her eyes and looked into his again. In the old days something elusive had lurked there; something serious that was a foil to his happy lightness of heart. To-day his eyes were filled by it. She looked at them steadfastly, trying to read their secret; but it baffled her. Behind those dark blue eyes lay hidden depths which she had never plumbed. Her curiosity was quickened, for her heart rebelled because she could not read the face of her lover like an open book.

And then, suddenly, Alan smiled. His eyes lit up with the old happy gleam.

"I dare not call you little brown squirrel now, Margaret. I stand in awe of you; so womanly you are."

Margaret steeled her trembling heart.

"So must the rebel ever feel in the presence of the loyal," she said, and having thrown down her gauntlet she entered the lists headlong. In a torrent of impassioned words she poured out her soul, appealing to his love for parents and friends, to his loyalty to the traditions of his house, to his reason, his sense of duty, his honour. She was too deeply moved to marshal her arguments with skill. What had seemed so easy in imagination proved in reality hard beyond expression, and when she stopped breathless she knew that she had failed.

"By the love of all who love you, I ask you, Alan," she ended, "to give up this mad adventure which places you in daily danger of death."

Her eyes had been on Alan's while she spoke, and when she ceased she saw that his were full of pain. He looked away for a moment, as though unable to bear her searching gaze; then he turned towards her and, speaking gently, said:

“Margaret! This is no little thing. You do not understand. For me the choice is to be a rebel or a traitor. There is no third course; and I choose to be a rebel against the King rather than a traitor to my own soul.” And then, his voice gathering strength and passion, he told her how he had taken a step irrevocable, not for a mere whim, but because of an inner light that had been kindled in his soul, a new vision that had burst before his eyes, a new voice that had spoken to him. “I stood,” he said, “with James Renwick of Glencairn in the Grassmarket at Edinburgh on the day that Donald Cargill went bravely to his death. And when that Saint of God had gone to his reward, Renwick laid a hand on my shoulder and whispered, ‘What is your life?’ ”

Alan paused for a moment and raised his eyes to the distant hill-tops. Margaret, watching him, saw their colour deepen. Then he went on:

“The words were a goad—torturing me. What was my life? I had never put the question to myself. I made my way out of the city and climbed to the top of Arthur’s Seat and threw me down on the grass. What was my life? Far off below me rolled the eternal sea, and beyond towered the everlasting hills. Before their immensity my life seemed a paltry thing—a leaf blown by the wind, a passing shadow between two eternities; so little it seemed, so useless, so misspent. And around me were opportunities challenging me—calling me. I was at the cross-roads in the Valley of Decision. I chose, God helping me, and here I stand.”

He spoke humbly, without conscious pride, and Margaret heard him in silence to the end. She took her eyes from his face, and toyed with the silver head of her stick. She had misjudged him. He had not acted on impulse, but from conviction, and, against her will, her heart cried praise upon him. She looked at the bluebells nodding at the burn-side, then in a far-away voice, that to herself seemed hardly hers, she said, “There is a price on your head, Alan.”

Alan laughed; his serious mood had passed.

“Ay, Margaret, two thousand merks the warrant runs—alive or dead.” He took his head in both hands and moved it playfully from side to side. “More than it’s worth, Margaret. The King’s men have no sense of value; five thousand merks for the sainted head of Donald Cargill, and two thousand for this useless pow of mine—a poor bargain for the King.”

The gaiety of his mood perplexed the girl, and she turned quickly and looked at him. And as she looked at his lined and weathered face, and at his

unruly black hair, a wild desire seized her to take that precious head in her arms and fold it to her breast. She clasped her hands fiercely together.

"And the penalty is death," she said.

Alan smiled at her, and made to lay a hand on hers caressingly, but checked himself before he touched her.

"Ay, Margaret, death! But what of that? I would not boast me and pretend that I wish to die. My desire is to live, and I shall do all I can, as in the past, to escape death. The compelling force of life that thrills in my veins urges me to that. But at long last all of us must die, and in the immeasurable range of time what does a year or two matter? And death, when it comes, what is it?"

He paused, as though awaiting Margaret's answer; but it did not come, nor did he expect it. He waved his hand towards the little stream that tinkled at their feet.

"To die, Margaret, is but to step across the wee burn that separates the moss-hags and peat-bogs of life from the Delectable Mountains."

A mist filled Margaret's eyes—she could not speak. Beyond his knowledge Alan was playing on her tremulous heart-strings, moving her strangely. She took her lace kerchief from her bosom and pressed it gently to her eyes. Alan looked at her tenderly, longing to kiss the tears from her cheeks. But curbing his desire with an iron hand, lest such a tenderness should make the parting harder, he said in a sprightly voice:

"But enough of this miserable rebel, Margaret. Let us forget him; I had liefer speak of you."

Margaret turned towards him. The old bright smile illumined his face, and they looked into each other's eyes with the simplicity and frankness of children. Margaret moved a little nearer to her loved one, and in a moment they were chattering briskly, recapturing old memories, laughing over half-forgotten adventures of the vanished happy days. "And do you remember?" she would say, and he would cap her memory, when the glad tale was told, with "You mind the day when——"

Old memories are as rich wine to the old; to the young they are fragrant rose leaves.

But at last the moment came when they must part. Silence poured over them suddenly like a wave, and they held their breath. It was Margaret who spoke. There was a tender urgency in her voice.

“Alan,” she said, “if some one who loved you very dearly—your mother mayhap—were to ask you to come back, would you listen? There are other ways of service besides devotion to the Covenant; other means of spending your life nobly without sacrificing it.”

Alan laid a hand upon hers, and was fain to leave it there; but he remembered his resolution and withdrew it.

“Little brown squirrel,” he said tenderly, “I must call you that once again, maybe for the last time. I cannot abandon the Cause. He that has seen ‘the gleam’ dare not be traitor. I would you could see things as I do; but since that may not be it were best that we said farewell. Though I can never forget you, and the memory of your friendship will ever be dear to me, from this day our ways must lie apart.”

Margaret rose to her feet. Her eyes were gleaming. Alan was sending her away!—he did not care! She looked at him as he raised himself from the grass, and saw his tired eyes and the furrows on his face that privation and suffering had graven there as with an iron pen, and her heart melted within her.

“Alan,” she said gently, “you may be wise as to the eternal purposes of God, but you know nothing of a woman’s heart. I will not say farewell.”

“But, Margaret,” he urged passionately, “it is better so. My life is in daily jeopardy. I have no home but the hills; no roof above me but the open sky. You are for the King; I am for the Covenants. Be brave, Margaret, and leave me in God’s keeping.”

He seized her hands impulsively, and bent over them, but he did not touch them with his lips; then, turning quickly on his heel, he left her.

Margaret stood for a moment frozen to the spot, tears blinding her. Then pride welled up within her and she dried her eyes, and with chin held high she climbed out of the hollow and began to descend the hill. She walked quickly, as one eager to escape from a hated place.

And Alan, higher up the hill, turned to watch her. Margaret, his beloved, was going out of his life—going into the distance, going for ever! A sense of desolation, of chill loneliness, swept over him; he could not bear it. He started to run down the hill. His heart cried Margaret, and though he had not meant it so, the agony of his heart escaped from his lips.

“Margaret!” he cried, and again, “Margaret!”

The lark above him ceased his song and dropped fluttering to earth. The warm wind tarried as though to catch her answer. And Margaret, afar, hearing her name, turned and saw her lover rushing towards her. In a moment he was beside her, his strong arms round her, his lips pressed to hers. He kissed her on brow and cheeks, whispering little endearments, caressing her. “Little brown squirrel!” he whispered! “Margaret!—my own!—beloved!” and again, “Margaret!” And she, clinging to him with a passion like his own, buried her face against his shabby coat, murmuring softly, “My Alan—my own dear Alan!”

And Willie Stott, an involuntary witness of their glad reunion, turned his face to the sky and spoke to the larks.

“Umphm! That’s something like,” he said, and threw himself down again that he might not spoil their rapture.

To those who love, time is not. How long they clung to each other in that glad embrace neither ever knew. But at last, with a little shy smile, Margaret disengaged Alan’s unwilling arms and stood away from him. And he fell back from her a pace or two, and stood gazing at her, reverently and adoringly, as one who looks upon a holy thing. In all the world there were but they twain—love in their hearts, and God’s high heaven over them.

The hush of that hallowed moment was shattered as by the crack of doom. A musket crashed, and Alan, pitching forward, fell, and lay pale and still as one stricken by Death.

CHAPTER X

Margaret ran to her lover crying, “Alan!” But Alan neither moved nor spoke. She knelt beside him and, raising his limp head, stared into his bloodless face. He was dead!—the marble coldness of his brow when she pressed her lips to it told her he was dead. Reverently she lowered his head to the ground and, dashing the tears from her eyes, sprang up.

In a moment she had found her sword-stick, and, whipping the blade from its sheath, she stood at bay, like a wild creature robbed of its young, quivering with desire for vengeance. With eyes keen and quick as a kestrel’s she swept the hill-side.

Suddenly, over the top of a boulder, she saw a face rise cautiously. Fearless, she leaped forward, and ere the dragoon could reload his weapon she was upon him. The glint of steel in her hand frightened him, but he clubbed his musket and thought to save himself by dashing her brains out with the stock.

He swung his weapon high, but with a bold, sure lunge, Margaret drove her rapier through the muscles below his right shoulder-joint, and the musket fell behind him from his nerveless hands. With a clean turn of her wrist she withdrew the point from the bleeding wound.

“Hands up!” she cried, “or I pierce your heart!” and she thrust threateningly.

Up went the trooper’s left hand, high above his head, and with an effort his right arm followed as high as his ear. His awestricken eyes were fixed upon that shining point so near his heart. His knees quaked; his lips slackened. If this wild she-cat lunged again, he would be a dead man!

But Margaret held her hand. Behind her she heard the sound of running feet and panting breath, but she dared not turn. Nor was there need. With a loud cry Willie Stott hurled himself upon the dragoon. He seized him by the collar of his coat and, swinging him round, brought him down heavily, catching the back of his head adroitly on his own strong knee-pan. It was such a blow as would have smashed the skull of a weakling, and it hurled the dragoon into swift unconsciousness.

Margaret lowered her bloodstained rapier and wiped it on the grass, then turned to watch the blacksmith as he trussed his captive. He bound his wrists

with tarry twine, and, pushing up his flaccid thighs between his outstretched arms, he thrust the musket over the elbows and behind the knees, and rolled his helpless prisoner on his back, so that he lay, heels in air, like a dead rabbit.

The smith's lips were set sternly as he muttered, "Umphm! The murderous ruffian! That'll keep him quate for a wee! An' noo for Maister Alan."

Margaret's lips trembled. "Alan is dead," she said.

"Na, na, Mistress Margaret. There's life in him yet. I saw him move as I ran by him."

"Saw him move!" she cried; and on feet that seemed hardly to touch the heather she flew to her beloved, and in a moment had reached his side.

A miracle had happened. No longer was Alan lying inert and cold; he was sitting up, steadying himself with hands outspread on the hill-side, his dazed eyes looking perplexedly from his ashen face. Margaret kneeled beside him, and, putting her arms round him, kissed him.

"Alan—my Alan," she whispered brokenly, and fell to tears.

She was still weeping, still holding her lover protectingly, when the blacksmith came up. Alan gave him a wan look of recognition, a feeble smile breaking in his blue eyes. Margaret shyly withdrew her arms.

"Ha'e ye staunched the wound, Mistress Margaret?" asked the smith.

"The wound!" she cried. "Oh, Alan, Alan, what a poor lack-wit I am! You bleed to death, mayhap, and all I do is weep over you."

"Let's ha'e a look at him," said the smith, eager to exercise his practised hand on one so dear to him. He laid Alan gently on his back and began to examine him carefully, registering his observations by word of mouth: "There's nae bluid ootside; umphm! But it's better tae bleed ootside than in —ay, it is so! Certes!—that's where it hit him!" and he pointed to a ragged tear in Alan's coat. "Richt owre the hert, ye see. It's a God's wonder he's leevin'."

With deft hands he unlaced Alan's coat, and slipped his hand inside it. "What's this?" he exclaimed suddenly, and withdrew a thick leather-bound Bible. One side of it was smashed in, and deep in its centre, buried among the broken leaves, there was a dull glint of lead. The smith took off his bonnet reverently, and handed the Bible to Margaret. "The Buik has saved ye, Maister Alan. The Word o' God is a sure shield."

Alan sat up. His colour had returned. As he had lain on his back, his stunned heart, that had been knocked out of action temporarily by the staggering blow of a heavy ball at short range, had recovered itself and was now beating steadily. He found Margaret's hand and pressed it gently.

"But for the grace of God, Margaret—I had been dead."

The blacksmith cast a savage glance down the hill at the recumbent trooper. "The black-herted rascal!" he muttered. "Firing a bullet intae the Buik! Sic sacrilege! I wunner the Almichty didna strike him deid."

Alan laughed, and the sound was as delicious music in Margaret's ears. "You wrong the man, Willie. If he had known the Book lay over my heart, he would have aimed a little higher."

"Fegs, ye're richt, Maister Alan! May I ha'e a look, Mistress Margaret?" and the smith held out his hand for the Bible. He began to separate the pages carefully, while Alan and Margaret, with heads close together, watched him. Soon he had released the bullet—a solid but somewhat flattened ball—from its nest. "That's maist by-ordinar," he said. "It got nae farther than the Book o' Daniel. Yet no' sae queer," he added meditatively as he scratched his head. "I min' Maister Welsh sayin' that the Book o' Daniel was a hard book, an' took a bit o' maisterin'; an' this proves it. Umphm! That's so."

Alan laughed again, and patted Willie on the shoulder, and Margaret, who but a short while since had thought never to laugh again, found herself chuckling quietly.

"More things than that bullet, Willie, have lost themselves in the Book of Daniel," said Alan.

The smith scratched his head again, and looked perplexed.

"Umphm!" he said. He poised the bullet in his hand. "A hefty bit o' lead, Maister Alan."

Alan picked up the ball and looked at it. Then, turning, he held it out to Margaret. "For you, Sweeting," he said. "Take this and keep it. It will mind you of God's goodness—and of this day."

Margaret touched the bullet shyly, then drew her finger away. "I do not want the loathly thing," she said, with a little shiver. "And yet—and yet ——" and she stretched out her hand again and took it, smiling at Alan with starry eyes.

A loud oath startled them, and with one accord they looked towards the dragoon. He was beginning to come to himself, and was making frantic

efforts to get up. The smith laughed quietly.

"That'll bate him," he said.

They watched his futile struggles for a moment or two. The smith's hands opened and shut; his strong fingers curved into his palms till the sinews on the back of them stood out like cords. His teeth were clenched; his lips set firmly.

"What's to be done with him?" asked Margaret suddenly.

"If ye juist lift yer wee finger, Mistress Margaret, it'll gi'e me great satisfaction tae break his sacrileegious neck, or stop his dirty weasand; firing a bullet at the Bible—the blackguard!"

The words were hissed out with such venom that Alan turned quickly towards the blacksmith, and saw his fists open and close again with a purposeful menace. He laid his hand quickly upon Willie's knee. "Thou shalt not kill!" he said sharply.

The smith shrugged his shoulders.

"I ken—I ken!" he stammered. "But I'd like tae—there's nocht I'd like better," and then he groaned, as though conscience had suddenly hailed him to its bar.

"I have it," cried Margaret suddenly, and, rapier in hand, she ran down the hill, the smith close at her heels. She stood over the soldier, making play with her weapon, and the terror in his eyes told her he was a coward.

"Loose him," she said to the smith.

A startled "Loose him—Mistress Margaret! Ha'e ye gaen gyte—or am I hearin' wrang?" escaped from Willie's lips; but all she answered was, "Do as I bid you."

With a quick sweep of his knife Willie severed his bonds, and the man was free. But he made no attempt to rise.

"Yer pouther flask, and yer bullets, ma lad," said Willie sternly, as he bent over the recumbent figure, holding his knife threateningly in his right hand while he stretched his left out expectantly.

The soldier searched his pockets and, with a bad enough grace as one under duress, handed over his ammunition. The smith scattered the powder on the heather, and put the bullets in his pouch. Then he seized the collar of the man's coat and jerked him roughly to his feet with the words: "Get up, ye godless child o' Satan."

Margaret turned to the smith. “Leave us,” she said; and Willie withdrew reluctantly, but stood a few paces off. Margaret laid the point of her rapier over the soldier’s heart.

“I could kill you here and now,” she said, “for you are at my mercy. But I would not stain my hands with such caitiff blood. Do you know who I am?”

The man shook his head; his eyes were fixed in fear on the girl’s face.

“I am Mistress Margaret, daughter of the Laird of Knowe. General Dalyell and Lord Claverhouse are my friends.”

The dragoon’s knees began to tremble; his teeth chattered in craven fear.

“If I told them what you have done this day, it would go hard with you—attacking a friend of mine without provocation, to his deadly hurt. But I shall not tell—if you swear to be silent and say naught of what you have done to-day. Do you promise?”

“I swear by a’ the saints, an’ on my mither’s grave,” protested the soldier, with fervour.

“Well, do not forget your oath, and if you break it, I shall hear of it, and Dalyell or Claverhouse will deal with you.”

“No’ that! No’ that!” cried the terrified man.

“Now you are free—begone, ere I do you deadly harm,” and Margaret pressed the rapier-point firmly against his coat. The man stepped back and, stooping, picked up his musket; then, with uncertain feet, like one drunken, began to run down the hill.

Margaret watched him for a moment with a whimsical smile on her face; then she rejoined Alan, who had risen and was coming to meet her. The faithful blacksmith kept his place, following the retreating soldier with anxious eyes. “I wish they’d let me break his dirty neck,” he said to the wind, and he began to walk down the hill so that the lovers might say their farewell unhindered. It was a tender leave-taking, too sacred for other eyes; but it held in it the promise of meetings yet to come.

A long way down the hill Willie waited, and by and by Margaret caught him up.

“Ye’d best gang on, Mistress Margaret,” he said, “an’ I’ll follow. But if ye need me, juist gi’e a scraich.”

“Thank you, Willie,” said Margaret as she smiled at him. “You are a friend indeed,” and she hurried on.

And Willie, far behind her, saw that from time to time she put her kerchief to her eyes, and knew that she was weeping, and he spoke to the distant sky:

“Wullie Stott! Women are queer cattle! Whan she thocht her lad was deid she was as game as a fechtin’-cock, an’ had a dry e’e an’ a stiff upper lip. But noo she kens he’s a’ richt, she’s greetin’ like a bairn. Umphm, Wullie!—women are harder tae comprehend than the Catechism. That’s so! —I’m tellin’ ye!”

CHAPTER XI

Softly the night fell, and the moon, that bright eye among the orbs of heaven, which sees man at his best and worst, climbed over the hill-tops. Through a hole in the ill-kept thatch she peeped into an old barn and saw a dragoon bathing a wound in the shoulder of one of his fellows. He wrung a linen cloth from a bucket of water.

"Ye tell me, Andra, that a wild cat bit ye?" Andra grunted savagely. "Ay; a she-cat." "It bates a'. A cat wi' ae tooth—an' that as thick as ma thoomb. I think ye're leein'. I never heard tell o' a beast like that in the hale o' Galloway."

"Ach, baud yer wheesht, Mac; an' for Heaven's sake say nocht o't tae the sergeant. But if I ever lay hauns on the lousy de'il that telt me there was a Covenanter up yon hill, I'll break every bane in his body."

"I see," said Mac, with sudden understanding; and the moon drew a wisp of cloud across her face to hide her laughter.

* * * * *

The moon hung over the smiddy at the down-going of the brae towards the sleeping village. The door was barred, and over the window on the inner side hung a thick piece of sacking, so that the hawkeyed watcher without could not see what was toward. A moonbeam fell on the spy, who shuffled stealthily out of its light into the shadows as though the gleaming sword of conscience had pierced him. But in the shadows he continued to listen to the dull "thud, thud" that came regularly from within.

Where the eye is baffled, the moon can find a way, and a beam trickled through a chink above the door and fell upon the anvil.

The smiddy was in darkness save for the feeble light of a candle that hung in an iron loop dependent from one of the rafters, and when the moonbeams struck the anvil the smith raised his head and looked expectantly along it, as though down such a pathway some angelic host might come to bless his work. But no heavenly visitant descended. The smith stooped and picked from the die a little square of lead. The moonbeam touched it as it lay in his strong hand, and its dull lustre turned to silver. By the candlelight he read the letters "L.S." graven on the token. "The Lord's Supper," he whispered reverently. "Eh, Wullie, I fear ye're no' worthy; there was black murder in yer hert this very day," and he shook his head sadly.

* * * * *

Silently the moonbeams wandered over the steep hill-side. No nook or bield, no cranny or sheltering rock was free from their wistful scrutiny. Now they rested for a moment on a little flock of slumbering mountain sheep, huddled in a heugh, and it was as though the hollow were filled with drifted snow. Now they peeped into the hiding-place of some hillman, with no malice, but with pity and benediction. And climbing up they came at last to the peak of Skeoch, where they found a tall gaunt man standing with hands raised to high Heaven. The moonbeams fell upon his white locks, and turned them to silver. They played upon his wrinkled face—with its deepset ardent eyes—softening its hardness, hallowing it to saintliness. And the moon heard the anguished cry that rose from the old man's heart: "Peradventure there be ten just men in this puir land o' Scotland, spare it, O Lord!" And the moon passed on, leaving Sandy Peden to his lonely wrestling with God.

* * * * *

Far away on the ridge of a distant hill the moon peeped over a boulder and saw a man stretched prone among the heather. His eyes were searching the distance, and were fixed on a far-off feeble gleam fainter than the faintest star. Yet in the hill-man's eyes that light was brighter than the light of all the constellations. For a rush-light is more radiant than the sun when love kindles it, and the heart sees it: for the vision of the heart is truer than the vision of the eye. And Shadrach Melville, whom the King's men knew as a dour, granite-hearted rebel, rose to his feet and lifted his face to the sky. And the moon saw on his haggard cheeks two trembling drops that glistened like beads of dew.

* * * * *

The grey turrets of Knowe were bathed in the silvery light of the full round orb that hung above them, and the moonbeams wandered noiselessly along the walls, seeking for entrance. One adventurous beam stole into a room where, by a bed on which lay an injured officer, an old woman sat reading. She read aloud, with sibilant murmuring, her hand beating time in the air:

"And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat."

The man turned on his couch, and drew the blankets over his ears; but the sibilant voice went on, torturing him like conscience:

"I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned."

With a savage tug the blankets were drawn higher, and the bandaged head disappeared under them; but the voice of Elspeth read on, and even the bedclothes could not keep out the news of the prodigal's glad homecoming.

* * * * *

Like a silver spear a moonbeam thrust itself through between the shutters of the Laird's study and lay across the table, at which sat the Laird and another. The face of the Laird was heavy with anxiety; his eyes were dreamy, his mind seemed far away. But his soul leaped into his eyes as his companion spoke:

"The last step, Lansburgh, is the easiest."

"Would I dare take it, Welsh! Would I had the courage! I am not of your mettle, nor your vision. You give up Kirk and home and become a hunted wanderer for your faith. I am but poor stuff, Minister—poor stuff!" and the Laird hid behind his eyes again.

The minister rose. "It is not for me to dictate to any man, least of all to you, whom I love and honour; but dinna forget the fate of those that 'are neither cold nor hot'; remember the Laodiceans."

* * * * *

Through the uncurtained window of the high room in the tower where Mistress Margaret slept the moonbeams poured in a pearly stream. They found her kneeling by her couch with bent head and folded hands. Reverently they stole upon her, kissing her feet where they peeped from under the hem of her gown; then they swept over her till her robe of fairest lawn was turned to silver and the unbound hair on her shoulders became a cascade of shimmering gold. But no moonbeam thrust its way into the sanctuary of her heart. That was holy ground, a well-spring of passionate prayer.

* * * * *

Slowly the moon sank towards the hill-tops. But ere she disappeared behind a swarthy bank of cloud she illumined a scene of tragedy. Her level beams struck under the far-stretching branch of an oak tree, within a mile of the Kirk of Irongray, and fell upon two dark shapes that swung noiselessly as the night wind played around them. For the King's soldiers had passed that day, and these were rebels! And the moon saw at the foot of the tree two women sitting hand in hand, tearless, for their sorrow was too deep—silent, for this was their Gethsemane. And the moon remembered a hill that is called Calvary.

CHAPTER XII

Margaret's new-found happiness wrought upon her like a spell, for love is to a woman what the sunlight is to a flower. Though she had been winsome to look upon before, her beauty ripened into fuller loveliness. Her brown eyes sparkled with a living light like a moorland pool with the sun upon it; her cheeks, under her long lashes, were like delicate rose petals; there was a new buoyancy in her step, a new note in her voice. She went about the house and the garden singing from dawn to dusk. It was only in the quietness of her room, in the still night, that her mood sometimes lost its gladness, and grim fears assailed her. For she could not forget that the man she loved was a man proscribed, who, twice already, had come near to capture and death at the hands of his enemies. And she would remember that awful moment on the hill-side when a soldier's bullet had so nearly robbed her of her beloved. Then she would rise and standing by the window, a tremulous, pathetic figure in her gown of lawn, she would look anxiously towards the hills, wondering whether Alan slept; or whether—dread thought—he had been shot down or taken prisoner. And often she cried herself to sleep. But with the morning courage would come again, and the house would be filled with the music of her voice. For love had come into her life rapturously, and Alan was hers, though King and King's men might call him rebel.

So she would make her way down to the bottom of the garden, and stealing through the hedge would hasten into the wood where the grass and the blue hyacinths still sparkled with jewels of dew. For there was a tree in the wood, an old oak with a hidden crevice where, in the long ago, she had sometimes secreted a letter for Alan. And now, of a morning, to her joy she sometimes found a letter waiting for her—hidden there in the dead of night. In that haunt of peace with its untrodden silence there were none but the birds or the shy rabbits to see her as she read her letter and, kissing it, hid it in her bosom. All was well with Alan!—and if that were so, all was well with the world. And her heart sang within her like a choir of happy larks.

Almost a fortnight had passed since she had kept the tryst with Alan on the hills; and the letter hidden over her heart told her that, an' so she willed, he would see her again ere long if she would fix the time and place. For the hawks were giving "the moorbirds" a respite, and Dalyell and his men had moved from Irongray, and the way for another tryst seemed clear. She danced out of the wood like a sprite, and scampered over the lawn to the seat

beneath the beech tree in a whirl of happiness. As she sat she beat a merry little tattoo on the grass with her feet, savouring the happy moment of reunion. She was whispering to her heart, and her heart was whispering to her, all the tender things she would love to hear on Alan's lips. She clasped her warm hands over her throbbing breast in ecstasy. Then she closed her eyes, for so it was easier to conjure up that steadfast face with the deep blue eyes, the level brows, and the unruly black hair that would tumble over the sunburnt forehead. And a blackbird piping somewhere near whistled Alan—Alan—Alan! As she dreamed, she was brought suddenly back to earth by the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. She opened her eyes quickly, and for a moment she was dazzled by the shimmering light; then she saw that Lieutenant Adair was coming down the garden towards her. She looked at him keenly. He was young—about her own age,—but he walked listlessly, like an old man, and his face was pale and thin. As he drew near he saluted her gravely. She smiled a welcome, and moved along the seat to make room for him beside her, but he continued to stand.

"I thank you, Mistress Margaret," he said. "I have come to bid you farewell."

Margaret rose to her feet. "I am sorry you are leaving us," she said. "Are you sure you are fit to return to duty?"

The soldier smiled. "I am still shaky; but a day or two in the open will put me to rights, and I have orders from Sir Thomas to report at Minnyhive this afternoon."

"And what then?" asked Margaret.

"If I have luck, a fortnight's leave; and after that I'll be fit as I ever was. But for a time my duties will be light. Sir Thomas is making me billeting officer, and charging me with the commissariat—that is to say, if you do not understand, I shall have to find forage for the horses and food and lodging for the men."

"Ah," said Margaret charitably, "that I should say will be more after your heart than harrying the hillmen."

She looked at him quickly with lustrous eyes, but he did not at once reply. This radiant girl thought well of him: and, knowing the man he was, he was humbled.

"I owe you much, Mistress Margaret, you and your father. I shall never forget it."

Margaret smiled.

“You owe us nothing,” she said. “You owe all to Elspeth and Willie Stott. They have spared no effort to save you.”

The soldier turned his head slightly and looked back towards the house.

“Ay,” he said, “Elspeth is wonderful. My own mother could not have nursed me with more devotion, nor been more anxious for my soul.” He smiled wanly. “She has rubbed my sins into me with a rough hand and an acid tongue. She has read the parable of the prodigal to me till my stomach has turned, even as his did, at the swine’s husks: but she meant well, and her care has saved my life.”

“And Willie Stott?” asked Margaret. “What of him?”

The soldier laughed.

“When I was near to death I understand he did me great service. He has told me that more than once with his own tongue, assuring me that none but Willie Stott could have worked the miracle. He has fixed me with his eye, and through his clenched teeth has said: ‘Man, when I took a grup o’ ye, ye’d ae foot in the grave already; but I pu’ed ye oot juist in time!’ He’s a queer mixture. His touch is as soft as a woman’s, yet when he was dressing my wounds I sometimes felt that, for a pint of ale or less, he would gladly have closed his fingers round my thrapple, and choked the life out of me. He has no love for the dragoons. I could see it in his eyes; feel it in his presence.”

Margaret laughed. “Willie is a friend of mine. You misjudge him. He has a heart of gold.”

“I grant you that, Mistress Margaret, and whenever I think of Knowe I shall remember it as the house of golden hearts.”

A quick smile lighted Margaret’s face. “A pretty speech, Lieutenant,” she said; “I shall not forget your thought of us.”

“And I, Mistress Margaret, shall never forget all the kindness shown me here. And if ever I can render you or yours a service in return, I pledge my word I shall not fail you.”

He drew himself up smartly, and, heels together, saluted Margaret.

She held out her hand, and he bent and raised it to his lips: then he turned and left her.

Margaret returned to her dreams. She must think of a safe meeting-place. Even though Dalyell and his troopers had left the neighbourhood for a time,

she must not expose her loved one to needless risk. Some straying soldier might see him if he were careless; and seeing, recognize him, to his undoing. She thought of one place after another and rejected them all. Then, like a homing bird coming to its own nest, a happy thought lighted in her heart, and she clasped her hands. Could there be a better place than the wood behind Knowe? Save for the chatter of birds it was a haunt of silence not likely to be invaded by any lawless marauder. It was near at hand: and full of pleasant sanctuaries in whose purple shadows love's tale might be whispered and heard, for heart's ease, without hindrance. She could steal from the house in the twilight so easily, and steal back again unseen—and Alan could come to her under the cover of the dusk, and slip back to the hills in safety after the darkness fell. And, Elspeth conspiring with her, it would be possible maybe to smuggle him into Knowe, and set a meal before him. Like every woman who loves a man, she was already beginning to mother her beloved; and she thought of Alan's thin worn face, and wondered if he were often hungry. She closed her eyes again, the better to see him, and studied his every feature in the mirror of her mind. Then she fell to imagining—weaving a pleasant web out of her memories. Would Alan and she be able to pick up the thread just where it was broken when they parted? Would he put his arms about her again, lovingly, protectingly? It was sweet to remember their warmth, their strength. He had held her so close, she had felt his breath on her neck, on her cheek, among her hair. And as though to make her fancies real a playful gust of wind, warmed by the sun, caressed her. And would it be unmaidenly to hold her face up, challenging him with her eyes to kiss her? Ah—that would be wanton, unlovely: and yet his lips on hers would be sweet beyond all telling. She smiled happily, and opened her eyes. A fat, speckled thrush ran across the lawn, the chaffinches in the hedge chattered gaily, and a pair of swallows with white breasts gleaming darted past her, and with a lift sailed over the house-top and away. She followed them with her eyes till they sank out of sight.

It was good to be alive, and the world was a happy place because—yes, that was why—because Alan lived and loved her.

Suddenly she saw her father coming round the end of the house. He held a paper in his hand, and when he saw her he quickened his steps. She sprang up and ran light-foot to meet him. She saw his face was troubled.

"I have received a message from my Lord Claverhouse," he said. "He comes this afternoon to administer 'the Test' to us and to the household."

Margaret did not speak: for suddenly a cloud had passed across the sun, and the earth had gone grey.

CHAPTER XIII

Late in the afternoon Claverhouse stood by an oak table in the library at Knowe. His back was to the window so that his face was in shadow, but Margaret, looking at him, saw the petulance of his mouth, the hardness of his large eyes, and wondered why she had ever thought him good to look upon. For another face now filled her dreams and, seen beside it, the face of this King's gallant was bereft of its old charm. At the table sat his clerk, a young man of a muddy countenance whose cheeks and nose were studded with pimples. He wore the uniform of a dragoon, but his stooping shoulders and his peering short-sighted eyes bespoke the student rather than the man of action. A large sheet of blue paper lay on the table before him, and beside it stood an ink-horn and a small wooden platter full of sand. He picked up a quill, tested its point on a finger, then, after peering at it closely, proceeded to sharpen it.

Claverhouse turned to the Laird.

"So far as you and Mistress Margaret are concerned," he said, and he bowed to the Laird's daughter, "this is merely a matter of form, for I know you to be loyal folk: but the Council has reason to believe that even in the loyallest households there are unacknowledged Covenanters, and we wish to root them out."

He took his seat by the table and turned to his clerk.

"Let us hear the terms of 'the Test,' " he said.

The man bent over the scroll before him, and in a sing-song voice began to read:

" 'I swear I sincerely profess the true Protestant Religion contained in the Confession of Faith . . . shall adhere thereto . . . never consent to any change thereto . . . affirm the King's Majesty is the only supreme Governor in all causes, ecclesiastical as well as civil . . . judge it unlawful to enter into Covenants or to assemble in assemblies . . . or to take up arms against the King . . . that there lies no obligation on me from the National Covenant or the Solemn League and Covenant.' "

The sing-song voice droned away, but the Laird, who had been standing with bent head, with eyes half-shut, suddenly made a gesture.

"It is needless to read it through, my lord; I have already signed it."

“Ah!” said Claverhouse, looking up quickly, “I was unaware of that, but I knew you to be a loyal man.”

He turned to his clerk. “Make a note, Scougal.”

The clerk bent over the blue scroll, and for a moment there was no sound save the scratching of his quill. Then he read aloud:

“David Lansburgh, Esquire—Laird of Knowe, already attested, renews his attestation this day.”

“That is in order,” said Claverhouse, and he turned to Margaret with a smile.

“And you, Mistress Margaret?” he asked. “I suppose we may take it for granted?”

Margaret bit her lip. “He is a rash man, my lord, who takes for granted any opinion of a woman; but so far as my poor wit can understand what I have heard, there is nothing in ‘the Test’ with which I do not agree.”

The clerk dipped his quill in the ink-horn and held it over the paper as he looked to Claver’se for a sign.

His master looked at Margaret. “Then we shall set your name down, Mistress Margaret,” he said.

Margaret bowed her head. She was loyal to the King, and in what of “the Test” she had heard there seemed nothing to make a pother of: yet, as she bowed her head, a doubt entered her heart: in letting her name go down, was she playing the traitor to Alan? She raised her face and looked Claverhouse in the eyes.

“I had rather you gave me time to consider, my lord. There may be things in ‘the Test’ which I do not understand.”

Claverhouse smiled. “You may take it from me,” he answered, “that there is nothing to which a loyal subject cannot set his or her hand. Do you acknowledge the sovereignty of the King?”

“Most certainly,” said Margaret.

“And, I take it, you have not signed either of those traitorous documents, the Covenants,” said Claver’se with a laugh.

“I have not,” she answered. “I have never seen them.”

“Then, Scougal,” said Claverhouse, as he turned to his clerk, “set Mistress Margaret’s name below her father’s.”

There was a scrape and squeak of the pen as, tongue protruded, and peering eyes so close to the paper that his pimply nose almost touched it, the clerk obeyed. Then he straightened his shoulders and read:

"Mistress Margaret Lansburgh, daughter of the above David Lansburgh, attests herewith."

Margaret puckered her little mouth and, with a challenge in her eyes, addressed Claverhouse.

"If, my lord," she said, "you always take a maid's Yea on such slight grounds, you may yet come to disaster!"

Claverhouse sat back in his chair and laughed.

"A pretty jest, Mistress Margaret! I must take heed."

"And what if I change my mind, my lord?" asked Margaret. "My sex claims that right."

Claverhouse toyed with one of his curls. "If I know you, Mistress Margaret, you will never become a rebel; but an ye do your blood will be on your own head!" There was a gleam of laughter in his eyes, but Margaret saw his petulant lips close firmly and read the cruelty of his mouth.

"And now," said Claver'se, addressing the Laird, "what of your household?"

The Laird, who had been standing a little apart, crossed the room and rang a bell. "I have warned the servants to attend on my summons. They will be here on the instant."

As he spoke footsteps were heard upon the stair, and, after a knock, the door was thrown open and eight men and women entered. The Laird beckoned them forward, and they took their places in a row before the table, the two men-servants at one end, Elspeth at the other.

Margaret had stolen to the window-seat and settled herself snugly in a corner. She looked at Elspeth anxiously, but Elspeth stood demure and calm, the picture of quiet self-confidence, in her grey gown and spotless apron.

The men were ill at ease; some of the women folk, in the presence of authority, were confused and trembling. Claverhouse looked across the table, sweeping the line with his eyes. Then he beckoned to the Laird,

"Perhaps," he whispered, "you had better explain why we are assembled."

The Laird cleared his throat, and came suddenly from behind his eyes. Then, somewhat haltingly, he told his servants that they were gathered to declare their loyalty to the King, and to take "the Test." "I am not a master," he ended, "who would ever try to tamper with the conscience of any servant; but I judge you all loyal to the King," and his eyes sought Elspeth's, "and there is nothing in 'the Test' to which any man or woman who respects the King's Majesty and desires law and order in the land cannot honestly put his or her hand."

Claverhouse nodded his head approvingly, and bade his clerk read "the Test." The servants fidgeted a little as the sing-song voice repeated the words. When he had finished, Claverhouse looked keenly at the group before him.

"It's as plain as a pike-staff," he said. "Will you put your names to it?"

There was a confused murmur which he took for assent. He looked at the man at the end of the line.

"Your name?" he asked.

"John Bryden, my lord."

"You are willing to take 'the Test'?"

"Ay, sir. There's nocht in't that I can see tae tak' exception tae."

"Very good," said Claverhouse.

Again the clerk bent over his paper and wrote squeakily; then he read:

"And of the household of the above David Lansburgh of Knowe the following attest herewith:

"John Bryden——"

Quickly the question was put to each, and as quickly answered, and as each name was set down, its bearer, on a sign from the Laird, left the room. At last it came to Elspeth's turn. Claverhouse looked at her, remembering her defiance of Dalyell. He did not speak to her for a moment, while he pondered how he should best deal with her. He remembered Dalyell's direct attack. He would try more gentle means. Perhaps with a little tact, a little judicious wheedling, he could bring this woman to a better frame of mind. He beamed upon her suddenly.

"Well, Elspeth," he said, "how are you?"

Elspeth dropped a curtsy. “Thenk ye for speirin’, ma lord. I’m in my frail ordinar.”

She spoke quietly and respectfully, but there was a flinty look in her eyes which Margaret, watching anxiously, was not slow to see, though it was lost on Claverhouse. He smiled at her again.

“You have heard the words of ‘the Test,’ Elspeth. I am sure you have no fault to find with it. Let me set your name down.”

She looked him straight in the eyes. “Ye’ll dae nocht o’ the kind, my lord. The Buik says ‘swear not at all.’ ”

“Tut-tut, my good woman,” said Claverhouse, still smiling. “You make a mountain out of a mole-hill. The words ‘I swear’ are nothing but a legal phrase meaning that you promise.”

“That’s as may be,” answered Elspeth resolutely; “but I neither swear nor promise the things that are set doon there,” and she pointed at the blue paper on the table.

Claver’se frowned. Then he recovered himself and smiled at her again. “To what do you object?” he asked.

“I object tae the hale thing,” she answered, making a sweeping gesture with her arms. “I dinna pretend tae unnerstaun that lang rigmarole—but I ken this, Saints o’ the Covenant ha’e dee’d sooner than pit their name tae ‘the Test,’ an’ there’s something wrang and rotten in it, or they would ha’e signed it gladly.”

Above his large eyes his brows were knotted as Claver’se replied:

“Now, Elspeth, you are allowing your own good sense to be overruled by your devotion to some of the misguided ministers and men who have shown themselves rebels. Do you acknowledge the sovereignty of the King?”

“Ay—in things temporal; but maist certainly no in things spiritual.”

“Are you ready to say ‘God save the King’?”

“I pray for him every nicht, my lord.”

A look of astonishment filled Claverhouse’s eyes. Then he laughed. “I knew it, Elspeth! You are more loyal than I am. I fear I rarely make mention of his Majesty in *my* prayers.”

“Nae doot, sir,” said Elspeth, “that’s because ye dinna realize hoo muckle he stands in need o’ savin’.”

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders and tapped the table lightly with his long fingers.

“Well, now, Elspeth,” he said, “you have declared your loyalty—and after all ‘the Test’ is nothing more than a declaration of loyalty—let me set your name down.” He turned and made a sign to his clerk, who dipped his pen in the ink and prepared to write.

But Elspeth forbade him sternly.

“Young man,” she cried, “ye’ll dae nocht of the kind: juist pit yer goose’s feather ahin’ yer lug an’ let it bide there.”

“But,” protested Claverhouse, abandoning his wheedling tones and speaking severely, “do you understand that if your name does not appear upon that paper I must report you to the Council?”

There was a flash of fire in Elspeth’s eyes as she pointed firmly to the document, and answered:

“If my name gangs doon on that paper the Recordin’ Angel blots it oot o’ the Buik o’ Life. I dinna care a crack o’ the fingers for the Council, but I fear God.”

Claver’se glowered at her angrily as he rose to his feet.

“Woman!” he cried, “this is open defiance of Authority to which I cannot submit. Will you attest or not? I give you one minute to consider your position.”

The Laird took a step forward as though to say a word on Elspeth’s behalf, but Claverhouse waved him aside.

“I dinna need a minute,” said Elspeth. “My answer is here an’ noo and always, No!” and she flung the word defiantly at Claverhouse with a jerk of her head.

“So be it,” said Claver’se, and he turned to his clerk. “Make a note, Scougal, that Elspeth—Elspeth——”

“Elspeth Craig, sir, bairnswoman at Knowe, refuses to tak’ ‘the Test,’ ” interrupted Elspeth.

The clerk pushed the large blue sheet from him and made a note on a smaller piece of paper. Elspeth watched him with interest as he handed the

note to his master.

"You know what this refusal may mean, Elspeth Craig?" said Claver'se solemnly. "It may mean your trial at Dumfries—or I can send you before the Council."

Elspeth smiled quietly. "I ken fine what it means, my lord. It means peace o' conscience and a quate sowl—whatever you or the Council may dae to my auld body or banes."

"No more of your contumacy, woman," cried Claverhouse. "You have said enough; leave us."

Elspeth curtsied, and walked steadily to the door. Claverhouse, still standing with the note in his hand, followed her with his eyes. Margaret, in the corner of the window-seat, bit her lip, and clasped her hands nervously together. The unbidden tears started to her eyes. Elspeth was brave—her heart cried praise upon her: but was she not too unbending? Did she know the risks she ran? What would Lord Claverhouse do?

When the door was shut, and the sound of Elspeth's footsteps had died away, Claverhouse turned to the Laird.

"She's as dour as a granite rock, Laird. This countryside breeds some stiff-necked stuff!"

"She's a worthy woman: loyal to the core, not only to my house, but to the King!" protested the Laird, entering a quick plea on Elspeth's behalf. "I pray you, deal leniently with her."

Claverhouse smiled. The furrows on his brow relaxed.

"Laird," he said, "I know a true heart when I meet it; and if I had a regiment of dragoons with spirits such as hers I could storm the gates of hell."

He folded the paper in his hand, and tearing it in little pieces he dropped them on the table. Margaret, watching him anxiously, sighed with relief. She had been sore tempted to try to come to Elspeth's aid, but she was glad that she had held her peace. She might have made matters worse.

Claver'se turned to his clerk.

"Write down the name of Elspeth Craig," he said, "and opposite it the words—'Prays for the King's Majesty every night.' " He laughed quietly. "That will give the Council something to think of. Beshrew me! if many of its members are as loyal—and they can make what they like of it!"

If Claver'se had turned his head as the clerk's quill squeaked over the paper, he would have seen Margaret in the window-seat, with gleaming eyes, noiselessly clapping her hands. Her dainty feet were tapping a silent pæan; her heart was singing a song of thanksgiving.

"And now," said Claver'se as he rose from his seat, "I should like a private word with you, Lansburgh."

The Laird nodded his head. "If you come to my room we can talk at our ease. I have some most excellent Virginia weed and, if I mistake not, a glass of the White wine of Xeres would be welcome!"

CHAPTER XIV

As soon as the door was closed behind Claverhouse and her father, Margaret sprang from her seat and took her stand at the end of the table.

The clerk was reading carefully, half-aloud, the names on the sheet before him, dotting here an *i* and crossing there a *t*, meticulously. Margaret looked at his pasty, unwholesome face and his bent shoulders, then her eyes travelled to his knobby reddish fingers. He might be a good scrivener, but, by every token, her woman's wit told her he was a poor specimen of a dragoon.

"I can see," she said, "you were never meant for a soldier."

The man looked up and, opening his eyes widely, thrust forward his scraggy neck and stared at her.

"You say truly, lady! I am no soldier; I am a scholar."

"How came you, then," she asked, "to take the King's shilling?"

"Misfortune, my lady, brought me to this pass: poverty and a love for strong waters."

The clerk sighed, and laying the feathered end of the quill against his nose looked down it sadly.

"You make no bones about it," said Margaret. "You are an honest man, or you would not speak so frankly."

"Yes, lady, I am poor and honest. So was Diogenes of choice: so was Socrates because he preferred talk to honest work: so is David Scougal—at your service."

"You interest me," said Margaret kindly. "Tell me about yourself."

The clerk sighed, and dropped his quill on the table.

"There is not much to tell," he said. "I can retail it *paucis in verbis*, as we scholars say. My tragedy will go in a nutshell—a hazel-nut at that. I was a student at Glasgow College, but I had not the wherewithal to pay my fees, or if I had the wherewithal I spent it on drink, and here I am."

"Well, well," said Margaret sympathetically, "there are worse trades than soldiering."

“I am a soldier, lady, yet no soldier; yet I am greater than any soldier, for the pen, which is my weapon, is mightier than the sword——” and the stooping clerk straightened his shoulders with an air of pride.

Margaret smiled. “You are Lord Claverhouse’s secretary, I take it?”

“And your humble servant, lady,” said Scougal, rising and bowing. “What think you of my master?”

The question, asked quite simply, took Margaret aback. It was not seemly that a private soldier, even though a secretary, should ask her opinion of his officer. Yet she had begun the conversation, and she had no desire to appear ungracious.

“Lord Claverhouse is a brave soldier,” she answered.

“Mayhap,” answered the clerk; “but he cannot spell.”

Margaret laughed merrily.

“A man may be a brave soldier and yet no scholar.”

The clerk shrugged his shoulders.

“He cannot spell: he cannot write the King’s English: and yet he is a Master of Arts of St. Andrews—and I have no letters to my name.”

“Then he must be a scholar,” protested Margaret.

The clerk shook his head lugubriously. “He is an ignoramus, which in the Scots tongue, lady, is a donnert sumph.”

Margaret protested with vigour.

“I cannot have you speak with such disrespect of your officer,” she said.

The clerk gave a little nervous cough.

“Where there is no reason for respect, David Scougal, erstwhile student of Glasgow University, gives none. My master wears curl-papers of a night, and weights his ringlets with leaden weights by day that they may hang orderly. He likewise carries a tiny brush to brush his eyebrows, and besides gunpowder there is in his saddle-bags powder for his face. He is a vain man, lady, and though he is a Master of Arts he cannot spell.”

Having delivered himself thus the clerk smacked his loose lips, and picking up the weights which kept the large blue paper flat on the table, he began to fold it carefully.

Margaret watched him with interest. “You are a careful scrivener, but a bad soldier, or you would not so deride your officer,” she said teasingly.

“I am no soldier,” protested the clerk; “I am but a poor scholar—the child of misfortune, lady.”

With a gay laugh Margaret left him, and raced through the house in search of Elspeth. She found her busy in the still-room. She flung her arms impulsively about her neck and kissed her on both cheeks.

“Elspeth, you darling!” she cried. “Lord Claverhouse says you are a brave woman. He says you have a lion heart. He says he is not reporting you to the Council.”

Her words poured out ecstatically, and between each sentence she kissed Elspeth again.

“Hoots, lassie!” laughed Elspeth. “There’s nocht tae make sic a stramash aboot.”

“But there is! There is!” protested Margaret. “Lord Claverhouse is splendid!”

“Umphm!” said Elspeth dubiously. “Umphm! He may be in a lassie’s e’e—but the Lord is guid tae an auld woman like me. Ay, He is so! Hooever, a word in yer bonnie ear, lassie.”

“I am all attention,” said Margaret demurely.

“Weel, never be feared o’ a man. If ye show fear, he’ll pit his fit on yer neck; but if ye stand up tae him, he’ll respect ye, even though he disna like ye.”

“O wise Elspeth,” said Margaret as she kissed her again, and, with a roguish twinkle in her sweet brown eyes, asked: “And in what fashion shall a maid treat the man she loves?”

It was Elspeth’s turn to smile. “There ye ha’e me bate, lassie,” she answered. “I’ve had nae experience, but I should say follow yer hert, and never lose yer heid. Noo, rin awa’, Mistress Margaret, like a guid lass. I’m busy wi’ the cowslip wine, an’ if I start haverin’ I’ll spoil it.”

With a gay laugh Margaret left her. She went to her room and changed her gown, donning a pretty costume of soft sage green. Then she unlocked a drawer, and taking a letter from it hid it in her bosom and tripped downstairs. Claverhouse was still engaged with her father: his clerk sat in the hall asleep; there was no one about to observe her as she slipped out and

walked slowly, with feigned indifference, down to the bottom of the garden, stopping for a moment as she went to pluck a handful of rich brown wallflower. She buried her face in it, savouring its sweetness, then she pinned it at her breast. Against the soft green of her gown it made a seemly contrast. An hour ago the garden had been sprinkled by a fleeting summer shower, and the air was redolent with the wholesome kindly smell of the earth and the scent of many flowers.

Beyond the screen of the apple trees, close by the hedge, she turned and looked back towards the house. There was no one to be seen: in the drowsy light of early evening Knowe seemed half-asleep. Carefully she stole through the hedge, and paused on the other side to look around. Then, satisfied that she was unseen, she picked up the hem of her kirtle and darted into the depths of the wood, among the grey and purple shadows, almost as elusive as one of them. Beside the hollow tree she paused again and searched the wood with anxious eyes, then she drew her letter from her bosom, pressed it to her lips, and hid it carefully.

She picked her way back through the wood, her light steps noiseless on the withered beech leaves and the soft grass, and slipped into the garden by the way she had come. An overhanging tendril of sweet-brier in the hedge caught her hair and brought a wayward tress tumbling down. She released herself carefully, and with a few deft touches set her hair in order again, and in a moment she was on the seat under the copper beech, as "mim as a mouse," a demure picture of maidenly propriety, with no secret lover, with no hidden sanctuary for lover's letters.

It was here that Claverhouse found her. He came down the gravel path from the house with the smart quick step of a soldier, a smile on his face. She rose and went to meet him. His eyes dwelt on her beauty. That soft green gown and the dark flowers at her breast made her more bewitching than ever, and his heart beat wildly.

"This is a garden of sweet flowers,—a fair setting for its mistress," he said.

"You do me too much honour," she answered with a laugh, "but you speak truly,—Knowe is beautiful."

Claverhouse let his eyes wander for a moment as though drinking in all the beauty around him, then he brought them back to Margaret's face.

"Which is your favourite flower?" he asked, trying to control his throbbing heart.

“I have many favourites,” she answered, “each in its own season. In springtime the shy primrose; in summer the blue cornflower; in autumn the heather on the hills, all purple in the evening light; and in winter I live on the memory of the flowers that have faded till the snowdrops come again.”

“You have a pretty taste,” he said.

“And yours?” she asked, stopping suddenly on the path below the apple trees, lest a few more steps should bring them too near the hedge beyond which lay the enchanted wood.

“Mine!” he said, “Mine!—” as though searching his memory, “A soldier has no time for flowers; but if I had to make a choice, I should choose a wild rose.”

Margaret had turned and stood facing him. She looked up at him quickly, catching the note of passion in his voice. His eyes were gleaming: there was fire in his blood. He could hold himself in leash no longer. This winsome maid had rebuffed him, though not unkindly, a few short weeks ago. Mayhap that was but a passing whim of a maid who did not know her mind. A bold enough lover might take her by storm.

“Margaret!” he cried passionately, and throwing his arms about her he drew her towards him and bent to kiss her lips! “Two hours agone you said a maid might change her mind. Have you changed yours, little woman?” he cried.

There was fury in Margaret’s heart and wild anger in her eyes as, with hands pressed firmly against his shoulders, she tried to push him away.

“Margaret—my own!” he cried again, his voice trembling.

The wallflowers at her breast were crushed.

“Unhand me, sir,” she cried passionately. “You must not use me so, my lord. I do not love you. I have not changed my mind!” and the tears welled up into her eyes.

Claverhouse released her gently. The broken petals of the wallflowers fell from her breast and lay between them on the grass.

“Forgive me, Mistress Margaret,” said Claverhouse humbly. “I know I did wrong—but the love I bear you, and shall always bear you, is my plea.”

“Love is no excuse for ungentleness,” said Margaret, with quiet dignity, as she wiped her eyes. “I am grieved, my lord, that you should think so lightly of me as to treat me so.”

“Margaret,” said Claverhouse solemnly, “before God I swear I would not do you wrong. Of your charity, forgive me.”

There was such pain in his voice, and he looked so shame-stricken and distressed, that Margaret’s anger ebbed.

“I forgive you, my lord,” she said simply. “But remember my lips are for my lover, if it please God ever to send me one—my hand is for my friends,” and she held out her right hand towards him.

Claverhouse took it and, raising it to his lips, kissed it reverently.

“And now,” said Margaret, hiding her confusion behind an assumed gaiety, “let us forget. I have forgiven,” and she laughed.

It was with a sense of relief and a flush of shame on his pale cheeks that Claverhouse heard her. He knew he had acquitted himself ill, though he sought to appease his conscience by pleading that this sweet maid intoxicated his senses and upset his reason.

They walked together towards the house, stopping now and then to look at a flower. They talked of things indifferent, as though they were almost strangers, and Claverhouse, who was no novice in the ways of woman, had to admit to himself that this country maiden bore herself with fine self-possession. She had humbled him in the dust: yet she showed no haughty pride in her victory: and, being a man puffed up with self-esteem, he began to flatter his heart that she still thought well of him.

But if he had been permitted to peep into her room half an hour later his vanity would have received a stern rebuff. Margaret stood before her glass studying her face with care. She took the broken blossoms from her breast and passed a finger gently over her lips and cheeks.

“I do not think he touched me,” she whispered musingly. “It were unthinkable that he should pollute the cheeks that Alan——” and without finishing the sentence she bathed her face carefully with orange-water, as though to rid it of defilement. Then she looked at her reflection again. “Methinks,” she said, “Master Scougal spoke the truth. I know not if he can spell; but, in all that pertains to true love, my Lord Claverhouse is a donnert sumph.” She laughed at the face in the mirror, and turned this way and that, with a glass in her hand, that she might study her hair. Then she unbound a few locks and set them more to her liking, running a lilac-coloured ribbon through them to keep them in place. She smiled as she looked at the mirror again, and dropped a playful curtsy to the girl who smiled back at her.

“You are looking your best, Mistress Margaret,” she said. “How it will tease him to see you thus, and know that he dare not touch you,” and she danced a light step or two like some nymph of the woods.

Taking a bunch of purple violets from a vase, she dried their stems and pinned them at her bosom. Then she tripped back to the mirror for a last look at herself ere she went down to the evening meal. The picture pleased her, and she smiled with that mysterious smile that God has given to woman —the smile that beckons, but baffles: that reveals, yet hides: that invites, but eludes: that is plain as day, but inscrutable as the night. Then the light died out of her eyes and she looked as demure as a nun. She held up a protesting finger and spoke to her reflection.

“Margaret!” she said. “Your conduct is most unseemly for one who loves a Covenanter. Be sober, be grave as a judge, be staid as a philosopher.”

The image in the glass smiled roguishly and drooped a flickering eyelid, and Margaret saw the tip of a little red tongue protruding for a moment between its white teeth. As she tripped downstairs she was singing:

“To love and to be wyse;
To rage with guid advyce,
Now thus, now then, so goes the game,
Incertane is the dice;
Thair is no man, I say, that can
Both love and to be wyse.”

But to all outward seeming her whimsical mood had passed when she joined her father and Claverhouse, who were waiting for her by the door of the dining hall.

Her demureness, however, did not last long. The varied happenings of the afternoon had stirred many emotions, and she had to laugh because she was too proud to cry. So she bubbled over with gaiety during the meal, till even her father, coming quickly from behind his eyes, laughed heartily over and over again. Claverhouse was amazed and entranced. Never had this elusive girl seemed so adorable, never had he talked with a woman of a nimbler, prettier wit. In that dark timbered room with its drab hangings, and its sombreness, she was like a dancing beam of light. Her sparkling chatter, her gay mirth, her merry laugh were things of wonder and joy. And though he laughed—laughed so boisterously that he had to lay a hand upon his side —my Lord Claverhouse was sore at heart. This was the woman he had alienated, mayhap lost, through his own impetuousness!

It was in a lull of the gaiety that her father suddenly asked: “Have you seen aught of the ghostly rider, my lord?”

Claverhouse started. “I have not seen him: I have no wish to see him, as I have no relish for the unearthly.”

The Laird nodded his head. “Nor have I; but this spectre is the talk of the countryside, and has been for more than a fortnight. It is most uncanny.”

“If all the tales are true,” said Claverhouse, “it is a most eerie spectacle. I speak within walls, and to friends, so I need not make a secret of it: this apparition—call it what you will—has cast such a gloom of dread over the soldiers that Sir Thomas has withdrawn his men from Irongray for a space till they can recover their spirits.”

Margaret’s eyes were wide with interest. She laid her hand over her heart. “I had heard,” she said, “that Sir Thomas and his dragoons had left the district. I did not think that the ‘Iron Hand’ would shrink from grappling with a ghost.”

Claverhouse smiled at her. She was clasping her hands a little nervously. Claverhouse thought she looked pale.

“I have had no talk with Sir Thomas on the matter,” he said, “but I learn from Murdoch that the old warrior breathes out threats and execrations that might well make the blood even of a ghost run cold.”

The Laird, who had been ruminating in the back of his mind following his own thoughts, spoke again:

“Some say that it is the Devil himself; others, that it is the ghost of Pechin’ Jock, the highwayman.”

“Ah,” said Claverhouse, “the fellow whose bones still rattle o’ nights from the gibbet at the cross-roads?”

“Ay—that very same,” answered the Laird. “He was a dare-devil horseman: a cut-purse and thief, who made the road from Dumfries to Glasgow a haunt of terror by night.”

“I remember,” said Claverhouse. “He was shot out of hand some twelve months ago, and his body was hung in chains as a warning to all other gentlemen of the road.”

The Laird nodded his head again.

“And his ghost rides, the folks are saying, because his bones lack burial.”

Claverhouse stroked his chin meditatively.

"That is a more likely tale than that the Devil himself has taken a law-abiding parish like Irongray under his wing."

"It's queer and uncanny," said the Laird. "Ghost or de'il, the spectre seems proof of lead. It has been fired at more than once, but they say the ball passed through it."

"If it's a ghost, with neither flesh nor substance, that stands to reason," said Claver'se, as he raised his wineglass to his lips. "If it's Nick himself, nothing will pierce his coat of mail but a silver bullet washed in holy water."

"They tell me," said the Laird, "that Dalyell himself met the spectre a night or two ago."

Claver'se lay back in his chair and laughed.

"It's true, Laird: and, by every token, a most excellent story. Sir Thomas was riding alone late at night when suddenly this ghostly rider, springing from nowhere, barred his path. Dalyell is, as ye well know, a man of grit, and drew upon him instantly and fired. But the spectre was untouched. Sir Thomas swears his horse was so restive that it spoiled his aim. Be that as it may, the ghost came at him with a flaming sword: but Dalyell's horse turned tail and bolted. When he reached his quarters Sir Thomas burst in on Captain Murdoch. 'Alec!' he cried, 'tak' a guid look at me. Am I, or am I no, in my cups?

"Murdoch looked him up and down with care. 'You're as sober as a judge,' he said.

" 'Then,' said Dalyell, wiping his brow, 'I've seen the De'il!' "

Claver'se laughed again and took a sip of wine. "But the best of the story is to come. Next morning Sir Thomas sent for four troopers whom he had punished severely on the ground that, when they said they had seen the De'il, they were drunk on duty, and had let two prisoners escape. And by way of atonement he gave each of them, out of his own pocket, a week's pay. The next night my four bold lads took French leave, and spent a wild evening in 'The Hole i' the Wa' ' at Dumfries. They were turned out in 'the wee sma' oors' and proceeded to raise Cain in the streets of that God-fearing town. But the Watch overmastered them, clubbing them on the head, and now they lie in the Tolbooth sick and sorry, seeing more fearsome spectres, the jailer tells me, than they ever saw in Irongray."

The Laird laughed, but Margaret gave a little nervous shiver. She did not like the turn the talk had taken. It made her feel cold. “I shall not sleep to-night,” she said, “if I listen any more, so I shall leave you to your wine and your wraiths,” and, rising, she curtsied and left the room, Claverhouse bowing low as he held the door open for her.

CHAPTER XV

As she crossed the hall, Margaret caught sight of Scougal sitting huddled on the corner of a bench behind a table on which lay four pistols. On hearing her approach he rose.

"I hope you have supped well," she said.

"Heaven be praised, lady," he answered, "I have fared sumptuously. That contumacious rebel, the woman Elspeth, who prays for the King's soul, is mindful also of a poor soldier's belly. She hath a heart of gold."

"Elspeth is wonderful!" said Margaret with honest admiration.

"She is a woman in ten thousand," said the secretary. "If Solomon had known her he might have thought better of your sex, lady."

Margaret laughed. "Yes! her price is above rubies."

Scougal nodded his head, then he threw up both his hands.

"But what a gluttony she hath for prayer, lady. As she set my kail before me, she said a grace over it, and then nudged me with a bony finger and said, 'Pit tae yer haun, lad.' I was not slow to obey, for the kail was of a savouriness such as my sainted mother used to make, and with such body of good garden produce in it that a horn spune would stand upright in it." He smacked his lips reminiscently. "And later, as she placed in my empty platter the leg and breast of a fat and tender capon, and poured me out a chapin of frothing ale, she upbraided me, saying: 'Young man, Satan is a bad maister; but I'll pray for ye every nicht, an' maybe, by the Grace o' God, ye'll quit his service, an' so escape the fires o' hell.' I tell you, lady, she spoke with such vehemence that my skin crept upon my flesh with awe."

Margaret smiled. "She is a saint, Master Scougal."

The secretary scratched the side of his head with his thumb.

"I do not deny it," he answered, "but with enough spice of the de'il in her to lend her savour. I like her well, lady, and, since the pen is mightier than the sword, I shall reward her for her thought of my hungry stomach. For when I make the fair copy of that document which presently lies in my pocket, I shall of my own accord put behind her name such praise of her as will make the Council think the King has no liege more loyal."

“That is good of you, Master Scougal,” said Margaret. “But have a care, lest my Lord Claverhouse think you speak too well of her, and draw his pen through your praise. That might bring trouble on her head.”

Scougal laughed, a low, derisive chuckle. He jerked his thumb towards the door behind which Claver’se and the Laird were closeted. “My master, though he be Master of Arts of St. Andrews, hath no more love for reading than the village dunce has for his horn-book. He will never know. As is the custom of soldiers, he signs documents without perusing them. He will put his name where I tell him.”

“Your heart is in the right place, Master Scougal,” said Margaret with a smile.

“And eke my brain”—and he tapped his forehead. “It is my body that is out of place,” he said passing his sprawling hands over his chest. “It is in a soldier’s uniform; it ought to be in a scholar’s gown.” He shook his head sadly.

Margaret laughed, and waved her hand at the weapons on the table.

“You are well armed, Master Scougal.”

He followed her gesture with his eyes, and looked at the pistols as though he had never seen them before. Then he picked one up. “A plague upon this soldier business,” he cried. “My master bade me charge the weapons against our homegoing; but my mind was so set on composing a distich or two for a maid I wot of that I had forgotten.”

He lifted the “dog” with his thumb, and blew into the priming-pan. “We ride at ten o’ the clock, lady—so my master instructed me. There is yet an hour, and even David Scougal, who has no love for villainous saltpetre, can load four pistols in an hour.”

He laid the weapon down and began to search in his pockets. At last he found his powder-flask and, after a further search, produced two leaden balls which, for safety’s sake, he placed in his mouth. He picked up a pistol again, holding it clumsily in his knobby hand.

“My master’s,” he said, speaking indistinctly because his mouth was full. “See the silver-work on the butt,” and he offered it to Margaret. She took it and looked at it for a moment. The silver gleamed in the light of the lantern hung from the wall behind her.

“I see your brace is unadorned,” she said, looking at the weapons on the table.

He removed the bullets from his mouth before he replied.

"Ay, lady, they waste no silver on a common trooper; but my master is a soldier of high rank, entitled to much adornment, though, God knows, he cannot spell."

Margaret watched him as he filled the powder measure, and with his fingers clasped cone-wise round the muzzle of the pistol let the coarse granules trickle into the barrel.

He was about to drop the ball in after the powder when Margaret interrupted him.

"Master Scougal," she said, "meseems you are still weaving distiches; you have forgotten the colfin."

The secretary started, and scratched his head.

"Tell it not in Gath, lady, methinks you are a better soldier than I am: but, as I have said before, my body is in the wrong place."

"And, at the moment, your wits as well, Master Scougal," said Margaret playfully.

There was a further search in sundry pockets, and at last the soldier found his packet of wads.

He chose one, slipped it into the barrel, and pushed it firmly home with the ramrod. Then he dropped in the bullet, and, inserting another colfin on top of it, beat it down gently, but firmly, with the ramrod. When he had loaded his master's brace of weapons, he rubbed his large hands together and stood looking at the pistols as they lay on the table. He spoke almost under his breath:

"A curse on the devil who first invented gunpowder! To think that a pinch of the pestilent stuff will drive a ball through the heart of a genius. 'Sdeath!—an unlettered clodhopper might kill a scholar!"

"Or," said Margaret, "if he draw quickly enough and aim surely, a scholar might let light through a clophopper."

The secretary shook his head, and set about putting his own weapons in order.

Margaret, watching him closely, saw that though he charged them with powder he did not load them with ball, and thinking that his mind was still spinning couplets, and that he had done this unwittingly, she called his attention to the omission. He peered at her with twinkling eyes, and grinned.

“If I may make so bold, lady, without offence, I jalouse there is a spice of the de’il in you as well as in the woman Elspeth.”

Margaret laughed. “Belike there is,” she said, with a toss of her head, “for a woman without that would be like kail lacking salt. But what of it?”

Scougal laid a knobby finger along his pimply nose. “Then I’ll tell you a secret. I never put ball in my pistols,” and he straightened his bent shoulders superiorly.

Margaret laughed again. “It is nothing to me,” she said, “so your secret is safe. But you are the queerest soldier I have ever encountered.”

“Certes, ay, lady! I am no soldier, but a scholar. My weapon is my pen. Were these pistols loaded with ball I could kill nobody, for I cannot hit a barn-door; but I can kill with my pen—and,” he added slowly, “I do not see blood.”

He shuddered slightly as he set the four pistols in order side by side on the table, and then passed his hand over his eyes.

“I have written death-warrants, lady—it is a gruesome task.”

Margaret gave a little shiver and drew her scarf round her neck. She did not speak.

“We ride at ten o’ the clock, lady, and having loaded the weapons well and truly,” and he grinned as he looked at his own, “it behoves me to saddle the horses,” and with a bow he left her.

Margaret followed him with her eyes across the hall, then she sat down on the bench by the table and looked at the four pistols lying there. She pursed her lips. Surely, she thought, of all soldiers Master Scougal is the most addle-pated! She picked up one of the pistols with the silver-work on its butt and looked at it carefully. “To think that that conceited numbskull has not the wit to know that a loaded pistol may be tampered with,” she whispered to herself. She laid the weapon down again, and with elbows on the table and her chin in the cup of her palms she stared at it fixedly. “He tried to kiss me,” she thought. . . . “It would pay him back—in coin he might understand, being thick of skin—” . . . and then she laughed. “Margaret,” she whispered, “you must not. . . . That would be a scurvy revenge—” and then the smile went out of her eyes and her heart froze in her breast. What if Claver’se should come upon Alan on the road, and draw upon him? A little shiver ran down her neck; it was too horrible to think of. There could be no danger to Claver’se on his ride to Dumfries; no one would assail him. While he, armed, might attack some poor Covenanter—mayhap her own Alan. Her

love blew her scruples to pieces. In a trice she was racing up the stairs to her room, where she searched rapidly in a drawer. A moment later she was in the hall again—an eye watching shrewdly the door of the dining hall—while with deft fingers she pushed a long button-hook carefully down the barrel of one of Claver'se's pistols. The wad was firm, but with an adroit twist she loosened it, and in a moment she had it out, and a second afterwards the ball lay in her hand. Quickly she removed the bullet from the second pistol and laid the weapon by its fellow, just where Scougal had left it. There was a blush on her cheeks, which was more than the reflection from the fire, as she stooped over the peat embers and carefully hid the colfins in their heart, raking fresh fuel over them. She hid the bullets in her pocket, and sat quietly down again to persuade her conscience that all is fair in love—more particularly when the life of the loved one may be at stake.

Across the hall, through the closed door beyond which Claver'se sat with her father, came the sound of voices, and from without she heard the rattle and crunch of gravel under the horses' hoofs as Scougal led them round.

CHAPTER XVI

It was long past ten of the clock when the two riders set out for Dumfries. Claverhouse had tarried with the Laird over his wine, and at the last he had lingered for a few minutes of pleasant converse with Margaret, who was still as delightful, though as elusive, as she had been at the evening meal.

But at last the stirrup-cup was drunk, the last good nights spoken, and the two horsemen took the road.

The night had suddenly gone dark. The wind had risen, and black clouds driven across the sky obscured the moon. Claverhouse rode a mettlesome charger, swift and sure-footed; but the horse of the soldier behind him was a sorry nag, broken in the wind and prone to stumble. Had he been alone Claverhouse would doubtless have accomplished the journey at a gallop, but, with Scougal in attendance, that was out of the question. So, somewhat against the grain, he restrained his eager beast, and jogged along at a gentle trot some ten yards ahead of his secretary.

His mind was occupied with many things, but over and over again, like a moth to a candle, his thoughts flew back to Margaret.

"The little jade!" he whispered to himself. "She doth but play with me, God bless her; but I shall win her yet."

He sighed to the night wind and, thrusting his feet more deeply into the stirrups, turned in his saddle to look back at Scougal. And, having satisfied himself that his secretary had not lost his way, he strained his eyes into the farther distance towards Knowe. But it was no longer visible. He kissed his hand to it playfully, "Ah me," he thought, "how strange are the ways of a woman. The little witch knows well she fans my love by shaking her pretty head at my appeals. Would I could peep into that heart of hers. Belike my name is written there—sweet maid!"

And Scougal, as unskilled in horsemanship as in all the other arts of war, let his reins lie loosely. His old nag could find the way without his guidance, and was less likely to stumble if left to itself. So the scholar-soldier turned his mind to his distiches, though now and then he smacked his lips as he remembered the rich broth which Elspeth had set before him.

Suddenly Claverhouse drew rein. A strange sound had struck his ears. He leaned forward and listened; his horse pricked its ears curiously. Scougal, unaware that anything unusual was toward, came on from behind, but his horse, without his curbing it, ranged itself alongside Claverhouse's steed and stood stock-still.

"What's that?" asked Claverhouse under his breath.

Scougal came out of his reverie suddenly and listened. The noise was audible again, a heavy, monotonous, recurrent creaking. In that lonely place, in the sullen dark, the sound was uncanny and perplexing. Scougal swallowed nervously; his hands were suddenly moist.

"I cannot tell, my lord."

Claverhouse withdrew a pistol from its holster. "You loaded them?" he asked under his breath.

"With care, sir," answered the scholar. "They are loaded, but not primed."

In the dark Claverhouse fumbled for a moment as he pressed a little powder into the priming-pan first of one weapon then of the other. "You had better prime as well," he whispered. "There's something unchancy about, and we had best be prepared."

He returned one of his pistols to its holster, but after sparking his tinder, and placing it smouldering in his tinder-box, he urged his horse with his knees, and with his left hand on the reins, while his right held the pistol, he began to move slowly in the direction from whence the sound came. Scougal would gladly have turned his horse and made off in another direction, but that would have meant sacrificing the companionship and protection of his master, so he followed close behind, though he was cold with fear and his teeth chattered. The eerie creaking sound grew louder. It was rhythmical, like the swinging of a pendulum, and then, suddenly, Claverhouse recognized what it was.

He turned on Scougal sharply and spoke angrily.

"A murrain on us both," he cried. "It is no ghost clanking its chains, but just Pechin' Jock swinging in the wind on the gibbet at the cross-roads. Why did you not remember—dunderhead?"

Scougal excused himself. "The night is dark, sir. I had lost my bearings; I did not know we were near the cross-roads."

Claverhouse grumbled under his breath, but he turned his horse sharply to the right and urged it to the gallop. “A plague upon all ghosts; I snap my fingers at them,” he said. “But I’d liefer give yon carrion a wide berth.”

Scougal, lest he should be left behind, spurred his horse to the gallop also, and straightway was so occupied in trying to keep his seat that he had no breath wherewith to reply. He had forgotten the riding-master’s instructions, shouted at him with curses a thousand times. Precepts and rules were thrown to the wind and, under cover of the dark, he clung to his saddle with one hand and to the mane of his horse with the other, and at every jolting step the beast shook him unmercifully, so that his teeth clacked like castanets.

Ahead of the riders was a grove of trees. In the darkness it looked like a high black wall towering almost to the sky. It was only when a ray of the moon struck the swaying topmost branches and made the leaves gleam for an instant like silver pennons set on a battlement, that the dark and lofty wall revealed itself as a line of trees. The road ran by the edge and under the shadow of the wood. Many a time the highwayman whose bones still rattled at the cross-roads had waylaid travellers at this very spot, dashing out of the shadow of the wood across their path on his stalwart horse, and, pistol in hand, challenging them with a stern “Hands up, or I fire!”

It was the thought that some such ruffian might be in hiding in the darkness that made Claverhouse look again to the priming of his pistols and to his tinder ere he came abreast of the wood. When he had satisfied himself that his weapons were in order, he once more spurred his horse to the gallop, for he was eager to get beyond the ominous darkness of the wood as quickly as possible.

Suddenly, as though taking form from nothing, there appeared right in his path a spectre: a horse with head and flanks and hoofs luminous with greenish fire, and on its back there sat a rider—ghost or devil—whose face and helmet and hands glowed with pale flames. So awful the apparition, so sudden its appearance, that Claver’se’s horse reared in terror and almost threw its rider. But my lord was a rare horseman, and with bridle and knees and voice he controlled his charger, and as it found its feet again he fired straight at the spectre. There was something unusual in the recoil of his weapon that startled Claverhouse; but he did not pause to consider it as he drew again and fired with his second pistol. The spectre and the spectral horse were untouched! They stood motionless and scathless right in his path. Then suddenly the ghostly rider whipped his sword from its scabbard. It gleamed in the darkness like a flame as he bore down upon Claverhouse.

For a moment the cavalier was tempted to turn tail and flee; but old habits of discipline in the face of danger, and that natural courage for which he had the name, kept him from playing the craven. He plunged his useless pistol into its holster, and drawing his blade prepared to ward off the first stroke of that gleaming sword that already swung so dangerously near. The weapons clashed; Claver'se's sword rang upon ringing steel. The homely sound gave him courage. Whatever this spectre might be its weapons were of the earth: no hell-forged sword would ring so honestly, and my lord set his teeth and joined combat lustily. But he was at a disadvantage. His horse was in a sweat of fear. His gripping knees, his firm left hand on the tightened reins, the rowels dug into the quivering flanks could not make the terrified beast keep its place. If Claver'se were to come victorious from the fight his horse must answer every delicate pressure of the bridle, every gentle urge of the knees. Instead it backed and swerved, and backed and swerved again, and more than once tried to rear in its horror at the unearthly charger and the uncanny rider who closed in upon it so relentlessly. Steel rang upon steel till sparks of fire flew from Claver'se's blade. He had not so much as touched his enemy, but a half-parried blow from the gleaming weapon of his antagonist had struck him on the shoulder and glanced off, tearing a gash in his buff sleeve and drawing blood from his arm. The wound angered him; he fought more fiercely. He drove his spurs savagely into his horse's side, and the startled beast, forgetting its terror, leaped forward. Standing high in his stirrups, Claver'se swung his sword up and brought it down with such a blow as would have cleft the spectre's head in twain had it struck him. But like a lightning flash the gleaming blade flew up to meet the descending steel; the murderous blow was parried, and Claver'se's sword broke in his hand, and he was left unarmed.

Under his breath he swore savagely. He was completely at the mercy of his enemy now—man or devil, fiend or spectre, he could not tell. But he would die bravely! No cowardly stampede for him! He flung the useless hilt of the sword on the grass and, with both hands on the reins, steadied his quivering steed, and waited for the end. But the end was not after the fashion of his thought. The victor did not press his victory. Instead he reined his horse back a pace or two and, halting, raised his lambent sword and saluted Claverhouse, as one who had fought bravely against heavy odds.

Then, with the speed of the wind, the spectral horse dashed off with its spectral rider, and Claverhouse was left alone in a stupor of amazement. He had been nearer death than ever before in all his experience of warfare and hard-fought battles, and he knew it. But for the chivalry of his opponent, who had refused to strike him when disarmed, his life was forfeit. And

instead of slaying him his strange opponent had paid him the honour of the fight, and had saluted him as a foeman worthy of his steel. It was most strange. He could not fathom the mystery.

He leaped from his horse and fell heavily to earth, astounded that his shaking limbs could not support him. He raised himself slowly on hands and knees and found himself shaking, as though seized by one of those old ague fits that had plagued him in the Low Countries. His teeth chattered; his blood ran cold; the flesh on his neck and along his spine crept eerily. He was unmanned, for the fear which he had held at bay while in the stress of the fight had gripped him suddenly by the heart and worked its will with him. For a long space he knelt shivering, gasping for breath, wet with perspiration, till the storm spent itself and his courage began to revive; then he raised himself to his feet and stood, uncertainly and wearily, with an arm thrown over his horse's shoulder for support. The contact with flesh and blood revived him, and his mind was deflected from his own sorry condition as he began to take note of the state of his charger. That mettlesome thoroughbred, in whose veins flowed the blood of a long line of gallant sires, was in a lather of cold sweat. Its knees trembled; its ears lay back dejectedly; the proud arch of its neck had fallen, and its head hung down so that its muzzle almost touched the grass. He patted the disconsolate beast on the shoulder and spoke soothingly, but for a while all his efforts were vain. It was not until he had pulled a handful of grass and, with the caressing murmur of an ostler, rubbed down the trembling animal from neck to croup that some spark of its old fire nickered up in its heart again. It whinnied timidly, and Claver'se, taking its muzzle in his hands, comforted it with whispered words. But it was long ere he ventured to bestride it again. Ere that he had walked it up and down until the action brought the warm blood back to his own limbs as well as to the limbs of his beast. Then with a word of cheer he put his foot in the stirrup and raised himself into the saddle. The grip of his knees and legs, and his firm hand on the reins, were as strong wine to the horse. It flung up its head, arched its neck and pricked its ears—it was once more the charger scenting the battle from afar.

More than once since the combat had ended Claverhouse had thought of his henchman. He was nowhere to be seen! He had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him; but, knowing his man, my lord had little doubt that a less sinister fate had overtaken him. He surmised, and rightly, that at the sight of the spectral horse and its spectral rider Scougal's sorry nag had taken to its heels and bolted. As like as not it had thrown its rider; mayhap at that very moment he was lying within earshot, it might be with a broken limb, or, Heaven forfend it, a broken neck.

The silence was broken by the cry: “Scougal!—Scougal! Where are you, Scougal?”

There was no answer to the first challenge; but when Claver’se repeated it a second time a faint reply came tremulously through the dark. Claver’se turned his horse in the direction from which the voice had come, and moving towards it gradually, still calling, came at last upon his man, stretched prone, his horse standing over him.

Claverhouse dismounted and knelt beside his secretary. “Where are you hurt?” he asked anxiously. “Are any bones broken?”

Scougal groaned heavily. “From what I feel, sir, I jalouse every bone in my body is broken.”

With the rough skill of a soldier who had seen many wounded men Claverhouse ran his hands quickly over him, moving one limb after another, at first gently, then with some roughness, and finishing up by passing both hands carefully over Scougal’s head. Then he rose to his feet, and in a tone that was not lost on Scougal, said roughly: “Get up!”

To his own great surprise the secretary rose, and after a momentary unsteadiness in which he gripped at the air with pawing hands, found his balance, and kept it.

“Scougal,” said Claverhouse sternly, “you are a coward! Do you know the penalty for desertion in face of the enemy?”

“Yes—death!” answered Scougal promptly; “but surely, sir, you wouldna visit the cowardice of my sorry nag upon my devoted head. The damned beast ran away with me. I couldna restrain him.”

Just then the moon peeped from behind a cloud and lighted up Scougal’s face. It was so woebegone, so little in keeping with his ready answer, that Claverhouse laughed. He struck his secretary on the shoulder.

“Methinks,” he said, “you are a better dialectician than a soldier. You are white-livered, and there’s water in your blood. Into your saddle, man! You’re not hurt—only shaken!”

A moment later the two were riding side by side towards Dumfries. Scougal had drawn up level with his master for company’s sake, and Claver’se was content to have him there. Neither spoke until they had passed the wood, then Claver’se asked:

“Did you see the ghostly rider?”

“To speak the truth, being short of sight, I did not,” said Scougal. “I saw a strange greenish light, and that was all, for my horse turned tail and bolted. But ere he threw me I heard your pistols bark, and I guessed you were in deadly combat. And, putting two and two together, as I lay with every bone in my body broken, unable to come to your aid, I jaloused that the greenish light must have been this ghostly rider of whom we have heard so much. Did you send him back to hell, sir?”

Claverhouse laughed. “He had me at his mercy. He was within an ace of nicking my thread for me; but he forbore. Did you put ball in my pistols?”

“ ’Sdeath, sir, I did. I mind well doing it. Mistress Margaret Lansburgh can vouch for it. She saw me load the weapons.”

“Yet when I fired—and I fired twice—the kick was that of a weapon without ball. And my enemy was scathless, though my aim was true. It is most strange!”

“Then you were fighting with the De’il himself, sir. He chairmed the lead from your pistols by his black arts.”

Claver’se turned in his saddle and spoke with bated breath:

“I know not with what I fought: ghost or devil, or human being strangely disguised. But when I fell upon him with my sword, his sword was of honest steel, and rang truly. Methinks the devil would not use such a weapon; but something magical, incorporeal, without body or earthly substance in it. Surely the Prince of Darkness does not make use of weapons fashioned by human hands!”

Scougal gripped the mane of his horse firmly with his right hand.

“With all respect, sir, I would dissent from your opinion. Since first the De’il took to interferin’ in the affairs o’ men he has used what the theologians would ca’ carnal weapons belonging to this terrestrial sphere. Think on! He micht have tempted Eve wi’ some bonnie bauble from the caves of hell—but instead he tempted her wi’ an apple. And when he would break man or woman he tempts them wi’ gold, or honours or the lust o’ the eye, the lust o’ the flesh. For the De’il is a master of arts—beggin’ yer pardon, sir—a master of the Black Arts, not of the humane arts like yersel’, and his weapons are maist often, if not always, juist human weapons—the things that lie juist tae his haun an’ that silly folk would hardly suspect o’ being guid eneuch for the De’il tae use.”

Claver’se looked keenly at his secretary.

“You talk like a Covenanting preacher, Scougal; yet there’s sense in your thick head.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir, the thickness is only of the bone; the brain within is that of a scholar,” answered Scougal haughtily.

Claverhouse laughed.

“Scholar you may be, but you’ll never be a soldier.”

Scougal steadied himself again. “What of the fight, sir? You live to tell the tale!—but you have told me nothing!”

“Ay—I live by a miracle,” said Claverhouse. “My enemy broke my sword, and I was at his mercy. Then he did a thing most chivalrous. Instead of striking me dead he raised his sword and saluted me, in token that I had fought worthily; and with that he galloped away.”

Scougal whistled softly. “That proves it to demonstration, as we scholars say.”

“Proves what?” asked Claverhouse.

“Proves beyond shadow, tittle, or iota of doubt that your enemy was no ghost, nor yet human being-disguised, but the De’il himsel’ *in propria persona*.”

“I do not follow your reasoning,” said Claverhouse. “Why so sure?”

Under cover of the dark Scougal made a wry face. He remembered he had spoken of his master as a donnert sumph. Here was proof indeed! He had not the wit of a child! He could not work to a conclusion unless every step were set before him as on a dunce’s slate.

“You told me, sir, your enemy behaved like a gentleman, saluting you instead of slaying you.”

“I spoke the truth,” said Claverhouse.

“Well,” said Scougal, “those best acquaint wi’ the De’il say he’s a perfect gentleman; so you may take it as proved that your enemy was Auld Nick himsel’ on three grounds: *imprimis*: he charmed the bullets out of your pistols; *secundo*: he made use of earthly weapons, as is the way o’ the De’il when he has commerce wi’ human folk; *tertio*: he showed himself a perfect gentleman. There’s nae mair tae be said, sir; the De’il it was—none other; and I offer you my humble duty and most loyal congratulations on your victory.”

The secretary spoke with unction. His voice rang with the pride of one who has demonstrated a theorem. Claverhouse who, like most of the dragoons, was a victim of superstitions most childish was impressed by his henchman's reasoning.

" 'Sdeath, Scougal," he said. "You make out a most excellent case for the Devil!"

"I make out no case, sir, asking your pardon. I state incontrovertible facts, and frae the facts I make sound deductions. Your opponent was the Devil himself—and none other!"

Claverhouse stroked his chin with his right hand.

"Then I am doubly fortunate to be within sight of the Brig End of Dumfries," and he waved his hand towards the blazing beacon on Devorgilla's bridge.

"There are few men, my lord, who could have come through such a fight. But you are a brave man; your men know you are a brave man! Mistress Margaret Lansburgh called you a brave man in my hearing a few short hours agone."

Had it not been for the darkness Scougal would have seen the colour mount in his officer's cheeks.

"Said she so, Scougal?" he asked.

"With her own lips—in my hearing," answered Scougal firmly. "She thinks well of you, my lord!"

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders, as though to convey to his henchman that the opinion of Mistress Margaret was of no account. But in his heart he was whispering to himself: "The little witch! She plays with me—she loves me all the time and teases me with 'nays' to fan my ardour. Ah well—she shall yet be mine!"

As they drew near the Brig End Scougal slowed down his horse, and fell some half-dozen paces behind his master. It was thus they crossed the Bridge of Devorgilla, the Nith lapping softly against the red stone piers and whispering, so it seemed to Claver'se, like a lovesick maid. They entered the town by the Vennel Port, the Watch challenging them, but letting them pass when assured of their identity.

As he rode up the narrow wynd Claverhouse was deep in thought. He had fought the Devil, of that there could be no doubt, for Scougal's reasoning was conclusive. And he had fought so well that the Devil had

ceded him the honours of the day. Men did not call him brave for nothing! Few, if any, of his friends would have fought such a battle with a like courage! His heart began to swell with pride; he was consumed with self-esteem! It had been a great day, and best of all that little witch, Mistress Margaret (bless her!), thought well of him. He was in high fettle when he dismounted at the door of his lodgings, and handed over his horse to Scougal with a cheery “Good night!”

CHAPTER XVII

Love laughs at locksmiths and lovers may crack fingers of derision at the King and all his men. As there was danger in their meeting every tryst became an adventure, and because of the hindrances in the way every opportunity to meet was cherished by Margaret and Alan as a thing most precious. Hazard may snuff out the spark of love if it be a mere rush-light, but if it be that true and holy fire kindled in heaven danger serves but to fan it into an all-consuming flame. The unspoken thought that each meeting might be their last hallowed the rare moments they spent together; the uncertainties that beset them drove them to contrive occasions to meet again. Into the life of each had come a new rich joy. For Margaret the joy was all the greater because it was mixed with pain. The black dread that sometimes seized her in the night, when Alan was far away and the darkness slumbered on the hills, could not live in his presence. One sight of his loved face, one whisper from his lips, and the touch of those lips on brow or cheek, drove every shadow from her heart. And when he was gone and the old gnawing fear tried to creep back she could often drive it away with the thought of some tender word Alan had spoken, or with the comforting memory of his strong arms about her. Love and the pain of fear wrought subtly upon her, subduing her to an exquisite tenderness, so that at each new meeting her lover found her more bewitching.

And Alan, strong in his manhood and elate with that happy buoyancy that love gives to youth, counted danger as naught if only he might clasp Margaret in his arms. She was his—inalienably his, and with the happy optimism of his nature he was confident that all would yet be well, and that a way would open for their deliverance from their present troubles. Neither ever spoke of the barrier that still separated them: their loyalty to opposing causes. For Alan that barrier had ceased to exist, because he would never let himself think of it; and Margaret saw it being burned thin by the fire of love. Some day, she knew that, love compelling her, she would step across its ruins; but the time was not yet. And, woman-like, she wished to postpone that day, for to a woman the last surrender of those things she has held dear is at once a sacrament and a sacrifice, and there is a satisfying delight in the thought that the ultimate offering has yet to be made.

The thicket of trees beyond the garden at the back of Knowe had proved to be a most propitious trysting-place. In the dusk of the warm summer evenings Margaret would sit in her room listening for a signal. She had

bidden her father “good night,” and he had betaken himself, with hands clasped behind his back and head bent, in a reverie to his study. Had she been less occupied with dreams of love, Margaret might have noticed that the Laird was living more and more in the aloofness of his own thoughts. Even at meal-times he said little, and often when she spoke to him he answered tardily and not to the point. He was fighting a battle in his soul, the issue of which was uncertain. He did not confide in his daughter; often he seemed unaware of her presence; and had her mind not been so absorbed in affairs of her own that she almost failed to notice his preoccupation, she might have taken umbrage. But she had no just reason to show resentment since her father’s fits of abstraction marched so well with her own desire. Occupied with his own thoughts, he would be the less prone to take an untimely interest in her affairs, and half the joy of youthful love lies in its secrecy. Some day she would tell him of the wonderful thing that had come into her life, but, as yet, she was fain to keep her secret to herself. So night by night she went early to her room and waited. All was still, save her own tumultuous heart, when suddenly from the copse an owl would hoot three times, and once again. None but Margaret and Elspeth knew the meaning of that strange repeated and broken call, and Elspeth was a willing conspirator in this stratagem of love.

A light would flash for an instant at Margaret’s window, the owl would hoot again, and then throwing a scarf of lace over her lustrous hair, with a heart keeping time to the quick race of her feet, Margaret would slip out, steal wraith-like down the garden, and pass through a gap in the hedge into the enchanted wood where Alan awaited her. She entered the wood almost reverently, as though it were a holy place, and a maidenly reserve fell upon her, as though she were abashed by her own effrontery; but her shyness and confusion fell from her when Alan seized her hands and, stooping, raised them to his lips. Nor did he let them go till he had drawn her towards him and taken her in his arms, and in that radiant moment the hours of heart-sick waiting were as naught.

Would you know what they said to each other, this rebel lover, this loyal maid? Then you must ask the soft night wind that has wafted so many tender messages from lover’s lips, or the old wise moon. The love of a man for a maid, of a maid for a man, is as old as human-kind; and love knows but one language, which changes not with the ages. They spoke to each other in little whispers and demure silences, and sometimes the silences were the more eloquent, for in them heart spoke to heart unhindered by the lameness of words. For words are crippled messengers when heart cries to heart. And, at

the end, when the moment of farewell drew near, Margaret would lift her face and knowing her heart an-hungered would whisper, “To-morrow?”

And Alan would sigh, and answer: “I would it were possible; but——”

Then Margaret would slip from his arms and chide him with upraised ringer. “Then you love me not, Mr. Rebel! There are no ‘buts’ in true love.”

“Little brown squirrel!” he would cry, “an’ you say so, to-morrow it shall be.”

Then she would cling to him timidly, afraid for him, and whisper warnings of danger, and say, “No! no!—you must not come, you risk too much for me.”

And he would laugh quietly, defying danger for love’s sake.

And once of an evening, moved by a sudden dread, she drew his head down and whispered: “I know you fear no man; but what of the Ghostly Rider—this spectre most awful? What if you should meet it? I shudder at the thought!”

He straightened his shoulders, then held her at arm’s length, looking into her face.

“What does my little maid know of the Ghostly Rider?” he asked.

“I know but little,” she answered, “but I have heard so much talk. It is a fearsome spectre. It has driven terror into the hard hearts of Dalyell’s men, and I have heard it fought with my Lord Claverhouse, and, but for me, my lord might have slain it.” She hung her head like one guilty, and Alan drew her to him and whispered:

“But for you, sweeting! What do you mean?”

She raised her head and whispered:

“The night it happened my lord had supped at Knowe. I drew the bullets from his pistols and left him unarmed!”

Alan laughed softly. “Oh fie, little maid,” he said. “Why did you play him such a scurvy trick?”

Her voice trembled a little, as though she stifled a sob.

“I did it for your sake, beloved. I feared he might come upon you by accident, and draw upon you to your deadly hurt. Besides—besides——” she faltered, and buried her face on Alan’s shoulder and fell silent. When she

raised her head again there were tears on her cheeks. Alan comforted her gently and waited. At last she spoke.

"I had a grudge against him. He tried to kiss me—and my lips are yours alone."

She held her face up to his then, nestling close, so that there was naught for a brave man and fond lover to do but kiss her.

Then Alan spoke with passion.

"The unhallowed ruffian! Were he here, at a sword's length, I should split his head," and there was such ire in his words that Margaret trembled.

"Nay, nay!" she said, and held up a warning finger. "Be not eaten up of jealousy. He never touched me. Had he done so my hands would have made his cheeks smart; but I could not forget his churlishness, and, for love of you, I tampered with his weapons. But my heart sometimes upbraids me—for I put him in deadly peril."

Alan laughed; his wrath had melted.

"Have no fear for me, my sweeting. If report lies not, this ghostly rider deals kindly with the hillmen. He has never yet laid hands on a Covenanter except to save him; but he has played havoc with the discipline of the troopers, and shown them to be white-livered cowards."

And then, because the moments were precious, and there are better things than spectres for a man and a maid to talk of when love fills their hearts, they thought no more of the ghostly rider.

Every tryst ended with the same long-drawn sweetness of farewell. "No, Alan," she would say, "I do but tease you. A little brown squirrel must not come between a man and his duty. To see you is bliss indeed; but do not court peril to-morrow. Come, an God will, the night after. A woman can wait!" And she would twist a finger playfully in the black lock that strayed on his forehead, and pulling his face down kiss him quickly on the lips. Then she would dart away like a bird, but only to stop and turn and trip back again to say with trembling lips: "Oh beloved, have a care, and court no hazard to come to me. God keep you, Alan!" and she would steal away with bowed head into the kindly dusk.

And Alan would stand gazing after her till the shroud of the darkness hid her; nor would he leave his place till he saw a candle gleam in her window. And the owl would hoot again; then silence would fall upon the wood, broken only by the crack of a twig as a quick foot stepped upon it. But far

away toward the hills Alan would turn and see that little light still shining, and his heart would burn within him for joy of loving and being loved.

They had met thus in the sanctuary of the wood on several occasions, but a night came when Alan was driven to doubt whether, for Margaret's sake, they could with safety keep another tryst under those kindly trees. Margaret had left him. Her candle had gleamed in her window as a signal that all was well, and he had turned to make for his hiding-place among the hills, when he was startled by the sight of a shadow moving furtively behind the trunk of a tree. He stole forward quickly on tiptoe, uncertain whether or not his eyes had deceived him. Then the shadow took body suddenly, and revealed itself as a man who sprang out of cover and raced off as Alan approached. Alan gave hot chase. At all costs he must lay this spy by the heels. The fugitive dodged in and out among the trees with an ease and speed that argued a clear knowledge of his surroundings. But in spite of this Alan was gaining ground, when disaster befell him. His foot caught in the uncovered root of a tree, and he was thrown headlong. So great his speed that the fall robbed him of breath and stunned him for a moment, and when he scrambled to his feet again there was not a trace of the fugitive to be seen. He searched the wood long and anxiously, but without avail. He was perplexed and ill at ease. The fugitive might be nothing more than some hapless gangrel-body who had stolen into the wood for a night's shelter. But he might, on the other hand, be a spy who had dogged his footsteps and followed him into the wood with evil intent. The haste of his flight added weight to the idea that his motives were sinister. For himself he cared little. He was already a man proscribed, with a penalty on his head, and he knew that the King's men believed him to be dead. But this watcher might have recognized him and, recognizing him, have seen, as there was little doubt he had, his meeting with Margaret. And to consort with a Covenanter was to render oneself suspect. Nay—worse than that—the stern logic of the King's men held that to shelter, befriend, or have dealings with one of the proscribed was a crime. Margaret was in danger! He had, in the foolishness of his love, encouraged her to take this risk. At all costs he must warn her. He sat on a moss-grown tree-trunk and tried to unravel the tangle of his thoughts. He could not by any signal let her know that night. He dared not any longer make use of the crevice in the old oak tree. He must think of another means of reaching her, and, above all, they must find another sanctuary for their love-trysts.

It was long past midnight when he knocked stealthily upon the blacksmith's cottage door.

CHAPTER XVIII

Margaret sat on the top of the long girnel or meal-chest in the kitchen at Craigend. She watched Mary Watret, the farmer's wife, as with two deft sweeps of her knife she divided the great circular oatcake on the baking-board into three. Mary laid the cakes on the girdle over the fire, and stood in the ingle-nook with a hand on her hip. She spoke with vigour:

"An' I juist said tae the curate, says I, when ye ca' the roll in the Kirk next Sabbath Day, an' ye miss Mary Watret, juist mark her present. Dinna forget I'm fell bad wi' rheumatics!"

"And what did the curate say?" asked Margaret.

"What could he say but Ay!" answered Mary. "Ye see, he had twa pun o' my guid butter in ae pooch, an' a wee cream cheese in the ither, an' if he's a man ava, he'll no let on tae Dalyell that I'm no Kirk greedy."

Margaret laughed. "And what of John?" she asked. "Is he privileged to absent himself as well?"

"Oh, John," said his wife. "John wull tak' nae hairm frae the thowless doctrine o' yon chiel. He's the best haun at sleepin' through a sermon in the hale pairish: an' that's sayin' a lot. So hearin' the curate does him nae hairm, as he's asleep afore the man begins his havers—an' it gi'es Craigend a guid name wi' the persecutors. John's reglar: I ha'e the rheumatics: the curate gets his butter an' cheese for nocht: so we're a' satisfied, an' there's nocht mair to be said."

Mary turned the oatcakes deftly.

"Ye see, it's this way. Baith John an' me are what Maister Welsh would ca' lukewarm. There's nayther o' us keen ae wey or the ither. We dinna want tae be fashed. So we juist tak' the easy road: though God kens, for He can read the hert, that Mary Watret would be a Covenanter oot-an'-oot if she had mair courage."

"There are many such, I imagine," said Margaret. "But I hear you have done many a kind thing for the hillmen."

"Wheesht! Mistress Margaret," said Mary, looking anxiously towards the door.

Margaret's presence at Craigend was the result of Alan's discovery that the wood behind Knowe was no longer a safe meeting-place. With the help of Willie Stott and Elspeth, he had succeeded in warning her to make no further use of the old oak tree for messages, and to listen no longer for the strange owl with its thrice-repeated hoot. Instead, he had asked her to make friends writh the good wife of Craigend, a task easy enough since Craigend was part of the land of Knowe, and Margaret knew Mary Watret already. So once a week, always on the same day, since the time of the warning, Margaret had ridden over to this little farm-house that nestled in a hollow at the foot of one of the hills. She did not stable her horse, but fastened it to a ring by the door, and waited in the kitchen. When a whaup wailed thrice and a peewit called four times in quick succession she knew that Alan was at hand, and, stealing out, she found him waiting for her in a sheltered place nearby. And when the happy tryst was over Margaret rode back to Knowe, elate with the knowledge that her hunted man was still safe, and that he loved her dearly.

But to-day the signal was long in coming. She had already waited an hour, and although she had heard more than one whaup crying she had not heard her own "moorbird," with the strange call that was sweet as music to her ears.

Mary lifted her bake-board from the table and, going to the door, brushed the crumbs from it. She stood for a moment in the doorway, and Margaret heard her give a little startled cry. When she came back to the kitchen there was a look of awe on her face.

"What is wrong?" asked Margaret in a tremor of fear, and she hurried to the door.

The sight she saw filled her with alarm. At some distance, quartering the hill-side in open order, was a party of dragoons. She drew back lest, framed in the doorway, she should be seen by one of them, but she continued to watch anxiously from within the house. Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps, and breathless, dishevelled, limping, Alan, crouching close to the wall, dodged in at the door.

She closed the door quickly and threw her arms about him.

"Alan—Oh, Alan!" she cried. "You are in danger!"

Alan comforted her. "Be of good cheer, Margaret," he said. "They have not seen me. They are searching for Mr. Welsh, but he has evaded them."

“But you!” she cried. “They will take you instead. Oh, Alan!” and her brown eyes glistened in the dim light behind the door.

And then a quick thought came to her in a flash.

“My horse, Alan; mount him; he is at the door; he will carry you swiftly and far! Oh, haste you!”

She threw open the door, but almost as quickly closed it again.

“It is too late,” she said. “They are closing in on every side.”

It was then that Mary Watret spoke. She was peering anxiously through the window.

“They maun ha’e seen ye, Maister Alan! They’re closing in quickly. Why didna ye keep tae the open hill?—a hoose is nae better than a trap.”

Alan looked through the window. What Margaret and Mary had said was true beyond dispute. The house was surrounded, though as yet none of the dragoons were within pistol-shot. But they were closing in steadily, and with method.

“I dared not keep to the open,” said Alan. “I twisted my foot and could not run—so I had to seek shelter. But I am not their quarry. They look for Mr. Welsh.”

“There’s nocht in that,” said Mary. “When they come tae the hoose, as come they will, they’ll tak’ you!”

Margaret gave a little startled sob. She clasped her hands and looked at Alan with eyes so full of tenderness that he was almost unmanned. But he bore himself stoutly.

“Margaret,” he said, “be brave. The end is not yet. I shall not be taken!”

Margaret twisted her fingers about each other, but did not speak. She knew that Alan was voicing a faith he did not feel. There was no means of escape: he must be taken. She darted to the window, and darted back again. “They are still nearer!” she whispered.

Alan turned quickly to Mary Watret. There was a question in his eyes which she was quick to interpret.

She shook her head. “There’s nae room in the thatch: ye daurna hide in the chimney—for they’ll look there.” She turned her head this way and that, searching for possible hiding-places, and then her anxious face lit up with sudden hope.

“Guidsakes!—the girnel: it’s near empty!” she cried, and stooping, she unlocked the meal-chest and lifted the lid. Save for an inch or two of meal lying in its bottom it was empty.

“Quickly—Oh, quick!” gasped Margaret, as she darted to the window once more, and when she turned again Alan had disappeared, and the key of the girnel was hidden in Mary Watret’s pocket.

The two women looked at each other with relief. Margaret bent close by the meal-chest.

“Are you all right, Alan?” she whispered.

A muffled assurance that heartened her came from the depths of the chest.

While Mary peeped through the window a sudden happy thought flashed into Margaret’s mind. She stooped and picked one of the toasting oatcakes from the platter on the hearth, then she seated herself on the top of the girnel and began to nibble the crisp farle.

“Mary,” she said, and her voice was calm and sure, “let me have a bowl of buttermilk.”

Mary turned from the window, taken aback by the request, but her quick wit gripped the situation in a trice.

“Guidsakes!” she exclaimed, “did ever onybody ken the like? That’ll pit them off the scent,” and she hurried away to get the buttermilk.

When, a few minutes later, Claverhouse stalked in at the door, he found Margaret seated on the top of the girnel, with her face half-buried in a bowl of milk and a farle of oatcake in her hand. He was so taken aback that for a moment he forgot the duties of courtesy.

Margaret, with wildly beating heart, but steadying herself with an iron hand, looked at him almost roguishly over the edge of the bowl.

Then, as he bowed deeply, she rose and curtsied.

“Methinks, my lord,” she said with a forced smile, “you must think me unmannerly. But this hill air whets the appetite; and Mistress Watret is a baker in a thousand.”

She seated herself on the girnel once more, as though she had not a care in the world and, like a greedy child, took another drink, and nibbled at the corner of her oatcake.

Claverhouse smiled. “There are dainties less toothsome than oatcake and buttermilk,” he said. And then he turned sharply on Mary.

“Have you seen aught of Mr. Welsh?” he cried.

“No for mony a lang day,” she answered firmly.

Claver’se looked at her sternly.

“You lie!” he said. “At this very moment Mr. Welsh is hiding here.”

“Weel, if that’s so,” said Mary undismayed, “ye ken mair o’ him that I dae. Ye’d better seek him oot.”

“We shall,” said Claverhouse. “The house is surrounded. He will not escape.”

With a coolness that astonished herself Margaret took a bite of oatcake. She spoke with her mouth half-full, the better to hide the tremor she feared might show in her voice.

“I have been here an hour or more, my lord, studying how to bake a good oatcake, for such things I did not learn in France; and I give you my word that Mistress Watret speaks the truth. Mr. Welsh is not here.”

Claverhouse looked at her.

“It is most strange,” he said. “He was in our net. We have been closing in on him all the afternoon, and less than half an hour ago one of my men swore he saw him crouch by the wall of the house.”

“I have not seen him,” said Margaret.

Claverhouse turned to Mistress Watret.

“You say Mr. Welsh is not here?”

“No, my lord,” she answered. “He’s no here.”

“Then I warn you that if our search reveals him it will go hard with you.”

Mary nodded her head. “I ken,” she said, “but he’s no here.”

He fingered one of his ringlets, then he crossed to the wide fireplace and, stooping, looked up the chimney.

The hot peat smoke scorched his eyes, so that he drew back with an angry start. He stood in the middle of the kitchen for a moment, blinking painfully. Then he fixed his eyes on the girnel, where Margaret sat demurely, her bowl of buttermilk still in her hand.

“What’s in the meal-chest?” he asked suddenly, and looked piercingly at Margaret.

Mary Watret answered. “What should be in a girnel but meal of course?” she said, evading a direct answer.

A shiver—an ice-cold wind—ran down Margaret’s back. Alan’s life was at stake; she must play her part boldly. She nibbled her oatcake slowly, as though her appetite were cloyed, and, speaking firmly, said: “I assure you, my lord, there is meal in the girnel; I saw it with my own eyes.”

Claverhouse frowned, and stroked his chin.

“We shall search the outhouses and the farmyard,” he said. “Later we shall search the house.” He shot a menacing glance at Mary and strode to the door. In a moment he came back again, accompanied by a young officer.

Margaret, looking at him quickly, recognized Lieutenant Adair.

“Take charge of the house, Adair,” said Claverhouse, “while we search the other buildings.” And with that he marched off.

Lieutenant Adair, after acknowledging Margaret’s greeting, began to pace up and down restlessly.

“I trust you have quite recovered,” said Margaret kindly.

It was then that Alan, his nostrils irritated beyond endurance by the fine meal-dust in which he was lying, sneezed loudly. The strange, uncanny noise, muffled by the thick oakboards, startled Adair, who swung round quickly and stared first at the girnel and then at Margaret.

“There’s a man in the meal-chest,” said Adair sternly, and Alan, as though to seal his fate, sneezed loudly again.

The officer leaped forward. “Who is it?” he cried.

Margaret looked at him with steadfast eyes. Her voice was firm.

“Lieutenant Adair,” she said, “once you made me a promise. Did you mean it?”

The officer looked at her quickly. “Yes!” he said. “What of it?”

“Then I hold you to your word,” she said. “My betrothed, a hunted man, is in the meal-chest.” Her voice broke. The strain had taken toll of her: her brown eyes filled with tears.

“Your betrothed?” he repeated slowly, as though his ears had deceived him, and he looked at Margaret with perplexity written large on every line of his face.

She bowed her head. Adair strode up and down the kitchen in a fever of alarm; then he went to the door and looked out. As he came back Margaret raised her eyes to his: they were full of entreaty and pain. The young officer was at his wits’ end.

“I shall help you if I can,” he said. “But we are in desperate case. When my lord returns he will have that girnel opened.”

He strode up and down again, looking this way and that, as though to seek new shelter for the hunted man; but finding none, his face grew dark, and his brow knotted with dismay.

Suddenly he stopped in the middle of the floor.

“Quick,” he said. “Open the girnel: tie a wet kerchief over your betrothed’s face. He will then sneeze no more—and leave the rest to me.”

He spoke with confidence, as one who had caught a glimmer of light amid darkness impenetrable.

In a moment Mary, who had been standing by the fire with awe on her face ever since Alan’s unlucky sneeze had revealed him, whipped the lid up, and Alan raised his head. He looked a sorry sight with hair and clothing powdered with meal.

Margaret drew a kerchief from her bosom, dipped it quickly into the buttermilk, and tied it firmly over Alan’s nose and mouth. As Alan was about to lower his head again, Adair stepped forward. He did not look at Alan, but he thrust his hand into the bottom of the meal-chest, and withdrew it full of meal.

As Mary locked the chest he sprinkled the meal in a little heap near the girnel, and held out his hand for the key. He looked at Margaret with meaning.

“We risk a deadly hazard,” he said. “But no Adair goes back on his word. Trust me! and, as you love this man, I charge you, say naught whate’er befall.”

Margaret thanked him with shining eyes. She dared not trust herself to speak. Though the lieutenant spoke with boldness, she knew that she depended on a hope that was almost forlorn. But nothing was to be gained

by showing the white feather. She must be bold and play her own part bravely.

When Claver'se returned a few minutes later he found his lieutenant standing stolidly in the middle of the floor, gazing at the meal-chest, where Margaret had seated herself once more with another farle of cake in her hand.

He looked at Margaret curiously. Her presence in that little kitchen made it a royal room. She raised the curved farle to her lips, and smiled at him.

"My lord," she said, "come sit beside me. I have little doubt that Mistress Watret will let you taste her excellent oatcake: and her buttermilk is of a most pleasing acidity—not sour as vinegar, like poor wine—but of a refreshing tartness."

Lieutenant Adair caught his breath, astonished at the spirit with which this pretty creature bore herself. Of a truth she was a brave maid.

She drew her skirt aside to make room for Claver'se, who, with a smile, seated himself. Without a tremor of the hand she broke the farle she held and offered half of it to him. He took it, and tasted it appreciatively. Mistress Watret pressed a bowl of buttermilk upon him. He savoured its goodness.

"Most excellent oatcake," he said, "and of a crispness!"

He took another bite and looked at Margaret with passion in his eyes. She, playing her part bravely, though her heart was turned to ice, nibbled her farle and looked at him out of the corner of her eyes, with a coy glance that stirred his heart like wine. He remembered what Scougal had told him: "She thinks well of you, my lord." His self-pride mounted high. But this was no time for love's sweet dalliance, and in the presence of his lieutenant and Mistress Watret he must control himself.

He darted a glance at Adair. "Have you searched the house?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Adair promptly. "I have searched nothing but the girnel. I thought a man might hide within it, for it is of a size."

The fragment of oatcake in Margaret's hand crumbled, crushed by her fingers. Had Claverhouse looked at her then, he would have seen the last trace of colour ebb from her cheeks.

"And you found?" said Claverhouse.

Adair took a step forward and, stooping, picked up some of the meal that a few minutes before he had scattered on the ground.

“Most excellent meal, my lord,” he said, and held out his hand.

Claverhouse took up a few of the grains and let them trickle slowly through his fingers.

“It is good meal,” he said,—“hard pin-head meal. Most excellent provender for hungry horsemen. If I mind right, Dalyell told me you are responsible for supplies.”

“I am,” said Adair.

“Then take this—girnel and all. It will plenish your store well; and let this good woman have a note of hand which her guidman can redeem for its price at my office in Dumfries next market day.”

“That was in my own mind,” said Adair promptly.

He looked at Margaret, seeking to tell her with honest eyes not to despair. He saw her lips tremble. But she steadied herself and took courage again. For Alan’s sake, so long as there was the faintest gleam of hope, she must be brave.

“My storehouse is but a mile away in the old barn at Springland. Six men could carry that girnel easily—full as it is. I shall see to it, my lord.”

Claverhouse turned to Mary Watret, who stood twisting her apron nervously. Her face was ashen, as though it had been sprinkled with her own good meal.

“We are taking your meal-kist, my good woman,” he said.

Mary began to cry. Her stratagem was defeated. She trembled for Alan. That meal-chest must not go! It would mean Alan’s certain death.

“Ye would rob a puir woman, my lord,” she said.

“There is no robbery about it,” said Claverhouse reassuringly. “We pay for what we take. I have little doubt that Lieutenant Adair will return your girnel when it is empty.”

“Without fail,” said Adair firmly, and turning to Mary so that Claverhouse could not see his face, he made a signal to her with his eyes.

Mary dabbed at her wet face with her apron, but said no more.

Adair went to the door, and in a moment returned with six soldiers.

“At your convenience, my lord,” he said, “we will take the meal-chest.”

Claverhouse smiled. “And rob a lady of her chair,” he said, and laughed at Margaret.

“Let the men search the house first——” and he waved his hand.

He moved more closely to Margaret.

“It is most strange,” he said. “We have failed to find our quarry in the outhouses or the farmyard. Yet we had him in a net. I am sure he is somewhere close at hand.”

Margaret’s heart stood still. The walls of the kitchen reeled about her: the clay floor seemed to rise like the billows of the sea. She gasped for breath. With a staggering beat her heart recovered again. She forced herself to speak.

“I have heard,” she said, “that the hillmen take cover with more skill than the foxes.”

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders and looked at Mary Watret.

“Our trouble is,” he said, “that even those who profess loyalty to the King have soft hearts for the rebels. We do our duty in the face of great difficulties.”

Meantime Lieutenant Adair and the six soldiers had searched the house with care. They had looked in every corner: thrust swords into the thatch: thrown the bedclothes from the beds: examined the chimney. Their search was fruitless.

Adair reported failure. Claverhouse fingered a ringlet.

“I am beaten,” he said. “I thought when Dalyell asked me to captain his men for a day I should be able to show him a good bag of ‘moorbirds.’ But my luck is out.”

He rose from the meal-chest, and Margaret, steadying her shaking limbs, held out her hand to him.

“Your hand, my lord,” she said, and he raised her up.

At a word from Adair, the six dragoons lifted the meal-chest. With eyes haunted by love and fear, Margaret watched them go. They could hardly pass the doorway. She looked through the window and saw them walking slowly down the hill, with that burden—so precious to her—borne high on their shoulders. Lieutenant Adair had mounted his horse, and rode beside them. There was hope in that—for he had shown himself friendly—but the

hope was no more than a tiny flicker, the last faint spark of a dying rush-light.

The voice of Claver'se struck harshly on her ears.

"You ride to Knowe, Mistress Margaret," he said. "May I ride with you?"

Margaret schooled herself sternly.

"If your lordship pleases," she said, and forced a wan smile to her pale face.

CHAPTER XIX

Margaret reined in her horse. She had urged him to the gallop the moment she and Claverhouse left Craigend, for she was in no mood for talk, and her anxious heart sought solace in the sting of the wind.

The gallop whipped the colour back to her wan cheeks. The wind, catching her hair, had tossed her curls into pretty disarray, so that Claverhouse, reining in his horse beside her, and looking at her with a lover's eyes, thought he had never seen her look so fair.

"A jolly gallop, Mistress Margaret," he said. "You ride right well."

She mastered herself with a high hand. The burning torment in her breast might consume her: it should not reveal itself in her words.

"I have been in the saddle since I was a child," she answered simply.

To her surprise the mere act of speech eased her pain. She laughed—almost gaily. At any cost of suffering to herself she must play her part, and for Alan's sake be brave. He was still in danger most dread. She had the pledged word of young Adair. His eyes were honest: he had helped her nobly, and would doubtless help her still. But Alan was in jeopardy. At any moment the dragoons who bore that girnel on their shoulders might learn its secret. And then!——She dared not think of the issue.

Meantime she could be of help. She must, at any sacrifice of pride or feeling, keep her companion's mind away from the dark events of the afternoon. He was crafty. He might yet grow suspicious and, hurrying back to Springland, insist on seeing the contents of that meal-chest before Adair could compass Alan's deliverance. She must hold Claverhouse in her toils at all hazards.

She knew that she had power to charm him still, so, though her heart was heavy, she beat her dolour down and forced a smile to her face, and gay, carefree words to her lips.

Beyond her wildest dreams she succeeded. She cast a glamour over Claverhouse, till his pulses throbbed in his temples and his brain was almost dizzy with delight.

"What a maid she is—a delightful little witch!" he told himself. Was there ever a woman like her?—such a strange delightful blend of grace and

wit: of gaiety and sense: of elusiveness and alluring charm. Were she his, there were no heights to which he might not aspire. If any woman were worth a soldier's winning, it was this sweet wild rose!

He drew his horse more closely to hers: so closely that as they walked he could have touched her had he stretched out his hand.

He made love to her openly, with his great sad eyes and the whispered messages of his lips.

And, for Alan's sake, Margaret found words wherewith to answer him. She did not give him reason to flatter himself that his suit went well. But the gay words with which she teased him, the light taunts with which she upbraided him for what she called his martial boldness, served but to inflame his blood and feed his self-esteem.

And all the while she was suffering torture: and every word this ardent lover spoke added to her pain. Yet she could bear it all for Alan—dear, wayward Alan!

A respite came unexpectedly. They were riding near the river when suddenly Claverhouse drew rein and halted. His eyes had caught a glimpse of a bowed figure moving mysteriously by the edge of the stream. He sat for a moment at gaze, then he urged his horse towards the river. Margaret followed him. In a moment they were standing beside an old man, who had risen to his feet at their approach. He raised a wet hand to his bonnet in salutation, and addressed Claverhouse without sign of fear.

"It's a bonnie day, sir," he said.

Claverhouse looked him up and down before he answered.

"You are Sam'l McMuldrow," he said.

"That very same: by the Grace o' God apothecary at the Vennel Port: at your service, sir."

"And what do you here?" asked Claverhouse, challenging him.

The man stooped, and picking up a linen bag withdrew some leaves and roots from it.

"I'm plenishing my stores, sir. I'm juist gaitherin' a few simples, sir, being weel acquaint wi' the remedial properties o' herbs."

The answer should have disarmed any suspicion, so simply was it spoken, so truthful did it seem. But Claverhouse was not to be put off.

He looked sternly down at the apothecary, who stood waiting, with his roots in his hand.

"Sam'l," he said, "I have some knowledge of you. Why do you always come to Irongray for your simples? Are none to be found on the other side of the Nith?"

Samuel looked at Claverhouse with a whimsical smile.

"The best dandelions in a' Scotland grow in Irongray; an' the tormentil on the sides o' Skeoch canna be beaten for potency. Ye wadna come between a man an' his business, sir."

Claverhouse smiled.

"Well—have a care, Sam'l," he said in a voice of warning. "Irongray is a parish full of disaffection: and you visit it once a week. That is enough to make you suspect in these disturbed times."

The old man raised his hand, still clutching the dandelion roots, and scratched his head.

"I ken nocht o' disaffection, sir. That's no a disease o' the body, an' naebody has consulted me about it. But taraxacum micht cure it, sir, an' the pairish o' Irongray grows guid dandelions."

Claverhouse laughed.

"It's a disease of the spirit: a disease of loyalty, Sam'l. Lead and steel are its best antidotes."

He said no more, but turned his horse, and Margaret and he returned to the road. She urged her horse to the gallop again. It prolonged her respite from her lover's pleadings. She did not draw rein till she was within a mile of Knowe, under the beech trees in whose high branches the cawing rooks were gathering. The purple shadows nestled among the soft whispering foliage, and mantled the grey boles of the trees. A gentle evening wind, odorous with the incense of flowers, played about them. It warmed the blood of Claverhouse like wine.

"Mistress Margaret," he said, "you do but play with me. Yet, simple soldier though I am, I know that in such wise a maid often disguises her affections. Look into your heart, Mistress Margaret! Surely you find love for me there. The love that consumes me must have kindled some answering flame in you."

Margaret did not answer. In the plumbless depths of woe that filled her there was no answer but a tear. She bowed her head—and turned her face away. This foolish suitor—how he tortured her!

Claverhouse, misreading her silence, took heart of courage. He spoke from the heights of his self-esteem.

"Mistress Margaret," he said, "no maid could be so bright and gay, so charged with sunshine and light, and sweetness most adorable, if her heart were not filled with the joy of love. Look into your heart, I beg you! Is not love, happy love, the fount of perfect joy? You blind yourself to its presence. You do yourself and me injustice by not acknowledging it."

Margaret sighed, and turned her head so that she looked into the gleaming eyes he bent upon her.

"My lord," she said, "one who knows well tells me that love is most exquisite pain."

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a deep saying," he answered; "but it is not true. As I know it, as you would know it if you would look into your heart, you would know it as happiness unspeakable. Do you not, will you not, Mistress Margaret, own to your love for me?"

It was then that Margaret turned upon him.

"My lord," she said, "if I have misled you, forgive me. I do not love you: I can never love you. I have looked deep into my heart, and that is its answer. I prithee hurt me no more with your vain pleadings."

She bit her lip to hide its tremor. The blood flooded into her face, and ebbed again. Her eyes filled with tears.

Claverhouse was silent. Her words had stunned him.

They rode on together without another word. At the gate of Knowe they parted.

"I was minded to ask you, my lord, to sup with us to-night. But I am too distraught. I should make but a sorry hostess. Forgive me! Mayhap some other evening you will honour us with your presence."

She held out her hand, and he bent and raised it to his lips.

"I understand," he answered simply. " 'Tis better so," and turning his horse towards Dumfries rode off at a gallop.

When she reached her room Margaret threw herself on her bed and sobbed passionately. It was thus that Elspeth found her.

"What ails ye, my bonnie bairn?" she asked tenderly.

Margaret told her all. The old woman sought to comfort her with a confidence she did not feel.

"Dinna break yer hert, lassie," she whispered. "The sodger wull keep his word. I saw signs o' grace in him afore he left us, an' God is guid."

Long after Knowe was asleep that night Margaret kept vigil at her window. Tortured by fears that drove all slumber from her eyes, she rose from her bed and, seating herself by the window, leaned her elbows on the sill. The cold stone touching her throbbing breast dulled its fierce pain. Her eyes sought the hills, and wandered from them to the starry sky. The moon sank: the night deepened, and black darkness filled her heart.

In that moment of utter desolation there came a sharp tap upon her window. She drew back affrighted, her hands clasped on her breast.

The tap came again—hard, and clear. Some one had thrown a pebble! With trembling hands she threw the casement open and, leaning out, looked down. Far below her she saw a face upturned, and the dearest voice in all the world called softly to her, "All is well."

Adair had kept his word!

CHAPTER XX

"The iron hand, Murdoch, the iron hand! That's the only measure for rebels," and Dalyell clenched his strong fists till the sinews at his wrists stood out like cords.

"You may trust me, Sir Thomas," answered Murdoch. "I have learned my lesson in a guid school."

The two were closeted in the low-roofed garret of "The Plough Inn" at Holywood. On the table between them stood two pewter tankards. Dalyell raised his and took a long draught, then wiped the clinging froth from the heavy moustache that hid his mouth. Murdoch, with finger and thumb, snuffed the guttering candle that stood nearest him. The light burned more brightly.

Dalyell waved a hand towards it.

"If ye handle rebellion wi' velvet gloves, Murdoch, ye dae nae mair than snuff the candle, and the flame burns the better. If ye grip it firmly, and crush it hard, the flame gangs oot."

Murdoch nodded assent.

Dalyell thrust his hands in his pockets and leaned back in his chair.

"It's no every ane I wad trust as I'm trustin' you, Alec. This call to Binns couldna hae come at a waur time, for there's muckle hereawa' that needs my personal attention. But I think a lot o' ye, Alec; and ye've a chance tae win yer spurs."

"I'll do my best," answered Murdoch.

"And abune a' deal oot summary justice. That has been my wye ever since the victory at Pentland. I'm a plain man as ye weel ken: and, being a soldier, I'm a man o' my word."

Murdoch moved a little uneasily in his chair. He knew what was coming, for he had heard it many times before. Dalyell was a man with a grievance.

"Ye may ha'e heard tell that at Pentland the rebels surrendered on condition that they be treated as prisoners o' war. I gave them my word, an' I meant it. But Shairp, 'the holy man o' Crail,' the president o' the Council, made me a liar." The old man's lip curled in a savage sneer as he continued: "He took eleven o' the foremost, an' had them tried by the criminal court.

They pleaded my promise o' mercy. 'Sir Thomas Dalyell,' they said, as they had every richt to, 'pledged his word,' but their plea was wiped oot by a quibble. 'Ye were pardoned as soldiers,' says Shairp, 'but ye are not acquitted as subjects o' the King, an' maun stand yer trial,' and he hanged and quartered the lot o' them. An' so Tam Dalyell gangs doon tae history as a liar, a' because o' the hair-splittin' an' private jealousy o' a double-dealer like Shairp."

The yellow eyes gleamed, the huge nostrils quivered with anger. Dalyell took another deep draught of his ale, and went on:

"Tak' tent o' men that use their releegion for their political advancement. Ye canna trust ane o' them."

"I had heard, Sir Thomas, that Sharp played you false," said Murdoch.

"Ay! an' it's true. An' it's because o' that I'm reckoned a fierce an' bloodthirsty tyrant by the rebels. I'd sooner execute judgment on the spot, an' run the risk noo an' then o' hangin' a man that maybe doesna a'thegether deserve it, than chance ha'ein' ma guid name smirched by the casuistry o' a wheen politicians in Edinburgh. I tell ye, Alec, there's less cunning in a fox than in a politician. They're a' liars!"

Murdoch laughed loudly, but stifled his laughter suddenly as a sharp knock sounded on the door.

"Come in!" cried Dalyell loudly.

The door was thrown open and a soldier entered. He saluted Sir Thomas, and stood at attention.

"Weel?" said Dalyell, looking his man up and down with piercing eyes.

"There's a gangrel-body below would ha'e word wi' ye, sir."

"What like is he?"

"He's no muckle tae look at, sir. He's ragged, bare-fit, starved-lookin', an' far frae clean; but he says he has a message that he maun deliver tae yer ain sel'."

"Humph!" said Dalyell, as he looked at Murdoch. "We'd better see this tatie-bogle," and turning to the soldier added: "Bring him up: but dinna forget tae run yer hands owre his rags tae see he carries nae weapons."

The soldier saluted and clattered down the stairs, while Murdoch took a pistol from his belt and, after seeing to its priming, laid it before him on the table.

In a moment the door was pushed open again, and through it was ushered a gaunt, furtive-eyed man, with unkempt hair, slack lips, and restless hands. Through the rents in his faded clothing his grimy skin showed here and there. He kept twisting his ragged bonnet nervously between his fingers. The soldier behind him pushed him towards the table, and on a sign from Murdoch withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Dalyell, sitting erect in his chair, glowered at the man, bullying him with his eyes, then growled angrily:

"What do you want wi' me?"

"Beggin' yer pardon, Sir Thomas, I've news for ye. But I want my price."

Dalyell looked meaningly at Murdoch, then turned his eyes quickly upon the stranger.

"I buy nae pig in a poke. Say yer say, an' I'll reward ye accordin' tae its value."

The man laughed—a thin, silly giggle—and leered at Murdoch with his red eyes. "I'm no as green as I look, Sir Thomas—but I'm a puir man. I want my deserts."

Dalyell struck the table with his clenched fist and spoke angrily.

"By the look o' ye that's a strong tree branch an' a guid hemp tow. If ye've ocht worth tellin', get on wi't. If ye've naething but auld wives' havers, clear oot afore I fling ye doon the stairs." The old warrior moved in his chair as though about to execute his threat.

The man stood silently for a moment, awed by the menace in Dalyell's eyes, then he began to search his rags and produced from among them a little square of dull metal which he threw on the table. It fell inert, and did not ring.

"Tak' a look at that, Sir Thomas," he said, and grinned so that his yellow teeth showed between his bloodless lips.

Sir Thomas picked it up, while Murdoch quickly snuffed a candle, and together the two studied the object as it lay in Dalyell's palm. It was a piece of thin lead, cut roughly into a tiny square, and on its surface were stamped the letters L.S. Dalyell turned it over.

"A token," whispered Murdoch. Dalyell nodded his head.

"Where did ye come by this?" he asked.

“Are ye satisfied noo, Sir Thomas, that I ken something worth siller?” asked the man impudently.

Dalyell glowered at him angrily. “I’d ha’e ye understand, my man, I’m no here to answer your questions. Get on wi’ yer story. Where did ye come by this? Answer on the instant, or I’ll make it hot for ye!”

The man was awed by the ferocity of the look on Dalyell’s face. He swallowed nervously.

“There’s a wheen fowk in Irongray, Sir Thomas, that want watching, and ane o’ them’s Wullie Stott, the blacksmith. I found that in the smiddy.”

Dalyell turned to Murdoch. “We’ve aye reckoned Stott to be loyal, Murdoch,” he said. “We’ve naething against him?”

“Nothing,” answered Murdoch, “that I know of. He did well for young Adair.”

The man laughed impudently. “Them that ken could tell ye a lot. I’ve been watchin’ Wullie. For weeks he’s been workin’ at nicht in the smiddy behin’ steekit doors, makin’ them things; an’ yestreen, juist afore scraich o’ day, he cam oot, but didna bar the door. So I stepped in an’ found that token amang the stour.”

Dalyell and Murdoch exchanged glances.

“He has been making tokens for weeks, has he?” asked Dalyell.

“I’m tellin’ ye,” answered the man. “He has made thoosans o’ them. He had a heavy bag in his haun last nicht.”

Murdoch whispered something to Sir Thomas.

“Umphm!” said Dalyell, and stroked his beard. “And can you that kens sae muckle tell us the time an’ place o’ the conventicle?”

The man shook his head. “No me, Sir Thomas; but nae doot Wullie kens, an’ ye can speir at him.”

The eyes of the “Muscovy beast” dilated.

“Think of it, Murdoch!—think of it. A holy fair—wi’ some thousands o’ folk there. We micht smash the rebels at ae stroke,” and he rubbed his hands gleefully together.

“A great opportunity to take them unawares,” said Murdoch.

The spy, heartened by these words of approval, cast thirsty eyes upon the untouched tankard of ale that stood at Murdoch's elbow, and stretched a skinny hand towards it.

"Daur I tak' a sup, Captain?" he asked, and on Murdoch passing the tankard to him, he drained it to the dregs.

Dalyell watched him, amusement in his eyes.

"Ye're a man o' some capacity," he said.

"Ay—an' o' knowledge tae, Sir Thomas. I could tell ye a lot."

Murdoch rapped sharply on the floor and called for another tankard of ale, which he passed to the spy. The man gulped it down gluttonously.

"Weel, now that yer thrapple is moistened, say on," said Dalyell.

"Wullie Stott is hand in glove wi' the Covenanters. Maybe twa months sin', he sheltered ane a' nicht. Forbye, Alan Troquair is nae mair deid than I am. He's still a poo'er amang the hillmen. An' if I were you, Sir Tammas, I'd keep an e'e on the Laird o' Knowe an' his bonnie dochter. The auld man is collogin' wi' some o' the outed ministers; an' his dochter could tell ye mair aboot Alan Troquair than ye'll fin' oot for yersel' in a hunner year."

The ale had loosened his tongue. The news which he had hoped to sell bit by bit, haggling over the price of every item, had poured from his lips in a spate. He thrust out a claw-like hand.

"That's a' I ken, Sir Tammas, an' it's for you tae test it. It's worth muckle siller, but I'm a puir man, Sir Tammas, an' I'll leave it tae yersel'," and the slack-lipped ruffian looked eagerly at Dalyell.

Sir Thomas waved the outstretched hand aside.

"No sae fast, my man," he said. "Let us juist ha'e yer story again. Ye say the blacksmith sheltered a Covenanter. Wha was he?"

"That I canna say," answered the spy. "It was owre dark tae mak' him oot: but I ken it was a Covenanter, for I heard him readin' the Book."

"Oho!" said Dalyell. "It wasna Mr. Welsh, or Auld Sandy by ony chance?"

"It was nane o' them, sir. It was a young man. I've sometimes thocht it micht be Alan Troquair."

Dalyell rapped out an angry oath.

"Ye lie!" he shouted. "Alan Troquair was drowned twa months back. I hunted him owre the Linn masel'."

"Beggin' yer pardon," said the spy firmly, "Alan Troquair is nae mair deid than I am. I've seen him mony a time this wheen weeks back. An' it's no his ghaist nayther. At ony rate Mistress Margaret Lansburgh disna think sae; she's no the kind that would let a ghaist pit his airms roon her in the wud behin' Knowe!" He laughed drunkenly.

Dalyell and Murdoch exchanged glances, and whispered together for a moment. The spy, thinking they doubted him, spoke again.

"I see'd them!" he cried, "I see'd them wi' ma ain e'en. It was Alan Troquair richt eneuch. Nae ghaist could cuddle a lass sae muckle tae her likin'. He's a man!—wi' guid strong airms o' flesh an' blood—the kind a lass likes roon her. I'm tellin' ye!"

In his excitement he had begun to gesticulate, but with an angry snort Dalyell silenced him, and he stood stock-still.

"Are ye often drunk?" he asked with a scornful smile.

"Me drunk!" exclaimed the spy. " 'Tippenny' costs money, Sir Tammas. There's little eneuch o' it comes my way."

Murdoch laughed. "You have not done badly to-night, at any rate," he said. "Do you wish Sir Thomas to understand that Alan Troquair is alive, and that the blacksmith of Irongray, the Laird of Knowe, and his dochter are all in league wi' the Covenanters?"

"I'm tellin' ye," said the man peevishly. "I canna make ye believe; but it's the gospel truth I'm tellin' ye."

"Well, well," said Sir Thomas to Murdoch, "we can look into these matters for ourselves," and then he turned to the spy. "Ye seem weel acquaint," he said, "wi' a' that's passin' in the countryside. Ha'e ye seen the Ghostly Rider?"

The man's face went suddenly pale. He gave a little nervous shrug to his shoulders. "Guidsakes, no!—Sir Thomas. That's the De'il himsel'!"

"I agree wi' ye there! That's my opinion," said Dalyell firmly, "an' I hear that Claver'se himsel' is o' the same min'—though there are some doubters," and he looked at Murdoch archly.

Murdoch drummed with his fingers on the table top, but said nothing. The spy shot out his claw-like hand again. "Ye'll no be denyin' me my

wages, Sir Tammas? I've telt ye a' I ken—an' it's worth money."

Sir Thomas rose from his chair and, plunging a hand into his pouch, withdrew a few pieces of silver which he dropped into the outstretched palm thrust greedily towards him.

The man studied the coins with contempt, then spoke truculently:

"I expected better frae ye, Sir Tammas. I've brocht maist valuable news —an' ye pit me off wi' a meeserable five shillings. I'm a puir man, Sir Tammas."

Murdoch sprang up and seized the spy by the throat.

"Be silent!" he thundered.

Dalyell let his lids fall half-way over his yellow eyes. He smiled bitterly.

"Ye're weel paid, my man. If I min' richt, Judas got thirty pieces o' siller for sellin' his Maister, so ye're amply rewarded wi' five guid siller pennies for sellin' the blacksmith o' Irongray. Get oot—ere I repent o' the bargain."

The man still hesitated, but Murdoch swung him round and, throwing open the door, pushed him roughly through it.

There was a grim smile on Dalyell's face when Murdoch came back to his place. The old man threw the token on the table and laughed aloud.

"Murdoch!" he cried, "if ye handle this maitter weel your name's made. Tackle the blacksmith wi' the iron hand, an' gar him speak."

"And if he will not speak under threats, sir, what then? The thumbkins?"

Dalyell laughed. "Ye forget he's a hefty man, and likely a dour ane. The thumbkins," he cried contemptuously; "ye micht as weel rub butter on his heid. He'll want the 'boot' ere he'll speak, or I misjudge him."

Murdoch nodded. "You may trust me. I'll wring his secret from him."

Dalyell patted his henchman on the shoulder. "It's no every ane that I'd trust as I do you, Alec: an' when ye've found the time and place o' this field-meeting, let Claver'se and Lag and Turner ken, an' send a messenger on a fast horse tae Binns. He'll find me there, an' I'll come back to be in at the death. It's a great chance, Murdoch: the Lord has delivered the rebels into our hands."

"And what of Alan Troquair, the Laird of Knowe, and Mistress Margaret, Sir Thomas? I could lay my hands on the Laird and his daughter easily enough."

“Let them bide the noo, Murdoch. We want mair evidence than the haverins o’ a drunken tatie-bogle! Settle the big job first, an’ the rest will be easy. Muckle that yon man said may be naething but blethers, but this bit o’ lead is a solid fact.”

Murdoch picked up the token and slipped it into his pocket.

Dalyell rose. “I’ll away to my quarters, Murdoch, for I maun start for Binns at dawn. Dinna forget—the iron hand, the iron hand!” and he clenched his brawny fist and shook it in Murdoch’s face, then turned, and on noiseless feet walked through the inner doorway into his room beyond.

Murdoch sat down again by the table, supporting his chin in his palm. His heart beat high. Fortune had thrust a great chance into his hands. Dalyell might have chosen to delay his return to Binns for one day that he might probe this matter to the bottom with his own hand. Or he might have entrusted to Lag, or even to my Lord Claverhouse, the task of wringing a secret of such import from the breast of the blacksmith. But he had left it to him—and Alec Murdoch would not be found wanting. He drew the candles towards him and extinguished them, then folding his arms on the table he laid his head upon them, and was soon asleep.

Below in the tavern kitchen a soldier called for a mutchkin of ale. He paid for it with a silver coin that less than an hour before had lain in the pocket of Dalyell. Outside, in the ditch a mile away, with a broken head, lay a ragged, drunken man, robbed of his blood-money.

CHAPTER XXI

The blacksmith rose from his bed and looked through the little window under the thatched eaves. Far off he heard a curlew call. He turned his eyes to the sky—a glorious blue beneath which floated great masses of fleecy sun-kissed clouds. The soft warm wind stirred the branches of the beech tree across the road, and the leaves whispered to each other. A swallow twittered at the edge of its empty nest under the eaves.

The blacksmith dropped on his knees below the window. For long his prayer was a silent aspiration rather than a moulded thought. Then the floodgates of his soul opened, and he poured out his petitions in a broken stream of whispered words. He prayed for the Cause, for blessings on the hunted men among the hills, for the rout of their enemies. And then in trembling accents he prayed for himself:

"Ha'e mercy on Wullie Stott, O Lord! Ye ken he's a puir wake-kneed sinner, an' no fit tae haud a caunle to the least o' the godly; but purge him o' cowardice an' mak' a man o' him, if ye think sic a puir worm is worthy tae be made a man!"

He rose from his knees, and, throwing on his clothes, went out to the river. There he knelt on a flat stone, and leaning over laved his face and hands in the cool water. As he rose he turned and looked towards the hills. Up in their fastnesses godly Maister Welsh and Alan Troquair were in hiding. Under cover of the night he had sought them in their retreat, bearing with him the four thousand precious tokens he had made. His heart glowed within him as he recalled the minister's words:

"Wullie Stott," he said, "the minister ca'ed ye faithfu' servant. He said, 'Well done!' Eh, wull ye ever hear sic words frae the Maister Himsel'?" He shook his head sadly. "Ye'll ha'e tae mend yer weys, Wullie, or ye'll never get that praise!"

As he made his way back to the smiddy, he stopped and looked over a hedge and whistled a low soft note. The mare in the field pricked up her ears, and with an answering whinny trotted towards him. He stood for a moment and stroked her head, talking to her softly, while she raised her ears and looked at him with humid brown eyes as though she understood. "It's a queer world, Maggie lass," he sighed. "Umphm! it is so!" Maggie stretched her muzzle out and rubbed it on his shoulder. "The same Maker hammered

us oot on His anvil—you and me. But Wullie Stott is held answerable for a' he does, while you, being a puir beast wi' nae reason, couldna sin if ye tried. I envy ye, Maggie, ye're better off than me," and he patted her lovingly on the neck. "Ay—ye're better off than me. Nae temptations—an' ye're no wake-kneed." He looked critically at the mare's legs, and nodded his head. Then he patted her gently on the neck.

He walked slowly up to his cottage, and after supping his porridge betook himself to the smiddy. He whistled as he worked, pausing from time to time to recall what the minister had said: "Three weeks come Sabbath, Willie. Up on the heights of Skeoch. You'll be there," and Mr. Welsh had gripped his hand warmly.

Willie had shaken his head sadly. "I doot I'm no worthy, Minister."

"Of our own merits, Willie, there are none of us worthy," the Minister had said gently. "Come! The Table is spread for such as you."

The sun was nearing the zenith when the smith went to the smiddy door. He undid his leathern apron and stood in the sunlight drinking in its warmth. A rose flaunted its red beauty against the white-washed smiddy wall. The smith looked at it musingly. What did the Book say about roses: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." Ay! that was it. Bonnie words—would they ever come true for puir auld tortured Scotland?

He looked up the road. Round the bend, in a cloud of dust, a company of dragoons was approaching at a trot. As likely as not they were coming to the smiddy. One or other of the horses might have cast a shoe. Many a time he had shod a trooper's horse—though never without a qualm of conscience. Could he do it to-day, and so assist the persecutors in their evil work? He felt the minister's handgrip: he heard again his words of praise—"Well done—faithful servant!" No! his hour had come. He set his teeth and drew himself to his full height. He would be a coward no longer: he would declare himself to-day.

The cavalcade drew up at the smiddy door, and the men dismounted. Captain Murdoch came towards him, the furrows on his brow knotted, his eyes cold and hard. He did not return the smith's greeting, but saying sternly, "I want a word with you, Stott," strode into the smiddy. The smith followed him, and in his wake came half a dozen dragoons. Near the anvil Murdoch swung round suddenly and, thrusting out his hand, demanded: "What do you know of this, Stott?"

The blacksmith saw a little leaden square lying in the officer's outstretched palm.

"I'm no sayin', sir, that I ha'ena seen the like before," he answered.

"Bandy no words with me, Stott," cried the officer. "I know you made it —and many more besides."

A denial rose to Willie's lips, but it died unspoken.

"You cannot deny it, Stott," shouted Murdoch. "When and where are the rebels keeping their Holy Feast?"

"That's no for me tae say, sir," answered the smith stoutly.

"Do you refuse to answer?" thundered Murdoch.

The smith raised his head and squared his shoulders.

"Dae I look like a traitor, sir?" he answered simply.

"Traitor!" stormed Murdoch. "You're a traitor to the King if ye consort with his enemies. Answer me—when and where are the hill-folk meeting for the Sacrament?" and Murdoch threw the token down roughly.

The smith stooped and picked it up reverently. "I canna tell ye, sir," he replied.

"You can, but you will not, you dog!" cried Murdoch, glaring at him.

"Ye can tak' it that way if ye like, sir. It's only a maitter o' words," answered the smith.

"Curse you!" growled the captain. "You word-splitting fanatics drive honest men crazy"—and he spat on the ground. "I give you one more chance. Answer me, or I'll crush the answer from your marrow," and Murdoch clenched his fist as Dalyell had done the night before.

The smith knew the hideous threat that lay behind the words, but his courage did not fail.

"Ye may kill me, Captain," he said, "but I'll never tell ye."

Murdoch laughed. "Dead men are dumb, Stott, so I shall not kill you. But I'll make you tell what you know. Sergeant—the 'boot!' "

The half-dozen dragoons who had come into the smiddy fell upon the smith, and though he struggled manfully the odds were against him, and soon he was overpowered. They bound him with ropes in a strong oaken chair they had brought from his cottage, and baring his right leg from knee

to ankle they clamped the wooden box of the "boot" about the limb. The sergeant slipped the long oak wedges into the boot on each side of the knee-joint and, hammer in hand, stood ready, waiting for the word. Captain Murdoch strode restlessly up and down the smiddy floor. He was ill at ease. His mouth was parched, his hands and brow were moist, his lips trembled a little. At heart he was not unkindly; but he remembered that Dalyell trusted him, and he must not let any foolish qualms betray him into weakness. He turned suddenly to the smith.

"You know what awaits you, Stott," he said. "I give you one more chance. Will you tell me what you know?"

The smith looked him full in the face, and shook his head.

Murdoch strode the length of the smiddy floor again. He must make this man speak: his future depended upon his success. He raised a hand and let it fall, and as it fell the sergeant swung the hammer and brought it down with all his might on the oaken wedge.

A convulsive shudder shook the tortured smith, but no groan escaped him. The hammer rose again, and fell with a ringing crash on the wedge on the other side of the knee. The strong hands of the smith were clenched in agony, and the token that he still held in his left palm bent and crumpled like a leaf. The hammer fell again. The flesh was torn from the bone, the blood spurted, and the sweat of agony broke upon the victim's brow, but still he did not speak. Even the dragoons, hardened though they were, began to feel admiration for a man of such fine courage.

"Will you speak now, Stott?" asked Murdoch almost gently.

The smith moistened his parched lips with his tongue.

"God helpin' me—I'll dee first," he answered.

Again the hammer descended, and yet again, driving the wedges deeper into the iron-bound box, crushing the flesh to a shapeless jelly, shattering the bones into splinters. Before each blow the question was put to the tortured man once more; and always he shook his head. He was in too great agony to find speech. The lust of cruelty had seized Murdoch, as it had seized the sergeant. They were no longer torturing a creature of flesh and blood like themselves, but a fanatic who could feel nothing. There is one cruel creature on the earth, and one only: its name is man. He boasts he was made in God's image—but the Devil can take possession of his soul!

Fifteen times the relentless hammer had fallen, when with a groan the head of the smith fell forward, and a pallor as of death swept over his face.

So ashen he looked that Murdoch feared he was dead, and with his death the secret that he had kept so stubbornly would be lost for ever. He gave a sharp order. The soldiers undid the smith's bonds, and laid him on the ground. The sergeant unlocked the boot, separating its sides and the wedges with difficulty from the crushed mass that had once been a shapely limb. They dashed water from the cooling-trough upon the pale face, and by and by, with a little sighing breath, the spark of life flickered up again. The smith opened his eyes, and looked around. Before his gaze the troopers drew back, covered with a guilty sense of confusion, for some of them had known him well and liked him, and one by one they stole out of the smiddy. Only Murdoch and the sergeant were left, and they withdrew a little way and stood talking together.

"He has told us nothing," said Murdoch.

"No, sir," answered the sergeant, "but if we haud him prisoner the nicht, and threaten him wi' the 'boot' again the morn, he'll tell us everything. He has still got ae guid leg."

Murdoch shuddered. The sergeant's grim suggestion filled him with sickening disgust.

Behind them, near the anvil, lay Willie—slowly coming to himself. There was sullen anger in his breast. He looked round the smiddy, picking out the old familiar things one by one. There was the forge—that was the Barncleuch harrow, waiting for six new teeth, and above him were the smoke-grimed rafters with their straddling horse-shoes. And there!—there!—not far off, were the men of blood—the enemies of God—his torturers. An hour ago he had been a humble, somewhat fearful Christian: now he had become the old unhallowed Adam. A fierce wrath surged over him—a thirst to be avenged. What had the blind Samson prayed? There in the gloomy smiddy Willie saw him, the impotent giant groping with brawny hands for the pillars, and saying—"Remember me, I pray Thee, and strengthen me I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged." His mangled limb was numb—the nerves too mutilated to hurt any longer. He turned slowly on his side and, reaching out a long arm, seized the sledge-hammer that stood against the anvil. Then slowly he drew himself up till he stood on his sound leg. The smiddy whirled round him; but he leaned on the shaft of the hammer and found his balance. Murdoch and the sergeant turned as they heard him move. They looked at him curiously, but without suspicion. A man so sorely stricken was powerless for evil. Murdoch's eyes were glued in sick loathing on the mangled leg, from which dark gouts of blood dropped sluggishly. The smith steadied himself on the hammer-shaft

and shuffled a step forward, then in a flash the great iron head swung up and fell square on the skull of the sergeant, crushing it like an egg-shell and smashing his brains to pulp. With a cry of fear Murdoch sprang back, and whipping his pistol from his belt fired at the blacksmith; but in that instant the sledge-hammer hurtled from Willie's hand and, crashing into the officer's face, laid him dead beside his henchman. But the bullet sped true, and struck the smith full in the chest, so that he fell headlong, blood frothing at his lips.

In a moment the smiddy was crowded by troopers, who had rushed in at the sound of the pistol-shot. They stood aghast at the scene of blood, trying to understand what had happened. The facts were plain enough: their captain and the sergeant were dead, the smith so near to death that none cared to wreak vengeance on him. The corporal turned him over on his back, while some of the dragoons bore the bodies of the officer and sergeant to a corner of the smiddy and covered them with sacking. Then they stood awed and irresolute in the gloom, cursing under their breath.

Suddenly a ray of sunlight pierced the mirk: Mistress Margaret Lansburgh entered the smiddy. She had ridden down to see the smith, for her pony had cast a shoe, and when she saw the horses of the dragoons picketed by the roadside she knew that some evil was toward. With quick light steps she entered, a question on her lips, which died there as her eyes took in the tragedy. In a few stumbling words the corporal told her what had happened. She looked at the body of the smith: saw his mangled limb, and the hand of Death on his face. Tears filled her eyes; but she spoke firmly.

"Take your men outside, Corporal," she said, "and leave us!"

There was such quiet dignity in her tones that without demur the corporal obeyed and left her alone with the dying smith. She dropped on her knees beside him, and with her lace kerchief gently wiped the blood from his lips. Then she raised his head and laid it in her lap. "Willie," she whispered gently.

The smith opened his eyes, and looked into the sweet face that bent above him. "Is it you, Mistress Margaret?" he asked.

A hot tear fell on his cold brow. "Yes, Willie," she answered softly.

His heavy lids closed for a moment over his filmy eyes, but he opened them again. "Mistress Margaret," he whispered, "pray for Wullie Stott: there's bluid on his hauns: he's gangin' afore his Maker wi' bluid on his hauns!"

“No, no!” cried Margaret passionately. “Say not that of yourself. Remember the promise—‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as wool.’ ”

The smith rolled his head heavily in her lap. He spoke brokenly, in little gasps:

“Bonnie words . . . but no for sic as me! . . . I’ve had black murder . . . in ma hert . . . these mony years . . . an’ the evil that a man nurses . . . in his hert . . . aye shows . . . afore he dees.”

Margaret’s heart was too full for words—she knew not what to say. The smith closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again.

“Bend yer heid low . . . Mistress Margaret . . . so that nane but you . . . can hear.”

She lowered her head at his bidding, and he whispered faintly:

“Tell Maister Alan . . . I lo’ed him . . . an’ . . . an’ . . . I kept the . . . secret. . . . They . . . couldna . . . mak’ me speak.”

“Brave soul!” said Margaret, “I knew you were true as steel!”

The ghost of a smile—so wan it was—played on the smith’s face. “There’s an . . . an empty boaster . . . ca’ed ‘The Brand’ . . . he thocht . . . I wasna . . . a true man. . . . If . . . ye ever . . . see him . . . tell him . . . I forgi’e him . . . an’ tell him . . . though they smashed . . . ma leg . . . they didna . . . break . . . ma . . . spirit.”

Margaret wiped the cold beads from the ashen brow, and whispered words of comfort.

The lips of the stricken man moved silently, as though he prayed, then he looked wistfully round him as though his dying eyes would fain cling to the old familiar things of earth, from which he was soon to pass. He tried to raise his head, and looked up into the winsome face that bent above him.

“Mistress Margaret,” he whispered hesitatingly—“I’ve missed something . . . in life . . . nae woman ever loved me.”

It was the cry of a lonely heart to a heart that understood. The brown eyes above him filled with sudden tears, and Margaret stooped and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. A feeble smile trembled on his pale face, and in his eyes for one brief moment Margaret saw the beauty of his soul. “That was . . . rale guid o’ ye . . . Mistress Margaret,” he said quietly. Then he lay still for a moment—so still that Margaret thought the end had come. But

suddenly, shakily, he lifted his left hand and laid a little piece of crumpled metal in her lap. “My token,” he whispered. “I’ll no . . . need it . . . noo,” and with a little shivering breath the brave spirit stole from the broken clay.

CHAPTER XXII

It was close on midnight. The little door in the west tower of Knowe was opened stealthily by the Laird. A dark figure stole out and, on tiptoe, made for the bottom of the garden. The Laird watched till the retreating figure was lost in the darkness. Then he closed the door noiselessly and returned to the library.

With hands clasped behind his back, and head bent, he paced restlessly up and down. Now and then he stopped suddenly and stroked his chin. Then he resumed his slow walk. Sometimes he paused by his bookshelves, and more than once he reached out as though to choose a volume; but always his hand fell away empty, as he turned and continued his walk.

The room was ill-lit. A pair of guttering, unsnuffed candles stood in silver candlesticks on the table. The moonlight poured in a long beam through the unshuttered and uncurtained window. But there were more shadows than light within the walls, more darkness than light in the Laird's troubled mind.

He halted by the window and stood gazing earnestly at the rolling fields and the distant hills seen as dim shadows against the starry sky. His eyes wandered lovingly from point to point. Even in the dark of distance he could make out familiar landmarks.

The broad acres of Knowe were good to look upon by day, but bathed in the mysterious beauty of the night they ravished his heart. Never before had his land seemed so much a part of himself—a bone of his bones, his very life-blood. He sighed and turned his head, then fixed his eyes on a clump of oak trees on a mound near the river. He looked at them long and earnestly, then he turned slowly and resumed his walk.

Had there been a watcher hidden in the shadows, he would have seen the Laird's brow furrowed with care, his eyes troubled with pain. He was in the throes of a conflict. He was alone with his conscience at the cross-roads of decision. He walked up and down slowly. His hands, behind him, were clasped tightly so that his fingers were bloodless. His lower lip was gripped between his teeth. Two paths stretched before his imagination. One was a pleasant, easy path. Its choice meant freedom from persecution, liberty to enjoy his heritage, and a good name among all those who honoured the King. The other was a hard path—rugged, inglorious. To choose it meant

obloquy, persecution, the forfeiture of his lands, and mayhap death. Yet it was towards this harder path his heart was turning. For in its rugged steeps lay hidden ease of conscience and a quiet mind. For long he had doubted the justice of the King's cause. His soul had cried out against the cruelties so ruthlessly inflicted upon the hillmen. He had known many of the victims of the persecution. Most of them were honest, peace-loving, industrious tillers of the soil. They had been loyal to the King long after he had ceased to be loyal to them. But they had been driven into rebellion because the King and his ministers had sought to impose their authority upon their consciences. And to these men conscience was more than a mere pin-prick of the mind. It was the voice of God speaking to their souls—an oracle that claimed from them a homage they dared not render to an earthly King.

The Laird looked through the window again. Once more his eyes were held by that clump of oak trees. He looked long and steadily, then closing his eyes he let his mind wander through the ages. What was the witness of history? Truth trampled under foot and wrong triumphant, because the mighty had espoused it! Yet always truth had come into its kingdom, the verdict of judicial time reversing the verdict of the impassioned moment. For when passions die the vision is clarified, and things are seen in true perspective. And who had kept the lamp burning before the shrine of truth? Sometimes the strong, but more often it had been tended and fed with the oil of faith by lowly hands. Its light may have burned low, it may have been choked by the hatred of those who should have cherished it. It may have come near to extinction, yet because a lowly remnant of faithful hearts has cherished it, it has blazed up again and become the light that has led men into a larger liberty. Might not what had happened in bygone generations be happening again in his own?

The Laird stood stock-still in the middle of the room. Pilate's old question rang in his ears. "What is truth?" he said aloud, and looked into the farthest corner of the room as though the answer lay hidden in the shadows. He turned and went with heavy steps back to the window. That little cluster of oak trees by the river bank would not let him go. There but a short while since Edward Gordon and Alexander McCubine had laid down their lives sooner than play traitor to the truth as they knew it. Who had killed them? The question blazed before his eyes in letters of fire. They had been hanged by the King's men—not for any crime against the King's person, nor for bearing arms against the State, but simply because they had refused to surrender their consciences to the keeping of other men. Was it the King's men that had slain them? Then every man who was on the King's side had a part in their death. And at the last assize it would not be the soldiers alone

who were held blood-guilty; but all who, ranged on the King's side, were mute before such horrors.

Blood-guilty! . . . All!—The Laird started as though he had been stabbed. His soul leaped into his eyes, peering forth eagerly like a prisoner through his prison bars. He held up his hands and stared at them. There in that shadowed room he saw blood upon them; gouts of blood dripped from his trembling fingers. He, David Lansburgh, was blood-guilty as Lag, Dalyell, Claver'se, and all the rest of them! He, David Lansburgh, was guilty of rapine, of cruelties most foul, of hideous deeds born in the caves of hell. Before his eyes there passed a vision of burned farms and homes made desolate. He saw a long line of tortured men: of women young and old done to death with halter or by the merciless sea; of men bowed with years, and boys with the bloom of their youth upon them, butchered on the purple moors, and as they passed each pointed an accusing finger as though to say, "Thou art the man!" The Laird shuddered and passed his hand across his eyes; then he started again with awful dread. That bloodstained hand had left the mark of Cain upon his forehead!

So seized was he of horror that his knees trembled and gave way beneath him. He staggered to the table and sat down. The question that so long had vexed him had assumed a simple though an awful guise. It needed no appeal to history for its settlement; no sophistry, nor cunning words, that confused and darkened counsel were required for its solution. In stark reality it meant, would David Lansburgh remain blood-guilty, or would he seek to atone by breaking an unworthy allegiance and giving himself to a nobler cause?

He buried his ashen face in his hands. His battle was over! He knew where he stood now—he was on the side of the hillmen. He who feared God and loved his fellow-men dared not any longer have part and lot in the cruelties and bloodshed of the persecutors! He raised his head and sighed. All weariness, all fear fell from him like a garment discarded. There was pride in his heart, peace in his mind.

He rose and went with quick steps to the window. He looked at his hands bathed in the moonlight. They were white as snow; his fingers dripped blood no longer. This was indeed the sign of God's pardon! His heart glowed within him. He thought of Margaret. He must seek her out and let her know the step he was taking. His decision touched her. How would she take it? And then he remembered how she had once borne herself in that very room when she had read his soul and charged him with a loyalty to the Covenants that, in surprise and awe, he had denied. He saw the gleam in her rare brown

eyes, the proud uplift of her chin, and heard the ring in her voice as she had said:

"I know not yet which side is right; but if my conscience told me the King was wrong, not even Knowe, which I love with a love as strong as yours, would hold me back from espousing the Cause of the Covenant."

And though he had thought them reckless words, and had rebuked her for them, he thought of them now with pride. She was a daughter of whom any man might be proud: a maid of mettle, with all the gracious sweetness of a woman, but with red blood in her veins and fire and courage in her soul.

Picking up a candlestick, he left the library and began to make his way to Margaret's room. But as he crossed the hall he heard the tick of the clock and held the light high to look at its face. It was two in the morning! It would be unseemly to disturb her at such an hour.

He hesitated for a moment and stroked his chin, then he turned and went back to the library, and sitting down at the table drew ink and paper towards him. And while the candles guttered beside him he wrote her a letter, telling her of the battle he had fought in his soul, and how he had found ease of conscience and a quiet mind at the last. He wrote long and carefully, and ere he ended the dawn was breaking on the eastern hills and the early birds were piping in the trees. He folded the letter and wrote his daughter's name upon it. She would find it after he had gone to keep the Feast with the hillmen on Skeoch. It would tell her all, and if he judged her aright she would understand.

Then he wrote a little note to Elspeth, and folding it, laid it on the table beside his letter to Margaret.

For a moment he sat upright in his chair, a finger laid questioningly upon his lips. Then he rose and searched in a drawer till he found the token that Mr. Welsh had given him. He had not meant to use it, but now all was changed. There was blood on his hands no longer! He would dare to approach the Table spread in the wilderness.

With quick hands he seized his plaid from the hook on the back of the door. As he flung it over his shoulder a corner struck the table and swept the letter he had written to Elspeth on to the floor. He crushed his bonnet on his head and found his stick. Then he walked to the window and looked once more at that haunting clump of oak trees. When he turned away his mind was in a dream. As he passed the table he saw something white upon it, and, still in a reverie, not knowing what he did, he picked up his letter to

Margaret and thrust it into his pocket. Then he stole down to the hall, unbarred the door, and with a resolute step, and head held high, turned his face to the hills.

While her father had been fighting his lonely battle of the soul Margaret also had joined issue with her conscience. But with her the combat was not a stern one. Gently and surely she let love lead her to a decision. And, as is the way of a woman, when she had made her choice she marshalled her arguments and persuaded herself that at every turning of the way she had looked to reason for her guidance, and shut her eyes to all the promptings of love. On the morrow she would keep the Feast on Skeoch! No longer would she render lip-service to an allegiance that bound her no more. The King was in the wrong; Alan—no, not Alan alone!—but the hillmen with whom he had thrown in his lot, were in the right. It was as clear as the day; for Love lights up the difficulties which Reason sometimes darkens.

She found the bent and crumpled token that Willie Stott had laid in her lap with his dying hand. She looked at it with glistening eyes. Surely there could be no better warrant for her approach to the Holy Table than that little bit of metal, crushed by a martyred hand! That, and a contrite heart, were all she needed.

As she sat by her window, looking towards the distant hills, she wondered why Alan had not urged her to make this great decision, the joy of which filled her heart. She remembered how he had looked at her, wistfully, yearningly, when last they parted. She knew there was something he longed to say. But he had kept silence. Deep in her heart she would fain have had him urge her to this conclusion; yet she understood his silence, for she knew he shrank from making love an argument in a realm where conscience should be King.

She crept into bed and, pillowing a cheek upon her hand, smiled in the darkness. On the morrow, for love's sake—no! for conscience' sake—she would step across the last barrier that separated her from Alan. The surrender would be no sacrifice, but, instead, a glorious gain.

But as she lay, dreaming happily, a little canker of disquiet entered her mind. She owed a duty to her father. She must tell him of the step she contemplated. She had brought herself near to doing so when she bade him good night. She remembered how, when he kissed her, he had taken her face in his hands and looked at her with his soul in his eyes. She had all but spoken then; but ere she could find words for her hurrying thoughts the

gleam had died. The eyes she loved were grave and dispassionate; her father had lost himself in the dim caverns of his mind.

She could not speak then; but she must tell him now. Mayhap her decision would grieve him. He might forbid her! If he did so she, who all her life had rendered him ready obedience, would disobey him. Her life and happiness were in her own keeping! Conscience had spoken: Reason had led her. There was no more to be said! The die was cast. In the morning, before she set out for Skeoch, she would seek her father and tell him all.

A straying moonbeam wandered across her bed as she lay asleep. It fell upon her golden hair and turned it to an aureole; it touched her cheek lightly like a lover's kiss. She smiled as she slept. Her heart was full of happy dreams.

She rose early, and dressed herself soberly. With a full heart she knelt for a moment by her bedside, then rose, alive with purpose, and went to seek her father. As she crossed the hall she met Elspeth, who flourished a piece of paper.

"Did ever ye ken the like, Mistress Margaret?" she cried. "The Laird hasna sleepit in his bed, an' he's naewhere tae be found!"

Margaret caught her breath. "Where can he be?" she asked anxiously.

"That's what I'd like tae ken," answered Elspeth. "But set yer mind at rest. Nae hairm has come tae him. Read this!"

Margaret seized the little paper, and read its message aloud:

"I shall be back at nightfall.—D. LANSBURGH."

She looked at Elspeth with troubled eyes. "What does it mean?" she asked.

"Nae doot what it says," answered Elspeth stolidly. "But I'd like tae ken what's come owre him tae mak' him leave the hoose without breaking his fast."

"All was well with him when I left him last night in the library," said Margaret, taking heart of courage.

"An' efter that he was closeted till close on midnight wi' the minister; but the minister went awa' alane."

"What minister?" asked Margaret.

"There's but ae Minister o' Irongray, lassie, an' that's godly Maister Welsh, wha is still the minister though he's oot on the hills wi' the Remnant. The thing that claims tae be the minister o' the pairish the noo is nocht but a yammerin' cuckoo—wi' nayther grace nor soun' doctrine," said Elspeth bitterly.

"My father was closeted with Mr. Welsh!" exclaimed Margaret. "I am amazed."

Elspeth smiled. "That shouldna surprise ye, if ye kent yer faither as well as I dae. The puir man has been torn wi' trouble these mony weeks. I've seen it wi' ma ain e'en, an' my hert has bled for him. If yer mind hadna been sae ta'en up wi' yer ain affairs ye wad ha'e seen it yersel'. But when a lass is in love she's blin' tae a' things—even tae the fauts o' her lad!"

"Alan has no——" said Margaret with spirit, then she checked herself quickly and smiled. "I have seen my father preoccupied, but that is his wont. I did not know his mind was troubled."

Elspeth shrugged her shoulders.

"It's aye the way. The young canna read the auld; the auld canna read the young. . . . But dinna fash yersel'. Yer faither will be a' richt. He says he's comin' back . . . but I wish he'd sleepit in his bed, an' broken his fast afore he went oot." She smiled into Margaret's troubled face. "Even the best man's but a bairn," she said.

Margaret stood for a moment hesitatingly. Then in a sudden burst of feeling she threw her arms about Elspeth's neck and whispered:

"Elspeth, to-day I go to keep the Feast on Skeoch! To-day I become a Covenanter!"

"Mistress Margaret!" cried Elspeth, her eyes gleaming, her wrinkled face radiant, "O Mistress Margaret, my bonnie, bonnie bairn! Thank God I'm spared tae see this day!"

Margaret kissed her gently. The old woman's eyes filled with tears. She held her mistress at arm's length and looked at her anxiously, her faithful mind perturbed.

"Ye're sure ye're daein' this for conscience' sake—an' no juist for love o' Maister Alan? Dinna forget the Angel o' Darkness sometimes appears as an Angel o' Licht!"

"My heart is for the Cause!" said Margaret solemnly. She looked into Elspeth's worn face. It was beautiful, as though a light from heaven shone

upon it. The thin lips moved almost silently, but Margaret heard a broken voice whisper the inspired words spoken by another faithful soul in an hour of supreme joy: “Now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.”

Moved to the depths, with quick responsive tears brimming in her eyes, Margaret kissed her again. Then she turned away.

“I must be wiser than my father, Elspeth, or you will be calling me a bairn. I must break fast before I go!”

Elspeth laughed quietly. “Ay—ye’d better,” she said. “There’s routh o’ parritch an’ guid cream waitin’ for ye!”

CHAPTER XXIII

With Elspeth's blessing ringing in her ears, Margaret set out for Skeoch. It was a fair summer morning. Under the soft rays of the early sun the untrodden grass was a dew-laden carpet of green. In bush and hedge and trees the birds sang blithely, and high above her the rapturous larks poured forth their souls in song. What was the old legend? "The first word God spoke to the world became a lark." It was a pretty conceit, and in her mood of joy Margaret was fain to think it true. Her own heart sang within her. Never had earth seemed fairer, quivering with the ecstasy of life new-born. There was beauty everywhere, even in the grey stones. For we see things not as they are, but as we are; the mood of the moment colouring our vision. She walked briskly, with easy grace; and, though she wist it not, her face was transfigured.

Elspeth had waved aside her invitation to accompany her.

"Ay—I'm comin'," she had said, "but ye'd best gang on yersel'. My auld legs canna travel as fast as yours"—and though Margaret pressed her she insisted on her mistress setting out alone.

As Elspeth set about preparing herself befittingly for the solemn "occasion," something happened that startled her. The window of her room was closely curtained (for was it not the Sabbath Day, and who knew what evil might enter a house with the rays of the sun?), but she had opened the curtains a hand's-breadth so that she might see that her mutch was spotless. Suddenly a bird flew, a living streak of black and white, close by the window. Elspeth caught her breath; the mutch dropped from her hand.

"A pyat! That's an ill sign," she said. "I wunner. It means bad luck," and she stood irresolute. She argued with herself. "There's nae sic thing as luck," she said. "A' oor weys are ordered by a Higher Haun, an' omens an' sic-like signs are juist heathen superstitions. . . . Ye ca' yersel' a Christian, Elspeth, an' yet a pyat can fricht ye!"

So she upbraided herself, and put her mutch on her head, tying its strings carefully. But as she went down the gravel walk from the house the magpie flew chattering across her path, and she stopped suddenly. Her fingers worked nervously, and she laid a hand over her heart and sighed. Then she took another step forward and paused.

"It's no chancy. . . . It may be nocht but a heathen superstition . . . but maybe superstition is the wey the Lord reveals Himsel' tae heathen an' tae bairns. God forbid, Elspeth; ye're no a heathen . . . but in the things o' the Lord ye're juist a bairn—so ye'd better tak' tent."

She stood for a moment uncertain, anxious of heart. Her eyes sought the distant hills longingly, but close at hand she heard the chatter of the magpie, though she could no longer see it. It perturbed her strangely. Doubtless a long line of her forbears had ruled their lives by superstitions, and her mind for a moment was the battle-ground between age-long tradition and a more enlightened faith. But in the end the old tradition conquered, though, being of a pious mind, she did not yield to it until she had satisfied herself that the heathen superstition was supported by the evidence of the "Buik." As she stood irresolute, uncertain whether to go or stay, she drew her Bible from under her plaid and, closing her eyes, thrust a finger at a venture between the pages. She opened her eyes quickly and stared at the printed words which her finger touched. They read:

"Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom."

She nodded her head, and read the words again. Did a self-willed woman ever get a clearer warning than that? The first few words did not concern her, but the second half of the verse cried to her as clearly as though the voice of God had spoken from a burning bush. She turned and walked back to the house, repeating the words. "Cease from thine own wisdom," she said. "Eh, Elspeth Craig, though ye think ye're o' the elect ye're ane o' a stiff-necked an' rebellious generation. . . . Tae think o' you daurin' tae set yer puir human wisdom against the signs o' the Almichty! . . . He sent ye the pyat tae warn ye—an' ye doubted the sign! . . . Dae ye think He should ha'e sent an angel wi' a flamin' sword? . . . Ye flatter yersel'. The Lord talks tae bairns in bairns' talk—an' for a wean in the things o' grace sic as you are, a pyat was guid eneuch. . . . Look tae yer sowl, Elspeth Craig! The Lord taks ye for a heathen, an' nae doot He kens ye better than ye ken yersel'."

Crestfallen and in a mood of stern self-judgment she entered the house and made her way to her room. For many weeks she had looked forward to this day as to a day most precious; now the Lord had forbidden her to take part in the "occasion."

She took off her mutch, unfastened her plaid, and sat down by the window with her Bible on her knee. Mercilessly she examined herself.

"You," she said, "that thinks sae weel o' yersel', Elspeth. . . . Ye're eaten up wi' self-pride. . . . What o' yer walk an' conversation? . . . Ye've failed tae walk humbly in the presence o' yer betters. . . . Ye dinna tak' the name o' God in vain; no, but ye've used minced oaths like Losh, Gosh an' Lovananty, whilk in the mouth o' a woman are as bad as an oath frae a man. . . . An' ye've sometimes—no! often—neglected yer daily task. . . . Ay, an' ye ha'ena prayed eneuch, an' when ye've been on yer knees yer mind has wandered. . . . An' ye've been ill-tempered an' complainin', an' ill tae leeve wi'. . . . Yer tongue's nippy . . . an' ye've used it ruthlessly on them below ye. . . . No that they didna deserve it, but were a' the better for the taste o't," she whispered in self-defence. "Ay—an' ye thocht yersel' better than that brave Saint o' God, puir Wullie Stott! . . . Elspeth Craig, the Lord can read ye like an open book. Weel He kens, in spite o' a' yer profession, that ye're nocht but a cankert auld buddy, an' in His mercy He sent that pyat as a sign, lest in yer misguided pride ye had 'gane forrit' an' eaten an' drunken judgment on yersel'! . . . Get doon on yer knees, wumman, an' thank God for His mercies!"

A Sabbath stillness brooded over the house. Knowe lay asleep in the lap of silence. The men-servants had betaken themselves to their own homes; the women-servants, their week's work over, sat somnolent in the kitchen. They had no work to do till the morrow, for in that house the first day of the week was observed with rigorous solemnity.

And in her room, her heart full of strange forebodings, Elspeth sat with her Book on her knee. Sometimes she read; sometimes her thoughts wandered. "There's something comin'—ay! I'm sure o't. The pyat flew close by the window." Her lips moved in prayer; she prayed for the safety of the hillmen, for her master, for Mistress Margaret, for Alan Troquair. Then a black fear entered her heart.

"Ae pyat, fleein' past the window—that's a death. God forfend it's no the Laird—guid man!" She fell to wondering where he might be—her devoted heart in a turmoil of dread. "If he'd only see the licht I'd ken his sowl was safe," she assured herself, being certain that the one thing needful for a man's eternal salvation was allegiance to the Covenants: all other else was useless!

Her heart glowed at the thought of Margaret. "The bonnie bairn—God keep her—the wee lamb that never kent a mither but masel'." A tear stole down her furrowed cheek. Then she thought of herself. "The warning maybe meant yersel', Elspeth. Ay—the Lord has spared ye for close on sixty years tae vex Him wi' yer rebellious spirit—an' the Book says yer days are as

grass." She looked down at her wrinkled hands. "Ay—grass—green nae langer, for the mornin' is ower, an' the evenin's nigh when it shall be cut down and withereth." She wandered off in a reverie, indulging another mood of self-examination and self-condemnation. She who had lived godly all her life tortured herself with self-reproach, but in the discipline found satisfaction as well as humiliation.

The sun crossed the roof of Knowe and the day drowsed on to the late afternoon. Elspeth had fallen asleep, her hands folded over the Book on her knee, when suddenly she was awakened by a clamour of loud voices and the sound of heavy footsteps on the gravel outside. She drew the curtain aside and peeped out. A company of soldiers had entered the grounds and was rapidly approaching the house. She hastened downstairs and, as she crossed the hall, there was a loud knock on the door. She hurried forward and drawing the bar threw the door open. There was no fear in her eyes or terror in her voice as she demanded:

"What dae ye mean by makin' sic a noise on the Sabbath Day?"

She hurled the words defiantly at the whole troop, for her eyes had swept the soldiers quickly, and she saw no officer. One of the soldiers answered her roughly. He rapped out an angry oath.

"Whaur's the Laird, beldam?"

"What business o' yours is that?" she asked defensively.

The man laughed; the other troopers crowded round, and among them Elspeth saw a swarthy, hawk-beaked man, without uniform, who brandished a cutlass in his hand. She fixed her eyes on him. Surely she had seen or heard of such a man before!

"Then the Laird's no at hame?" said the spokesman, making a rapid deduction from Elspeth's defiant question.

"An' if he's no, what has that tae dae wi' ye? Can a gentleman o' his quality no gang his ain gait withoot the leave o' sic trash as you?" she asked wrathfully.

The man with the cutlass pushed his way to the front.

"The Laird's a traitor!" he said, and spat contemptuously.

Elspeth looked him up and down. Her memory awoke. This was the man of whom Willie Stott had spoken. She glared at him in anger and disgust.

“If you are the man that ca’s yersel’ ‘The Brand’ ye should be a guid judge o’ traitors.”

There was a roar of laughter from the troopers, who turned on “The Brand” and jostled him playfully. He was beside himself with anger, and leaped forward as though he would strike Elspeth, but some of the men held him back. The first speaker spoke again:

“Ay—the Laird’s turned traitor, an’ his dochter as weel! They were seen making for the Holy Fair the day.”

“An’ what if they were?” asked Elspeth haughtily, though her heart was sinking within her. “Are their sowls in your keepin’?”

The soldier bit his lip.

“We’re no talkin’ o’ sowls,” he said, “we’re talkin’ o’ traitors. If the Laird and his dochter ha’e turned Covenanters their bluid’s on their ain heids.”

“That’s no for you tae judge,” said Elspeth defiantly. “If it has pleased the Laird and Mistress Margaret tae gang forrit tae the Lord’s ain Table, that’s a maitter between them an’ their Maker. Sic scum as you hae nocht tae dae wi’ it.”

As she spoke she backed into the doorway, and with a quick fling-to of the door banged it and barred it.

Some one hammered at it angrily from without. When he ceased Elspeth’s shrill voice came through it angrily.

“Awa’ wi’ ye,” she cried, “an’ leave honest fowk alane. . . . Ye’re juist a bloodthirsty pack o’ ruffians. . . . Ye’ve nae richt tae molest dacent fowk. . . . There’s nae officer wi’ ye—an’ Dalyell and Claver’se wull mak’ it hot for ye when they hear o’ this.”

Her words carried clearly, and were not without effect. Though the troopers had a free enough hand to pillage and oppress any suspect of sympathy with the Covenanters, it was one thing to plunder the cot-house of some humble peasant, and another to attack the house of a Laird. Elspeth’s defiance, and her threat, gave the soldiers pause. They fell back from the door, and took counsel with each other. Elspeth, listening sharply, could hear them at it. She caught the voice of “The Brand” breathing maledictions:

“Burn the place aboot the auld bitch’s lugs. Tae hell wi’ traitors!”

But more temperate counsels prevailed. The soldiers felt they dared not act without the sanction of authority, and, to her joy, Elspeth heard the shuffle of feet upon the gravel and the sound of retreating steps. She put her eye to the keyhole. Her ears had not deceived her; the soldiers were going.

She waited, watching anxiously, till the last had disappeared; then she turned. Behind her in the darkened hall she found three of the women-servants standing with awestricken faces. One of them found her voice and asked in a frightened whisper: "Ha'e they gone?"

Elspeth nodded her head solemnly.

"Ay—they're awa'. They kent they daur dae naething!"

"But they'll maybe come back," said another of the women timorously.

"No them," said Elspeth firmly. "I pit a flea in their lugs," and she shut her mouth firmly.

"Ye were maybe no wyse tae be sae high-handed wi' them, Elspeth," said the first speaker.

Elspeth looked her up and down pityingly.

"Mirren McTurk," she said, "ye're no the woman yer mither was. . . . Nane o' ye are!" and she swept the three with a withering glance. "The suner you young women learn that the wey tae handle a man is tae staun up tae him, instead o' saft-sawderin' him an' fa'in' intae his airms, the better for yer ainsels. Ye'll never win onywhere if ye show the white feather tae a man," and with a defiant toss of the head she left them and went back to her room.

She picked up her Bible again, but her mind was too filled with troublous thoughts to let her read. She peeped out at the sky: evening was at hand. The service among the hills would be drawing to a close now! She comforted herself for her self-denial. If she had gone Knowe would have been left defenceless. The Lord knew what was best, and a black and white pyat might be His messenger!

She drew the curtain aside from the window so that she might the better catch the first glimpse of the Laird on his return. Her heart was glad to think that he, her master, whom she loved and reverenced, had at long last thrown in his lot with the Elect. It was hardly likely that the soldiers had lied. One or other of them must have seen him making for the place of assembly. Her mind roamed back into the old days when the Laird and his lady were young. He had always been a good master, and by common consent the best

Laird in the countryside. His name was on every lip as a model of all that a man and a Laird should be. But this step of his, this embracing of the Covenants, was, in her mind, the seal on his forehead spoken of in the Book. The Lord could not think ill of her after all, or He would not thus have answered her prayers!

Nearly two hours had gone, and it was close to seven on the clock, when her long-drawn reverie was rudely disturbed. Mirren McTurk burst into her room.

"They're comin' back," she cried. "Mercy on us! They're comin' back! An' their airms are fu' o' strae!"

Elspeth peeped out of the window. She saw no one.

"Havers, lass," she said, "ye fancy things."

"Nocht o' the kind," protested Mirren. "They're comin' doon the side loanin'; there's a man on horseback leading them!"

In a moment all doubt was set at rest. The sound of violent knocking on the door rang through the silent house.

Elspeth sprang up. "Bring me the tatie-beetle, Mirren," she cried firmly, and hastened down to the hall. The loud knocking was repeated. She stood behind the door and shouted: "What want ye here?"

"Open, in the King's name!" cried a voice from the other side.

"I'll dee first," cried Elspeth stoutly.

There was a pause for a moment, as though the officer hesitated, then there came a rattle as though he knocked on the door with the hilt of his sword. "In the King's name," he cried.

Elspeth made no answer. The three women-servants clustered around her, white of face and terror-stricken. Mirren thrust the "tatie-beetle" into Elspeth's hand. She gripped it firmly.

"In the King's name!" came the voice again sternly.

There was no sound within the hall, though all the women but Elspeth heard their hearts beat noisily.

Again the voice spoke: "At your peril—stand back!" and a thunderous noise, as though the door were being hammered with a battering-ram, crashed into the silence. Again, and yet again, the blow was repeated. The great door shook; its hinges creaked; its timbers groaned and splintered.

There was another cry of warning from without; another mighty blow fell on the door. Its bar was shattered, its hinges tore away from the doorpost, and it fell inward with a thunderous crash.

Over its ruins into the hall the officer guided his horse. Behind him crowded his men, many of whom, as Mirren had told, bore arm-loads of straw. The officer waved his sword at the women.

"Turn them out, but do not molest them," he said.

Elspeth alone resisted. The others were glad enough to escape into the open air. Two soldiers laid rough hands on Elspeth, and pushed her rudely out. She stood disconsolate on the gravel before the house with tears in her eyes. It was plain enough—a child could tell—what devilry was afoot. These trusses of straw, this running to and fro with arm-loads of dry branches through the bonnie rooms of the bonnie house could mean but one thing. Elspeth wept broken-heartedly.

Had she been within she would have seen the soldiers uncap their powder flasks, and sprinkle powder here and there to feed the coming flames. Then there was a loud shout, and the men began to pour out of the house. Last of all came the officer, and when he was certain that all his men were out he turned to Elspeth.

"There are no women within?" he asked.

"Nane," answered Elspeth through her tears. "Nane—but I wish there was ane," and she wept bitterly.

The officer uttered a sharp command: two of his men slipped back into the house. The three women gathered round Elspeth and sought to comfort her, though their own tears were falling fast.

The soldiers rushed out from the house. A low rustling sound, as when the wind scampers over the full-eared corn, came through the doorway; it grew in volume till it sounded like the moan of the wind among branches; it rose till it was like the low muttering of some ravening beast. And with the muttering came ominous cracklings, as though the beast were breaking cover. Knowe was on fire: Knowe, the house of a hundred kindly hospitalities, a house that never turned away a stranger, was doomed to destruction. The officer and his men fell back; then a voice spoke loudly:

"So perish a' traitors," it cried.

All eyes were turned upon the speaker—Elspeth's with them. "The Brand," in a frenzy of excitement, was strutting up and down, cutlass in

hand, as though he were the officer in charge. It was from his lips the words had come.

Elspeth gripped the beetle firmly and like a scuttering hen ran towards him. He had turned away from her and did not see her coming. She swung the beetle out and struck him a ringing blow on the side of the head, which split his ear as though she had cut it with a knife. The blow caught him so unawares that his cutlass fell from his hand. As he stooped to pick it up she struck him savagely between the shoulders, and sent him sprawling on hands and knees. He made a grab at his weapon, but Elspeth kicked it out of his reach and fell on him with such fury that he made no further attempt to retrieve it. The wooden club caught him in the ribs, and knocked the breath out of him. He threw up his hands to shield himself, and the beetle broke his knuckles. "The Brand" rolled on his back and, raising his legs, tried to kick the furious woman. Her weapon fell sharply on his shin-bones, and he shrieked with pain. With every blow she reviled him.

"Tak' that, ye viper!" she cried, and the beetle rattled on his skull and drew blood. "Ye ca' yersel' 'The Brand'! Ye Judas," and the merciless weapon struck his ribs again. " 'The Brand'! It's the richt name for ye; for ye'll burn in hell-fire through a' eternity," and the beetle found its mark again.

The soldiers, even the officer, watched Elspeth's onslaught with ill-concealed amusement. "The Brand" was not one of themselves, and though he had betrayed the Laird and Mistress Margaret to them by sneaking down from the hill after he had seen them making for the great Assembly, there was not one of the troopers ready to raise a finger in his defence. His empty boasting, which fitted ill with his evident cowardice, had turned their stomachs against him, and they rejoiced at his discomfiture. Their low chuckles changed to boisterous mirth when at last, writhing in pain, "The Brand" struggled to his feet and, limping like a wounded rabbit, ran for his life. Elspeth tore after him, one hand gripping her hindering skirts, the other wielding the beetle relentlessly. Over the lawn she chased him like a fury, silent because she had no breath for speech, but dealing him blow after blow till his whole body was bruised and bleeding. He screamed as he ran, and then his yells sank into an angry whimper of vexation and pain. At last Elspeth, too breathless to pursue him any longer, ceased her punishment. She dealt him a final blow upon the shoulder, that made his right arm hang limp and useless, then, still brandishing her weapon, she stood and watched him hobble down to the gate and so make his escape.

She turned then, and the sight that met her eyes brought the tears back to them in a flood. Long tongues of flame were licking up beside the windows; clouds of smoke were belching through the doorway; Knowe was doomed.

She staggered back towards the house, and at her coming the officer, still in the throes of laughter, cried; “A cheer for the old dame, lads! She’s a guid-plucked ane!”

The soldiers cheered lustily. With a broken but angry voice Elspeth upbraided them.

“Ye godless ruffians,” she cried. “Dae ye no ken this is the Sabbath Day?” and turning her eyes again to the old beloved house she buried her face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

The soldiers did not wait to see the end of their evil work. Satisfied that the fire was thoroughly alight, the officer marshalled his men and, at their head, rode off to execute summary justice upon other “traitors.”

CHAPTER XXIV

Alan Troquair turned on his bed of heather on the heights of Skeoch and sat up drowsily. Day was not yet come, but as he looked to the east he saw on the far horizon a blush of rose. He sprang to his feet and waited. The blush deepened to a golden red, the distant hill-tops glowed as though a beacon had been lit upon them, and the sun came up in glory shouldering the night-clouds before him.

With firm, easy strides that scattered the dew from the heather Alan climbed over a ridge of the hill and descended into a vast amphitheatre. He made his way to a rough cairn fashioned of granite boulders. With his own hands he had erected this table in the wilderness, and here, on this day, the Sacred Elements would stand. He laid his hand reverently upon the topmost slab and taking off his bonnet bowed his head, his lips moving.

Then he turned and climbed to a peak from which his eye could sweep the whole hill-side. Far below him he saw a troop of horsemen. They were not in close order, but straggled loosely, like men undisciplined. Before them rode a youth bearing a flag. The sunlight fell upon it as the wind flung it free, and revealed the blue banner of the Covenant. He left his place and ran down to meet the advancing troop. The horsemen gathered round him as he spoke with their leader.

"The outmost sentinels are posted, Maister Alan, three miles awa'—an' there's a second ring closer at haun; but ye ken the lie o' the land hereawa' better nor me, an' I'll welcome yer help in ma' final dispositions."

Thus the leader, puffed up with martial pride, but yet eager that no haughty self-reliance of his should place the Cause in danger. Alan waved his hand to the heights above him.

"Twenty picked men! . . . I have chosen their places, and your reserves can station themselves at the heid o' the heugh."

Knee-deep in heather the cavalcade continued its slow ascent, Alan holding the stirrup-leather of the captain of the troop, and talking earnestly as he walked. More than an hour had passed ere the last of the sentinels was posted, and the reserves disposed suitably in a deep hollow out of sight. They were but poorly armed. Only a few had muskets; the rest were equipped with hedging bills, reaping hooks, roughly made lances of ash tipped with iron, though here and there a lusty lad had a broadsword at his

belt. A sorry-looking battalion, sorrily equipped but for their zeal—their best weapon.

Alan threw himself down on the hill-side and looked towards the valley. A strange sight met his eyes. Out of the grey mist that still hung along the lower slopes figures began to emerge, sometimes singly, sometimes in little bands. From every airt of the wind the faithful were coming: stalwart men, old men and women bowed with age, young men and maidens with the dew of youth on their brows. It was such a sight as would have moved a heart of stone. These brave-hearted simple folk were gathering to keep the Feast, and the penalty for their devotion was death. Many of them had travelled far, quitting their distant homes to make their way over moor and trackless hill, fording rivers and scaling mountains, liable at every step to be challenged by dragoons. Others were men who had been in hiding with a price on their heads. They had come from their lone fastnesses, from caves in the hills, from distant corners of the moors where none but the moorbirds companied with them. Humble men with backs bent and hands hardened by toil, they were the salt of the earth, the marrow of Southern Scotland. For they were great in faith, and because they were great in faith they were great in manhood.

As Alan watched he saw each little group of advancing folk brought to a sudden halt. From under a whin-bush, or from the heart of a clump of heather, a man would rise and challenge them. A whispered colloquy, a whispered password, sometimes accompanied by the display of a token, and, with a word of guidance, the watchman would stand aside and let the pilgrims pass.

Slowly the grey mist rolled off the heather. Alan lay watching in a fever of hope and doubt. There was one for whom he watched above all others, uncertain whether she would come. Two nights ago he had told her of the preparations. His heart had ached to ask her if she would come. But the question was unspoken, for he shrank from hurting her, and he knew that no battle of the soul is ever won without wounds and pain. She had looked at him wistfully, he remembered, as though her eyes sought to interpret the pleading which spoke in his own, though his lips were silent. And in her farewell that night there was a strange tenderness, something not of the body but of the spirit, something not of the lips but of the soul, which his own spirit discerned but could not fully understand.

With his chin propped on his hand he lay with eyes straining towards the valley, watching and waiting, hoping and doubting, torn on the rack of uncertainty.

At last—O joy of joys!—she came. He saw her afar, his eyes being drawn to her by some strange force long ere she was near enough for him to tell by the grace of her walk and the poise of her body that it was Margaret. He ran to meet her with a full heart.

"Margaret!" he cried, and seized her hand. She stood before him, sweet in her simple gown, and bowed her head. Then she raised her eyes and looked at him proudly through a mist of tears.

"Alan," she said, "once on this very hill you were minded to banish me from your life; but love forbade you. Now of my own free will I come to you, and here, before God, I say, 'Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou dwellest, I will dwell; thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God.' "

The last barrier was broken down, the last surrender made. A light that was not of earth trembled a moment in Margaret's deep brown eyes. The peopled hill-side vanished from Alan's sight. He heard the trees in the valley clap their hands, and the mountains and hills around him break forth into singing. They sang the pæan that was in his heart—a song too wonderful for words, too deep for tears.

Hand in hand, almost like children, they climbed the hill together, and made their way to a hidden nook where they could talk in peace. There was a spell upon them, so that they spoke with hushed voices, when they spoke at all. But there was no need for speech. Spirit communes with spirit in a language beyond human utterance, and a glance of the eye, a touch of the hand, may whisper the deep emotions of the soul which no words can express.

They sat close together with arm touching arm, Alan proud, yet humble, that on this day of days his fondest hopes had found their fulfilment: Margaret, contented, happy—a holy peace nestling in her breast like a brooding dove.

She swept the hill-side with wondering eyes. Never had she imagined that the Covenants claimed such large allegiance. The wastes of heather were thronging with worshippers, the lone hill-side had become a peopled place.

"Meseems," she said, thrilling with her own new loyalty, "the Covenants prosper mightily."

Alan nodded his head. "There are many for us, but there are many against us, and some are too lukewarm to take a side."

“Poor craven souls,” said Margaret. “If they knew—if they could look into my heart——” and she paused, and looked dreamily into the distance.

She laid her hand gently upon Alan’s, then turning her wrist she opened her fingers. In the shallow cup of her palm lay a crumpled piece of lead. “That was Willie Stott’s token,” she whispered, and for a moment, with heads together, they gazed at it reverently. Alan picked it up. His eyes filled as he saw how it was bent and twisted. “Crushed by a strong man in his agony!” he murmured. “Oh, Willie, lealest of friends, how ill they used you.”

“Mayhap,” said Margaret gently, “he keeps the Feast to-day where the ‘token’ is a contrite heart!”

“God grant it may be so,” said Alan solemnly. “But for his lion heart this had been impossible,” and his eyes wandered over the thronged hill-side. Then he looked up at the sky, judging the place of the sun.

“Come,” he said simply and, rising, held out both hands to Margaret and raised her to her feet. They made their way to the great amphitheatre, and seated themselves on the slope some distance above the long rows of stones that had been set for the communicants. The hollow was crowded. Row upon row sat the expectant worshippers waiting in silence. And then the ministers came, men well-beloved, tried in the fire and not found wanting, every one a homeless wanderer, a hunted man. Foremost came John Welsh of Irongray, and with him three others, saintly and revered as himself. As they took their places behind the grey stone table, now covered with a fair white cloth, a murmurous rustle as of wind stirring the corn ran through the multitude. Then every head was bowed in solemn stillness as the minister raised his hands to heaven and commended that mighty congregation to the care of God. The prayer over, in a ringing voice, clear-heard along the slopes, he gave out the forty-sixth psalm:

“God is our refuge and our strength.”

The brave words sung by six thousand voices were at once a challenge to the persecutors and a lofty declaration of faith. The music rose and fell, now surging up in triumph, now sinking to a murmur. Borne on the soft wind it was carried to the hill-tops, and fell like gentle rain upon the valleys. High in the blue lift the larks heard it and pointed it with golden notes; and far away where no human sense could catch it, the horses of the outmost sentinels pricked their ears and raised their heads as though they scented battle.

When the singing was over the service moved slowly along its appointed course to its culmination. With the words of the hundred-and-third psalm trembling on their lips, the communicants reverently took their seats on the four rows of boulders that had been spread in long lines over against the table of stone where the Sacred Elements stood. Then, with simple ritual, the Sacred Feast was kept. Borne by men, humble in place but great in worth, the consecrated Bread and Wine passed along the lines of worshippers. There was no pomp of ceremony; but in the hush that held the multitude more than one of these hard-faced, weather-beaten, hunted men was conscious of a Presence, and heard a Voice that was not of earth saying: "This do in remembrance of Me." And it was not from the gnarled hands of some earthly saint they received the cup, but through their tears they took it from the pierced but radiant hands of One who like themselves, was despised and rejected, and in His body knew the bitterness of torture and of death.

Of the six thousand worshippers close on four thousand took the Sacrament. The rest, examining themselves ruthlessly, deemed themselves not worthy, and shrank from approaching the Table. Yet some of those who thus misjudged themselves were destined to make a bold profession in the hour of trial, and bear themselves stoutly on their way to martyrdom.

As one body of worshippers retired from the Table another took its place, and the simple ritual was repeated. Margaret and Alan remained seated on the outskirts of the great congregation waiting reverently: he proud that so many had ventured thus to pledge themselves to the Cause, and she moved to the depths by the grave but simple dignity of the service, and the solemn beauty of the scene. Suddenly Alan turned his head. He had heard behind him a muttering voice which he recognized. Standing a little way off, with Jean beside him, her baby in her arms, was Shadrach Melville. Alan beckoned them forward, and they came and sat down. There was trouble in the sloe-like eyes of the mother, and Shadrach seemed ill at ease. At last he spoke.

"Maister Alan," he said, "on a sacred day like this Jean an' me ha'e been ha'ein' words."

Jean's dark eyes flashed with a rebellious light; she held her child more closely to her breast and looked at her husband.

"Did ye ever hear the like, sir?" she said, turning to Alan. "Shadrach there winna let me gang forrit tae the Table wi' the bairn in my airms. He says the Table is for fowk o' discretion, no' for weans!"

Shadrach nodded his head. “Ay, Maister Alan. That’s my poseetion. There were nae bairns at the first Supper; nane but grown-up folk.”

“Shadrach,” said Jean reproachfully, with tears brimming in her eyes, “ye stick tae the letter. But ye forget the Maister lo’ed the bairns an’ took them on His knee, an’ rebuked the disciples.”

“Oh ay—I ken a’ that,” said Shadrach stubbornly, “but that’s in anither bit o’ the Buik a’thegether. There were nae bairns in the Upper Room. Besides,” he added self-consciously, “if ye tak’ the bairn forrit what wull the neebours think? They’ll be sayin’ Shadrach and Jean Melville ha’e a guid conceit o’ themsels.”

“I dinna care that for what fowk think,” said Jean stoutly, cracking her fingers. “The bairn willna handle the Elements; he’ll juist lie cuddled in my airms, the wee lamb, an’ maybe the Guid Shepherd wull gi’e him a blessin’ as, unseen, He walks doon amang the tables.” Her bonnie face was wet with troubled tears. She who loved her husband and her child with a fierce love was cut to the heart that the father of her little lad should, in the narrowness of his faith, have raised this difficulty.

Tactfully Alan tried to smooth things over.

“Shadrach,” he said, “you are a splitter of hairs. The Table is the Lord’s; He does not fence it against children.”

But Shadrach shook his head. “On a point o’ this kind, Maister Alan, beggin’ yer pardon, I haud tae my ain opeenion. There’s nae warrant for weans at the Table in the Book.”

Alan shrugged his shoulders. It was Margaret’s womanly understanding that composed the difficulty. She rose and held out both her arms to Jean.

“Let me take care of your bonnie boy,” she said, and smiled, “and you and your husband can go to the Table with an easy mind. You will find me here when you return.”

Without a word, but with a look of gratitude that leaped straight from her heart, Jean laid her child in Margaret’s arms and turned towards her husband. She touched him gently on the sleeve.

“Bide a meenute, Shadrach,” she said, “till the last angry thocht dies doon in ma breist, an’ then I’ll gang forrit wi’ ye.”

Shadrach looked at Alan shamefacedly, and bit his lip nervously. Then he placed his hands on Jean’s shoulders and kissed her shyly. “Forgi’e me,

lass," he whispered humbly. "I didna mean tae hurt ye, but in dealin' wi' the Almichty it's best tae tak' nae liberties."

Jean's sloe-like eyes lit up again; her tears were dried, her heart was happy.

Alan and Margaret watched them make their way slowly towards the Tables. "A brave man," he said. "A pillar of the Covenant! But so troubled by the letter of the law that he sometimes misses its spirit. . . . There are many like that among us," he added meditatively.

Margaret hardly heard him. The child in her lap had taken quick hold on her heart. He had opened his dark eyes and looked into hers questioningly, and for one brief instant his lips trembled as though he were about to cry. But he had looked at her again, with the deep understanding of a child, and seen the mother in her eyes, felt the mother in her arms, and he smiled contentedly. He thrust a chubby fist from under the little plaid that happed him round, and seizing one of Margaret's fingers clasped it firmly and fell asleep, still holding it in his warm grip.

When Shadrach and Jean returned, with hearts uplifted since they had kept the Feast together and found in that solemn festival a new tie to bind them closer to each other, Alan and Margaret went forward to communicate. It was late in the afternoon, and the last Table was set. As they drew near their places Margaret laid a quick hand on Alan's arm.

"Look!" she whispered breathlessly—"My father!" and there before them, with head held high and firm step, as one who had cast all doubt aside and had found himself at last, was the Laird. He did not see them, for his eyes were fixed on things hidden as he took his place among the communicants and, sitting down, bowed his head in his hands. Margaret smiled happily at Alan, and Alan whispered a word of cheer. In very deed this was a Day of Days!

When the ceremony was over and the last psalm was being sung there was a sudden alarm. A cry rose—"The dragoons!" and in a moment the mounted men formed up in readiness to meet their foes. But no attack came. The soldiers, a mere wandering band who had spied upon the gathering judged that they were in too small number to deal with such a multitude, and when the mounted scouts who were sent out returned, they reported that the dragoons were in retreat.

At the first cry of alarm Alan, bidding Margaret wait where he left her, sprang off to reconnoitre; but ere long he returned to reassure her. He found

her father standing beside her. She had plucked his sleeve as he passed her, bent in thought. He had turned round dreamily, and looked at her with distant eyes, that lit up with sudden amazement as he recognized her. “Margaret—Margaret! My darling child!” he had cried, and the tears had risen to his eyes. “By what hard travail of soul have you come to this glorious liberty?”

“By a road less hard than yours, father,” she had answered, as she lifted her face and kissed him.

The two were talking eagerly when Alan drew near. The Laird held out his hand and greeted him warmly. “I used to think,” he said, “that wisdom was the possession of age. In these days, Alan Troquair, the old may learn from the young.”

Alan bowed his head; then he raised it and looked at Margaret. Never had she seemed so winsome. There was in her eyes something that cried aloud to him. His heart heard, and did not fail him. He seized her hand and turned to her father.

“On this day, sir,” he said, “when we three have pledged ourselves to a common loyalty, I venture, greatly daring, to ask your blessing on our betrothal.”

The Laird started. He looked at Margaret.

“I thought you loved My Lord Cla——” he exclaimed, and stopped abruptly, biting his tongue. Margaret smiled at Alan radiantly.

“Yes,” she said, “I love my lord, and will ever love him.”

Her father’s eyes lit up for a moment, then the gleam died out of them, and his look became distant and sad.

“Alan Troquair,” he said, “you ask for much—you ask me for my all.” He looked at Margaret wistfully. “I cannot part——” he said, and stopping suddenly, he shook his head. “Who am I,” he asked, “to try to change the way of the world?” He walked away for a short distance and stood silently. Then he turned and came back quickly. Deeply moved, he lapsed into the soft speech of the common folk: “So ye would tak’ my wee lass frae me? Ay—it’s the wey o’ the world; the young birds leave the auld nest tae big nests o’ their ain. It’s the will o’ God, an’ the wey o’ a man wi’ a maid.”

He paused and brushed his hand across his eyes. “God bless ye, bairns—baith now and a’ your days,” and he turned quickly and left them.

CHAPTER XXV

Margaret and Alan stood watching him till he was lost among the little groups of folk who, guarded by horsemen and armed men on foot, had begun to take their homeward ways.

This was the greatest day in their lives, and they were fain to extract the last drop of sweetness from it. Their hearts were full of wonder, of gratitude and new courage. The future had suddenly become radiant, for when love and faith dwell in the hearts of youth nothing can shatter its dreams.

They found a sequestered nook and sat down.

"You are mine now, little squirrel," said Alan proudly. "Your father has given you to me with his blessing."

Margaret smiled roguishly. "Mr. Rebel," she answered, "you presume too much, and you speak foolishly. My love is not my father's to give. That, by divine right, is a maid's own to give of her own will to the man she loves, and mine I have, foolishly trusting, long since given to you. But I am glad my father gave us his blessing, though, poor man, we took his breath away!" She tossed her head prettily and laughed. "He thought I loved my Lord Claverhouse! I love a better man—but an' he comports him ill and turns traitor to the Cause I shall have none of him."

Alan laughed. "There is little fear of that," he said. "The Cause is too dear to me, and dearer still since you have espoused it." He laid a hand on Margaret's. "I have something to tell you, little squirrel—a secret. Can you keep a secret?" and he smiled at her playfully.

"Need you ask, Mr. Rebel?" she said. "I kept the secret of our love so closely that even my father did not guess it. What is your secret? Is it that once you loved another, and whispered in her ear the same sweet words that now you tell to me? Oh fie upon you, Mr. Rebel," and she held up a finger and looked at him archly.

Alan tapped her finger lightly.

"No, Mistress Jealousy," he said. "This is a weighty secret. Something that will make my little squirrel glad."

She nestled up to him then, her lips half-parted, her brown eyes questioning. She clasped her hands. "A secret!" she cried. "Tease me no

more, but tell me; I am all impatience."

Alan rose and looked carefully about, nor was he content till he had made sure that the boulders near them, and a thick patch of heather that lay before them, hid no curious listener. He seated himself again, and taking one of Margaret's hands in his held it in both his own. "The secret is this," he said, and then he unburdened his soul.

It was a bold, a venturesome plan he had formed in his mind. The oppression of the hillmen was daily becoming sterner and still more stern. Sooner or later a great pitched battle would come when, but for the grace of God, the Cause would be defeated. In England there were, there must be, thousands of men of goodwill whose love of liberty in the things of the spirit must be as great as that of the hillmen. They were holding aloof from the fight, not from lack of zeal, but simply because they did not know what was happening across the Border. A spark would kindle their enthusiasm; a little of the leaven of knowledge would start such a ferment in their minds that thousands of them would rally to the side of the Covenants, and the King's men would have Covenanters to deal with, not only on the moors and hills of Scotland, but all over England as well. As he spoke his dark blue eyes flashed with prophetic fire, his whispering voice rang with the passion of a zealot. Margaret, watching and listening eagerly, felt her heart kindling with his enthusiasm.

"That is the work that calls me," he said. "The call came to me in a dream in the dead of night. The work I am doing here can be done by others. The field lies open before me; I must set my hand to the plough."

Margaret withdrew her hand from his. A cold dread had suddenly touched her.

"Then you would leave me, Alan?" she whispered tremulously.

"No, little squirrel," he cried. "This plan of mine—Oh, I can see God's hand in it!—would give us both our heart's desire. Here I am a homeless, hunted man. Yonder"—and he looked away towards the sea—"I should be a free man, with no price on my head. I should work secretly, sowing the seed here and there quietly, but in less danger than besets me daily here. And if you would come to me, if you would come to me," and he turned his gaze full upon her and was silent.

"If I would come to you," she said slowly, lingering tenderly over every word, "if I would come to you, you would . . . Oh, Alan!" she cried, veiling

her deep emotion behind a happy burst of laughter, “you would take me ‘for better or worse’?”

“Yes, sweeting,” said Alan simply; and for answer she threw her arms about him and kissed him on the lips.

The future that had sometimes seemed so dark was bright as a summer dawn. They ceased to whisper and talked rapturously, lifted outside their sober selves by the enchantment of that happy hour.

“And when does my knight set forth on his pilgrimage?” asked Margaret at last.

“Within a month,” he answered. “There are some things lying yet to my hand in Irongray that I must accomplish ere I go. But within a month all will be ready for the venture.”

Margaret clasped and unclasped her hands.

“I bid you God-speed,” she said. “And when this rebel man of mine calls me, I come,” she said firmly.

She rose, and shook her kirtle with both hands. “Mr. Rebel,” she said, “you are an impetuous lover. Think you these little hands are so deft with the needle that in four short weeks I can be ready?” and she looked at him roguishly.

Alan did not answer, but he slipped his arm through hers and together they began to descend the hill. The dusk was gathering when they took a tender farewell of each other within a mile of Knowe. The sky was overclouded, but there was sunshine in their hearts.

Margaret quickened her steps. In love’s happy dalliance she had forgotten the flight of time. Before her, across her path, hither and thither darted the swallows, flying low in the cool evening air. Their shrill screaming sounded almost melodious to her happy heart.

She raised her eyes and looked towards Knowe. She could see one of the turrets, but over it hung a black moving cloud that masked its familiar outline. The cloud puzzled her, it hung so low; and as she looked she saw that it was lit from beneath by a reddish glare. For a moment she stood astonished; then a strange fear seized her and she began to run. Soon she was within sight of the house, and horror struck her like a blow. Knowe was on fire! She could see great flames licking up through the windows and breaking through the roof. For one awful moment she stood frozen to the ground, then she leaped forward like a frightened fawn. Fleet-foot, with

throbbing heart and anguished breath she ran. She raced up the drive. Before the doomed building women were scurrying to and fro, wringing their hands in futile agitation. For a moment none recognized her. Then Elspeth saw her, and came running.

"The Laird's inside, Mistress Margaret; God help him!" she cried. "I tried tae haud him back—but he broke awa'. Oh, wha' will save him?"

Margaret darted forward, but Elspeth seized and clung to her; and at that moment the roof fell, throwing smoke and crimson sparks and pennons of flame high to the heavens.

A sudden silence fell on the helpless women, who stood awestricken. Then, as though to add terror to the affrighted moment, a spear of lightning struck through the murky sky, and like the crack of doom a thunder peal rolled and reverberated along the heavens. Ere its last echo had died there came the patter of rain, and suddenly, as though a cloud had burst, a deluge poured from the sky. As the heavy drops struck the hot stones, or fell into the heart of the furnace, they hissed and sputtered and were changed to little puffs of steam. But no conflagration could long support such a smother of rain. Gradually the leaping flames were beaten down, and the furtive little smoulders of fire in the hidden places were quenched. But at the end Knowe stood, a blackened ruin—a home made desolate.

Though they were drenched to the skin, so that their clothing hung about them like sodden rags, the women did not seek shelter till at last some glimmer of sense came back to Elspeth. Very tenderly she led her heart-broken mistress to the back of the house, where one small portion had escaped the flames. Somewhat brusquely she ordered the other women to their tasks.

"Ha'e ye nocht tae dae but staun aboot greetin' and twiddlin' yer thooms? Think o' yer puir mistress. . . . See if ye canna fin' some dry claes for her, an' get oot o' yer ain wet things. An' Mirren, pit on the pan an' boil some milk."

With fine spirit, though her heart was heavy within her, she established her rule.

Margaret sobbed broken-heartedly. "My father. Oh, my father!" she moaned.

Elspeth sought to comfort her, though in the act her own tears came again and she wept bitterly. "Dinna greet, lassie, dinna greet," she said as she stroked her hair. "It's the Lord's will, an' He kens best, so we maun juist

boo." But she straightened her back at the words, and added with strange lack of logic: "But if the Laird had only listened tae me an' stopped whaur he was, he micht ha'e been wi' us yet. Umphm!—that's so. . . . Dinna greet, there's a guid lass!"

When the first storm of her grief was over, Margaret began to question Elspeth and, bit by bit, heard the story of all that had happened at Knowe since the morning. The tale was interrupted, not once but many times, as the two heart-broken women mingled their tears.

At the end Elspeth sighed, and folded her hands in her lap. Her mind wandered to the happy past.

"Ay, Mistress Margaret! A bonnie hoose it was. I min' when the Laird brocht yer mither hame—juist sic anither as yersel', lassie—in the auld days when I was in my prime." She wiped her eyes furtively, and sighed again. "But what bothers me is what took yer faither. He cam' back, maybe half an oor afore ye, an' dae what I could he would gang his ain gait. Without rhyme or reason he forced his wey intae the hoose, though it was a bleezin' furnace. There was something he wanted. . . . Maybe it was the locket wi' yer mither's hair." Her voice trembled and broke, then she steadied herself and asked, with a wistful look in her eyes: "Is it true what the sodgers said, lassie—was the Laird up on the hill the day?"

Margaret dried her tears.

"My father was on Skeoch and took the Sacrament," she said.

Elspeth rose to her feet. Her voice rang proudly. "The Laird a Covenanter!" she cried. "Then ye need greet nae mair, lassie. Yer faither's in heaven!"

CHAPTER XXVI

The death of her father and the destruction of her old home came near to breaking Margaret's heart. Had it not been for the thought of Alan her grief would utterly have crushed her. But even in her darkest hour her love for her betrothed, and the knowledge that he loved her with a passion as tender, shone through the clouds like a serene and gracious star. Her sorrow wrought a change in her. She lost her bird-like gaiety, but in the quietness of her heart new graces of the spirit flowered into beauty and made her more winsome than ever.

She clung affectionately to that little corner of the House of Knowe which the flames had spared. There was room enough for her to live there with the faithful Elspeth and Mirren McTurk. An unseen bond, stronger than the tendrils of old memories, bound her with golden links to the ruins of her home. So long as she remained there she was within reach of Alan. The hills that were his hiding-place were before her eyes and, being near him, she felt that she was within call should he ever need her, or close at hand to shield him should danger threaten.

So when her Aunt Grizel pressed her to leave Irongray and take up her abode with her in the gaunt house that stood over against the Plain Stanes in Dumfries, she declined. Apart from all else she had little love for her kinswoman, a lady of shrewish face and shrewish tongue, who looked at her with a cold and beady eye and laid down the law in no uncertain voice. With her niece by her side she stalked round the burnt ruins, stopping every now and then to shrug her shoulders and utter a condemning "Humph." She had no patience with Covenanters, and she was angry and shocked to think that the Laird, her brother, had forsaken the King's cause and joined the rebels.

"I am surprised that your father should ha'e done this," she said. "Whatever can ha'e come owre him? Yet efter a' I'm no surprised, for Dauvit was aye queer. He was aye gatherin' 'oo somewhere in the back o' his heid; aye walkin' through life in a fog. Even as a lad he was fu' o' notions. An' ye see what comes o' notions in these testin' times!" and she waved her hand towards the blackened ruins.

Margaret defended her father with vigour. "He was the best father in the world," she said.

Her kinswoman sniffed at her pouncet-box. “Oh ay,” she answered, “being a Lansburgh he couldna help ha’ein’ guid points; but he maun ha’e gaen gyte,” and she tapped her forehead with a bony finger. “He’s the first Lansburgh that ever brocht disgrace on his family by turning traitor.”

Margaret’s anger rose.

“My father did not disgrace his name. He was no traitor, but an honest man.”

Her aunt looked her up and down with scornful eyes. Having laid three husbands to rest in Saint Michael’s kirkyard, she claimed to be a judge of men.

“Men are a’ fules,” she said sweepingly. “They’re a’ eaten up wi’ conceit in their ain strength o’ mind, and there’s no ane in ten score has ony mind to speak o’.”

“But my father was not like that,” protested Margaret. “He was both wise and kind, and I am sure that he did not become a Covenanter till he was certain that the step he took was right.”

Her aunt looked her up and down severely.

“Ye’re juist haverin’,” she said, “an’ talkin’ treason. The Covenanters are nocht but heidstrong rebels, an’ deserve a’ they get,” and she closed her thin lips sternly.

As she prepared to leave, in some dudgeon because Margaret had told her firmly that she intended to remain at Knowe, she turned suddenly upon her.

“Weel, yer mind’s made up, is it?”

“Yes!” said Margaret firmly. “It is most kind of you to ask me to come to you; but my heart clings to Knowe.”

Her kinswoman snorted. “Weel—we’ll let it bide there. Ye’ll maybe rue yer decision, for I’ll no ask ye again.”

Margaret watched her stalk off, and then sought Elspeth, who gave her ready comfort.

“Yer aunt was aye a queer woman,” she said. “I could never comprehend her being o’ the same bluid as yer sainted faither. They never drew weel thegither, an’ it was a’ her faut; for if there ever was a guid man it was the Laird.”

Margaret smiled gently.

“Did she say ocht aboot her first husband?” asked Elspeth.

Margaret shook her head. “No,” she answered, “she mentioned none of them, but she said sweepingly that all men are fools.”

Elspeth laughed aloud. “Nae doot the three that gied their names tae her thocht sae themsels afore the Lord delivered them. But she’s fond o’ sayin’ that her first man was a nonesuch.”

“And was he?” asked Margaret, her curiosity awakened. “I never knew him.”

Elspeth pursed her mouth. “As he has been under the mools the langest she thinks maist o’ him. But she thocht very little o’ him when she had him, an’ often said as muckle. She’s a wumman ill tae leeve wi’. I’m gled ye didna yield tae her.”

Margaret and Elspeth were still talking when they were disturbed by the sudden entrance of Mirren. She was pale with fright, and could hardly gasp out the words.

“The dragoons are comin’, wi’ Dalyell at their heid!”

Margaret rushed to the window, her heart beating wildly. Elspeth came and stood beside her and looked out. At the head of a small company of men, his grey beard sweeping behind him in the wind, Dalyell was riding across the lawn.

“In God’s name what can they want?” whispered Elspeth. “Ha’e they no dune eneuch a’ready?”

“Hush, Elspeth!” said Margaret. “As like as no Sir Thomas has come simply to inspect the handiwork of his minions.”

Elspeth seized her mistress’s arm. A sudden fear had struck her. These fiends had come to take her mistress! At all costs she must save her!

“Bide here wi’ Mirren,” she said quietly. “I jalouse they’ve come for me. I wouldna tak’ ‘the Test,’ as ye weel remember, an’ Dalyell kens I’m a Covenanter. So I’ll juist awa’ doon an’ get it owre.”

“No, no!” cried Margaret, throwing her arms passionately about her faithful nurse, “you must not go,” and her eyes filled with tears.

With firm hands Elspeth loosened the clinging arms.

“Hoots, lassie!” she said. “I’m no feared o’ Dalyell. Let me gang,” and bravely and steadily the old woman walked to the door and, opening it, went forth. But she did not go alone. Margaret sprang after her, and in a moment the two women stood before Dalyell. He withdrew his eyes from their survey of the blackened ruins, and looked down at them. They stood silently, Margaret steeling her heart lest the fear that trembled there should show itself in her face; Elspeth calm and unafraid, but ready to die, if by her sacrifice her mistress might be saved. At last Dalyell spoke. He waved his hand toward the ruins and said, not unkindly:

“It’s a sair sicht, a sair sicht!”

Steadying her voice, Margaret answered:

“Yes, Sir Thomas. . . . My home made desolate,” and she bowed her head lest he should see her tears.

Dalyell turned to Elspeth. “If I min’ richt,” he said, “you’re a Covenanter!”

“Thank God I am!” she answered stoutly.

Dalyell laughed. “There’s no muckle tae thank God for in that. Ye see what comes o’ being a rebel!” and he pointed to the house.

“If the Laird was here tae speak for himsel’,” said Elspeth, as she looked up into the depths of the sky, “I’m thinkin’ he’d tell ye it was worth it.”

Dalyell shrugged his shoulders. “Ye’re a fanatic!” he said, “a dour, daft auld woman,” and he shook his fist at her. He looked at the ruins again, then turned to Margaret. His flinty eyes above their pouched lids were sullen and brooding; but he spoke without harshness, almost sadly. “It’s peetifu’, peetifu’!”

Margaret took courage; the “Muscovy beast” had a heart after all; he was better than men called him!

“It is worse than pitiful, Sir Thomas,” she said. “It is cruel that a home so fair as mine should have been destroyed without just cause!”

Dalyell thrust his shoeless feet more deeply into his stirrups.

“Like a’ yer sex, Mistress Margaret, ye tak’ a man up wrang! It’s peetifu’, I say; but I dinna mean this heap o’ blackened stanes. That’s a sma’ enough penalty for treachery! What’s peetifu’ is that yer faither, a man that I respected, should ha’e fa’en frae grace.”

Margaret bit her lips, lest the hot words that were on the tip of her tongue should break cover and provoke Dalyell to savage wrath. But Elspeth, less cautious, her eyes flashing, spoke up with spirit.

"Fa'en frae grace!" she cried. "He got grace the day he died; an' he never fell frae it!"

Dalyell turned upon her angrily.

"Haud yer tongue, wumman!" he roared. "Speak tae yer betters when ye're spoken tae."

Elspeth shrugged her shoulders defiantly, and did not lower her eyes before Dalyell's savage gaze. There was a long and ominous silence, as though Sir Thomas were gathering himself together for a wild outburst, but no explosion came. Instead, he turned and spoke quietly to Margaret.

"Lang syne I warned yer faither! He lived in a dangerous place—in the back o' his ain heid. That's a dark chamber whaur mony an ill thocht is conceived, an' mony an evil deed is brocht tae the birth." The hard eyes softened, a flicker like a smile played round the stern mouth. Dalyell leaned forward in his saddle as though to whisper a secret. "Mistress Margaret," he said, "being a lass ye're no in muckle danger o' leevin' inside yer heid; but the hert can be as bad a guide as the heid, so tak' tent, tak' tent, afore its owre late!"

Margaret looked up at Dalyell with a question in her eyes, but she did not speak.

Sir Thomas dug his heels into his horse's flanks and rode at a walk round the ruins. Then he came back, shouted an order to his men, and looking down at Margaret again, said sternly:

"Ye've had yer warning, young lady! I ken mair aboot ye than ye think."

The girl stood bewildered. She knew not what to say, and before she could find speech he had urged his horse to a canter, and at the head of his troop was making for the hills.

Margaret watched the retreating horsemen till Elspeth's hand on her arm called her out of her reverie.

"Did ye ever hear sic impidence, lassie? Tae think o' that blasphemous sinner settin' himsel' up tae judge yer sainted faither!" and her eyes were filled with withering scorn.

Margaret shook her head. Her heart was perplexed with vague misgivings. Was there some dark threat behind Dalyell's words? What had he meant? What did he know? Did he know that Alan Troquair was still alive, and that she loved him? Was he off to the hills now, he and his armed dragoons, to find Alan and take him? Oh! would that Alan were across the Border, safe from those ravening beasts that sought his life.

It was with a glad heart that she heard the owl hoot in the copse that night. Since the burning of Knowe, Alan, unwilling that Margaret should expose herself to danger by seeking him among the hills, came often, under cover of the shielding dusk, to the old sanctuary in the little wood. And, as of old, he revealed his presence with the cry of a bird of the night. She had waited for the signal with beating heart and bated breath, uncertain whether she would ever hear it again. And when it came she was so overtaken of joy that she clapped her hands. Flinging a light plaid over her head, she stole out to Alan and, clinging to him passionately, buried her face on his shoulder and wept. Alan stroked her head gently and comforted her, thinking she wept for her father. It was long ere she dried her tears. Lifting her head, her heart warmed by the solace of her lover's whispered words, she said:

"How wonderful love is! The earth may reel beneath one's feet, and all else changes, but love endureth."

And Alan, looking into her upturned face, fair as a flower in the soft light of the moon, answered gently:

"Yes, little squirrel! What is of the spirit can never die!"

It was then she had flung her arms about his neck, and in a passion of burning entreaty implored him to flee. She scented evil. Dalyell's dark words were heavy with menace. Though it was hard to part with Alan, he must no longer delay.

But Alan shook his head.

"I have much to do ere I go," he answered, "and the time is all too short." He smiled into her troubled eyes.

"Dalyell plots against you. I know he has learned that you still live," she whispered.

Alan laughed. "A fig for Dalyell and his Grey Dragoons! There are more than he who have cause to know that I still live." He spoke boastfully, as never before, and Margaret was distraught with urgent fears.

"You are headstrong and reckless," she whispered, upbraiding him.

Alan laughed again, and held her at arm's length.

"And does my little squirrel think she would love me were I aught else? I know her better! She would despise me."

Margaret shook her head sadly.

"I should never despise you. I know your worth too well. But I might think better of your wisdom if you courted danger less! You are in deadly peril." She trembled in his arms, and when he kissed her her lips were cold.

He sought to comfort her with brave and cheerful words, and for his sake she dried her eyes and forced a smile back to her pale cheeks. But when she left him her heart was heavy. The cold hand of coming doom had touched her. She who had never lowered her flag to a fear was seized with mortal dread. And the man who was dearer to her than life itself would not understand!

The grey dawn found her, a lone, pathetic figure, sitting by her window, her brown tired eyes fixed on the distant hills.

CHAPTER XXVII

The dusk was deepening into darkness. At the edge of a little clump of trees by the brink of the river, a mile or more above the waterfall, stood a young man. With his back against a tree-trunk, so that he might be less easily discerned, he surveyed keenly all of the landscape within range of his sight. The fading light made distant vision impossible, but when he had satisfied himself that no lurking watcher was close at hand he stole into the heart of the thicket. In its depths he dropped upon his hands and knees, and crawled beneath some undergrowth. Pushing aside a mass of withered bracken he came upon a sword. With this in his hand he crawled out from the undergrowth and, laying the weapon at the root of a tree, he dived once more under the low bushes. When he emerged again he bore a saddle and bridle. These he laid by the sword, and stealing to the edge of the river he threw himself upon his face and, after drawing up his sleeve, plunged his right hand into the water. With deft fingers, used to the task, he groped in the bottom of a pool. In a moment he lifted a large flat stone on to the grass beside him, and plunged his hand into the water once again. He raised it slowly, the water dripping through his fingers, which grasped firmly a wide-mouthed bottle sealed carefully with a capping of sheepskin. The thin light sufficed to let him see that the bottle contained a whitish stick like the stump of a candle. He placed the bottle carefully in his pocket as he rose to his feet. Had there been a listener close at hand he might have heard the young man mutter: “Sam’l McMuldrow is a man of his word.”

He rested his back against the tree-trunk again, and looked about him carefully once more. Then he placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled long and piercingly. It was such a sound as might have issued from the throat of a moorbird, and some wayfarer of the night, hearing it, would in all likelihood have taken it for that. But the ears for which it was intended knew it for what it was.

Far off, out of sight, almost at the verge of the distance to which the whistle carried, a black horse lifted its splendid head and pricked its ears. The whistle came again—faint, yet certain, and like the wind the black horse answered the summons. Belly to earth, and sinewy legs outstretched, its hoofs spurning the ground, it raced towards its master. It took every obstacle in its stride—earthen dykes, low bushes, grey boulders.

The young man at the edge of the wood listened with straining ears. He heard the expected thud of hurrying hoofs, and he whistled again. The note that came from his lips was soft and low. The horse caught the message: pricked its ears: stood still: and then, as though conscious of encompassing danger, moved quietly onward at a walk. Its master heard the cautious splash of its feet as it forded the river. He whistled again, more softly still, and in a moment the horse was beside him. It rubbed its muzzle against his coat fondly, and he slipped an arm round its neck and whispered quietly while he searched in one of his pockets for a handful of oats. Crunching the corn with obvious liking, the horse followed its master under cover of the trees, its muzzle stretched expectantly towards the pocket from which its bounty had come.

When they came forth again the man was in the saddle—his sword girt at his side. He reined in his horse for a moment at the edge of the river and looked up at the sky. Then he patted his mount on the neck and spoke softly: "Not yet, Beauty, not yet! We must wait for the dark."

The horse pawed the ground. It did not understand its master's words, but it loved the sound of his whispering voice and, trained not to whinny, save when the moment was ripe, it showed its pleasure with its scraping hoof.

Leaving the brink of the river the rider turned his horse towards the hills, and soon it was climbing steadily and easily, its hoofs half-buried in the heather. The rider was in a happy mood—under his breath he hummed a cheerful song. Life was sweet! The cool evening air was like a draught of crystal water: the earth was odorous of bog-myrtle, wild thyme, and wholesome peat: the sky was diamonded with sprinkled stars: and in his veins the warm blood of youth coursed bravely. It was glorious to be alive!

Good to be alive! The thought fluttered through his mind again. Yes—life was sweet! But men he had known and loved had counted the price of life too high if its price was dishonour. He thought of Willie Stott—honest, warm of heart, fearful of faith, yet brave as a lion. But for his courage the Cause might have come to hopeless disaster. The blacksmith had loved life; yet he had borne torture and suffered death. Died!—with blood on his hands!—fearing his Maker. Would he be judged guiltless? Ah—who could tell? The horse climbed steadily on, the reins lying easily upon its neck, its master occupied with a problem he could not solve.

High on the hill-side the rider halted for a moment and turned to look back at the valley. Here and there a light twinkled from a distant cottage, and

the dark clumps of trees looked like bodies of massed men. Silence lay heavy on the hill-side—the earth was falling asleep.

Suddenly, from no great distance, came the sound of loud voices, and the rider was instantly alert. He turned his horse to the ascent again, and with a whispered word urged it on. Just above him was the crest of a ridge. Below it he leaped from his horse and crawled to its edge. He looked into the long hollow that lay beneath him, and strained his eyes to see what was happening. At first he could discern little—uncertain whether upstanding boulders were mounted men or naught but stones. But where his eyes failed his ears served him. Within the hollow, between the steep flanks of the hill, something evil was toward. He knew the sound of the hue-and-cry. It had echoed and re-echoed in his own ears when, hot-foot, he had fled for his life. And now he heard it again—like the baying of hounds; yet more awful, for the life of a man he loved was at stake. Within that hollow he knew the sainted minister of Irongray, who had thrown in his lot with the hillmen, and so been "outed" from kirk and manse, had his nightly hiding-place. Had some nocturnal band of raiders found him? He saw a yellow flash on the farther slope, and heard the bark of a gun. Then there was an ominous silence, broken by loud voices cursing wildly. By that token he knew the shot had not found its billet.

The voices came nearer: his straining eyes could make out mounted men, some in the depths of the hollow, others making their way cautiously along the steep slopes on either side. He hesitated no longer. Leaping back, he found his horse, which stood like stone where he had left it. He pulled the bottle from his pocket, tore off its sheepskin cap, and seized the white stick that lay within it. It shone with a ghostly lustre in his hand, and where his fingers touched it they became luminous. Swiftly he brushed it down the forehead of his horse, rubbed it lightly here and there on shoulders and flanks, and, wherever it touched, the horse gleamed with little glimmering streaks of light. He whipped his sword from its scabbard, and when he thrust it back again it was a living flame. Then quickly he passed his glowing hands over his face, and it was lit by a ghostly radiance.

He leaped into the saddle, and urging the horse with bridle and voice and heels, tore along the hill-side. He kept below the crest of the ridge that bordered the hollow, so that none within it could see him. He knew every inch of that hill-side as he knew the palm of his hand, and from what he had seen of the mounted men in the hollow, he judged that the hunted minister was leading them cunningly towards a rocky gorge known as "The Thrapple." It was steep and stony and narrow—difficult ground for mounted

men, but easier for a hunted man on foot. A fugitive, reaching the gorge, might steal through on to the open hill-side, and in the darkness make good his escape, while his pursuers on horseback would be delayed, and might possibly come to disaster in trying to follow him through.

He patted his sure-footed beast on the neck. “In the Thrapple, Beauty,” he whispered, “you and the Ghostly Rider can hold back an army of white-livered cowards.”

The horse galloped faster, as though it scented battle and lusted to be in the thick of the fray.

With a firm hand and a whispered word the rider drew rein and slipped to the ground. His horse stood still where he left it, while its rider stole cautiously into the gorge on foot, and, hidden by a boulder, listened anxiously. He had judged rightly. Though he could see no dragoons he could hear them. Every moment their voices sounded louder—they were approaching slowly—spread out doubtless in a great crescent like a net. Somewhere within its curve was their quarry. If the net closed round him before he could reach the Thrapple the minister would be taken: if, like a fish, he could find his way among the rocks, the net would lose its prey. Again the watcher saw the flash of a gun, and again the hills rattled with echoes. He held his breath anxiously. Were his pursuers so close on the heels of the fugitive that they could see him; or was some excited dragoon mistaking a standing stone for a man and wasting powder and shot on a granite boulder? If he knew aught of the minister, he was no simpleton in the art of taking cover. He would not show himself unless closely pressed.

The watcher waited, straining his eyes into the grey darkness, listening with anxious ears. The shouting came nearer: it was no longer a distant confused babble; words—curses for the most part—began to distil out of the general discord.

The watcher moved uneasily. A sudden thought had struck him. Never before had he known the dragoons make a raid on the hills at night. Night forays among these mountain fastnesses were hazardous adventures; and in the dark the soldiers were less likely to find the hillmen than in the day. Unless—unless—and the watcher bit his lip savagely in an agony of suspicion—unless there were treachery abroad, and some renegade who knew where the “moorbirds” had their hiding-places were leading the troopers to them. A cold sweat broke upon the gleaming face and glowing hands of the watcher. Between his clenched teeth he muttered, “The Brand!” and his fingers closed in an iron grip as though they were on the throat of a

traitor. He leaned forward eagerly, peering out of the gorge. Here and there he could make out a slow-moving shadow—in bulk and shape like a mounted man. He drew back behind the boulder and, thrusting a hand into his pocket, found the bottle he had taken from the stream. He took the white stick from it and passed it lightly over his hands and face, which had begun to lose their ghostly radiance. The weird greenish light was rekindled: the watcher became a spectre again.

He ran quickly back to his horse, which he touched lightly on head and flanks, re-awakening the fading gleams; then he bounded into the saddle, and urged his steed forward. Sure-footed as a mountain goat, it made its way almost noiselessly among the boulders that half choked the Thrapple. Its rider guided it to one side, so that it stood under the shadow of a huge overhanging rock. Immediately before it was a large rounded boulder that afforded ample cover. From his elevation on the horse's back the rider could see what was toward in the hollow. The pursuers were closing in rapidly now: from their excited cries the watcher judged that ever and anon they caught, or fancied they caught, a fleeting glimpse of their quarry, and more than once a musket cracked. But vainly; for always, after a little silence, the hubbub of voices broke out afresh.

Suddenly the watcher's straining ears caught a familiar sound—a low rustle as though the wind was stirring among the heather or as though a hillman, sore beset, crawled over it. The rustle ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The watcher knew what that meant. The fugitive had paused to nerve himself for a final effort. In a moment he would spring up and make a dash for the Thrapple.

Silently the watcher drew his sword. It was hardly out of its scabbard when his eager eyes saw what they had looked for. Out of the shadows in front of him a man sprang erect, and dashed forward. There was a wild shout, for more than one of his pursuers saw him. The man stumbled and fell close to the mouth of the gorge. The watcher heard the thudding of galloping hoofs and loud shouts of "Ha'e at him; he's doon!" He waited no longer. With a wild cry, flaming sword in hand, the Ghostly Rider on his ghostly steed leaped from the gorge and stood, a spectre of eerie horror, between the prostrate fugitive and his foes.

There was a sudden silence, deep and awesome, like the silence that follows the fall of a thunderbolt; then the hills re-echoed to the noise of frenzied shouts:

"God save us—it's the De'il!"

The rider waved his flaming sword high in the air. The prostrate man picked himself up slowly. The rider heard him and, without turning, whispered, “Are you wounded?”

“By God’s mercy, no!” came back the answer.

“Then slip through the Thrapple; the way is clear. I’ll hold them at bay,” said the spectre; and with a loud whoop he dug his heels into his horse’s sides and rode headlong into the hollow. Terror spread before him like a blast. He heard the cries of frenzied men urging their horses: shouts that were half an oath and half a prayer: growls and snarls as, in the dark, in the wild undisciplined flight, horse jostled horse, and their riders cursed each other.

The spectre laughed aloud. The joy of battle was in his blood: single-handed he had put to rout a strong company of dragoons, and saved his friend the minister from capture and death. It was good to be alive, with such a trusty steed under him. To-night he would put such fear of the devil in the hearts of these men of blood that never again would one have the pluck to make a night-raid on the hills. He called on his willing horse for another effort, and the gallant beast leaped forward.

There was a flash out of the earth: a musket crashed on the instant: the brave horse shrieked in its death agony and plunged forward lifeless, and its rider, thrown from the saddle over its ears, was swallowed up in swift oblivion.

He came to himself again from the depths of a bottomless sea, rising slowly, with the sound of many waters in his ears, through untold fathoms towards a surface that seemed to recede and ever recede. He was stifling for want of breath: an iron hand gripped his chest like a vice: he was chilled to the bone: his heart was sick within him. With a gasp and a sob, and an attempted cry that never came to being, he opened his eyes. Above him was the grey sky; around and beneath him no waste of treacherous waters, but homely familiar heather. He saw dimly as through a mist. He closed his eyes and drowsed along the brink of unconsciousness, only half capable of thought or feeling. Thick voices, foggy, uncertain, distant, struck his ears. He braced himself to listen: the voices sounder louder. Some one was boasting truculently: “Sodgers, ye ca’ yersels! Gamecocks on yer ain midden, nae doot, but chicken-hearted cowards when there’s brave work tae be done!”

Some one answered with a shaggy oath. The boasting voice lifted itself again.

"Ye thocht it was the De'il! Whaur's his horns? whaur's his cloven hoofs? It's a man o' flesh an' bluid. It's Alan Troquair!"

Hearing his name thus spoken with no uncertainty, Alan awoke to a livelier consciousness. He opened his eyes and turned them to the side from whence the voices came. He saw a huddle of men seated on the hill-side close at hand, their horses picketed behind them. Before them, strutting up and down with chest thrown out like a pouter-pigeon, was "The Brand." A flood of anger surged in Alan's heart and brain. All his senses came back with a rush. He tried to raise himself: staggered unsteadily to his feet: reeled like one drunken: threw out his arms and floundered to earth again. Three of the soldiers leaped upon him and held him down. It was useless to struggle against such odds. He resigned himself to his fate.

"The Brand" stood over him looking down on him with contempt.

"You and yer ghostly cantrips!" he said scornfully, and spat his derision.

Alan made a wild attempt to break from his captors. His fingers itched to be at the traitor's throat. But he was overmastered. "You Judas!" he hissed, and withered "The Brand" with a look of scorn. And then, not from self-pity, but because his heart was full and he feared greatly for those he loved, his eyes filled with tears. "The Brand," exulting, and without understanding, laughed aloud, and the tears dried up at their source. "The De'il forsooth! He's nocht but a greetin' wean!"

But one of the soldiers, a man of feeling, who knew a man when he saw one, cried shame upon him angrily.

"Shut yer bloody mou'," he shouted. "I ken Alan Troquair for a brave man. He has mair guts in his wee finger than ye ha'e in yer hale carcass! Tae hell wi' ye!"

When they judged him fit for the journey, they mounted Alan on a trooper's horse and tied his feet under its belly. With longing eyes he looked at the hills around him, soft purpling in the dawn. Lovingly he bade them farewell: he would never see them again. His eyes filled with sudden tears when, near at hand, he saw the body of Beauty, his gallant steed, with blood at the nostrils and a bloody gash in his chest where the bullet, fired at short range, had dealt him death. As they led him past he raised his right hand to his forehead in salute. Of such honour Beauty was worthy—Beauty, the brave companion of many a midnight raid!

The blackened ruins of Knowe slept tranquilly behind their screen of trees as the tragic cavalcade passed. Alan turned and looked wistfully at

them, then raised his head to catch a glimpse of the treetops in the little wood hallowed by memories sweeter than life itself. Dear little brown squirrel! Never again would she shelter in his arms!—never again!

The sun was mounting the heavens, and the Nith, a winding ribbon of silver, sparkled in the light as the dragoons clattered over Devorgilla's Bridge with their close-guarded prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Tidings of Alan's capture came to Margaret late on the following day. The news stunned her; the world went cold and dark, as though the sun had been blotted out of the sky. For an hour she sat dazed, staring with dry, fixed eyes into vacancy, pain gripping her breast and throat with iron fingers. Then she sprang up, alive with purpose. She had too fine a soul to waste her emotions in futile tears when there was need of action. Alan was in Dumfries—only three miles away; and there he would be in the custody of my Lord Claverhouse. He had not been dealt with summarily, and shot on the hill-side! Therein lay hope—and the feeblest spark of hope becomes a radiant flame when fanned by a woman's love. There was no time for delay, for in these stern days the inexorable wheels of the King's justice moved quickly, and at any moment Alan might be transferred to Edinburgh. Once in the grip of the Council, any influence she could exert upon his behalf would be of no avail. But while my Lord Claverhouse was still the arbiter of his fate her pleading might count for something. She smiled—a wan, pathetic smile—for her woman's heart remembered that not once, but many times, Claverhouse had declared his love for her. Were all his burning words and eager protestations to count for nothing now? She would not, she dared not think so. If he had really loved her then she must mean something to him still, even though she had left him no reason to think that she cared for him. He would—he must—lend a kindly ear to her entreaty.

Such were her thoughts as she busied herself in preparation for her journey. She summoned Elspeth and bade her dress her hair. "Make me look my best," she said; and the old nurse, puzzled that on such a day of dule her mistress should have the heart to think of her appearance, obeyed with deft fingers, but protesting tongue,

"What's in yer mind, lassie?" she asked between her tears, as she plied the brush quickly.

"I go to my Lord Claverhouse, to plead for Alan's life," she answered.

Elspeth's loyal heart cried praise upon her, but she protested.

"There's nae bluid in yon stane!—there's nae milk o' human kindness in yon hard hert! Ye wad be better on yer knees, lassie, than gangin' on sic a useless errand. Yer lad's in God's hauns."

"I know, I know," cried Margaret passionately, as she clasped and unclasped her hands. "But God helps those who help themselves, and I must do all I can for Alan."

Elspeth shook her head. "That's no a text frae the Buik," she said dryly, "an' maybe ye'll mak' things waur. Claver'se was saft on ye himsel'. . . . Oh ay—I ken he was . . . ye needna shake yer heid! . . . An' if ye plead wi' him for Maister Alan, ye'll only mak' him jealous. . . . An' jealousy workin' in an evil hert can mak' a man a devil!"

"I cannot think," said Margaret, "that Lord Claverhouse is as bad as that. . . . He has many good qualities," she added, defending him to herself.

"If he has, lassie, he's shown nane o' them in this countryside," said Elspeth bitterly, as she set a long plait of hair skilfully in its place.

"You misjudge him. I'm sure you misjudge him," cried Margaret.

Elspeth shook her head. "If ye're set on gangin' tae see him I'm comin' wi' ye."

Margaret bit her lip with annoyance. She must go alone. Anything else was impossible! She spoke gently, hiding her feelings.

"I do not think that would be wise, Elspeth. I flatter myself I can persuade my lord better if I am alone."

Elspeth shook her head. She took a hairpin from her lips and spoke with decision. "An' dae ye think for ae meenute that I'd let a lamb like you walk intae the den o' sic a lion, an' no be there tae shield ye?"

"I know your warm heart, Elspeth—I know your love for me. But I shall be in no danger. My lord will not eat me—he is but a man!"

Elspeth's thin lips twisted wryly. "Mistress Margaret," she said, "ye dishonour yer ain faither, that was a man if ye like, by ca'in' Claver'se by sic an honourable name. A man forsooth! Certes!—him an' Dalyell an' Lag are nocht but the abomination o' desolation let loose on Scotland for its chastisement."

"Oh, Elspeth!" said Margaret with ill-concealed vexation, "we do but waste time with this bickering when every moment is most precious. Perhaps, even now, Alan is being hurried off to Edinburgh. Let us make haste!" She bit her lip to stem her rising tears.

Elspeth took the rebuke in good part, but at the last she would take no denial.

“If ye’ll no let me ride ahin’ ye on the pillion, I’ll follow ye on the cuddy.”

“But, Elspeth,” protested Margaret as she drew on her gloves, “I shall ride at the gallop all the way. No donkey could keep up with my horse. Do listen to reason! I shall come to no harm,” and, as though to atone for her seeming hardness of heart, she took Elspeth’s face between her hands and kissed her.

“Weel,” said Elspeth, “gang yer ain gait, lassie; but I’m followin’ ye on the cuddy, an’ if when ye’re collogin’ wi’ Claver’se he tries tae lay hauns on ye, juist gie a scraich. I’ll be ootside, close by; an’ if he as muckle as touches a hair o’ yer bonnie heid a’ the King’s sodgers wull no keep me back frae comin’ tae help ye.” She spoke boldly as one who knew no fear.

Margaret’s horse was in a lather of sweat as he clattered over Devorgilla’s Bridge. He was panting heavily as he raced up the Vennel of the Grey Friars. Never had he been so hard ridden. His flanks were heaving laboriously when his mistress drew rein before Claver’se’s head-quarters in Dumfries. The sentry on guard at the door, a young man of inflammable heart, opened his eyes wide at the vision of radiant beauty that seemed to have sprung from nowhere, so rapid had been Margaret’s approach. And he boasted that night, in “The Hole in the Wa’ ” over his ale, that the lady had smiled upon him when he challenged her, “an’ her face lighted up like a floo’er wi’ the sun on it. I never saw bonnier.”

A like thought crossed the mind of Claverhouse when she was ushered into his presence. As she made her curtsy he bowed low before her, then taking her hand led her to a seat by the table. He sat with his back to the window opposite to Margaret, so that his face was in shadow while hers was in the light. Margaret cast a quick glance round the room. At a table in the corner sat Scougal, pen in hand. With neck thrust forward, and a look of curiosity on his pimply face, he was peering at her with his watery eyes. She bent her head, acknowledging his presence, and Scougal rose to his feet and bowed. Then she turned to Claver’se.

“I would see you alone, my lord,” she said.

Claver’se, with a sign, dismissed his secretary. “I shall ring when I need you, Scougal,” he said, and Scougal, sticking his pen in his mouth and gathering up a sheaf of papers in each hand, went as he was bidden. When the door was shut behind him Margaret drew off a glove, and as she waited for Claverhouse to speak she cast a quick glance about the room, noticing its soldierly austereness—the bare floor, with its knotted boards, the bare walls,

the long oak table, cumbered with a litter of papers, and near its farther end the plumed hat of Claverhouse thrown down carelessly.

Claverhouse toyed with a quill, his eyes on his visitor, watching, admiring. Then he spoke.

"To what do I owe the honour of this visit, Mistress Margaret?" His voice was not unkindly; it gave Margaret courage.

"My lord," she said, "I come to beg your interest on behalf of a prisoner at present in your hands." She was looking straight into his face with eager eyes, and though that face was in the shadow she saw a little frown knitting the furrows on his brow.

With finger and thumb he bent the plume of the quill, and studied it for a moment. Then he looked up.

"And his name?" he said.

"Alan Troquair," she answered simply, though there was a ring in her voice.

Claverhouse sat upright suddenly. "Alan Troquair!" he exclaimed. "He is a rebel: a most pestilent Covenanter: a bitter enemy of the King's Cause; and in virtue of what he is, a laird's son, as good as a battalion of recruits to the hillmen. The best that can be said of him is that he is a brave man. He was taken because he chose to risk his life to save a friend; but as that friend is a Covenanter, more pestilent than himself, his bravery adds only to his condemnation. He is a most dangerous rebel." He spoke firmly, almost with anger, and throwing down the quill drummed with two fingers of his right hand upon the table. Then he spoke again.

"As a Covenanter he places himself outside the law. But that is not all. For months past Alan Troquair has been striking terror into the hearts of the lieges and breaking the discipline of the King's troops by masquerading as a Ghostly Rider. That adds to his guilt fourfold. He is altogether an ugly customer, a most dangerous fellow."

Margaret bit her lip quickly.

"Alan Troquair the Ghostly Rider!" she exclaimed. "Impossible! You must be mistaken, my lord!"

Claverhouse smiled cynically.

"The facts are proven to the hilt. They cannot be denied. Alan Troquair is a lawless adventurer, disloyal to the core."

"You misjudge your prisoner, my lord," answered Margaret quietly, leaning a little forward. "Alan Troquair and I were boy and girl together. He was loyal then; and though he has thrown in his lot with the Covenanters through his sympathy with their sufferings, I believe he is, beyond his own knowledge, loyal to the King still and, if need be, would defend his Royal Person with his life."

Claverhouse threw himself back in his chair and laughed.

"Loyal!" he exclaimed, "yet he consorts with the King's enemies, breaks the King's law, terrorises the King's soldiers, and by his presence among the rebels nerves them for fresh resistance. Mistress Margaret, I prithee forgive me, for my simple soldier's mind cannot comprehend such delicate distinctions as your woman's wit; but I know black from white, Mistress Margaret, and a rebel from a loyal man!"

Margaret drew her glove slowly through her fingers.

"Do you know," she asked, "of a single disloyal act that can be laid to your prisoner's charge?"

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders, and turning to the litter of papers on the table selected one.

"I have had him before me this morning," he said. "He refuses to take 'the Test.' That in itself is a proof of disloyalty. He refuses to forswear the Covenants. He admits that he is guilty of taking part in Conventicles, both in field and house, and to a score of questions his answers were either unsatisfactory or were flat refusals to speak. He does not deny that he was the Ghostly Rider. He could not, having been taken when he was playing the part! He is a man with a bad record, Mistress Margaret—a dangerous rebel, and the sooner he is dealt with the better for the safety of the King's Cause," and Claverhouse looked sternly at the woman before him as he folded the paper and returned it to the table.

Margaret felt her heart throb painfully, and when she essayed to speak she had to steel her lips from trembling.

"Then you refuse to listen to my plea?" she asked.

Claverhouse smiled. "You do me an injustice, Mistress Margaret. I have listened patiently; but your plea can carry no weight against the knowledge I possess of this man's doings and disloyalty."

He caressed one of his ringlets with his shapely hand as he waited for her answer; but she did not speak, and he went on:

“In cold blood, Mistress Margaret, you have put forward no solid plea on the prisoner’s behalf. Your appeal is based on sentiment—on an old friendship—and I am too hard a man, with too stern a sense of duty, to be influenced by the froth of sentiment.”

The roses faded out of Margaret’s cheeks. There was anguish in her lovely eyes. “And his fate?” she asked shortly.

Claverhouse shrugged his shoulders. “To-morrow he sets out under escort for Edinburgh. There he will go before the Council—and his fate will depend upon how he comports himself.”

Margaret clasped and unclasped her hands, crushing her gloves between them. Claverhouse, watching her, could see she was suffering, but he added pitilessly:

“If he will take ‘the Test’ and tell all that he knows he may go a free man. If not——” and he spread both hands, palms upwards, as though it were no concern of his.

Margaret sprang to her feet. Her eyes in her lovely face were as twin lamps; her colour had returned; her voice was firm.

“If not—then torture and death!” she cried. “My Alan!”—and in her voice there was the tenderness of a mother, the love and passion of a bride.

Claver’se rose from his seat, perplexed and astonished.

Margaret threw out her arms. “Then I go too,” she cried. “I, too, am a Covenanter. I am guilty of field Conventicles: I have consorted with the King’s enemies: the King does not reign by divine right: the killing of the Archbishop was not murder, but the execution of a just judgment on a wicked old man—and—and——”

The torrent of her words dried up suddenly, and she sank into her chair and buried her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving.

Claverhouse looked at her for a moment and bit his lip, then he began to pace the floor restlessly.

“You are distraught, Margaret,” he said, “and not responsible for your words. If I thought otherwise I should have to make you a prisoner.”

Margaret lifted her head quickly, and looked at him unafraid. “I have spoken the truth,” she cried defiantly. “Do your duty as a loyal servant of the King, my lord. Imprison me!—I ask nought better.”

Claver'se turned on his heel and looked out of the window for a moment, then he came and sat down again and, speaking gently, said: "Meseems there is more than the interest of mere friendship behind all this. Margaret, do you love this man?"

"With all my heart and soul!" she answered proudly. "I am his betrothed."

Claverhouse moved uneasily. A question took form in his mind, but that proud self-esteem which was his weakness checked its utterance. At last he spoke; but he moulded his thought into an assertion, he shrank from humbling himself by framing it as a question.

"And it was for love of this man that you turned a deaf ear to me!" he said.

Margaret looked at him unabashed, and nodded her head; then, lest doubt might linger in his mind, she answered quietly, "Yes, my lord."

It was the answer he had expected, the answer he dreaded; and it struck him like a blow, wounding his pride. That any woman, and above all one so beautiful and adorable as Margaret, should prefer a hot-headed, dour rebel to himself, an officer of the King, and one not undistinguished, was a thing unthinkable. But there it was: he had had it from her own lips! Witless creatures women—of a truth outside the bounds of man's understanding!

He rose from his chair and began to pace restlessly up and down again. That Margaret loved this man only added to his condemnation. Her ardent love for him was almost an excuse for his death. If this traitor were out of the way an honest soldier might come by his own! He stood with his back to Margaret by the fireplace at the farther end of the room, his mind in a fever of bitter, vengeful thoughts. He rested an elbow on the mantel and supported his head in his hand. Then he turned impatiently and began to retrace his steps. Each step brought him nearer Margaret, who sat with hands clasped in her lap, her face set like beautifully carved marble—impassive, cold, save for the blush roses on her cheeks.

A woman adorable above all others!—and this miscreant!—and Claver'se ground his heel almost savagely on a knot in the boards.

Margaret raised her eyes to his as he passed. She was no longer a suppliant, she had become his judge, and the look she gave him pierced him, wounding him in his pride even more keenly than her words. She thought ill of him now, and would think ill of him to the end of her days! Those radiant eyes that once had lighted at his coming would kindle with a fierce gleam at

the thought of him; those moulded lips that had parted so prettily when she used to smile on him would be stern and contemptuous whenever she heard his name. They would never utter that name except with scorn. And of all the women in the world this was the most adorable. His cup was indeed a bitter one. He paused and sighed wearily, then walked to the window and stood tapping the panes with his finger-tips. There was a tumult in his breast. He was well-born: he had been successful: honour had come to him from the King whom he had so faithfully served, and mayhap there were greater honours yet in store: and yet, and yet—there was another side of the shield! He knew how his name was a thing of loathing among the people whom he had harried—"Bloody Claver'se" they called him—a name of scorn—odious—horrible! He shrugged his shoulders defiantly. After all, what did it matter how ill the rebels might think of him if he did his duty? But that this sweet woman should cherish hard thoughts of him was another matter, and more than he could bear.

He turned and looked at her, sitting so still, so fair, and his heart melted within him. He ceased for a moment to be a tyrant: he became a beggar. He stretched out both hands towards her yearningly.

"Think not ill of me, Margaret," he said. "I do but my duty."

She did not move, but sat as though she did not hear, looking into his eyes so steadily that he shrank from her gaze. And for the first time in his life this ruthless soldier, who had never questioned an order, and who had boasted that it was not his to think, but to do, began to wonder whether loyalty to duty might not be bought at a price too high.

He paced the floor again, and as he walked he saw burned homesteads: heard the wail of women sorrowing for their loved ones: saw brave men lying dead among the heather with blood on their breasts and a mute appeal to the blue heaven above them in their sightless eyes. He tried to brush the vision aside. It faded; but another took its place. He saw himself in deadly combat under the shadow of a dark wood. He caught his breath and stifled an oath, for he felt his sword snap in his hand!—he was at the mercy of his enemy! He waited for a blow that did not come. His enemy gave him quarter—nay, honoured him by saluting him: and now that enemy was a prisoner in his hands, at his mercy. The vision faded: and there, in that silent room, this stern soldier trembled.

He turned to look at Margaret. His heart was strangely moved. Deep within him a voice cried—"Oh, my beloved!" and at the unspoken words the old love he had borne her rekindled within him. Before its ardent flame the

baseness of his nature melted like snow. Love, like a holy fire, burned up the poison of pride which too long had filled him—the self-pride that was the root of all his baseness. He could help Margaret! He would help her: and not that she might think well of him for what he did, but because he still loved her. He seated himself with a sigh—so weary that Margaret turned to look at him. He spoke softly.

"Margaret," he said, "I am a hard man; yet not by nature—only because I am in a hard service and must do my duty." He paused, half hoping that she would say something, but she made no reply. "This man whom you love, Margaret, is a rebel and, if justice were done, has forfeited his life. Many a man has died for less."

She tossed her head, and spoke firmly.

"Speak not ill of my beloved, Lord Claverhouse. I ask naught of you but to let me share his fate. I am a Covenanter."

"Hush, Margaret," he said gently, "these walls may have ears." He passed his hand over his face from brow to chin, and picked up the paper which but a little before he had placed on the table. "In dealing with the rebels some discretion is left to me. I may deal with them summarily—or send them before the Council. I was minded to send Alan Troquair to Edinburgh; but I shall not do so, for your—for your dear sake." His voice was broken and tender.

Margaret sprang to her feet, her eyes glowing, her cheeks suffused.

"Then you will set him free, my lord. Oh, thank you!—thank you! My heart cannot find words with which to thank you!"

Claverhouse held up a hand, and the high hope that had sprung to life in Margaret's breast shrivelled and died. She sank into her seat wearily: the colour left her cheeks, her hands were clenched. There was sorrow in the eyes of my Lord Claverhouse, and pity in his voice.

"That I cannot do, Margaret!"—and at the words it was as though the world had crashed about her ears. She made a little tremulous movement with her hand as though she could bear no more; but Claverhouse continued:

"I cannot pardon such a rebel and set him free. But I can save him from death by pronouncing sentence of banishment upon him."

Hope the unconquerable rose again in Margaret's heart, and she smiled.

"I shall banish him furth of Scotland for life, Margaret; and you will understand that, if you join your lot to that of a banished man, you share in

his condemnation, and become yourself an exile, with all your lands held forfeit."

Margaret bowed her head for a moment, then raised it proudly, and Claverhouse saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"You may banish us furth the Kingdom of Scotland, my lord: you cannot banish us from the Kingdom of Love."

Claverhouse picked up a quill and made a note on the paper before him.

"Pretty words, Margaret; pretty words!" he said almost under his breath.

Margaret had risen. She stood proudly, yet when Claverhouse turned towards her she bowed her head humbly before him.

"My lord," she said, "I have wronged you in my heart. Forgive me! From my heart I thank you. You have done a noble thing which I shall never forget." She seized his hand impulsively and raised it to her lips.

Claverhouse withdrew his hand reluctantly, and taking both hers in his bent over them.

"To-night, at eight of the clock, Alan Troquair will leave the Tolbooth under escort for the coast. He will have a safe conduct out of the country, and he must never return."

"I understand," said Margaret simply.

Claverhouse struck a bell and, after a moment's delay, his secretary entered.

"Scougal," said Claverhouse, "draw up a warrant authorizing Mistress Margaret Lansburgh to see the prisoner Alan Troquair, lying presently in the Tolbooth."

CHAPTER XXIX

Ten years had passed since that fateful day when Margaret Lansburgh pleaded for the life of her lover.

The old evil order had changed: a new day had dawned upon Scotland. The long and dreary night of her persecution was ended; the sun had risen upon a land made glorious by the sufferings so dauntlessly borne. The heart of the people, which had been bowed down but never broken, was lifted up again. Men and women sang at their tasks; their hearts were free. No longer need the ploughman, following his oxen down the long brown furrows, fear lest at the end of the field, by the earthen dyke, he be challenged with a fierce "Will ye tak' 'the Test'?" and find himself suddenly in the midst of life confronted with the issue of death. And the milkmaid, her brown head resting against the warm flank of the cow, her brown arms moving rhythmically as the milk streamed into the coggie between her knees, might dream securely of the tryst she would keep in the gloaming among the heather. No longer need she fear that ere the magic hour should come her lover would be lying with sightless eyes and broken body—a martyr for his faith. For the black night was over and ended for ever.

Yet the memory of the evil days survived, and of a night, when the winter wind howled over the warm thatch, men would gather round the peat fire in cottage and farm to talk in hushed voices of the things that befell ere deliverance came to their beloved land. And the bairns, scampering barefoot on the sunlit summer hills, would start suddenly, and stand in silent awe because, in an unexpected place, they had come upon a low mound the length and breadth of a man, and knew that a martyr, mayhap one of their own blood, slept his last sleep beneath.

There was one such lowly mound beside the Kirk of Irongray, in the corner of the yard round which the river croons its deathless song. There the first snowdrops peeped up timidly, and the April winds bent the tall daffodils as though to render homage to the man who slept beneath. A lonely grave—yet not a grave untended. Each in their season—the rathe primrose, the trailing honeysuckle, the blue cornflower, roses, and rowan berries were laid there by the loving hands of her who once was Mistress Margaret. For Willie Stott was not forgotten.

The House of Knowe had raised its proud turrets again. Out of the ashes of the old a nobler edifice had sprung, and the broad acres round about it,

which became forfeit the day that Mistress Margaret followed her lover into exile, had been restored to her by act of grace.

On a day in late November, when the dusk was gathering, Alan and his wife sat in the library by the great peat fire. Margaret was knitting, her deft fingers moving quickly as her long needles clicked, while Alan was studying a little book he held in his hand. His brow was knit as though he were deep in thought. Now and then his lips moved silently, and anon he took his quill from behind his ear and wrote a figure or two, then turned a page briskly. The years had dealt kindly with him. Love and happiness had wiped out all the lines graven on his face by the trials of those days when he was in hiding on the hills. His deep blue eyes had lost none of their honest brightness. His hair was still as dark as a raven's wing. He looked up suddenly.

"It has been a good year," he said. "The sheep and the cattle have done excellently; the crops have been heavy; prices are good."

Margaret looked up from her knitting. The grace of her youth had mellowed into matronly graciousness. She had lost none of her beauty. She had kept the proud uptilt of her chin, her winsome smile, the brown lustre of her hair, and her eyes still kindled with love or laughter. She smiled as she spoke.

"You will never succeed as a farmer, Alan!"

Alan rose and made a mock bow.

"And prithee why, Mistress Critic?" he asked.

"Because," she answered, "the first and greatest commandment in the law of the husbandman is ever to complain of bad times."

Alan laughed aloud with the gay laugh of a boy. His blue eyes danced under his level brows as Margaret's merry peal of laughter echoed his own. The golden link, forged in the fires of trial, which had drawn them so close in the old days still bound them heart to heart. They were lovers still.

Alan sat down again and, crossing his knees, turned once more to his calculations. Margaret let her knitting lie unheeded in her lap. Her quick maternal ear had caught the sound of scampering feet and childish voices. There was a knock at the door, and quick on its heels four children came tumbling in. With happy shouts they ran to their mother and grouped themselves about her knee. She embraced them all with a welcoming smile, and stooping lifted Peggy, her youngest born, into her arms. Peggy, wise beyond her three short years, was a sweet little maid with rosy cheeks. Her

dark hair hung in graceful curls about her oval face, made beautiful by eyes of forget-me-not blue.

Alan laid his book aside and looked proudly at his little flock. He fixed David, his eldest born, a quiet reflective boy of nine, with a paternal eye.

"Come tell me," he said, "what mischief you have been up to this afternoon."

Bullet-headed Willie, the second born, a sturdy boy with a shock of reddish hair, laughed aloud. His freckled face dimpled on chin and cheeks. David answered solemnly:

"No mischief, father; but we found a little bird with a broken wing in the garden."

"And what did you do with it?" asked their father. "I hope you did not hurt it."

"No, no!" said Willie, forestalling his slow-thinking elder brother; "we catched it with our hands and took it to Elspeth."

Little Peggy's blue eyes dilated. She shook her pretty head. "Poor ickle, ickle bird," she said. "I touched it with me hand," and her warm heart was on the verge of tears.

Her mother stroked her head and whispered to her; but Willie chided her.

"Dinna greet, Peggy," he said. "Only lassies greet. You said you wished you were a boy."

Whereat Peggy smiled her tears away, and her father cheered her with the comforting words:

"If Elspeth has the wee bird she'll make it well again."

Alan held his hands out towards his little daughter, and when her mother set her down she raced across to him. She clambered on his knee and cuddled her face against his rough coat, nestling into the fold of his arm. Then she lifted her head and, calling gaily to her mother, threw her a kiss with a chubby hand. Her mother looked up fondly at the happy child, and blew her a kiss in return. Then she laid a hand upon the head of little Alan, her youngest son, a boy of five, who bore his father's name but who had his mother's eyes and his mother's hair. A shy little lad, he was not given to much speech, but his heart was warm. He seized his mother's free hand with his soft fingers and pressed it lovingly.

Suddenly David cried, "Tell us a story, daddy."

“Yes, tell us a story,” cried Willie and little Alan in one breath, and the three rushed over and grouped themselves round their father’s knee. Margaret picked up her knitting again.

“What shall the story be?” asked Alan, raking his mind.

“Tell us about the ickle brown skirrel,” cried Peggy, as she clapped her hands.

“Hoots!” said Willie with contempt, “that’s a lassie’s story, and ye said ye wished ye were a boy, Peggy,” and he looked at her pityingly.

Her mother laughed quietly, and bent her head over her knitting.

“Tell us,” said little Alan, suddenly finding voice, “how Elspeth rode the cuddy.”

His father laughed. “That’s Elspeth’s story,” he said. “You must ask her for it.”

“Tell us,” said Willie, “about the Ghostly Rider; that’s the best story.”

“Yes—yes! the Ghostly Rider,” cried David and little Alan.

“So be it,” said their father, and holding up a finger solemnly he said: “Hush—sh—sh,” as though the Ghostly Rider might presently appear.

And then, to an accompaniment of little startled “Ohs!” and holdings of the breath, and sudden claspings of the hands, he told them a story they had often heard before, but never tired of hearing, of a ghostly rider on a ghostly horse who brought succour to the Covenanters and struck terror to the hearts of the King’s men. The boys listened breathlessly, but through the grim recital little Peggy slept quietly, cuddled in her father’s arms.

At last the tale was over, and the boys clapped their hands.

“You were the Ghostly Rider, daddy!” said David proudly.

His father nodded his head. “I plead guilty,” he said, and looked with a smile at Margaret.

“And how did you make your face shine?” asked little Alan.

“With a rare substance called phosphorus, that Sam’l McMuldrow, the apothecary, used to hide for me in the bed of the river.”

It was then the door opened and Elspeth entered. She bore her seventy years bravely. She had followed her mistress into exile, like the faithful soul she was, and for close on seven long years had pined among the flat lands of

Holland for the Galloway hills. Though she loved all the children with the devotion of her honest heart, she loved little Peggy the best. She alone had been born in Scotland, "The Floo'er o' the flock," she called her proudly, while the boys, in moments of umbrage, she taunted as "wee Dutchmen" with a tongue that gave the lie to her warm old heart.

She crossed the floor slowly and, taking her stand beside her mistress's chair, looked affectionately at the children.

"When I'm a big man," cried Willie, "I'll rub my face with fossy-fuss and frichten folk."

His father smiled, but Elspeth shook a warning finger at the boy and chided him.

"Ah, ye wee Dutchman," she cried, "ye're a bad lad! Frichten fowk, wad ye? Ye need a guid skelpin!"

Willie laughed gleefully. He knew that Elspeth's bark was worse than her bite.

The old woman turned to her master.

"I'm fair scunnered at ye, Maister Alan, pittin' sic-like notions in the bairns' heids. They'll no sleep the nicht."

Alan laughed happily, and his laughter woke the sleeping child in his arms, who sat up and rubbed her eyes with her fat little fists.

"Ah, Elspeth," he said, "you are still the same! You stood up to Dalyell and Claver'se without fear. So what need your master expect of due honour from you?"

Elspeth smiled. "I'll aye dae my duty by ye, Maister Alan, but I've kent ye sin' ye were a bairn, an' age has its privileges."

Alan's deep blue eyes looked with such honest affection at the old woman's wrinkled face, that her heart glowed in her breast.

She bent low and held out her arms to little Peggy, who slipped from her father's knee and toddled towards her. With a smile and a happy little cry, the child threw her arms round her nurse's neck and whispered: "Elspie—I loves 'oo."

Elspeth picked the child up, and swept the boys with her eyes.

"Pay yer duty tae yer faither and mither," she said, "an' c'wa' tae yer beds."

She spoke as one accustomed to obedience. She stood with little Peggy in her arms while the three boys bade their parents good night; then she held the child low so that father and mother might kiss her. As she shepherded the “wee Dutchmen” towards the door, she spoke to the “floo’er o’ the flock.”

“Ah, my wee cushie-doo,” she said, “when ye’re a woman grown ye’ll no want tae fricht fowk like yer naughty brither. Wull ye, my precious?”

Peggy clasped her arms more tightly round Elspeth’s neck, and jumped with glee.

“When I’se a big ’ooman, Elspie,” she cried, her shrill little voice ringing clearly, “I’ll be a ickle brown skirrel, an’ marry daddy!”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Through Flood and Fire* by Robert William McKenna]