

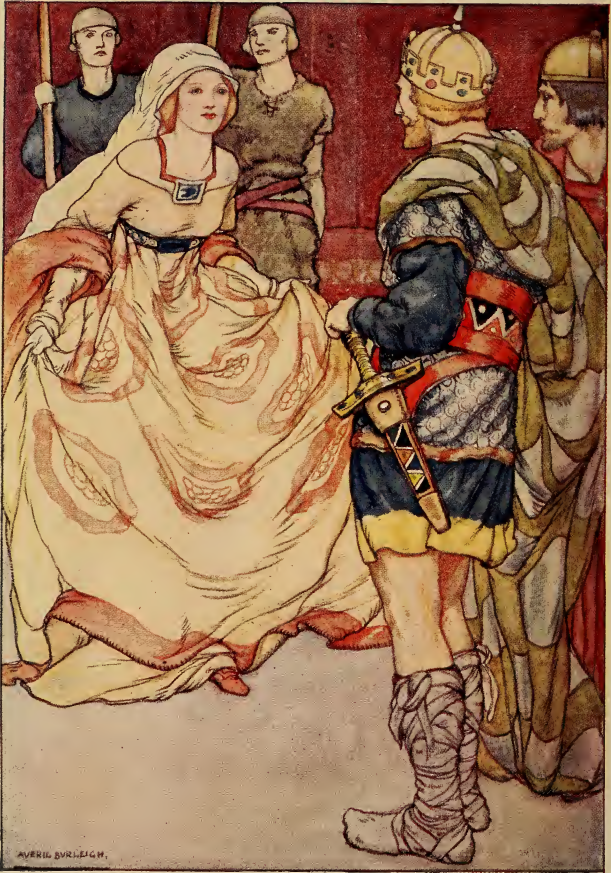
MACBETH



Told by
A POPULAR NOVELIST







Lady Macbeth meets King Duncan.

Novels from Shakespeare Series

MACBETH

TOLD BY
A POPULAR NOVELIST

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS
IN COLOR BY

AVERIL BURLEIGH

PHILADELPHIA
THE JOHN C. WINSTON COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

In this Series the plays of Shakespeare appear in an altogether new guise.

In his Preface to the "Tales from Shakespeare," Charles Lamb confessed the omission of "many surprising events and turns of fortune, which for their infinite variety could not be contained in this little book, besides a world of sprightly and cheerful characters, the humour of which I was fearful of losing if I attempted to reduce the length of them."

Here, however, in the "Novels from Shakespeare," the limit of length is removed and the plays appear as old time romances in which almost every character keeps his place, and every incident is retained, only the dramatic and poetic setting giving place to the devices of the novelist.

It is hoped that by means of this Series the charm of the stories in Shakespeare's plays will be better appreciated than before, and that through this means a fresh inducement will be created to read the plays themselves and to see them upon the stage.

CHARACTERS IN "MACBETH"

| | | |
|--------------|-----------|---------------------------------------|
| DUNCAN | | . King of Scotland |
| MALCOLM | } | His sons |
| DONALBAIN | | |
| MACBETH | } | Generals in the King's army |
| BANQUO | | |
| LADY MACBETH | | |
| BETHOC | | . Stepdaughter of Macbeth |
| LULACH | | . Stepson of Macbeth |
| MACDUFF | } | Noblemen of Scotland |
| LENNOX | | |
| ROSSE | | |
| ANGUS | | |
| MENTIETH | | |
| CATHNESS | | |
| FLEANCE | | . Son of Banquo |

MINOR CHARACTERS

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| KENNETH SWIFT-FOOT | | . A messenger |
| SEYTON | | . An officer attending Macbeth |
| SIWARD | | . Earl of Northumberland |
| YOUNG SIWARD | | . His son |
| LADY MACDUFF | | . Wife of Macduff |
| INDULPH | } | Her children |
| ODO | | |
| JOAN | | |
| ILDA | } | Witches |
| GRAITH | | |
| MAURNE | | |
| CEDRIC | | . A murderer |

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MACBETH

CHAPTER I

THE HERO OF FIFE

THE outskirts of the forest reached at last! The man who staggered down the long slope of moorland towards the shelter of the trees drew a sobbing breath of relief.

“On!” he muttered, as though encouraging himself. “On, if you would not be dubbed Kenneth Faint-heart instead of Kenneth Swift-foot.”

Rallying under his own lash the dauntless messenger reeled on—a sorry figure—bare-headed, with long, shaggy locks clotted with blood, his brogues slit and tattered, his Highland plaid and shirt in little better plight.

Yet he bore himself gallantly, as one who scorns to fail of his trust; and there was kindling hope for him now the desolate moors were passed and he entered the cool shades of the forest.

A mile or so more and he would be in sight of the little town of Forres, whose royal castle stood like some protective spirit on the eminence rising to the left of the burgh, girt about by the gently-flowing Mosset burn. The fainting soldier pictured these things as a dream of home to inspire him for a last sprint along

winding glades. But alas! loss of blood, weakness and exhaustion overcame even that indomitable spirit, and, with a sobbing moan of protest against unkindly fate, he sank down upon the flower-strewn sward. Around him birds sang in the jubilee of happy springtide, life was buoyant, young and beautiful everywhere, so that the man lying there, marred, disheveled, battered by the fierce conflict with his enemies, became a blot, if not a shame, to Nature's peaceful picture. A rabbit crept from the undergrowth near, paused, then went scuttling back to its burrow. It was no human wise-acre to philosophize over fellowmen who chose to hack and break, mar and maim, what God had made after His own image.

And Kenneth Swift-foot lay still, inert, having failed of his mission within a mile of his goal, whilst his lean, rugged face, pillowed amongst nodding blue-bells, streamed still with sweat and blood.

Another note was struck as a horn sounded, sweet and musical, with a gay lilt of laughter in the blast which called to the enjoyment of a less arduous chase than that in which the unconscious sufferer had taken a part; whilst up a winding glade of the forest a young man came into sight. No spent or weary soldier this, but a slim and goodly youth, fair-haired, handsome, with command as well as laughter in his keen gray eyes and dominance in the set of his lips and square jaw.

One born to rule—not serve—was the new-comer, and such was his birthright, since this was Malcolm, elder son of Duncan, King of Scotland, who awaited tidings of battle yonder at his Castle of Forres. Good and gracious Duncan, whose noble soul had made him the beloved ruler of his people.

And Malcolm was worthy of such a sire, at least so those who knew him said, for the boy is father to the man, and the boy prince had proven himself of a loyal, generous disposition, fearless and true, yet gay-hearted, too, with a zest for life, which is youth's privilege.

He was on foot now, since in hunting the wild boar he had lamed his horse and sent the animal home by an attendant, whilst he lingered, summoning his younger brother, Donalbain, by the winding of his horn. But Donalbain did not reply—and Malcolm was about to repeat the call when he spied that which lay so limply beneath the oak tree.

A man! A soldier! Why, this was the messenger they had been expecting so eagerly. The messenger from the army which the gallant Macbeth—Moormor of Ross—was leading against the rebel Macdonald, and other of the king's enemies.

Eagerly the young prince bent over the swooning man, fetched water from the burn near to revive him, and presently had the satisfaction of seeing the heavy lids unclose and a faint color creep back to the ghastly face.

"Hist," quoth Malcolm, with that kindly solicitude which thought more of the sick man's need than his own desire for news. "You shall not rouse yourself to speak till I have sought succor and wine to revive you. I doubt not you have sped gallantly—but the tale will be better told for its keeping."

Yet, even as the prince raised himself, glancing round whilst meditating as to how best bring the succor he spoke of, the sound of voices and cantering of horse-hoofs over the soft ground awoke fresh echoes around.

"The king," quoth Malcolm, and, at the words, noted how the flame of a loyal love kindled in the man's eyes as Kenneth the soldier dragged himself painfully to a sitting posture, echoing those two inspiring words, "The king."

Malcolm smiled, well pleased, since his own love welcomed signs of devotion in others, and he was quick to cross the glade, crying to those who returned to the castle to await his news.

Kenneth Swift-foot, drawing deep breaths in his fight for clearer consciousness, saw as in a dream the advance of those well-known figures, chiefest amongst them the stalwart king—a gallant figure in his gracious prime; a king indeed! noble and regal in his dignity of bearing.

Around him were gathered a group of nobles, conspicuous amongst them his two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, with Lennox, suave and courtier-like, by the latter, whilst Duncan's hand rested on Malcolm's shoulder. Behind them came attendants, who held the steeds from which their riders had dismounted.

The wounded soldier essayed to rise, but faintness held him back, whilst Duncan, bidding an attendant return to the castle for a litter and physician, approached the stricken messenger's side.

"You have news," quoth he, very kindly. "I give you praise, honest fellow, for the way you have carried it. Such wounds should have brought a less resolute man to a sick-bed long ere crossing the Hard Moor. Tell me then of the battle. Who stands for victory?"

The man stared upwards, seeing through a mist of blood that quiet, noble countenance and mild blue eyes watching him in kingly approval, whilst he stammered forth his tale.

"Doubtfully it stood, my lord king. The rebel forces are strong. Macdonald—foul traitor that he is—is well supplied with kernes and gallowglasses from the western isles. It seemed at first that we could not hope to stand against such a horde. But brave Macbeth—oh, my liege—well he deserves that name—carved his way through the enemy's ranks, against overwhelming odds, and so fierce his zeal, so inspiring his example, that he was enabled to lead his men to conquest over that traitorous chief; nor did our leader rest till the rebel's head was fixed to warning against villainy upon the battlements of the town."

Young Malcolm flung back his head, laughing aloud at such welcome tidings, but Duncan was silent, waiting for that further news which made complete victory for his brave generals doubtful.

And the messenger rallied himself to give the tidings to the full, though, even as he spoke, the ring of kindly faces above him became blurred and indistinct, whilst other voices, such as cry in din of battle, thundered in his ears.

"Fresh foes," he muttered. "Why, yes—one battle-cry hushed, another rang out. The King of Norway came swift upon the heels of his vanquished ally and began a fresh assault. We were weary—his men new to battle—a fearsome fight, lord king—a fearsome fight—its echoes ring again and again in my ears."

Duncan frowned.

"The King of Norway!" he cried. "Ah! and how fared it with our loyal captain then? How did Macbeth and Banquo, my gallant generals, greet this grim foe from northern shores?"

The man's smile was proud, though wan.

“They were no more dismayed, my liege,” he replied feebly, “than a lion might be at the sight of a hare, or an eagle faced by a sparrow. Swiftly they rushed out to greet this enemy, who came too confident for a victory I’m well assured he never gained. But I was sped hither ere the fight was o’er. Heaven grant the victory to the brave Macbeth—who fights for you, my king—and fights as few before him, though Banquo is second . . . to no other. A gallant fight . . . and gallant leaders both.”

The man himself was a fighter to the last. Livid of face, his eyes yet gleamed over the memory of brave deeds, such as those of the fierce old days extolled on thrilling harp-strings and in wild songs of praise; but Nature asserted herself in the end and Kenneth Swift-foot sank down bleeding and swooning at the king’s feet.

But he had told his news, and those who heard looked each on each eager for confirmation of such a message. That stubborn fighting had been in progress all could guess—none better than young Malcolm himself, since he had fought side by side with Macbeth during the earlier part of the rebellion of the chiefs, and had been taken prisoner, only escaping an ugly fate by the devotion of an attendant and the susceptibility of an enemy’s daughter. He had returned to Forres to bring news to his father, who had detained him, unwilling again to allow the risking of a life so dear.

After seeing to the disposal of Kenneth the soldier, the royal party proceeded towards the castle, eagerly discussing the situation and likely crushing of rebels.

Gentle as he was by nature, Duncan was too wise a

king to show misplaced leniency to traitors—yet he grew grave as he thought of all this bitter fighting in a kingdom he would have knit with bonds of loving fellowship each with each. But for all his desire for peaceful prosperity he did not forget that the blood of the great Malcolm flowed in his veins. Malcolm, the prince who for so many years was known as the “Victorious King” and who drove the cruel Danes from the Scottish shores. And it may have been love and reverence for his mighty grandfather which gave an added tenderness to Duncan’s regard for his own elder son.

Young Malcolm should emulate his great ancestor, and the story of Scotland’s glory ring through the world’s length and breadth.

Still, for himself, Duncan would have chosen the peace which blesses bounteous harvests and invites steady industry and more prosperous trading. But we may not choose our destinies, and Duncan had been conscious of an unwonted stirring of his pulses as he listened to this tale of heroism. Macbeth, Banquo—the whole army—should be welcomed and rewarded for their loyal devotion; and if he thought first of Macbeth it was because the powerful Moormor of Ross was a man knit in close bonds of love and relationship to himself.

News flies at times—at others skulks behind hedges, creeping loiteringly on the way; but now fresh tidings trod on the very heels of that brought by Kenneth the soldier. An officer this time—in fact, no other than the loyal Rosse himself, whose love for the king had been proved so often.

A red-faced, red-haired man, scarcely less battle- and

travel-stained than his predecessor, but unwounded and clear-brained to tell his tale.

The king was about to be served at supper when he arrived, and the great hall formed a lively scene of bustle and merry confusion.

The king, his family and nobles, sat at the central table, whilst his dependents had barely taken their places on the low, long benches forming a wider circle around, when the winding of a horn and shouts of the warden without told of the coming of a visitor.

With busy thoughts for the armies engaged in critical combat at no great distance the same cry rose to all lips. "News! News! A second messenger!" Whilst even the hungriest turned from pleasant surveying of heaped viands to gaze towards the man who stood on the threshold of the great doorway.

"The worthy Thane of Rosse!" cried Malcolm the restless, and was on his feet as he pronounced the name. Lennox glanced back to a fellow courtier at his side. "He comes in haste," he whispered, "and in those eyes I read the hint of strange tidings. What shall we hear that brings such mingled emotions to stamp the teller's face?"

Already Rosse had stridden forward and had sunk on one knee before Duncan, raising his right hand in salutation.

"God save the king!" cried he in hoarse, cracked tones. Duncan leaned forward, peering through the gloom to read the tenor of the new-comer's tidings in his face.

"Whence did you come, worthy Thane?" he asked, and all in that great hall held their breath to listen. A strange scene it was during a long moment of tension;

the vast hall, low-roofed, with great rafters of timber; the narrow tables with their plentiful burden of coarsely-prepared food, the crowds of uncanny figures in loose shirts and kilted plaids, long-haired for the most part and shaggy bearded; the groups of boys and girls, whose duty it was to wait on the assembled company, some with flasks and pitchers in their hands, others holding lighted torches high, so that the ruddy flare fell on their own bonnie faces and fair hair, casting black shadows too, in the corners of the hall.

But none moved, none spoke, as they listened for the answer to the king's question.

Rosse had sprung to his feet and stood now facing Duncan with the eagerness of one who tells great news. "From Fife I come, great king," cried he, in those same husky tones. "Fife, where the Norwegian banners flout the sky, and where Norway himself, with terrible numbers, assisted by that most disloyal traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict. Oh, my liege, I could hold you half the night through and then again till the pale dawn broke, telling you the story of the fight. How success wavered at first, flitting from one army to the other, so that woeful cries rang hollow, hollow down the deep valley, echoing above the mountain peaks. A fierce fight it was—and red the waters of the fair loch showed with traitor blood and true. But at the end victory was ours. Victory for Scotland! Victory for the king! Victory to brave Macbeth, the hero of the battle."

The cries were echoed from a hundred throats. In the excitement of the moment men crowded over the benches, shouting, waving, gesticulating, whilst slender youths sprang even on the tables themselves, holding

the torches which flamed above their heads high as they cried hail to the king, hail to Scotland, hail to Macbeth, till the old hall rang with the shouts, and the peasants came forth from their huts down by the Mosset burn, to stare up towards the old fort which crowned the hill, and whisper to each other that the tidings from the north must be good and there was like to be wassailing on the morrow.

And, in the castle itself, Duncan had called for the serving of liquor, since he had noted how Rosse's deep voice cracked in husky dryness, and soon great drinking vessels of horn and timber, brimming with wine and spirits, were carried round, and Rosse, with but half his tale told, took both handles of his wooden *methir* in his grasp and drained it in one quaffing.

Then, as comrades laughed at such a feat, he resumed his speech as though he had taken but a breathing space. "King Sweno, Lord of Norway, was on his knees I trow when the battle was over; at our mercy was he, and all his pride hacked from him by our claymores. But the generals were resolute, and hailed him to Sir Colme's Inch, where, against his will, he was made to disburse ten thousand dollars to our general use before permission was granted him to bury his dead."

Again the acclamations rose high. The peril which had threatened had passed indeed, and the stirring tale of Scotland's glory warmed every patriot's breast.

But Duncan's head, bent awhile in deep thought, was raised now, and his voice took a stern note of command: "The Thane of Cawdor was our faithful friend and vassal, now, however, proved unworthy of such titles. Yea, unworthy of life itself since his own deeds

cry 'traitor' to a name once nobly held—aye! and to be as nobly held again. My lords, you shall carry my bidding with you this very night. The Thane of Cawdor has pronounced his own doom by meriting that death by which alone he expiates his fault. Death to the traitor, since mercy in such case breeds other traitors to authority. Yet, a more welcome task I give you, friends—for, as you go to bring just sentence to a false servant, you shall carry due reward for loyal devotion. The Thane of Cawdor shall live in brave Macbeth, whom ye shall hail by that title, a first fruits of well-earned honor for one whose honor is so high."

He glanced to where Rosse had withdrawn a space to speak to his friend Angus, and the two nobles bowed low in acceptance of a mission to which they should ride presently when supper had been served.

For the moment even Duncan himself seemed to lay aside his robes of majesty and grin like some beneficent parent in the rejoicing of his children, whilst high and loud rang the lilt of the harper's melody as he beguiled the feast with songs of Scotia's brave sons, who had fought and died for a well-loved country.

And the name which rose again and again to the merry-makers' lips in shouts of acclaim was that of Macbeth—the brave and stalwart champion who had dragged the proud banners of Norway in the dust and trampled traitors to his king under his heel.

Macbeth! Macbeth!

Young Malcolm's voice rose gay and shrill with the rest as he thought not only of that stern and rugged chief, but of the latter's young stepdaughter, Bethoc, the child of Gilcomgain, Moormor of Moray, who had been treacherously assassinated by his own great-grandfather.

Bethoc—his white lily of the north, who smiled when her eyes met his—whilst the rosy flush crept up under that fair skin which had earned her his tender appellation.

Bethoc! Ah, it was good to be young, good to feast, to laugh, to cry “hail” for victories won, aye, good to fight, to kill one’s enemies, to win renown. Yet, best of all, to love when the sky of youth is one unclouded blue and the songbirds lilt to their mates in brae and forest.

CHAPTER II

THE WITCHES PROPHECY

DESOLATION!

It was the one word which could describe that wild tract of barren heath to westward of Forres known as the Hard Moor.

Barren and desolate indeed, with gray rocks grouped in grim cairns over the sterile ground, where even the purple heather lost the richness of its hue and appeared brown and faded, whilst dark and wind-swept pine clumps took weird and twisted shapes as though they writhed in fear of that which brooded here—the intangible evil of the place that had given it an ill name as the abode of haunting spirits and things uncanny and fearful.

How the wind wailed as it swept across the accursed waste! Wailing, wailing, like some lost spirit which wanders in hopeless search through the æons of eternity.

There was the oppressive sense of storm and tempest in the atmosphere, whilst through the gloom and drizzle of rain, a lightning flash leapt out, streaking the sky with lurid brilliance. Then the thunder crashed, echoed by the moaning cry of some frightened animal fleeing for shelter amongst the rocks or towards the dark fringe of woodland, pursued by the louder wailing of the hurricane which followed like some phantom host of avengers.

Wailing, wailing, and then a cry—not of fear or pain this time, but pitched on a note of triumph.

Yet such a triumph! That of devils, maybe; for there was an evil mocking in the sound, followed by laughter, which should have made a listener cold with fear.

Gray shapes crept out of the mist of rain, hither, thither, blurred, almost unrecognizable at first for the figures of human beings; yet such they were. Figures of women wrapped in tattered cloaks and gowns; figures of women, two of them, as twisted and misshapen as the stems of the gnarled alders which hung over dreary morasses. But the faces—were they those of women too?

A shuddering denial had been the gazer's reply at first, since so alien were those harsh and rugged features to the soft and tender lineaments of womanhood. Blear and cunning of eye were these gray-cloaked hags, with straggling locks, floating elf-like in the hurricane, and bearded chins at which claw-like hands scraped and scratched incessantly.

Spirits of the gray rocks themselves they might have been, hideous in their inhumanity, yet stamped with the impress of an evil which inanimate Nature could not emulate.

But, as they groped towards each other through the mist of rain and driving tempest, that weird, mocking laughter rang out in sheer, delighted deviltry, and a third shape, slimmer and more graceful than the others, glided from the blacker shadows of a ravine and joined them. A third to complete the trio of a dread sisterhood, whose fame was as a blighting ban throughout that gray land.

But she who came last was the most terrible of the three. Her loose robe was open to show her bare

breast—to show, too, the red line where some strangling cord had fastened in deadly grip about her neck. She was young, with fair hair tossed like Medusa's snake-tresses about her shoulders, and her face was the more terrible by reason of a certain beauty, which had been marred into loathly horror by sin. All that was evil, vile and hateful, was stamped on the face of Ilda the witch, and her laughter was as the echo of fiends who rejoice in the damning of a human soul.

Part and parcel of the raging storm were those three weird sisters who crouched together, regardless of the mist of rain, the moaning wind, the deep, sullen roar of distant thunder.

"Where hast thou been, sister?" asked the elder of the trio, drawing back under shelter of the rocks, and huddling her wet cloak about her.

The latest comer laughed again, and flung back her long tresses. "Killing swine," quoth she, and mimicked the death cries of tortured beasts as if she would keep the sounds of pain in her ears. Graith turned from her impatiently, whilst Maurne, her companion, interrupted with the same question, "Sister, where thou?" she croaked, as she sucked at her toothless gums.

The first speaker began to mumble, clawing at her chin, "A sailor's wife had chestnuts on her lap," she rasped, her red-rimmed eyes showing vicious in the half-light, "and munched, and munched, and munched. 'Give me,' quoth I. '*Avaunt thee, witch,*' the rump-fed ronyon cries." The hag stretched out a long, lean arm, pointing with a shaking finger of hate into the distance, whilst her voice rose shrill in denunciation. "Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master of the Tiger. But in a sieve I'll thither sail, and like a rat without a tail I'll do, I'll do—and I will do."

It was an echo of the storm growlings which gurgled in a scarcely human throat. But it was not the refusal of a handful of chestnuts which had provoked such fury in the breast of Gray Graith the witch, rather the curse of a name which she shunned even though welcoming the power her Satanic league gave.

So pretty, plump Joan, the wife of Duncan the fisher, was to mourn a husband because of careless speech.

Thus Graith vowed as she crouched there in a twilight corner of the storm-swept heath, whispering the tale of her unmerited vengeance to ears as keen for mischief as her own.

"I'll give thee a wind," cried Ilda, springing to her feet and flinging her arms wide as though welcoming to her sinful breast some demon of the tempest.

"And I another," muttered Maurne, and hugged herself in satisfaction at thought of suffering—for others.

"I myself have all the other," retorted Graith gleefully, as, in dirge-like tones, she chanted her spell—a spell borne by the wailing breeze across the moors to the very keyhole of the door behind which Joan, the sailor's wife, ignorant of witch's malice, sang lullaby to the rosy-cheeked babe who lay so close to her mother-heart.

"See," crooned Graith, her spell woven, her malice secure, "here I have a pilot's thumb, wrecked as he voyaged homewards. Will she suffer—she who called me witch? I think so. Will she weep—she who laughed, mocking poor Graith? I dream so—and the dream is good."

"Hist," replied Ilda, who had crept to the top of the winding path, and now descended rapidly, hastening back towards her companions. "He for whom we wait approaches. He whom we have been bidden to claim

for our master. He comes—Macbeth—proud in the triumph of his victory as has been foretold. He comes—and Banquo with him. Ours be the task now to speed a halting fate which stands on the brink between good and evil. Great Macbeth—whose despair shall be our triumph—unless he be too truly great for our snare.”

Maurne laughed, gripping at the gray rock as she rose to her feet.

“Too great?” she echoed. “Do any look too high to blind their eyes to the goal of ambition? Nay, nay. Weave we the spell closely enough, bait we the trap with a prize worth the winning and the sinning—and our master is obeyed—a man’s doom sealed.”

“Come,” shrieked Ilda, in an ecstasy of diabolical glee, “let us weave our spell, bait our trap, and—await the fool whose eyes are blind and ears deaf to all beyond the promise of ambition.”

She threw back her head so that the red line about her throat showed like a blood-stained ribbon in the fading light.

Distant and more distant came the roll of thunder, only an occasional flash of lightning lit up the barren scene, yet the storm did not seem to have cleared the atmosphere, which remained heavy and oppressive. From the far-off forest came the echoing cries of animals, hoarse with the note of fear. It was as if some brooding evil haunted that dread place which the presence of those three gray-clad figures made still more terrible. They were flitting forward, bat-like in the gathering darkness, till they paused close to where a blasted oak, stripped of all foliage, stretched bleached boughs upwards towards the lurid skies.

“The spell,” gasped Ilda, breathless with laughter, and caught at a hand of each ill-omened sister.

Thus, fantastic, shapeless, swaying like mummies in the wind which still swept moaning over the moor, they encircled that stricken tree, beginning to dance, at first with slow, shuffling steps, then with gradually increasing speed, till their cloaks and loose, tattered garments whirled and fluttered madly in the wild orgy of the dance. Leaping, swaying, stooping, crouching, they danced in such giddy gyration as had seemed impossible for two such decrepit hags as Graith and Maurne to perform, whilst all sang in varying keys, which scraped and jangled in torturing discord, the following spell:

The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about;
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine.

Then, breaking suddenly apart, each fled shrieking towards the shelter of some gray boulder, whilst a great raven perched in a tree near uttered its plaintive croak in echo, and spread black wings to hover over the spot where evil lurked before sailing away in search of garbage to feast his foul appetite. Was it silence that followed? If so, a silence haunted by inarticulate sound, the sighing of the wind amongst the branches of the clump of dark pines to the westward, the monotonous drifting of rain against the breeze, the echoes of the storm and the shrill screech of a bird.

Then, above and through all, the skirl of pipers playing wearily, wearily, yet with the tenacious courage of those who in worse case would call "victory" with their last breath.

See how they marched! these tattered, exhausted soldiers, limping, fainting, hungry and weary, yet martialled onwards to a triumphant measure of music.

Duncan's army—victorious over rebels, yet weak and weary in its need, marching over the desolate moors towards Forres.

On they came, looming into sight only to disappear almost as soon in the mist, which crept higher and higher like some intangible, diaphanous death shroud.

Thus passed the army which called Macbeth its leader and Duncan its king, marching to tell a tale of conquered foes and to hail their lord with the tidings that no rebel standard was set in rebellion in this his fair realm of Scotland.

And, though hundreds of those ragged kernes passed within a stone's throw of gray rocks, none saw the ominous figures crouching there, till at last, when the army's remnant had vanished into the shrouding mists, came two who paused under the shelter of the pine trees crowning a higher slope of moorland, above where the witches hid. Both were clad as chieftains, in the national dress of those northern shores, with voluminous saffron shirts, reaching below the knees and girt with jeweled belts about the middle, forming a tunic, wide-sleeved for the greater convenience of throwing their darts, buskins of varied colors covered their legs, and were tied above the calf with striped garters, whilst brogues of deer skin were worn upon their feet. Over their tunics were flung wide mantles of fine wool, known as plaids, and very ingeniously woven with divers colors. Their hair was long and shaggy, that of the elder already tinged with gray. The younger was of medium height and great strength of build;

his hair was black, his eyes dark, bright and restless, the whole face that of a man who sees great possibilities in life and longs to grasp all, forgetful of the fact that in too greedy a claiming some portions of his desire must be lost to him. Yet, withal, it was the face of a leader, eager, dominant, in spite of a certain narrowness of the jaw and weakening of the chin—not noticeable now since both were covered by a short black beard.

This was Macbeth, Moormor of Ross, over which province he ruled with an authority little less than regal. His companion and friend was his fellow general, the noble Banquo, who walked with the greater weariness by reason of a slight wound to his thigh.

Pausing at the head of the pine-crowned knoll, Banquo scanned all that could be seen of that darkening, storm-swept moor.

“How far is it to Forres?” he asked, with the wistfulness of one who would fain be at his journey’s end. But, before he could reply, shapes seemed to rise up out of the mists below. Shapes which at first seemed part of those gray mists themselves, but gradually resolved themselves into human figures, cloaked and garmented like women, yet showing faces which startled those intrepid beholders.

“What?” muttered Banquo, staring down into those weird and terrible faces, whose eyes fastened so fiercely upon him and his companion. “What are these, Macbeth?—so withered and so wild in their attire. Speak, if indeed you be inhabitants of the earth. Live you? or are you aught that man may question? See, they seem to understand, mark how each lays her finger to her lips. Women, are they? with beards upon their

chins, and twisted features which resemble those of corpses some time dead."

"Speak, if you can," cried Macbeth, and there was more resolute command in his tones than in those of Banquo. "What are you?"

Both men looked curiously down upon the hags, who had drawn close together on the lower slope of the moor beneath them, whilst with outstretched right arms raised aloft they seemed to point to their interlocutors.

It was a strange picture, and one to excite the superstitious fancy of those whose nerves were highly strung after the exciting events of the past few days. The rebellion of such chieftains as Macdonnald and Cawdor, together with the invasion of the Norwegian king, had made the campaign exceptionally painful and difficult. There had been sleepless nights, anxious days, and tense suspense for the leaders of the king's army as well as the demand for personal bravery, whilst complete success and the knowledge of praise deserved caused a sub-delirium of restless excitement to engross them with proud and pleasant anticipation.

And now, on the threshold of their triumph, whilst possessed of weary bodies and elated souls, they were met by these witches of the moors, whose evil fame was well known to them.

Those were days when witchcraft was regarded as a very real though terrible profession, which to embrace was to be damned in the life to come for sake of the gift of certain Satanic powers in the present. Ghastly tales were told and believed even by the nobility and clergy of the service of initiation which abandoned creatures of both sexes were willing to perform for the

sake of those gifts which should make them so feared by their fellows.

But, though the very name of witch or wizard was abhorrent to all upright folk, none doubted the validity of the Satanic compact or the power given to his disciples. So, fear of what they could not understand kept people from denouncing these enemies to God and man, or meting out to them their well-deserved punishment.

Thus, the trio of weird sisters haunted with impunity the neighborhoods to which a wandering fancy led them to perform their acts of vengeance and wanton mischief against those they hated or envied.

And here they stood today on the hard moor, grouped as though to welcome the victors of a hard-won fight.

No wonder that their very presence and attitude excited the imagination and curiosity of the two successful soldiers who watched them.

Then, in swift answer to Macbeth's command, Graith cried aloud, her skinny arm upraised.

"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!"

"All hail, Macbeth!" shrilled Maurne, echoing her sister. "Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!"

There was a moment's pause, and whilst Macbeth, with flushing cheeks and clenched hands, stood silent in amaze above, Ilda glided forward, more graceful, yet if possible more sinful than her companions, the dying light full on the marred beauty of her face, showing the mockery in her reckless eyes.

"All hail, Macbeth!" cried she, "*that shalt be king hereafter.*"

Each word a stab deep into a man's soul! Each

word a poison seed to die and live in terrible growth!
Each word a message from the nethermost hell!

No wonder the color drained from bold Macbeth's cheeks or that he stood as one entranced, staring hollow-eyed as at a vision—at first too startling to be believed, with something tragic, ominous, in the picture; yet, as the gaze became clearer, growing in beauty, allurements, wonder, so that the trance became deeper—more real—more tangible.

"That shalt be king hereafter."

And the soil was prepared for the seed.

Success already had engendered ambition, yet the listener's mind seemed to reel as he imagined heights to which he had never dreamed to aspire. Yet always before his eyes was the face of Ilda the witch, prophetic, magnetic, losing its hideous horror till the gazer saw it beautiful, desirable. The face of one who foretold a glorious future—herself an inspiration to greater deeds by which to win the goal she set.

Deeds! Deeds! What deeds, what thoughts were these? The spell was broken by Banquo, who, forgetful of weariness, rallied his friend in lighter tones, questioning a seeming fear of such fair promises, whilst in his turn he looked towards the three who had drawn together again, barely distinguishable now in the dusk.

"You see," cried he, with scarcely veiled eagerness, "how rapt my companion has become. And what wonder? Seeing how prodigal you are in promises of future hope and greatness. But to me you speak not. Yet I adjure you, if indeed you can look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not—speak then to me, who neither begs nor fears your favors nor your hate."

It was the speech of a man who denied the anxiety he felt for an answer.

Easily impressed by such prophetic words, the place, hour and occasion, all added to the sense that some close veil of the shrouded future was being raised and they invited to peer beyond; an invitation both were too absorbed in curiosity to refuse, in spite of the knowledge that the hands raising that dark screen of futurity were devil-damned. A brief pause succeeded Banquo's speech, the storm-laden atmosphere seemed to stifle the listeners' lungs as they waited . . . waited as for a pronouncing of doom.

Then—"Hail!" cried Graith the elder, raising her lean arm again, whilst the red rims of her eyes fluttered as though she would hide the mockery of her gaze.

"Hail!" cried each of her companions in turn. Again a pause. Had the weird sisters no prouder title for Banquo than the unsullied name he bore?

But this time Graith spoke again.

"Lesser than Macbeth," she mouthed, "and greater."

"Not so happy—yet much happier," quoth Maurne.

Ilda laughed shrilly, clapping her hands, then twining them in her long loose locks of hair.

"Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none," shrieked she. "So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!"

Swaying she bowed before them, then turned to flit, like some phantom spirit, into the darkness. Nor were the others slow in following. Wraith-like they vanished as they had come—but over the darkening moor came drifting back the echo of their words, repeated in shrill, mocking tones.

"All hail, Macbeth and Banquo . . . and Banquo . . . and Banquo."



"Lesser than Macbeth and greater."



It was as some croaking raven's cry, presaging doom, rather than a salutation to conquerors; and Banquo, listening, drew his mantle more closely round him, shuddering as he heard the mocking lament.

But Macbeth sprang forward as though he would have hastened to descend the slope and race in swift pursuit of those strange messengers of fate.

"Stay," he cried wildly, beckoning with outstretched hands. "Tell me more, imperfect speakers! By Sinel's death I know I am Thane of Glamis. But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives and prospers. Whilst . . . to be *king* stands not within the prospect of belief—no more than to be Cawdor. Why, then, did you speak so? Whence did you derive such knowledge?—if it be knowledge—which I cannot believe it to be. And yet why should you stop our way upon this blasted heath? Why bring such tidings to stir our hearts with false hopes, wild desires impossible of fulfilment? Speak—I charge you."

But in answer to that fierce appeal by which the speaker seemed to desire to tear aside the whole obscuring veil, raised for too brief a space by impious hands, came only the echo of a mocking laughter borne of the moaning wind, which carried also a lament as of many voices, rising and falling, rising and falling, in pitiful cadences of despair.

CHAPTER III

AMBITION TEMPTS

FORRES in sight! Aye, silver-decked by sheen of moonlight, which showed the gray walls of the grim old fort, the green slopes of the hillside from which the castle frowned, and the silvery waters of the Mosset burn which flowed so softly towards the black mass of surrounding forests.

“Who comes?” quoth Banquo, rousing from a deep reverie, in which phantoms of the future had risen before his dreaming eyes. “Can it be Rosse himself, with Angus by his side? Why, see, Macbeth, the king honors us by sending these noble chiefs to bid us welcome.”

Macbeth followed the direction of the other’s gaze with moody, inscrutable eyes. He, too, had been lost in reverie and found it harder to shake his dream aside whilst greeting the friends who came in haste, gallant figures striding towards him with hands outstretched and laughter on their faces as became bearers and listeners of good news.

It was Rosse, ever impetuous, who became spokesman almost before he came within earshot of the new-comers.

“Welcome,” he cried gaily. “Welcome, brave conquerors, from the king and all Scotland to such sons. And you, Macbeth, the king will not so much as tarry your coming before he would acquaint you of his pleasure. News of your success has preceded you to Forres,

and all the castle rings with tales of a prowess which shall be voiced in song and told for generations yet to come upon the harp. Swift on the heels of every post another has reached us, and all with one tale to tell. The praises of great Macbeth, who fought the rebels and himself led men into the ranks of the Norwegian king, till they were mown and leveled like corn in harvest."

"So we are sent," added Angus, as the fiery Rosse paused, breathless in his eulogies, "to give you thanks from our royal master and herald you to his presence."

"And," quoth Rosse, "for an earnest of a greater honor, he bade me, from him, call you Thane of Cawdor. So, hail by such title, most worthy Thane, since henceforth it is yours!"

Macbeth did not reply. With his hand still locked in that of the speaker he looked across to where Banquo stood—and the eyes of the two men met.

Banquo's gaze was inscrutable, but he laughed—without merriment.

"What," quoth he, "can the devil speak true?"

Macbeth turned impatiently back to Duncan's messenger. "The Thane of Cawdor lives," he said coldly. "Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?"

The speech was impatient, the speaker's manner nervous, as though he were half afraid of some unspoken thought conceived in that instant in an over-busy brain. Had he again looked towards Banquo he would have seen a dawning pity on his friend's face. But Angus was brief with his explanation as the four chieftains climbed the hill towards the castle, where Duncan awaited the coming of his generals.

"He who was Thane of Cawdor," said the younger

noble, "lives still, but under sentence of death. A sentence most just, as none can gainsay, though we know not the full story of his guilt. Yet he is traitor, proved and confessed, though all his treacherous deeds are not discovered. Some say he was in league with Sweno of Norway to overthrow Duncan and establish himself upon the throne; others declare that only in secret did he aid and reinforce the Norwegians. Be it as it may, he was minded to wreck his country by selling her to a foreigner, and thus confesses that he merits death."

Traitor confessed!

Macbeth paused near the summit of the hill, looking back over the forest, beauteous in its spring foliage seen with the sheen of moonlight upon it—and saw, too, in the distance the blacker outline of the moors, where night lay brooding in more peaceful hush than when he stood upon its storm-swept waste and heard the weird sisters hail him by strange titles. Beads of sweat broke upon the soldier's brow, he clutched desperately at his plaid and drew gasping breaths as one wrestling with some fierce enemy. Then, seeing the astonished looks of his comrades, he broke into nervous laughter, striding forward towards the lowered drawbridge around which was gathered a group of soldiers.

"Death, indeed," quoth he, "is fitting guerdon for a traitor's deeds—the only guerdon such can hope to win. So Cawdor the traitor dies?"

"And lives," added Angus, "in a loyal and noble subject, whom the king waits to further honor with well-merited reward."

Thus, with the echoes of high praise resounding on

all sides, came Macbeth and Banquo to Forres, yet to the former was given the greater glory, the more lavish promise of reward; whilst Banquo, though praised too, stood somewhat aside, wondering all the time as he watched his dear friend's varying humors, his sudden fits of mirth, hilarious and wild, followed by a depression still more noticeable; saw, too, how this brilliant soldier had won the love and esteem of gracious Duncan, whilst Malcolm and Donalbain both vied in doing him honor and listening to his talk of valorous deeds, in which he did not spare to vaunt himself high.

So Banquo watched, less restless than his friend, because his thoughts were less disturbed by phantoms of a future which tempted an ambitious soul, even whilst it shrank in abhorrence from them.

Rosse and Angus were already on their way northward to see to the fulfilment of grim sentence on the traitorous Thane of Cawdor, and pending their return, Duncan remained at Forres, keeping both his victorious generals with him. Banquo had greeted his motherless son, Fleance, at the castle, where, during the campaign, he had remained under charge of Lady Lennox; but Macbeth grew impatient, longing to be allowed to return to his own castle of Inverness and the wife he so passionately adored. But the king's pleasure had to be obeyed, so days dragged slowly by, crowded with business of state, whilst for Macbeth half the nights became profitless vigils when he would crouch on the narrow stone seat near the unglazed window of his room, resting his arms against the iron stanchion built into the wall as a protection against intruders. Seated thus he would gaze out upon the wide stretches of forest and moor, loch and distant heights, moody,

gloomy, preoccupied with the chaos of such thoughts as he could not name. He was watching in such fashion, with burning eyes that sought to scorch the veil of the future to see behind its folds, when the curtain before the door was raised and Banquo entered.

The two friends had not spoken in private since their return to Forres, and Macbeth proffered no very hearty welcome as he turned from the high window, stepping back into the room.

"You do not sleep?" questioned Banquo. "Why, so it is with me! Too many voices call to me at nights, though who or what they are I know not."

He seated himself as he spoke, leaning back wearily, though from beneath shaggy brows he eyed the man opposite him curiously.

"Voices," growled Macbeth. "What voices should there be—to call at night?"

"I've asked myself the question," smiled Banquo, "but received no answer. At times I say they are the cries of those who in some bloody battle have perished at my hand; at others I believe them to be no other than the mocking gibes of those midnight hags who met us on the Hard Moor as we journeyed hitherwards."

Macbeth groaned, burying his face in his hands.

"Would they had stayed," he muttered, "to have told us more. So little did they say—yet too much for peace. Did we taste some magic, fateful herb that night which crazed our reason, Banquo, or did those same weird sisters really stand and cry that . . . that your children shall be kings?"

"As much and more they said," replied Banquo, keenly regarding his companion. "Was it not you who shall—according to their word—be *king*?"

Macbeth looked up, and his dark eyes were wild.

"Thane of Cawdor, too," he added hoarsely. "Went it not so?"

"Aye—to the same tune and words. 'A strange prophecy, Macbeth.'

"Glamis," murmured Macbeth, speaking as one in a dream, who sees the panorama of a future not to be believed, "Thane of Cawdor—the greatest is behind." He stretched out his hand, clutching at Banquo's wrist. "Do you not hope your children shall be kings?" he asked, with a sudden fierceness, "when those who gave the Thane of Cawdor to me promised no less to me."

Again their eyes met—but Banquo's grew very grave, compassionate, a warning in his glance and uttered words.

"If we trusted too deeply to such rash promises," said he, "you would be looking for a crown, my friend, and to be king as well as Thane of Cawdor. But it is strange how, to work us harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths—win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequences."

"Why, that's true," replied Macbeth, flinging aside his mantle as though its folds suffocated him; "and I will put aside such thoughts as these. We should be gay, Banquo, in a present where success is ours."

"In truth we should, cousin—and well content with the honor conferred on us."

Macbeth laughed mockingly. "Content?" he asked. "I would that virtue were less stranger to me. There are unscaled heights as yet, Banquo, and if I may not be king, at least there are fields of fair renown before us both."

"And in them serve a noble master," added Banquo.

"For myself I ask no better than to be vassal and subject to the kindly Duncan, or, in turn, to young Malcolm, who is a goodly prince of pleasant parts."

"Malcolm," echoed Macbeth, "why! 'Tis but a boy—a gallant youth, yet I for one should have no wish to put my hand in his or swear fealty to a beardless lad."

"Your thoughts travel post," smiled Banquo, "since Duncan lives, and by his hale strength and health promises us many years in which to serve."

"To serve," repeated Macbeth, "to serve."

His tones savored of little relish for such words, and there was a proud arrogance on his features which might have marked the rebel will had Banquo noticed it, but the latter had risen and was moving towards the door. With his hand on the curtain he turned, looking back to see Macbeth huddled low in his seat, one hand supporting his head.

"Sleep well, my friend," said he, "and if we dream let not ambition paint in the colors with too bold a hand. We do well to serve, are happiest thus, since so our lot is appointed us. So let us thank Heaven for success in service and follow no false lures to our destruction. God rest you well."

The door was closed. Macbeth listening, heard the sound of steps dying away down the stone stairs. He was alone in a room lighted only by the moon. A room, stone-walled and bare, with but the one high window through which the white beams poured their rays to gently caress the rough wooden carving of the crucifix fastened on the wall.

Ambition! Was it possible when gazing at the Divine Figure of Humility? Crown of thorns, cross of suffer-

ing, the glory of self-abnegation—all were there. But Macbeth did not so much as glance towards the crucifix, nor did he pray. He was thinking instead of the woman who was even now awaiting his home-coming at Inverness. He pictured her, stately, proud, beautiful—a queen uncrowned. Royal in her carriage, her nature, by birthright, too. A queen . . . his queen . . . Scotland's queen. . . . He started at that last whisper, clutching at his tunic, tearing it open so that his chest lay bare.

Scotland's queen! He could see her face as he hailed her by such a title. The flash in those gray eyes, the superb pride with which her dainty head would be poised, the slender arch of the white neck, the dewy red lips, parted in a smile of perfect content. A queen . . . his queen . . . Scotland's queen!

How the devil tempted him! And he had no desire to pray. Yet he feared, hearing the melancholy howl of a wolf in the forest near, shuddering, too, as he recalled the story of how nearly seventy years before the unfortunate King Duffus had been murdered in this very room.

Murdered! How redly the word shone before his eyes. A king murdered! Oh, foul and terrible deed. Could there be forgiveness for such in Heaven? Nay! that were a crime to damn a soul to hell. To hell!—he could imagine the torture of that punishment to-night. *Hell!*

Again the wolf howled and a night-bird cried, yet the moon shone peacefully down into a room where a king of Scotland had been murdered and where now a man crouched, afraid of himself and his own thoughts, which as yet he had not dared to breathe or formulate into definite ideas.

What had Banquo said? Had he not spoken of content? Macbeth laughed scornfully as once more he thought of a woman, proud and erect, with flaming auburn tresses alone to crown a head which would so bravely wear a crown of gold.

With trembling fingers he drew a scroll of parchment towards him. He must write to his wife before he sought his couch.

Only that evening had Duncan told him of his gracious intention to visit his castle of Inverness for a night on his way further north.

Macbeth had received the intelligence with all loyal protestations of satisfaction at the honor done him; but, as his royal master spoke the words, fear had again clamored at his heart. Fear of himself, fear of this opportunity to . . . to . . .

He never got farther than that in his meditations, yet at the moment he could have cried aloud to the king not to have traveled by way of Inverness lest evil might befall him. But such wild words could not be spoken with Malcolm and the many courtiers—amongst them Banquo himself—standing by the king's side, and now, as he laboriously indited that letter to his wife, he ceased to regret that he had been mute.

The king would come to Inverness. Well! What of that? He would come—and go—whilst he, Moormor of Ross, Thane of Cawdor, would be no nearer the throne of Scotland than before. How could he hope to be?

Slowly—more slowly—he wrote. He was too busy to answer that last question, yet it haunted him. How could he hope to be? *How could he hope to be?* Why, at that precise moment, did he think of King Duffus, dying here in this very room by a murderer's dagger?

Perspiration broke over the writer's brow and rolled down his face. It was of his wife he thought now. A queen—his queen—Scotland's queen. And ambition, eagle-eyed, vaunting, clamorous, stood at his elbow, weaving rare pictures of a future, to reach which lay the way of a dark and terrible valley, into whose depths Macbeth dared not gaze—he only looked beyond, so that the writing of his letter became easier, his heart beat faster, more triumphantly.

“All hail, Macbeth! that *shalt* be king hereafter.”

There was nothing sinister tonight in the echo of the salutation with which Ilda the witch had greeted him as he returned with Banquo from the vanquishing of the Norwegian hosts—and traitors to King Duncan.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

IT was the noonday sun which streamed into the gloomy council chamber of the castle of Forres, and Prince Malcolm, watching its bright rays, grew regretful for greenwood shade and the excitement of the chase. He was still too young and irresponsible to have cultivated any taste for the affairs of state, though in fighting, hunting, sports of all kind, and every healthy recreation he was an enthusiast.

To him Macbeth was a hero indeed, by whose side he hoped to fight in the next campaign against Scotland's enemies, whilst in the meantime he recalled with pleasant thrills of awakening passion that the favored general was stepfather to Bethoc, whom he might hope to see soon when Duncan and his court visited Inverness. That hope was food enough for a happy day-dream which his father's voice broke upon.

"Is execution done upon Cawdor?" asked the king. "Are not those in commission returned yet?"

Malcolm turned from watching a hawk poised motionless in mid-air ready for swooping on some helpless victim, and crossed towards the table where his father sat with Lennox and other councilors, whilst Prince Donalbain, a lad of some twenty summers, leaned against the high, carved back of his chair.

"My liege," quoth Malcolm, bowing with ready grace, "they are not yet come back. But I have spoken

with one who saw Cawdor die, and he told me that very frankly the Thane confessed his treasons, showed deep and sincere repentance, and humbly implored Your Highness' forgiveness. Indeed, nothing in his life became him like the leaving it; he died as one who studied in his death to throw away the dearest thing he owed as if it were a careless trifle."

The king sighed wearily. This business of treachery and stern requital—necessary though the latter was—had grieved him bitterly, so that he was aged by ten years in as many months. Now for a space he hid his face in his mantle, as one who grieves for a friend rather than rejoices in the death of an enemy.

"He was one on whom I built an absolute trust," he murmured, and lapsing once more into silence, prayed, no doubt for the peace of a soul which had not sinned beyond the hope of purgatory's cleansing flames.

But young Donalbain, straying from his father's side, cried the news of a return looked for in so much impatience, and less than half an hour later Rosse and Angus entered the room, dusty with travel and grave-faced, as became the bearers of such solemn tidings. One Thane of Cawdor had paid his debt of treachery by death—another now awaited fuller reward as the king's payment for loyal devotion. Strange fates, interwoven about a single name, stranger destinies weighing in the balances of time!

Macbeth stood before his noble sovereign—a subject worthy of favor, yet with the subtle poison of an evil woman's speech working like leaven in a heart and brain created for noble purpose.

Did Banquo guess at least part of such strife seething

in an ambitious soul? If so, he put such surmises aside as unworthy. Macbeth was too great, too noble, too loyal for such a shadow to be cast upon his name.

The king was speaking, having resolutely put aside his grief for the fate of an unworthy friend in the honoring of a more deserving one.

The prowess of Macbeth had restored peace to a war-racked kingdom—and the king's thanks were eloquent if simple.

Duncan's hand rested affectionately on the chief-tain's shoulder as he spoke of gratitude.

"Would you had less deserved," said he, "that the proportion both of thanks and payment might have been mine. All I have left to say, more is your due than I can hope to pay."

Macbeth raised his head, Duncan's gracious condescension and love had so moved the more generous impulses of his nature that for the time the evil demons of imagination disturbing his peace of mind were driven headlong and he answered with a sincerity none could mistake.

"In performing service and loyalty for such a master, I pay myself, my liege," he said. "Your Highness' part is to receive our duties. And our duties are to your throne and state, children and servants. We only do what we should in endeavoring to maintain your safety and honor."

Duncan's heart glowed with pleasure at hearing such an avowal. Here was devotion, simple, manly, obviously sincere. Here was a man whom he might trust indeed. One who would be as a tower of strength in the upholding of his throne against scheming enemies, a friend and subject who could not be too highly honored by the king who owed him so much.

Tears of gratitude stood in the good king's eyes as he listened to Macbeth's speech, and with a heart stirred by such promises he turned to his other general:

"Noble Banquo," he said, holding out his hand, and speaking with much emotion, "you have no less deserved than your partner in this successful enterprise, as all shall know; good and loyal friend, let me hold you to my heart, sure that a kindred spirit knits us each to each."

He embraced Banquo affectionately, whilst the latter, being freed presently from that kindly hold, fell on one knee, kissing the edge of the king's robe.

"The harvest of our love is your own, my liege," he whispered, and felt his heart swell in longing to perform fresh service to repay such gratitude.

But the king had returned to his seat at the head of the council chamber, where soon all were conferring on those matters of statecraft requiring instant attention after the late breaking of peace.

It was Duncan's purpose to establish more authority upon his elder son Malcolm, since he felt that the lad could not too early learn the meaning of the heavy responsibilities which, as his father's heir, must one day be his. To be king of Scotland in those far-off days of the eleventh century meant no empty title and honor.

The lawless spirit of the Highlanders, the independence of the tribes, the frequent depredations of the Norwegians and Danes, kept the monarch in a constant turmoil of business, besides calling for the need of infinite tact in the treatment of the various moormors or governors of the "great tribes" of Scotland, whose rule over their own particular provinces was

almost as absolute as that of a king, each "great tribe" being sub-divided again into lesser tribes governed by its "*toshach*," or chieftain.

For six years Duncan had reigned wisely and well, but, with the wisdom of one who looks with calm judgment to the future well-being of those he loves, he saw that young Malcolm's character would be strengthened and deepened by responsibility, and now announced to the assembled chiefs that he intended to bestow on him the title of Prince of Cumberland, and the post of his lieutenant in government.

All—saving one—heard the announcement with approval, for Malcolm had won the well-deserved favor of his father's friends and adherents, who were now loud in their acclaim, so that the silence of Macbeth passed unnoticed.

The Thane of Cawdor had indeed fallen into a reverie, in which it is to be feared he again indulged in those dangerous dreams of ambition which he had made only spasmodic efforts to crush. It was Duncan's voice speaking his name which recalled him to the fact that he was still seated in the council chamber of the king.

What was it the latter said? There would now be no delay in setting out for Inverness on the way south for the ceremony of Prince Malcolm's investiture?

To Inverness! How his pulses galloped at the thought as if lashed to some wild race by a fugitive whisper. A devil's whisper. . . .

Macbeth rose from his seat, pale but calm, masking the nervous emotion that consumed him.

"In that case, my liege," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "I must humbly crave permission to take my leave, so that, playing the part of welcome courtier, I gladden my wife's ears with the tale of such

honor put upon my house, myself and all within its walls."

Duncan smiled his permission, well pleased at such a promised hospitality.

He was glad to take this opportunity of showering his favors on so peerless a kinsman, and prophesied a pleasant resting place for himself and suite at the castle of Inverness, whose lord and lady would be so well prepared to welcome him.

But Banquo, returning alone to his lodging and finding Fleance already asleep upon his narrow bed, bent over the boy with tender love, yet sighed as he looked into the fair, flushed face.

"*Thou shalt get kings,*" he murmured to himself. "Poor Fleance! Would your father's ambition for you cast your feet amongst those quagmires and pitfalls where Macbeth already wanders? Shall I stir that damned spark in your young breast which beats already in loyalty and love to Duncan and his house? Why! I would not do this thing for all the wealth and honor of the world—least of all at the prophecy of those foul, abandoned hags whom I would fain condemn to the hangman or the stake. May flames shrivel those withered throats of sin ere I am beguiled by them from my loyalty. Aye—and may the Thane of Cawdor pray the same prayer, lest he lives to weep the snare which a devil from hell conceived and set by the help of filthy tools."

The boy stirred in his sleep, murmuring his father's name. With an overwhelming sense of tenderness and foreboding that father gathered the little lad into his arms and pressed him to his breast, as though poor impotent love could protect and shield him from all future and imagined ill.

CHAPTER V

LADY MACBETH AT HOME

A CHILD'S laugh rang out, high and clear, from the castle turrets, followed by the sound of scampering feet, as a boy of about eight years of age burst into the room where a young girl sat at her broi-dery frame.

"A messenger," cried the child. "See, Bethoc—one who rides wearily. Come and see if you can tell who he is?"

And, catching at his sister's hand, he dragged her impatiently towards the high window, from which he himself could not look out.

The broi-dery frame fell clattering on to the ground and carefully selected skeins of fine wool were scattered in hopeless confusion. But in the meantime, Bethoc, scarcely less interested than her small brother, was craning her neck to catch a glimpse of the horseman, who had just appeared in sight, riding over the crest of an opposite hill from that on which the castle of Inverness stood.*

"It is Dugald," said the girl, a flush rising to her cheeks. "I think he must bear a message from our lord."

And she turned back, as though hesitating whether

* This was not the Great Stone Castle built in 1059 by Malcolm Canmore, but one of earlier date standing on a hill known as the "Crown" to the east of the town.

to carry such tidings to her mother, who was resting in an adjoining room.

The two children—for Bethoc was scarcely more, though accounting herself at the age of sixteen a woman grown—were the step-son and daughter of the Moormor of Ross and Moray. Their mother—now Lady Macbeth—was Gruoch, granddaughter of Kenneth IV, surnamed the Grim, who was slain fighting against King Malcolm, grandsire of Duncan, the present sovereign. Nor was this the only injury which the lady could show against the reigning house of Scotland. As a young girl she had loved and wed with Gilcomgain, at that time Moormor of Moray, by whom she had two children—the eldest a girl, Bethoc—the younger her son, Lulach. Gilcomgain had been burned to death in his castle some six years previously, together with fifty of his friends, by order of the same King Malcolm who had killed her grandfather, and further incurred her vengeance by assassinating her favorite brother.

After her first husband's death, almost simultaneous with that of his destroyer, Gruoch had wandered from castle to castle seeking asylum for herself and young children. It was at one of these castles that Macbeth had first met her, instantly fallen in love with her beauty and fascination, and married her.

His devotion since had been unfaltering, in spite of the disappointment at having no heir. He showed, however, a father's kindness to his step-children, and still hoped that one day the saints would hear his prayer and bestow on him a child of his own.

Lady Macbeth herself was a woman of indomitable courage, powerful personality and possessed of that wonderful fascination which chains men's hearts and

enslaves their will far above mere beauty. Yet she was beautiful too, this woman with the blood of kings flowing in her veins and an insatiable desire for vengeance in her heart.

In a chamber luxuriously furnished according to the ideas of those rough times, she was resting extended on a couch near the window, when Lulach burst in upon her with all the lack of ceremony which a spoilt child may practice with impunity.

"It is Dugall, lady mother," he cried, in a shrill treble. "Bethoc says that he must have ridden from Forres with news of battle."

A slight frown contracted his mother's forehead, though she pulled the boy to her not ungently.

"What does Bethoc know of it?" she asked. "But you shall run presently and bid Ronald not delay to let me know the news when it arrives."

"He was crossing the valley when Bethoc looked from the window," said Lulach. "He will soon be here, and oh! I do hope he will have news of battle to tell me. I love to hear of the slaying and the fighting and how the brave kernes and gallowglasses smite down the foreigners. When I am old enough I, too, shall fight for the king, lady mother."

Lady Macbeth did not answer at once, but lay, one arm loosely about the boy's waist, regarding him with half-closed eyes which hid a fierce fire of love and hate.

Love for the child? Yes! she bestowed that upon this little lad—the love she had given to his father, the husband of her youth, the gallant, handsome, reckless Gilcomgain, whom she had so passionately adored that the thought of it shook her soul even now. Yes . . . even now. And yet Lulach was her own living image,

ruddy-haired, fair-skinned, gray-eyed. It was Bethoc who was like her father, raven-tressed, with blue eyes which held the trick of laughter and to whom tragedy seemed an alien thing. Bethoc! The very name brought hardness to her mother's eyes, since by some crank of a warped nature she had no mother-love to give her only daughter.

Was there reason for such antagonism? None whatever! But the fact was indisputable—and Bethoc knew it, wept over it—but withal, her futile, childish efforts could not alter it.

Was it a spice of unnamed jealousy which strengthened a wayward irritation against one who should have been altogether lovable?

Lady Macbeth did not deign to ask herself such a question. Bethoc was a personality without interest to her—so she told herself. But Lulach was her dead husband's son, her darling, her treasure, the joy of her fierce heart. Yet, hearing him speak now of service to one she regarded as an enemy, she silenced him with unusual curtness.

“You shall fight,” quoth she, “but not for one whose grandsire slew your own. There will be nobler deeds of prowess for Gilcomgain's son. A father's death to avenge—a mother's wrongs to right. But, tush! I speak in folly to a babe. Run, Lulach, and see that yon loitering messenger speeds. I would have news.”

The boy, half frightened, ran away blithely enough, shouting to Bethoc to come down to the hall with him. His mother heard the call and frowned again as she slowly rose from her couch so that she too might look from the window across the flat and marshy plains, watered by the river Ness, which flowed in several

channels towards the narrow sea visible beyond. The cool air of a spring afternoon blew through the unglazed opening to fan her face, and she was glad of the refreshing breeze.

Lulach's sudden entry and unfortunate speech had roused in his mother a train of thought which plunged her into the lurid places of the past so that her fierce heart beat yet more fiercely in thinking of the future. The awful days surrounding and immediately following the murder of her young husband, and her own narrow escape with Bethoc and the infant Lulach, had changed the sweetness of her woman's nature into bitterest gall. Ah, God! how she had suffered. How she had cursed those who had made her suffer—and yet how impotent those curses had been.

Malcolm the king had died in his bed in the odor of sanctity, shrived and assoilzied by mitred bishop and holy sacraments, whilst those whom Gruoch, wife of Gilcomgain, loved, had writhed in pains which were bitter foretaste of purgatory, forbidden by bodily pangs to think of their immortal souls.

So the story of a black past stood out before Gruoch, now wife of the great Macbeth, as she sat in her castle of Inverness and watched the red flare of sunset tinging distant waves with a crimson glory.

The past! The past! Why did it come so vividly before her this evening? Why did dead ghosts arise to pace slowly before her mental vision? Ghosts, all bloody and terrible, called forth by the careless speech of the child whom of all living beings she loved the best.

Would Lulach fight under the banners of cruel Malcolm's grandson? Nay! *That*, she vowed, he should not do, and caught at her throat with trembling fingers

whilst she swore it, as though to stifle back the sobs which were the outcome of her woman's weakness and therefore disdained. The sound of an opening door and the entrance of a page announcing the messenger roused her from so grim a train of thoughts.

Ah!—the messenger who had ridden, as Lulach said, from Forres.

The messenger from the husband who adored her, and to whom she vowed—much gratitude.

Gratitude! When Gruoch told herself where her duty to her present lord lay she would laugh—amused as though by some clownish folly.

Yet Macbeth loved her, and if she had no love to give him in return for all the lavish gifts his love bestowed, at least he never guessed it. Whilst, undeterred by the weakness gendered by too much affection, the Moormor's wife had never lost an opportunity of inspiring her husband with such ambitions as she fostered in her own passionate heart.

Was she not granddaughter of Kenneth the Grim? And, though she had not born a son to Macbeth, she would often look tenderly at her own little Lulach and dream of the goal of an ambition which Macbeth would help her to gain.

A man, sweating and faded by hard riding, had entered the room and was bowing low before his mistress. He still panted for breath and in silence handed the packet which Macbeth had found it so difficult to indite.

The lady took the scroll, fingering the seals with careless fingers as she glanced at the messenger.

Wherefore had there been such need of haste?

“What are your tidings?” she demanded curtly.

Dugald glanced up furtively; few were they in that castle but feared this lady.

"The king comes here tomorrow," he muttered, clutching at the curtain to steady himself, for he was faint with the stress of speedy travel.

His mistress started violently, as though the speaker had struck her a sudden blow.

The king? Her enemy?

"Thou'rt mad to say it," she whispered, as she broke the seals of the packet she held now in a firmer grip. "Is not thy master with him? Had the king been coming I should have been warned before to make preparation."

"So please you," replied Dugald humbly, "it is true. Our Thane is coming—I do precede him by an hour at most. And, hard on the heels of my master the king himself."

"Great news indeed," cried his mistress. "Go, you shall be tended well, fellow, for having used such necessary speed. And, having learned my lord's mind in this letter, I will be instant in obeying his instructions. Go, get you to your quarters, eat and drink, later I may desire to question with you further."

The man stumbled forth, glad enough of the permission to depart, knowing that he would be well served by those who were already greedy for his news, of which he would make much, as is the custom of those who desire to have comrades hang eagerly on the weight of every uttered word.

But Lady Macbeth, alone once more in her chamber, sat staring down at the unopened scroll, whilst a chaos of unruly thoughts made turmoil in her brain.

Duncan coming hither! How would she greet one who, for his grandsire's sins, she regarded as her enemy?

Hatred, indignation, resentment surged within her breast. How the flames had roared above the castle walls, behind which her beloved husband stood prepared to perish. She could hear the awful crackle of that dread holocaust even now, feel the agony which had wrung her heart, as with her babe in her arms she had crouched amongst the undergrowth of the forest near and prayed to Heaven to avenge her. But Malcolm the victorious was dead. It was only his grandson who lived. Would she preserve an undeserved hate for one who so honored her present lord?

Why came the king to Inverness? Surely, it must be accounted an honor. Should she mask her feelings and so help her husband up another step of a difficult ladder?

With a bitter laugh she broke the seals of a fateful document and read, slowly and carefully, its contents. And as she read, her face grew very pale, whilst the red line of her lips became straight and hard.

To the end she read, then once again re-read the whole as though astonishment had numbed her brain.

“They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by perfectest report, they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves—air, into which they vanished. While I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came messengers from the king, who all-hailed me, ‘Thane of Cawdor,’ by which title before these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time with ‘Hail, king that shalt be.’ This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightest not

* Macbeth at this time was Moormor of Moray and Ross.

lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised to thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell."

Not once, or twice, but many times read the lady that letter, whilst before her dazzled eyes a picture rose which seemed to her perfection of human bliss, crowning both vengeance and ambition.

"Hail, king that shalt be!"

Ah! had she been by when those soul-damned messengers had cried that prophecy she would have been swift to stifle down her husband's horrid dread.

Already, in that imagination which leapt the hollow spaces of time and bridged all dark places where horror brooded, she saw herself an enthroned queen, her husband crowned beside her—Lulach the heir to Scotland's throne, failing a son born to Macbeth. And, in such a vision, she saw also perfection of happiness so much to be desired that she would have stopped at no means to its attainment.

Means? Ah! how she caught her hands to her breast, now to still her heart's wild throbbing. But only for a second was she daunted by the thought which had held sleep from her husband's eyes for many nights.

"The king comes here tomorrow," she whispered. "Tomorrow." The swiftness with which decision must be urged startled her.

Would that Macbeth were here! Would she could hasten his coming! Could she master this fierce impatience till his arrival?

With hasty steps she began to pace up and down the room, whispering to herself, in broken ejaculations—

"Glamis thou art—and Cawdor. And . . . shalt be what thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature. It is too full of the milk of human kindness to catch

the nearest way. . . . Thou wouldst be great . . . art not without ambition . . . and yet would not dare to the uttermost to attain it. What thou wouldst highly, that wouldst thou nobly. Wouldst not play false—and yet wouldst wrongly win. Ah!—to what wasted opportunities will such weak-kneed procrastination lead? Yet—were he here . . . were he here. . . .”

Pausing, the musér leaned her arm against the bare stonework of the embrasure, from which the oval orifice looked out over the low-lying marshes. And in the white curve of her elbow she rested her throbbing temples.

How thoughts crowded within her busy brain! Thoughts which she—unlike Macbeth—did not fear to face, welcoming them rather as the whispers which helped to weave a deadly purpose.

Passion, like the impotent battling of waves against high cliffs, drove within her breast, lashing itself to a hurricane of desire and purpose.

If she could but infuse a wavering will with some of her own fire! Ah—if she could.

The sunset was fading in the west; night, cold and chill, was approaching. And when the morrow came, Duncan would be here.

The watcher's beautiful face was convulsed by the torment of her hopes and fears. If she herself might decide, then Duncan's days were numbered to a single span. But her heart grew faint with fear of baffled desire as she thought of the husband who might draw back in horror from the whisper of a ruthless deed.

Storm after storm swept raging over the woman's soul—that soul made for the white loveliness of womanhood's meek crown—a soul to be filled by gentle love, the dream of motherhood, pale purity of upward wing-

ing thought, rather than a whirlwind of red passion and vengeful hate, with the dangerous goad of a vaunting ambition to urge its owner forward towards a dread abyss. Ah! when Macbeth comes home, what a councillor he shall find!

A child's voice clashed jarringly with all that lurid dream. "Mother, the messenger said our lord returns within an hour or less. Shall we be meeting him at the bridge? Or shall I climb the turret stairs and cry to you when I see his horse breasting the hillside? Bethoc—"

The woman who had watched a dying day turned fiercely about, frowning on the rosy-faced intruder.

"Go," she commanded, "trouble me not, little prater, lest I punish you. Go—and do not let me see you before the morrow. Dost hear? Then obey, lest chastisement follow disobedience."

Lulach crept wonderingly away in search of Bethoc. He had often seen his mother angry with his sister, but seldom with him—and, after the fashion of spoilt babyhood, he resented the injustice.

But sight of his tears banished a very different dream from Bethoc's eyes, and after coaxing her little brother successfully into April smiles the two stole down hand-in-hand to the hall to try and glean tidings from Dugald of how long the king would be staying at the castle.

The king! It was a grand piece of news that the king himself should be coming to their home, and Lulach had many questions to ask as to whether he would wear his crown of gold and carry a mighty sword upon his hip wherewith to slay all his enemies.

So whilst Dugald related all sorts of fabulous tales wherewith to dazzle the childish fancy, Bethoc crept

apart to indulge in happy anticipation of a lover's coming.

Was it possible the handsome young Prince Malcolm could be that to her? Ah! no, no, she would not be worthy of such a mate. And yet—he loved her. Had he not told her so when last they met? A dream half-dreamed—then a hurried farewell. Yet how fondly she had cherished the word—the look—the clasp of his strong hands on hers—the eloquent pleading of gray eyes, which had looked her heart away.

Malcolm! Oh, the music in that name, the welling up of all the tide of love in her young breast. Was she a child? This blue-eyed maiden who dreamed of love? Nay! but rather was she a woman, with the dawning passion of a woman's love clamoring at her heart, since thus far had the daughter inherited her mother's nature—passionate in love—perhaps for that very reason passionate in hate; yet without possessing the proud ambition which also dominated the elder woman's heart. For Bethoc—unloved since her father died—was humble of nature, and in her desire thought rather of self-sacrifice—for love's sake . . . for love's sake.

With a little sob of joy the girl climbed the winding stair to her room.

It was dark without—the night had come. But tomorrow Malcolm himself would be here. Tomorrow the sun would shine.

Tomorrow! Ah, how well the mists of futurity held that morrow from her innocent gaze!

CHAPTER VI

REVENGE AND FATE

TORCHES flared from the iron cressets in the wall. There was a joyful baying of hounds, which leapt to welcome their master as he strode up the great hall to where his wife stood awaiting him.

Queenly and tall she stood in her close-fitting embroidered gown, girded by a jeweled belt below the breast, sleeves of scarlet cloth and gold lace, and a head-dress of fine white lawn which, lying straight about her ruddy hair, fell to the hem of her gown.

And, as Macbeth saw her, standing there in the garish light thrown by the torches, he recalled the words which had echoed so tormentingly in his heart. That night he kept vigil in the room of the old castle of Forres, where King Duffus had died by an assassin's dagger.

A queen—his queen—Scotland's queen.

What would she say to that triple title? Well! she had read his letter—she would be telling him soon how she regarded the weird sisters' prophecy.

Now she was coming to him, both hands outstretched, her head poised, so that he saw the full beauty of a face which to him had lost none of its early loveliness, though this woman was long past her first youth.

"Ah, welcome," she cried softly. "Welcome, dear lord, so glad am I to greet you."

It is said that a woman cannot be deceived as to the

genuineness of a man's love for her—but none have ever denied the ease with which a man himself may be tricked. As Macbeth felt the clinging caress of his wife's lips his whole being thrilled with the joy of believing that this woman was his—heart and soul, the wife who loved him with all the ardor of her passionate nature.

Little did he guess how she was even now searching his face—not for the love which shone there for her, but for the purpose she feared might be faltering in him. And what did she read in those dark, fierce eyes which demanded, pleaded, besought? Were they not the eyes of a man who mutely prayed to be saved—from himself?

Yet the answering flash of her own brilliant orbs was one of pride and resolve. Had not this woman a part set to play? And she meant to play it to its desired conclusion—cost what it might—cost what it might.

“Ah, my Gruoch,” whispered Macbeth softly. “So you received my message? You make preparation for the king's coming on the morrow?”

She drew back, the better to see his face, and smiled, the smile which told him all her mind.

“I have made preparation,” she replied very sweetly, yet with underlying significance in each word. “And already welcome my king.”

He turned away with a faint exclamation, half groan, half-gasping resolve, and began to speak to the old steward who stood near.

Lady Macbeth moved apart, pausing by a heavy curtain of dark woolen fabric which formed fitting background to her slender figure.

She was waiting—and, as she waited with all a woman's patient persistence to have her own will, the weirdness of the scene became impressed on her.

The dark hall, with its dingy arras, trophies of chase and battlefield, the flaming torches, which showed the great apartment with its cumbrous furniture, reed-strewn floor, crowding figures of retainers in plaids and buskins hurrying to and fro, some bearing in the viands for supper, some carrying logs of wood to fling on the fire, which was welcome on a chilly evening, all busy, all intent. Presently Lulach came running in, kneeling to greet his stepfather, then jumping up and racing round the hall, with Grim, the deerhound, at his heels, a buoyant, gay-hearted child, full of exuberant spirits at thought of the king's visit on the morrow. Then Bethoc entered, slim and graceful, and for the first time Macbeth smiled as he kissed the young girl's fair brow. Bethoc's mother drew back into the shadow—and the old antagonism against this, her elder child, kindled more fiercely. What was there in common between gentle Bethoc and the turbulent-hearted parent who bare her? It was not for some quarter of an hour that Macbeth turned from his conversation with Culen the steward to seek his wife. And somehow he approached more reluctantly now to the woman who had filled all his thoughts during his absence from home. Was it that he knew she grew impatient to give him his answer to the letter he had written?

Well, the answer must be heard—listened to—pondered. The answer—his wife would make.

Neither spoke as they went together to Gruoch's room—the room where she had received the messenger a few hours earlier. There were lights placed here

too—lights, with many a shadowed nook where the flaring rays did not reach. Ghost-haunted nooks, where grim spectres might be lurking.

The door had closed, the curtain fell into place. They were alone, husband and wife. He had been in the thick of battle since last they met, might have received some grievous, scarce-healed wound from cruel foes. He had—as she knew—been highly honored by the king's favors, so that her heart should have swelled with pride as she gave the loving greeting which would have set seal to such great and well-merited reward.

But the woman standing there with the flare of torchlight on her handsome face thought of none of those things which would have been on her lips and in her heart had she truly loved her husband.

As it was she spoke in a hushed undertone, as one who rings a knell on one solemn note.

"Duncan comes here tomorrow."

Macbeth clenched his hands and drew deep breath as one called to face what he fears.

"Yes," he replied.

"And when goes hence?"

"The day following—as he purposes."

"*As he purposes.*"

She was near him now, and though they spoke of things which yet they dared not name, each soul was bare to the other's gaze at the moment.

Again Gruoch spoke, seeing how her husband's face blanched, his eyes wavered.

She had caught his hand in hers, raised it to her lips, though her eyes never left his face.

"All hail, Macbeth," she murmured, "*that shalt be king hereafter.*"

He started violently and withdrew his hand.

Had the powers of darkness pursued him to his own home that they might damn his soul?

If so, they had chosen their instrument well, for the woman who watched her companion's face could tell exactly how those words had fallen like seeds into responsive soil. But, since the time was short, she must tend their growth with diligence.

"He that's coming must be provided for," she went on. "Leave it to me. There is opportunity here to mate with fate. Shall we let both pass us on the road of life? It is decreed, I, your wife, know that. Those who met you in the day of success spoke truth. Here is justice, here is purpose, here we stand to face the future. All hail, my king! Is not that a fair title? And I—your wife—am the first to cry the words which honor you."

Ambition stirred once more within him. Each softly murmured word became a clarion call. Through the eyes he loved he saw himself a crowned and puissant king, ruling the land he coveted. Ambition called—and was answered by a shuddering horror.

For an instant Macbeth looked into the abyss between him and his goal, and saw what lay there.

"Nay, nay," he cried passionately. "Such words have no honor—but a curse. Banquo spoke truly there. Listen, wife, I am Thane of Cawdor. Is not that enough? The king honors and trusts me. I think he loves me too. Let no black whispers haunt my couch till he has come and gone."

Lady Macbeth hesitated. Had the lure of ambition failed? Not altogether! Beads of sweat stood out on her husband's brow. He had supped on poison, later

she would administer another dose. At present she yielded to his restless will, stole to his arms, and with her own wreathed about him played the rôle of tender wife, suffered his kisses and endearments, smiled very subtly in greeting to his eager looks, and, Delilah-like, wove fresh chains about the man who loved her.

So Macbeth, endeavoring to banish all grim cares, supped with appetite, listened to Lulach's artless chatter as the child insisted on serving him, and brought the blushes to Bethoc's cheeks in speaking at random of a lover.

Poor child! At any such careless allusion her heart beat fast fearing her secret betrayed, since none knew how she and the young Prince Malcolm had trysted each other from time to time; for, with a woman's intuition, Bethoc knew her mother would have forbidden the meetings which were so precious to her. It was, however, not till long after Bethoc had fallen asleep, to dream of the lover who would be coming on the morrow, whilst little Lulach laughed in his slumbers at thought of the gay feastings and revelries to be held in the king's honor, that Macbeth sought his wife's chamber.

The castle was dark and silent now. The fire in the outer courtyard burned low. Night birds cried discordantly from the marshes near, and the wind wailed about the castle walls.

Macbeth, passing along narrow stone passages, felt his blood chill. What evil haunted this home of his, whose presence had never been felt before?

This was not the gloomy old fort at Forres, where Duffus the king had died. No such deed of blood sullied these rooms. And yet? He quickened his pace,

relieved to find himself presently in the lighted room where Gruoch awaited him.

Did she await him? At first he glanced around surprised to see an empty couch; but instantly he espied her—a dark wrap flung over her night attire, as she crouched in yonder carved seat, her beautiful arms rigid before her pillowing her hidden features, whilst the ruddy glory of her unbound tresses lay about her shoulders like a mantle of flame.

“Wife,” he whispered. “Wife.”

She sprang to her feet, facing him—more beautiful in this strange passion which obsessed her than he had ever seen her.

But it was Macbeth himself who spoke first.

“What is it, dearest love,” he asked, “that you weep?”

“Weep?” she echoed. “Come nearer, husband, and you will see my eyes are undimmed by tears. I have no tears to shed; their fountain was dried long years ago. Nay, if you ask me why I lay thus in bitter thought, you shall hear the tale—have patience—and listen.”

She drew him down beside her on the carved settle and rested her hands on his arm, thrusting her face close so that he should read the tale of her eyes.

“There was a cry in my ears,” she whispered. “It has been echoing there for hours past. My father’s cry as he sank down in death under an assassin’s dagger. My brother, too, laughing, blithesome Gocha, twin-born with me. He was scarcely more than a child, but a tyrant would not spare him any more than he would have spared me, had I and my children been in our home on the day when my husband died. There

were flames about our castle walls that day, dear lord—and the flames have smouldered in my woman's breast ever since. Do you not feel the burning smart yourself, since you too have wrongs to avenge on those of Malcolm's bloody line?"

"My father died in battle," quoth Macbeth "and yet——"

"And yet," echoed his wife. "Ah! do not shame your honor by such a pause. What is decreed must be. Thus fate works into the hands of justice. Will you not still and soothe the suffering of my woman's heart, Macbeth? Behold my wrongs—avenge them."

The words broke from her lips in a cry. With arms wreathed about him, her face upturned, she pleaded fiercely, with a dominance which the man's weaker nature acknowledged.

Love and ambition called him with trumpet note, and where singly each might have failed, the combined spell won.

There was silence for a while after that last fierce cry. Husband and wife sat as in a trance gazing into each other's faces.

"Avenge them."

Was that the inspiration, or was it the echo of Ilda the witch's words, "*All hail! thou that shalt be king hereafter?*"

These wrongs—half forgotten during past years—to be the stepping stones to reach ambition's goal?

"What shall I do?" groaned Macbeth. "What shall I do?"

He knew now—but for the moment a mental paralysis seemed to have seized him.

Lady Macbeth smiled as she swayed against him,

conquering him by the seductive charm of her womanhood.

"Shall I tell you?" she whispered, and pressed rosy lips close to his ear.

"This is—revenge," she concluded. "A just revenge." He looked at her, half-dazed.

"No—not revenge," he replied dully, "but—fate." She laughed softly.

"By all and any name, what care I," she asked, "so the deed be done. The deed that shall make you king."

Again ambition clutched him, dragging him down to depths where senses were stifled by longing, and from which he gazed to heights above. And over the chasm between brooded a darkness which was like unto a pall.

CHAPTER VII

AN OLD EMBLEM

A HORSEMAN rode up the steep side of a brae reining in his horse as his keen gaze traversed the plain beneath him.

On the hill to the right stood the castle of Inverness, built by King Brude, a rude structure, partly of stone, partly compiled of wood and wattle; the plain, which stretched seawards, was little better than a morass, whilst at the base of the "crown," or castle hill, was a huddle of low houses—built of wood, clay, wattle or turf, most of them thatched, and all crowded against the hillside as though resting under its shadow.

Beyond the low houses was the river, winding in and out on its way seawards. The sunlight sparkled on its waters till it reached the deeper shadow of the valley, whilst there, in the distance, near a clump of alders, stood a figure close to the river side.

And Malcolm Canmore laughed, the gay laughter of youth, springtide and dawning love, as he set spurs into the flanks of a weary steed, riding recklessly down the rough braeside to where a girl stood awaiting him in the morning sunshine.

Had Bethoc known that he, this lover as he called himself, would outride the king's cortège in hopes of some such meeting as this? If so, she had guessed aright. He had come—was here—long ere King Duncan could hope to sight the dark towers of his host's

castle. A slim figure it was, in a dress of some dull green fabric, the folds of her plaid fastened at the breast by a jeweled clasp, and at her feet the purple and yellow of iris blooms to perfect a picture of love's young dream such as the softly flowing river sang of.

A long curl of her glossy raven tresses hung down by the side of an oval cheek and was tied by a green riband. Raven tresses, blue eyes and white skin of satin softness, under which the rosy blushes flamed at sight of a lover. How fair was she, this Bethoc, daughter of the gay but ill-fated Gilcomgain, and descendant of Kenneth the Grim.

Was it possible that shadows of the past *could* steal across a sunlit path? Lips for kisses, eyes for love, heart for passion. Oh! how good it was to dream here by the river-side, with spring breezes singing amongst yellow and purple flags and love songs in hearts young, glad and happy.

Malcolm had tethered his steed to an alder stump and stood by his lady's side. How young they were, how unclouded their sky!

"You awaited me, Bethoc, little Bethoc?" whispered the prince eagerly, as he held both her hands and looked deep into those smiling blue eyes.

Ah! she would have waited longer hours than these for one glimpse of that handsome face, one echo of that tender voice.

Her starved soul had been so hungry for love till he came. And now? Now she was humble in her joy, afraid she might lose the treasure which was life, breath, being to her.

But none of these things could she tell him; she was dumb because she feared to say too much, to give too

wide a glimpse of that passionate heart which beat for him alone.

If he knew! If he understood! Yet he could not do so, since there had been no tragedy in his life as there had been in hers. He had never known what it was to be hungry for love since he could not recall the mother who had died when Donalbain was born, and his father had been father and mother both ever since.

So he could not sound the tragic depths of her fears as she thought of what it would mean to lose this lover even whilst she felt the passion of his first kiss.

"I love you," whispered Malcolm. "I love you, little Bethoc, fairest and dearest of maidens." And he laughed the glad laugh of the possessor, the conqueror, the lover who knows he has won his prize.

How the birds sang—as they never had before and might never do again; how the sun shone, warming their hearts till all life was bathed in a golden light. What matter that the marsh lands yonder were flat and dreary, or that gray ocean waves broke sadly on a barren shore? *They* needed to gaze no further than each other's eyes and were perfectly happy.

What matter that he was Malcolm, son of Duncan the King; was he not grandson of Malcolm the Victorious? And was it not good that his own first victory should be in the lists of love? He never even recalled that she whose blue eyes had won his heart was daughter to Gilcomgain, who had died a terrible death at his grandsire's command, or that the blood of Kenneth the Grim ran in her veins.

So they dreamed as they paced onward in the sunlight, and when they spoke, it was but the echo of their hearts, crying each to its mate in the language of love.

Nor did Bethoc voice her fears, for had not Malcolm sworn that she alone was his love whom he would wed and no other? Ah! how fair a picture did he paint of years in which they would be always together, always loving, always happy.

Thus rang the song of love in springtide when eyes are blind to what must be by inevitable decree of life, and ears refuse to listen to the long wail of suffering humanity which claims them too for kin.

It was as unreal, shadowy and wraithlike as the mists of dawn, yet, on their knees they might—had they known—have thanked God for such mists as hid the future from them.

Oh! Love was sweet and good and wonderful to Malcolm Canmore and Bethoc, daughter of a murdered father, that day, which in all the after years of life should never be forgotten. A memory to draw tender tears to the eyes of snowy-haired age, because of the joy of its passion.

And when at length they turned reluctant feet back to where Malcolm's horse cropped the grass under the alder shade, the young man drew from his finger a ring of exquisitely worked bronze, in the form of a spiral double serpent, and slipped it on that of his companion.

"So by a sign I claim you mine, sweet one," he whispered. "You will not forget Malcolm when you see the ring."

She smiled and shuddered together, twisting the ring about with nervous touch.

"I would the emblem were different," said she. "A serpent in our Eden."

"Close coiled to bind our hearts in one," added Malcolm. "See no fear where no fear need abide,

my Bethoc. What should we dread? Today my father tarries as honored guest in great Macbeth's house. He is the latter's friend as well as king. He will be glad to welcome his son's bride when I bring thee to him."

So Bethoc yielded to persuasion. Yielded to the passionate joy of that spring-time hour in which love reigned as monarch over the kingdom of their hearts.

"I love thee." Such was the confession Malcolm listened to that day—and Bethoc spoke with the quivering tones of one whose words can never tell the surging tumult of her heart. Love to the daughter of Gilcomgain and Gruoch was no gentle and placid current, but a tempest which shook her whole soul and body with fierce gladness that was akin to pain. And yet each told the other that the secret of their love must be carefully guarded in their own hearts—till Malcolm returned from Scone. What secret could be sweeter—more cherished? But Bethoc's eyes were dark with longing as Malcolm sealed that secret on her lips.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FATEFUL HOUR

THE king had come!

Without in the courtyard the bustle of so important an arrival was in progress.

Macbeth himself was attending on his royal guest, who was in the highest of spirits and lingered on the steps leading to the hall to praise the view which, though not commending itself for beauty in the immediate vicinity, gave distant glimpses of forest, sea and mountains.

The mistress of the castle awaited within, a proud and gracious personage, entirely masking the furious fever which surged in her veins, beating with tempestuous strokes within heart and brain.

And every stroke a knell—for Duncan.

Behind her stood Bethoc and Lulach, pleasantly expectant, the former smiling in sly deceit as she thought of the secret tryst by which she had already welcomed one who had rejoined the king's train in presenting himself at her stepfather's castle.

Lulach, child-like, gaped in open curiosity at sight of the kingly figure which, with Macbeth and many nobles in close attendance, came striding up the hall to greet his hostess.

The lady curtsied low, so that she seemed to kneel in deepest reverence before her guest. At first her eyes were veiled in modest obeisance, but when she

raised them there was only a smile of clearest welcome to be read in depths which so well concealed the dark enigma of her thoughts.

And she was beautiful. So much Duncan saw at a glance, and looked again, well pleased to find such loveliness to gaze upon. The ruddy tresses of her hair gleamed beneath the straight folds of her snowy head-dress, her swan-like neck seemed all too slender to carry its dainty burden so gracefully.

A queen—his queen—Scotland's queen.

Seeing her thus, bowing before the king his master, Macbeth's thoughts flashed like a searing iron through his soul. It passed, leaving him cold.

Opportunity was here—and Gruoch his wife had vowed him to a task which she was minded should be performed. Yet, to the man who watched, the passing scene was as some strange panorama having no reality.

Was yon smiling, gracious woman she who had cursed all King Malcolm's blood-stained line, vowing that none should live who called a tyrant sire?

And Duncan was Malcolm's heir, as the younger Malcolm was heir to Duncan.

Avaunt such hellish thoughts as those born in his brain! His wife had been mad to whisper them last night. She did not mean a word of the tale she raved.

"See," quoth Duncan, raising the lady very gallantly and kissing her forehead in kindly salutation. "Our honored hostess. How shall I thank you for all the trouble you have been at pains to take in bestowing on us such loving welcome?"

She did not flush or pale, but remained calm and self-possessed, yet bestowing all the witchery of which she was capable in an answer low-pitched and sweet.

"All our service in every point, twice done and then done double, were poor and single business to contend against those honors wherewith your majesty loads our house," she replied, and smiled—a radiant smile of guileless gratitude.

And the king was pleased with the answer, well gratified with his welcome, therefore, waxing more genial in his graciousness, as, with his hand resting on the lady's arm, he turned about.

"Where's the Thane of Cawdor?" cried he, grasping the latter by the other hand and drawing him close, so that they three stood together in friendly intercourse. "We coursed him at the heels," he added laughing, as he turned from host to hostess, "and had a purpose to be his purveyor. But he rides well, and his great love, sharp as his spur, hath brought him to his home before us. Fair and noble hostess, we are your guests tonight."

Fair she was in sooth—but did she, nourishing for one instant such a thought as had been born in her last night, deserve the title of nobility? Perhaps she asked herself that question in bitter irony, as she stood alone presently in her room, fastening the jeweled chain about the white neck which bent and swayed to and fro in restless movement.

It was a moment of weakness. Such weakness as she had deemed herself incapable of feeling.

The king had shown himself so kingly, so gracious, so other to her thoughts of him.

This was no tyrant, and surely some trick of nature had drained every drop of Malcolm's murderous blood from out the veins, which flowed instead with milk of human kindness. There could be no mistaking the gentle beneficence of Duncan's gaze, his generous praise

of her husband, his hints of future greatness, little dreaming indeed that he to whom he promised so much was minded to snatch yet more than he could give.

Was there no voice amongst the angel hosts of Heaven to cry a warning in the ear of such a king? No kindly presentiment to carry such feet as his to safety? The lady sighed, her spirits weighed down by the shadow of a passing remorse.

Remorse! Could the grand-chick of Kenneth the Grim feel so weak a twinging when bloody deeds remained unavenged?

Passing remorse! Aye—and sharp goads to speed it on its way. With an effort Lady Macbeth rallied from a squeamish fit, and, battling fiercely with so foolish a mood, lashed herself to fresh fury by thoughts of wrongs performed by those to whom the gracious Duncan owed his being.

A cruel law of vengeance—yet sufficient. Remorse had fled into the shadows of gray evening twilight before the king's hostess descended to take her place at the board, where feasting on a lavish scale was soon in progress.

The king had been right when he prophesied a royal hospitality. Rich wines, savory viands, diligent attendance, and a courteous host bade fair to make the evening a merry one, and that in spite of the fact that the night closed in stormily and more than one peal of thunder echoed round the lonely castle, booming like some crack of doom as it rolled onwards to the shore.

But Macbeth bade the harpist strike his chords to a more stirring measure, whilst the old man sang in full rich tones a ballad which praised the deeds of Duncan's grandsire, who by his prowess swept the Danish pirates

from Scottish coasts after the fierce battle of Aberlemmo. Thus the victorious king's deeds of fair renown were chronicled in eulogistic song, chronicles of many years, since for—

Thirty years of variegated reign
Was king by fate—Malcolm.

Nor did Duncan, faintly smiling at the compliment which the Gaelic bard would fain have put upon him, guess why his lovely hostess grew suddenly death-pale, as though some grisly ghost had risen from its grave to confront her, nor dream that the stirring stanzas of the harpist's song accounted for his host's abrupt rising from the supper table, and, with some hurried excuse, quitting the hall—alone.

Was Macbeth seized with sudden indisposition, or had the steward whispered in his ear that some other guest had arrived, whose coming might be importunate?

Lady Macbeth, seeing the question in the king's eyes as he turned to her, contrived to rally her self-possession.

She knew now just what was going to happen—and that there could be no drawing back.

Hugh, the bard, had unconsciously sealed the king's fate when he sang of the prowess of Malcolm the Victorious.

No, there was no going back. The woman at least could smile at her own weakness engendered by the gracious kindness of a noble sovereign.

There was a vow which, failing in its original purpose, must descend from generation to generation. A vow, the wife of Gilcomgain, Moormor of Moray, had registered, as she listened to the crackling of the flame which formed the holocaust around a beloved husband.

"It is nothing," she smiled, in reply to Duncan's unspoken question. "My lord is often seized with these fits of dizziness, engendered, as the leech declares, by too much emotion. The joy of receiving your majesty must account for my husband's brief indisposition. But, if I may seek him out and give him the draught which speedily restores him on these occasions, he shall return forthwith to this chamber."

The king acceded to the request with many expressions of concern. He had had a brief glimpse of Macbeth's pale and distorted face and feared that his wife made too light of the illness, on account of hospitable entertainment.

But the lady's tranquil expression and deliberate movements were reassuring; if so devoted a wife failed to be alarmed there was surely no reason for others to be anxious.

So the feast proceeded, though with less hilarity, and more than one low whispering, which voiced curiosity and concern. For none of the Moormor's friends or dependents had ever heard of these attacks, which his wife declared were so common an occurrence.

And Bethoc, in vague alarm, looked to where Malcolm sat near the place her stepmother had quitted, but forgot to answer the uneasy questioning of her heart when she saw him smile.

Meantime, Lady Macbeth had made haste to seek her husband out. She herself was schooled and strung to action—this awful action which she had vowed should be—shutting eyes, ears, senses, to the voices which cried in argument and condemnation for pity, mercy, justice.

She had felt remorse—and conquered it. The weakness had left her hard as flinty rock, so that soul and

body seemed drained of all the gentler elements of womanhood. Come what might, she was going blindly to her goal, having vowed a purpose should be carried out.

Revenge and ambition reigned supreme within the woman's breast, and the deadly desires consumed her very soul.

She found him whom she sought in his own room, crouching in a seat by the bed, a creature already convulsed by horror of himself, writhing in the grip of giant temptation. Had his wife not come Duncan's knell had never sounded from the castle of Inverness

But she was here, regarding him with calm, cold eyes, which held contempt, so that Macbeth was fain to plead in extenuation of his own irresolution.

"If it is to be done, then 'twere well it were done quickly," he muttered. "But we must think first. *Assassination!* Listen to the word, Gruoch—it hath an ugly sound. Ah, God! Shall it be done? If I but thought of the life to come I would risk it, and claim success by this final deed. But, alas! in these cases we still have judgment here. Bloody acts return to plague the doers. This even-handed justice forces the poisoned chalice to our own lips. How will this end?"

The beautiful woman, tall and stately in her close-fitting robes, stooped forward, touching his shoulder.

"All hail, Macbeth," she whispered, "*that shalt be king hereafter.* Fate spoke then."

He raised haggard eyes to hers, seeing unalterable purpose in the latter's clear depths—nor could he guess how once even she had wavered as he was doing.

"He's here in double trust," he entreated, urging the case of Duncan as against some harsh judge. "First,

as I am his kinsman and subject, strong both against the deed; then, as his host, who should be the first to shut the door against his murderer—not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan is a good and worthy king, faithful and upright in his great office, so that his virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against the deep damnation of his murder. Damnation! And none to pity such a curse upon the perpetrator of a bloody treachery; only pity for him, pity for the kindly king whose generosity I should thus repay if our purpose be fulfilled. A purpose to which I have no spur to prick me by vaunting ambition.”

She had listened—this, his wife, standing motionless before him, her eyes upon his face.

That steadfast gaze brought trembling to the man thus fixed by it, his regard grew more wild, more restless—but he was gradually being dominated by a will which at the time was more resolute than his own.

“The king has almost supped,” quoth Gruoch very calmly. “Why have you left the chamber?”

She knew the reason well enough, so there was no need to answer.

“Hath he asked for me?” muttered Macbeth.

“Know you not he has?”

He sprang to his feet, trying to break free from a mesmeric influence.

“We will proceed no further in this business,” he declared roughly. “The king hath honored me of late, and I have bought golden opinions from all sorts of people, which would be worn now in their newest glass, not cast away so soon.”

Still the woman remained tranquil, though more scornful, standing there like some beauteous figure of fate which he could not escape.

"Was the hope drunk, wherein you dressed yourself?" she asked softly. "Hath it slept since—and wakes it now, to look so green and pale at what it did so freely? From this time such I account your love. Art thou afraid to be the same in thine own act and valor as thou art in desire? Would you have that what you esteem the ornament of life, and live a coward in your own esteem, letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,' like the poor cat i' the adage?"

Macbeth clasped his hands about his head. He was in torment—because a woman tempted him against his conscience—whilst ambition took the woman's part and honor sided with conscience.

"Peace," he groaned. "Peace, wife. I dare do all that may become a man; who dare do more, is none."

She laughed—and surely sound of merriment was never more out of place.

"What beast was it then," she taunted, "that made you break this enterprise to me? When you durst do it, then you were a man. Have you not sworn to play your part with fate. Stand and face the future by my side. A king—and I your queen. The highest award—your due, and mine. Is not the blood of kings in your blood as well as in these veins of mine? Does not the blood of a king—a father, husband, brother, plead for recompense? Fate gives the hour—if you let it pass, she will not make the offer again."

"If we should fail—" whispered Macbeth, and his eyes were dark with horror.

Again a low, scornful laugh broke from those lips, which had been framed for nothing harsher than kisses.

"*We fail!*" she gibed. "But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we'll not fail."

She crept towards him, her hand—a white and shapely hand, gleaming with jewels—upon the flowing sleeve of his tunic. “When Duncan is asleep,” she continued, in those same insistent tones which pierced the clogged cells of her listener’s brain, “which is like to be a sound slumber after his day’s hard journey, I will see to it that his two grooms drink deeply enough of a potion which will hold senses and sight blind and dulled in an unconsciousness like to death. The king left unguarded, our way is clear—and, when the day shall show the deed, *our* guilt shall easily be borne by those who failed in their watch and ward.”

Macbeth paused in his restless pacing, and his dark eyes gleamed beneath their shaggy brows.

“Why so—and so,” he breathed. “Thus it might well be. The grooms beside the king—smeared by his blood, their own daggers used in the doing of the deed. Why! Who will dare look farther for murderers than there in his very chamber?”

“None will so dare,” asserted his wife confidently. “Whilst we shall safely raise clamor and loud-voiced grief upon his death.”

He stretched out his hand involuntarily, and Gruoch, knowing her will was won, swayed over it pressing it with her lips. “My king,” she whispered. “The king who shalt be hereafter.”

Like some fiery-hearted fate she urged him thus along ambition’s path, heedless of what they both must find after the treading of that bloody way.

Blind passion for revenge to be consummated this night; blind vaunting of ambition, which lay now within the reach of eager grasp, kept both—for the time—from seeing that which lay yonder in the shadows—the gray and ghastly features of an inevitable remorse.

CHAPTER IX

A KING'S DEATH KNELL

THE storm had passed, but the night was dark—pitchy blackness over all the land—a mourning pall to hide earth's corruption.

In the castle on the crown all was hushed and still, save where, in the courtyard, a sleepy porter drowsed over a great fire of smouldering logs. There was the chill of a spring night in the air, and an opening door brought a draught which scattered the white ash of the logs over the stones and nearly blew out the wavering torch carried by a servant, who held it high so that the lurid glare shone around on dark walls and wide wooden beams.

Behind the servant came Banquo, his little son beside him.

The soldier had come in search of his friend and host, since he had learned from one of the castle servants that Macbeth was making a final round of the place to see all was secure before retiring. A most natural precaution was this, seeing what guest slept under the Moormor's roof that night. But Banquo was oppressed by a heavy weight of anxiety. Presentiment of evil lay upon his soul; he was eager to find Macbeth, to look into his eyes, to reassure himself that this was indeed the noble-hearted friend who had fought so valiantly against traitors.

Traitors! The word had an ugly sound for Banquo.

The Thane of Cawdor, whose death had expiated his crime, had been an honorable gentleman before ambition seduced him by her wicked whispers.

Was there a curse in the title of Cawdor?

The question was thrust aside, and Banquo, resolved to crush down unworthy suspicions, rested his hand kindly on his young son's shoulder.

Fleance was sleepy—so sleepy that he stumbled in his steps, but he had refused to go to bed without his father. He liked this castle of Inverness but little, and earlier in the evening had quarreled, to the verge of fighting, with spoiled Lulach.

"How goes the night, boy?" asked his father.

Fleance blinked brown eyes as solemnly as a little owl. "The moon is down," he replied. "I have not heard the clock"

He stifled a yawn with difficulty.

"And she goes down at twelve," mused Banquo.

"I take it, 'tis later, sir," added Fleance wistfully.

"Hold," said his father. "Take my sword. There's husbandry in Heaven—their candles are all out."

He approached the fire, stirring glowing logs with his toe. His face was gloomy as he stared musingly into the red, cavernous depths at his feet. A witch's cavern it might have been—with gray-clad forms stealing in and out, wreathing lean arms about their heads, whilst crafty eyes leered at him, and shrill, wailing voices echoed in his ears.

And the voices had hailed Macbeth by strange titles.

Why was it the atmosphere of this place so oppressed Macbeth's friend? Why did he long to be away, drawing deep breaths of fresher, less tainted air?

Impatiently he turned from his brooding to re-cross the courtyard.

"A heavy summons lies like lead upon me," he murmured, less to Fleance than to himself, "and yet I would not sleep. Merciful powers—restrain in me the cursed thoughts that Nature gives way to in repose. Give me my sword."

He took back the heavy weapon from sleepy Fleance and would have climbed the stairs back toward his own apartment had not a second torch flared from a passage near, and Macbeth, preceded by a servant, appeared.

Banquo moved forward instantly, glad to have succeeded in his mission.

"The king's a-bed," said he, greeting his host, with an effort to assume his usual genial manner. "He has been greatly pleased with his entertainment, and after sending forth suitable largess to your servants, bids me greet your wife by the name of most kind hostess and ask her acceptance of this diamond in token of his esteem and gratitude."

Macbeth took the jewel in fingers that slightly shook.

"Had we been better prepared," he replied dully, "our entertainment had lacked less."

"All's well," replied Banquo lightly; then, as the torch-light showed him the other's face, his gaze grew keener and more searching.

"I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters," he added; "to you they have showed some truth."

Macbeth could not repress a slight start. "I think not of them," he declared—but the carelessness of the speech was overdone, and, knowing this to be the case, he added, with greater earnestness, "Yet, friend, when we have an hour to spare from stress of business, I would talk with you a space on that same subject."

"At your leisure," replied Banquo, and instinctively

drew little Fleance closer to his side. Were the shadows which gathered so thickly in that gloomy courtyard, likely to touch his boy?

Presentiment clung like some moist but intangible vapor about his soul as, wishing his host good-night, Banquo led his young son away.

Macbeth also had quitted the courtyard and entered a room close to the staircase leading towards the king's apartments. A passage to the right bed, also to his own rooms.

Macbeth motioned his servant to place the torch in the cresset above the table.

"Go," he commanded, "bid your mistress strike a bell when my drink is prepared. Get thee to bed."

The man obeyed. There was nothing unusual in the order, and being weary himself, he was glad to stumble off to his hard couch after giving the message to his mistress' waiting woman.

Left alone in that empty chamber, illumined only by a single torch, Macbeth himself kept awful vigil. The ringing of the bell was indeed to be a signal—not that a potion was prepared for him—but a dagger for his guest.

His guest!—his king. The gracious sovereign who had sworn to plant him in honor, who had so heaped favor upon him that he had engendered the dangerous lust for more than the giver might choose to give.

And now the crisis was here. The crisis of a kingdom as well as of many individual lives.

No wonder a brooding hush lay on all around, a dark and terrible pall, which crushed the soul of a man down to abysmal depths.

Half crazed by the ugly torments of ambitious and

vengeful thoughts, first quickened to life by the fateful words of Ilda the witch, Macbeth was in no normal frame of mind. A delirium was upon him, wrought by sleepless nights and his wife's ceaseless importunities. She had been stronger than his better self—this Gruoch, a king's grandchild, a woman fierce in her passions of love and hate. But Macbeth had no time to moralize on these passions, which scarcely touched the chief actors in the drama of tonight. Love for dead Gilcomgain, hate for dead Malcolm, inspired the woman in whose bosom such passion kindled to urge her husband to murder a kindly and innocent victim.

Sweat bathed the watcher's face; his hand was cold. With fixed and staring eyes, he muttered, "Is this a dagger which I see before me? The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee!—I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight? Or art thou but a dagger of the mind? Or false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet . . . in form as palpable as this which now I draw." He clutched at the dagger at his belt—but his eyes—wild in that delirious madness, stared into the darkest shadows of the room. "I see thee still," he panted, cowering back in his seat, "and, on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood, which was not so before. There's no such thing!"—he snatched at the empty air, staggering to his feet as the horrid vision of that ghostly dagger passed away. "It is the bloody business which cheats my sight. Ah, the night!—the night—in which over one-half wild Nature seems dead—and, in seeming death, wicked dreams hover in sleeping brains to madden them. How witchcraft celebrates pale Hecate's offering, and with-



"I see thee yet . . . in form as palpable as this which now I draw."



ered murder stalks with his sentinel the wolf, whose howl becomes his watch. Thus also ghosts creep forth, silent of foot, silent but terrible. So should my footsteps be. I pray the very stones not to hear my tread lest they should tell hereafter whither I went. And whither do I go? Whither?"

As if in answer to that agonized question a bell rang out in the silence of the night. A little, sweet-toned bell, which tinkled faint but clear—all too clear to one listener's ears—but not to his alone. Bethoc, roused, she knew not why, from pleasant dreams, in which her lover smiled at her from a river's bridge, sat up in bed to listen.

A little tinkling bell, rung in the silence of the night. What summons was that?

Poor child! Who was there to tell her it was a king's death knell? Who was there to show her the figure of a man creeping with stealthy steps along stone passages, black as Erebus, and up the winding stairs towards Duncan's apartments—a frozen horror on his face—a dagger clutched in his right hand? Who was there to tell her that her own mother stood on the threshold of her room listening, listening, her breath caught back the better to hear every sound, a terrible expression of triumph and fear transforming her beautiful face to the distorted mask of a fiend? Or, alas! who was there to warn a young and innocent girl to stay where she was, to lie down and close her eyes in sleep, forgetting that she had ever heard the sound of that sweet-toned little bell?

Bethoc had flung back the bedclothes, and wrapping a dark cloak over her night attire, stole from her room.

Perhaps Lulach was ill—or her mother! The bell

had surely rung from the direction of her mother's room. Why she went she did not ask herself; instinct and the desire to offer help, if such were needed, prompted her. Mayhap, too, it was that same inconsequent instinct which drew her back to the shelter of the heavy hangings before a door, as footsteps sounded from the direction of her mother's room, and she spied a tall figure coming towards her, a little lantern held in her hand.

It was her mother herself—and at sight of that mother's face Bethoc crouched down in the darkness behind the thick folds of the curtain, praying to the saints that she should not be discovered—for she was suddenly afraid—with an overmastering terror of what she was about to see—what she might be about to hear. What! What!

CHAPTER X

WEAKNESS AND STRENGTH

A VIGIL, long, terrible, nerve-racking. A woman's vigil. Had any other woman ever spent such an one as this? A vigil for a murderer's return—the murderer she herself had sped upon his way. Oh, dread task!—due consequence. Yet the woman who waited wan and rigid by the barred window, through which the night breezes blew so chill, was neither faint nor wavering in her purpose.

A knell was in Lady Macbeth's ears, though no prayer for a passing soul left her lips. She had deliberately frozen the warmer springs of pity within her heart and schooled herself only to think of those grim vows which cried for vengeance—the innocent for the guilty.

She had forced herself to drink wine sufficient to stir and inflame her fierce pulses, yet retaining every sense stretched on the rack of listening.

From without, a cry, weird and terrible, resounded.

Was it a witch's laughter or a shriek of anguish?

The lady's cheek blanched to a paler hue, but her eyes were hard and bright as those of some baleful Medusa, setting a chill as of death on all or any who might gaze into their depths.

"Hark!" she whispered, and clutched at the rusty bars, peering out into the starless void, then drawing back with mocking laughter for her own fears.

"Peace," she muttered; "it was but the owl that

shrieked—the fatal bellman which gives sternest good-night.”

Slowly she moved towards the door. The cry of a bird had unnerved her, so that she could only regain self-possession by movement—action.

Unseeing, she passed the spot where trembling Bethoc crouched, and so out of sight of the young girl, who lay half-swooning in an unnamed fear.

Had Bethoc followed she would have seen her mother pause in the passage which, widening here into a landing place, showed a flight of some half-dozen stone steps, at the head of which were folding doors, fast closed.

And within? Ah, God—*within*—what deed of blood was being even now enacted?

“He is about it,” thought the woman standing there, a shadow amongst shadows out of which her face gleamed white and ghost-like, with its ruddy flaming of hair.

With hands clasped she stood as in an attitude of prayer—yet with prayer far from her, all her conscience being centered in listening.

And to what did she listen? A cry? A groan? A sobbing breath, which let out a man’s soul? A moan telling of a horror which seared deep into a murderer’s conscience clamoring a loud penitence—too late?

Or was there only the silence of death who stalked past the listener down the steps, along the passages, out into the night, carrying the tale of his coming and going to shuddering ears.

The doors swung noiselessly open and a man crept forth. A man who peered and muttered, asking who was there—near him, but unseen in the darkness.

A trembling fit seized the woman who watched. Was it possible that those drugged sleepers had awaked and the deed they thus balked remained undone?

If so, this were calamity and disaster indeed! The attempt, frustrated in the making, would damn the perpetrators with direst ruin. Yet . . . *was* it possible? She herself had been so careful in carrying out that fell design—had, indeed, done all but the actual deed itself. When she had quitted Duncan's chamber an hour since to summon her husband, she had left the grooms in a drugged sleep, their daggers ready placed for a murderer's hand. Aye, so fierce and deadly her purpose that, had not the sleeping king reminded her too vividly of the father she had loved so dearly, she herself would have used those ready daggers and done the deed to which she had egged her husband.

The man had come out on to the landing now; she heard the door close behind him, the soft falling of stealthy steps upon the stairs.

Drawing the lantern forth from the concealing folds of her cloak she raised it aloft.

"My husband!" she breathed.

Was it indeed her husband?—this man with ghastly features twisted and distorted by the horror which he himself had stamped upon his own soul.

There was a wide vacancy in the distended eyes which told of a brain numbed by terror.

With a vague, groping gesture, he held out his hands, there was blood upon them, blood upon the daggers he still held—blood on his soul for ever.

No need to ask what had chanced in yonder chamber. No need to ask whether it had indeed been death, who stalked before-time down those steps and away into the blackness beyond.

The hand that held the lantern shook, so that the woman set the latter upon a bracket near—and waited.

"The deed is done," whispered Macbeth, and the words rattled in a dry throat. "Didst thou not hear a noise?" He glanced fearfully over his shoulder—but the doors were closed.

His wife shuddered. "I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry," he replied with bated breath. "Did you not speak?"

"When?"

"Now."

"As I descended?"

"Aye."

He thrust his face, so transformed by agony of soul, close to her colorless one. "Hark!" he gasped. "Who lies in the second chamber?"

"Donalbain."

Macbeth held out his hands, regarding them grievously as though they were other than his own

"This is a sorry sight," he mouthed—and there was froth upon his beard—a maniacal light in his dark eyes.

But Gruoch's nerve was returning. The crisis had not passed; it needed a woman's wit, a woman's courage, a woman's—deviltry—to carry the black deed of that night through to a successful issue.

"A foolish thought," she scoffed, icy in her calm, "to say a *sorry sight!*"

He did not heed the gibe, but trembled visibly as he told his tale.

"There's one did laugh in his sleep," he whispered, staring around, first at the flickering lantern light, then at the statuesque figure before him, so calm and seemingly self-possessed in its callous pride, "and one cried '*Murder*'—till . . . they woke each other. I stood and heard them—but they said their prayers and slept again."

"There are two lodged together," said his wife.

She showed no fear.

But Macbeth had crept nearer to the lantern, the better to see those bloody hands at which he gazed in seeming fascination.

"One cried, '*God bless us*'—the other said, '*Amen*,' as though they had seen me with these hangman's hands. Listening to their fear I could not say '*Amen*' when they said '*God bless us*.'"

His wife watched him narrowly, seeing how near to madness he was, how unnerved by this awful deed which set the seal on her revenge and left a clear field for the fulfilment of a joint ambition.

Were both to be rendered void because a man's nerve gave way?

"Consider it not so deeply," she soothed and loath though she was, would have rested her white hand upon his arm; but he shrank back, pitiful and pleading.

"But wherefore could I not pronounce amen?" he moaned. "I had most need of blessing—and '*amen*' stuck in my throat."

Lady Macbeth drew her plaid about her as though the night chill had touched her heart—but her voice was resolute.

"These deeds must not be dwelt upon after this fashion," she declared. "Else it will make us mad."

Macbeth paid no heed to her words. He leaned against the wall, a man sore spent and exhausted by such emotions as drain all strength and leave weak-kneed despair behind.

"Methought I heard a voice cry, '*Sleep no more*'" he complained piteously. "*Macbeth does murder sleep, the innocent sleep*. Sleep that knits up the ravelled

sleeve of care, the death of each day's life, sore labor's bath. Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, chief nourisher in life's feast."

So he babbled, uttering great truths with distraught mind, whilst his wife—true perpetrator of his deed—eyed him aghast, half contemptuous of his weakness.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and turned to look down the dark length of a gloomy passage behind. But her husband muttered on:

"Still it cried, '*Sleep no more,*' to all the house. Glamis *hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.*"

So earnestly he spoke that his listener felt her heart beat in full, deep throbs of fear. Yet she held to her task of encouragement, goading him to manhood by her insistent words.

"Who was it that thus cried?" she demanded. "Why, worthy Thane, where will your courage be if you think so brainsickly of things? Go, get some water, and wash this filthy witness from your hands. Why did you bring these daggers from the place? They must lie there. Go, carry them back; and smear the sleeping groom with blood."

But at this the half-crazed man drew himself up with sudden resolution.

"I'll go no more," he declared. "I am afraid to think what I have done. Look on it again, I dare not."

His very hair was wet with the sweat of his terror.

And over him seemed to tower the slender, beautiful woman who had inspired him to a purpose which appalled him in its execution.

Her eyes flashed with bright scorn, the color had come back to her ashen cheeks, her lips were set in a straight



"Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor shall sleep no more."



firm line. She knew that it devolved on her now not only to save her husband from ruin, but both him and herself from death—the death meted to felons as well as traitors, regicides as well as murderers.

With a quick snatch she grabbed the weapons held in a limp grasp.

“Infirm of purpose,” she cried passionately. “Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead are but as pictures. ’Tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil. If he do bleed I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal, for it must seem their guilt.”

He let her take the blood-stained trophies of their crime, watching with dull eyes as she stole, panther-like, away up the stairs towards those folding doors which hid a ghastly sight mirrored upon his soul.

For a few seconds he stood rigid, listening to the rustle of her skirts. Then, suddenly, succeeding silence was broken up by a loud knocking at the outer postern. The imperative knocking of one who does not fear to be importunate.

Who could the unwelcome and untimely guest be who reached the castle ere the gray dawn broke to eastward?

The sound, however, had succeeded where his wife had failed, in rousing Macbeth from a fatal lethargy. Here was an immediate call for action. A pregnant danger, which must be avoided before discovery leapt upon them with the inquisitive gaze of all too curious eyes.

“Whence is that knocking?” he muttered. “Ah, how is it with me, when every noise appals me?” He raised his hands as though to lift down the lantern from its niche, but paused, arrested by the sight of reddened palms.

“What hands are here?” he groaned. “Ha! They pluck out mine eyes! Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, no; this my hand will rather make bloody every sea that laps each distant shore, making the green—one red.”

The whisper rose to an articulate complaint which reached the ears of the woman, who already was at his side, panting a little but still mistress of herself, clear-headed in her thought of how to win salvation from suspicion, which should bring death upon them both.

“My hands are of your color,” she scoffed aloud, “but I shame to wear a heart so white. List! I hear a knocking at the south entry. We must retire at once to our chamber. A little water will easily clear us of this deed. Hark! More knocking! We must get to bed, lest if we are roused, those who come in search should find us to have been watchers. Quick—away.”

She caught up the lantern as she spoke and preceded her husband down the passage. The knocking at the south entry waxed louder, more insistent. The porter must have been drowsing. That was well! Time enough ere bolts and bars were withdrawn to cleanse themselves of these bloodstains, undress and get to bed.

They were safe enough! None had seen, none had heard. None would see or hear—till the daylight showed the hideous deed, which none could lay at their door.

If they were betrayed they must be their own betrayers. So thought Lady Macbeth, as she guided her yet dazed husband back towards their apartments, nor did she dream that the lantern-light, whose flickering yellow rays showed them the way down the dark and narrow passage, showed them in turn to the terrified gaze of the girl, who still cowered watching for her mother’s

return behind the thick folds of a curtain. A long shiver shook Bethoc from head to foot as she spied the faces of the two who passed her by, seeing, too, the red stains which bedaubed the slender, white hand that held the lantern.

She had meant to ask her mother if any one were ill, and whether she could be of service, but, seeing those ominous stains and the strained horror on her step-father's face, she only shrank back into deeper shadow, waiting till they had passed before creeping back to her own room, where she spent the remaining hour or so before the full coming of day in deep and earnest prayer.

For she was afraid, poor child, though still she had no name for her fears, nor dreamed of the awful tragedy which the new day was to bring.

The new day which slowly dawned in the east—the new day that Duncan, King of Scotland, would never awake to behold.

CHAPTER XI

DEATH MOST TERRIBLE

ADAM, the porter, snored lustily, choked, gaped, rolled back off his low bench almost a-top the smouldering fire and opened his eyes.

For a few seconds he lay where he was, till made aware that one of his brogues was singeing. Then, drawing in his legs, tailor-wise, he rubbed a scorched ankle and fell to complaining of the noise that had awaked him.

“Here’s a knocking indeed,” he grunted, taking the two-handled *methir*, which stood near, and gulping down a draught of the liquor which had promoted his drowsiness; “if a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old pick turning the key. Knock, knock, knock! Who’s there i’ the name of Beelzebub? Knock, knock. Never at quiet. What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I’ll devil-porter it no further.”

He scrambled up, muttering and chuckling, half-amused at his own wit, half-angry at being disturbed.

And of a certainty the new-comer was importunate. Never for an instant did the summons cease against the great wooden door.

Knock! knock! knock! He who came to Macbeth’s castle came with a purpose.

And the purposeful man must needs be served soon or late.

Adam knew that, though not minded to unduly

hurry his bandy legs as he waddled across the inner courtyard, halting near the door with arms akimbo, his rubicund face a-crease with smiles—being on the right side of that stout wooden partition.

It pleased him to think that some fine chieftain was being kept out in the cold by old Adam the porter, and he chuckled as very deliberately he thrust back bolt and bar.

“Anon, anon,” he bawled, as the knocking ceased. “I pray you, remember the porter.”

They had time to remember him as they stood shivering without, watching a gray dawn break over the distant horizon; but at length the great wooden door swung back, and Adam, lantern in hand, peered out, to see who had disturbed his slumbers at so unreasonable an hour.

Two men stood there, both wrapped closely in their plaids, for the night ride had been chill. One, the slenderer of the twain, was Lennox, mocking-eyed, but staunch of soul, who might jest with a friend, but would, aye, defend a leal one with his last strength. His companion was broader of build, taller and bulkier, with the strong face of a man born to command, and the steadfast gaze of one who may be trusted. A bulwark of strength and reliance was Macduff, Thane of Fife, to his friends, a threat and danger to his enemies.

There was something in his very presence which commanded confidence or awe, and yet those keen blue eyes of his could look very tenderly on women and children, and his fair young wife would be ready to tell that he was the kindest husband and father that could be found in all the world.

He and Lennox crossed to the fire and stood warming chilled hands before the red glow of smouldering logs.

Adam had re-barred the door and came shuffling back towards the visitors, who were both known to him as having before journeyed to the castle in company with his master.

Macduff eyed him with a humorous smile.

"Was it so late, friend," he asked, "ere you went to bed, that you lie so late?"

"Faith, sir," retorted Adam slyly, winking from one to the other. "We were carousing till the second cock. But my argument is just. When a king honors my master's castle, my master's servants should not be stinting in their toasts. So say I a long life and prosperous to King Duncan, who is the noblest king a poor serf may hope to set eyes on in a lifetime. You'll not deny me, masters."

"Nay—a very loyal sentiment," laughed Lennox, thrusting a fallen log back to its place. "As for toasting, I'll admit my own throat is dry. So, whilst we await your master——"

"Who already comes," added Macduff, "aroused, no doubt, by our knocking. Good-morrow, noble sir."

And he strode as he spoke to where on the threshold of an open door stood Macbeth himself. The age of terror had left the owner of the castle, and though his face was pale, there were no traces of his late disorder about him as he advanced to greet these unwelcome guests, unless they had looked close enough into the shadowed eyes, which still saw bloody tragedy mirrored before their gaze. But his wife's reasonings had reached the Thane's numbed brain; he knew he must play the actor, aye! and meant to play it as those who would win success by the deed from which they would fain turn averted eyes.

“Good-morrow, both,” quoth he, and held out hands washed clean from damning stains.

“Is the king stirring, worthy Thane?” asked Macduff, and being wholly unsuspecting, never noted the faint start of guilty nerves.

“Not yet,” replied Macbeth. “Not yet.”

Stirring? Would the king ever stir again? Not Duncan at any rate. But Duncan was no longer king. Who should be hailed by that title? Why—why—he himself!

The voice of Ilda the witch screeched the promise in his ears:

The promise that was coming true at last.

The abyss was crossed—he would be climbing the heights soon.

Ambition’s clarion voice was sounding—that of remorse was not awakened yet.

“He commanded me to call early upon him,” resumed Macduff. “I had almost slipped the hour.”

Macbeth rallied himself—it would soon be over—and the horror of his deed was already passing from his soul. *King. King.* Ah, that was the title he had dreamed of, coveted, plotted and planned for, since the momentous meeting with the weird sisters on the Hard Moor. The title . . . he . . . had murdered . . . to obtain.

“I’ll bring you to him,” he replied, with wonderful self-control.

“I know this is a joyful trouble to you,” apologized Macduff, with pleasant friendliness; “but yet I fear it is one.”

“A labor to be delighted in,” smiled his pale host. “This is the door.”

Daylight was brightening now, yet the passage and landing without Duncan's rooms were gray in shadow. Macduff had thrown wide the folding doors and passed within, after some further apology for such undue haste in presenting himself.

But it had been the king's desire—and the simple-hearted Thane found that sufficient excuse for such importunate rousing.

Lennox followed Macbeth to an adjacent room.

"Goes the king from hence today?" asked the younger man, finding his host strangely silent and morose.

"He does—he did appoint so," replied Macbeth, and walked towards the window, looking out over the marshy plain.

It was purgatory to stand thus—awaiting the cry which would presently rouse the castle to hear the startling and appalling news that red-handed murder had stalked at night through those dim passages, to pause and pass within those doors which should have better sheltered one it had been their duty and loving desire to protect with their own life's blood.

"The night has been unruly," observed Lennox, approaching nearer to where his host stood so gloomily silent. "Where we lay, our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say, lamentings heard in the air; strange screams of death; and prophesying with accents terrible of dire woe and tragedy to come swift on the heels of time. The death bird clamored the livelong night, and some say that earthquake was to be felt."

Macbeth surveyed the speaker with somber eyes. Had he heard the young man's words, or was he only listening still for the sudden turmoil which should tell of discovery?

He roused himself with an effort, knowing this to be but the apathy of a transition state. When need arose he would be ready. *Now.*

"It was a rough night," replied he.

"I cannot recall one like it in all my remembrance," said Lennox.

And then, as he ceased speaking, stirring his thoughts to lure so mean a companion into conversation, came the sounds for which Macbeth had been waiting. From the direction of the king's apartments came a cry—a cry of horror, dismay, rage.

Such a cry as foretells no small tragedy, but some woeful event that may shake a kingdom to its foundations.

A cry which Bethoc, kneeling in prayer before a wooden crucifix, heard shuddering, knowing that somehow, somewhere, the wan ghosts of a troubled night were, with the new day, putting on strange and terrible shapes of reality. And, because she feared to think what those shapes would be, she fell to more earnest prayer—for Malcolm, and their love. A cry which Lady Macbeth heard as she lay upon her couch, and, hearing it, rose, hastily beginning to don the robes so lately discarded.

The crisis was here—and she feared to trust her husband too long alone.

Need she have feared? Perhaps not, for with that cry Macbeth's apathy seemed to slip from him like a cast cloak. So the hare hears the hounds give tongue as she crouches in her lair, and quivers through every fiber of her being in desire to escape.

. The hounds upon a track!

Nay, not so, since no track was there to be found. Thus courage and the need for bold play came to aid a desperate man at such a crisis.

Macbeth had reached the threshold as Macduff came rushing headlong down the passage.

The latter's face was blanched in a fixed expression of such dismay as has seen death meet his unexpected gaze—his whole bearing that of a man distraught.

Scarcely checking himself, he reeled against the wall, covering his eyes with his hands.

"Oh, horror," he groaned, "horror, horror—tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee."

He was a strong man, fearless and disciplined in nature, yet as he huddled against the wall in that passage, to which a gray dawn had barely penetrated, he sobbed and trembled like a frightened child.

"What is the matter?" cried Macbeth, in well-feigned bewilderment, whilst Lennox, more genuinely perplexed, echoed the words.

"Murder," groaned Macduff. "Death most terrible, the image of death within yon room—stamped upon the features of one whose life we all did cherish as our own."

Macbeth stared at the speaker, his own apathy had entirely gone, though he did not seem to know this new personality which he put on with apparent ease. A personality in which it would be easy to play the part to save his life.

His life! Thoughts of the future in which that life should be passed pricked him to his purpose, whilst in gaping wonder he eyed the weeping and dismayed Macduff.

"What . . . is it you say?" he faltered.

"Mean you—his majesty?" whispered awe-stricken Lennox. Macduff stretched forth a shaking hand, pointing towards the open folding doors.

"See for yourselves," he muttered. "Do not bid me

speak. Approach the chamber and grow cold in numbing horror, as I have done."

A swooning fit was on him; inert he lay there watching the two who hurried away in fevered haste to read the riddle but half unsolved.

Then, as Macbeth and Lennox passed out of sight, strength seemed to return to the stricken Macduff.

"Ring the alarm bell," he cried, rousing himself to go struggling down the passage, shouting in husky, stentorian tones:

"Murder! and treason! Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm! Awake! Malcolm! Banquo!"

Like a blind man, groping, he stumbled on, not knowing whither he went in that maze of passages, till presently, meeting none nor hearing answer to his cries, since those he called were lodged at some distance from this spot, he returned to where a flight of stone steps led up to folding doors. And at the foot of the steps a woman stood. A queenly, handsome woman, beautiful still, though the years of girlhood had long fled, and sorrow had stamped her lovely face—sorrow that was imaged there now as she came forward, appealing to the pale Thane with anxious fear in her clear tones.

"What is the business?" she asked, as Macduff, gentle ever to all women if but for sake of his own Marjory—took her cold hands in his. "What are these cries that rouse all sleepers? Oh, speak! Tell me the truth! Speak! Speak!"

How she shook and trembled, roused no doubt from sleep to find an unnamed terror haunting her home.

"Oh, gentle lady," murmured Macduff, tears streaming down his rugged face. "It is not for you to hear what I can speak. Return to your room, when later your lord himself——"

He was interrupted by the appearance of Banquo, who, having heard the woeful cries, had hastened to hear their fuller meaning

He was shaking as in an ague as he raised his hands aloft, seeing Macduff.

“What did I hear?” he stammered. “Our royal master *murdered?*”

A shriek from Lady Macbeth echoed the words:

“Murdered,” she clamored, clutching at Macduff’s plaid. “No, no. Ah, woe, woe! Not here in our house?”

“The deed were no less cruel anywhere, moaned Banquo. “Dear Duff, I pray thee contradict thyself and say it is not so?”

But the Thane of Fife answered only by the deep-drawn sobs which seemed to rend his very manhood and leave him weak and exhausted as any part-drowned mariner who lies within the reach of ocean waves, scarcely escaped their fury.

Thus the three stood, the woman apparently bereft of consciousness as she clung against the wall, her unbound and disordered tresses loose over her shoulders like some flaming mantle, whilst Banquo, no less stunned, stood there, and against his will saw in mental vision a blasted heath over which storm clouds still hung ominously; whilst below where he stood could be seen a woman’s form, wreathed round in mists from which a face looked out, mocking, terrible, a blood-red band about her throat—the devil’s own image within her eyes, as she cried,—not to him but to another, “*All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.*”

And now Duncan was dead. Lying yonder, a murdered man in the castle of him whom Banquo had called friend no later than last night.

Two men came out from behind the folding doors. They both reeled as they descended the steps, reeled as men drunk with wine—but in reality dazed by the awful horror of a sight on which they had lately looked.

Lady Macbeth did not move at sight of her husband, but stood there, her arms outspread, almost as though she were nailed crucified to the wall.

A ray of morning sunlight tinged the red glory of her hair. Macbeth, looking up for an instant, saw in her a flaming vision of doom, and he hid his eyes in his plaid—afraid to look, lest love and ambition should betray him in a crucial hour.

“Had I but died before this chance,” he groaned. “Oh, woe indeed! My heart and voice are so choked with tears for this calamity. I have no utterance.”

How well he acted! Even the suspicions of Banquo were for the time allayed. Macbeth’s haggard face and grief-stricken mien told of an honest sorrow, and could not be the mirror which showed a murderer.

Macbeth himself grew confident. He had been afraid at first, but fear had gone after looking into Banquo’s eyes and reading no accusation there. His wife had been right. No one could trace that murderous deed to its true doers. All would be well. Thus, in the meantime, he acted as those act who assure themselves of success and great reward accruing to it.

And a chance word spoken by Lennox as they stooped over the couch of a murdered king had given him a hint of what might well serve a double purpose.

“The Prince of Cumberland,” the young noble had observed bitterly, “hath not had long to wait to climb to higher honor.”

The Prince of Cumberlând. Why! that was Malcolm.

Malcolm, his father's heir, Malcolm, scarce more than a youth, to rear a handsome head between Macbeth and his ambition. Malcolm!

As if in response to an unuttered call, the young prince came hurrying into sight accompanied by his brother. Goodly youths both, with a stalwart manhood embryo in the elder which Macbeth noted for the first time.

"What is amiss?" asked Donalbain, resting his hand on his brother's shoulder as the two faced the gathered throng at the foot of the steps.

Macbeth frowned gloomily, his regard fixed on Malcolm, who stood there, pale but self-possessed—more puzzled than alarmed.

"What?" he asked significantly. "You do not know?"

Question for question, but both Lennox and Banquo started as they listened to the second.

It was Macduff who explained, too pitying to break such news in roundabout phrase.

"Your royal father is murdered," said he—abrupt yet tender at sight of the stricken horror on the young men's faces.

Murdered!

And he, that father, such a parent as few sons had ever been blessed with.

Strong love had knit those close bonds of kinship, so that honor and reverence, as well as love itself, had made Duncan's sons his most loyal and devoted subjects too. Murdered!

What a knell to ring on bright hopes, sweet dreams, all the irresponsible joy of youth, drained in a single word.

Murdered! And at the sound a cord seemed snapped in young Malcolm's heart, transforming him from the happy boy to a stern and sorrowful man.

How could he answer such news as this? Surely not as Donalbain was doing, by bitter tears and lamentable outcry. Donalbain was but a lad still—his own younger brother. It was for him, Malcolm, to play a man's part in this fearful tragedy which struck at his own heart. For an instant he thought of Bethoc and all this day was to have been to him of love and sunshine.

Oh, God! What mockery it was that there could be sunshine still.

The world should have been gray today. Nay, black! Black as the pit in which so infernal a deed had been conceived and wrought, black as the night that had descended upon a beloved parent in the strong prime of manhood.

Dead! Oh, no, no, he could not believe *that*.

Only a few hours since he had felt the girding of his father's tender arms, heard his good-night blessing, seen him stand, a mighty oak tree, strong and lusty, to weather full many a wild storm of life.

Murdered! No, no, this thing could not be.

As through a mist, faces were turned towards him, pitying, wondering, suspicious, stern, and, more clear than all, a woman's face, framed by the flaming mantle of her hair as she lay back against the wall.

And there was that in the woman's eyes which made Malcolm Canmore understand this thing was true.

His father had been murdered.

He raised his clenched hand aloft as one who mutely registers a vow in Heaven, whilst in hoarse tones he asked his question.

“By whom? Who has done this deed?”

Was it chance which showed him the Thane of Cawdor's eyes, sinister and mocking?

It was Lennox who answered. Lennox, the prince's friend, who tried to tell the tale his own tears stemmed.

“The grooms of his chamber, as it seemed, had done it,” he faltered, “their hands and faces were all smeared with blood; so were their daggers, which, unwiped, we found upon their pillows. They stared at us in strange distraction. No man's life was to be trusted with them.”

Macbeth wrung his hands.

“Oh, yet I do repent me of my fury, that I did kill them,” he made lament.

Macduff started, eyeing the speaker askance in grave censure.

“You killed them?” he echoed, “before you spoke, asking them the reason for their bloody deed? Killed them before they could confess the meaning of so black a murder?”

If there was no actual accusation in such questions there was undoubted reproach, whilst before Banquo's eyes rose again the vision of a blasted heath and the echo of Ilda, the witch's words rang in his ears.

Macbeth, however, waxed eloquent in making excuse for a faulty deed.

“Who can be wise, amazed, temperate and furious, loyal and neutral, in a moment?” he asked scornfully. “It were a task beyond the control of man. My love and grief out-balanced reason. I confess it, friends, but would you blame me? Oh, I do not think so had you stood, as Lennox here, beside me in that woeful room and seen our noble Duncan lying there gashed and bleeding in terrible death, whilst his murderers, stained

by the colors of their trade, their daggers still dripping in their hands, crouched beside him. A fury was upon me at that sight. My love for Duncan was so deep, so true, that without argument or pause I stabbed those murderers to the heart, remembering only what those hearts had conceived, what those hands had done."

Could any doubt such argument? Could any cry, "liar and traitor, be damned in your own deed?"

It was impossible.

Eloquence had won—for the moment.

Looking at their haggard host as he stood facing them on the steps above, none of the men who loved Duncan could believe that passionate outcry false.

But what of the woman who had come to strengthen a weak-kneed waverer.

Was this husband who lied so glibly, who declaimed so falsely and who acted so splendidly, the same man who had mouthed and whimpered because his hands were blood-stained?

It was as if her own fierce spirit had been transmitted to this her lord. And being no longer called to aid one who could so well be trusted to stand alone in defence of a terrible secret, Gruoch yielded to the call of her woman's weakness and allowed reaction from that ghastly strain to seize and enfold her in its cold embrace.

"Help me hence," she moaned, "help me hence." And she would have slipped fainting to the ground had not her women, who, with crowding courtiers and servants, blocked the passage, agape to hear the tale of such tragic happenings, pushed forward, and, lifting her in their arms, carried her away. Meantime, Macbeth, after watching his wife out of sight, turned in grave and mournful dignity to the surrounding chieftains.

“Come,” said he, “let us to the hall, there to meet and confer in council as to what is best done. There is much to learn, and still more to teach, if we would save the kingdom from such discord as will be beyond our power to quell. A deed has been wrought here in my castle which shall shake all Scotland with a grief impossible to assuage. And since my honor is at stake, even above your own, my lords, it behooves me to search out with greater diligence the secret of this plot, of which yonder dead grooms were but the sorry tools. This murder goes deep into our honor. We must search it out—and seek in all things Scotland’s future welfare.”

And, as he spoke, he looked again towards Malcolm, the late king’s son.

CHAPTER XII

THE GOAL OF DESIRE

“DONALBAIN is fled?”

Malcolm's tones were incredulous as he looked to where Bethoc stood, a cowering little figure, bowed down by the tempest of her grief.

And she mourned for *him*. Aye, of course it was so. The young prince knew that well enough, since Bethoc had not known the king whose tragic death had so dried up the fount of youthful joy in his son's heart.

And now what was it this girl was saying? His brother fled? But wherefore? *Fled?* They only flee who do some wrong. Donalbain had done no wrong.

“To Ireland,” said Bethoc. She did not weep now. It had been hours ago that tears had overwhelmed her; now, though spent by grief, she was calm. A woman's calm in response to a call, a need for action.

Later she would perhaps dare to explore the haunted chambers of her memory and strive to drive forth those ghosts whose suspected presence made her heart faint within her; but now she must not think of past but present.

A present in which Malcolm was in danger.

“Yes, yes,” she continued feverishly, clasping her small hands very fast together, “he has fled to Ireland. Friends have gone with him. I . . . I sped them on their way. You, I could not find. Oh, how I have searched . . . but you I could not find.”

He moved towards her, but did not attempt to touch her. He must not think of love today.

Had he not been keeping vigil by a murdered father's side, whispering youth's hot, earnest vows into dead ears? Oh, the tempest of his soul! How it had lashed and tossed him with turbulent emotion, so that he could at one time have rushed forth from that room sword in hand smiting and slashing at all he met, killing all in hope of slaying thus a bloody murderer.

"Why should you have searched for me?" he asked presently, seeing Bethoc wan before him, her blue eyes rimmed round by swollen and discolored lids. "And wherefore speeds my brother hence?"

Bethoc shivered, but her gaze met his very resolutely.

"I had heard it said," she answered, "that you and Donalbain should be accused of conspiring against your father's life. There . . . there are those even now in council together who hail you as his murderers."

Malcolm stood aghast. This second blow was, if possible, more terrific than the first.

His father's murderer!

He began to understand—only dimly at first.

Those were reckless, fierce days, when only too often might was right. He and his brother were but youths. The love that had been given to their father they had had no opportunity as yet to win, and last night's deed was not yet unraveled.

"You must go," cried Bethoc, facing him, white-cheeked, her blue eyes wide in horror, yet passionate too, as those of a woman defending the one she loves against the foes who teem around him. "Those who struck down a father will not spare you. So Donalbain understood. He has gone. You too must go—at once."

Malcolm laughed—a bitter laugh, from which all joy had fled.

“Go?” he scoffed. “Not I! I am my father’s heir to whom he has legacied the task of vengeance. I will fulfil it.”

She still faced him, white and passionate.

“You cannot find revenge in all Scotland,” she replied. “You are alone. They will kill you if you stay. And I—oh! merciful saints, why do I not die too? Have any suffered as I am doing? The whole world was paradise yesterday—now it is hell. Yet not hell, since love remains. By my love, Malcolm, I bid you flee. I . . . bid you.”

She caught him by the sleeve, drew herself towards him, forgetting maidenly reserve in the abandon of her grief and pleading.

Was she not her mother’s daughter, passionate, forceful? And now her eloquence came in gasping sentences as she clung to the man who stood unresponsive as though turned to stone at sight of those Medusa-like eyes of tragedy. Not Bethoc’s eyes, tear-filled, piteous. But the eyes of fate, pointing down at a father’s corpse.

In vain Bethoc pleaded, touching his cold cheek with her burning lips, as she claimed his obedience to her command in the name of love. A dead name today for Duncan’s son.

Yet where love failed, a calmer counselor prevailed.

It was to Banquo, who had entered, unseen by Malcolm at first, to whom Bethoc turned at last, imploring him to add his prayers to hers, since, quoth she, very piteously. “If the prince stays—he dies as surely as a king died under this roof last night.”

And Banquo, with one arm about her, turned to Mal-

colm. "The child speaks truly," said he, "and you must ride with me this very hour, prince. To England you should go if you were wise. There's safety with King Edward, England's saintly king."

"What?" cried Malcolm in amaze. "You counsel flight? I cannot believe it, noble Banquo."

"Yet you shall believe it," replied the elder man quietly. "As that I am your friend and loyal servant, prince, such as your father called me. It is my loyalty which, beating with every pulsation of my heart, clamors with the same insistence as this poor maid who, if I mistake not, loves you."

Malcolm looked from one to the other.

That these two loved him he could have no doubt. Yet what strange counsel did they give?

"Listen," went on Banquo, "to the most difficult news that I could school my tongue to utter. In yonder council chamber the lords and chieftains of this fair realm talk together. Some tale—a whisper first gendered none know whence—has got abroad that you and Donalbain have conceived and executed this bloody plot, and argument hath been used to prove it. So, whilst men look askance, whispering the horror of such a story, others have named the Thane of Cawdor as king in succession. An honor he . . . is willing to accept."

Silence. A long silence, tense with the crowding emotions of human souls set on racks of pain.

To each a separate suffering, since each saw with separate vision the story of such deeds.

"To flee," muttered Malcolm—but there was irresolution now in his tones. "To flee hence to England—and alone?"

“We shall ride together, my liege,” quoth Banquo softly, as he held out his hand, “and, if Heaven wills, return together when traitors, discovered at last, have gone to their own place. Be advised. You are not strong enough to break those whose ambition would break you, mar you, thrust you out of life on any pretext. Thus, to win, you yield. To fight, you flee. To avenge, you suffer wrong to go unchallenged. Do not you understand? To save your life you ’scape with me to England, so that when the time is ripe and you are grown to fuller manhood, you can devote that life to searching out and destroying those who have so villainously murdered your noble father.” Malcolm bowed his head.

Unwelcome though the counsel was he saw now that it was the only possible one to follow.

What Bethoc’s love had failed to accomplish, the hunger for revenge and the grave advice of this well-proved friend had won.

He would flee with Banquo, knowing how dear a place Banquo had held in the king’s love. He would flee—but none would ever know how hard a task that was. To play the coward so that he might live to act the hero. Was this worthy the son of Duncan?

With bent head and faltering step the young man quitted the room, with neither farewell look nor glance for the girl who stood weeping in the shadows.

And in the same hour when Malcolm Canmore quitted the castle of Inverness, Lady Macbeth was awaiting the return of her husband from the council chamber.

There was a wandering fire in the lady’s eyes, as she paced restlessly to and fro, starting at every faintest sound from the outer chamber. She had refused to allow her little son to come near her—and Bethoc had not

attempted to enter her mother's presence. There had been excuse enough for the indisposition the mistress of the castle pleaded. The tragic event of the night had been enough to fever any sensitive woman's nerves. And in truth the fever seemed to run high. How bright were her eyes! How deep a carmine the patches of color on her cheeks; her hands were clasped and unclasped as thought ran riot in her brain.

But yesterday Duncan himself had been arriving at this hour. She had stood in the hall to greet him, and momentarily felt her sinister purpose weaken as she saw the goodly favor of the king's person, the kindness of his mild blue eyes, the story of high honor to be heaped upon her husband's house. He had been so gracious in his gratitude for her hospitality, so gallant in his homage to her beauty. And yet—she had slain him!

Yes, Macbeth might have struck down his deadly thrust into defenceless flesh—but hers had been the guiding fingers on the weapon.

But it was not of Duncan or his death that she must think. Let the dead past go, whilst she turned eager eyes to where a future blazed with glory.

"All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter."

The prophecy should be fulfilled. Aye!—thus high should he, her husband, climb with her beside him. A queen! Stately she stood, trying to smile, to find delight in so fair a title. What desire could remain when she was queen?

And after Macbeth, Lulach, her son. Yes, her pulses stirred there.

Lulach, her son. Gilcomgain's son. Gilcomgain, husband of her youth, her love, her desire. Well, it was good to think that other cries had echoed her dear love's

dying moans. Had Malcolm the king spared the man who was his enemy? Had he spared any? No, neither father, brother, husband. So last night's deed was but justice after all.

Gilcomgain's pale ghost could no longer cry down the wind, "Avenge, avenge." The seed of Malcolm the king had been destroyed. Duncan was dead, and if, in their first thirst after vengeance on the bloody deed, Malcolm and Donalbain were slain too—her cup of rejoicing would be full.

Yet it was very wearily that she who planned these things sank into a chair. Her heart grew faint thinking of the coming night.

Would she hear the owl hoot as yesternight? Would the sound as of witch's laughter haunt her ears? Avaunt! Was she not waiting to hear the news which Macbeth would be bringing? Macbeth, the husband who adored her, was swayed by her, was ready to serve her even to the selling of his soul, yet whose whole body she did not as truly love as dearly as she had loved one of Gilcomgain's little fingers. And yet Gilcomgain had brought her bitter woe and suffering, whilst Macbeth would make her a queen—his queen—Scotland's queen. As if in echo to such thoughts the door of her room was flung open and Macbeth himself stood flushed and triumphant upon the threshold. All shadow of fear, of remorse or guilty dread had fled from his face. He stood there a conqueror, on the summit of his ambition, with arms outstretched towards the woman for whom he had gone down into the filthy abyss of sin and death to win it—withal to crown her.

"We ride to Scone within the hour, dear love," said he; "there I shall be crowned king as all the fates decreed. The king."

She echoed the last word with him.

“The king!”

Had they not reached the goal of their desire?

CHAPTER XIII

A SECRET MEETING

“**B**ETHOC—farewell.”

So he had returned to speak those two words. Returned to lift a black despair from a young girl's heart. To give her hope, even though that hope were placed in the midst of lurid surroundings.

It was a little bare-legged fisher lad who had brought the message first to Macduff—that melancholy Thane who had listened with heavy heart to all the talk of those in council, himself as silent as any funeral mute.

Had Macduff, instead of the more cautious Banquo, been councillor, Malcolm and Donalbain had scarcely fled, but when the Thane heard the intention of the latter it was already accomplished.

And now Macbeth was on his way to Scone, King Duncan's body had been carried to Colme's Hill, and Macduff left to mourn as one whose breath has been snatched away by too much haste.

What was left after this dizzy turmoil of events? Duncan the king murdered, his sons fled, Macbeth named as successor to the Scottish throne.

Yet one of the items seemed to be incomplete. Malcolm had not yet left the Scottish shores, though he remained in hiding, since assuredly many enemies would be swift to his scotching and slaying were his place of concealment known. The little fisher lad told his mes-

sage cannily—and it was for Macduff to take it to the Lady Bethoc—stepdaughter to the new king. How fast events ran on. The new king! . . . And he who had been king last week not yet laid to rest.

But Macduff had brought the message to Bethoc because he had still enough of the fire of youth in his veins to remember love's young dream. And oh, but the Lady Marjory, his own sweet wife, was fair! Fairer than this black-haired, blue-eyed child, with her pale face, and red lips that quivered in sudden passion when he told her Malcolm would not flee to safety till he had bidden her farewell. In these days neither Bethoc nor Lulach saw anything of their mother, and it would have been easy for the former to have slipped away from the castle had it not been for her little brother. But Lulach, usually a high-spirited, gallant child, had become nervous and fretful of late. He was afraid that the wicked people who had murdered the king might creep at midnight into his own room. So more than once he stole to seek the comfort of his sister's arms at night, whilst by day he became her very shadow.

Yet she escaped from him at last—her wit sharpened by eager desire.

Why, how strange! The sun was shining again today. She was going to see Malcolm. Malcolm, who had not forgotten her after all in his precipitate flight.

Thus, in time, Macduff, staunch in his faith to Duncan's son and with no love to spare for the usurper, who should be presently crowned at Scone, brought Bethoc to Malcolm's hiding-place, whilst he and Banquo walked apart leaving the lovers to their sad farewell.

Was it altogether sad? Not to Bethoc, as she felt

strong arms about her and hid her flushing face against a lover's breast.

She had thought his dream of love had been as the passing mists of dawn—leaving naught behind. She had told herself he had forgotten her now sorrow had transformed him to a man—and though she wept she had said that this was best since she still dared not look into the haunted shadows of her memory.

And now it was to be farewell between a man and maid whose tale of love had been but the briefest.

As in a dream Bethoc felt Malcolm's arms about her, saw his handsome head bent to the level of her own, felt his kisses on her lips.

His kisses! She awoke then to life, and the tragedy, which was not all tragedy, since Malcolm still loved her.

"I love thee," she reiterated. "I love thee!"

What other words had she to give to go with him into exile.

And oh! the vibrant passion of each syllable as she clung to this lover of hers, quivering in her agony of voiceless grief.

But despair was conquered by that appeal which a woman is so attuned to hear in a man's silence.

Malcolm needed her—she responded to his need and smiled into the young man's anguished face, knowing that this farewell of theirs was to him more than farewell of man to maid, but also that of an heir to his kingdom—a patriot to his native shores.

"I shall await in a better hour for my king's return," was Bethoc's last whisper, and showed the promised joy of welcome in the eyes which would fain have been drowned in tears.

So, with brave lips she cheered him, whilst her own

heart ached almost to breaking, and she smiled with courage truly heroic as she watched him and his comrade gaze shorewards from the fast vanishing boat, till the mists of twilight hid them from each other.

He had gone! No need to smile now, and there were tears in the eyes of the kindly Thane of Fife himself as he led the weeping girl back towards her home.

Malcolm had gone! What and who remained—for Scotland?

The man's face was grim as he asked himself the question.

And Bethoc, asking no questions nor answering any, wept, because not only Scotland but all the world was empty—now that her lover had left her side.

Macduff parted from his young companion at the foot of the brae, within sight of the castle. He was riding home at once, not minded to follow the lead of other chiefs on the road to Scone. But his hand-clasp was one of friendship for this young girl, who herself was loyal amongst kin whom Macduff doubted. Aye, doubted as Banquo had done, though doubt was no clear certainty of thought.

It startled Bethoc when her little brother came to her an hour later, his clothes muddy and wet sand clinging to his brogues.

"Why did you not wait?" he complained fretfully. "I . . . I lost my way—and might have been drowned in the dreadful morass. Why did not you and the Thane of Fife await me when I called?"

He was cold and frightened, poor child, and therefore querulous, otherwise he had never quarreled with his dear Bethoc. And she, poor girl, was startled too, since she had made sure of having accomplished her journey unseen by any spy.

How she wished Lulach had not recognized the companion who had risked something in this trysting.

But worse was to follow, since Lulach's vexation grew to anger as she hesitated, thinking ere she replied.

"See," he said, "there is our lady mother upon the stairs. I shall go and tell her. Yes, I shall tell her how you and the Thane of Fife went far a-down along the shore and met with him whom they called Prince of Cumberland, who had to run away because he killed his own father."

In vain Bethoc strove to check the fatal words, in vain tried to soothe and coax the spoilt boy, who burst from her detaining grasp and ran towards his mother, who was passing along an upper gallery.

But Bethoc did not wait to hear the denunciation or the summons which should call her to account. Fearful of what storm Lulach's tale-bearing might evoke she fled to her own room, to hide, if possible, till her mother's anger should have passed.

The long minutes dragged by leaden-footed, since in each the girl trembled, sure she must soon hear the messenger who should call her to account. But the minutes lengthened into hours, bringing the shrouding of night, and no one approached Bethoc's sanctuary.

How strange it was! Had Lulach merely threatened and failed to fulfil? Yes, that must be it. Lulach, who loved her, had not carried this tale of a secret meeting to one who might condemn his sister.

On the morrow, Bethoc, sure of such repentance, sought her brother, and, kissing him very lovingly, thanked him for his silence.

But Lulach, though restored to love and good-humor this morning, was honest too.

"I *did* tell our lady mother," he confessed penitently; "but I wish I had not—for she only promised me a whipping if ever again I mentioned Prince Malcolm's name. I think, Bethoc, she . . . our mother . . . is afraid of the Prince of Cumberland, for she turned quite white when I spoke of him and the Thane of Fife. Is it because she knows him to be a very wicked man, who murdered his own father?"

"Prince Malcolm never murdered King Duncan," cried Bethoc passionately; "they lie who say so. I *know* he was innocent of such a deed."

"Hush," whispered Lulach, clinging to her skirts. "Hush, or . . . or I may be whipped. See—it is our mother."

Bethoc raised her head, and looking towards where a heavy curtain had been drawn aside, saw her mother standing there watching them.

She must have heard Bethoc's words—and the girl noted that all color was drained from the elder woman's cheeks.

Then their eyes met.

It was Bethoc who turned away first—shuddering as at something evil.

CHAPTER XIV

BETHOC GIVES WARNING

AUTUMN winds blowing across the Hard Moor—autumn winds stirring through the forest around Forres, bringing sear and yellow leaves fluttering to the ground, Nature's pall for the coming death of the year—autumn winds singing lullaby as they swept up the glen and across the peaceful streamlet of the Mosset burn, where a young girl stood, shining-eyed, gazing around at the gorgeous panoply of the woods, with their rare tinting of gold, orange, crimson, and brown, with dark, sombre green where the straight stem of a pine tree showed between oak and beech, chestnut and wild cherry.

"It was here," thought Bethoc to herself, "that Malcolm told me he stood—and dreamed of me, when the moonlight lay pale on the Mosset burn. It was here he hunted, winding his horn merrily, merrily, in a gay springtide, as he chased the gray boar to its death; it was here that he spent so many happy hours of boyhood, fishing, swimming, climbing. Ah!—I am glad to be here—where he was once so happy."

She was striving busily to put herself back into those old happy days, gone for evermore with their gaiety and irresponsible lightheartedness.

Gone—gone—and autumn leaves fell drearily for all the dreaming that she tried to make sweet.

So, to encourage fair memory, she seated herself on

a gnarled tree-stump and set to singing in low, crooning tones, a love song which Malcolm had sung in upward lilting notes that went rollicking through her memory.

The quaint crooning of words and tune made lullaby with wind and water—a lullaby; but there were tears in Bethoc's eyes ere she had finished—for the music of the winds made requiem for a dead past.

Death! Ah, woe!—how sadly had that grim spectre touched her life.

Yet Malcolm lived. Would he ever return to Forres? To the home of his childhood?

Ah!—did not a usurper sit on her lover's throne? Macbeth was king of Scotland. Duncan's sons were exiles.

A crackling of dry twigs, the scattering of newly fallen leaves, and a man came striding out into the glen, a slim little lad beside him.

Oh, but the wailing voices were hushed now, and Bethoc's cheeks aflame in welcoming joy as she held out her hands to Banquo and his young son.

“Banquo!” she cried softly, “and little Fleance.”

She kneeled, girding the boy with tender arms—for the youngest woman is mother to a motherless child—and he, knowing her of old for a loving comrade, clung to her, kissing her eagerly.

But it was to Banquo himself that Bethoc looked.

“He is safe?” she asked.

“Oh, very safe,” quoth Banquo, smiling as he seated himself on the high bank beneath a golden beech tree, “and well too. I will not tell you he does not fret, for you would not believe me. But the English king accords him a royal welcome and hospitality, hailing

him as son. You shall be at rest in your fears for Malcolm."

Tears filled her eyes, happy tears, yet tears of sadness too. For could not the sympathy of love read how hard an exile that must be, even though the English king's welcome were the warmest?

But she should be satisfied at least in knowing him to be safe. Here was a breathing space between a grim past and lurid future. Her whole soul longed and panted in the desire that that future might show her beside her lover succoring him—with her very life if need be. Was she not his—body and soul? And did not the tempestuous blood of Kenneth the Grim and Gilcomgain the Reckless flow in her veins?

She was not born for the sheltered, peaceful existence whose narrow limits were confined to the domestic joys and sorrows of a quiet home.

So she listened, eager-eared, to Banquo's tale of how Malcolm had come in safety to the court of Edward the Confessor—whilst of Donalbain they had heard no word saving that he had reached Ireland.

And when the tale was told, Bethoc set herself against the luxury of sweet conning over of messages sent her by him she loved. She must not be selfish—rather thinking as Malcolm would have her think.

"The king remains at Forres," she told Banquo, and saw the latter start as she gave her stepfather the title that had been his for several months.

"Aye," he replied dully. "So I have been told."

She looked at him, a pucker of anxiety between her brows.

"You will go to the palace?" she asked.

Banquo returned her gaze, his own serene.

"I have already been thither," he answered.

"And have seen—the king?"

"Aye—I have seen Macbeth."

A pause held their tongues mute for a space. Fleance had wandered off, impatient of conversation and eager in pursuit of a scampering squirrel.

"Tell me," questioned Banquo, "what ails him?"

Bethoc drew her plaid close, fingering the jeweled clasp which girt it about her breast.

"That I do not know," she faltered, "but there are times when a curious fit comes on him—which leaves him wan and sickly. Yet this is not often, and at other seasons he is filled with great zeal and energy in his task of kingship."

"His task of kingship," mused Banquo aloud. "Ah, me. I must not speak. Yet how can I be mute? He has it all—king, Cawdor, Glamis, as the weird women promised—and yet I fear . . . I fear . . ."

He broke off, seeing the expression of horror on Bethoc's young face.

His fears were hers. Yes, he knew that, knowing too, so well that love for Malcolm the exile burned as a bright flame in this poor child's heart to the exclusion of all other affections, such as that for parents or friends.

And Bethoc, he felt sure, guessed that Macbeth had played most foully in the gaining of his desire—the winning of ambition.

But these things must as yet remain a sealed book between them, seeing the time was not yet ripe. Macbeth was not only king, but had at least in part blinded his subjects' eyes and closed their ears, by showing a wise and temperate justice, besides much skill in king-craft.

He knew how to rule—in that at least he justified his actions, and since his accession a burning zeal for the welfare of his people seemed to obsess him, whilst all the time he had been busy too in setting the ban of parricides upon the young princes whose hasty flight to safety, though discreet in saving their lives, had left them open to an accusation they could not refute. So Macbeth was king. He should have been satisfied with that, growing sleek in such success instead of gaunt and wolfish in appearance, as one haunted by a dismal fear.

And such gripping dread leads to ill consequence. Even Bethoc was dimly aware of this, and since Fleance was absent, whispered her dread.

“The king received you kindly?”

Banquo looked up from a reverie ill-omened enough.

“Why, yes,” he smiled, “and bade me to the feast he holds tomorrow. A banquet in which he would honor me.”

Bethoc laid a trembling hand upon his mantle.

“Ride hence,” she entreated, “it is better so. Ride hence and homeward if you would not wish to share Malcolm’s exile. I shall . . . be afraid whilst you are at Forres.”

“And why?” he asked, “and why?”

He would fain have fathomed her knowledge, little dreaming how much she knew—and how much more she guessed.

“Oh, I do not know,” she answered pitifully. “I often am afraid, though I am happier here at Forres than at Inverness.”

She shuddered, recalling those days when she and Banquo had met before.

"I have faith in presentiment," she whispered, "and therefore bid thee go."

Banquo frowned. "Had Duncan a presentiment of his end?" he asked abruptly. "I do not think so, else he had never gone to Inverness. Yet Nature herself gave warning—as I heard—in bitter shrieks and lamentations, though none reached mine ears."

Bethoc crossed herself. "They say," she replied with bated breath, "that Duncan's horses turned wild in the night on which he died, broke from their stalls and devoured each other, whilst, contrary to Nature, a falcon was hawked and killed by a mousing owl. Oh, those were evil days! Would I could draw the curtain of my memory over all and blot those deeds from mind. And yet I cannot. These things all happened, Banquo, less than eight months ago—and when I pray it is with the petition that never may I see Inverness again."

"Poor child," said her companion. "Poor child—innocent and loving. These tragedies are too heavy in their weight for such shoulders. Yet, since we speak together of such things, I will confess that there are clouds on yon horizon which I dare not pierce. Macbeth was my friend."

Bethoc bowed her head. "Is the *king* your friend?" she asked.

Banquo smiled grimly. "Why, that's what I've come to prove—knowing the man and all his moods—save one," he replied; "and that last one the mood I met him in but now. Did he look sourly or sweetly, gladly or sadly, with suspicion or in love? When men wear masks it is difficult to study their features, little Bethoc. But I shall take trouble in searching for the truth ere I ride away."

"Ride now," she importuned. "Ride now."

He shook his head.

"I would not damn such a friend before I prove him," he replied, "and besides, I have my errand to perform at Forres. The time is not ripe for young Malcolm to return—but the soil must be prepared. I have come to tend the garden for Duncan's son. Herein is my vow—nor will I run away because perchance there are serpents in the garden such as flourished in Eden. Yet, because an unwary gardener might chance to receive deadly bite taken unawares, I speak to thee, child, giving thee a charge. My little Fleance. If I am not by to save him when the serpent strikes, wilt thou play the good Samaritan to this lone lambkin?"

Bethoc's eyes filled with tears.

"My heart cries 'Go'—and 'stay,'" she sobbed. "Stay—for Malcolm's sake and learn truths too deep for my solving. Go—also for Malcolm and your child's sake, lest one is left to mourn a friend—another a father."

"Did every man shirk death's shadow no battle e'er were fought or victory won," replied Banquo gently. "So I stay. Not rashly nor in foolhardiness—only so long as to learn the truth. Do I find indeed that treachery and murder lurk behind friendship's mask, Fleance and I will ride away. If not, I think I can serve Malcolm better here at Forres than in my lonely castle of the north. So, sweet maid, I must return to court, seeing his majesty gives me audience anon, and I shall be busy with my riddle reading."

He rose as he spoke, beckoning Fleance, who returned reluctantly, having found these woods more pleasant than the close atmosphere of the palace; and by the

burn-side were nuts, ripe for the picking. But hazel trees must be left burdened today—thus ran his father's decree, whilst the boy, laughing after a brief pouting, flung both arms about Bethoc's neck.

"Tomorrow," he said, "we will come together and pick the nuts. Will you promise, Bethoc? But do not ask Lulach to join us, for I do not love him very much. We always quarrel when we meet—I know not why, unless it is that I desire my way and he his. So we will come together, Bethoc?"

She promised readily enough, her starved heart glowing with new warmth and gladness—for she loved the noble Banquo, who was Malcolm's friend, aye, and little Fleance too, whom she had promised to protect if . . . if . . .

Banquo, watching her, saw the red lips quiver and blue eyes suffuse in tears. He understood the reason and held the young girl's hands in a tender grasp.

"There may be no need," he murmured gently. "But if there is, I do not fear you will forget, little Bethoc."

She looked at him with frank, clear eyes of affectionate misgiving.

"I have promised," she replied—and stooped to kiss Fleance again, thereby hiding the sight of her brimming tears from his father.

CHAPTER XV

AMBITION VERSUS FRIENDSHIP

SO Banquo had returned. Macbeth, pacing to and fro, paused suddenly with a quick, jerking movement as though an unseen hand had struck him.

He was alone. Yes, he who generally shunned solitude was alone. Alone to think—alone to consider—alone to fear.

Oh! he was afraid of Banquo, as he feared no other living man. Had not this bosom friend of his sternly chidden those weird prophetesses when first they hailed him—Macbeth—as king?

And after chiding had demanded to know what promises they could give him for himself!

Ilda, the witch, had answered—had promised—then fled, laughing mockingly,

“Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.”

Thou shalt get kings!

A zealous rage shook the childless man. Here lay a grudge, ripe for vengeance.

What! Should Banquo indeed prosper where he failed? Flinging himself down on to a low couch, the king covered his face in his mantle, as though to shut out some unwelcome vision.

“They hailed him father to a line of kings,” he muttered; “upon *my* head they placed a fruitless crown, and put a barren sceptre in my grip, thence to be

wrenched with an unlineal hand—no son of mine succeeding. If this be so, what is my profit? For Banquo's issue I have murdered the gracious Duncan, for Banquo's seed I have wrecked my eternal soul, for Banquo have robbed me of my peace. For Banquo."

Restlessly he rose and resumed his pacing, muttering into his beard, starting in nervous fits of fear, clenching and unclenching his hands.

He had fled from Inverness, hoping to 'scape memory and her ghosts, but those pale presences had followed him here where he reigned; here where he was king, lord of all—saving that traitor memory, who showed him murdered Duncan in every dark watch of the night, roused him to hear his wife, that honored partner of his throne, sobbing in her sleep. A queen was she—his queen—Scotland's queen. But what bliss had followed such crowning? A golden circlet girt her ruddy locks, but surely the weight oppressed her, for even he, though striving to be blind, saw how wearily at times that proud head drooped beneath its burden.

Only at times though. Such times as when that same pursuing memory held the clear mirror before her gaze, showing her a gracious sovereign lying in his gore, a loving guest murdered beneath her husband's roof—and at her desire.

And Banquo had returned.

Banquo, to whom the weird sisters had promised the throne—not for himself, but his heirs. Macbeth flung back his mantle as though the folds smothered him. He recalled how Banquo had stood but now within the castle hall, his hand resting on his young son's shoulder, a gallant little lad, bearing himself bravely, a ruddy health upon his cheeks, a proud up-rearing of his slim

young body. A king in embryo, for whom the king, so gloomily beholding, had damned his soul.

A fury shook Macbeth. Hatred flamed where once warm passion of love had been.

Banquo, his one-time friend, was now his enemy. Had he not read a covert accusation in those stern eyes?

Had it not been whispered in the king's ear that Banquo had helped young Malcolm to escape in safety to England—had himself been his companion and guide?

If so, Banquo was a traitor to the throne. And traitors died.

Had not the Thane of Cawdor died a traitor's death?
The Thane of Cawdor.

At such a question memory was busy once again—a weary torment which well-nigh maddened him.

How should he escape? What should he do? Banquo had returned. Every day he would see him at his court—every day gaze in those eyes which silently accused him.

“Murderer!” those same eyes cried. “A midnight assassin! Murderer of king, guest, friend. Oh, damned deed, which shall damn the doer.”

Again a frenzy shook the mind of Macbeth. Should those living eyes haunt him as well as the dead?

Nay! Banquo must die—as Duncan the king had died. And not only Banquo, but Fleance too. Thus should the prophecy be null and void. No seed of Banquo should mount *his* throne. And the king laughed, triumphing in the subtlety of his craft.

With Banquo and Fleance dead was it not possible that, the spell of prophecy broken, a son of Macbeth yet should ascend the throne?

Again ambition, soaring this time into the future, demanded a bloody crime.

And crime begets crime most surely.

This time decision was easier to the man who before had been pricked to his purpose by a woman's will.

Banquo and Fleance both should die—but there was no need for the queen to know till afterwards. Thus cunningly Macbeth argued with himself, doubtful of his wife's mind in this matter, for Gruoch was not as she had once been. Proud, queenly, self-possessed by day, he only knew how at night she would weep and moan, tossing to and fro, murmuring many names—those of her father, brother, Gilcomgain, Duncan. Yes, often that last in awe, terror, pity.

Duncan the king, gracious and kindly, who had thanked her with such condescension. Macbeth had never seen the diamond again, which had been a dead man's last gift. But there were dark circles around the queen's beautiful eyes when she rose of a morning, though she vowed her sleep had been sweet and untroubled. How could trouble haunt the pillow of a queen? Could not the voice of satisfied ambition lull any wakeful brain to rest and peace?

What mockery of questions were these.

But Banquo's fate must be no mockery.

So the pale king summoned his attendant and sent him on an errand.

The man was to be trusted, for Macbeth, with all his scheming ambitions, had possessed the trick—or gift, if you will—of winning men's hearts, and some hearts once won are constant in their love even when love must be blind and unquestioning.

So Donald, famous henchman to the Thane of Glamis,

was still faithful servant to the King of Scotland, though, had he chosen, he would not have gone on that errand to which Macbeth sent him so secretly on the day that Banquo and Fleance returned to Forres.

But Macbeth had essayed to smooth his brow into a semblance of gracious and kingly dignity before he, with his queen, entered the presence chamber, where Banquo awaited their coming.

What pomp was here displayed! Bowing courtiers, ready pages, subservient attendants, all added and bound up that state of royal splendor for which a man and woman had sold their peace.

A hollow bargain—hollow as the wind which swept across moor and plain, rustling through the forest, which scattered its tribute of golden leaves in its passage.

How hollow and how flavorless an honor surely the queen herself would have proved.

The queen! Yes, there she stood before the eyes of Banquo, who pitied as he saw her, not knowing the part this woman had played in the tragedy of Inverness.

A pale queen, wan of cheek, with dark circles about her lovely eyes. Yet the royal crown of Scotland gleamed less ruddily than her tresses, and her splendid robes showed a figure whose grace was unsurpassed in all the realm.

Was she content? Had she so glutted her sharp appetite with revenge and ambition, both fulfilled, that she could smile, saying, "*At last my heart knows peace.*"

It was not peace that shone in the troubled depths of eyes that turned a restless gaze this way and that, seeking but never finding. Seeking maybe for that very peace which should have been hers if peace follows satiated desire.

She had reached her goal—did she find she had been cheated by some false mirage? A fatal will-o'-the-wisp, who mocked in snaring her?

Possibly Macbeth, having more at stake as winner of a kingdom, was the better actor, for he wore his mask when greeting Banquo.

"Here's our chief guest," cried he, with seeming joviality and an eye askance for Banquo's grave-set face; and, so saying, took his old comrade by the arm, leading him to where Gruoch sat upon her dais-like seat.

The queen smiled—such a smile as had winter's chill and summer's burning, quenchless flame in it.

"If he had been forgotten," she replied, holding out her hand for Banquo's lips to press, "it had been as a gap in our great feast which none other could have filled."

"Tonight," added the king, giving his unwelcome visitor no time for answer, "we hold a solemn supper, and I'll request your presence."

Banquo bowed gravely. No smile lighted his eyes; his tones were formal.

"Let your highness command one," he said, "whose duties are knit to him forever by a most indissoluble tie."

Macbeth passed his hand across his brow.

What voice spake those words? Was it the loyal speech of an unbroken friendship and unswerving faith, or the bitter irony of one who knows his innermost secrets?

He could not answer that question—and would take no risks!

Banquo must pay the toll of those whose memory might retain too much knowledge.

If the weird sisters of the heath had damned Macbeth's soul by their too faithful prophecy, they must also be regarded as the slayers of Banquo's body. Banquo and Fleance—aye, Banquo and Fleance both.

A failing purpose was knit the faster by such thoughts, unshared by the listless queen who sat so wearily in her high place, unrejoiced by the splendor of a palace home, the lavishness of display, the subservience of many courtiers and wordy sycophants.

She only looked very wistfully at sturdy Fleance, whose blooming beauty seemed to gladden a dark room. Her own Lulach was out with his falcon, attended by careful servants, but Lulach had grown querulous and pale of late; too much pampering had agreed ill with him. And . . . she was afraid at times . . . afraid that Macbeth, jealous of mood, might conceive a misliking of the child, who was no son of his. So the tears gathered slowly in her eyes as she thought of her son and what the future held for him.

"Ride you this afternoon?" questioned Macbeth sharply, his piercing gaze fixed upon Banquo's imperturbable face.

"Aye, my good lord," replied the soldier—who had seen the queen's tears and felt his heart soften, deeming he guessed the cause.

Involuntarily the king drew a sigh of relief, though his reply was careless. "We should have else desired your good advice in this day's council," said he, "but we'll take tomorrow. Is it far—your ride?"

"As far," smiled Banquo, deeming this purposeless talk, "as will fill up the time 'twixt this and supper, though, unless my horse be swifter than my present purpose, night may overtake me ere my return."

Macbeth nodded. "Fail not our feast," said he.

Banquo bowed. "My lord, I will not," he replied; and in all his speech was the same grave courtesy of subject to sovereign, but no hint of former friendship.

In vain might the king's gaze strive to pierce the dark shield of his mind, and in failure his own black purpose strengthened.

But he dissembled cleverly.

"We hear," said he, with swift change of front, "that our cousins have found asylum in England and Ireland, where, instead of confessing their cruel parricide, they fill their hearers' ears with strange inventions. But of that tomorrow, when such matters can be discussed with the affairs of state. Hie you to horse. Adieu till you return tonight. Goes Fleance with you?"

Banquo drew his young son to his side with protective gesture, as though he spied a baleful gleam in the glance Macbeth bestowed upon the boy.

"Ah, my good lord," he retorted more curtly. "And, so please you, our time does call upon us."

"Farewell," smiled the king, as he rose from his dais, giving the queen his hand to lead her from the room. "I wish your horses swift and sure of foot, and so I do command you to their backs."

So speaking, he watched the soldier and his son quit the room, watched, first with smiling, then with moody eyes, his hand clenched hard against his side, the muscles of his face contracted as though to stifle back a cry.

A cry? Why should he cry or call? Would he give warning to the man who in other days had been his bosom friend, companion and sharer in triumphs or defeats, failures or success? Would he have pleaded, "Go not hence, Banquo, evil awaits thee. Evil, red-

handed and murderous, to strike not only thee, but at that line of embryo kings which might spring from thy seed?"

Should he so cry? Nay! that were to make all his own dreams abortive, all his own hopes null and void. So he was silent, watching the heavy curtains which had fallen into place behind young Fleance.

Banquo had gone—passing forever from his life. There were none left now whom he had cause to fear. Tomorrow he would sit firmer on his throne for this day's deed.

With a resolute straightening of himself the king glanced around, fearful that any might have noted his hesitation, or the nervous twitching of lips which had so nearly spoken detaining words of mercy.

"Let every man be master of his time till seven at night," he commanded, with would-be gaiety. "To make society the sweeter welcome, we will keep ourself till supper-time alone: till then, God be with you."

He raised the queen's hand and led her from the room; her head was drooping slightly, as though over-burdened by the weight of her crown.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WEIGHT OF A CROWN

WAS the king alone? Who, then, were those two admitted to instant conference with him as soon as he had reached the solitude of his own room? Why was it that Donald stood without the door on careful guard, leaving his lord within in company with those whose every secret look and shifty gaze bespoke them untrustworthy and possessed of villains' souls?

Men who glanced askance first at each other, then at the moody king, whose craft they feared might surpass their own and land them in some trap.

"We have spoken together before," quoth Macbeth, and though he knew the walls had no ears and the door a faithful guard, he spoke with bated breath as one who fears his own speech, though he would have none to guess it.

"It was so, an' please your highness," replied the foremost of the twain, a shiftless desperado of a fellow, named Cedric.

"Well then," said the king, speaking with some curious impatience at his own words, "have you considered what I showed you then? How that you have been brought to your present state of misery and misfortune, not—as you supposed—by me, but by Banquo? Thus it was he—who, with myself—led you aforetime to battle—who conceived hot anger and suspicion against

you both, and rested not till he had destroyed all but your shamed and destitute bodies and souls. Shall you in future recall your enemy's name? *Banquo?*"

The men stared again at each other, clutching at their ragged shirts, tearing them aside as though to show the stark leanness of their shriveled chests. Hunger was in their eyes—and lust of hate as well as cunning.

"We shall remember, my liege," growled Cedric with sinister intonation. "We shall not forget what your highness hath made known to us."

"Today I go further," said the king. "I will question you who lie so low in ruin and despair. From your palsied want would you rise to kneel in prayer for this good man and his issue, whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave? Is such meek patience yours?"

The mocking words brought a flush to both listeners' cheeks.

"We are men, my liege," retorted Cedric, and there was an ugly light in his narrow eyes as he spoke.

Macbeth laughed—a curious laugh, which echoed in his companions' memories.

"Aye," he assented. "In the catalogue ye go for men. As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs, are all cleped by the name of dogs. It is a shrewder definition which must single each forth according to the gift a bounteous nature has bestowed on it. And so with men. Now, if you have a station in the file, and not in the worst rank of manhood, state the fact plainly to me here, and I will show you how you can take vengeance on, and be forever rid of, this enemy, who has pursued you to your undoing, and at the same time—at the same time, mark you both—win our favor, regard, and rich bestowal of reward, since we will confess to finding

more pleasure in this paltry tyrant's death than in his life."

The second miscreant, stamped by the mark of lowest degradation, laughed aloud as he thrust forth his hand.

"I am one, my liege," quoth he, "whom the vile blows and buffets of life have so maddened that I am reckless what I do to spite a world that hath treated me so ill."

"And I another," added Cedric, "grown so weary of disaster that I would set my life on any chance to mend it or be rid of it."

Macbeth regarded each in turn as he spoke.

And on both sin-scarred countenances he thought to see a desperate honesty which confirmed the speaker's words. Yet he was slow to unbosom himself, though set in purpose.

"Both of you know Banquo was your enemy," he said, weighing each word with much apparent sincerity.

"True, my liege," muttered Cedric, wiping dry lips with the back of his hand.

"So he is mine," went on the king, clenching his hands and raising them to the carved elbows of his chair. "So he is mine. Like you, I have sworn to be rid of my enemies. Like you, I know the name of the worst of those. It is Banquo. But unlike you, I must restrain my hand. I am not free to pluck my dagger from its sheath and strike death down to his heart, though every pulse of that same heart beats against me, my throne, my life. Nay, I am not free, since friends of mine are friends of his. And these other friends, whose love I covet, are necessary to me. Necessary to the support of that throne which Banquo's greedy hands would pluck from under me. Here is

the full tale of why I seek your assistance, knowing that in Banquo's speedy death we have common cause of rejoicing."

The second fellow—he who had first declared his recklessness in life—grinned with clear understanding.

"We shall perform what you command us, my liege," said he.

"Though our lines—" began Cedric, his black soul lustful for reward.

But the king interrupted him.

"Your spirits shine through you," he commended. "Now you shall withdraw—but neither far nor yet for long. Since this deed must be performed tonight. Within this hour at most I will summon you and furnish you with exact directions as to where to plant yourselves, the hour when you must be prepared to strike the blow, each detail for the safe compassing of the deed. It will necessarily have to be some distance from the castle, and, since I would have it clear to you what you must do—remember that the boy Fleance, our enemy's son—and so, in time, if spared his avenger—must die too. Yes, the son's death is as important to me as the father's. It must be both—or neither. Now, if you will, talk together of what I command, make your resolution, which once made beware of retraction. Free you are to choose what part you will—though, if you are the men I suppose, I do not think either choice or resolution will be difficult."

In a breath they answered him, one in kindred as he guessed, to his dark soul. "We are resolved, my lord."

Macbeth's tense features seemed to relax; he passed his hand across his sweating brow.

"Good," said he, "the matter is concluded. Remain here till I call you—it will not need a long patience."

He raised a heavy arras, which showed an inner closet, and both men passed within.

Macbeth dropped the tapestried screen back into place. He had won!

After tonight fear would be dead—as dead as Banquo. What more could he ask of Heaven—or hell?

Banquo and Fleance would die. Whose eyes should then reproach him?

As if in answer to the boast a face rose before his vision—a noble, gracious face, with mild blue eyes, which fixed themselves on his in mute reproach. Duncan was dead. Would memory never die?

Thus asked the king—and mayhap those very words found echo in the heart of the wan queen, who stood amongst her women, robed for the feast, bosom, arms and hair flashing with jewels, her beauty none the less perfect because her cheeks were pale.

And presently she would laugh, the shadows which haunted solitude would be dispersed by that defiant will which claimed that she had won her desire—that vowed she was triumphant—that laughed even when the fiercely beating heart within was wrung by fear or anguish.

“Is Banquo gone from court?” she asked of the woman who knelt to straighten the folds of her fine embroidered robe.

“Aye, madam,” was the answer; “but returns again tonight.”

So Banquo returned again?

The queen fingered the jewels about her neck. How easily the sparkling gems might throttle her.

Why did she conceive such a thought? Why was death or its shadow always suggesting its grim presence?

And she had been thinking but lately of Banquo. The man her husband feared. Oh, yes, she knew thus much!

Macbeth feared Banquo—but Gruoch thought of Banquo's son. Such a bonnie little lad, so fearless of mien, so straight of limb. She would not have harm befall Fleance. But who spoke of harm to Fleance—or to Banquo? How her thoughts drifted!

“Go,” she commanded her woman. “Say to the king I would attend his leisure for a few words.”

The woman—Grizel by name—curtsied and retired. Who knew better than she what her mistress' moods were?

Left alone, the queen fell to musing—musing, as ever, on the past, from the time when Duncan had died at Inverness.

It had been so easy to gain their desire. An unexpected visitor, drugged grooms—a fatal dagger thrust—and lo! an open and unquestioned path to a throne. So easy a revenge—the innocent for the guilty. Yes! but joy in the knowledge that Malcolm's line had been destroyed, his descendants swept from life and sovereignty, to exalt his enemies.

Why was it that this knowledge, which should have been as balm to her fierce soul, brought no content? She had put forth a relentless hand to grasp joy—triumph—a crown, and lo!—naught but dust, ashes—a pursuing horror.

Surely it would have been better to lie in death with murdered Duncan than dwell in fear, a miserable, haunting present in which a dead man's eyes sought hers in pitiful reproach.

Who could kill ghosts? Did such an one exist, she, the queen, would honor him.

Her messenger returned. The king awaited her coming.

So the queen, forgetful of her own forebodings, sought her husband, finding him alone, ever pacing to and fro, muttering to himself, with gusty breaths of laughter shaking him at times as one who mocks a vanquished enemy.

Was this a new mood that flushed Macbeth's swart features and kindled lightning flashes in his dark eyes?

Gruoch approached, laying her hand on his.

"How now, my lord?" she asked in honey-sweet tones from which all fear had fled. "Why do you keep alone, making such sorry fancies your companions? Let these thoughts die as . . . as those died who fill them. Things without remedy should be without regard. What's done is done."

Macbeth turned, snatching at the soft fingers which had rested so lightly on his wrist. His face was haggard, though laughter twisted his lips—laughter that faded into grimness as he spoke.

"We have scotched the snake, not killed it," he muttered. "We must beware of the venom. Aye, the venom's there—have you not felt it in your blood, my wife? The venom which brings the torture of these terrible dreams that haunt us o' nights. Better be with the dead, whom we, to gain our place, have sent to peace, than to live in this torture of mind which damns the triumph we had hoped to gain."

A sudden weariness seemed to seize the speaker; he laid his head down on his wife's shoulder, encircling her slender form with one arm.

It was the gesture of a man who, having failed in his ambitions, gives way to despair, a slackening of strife, the desire to yield the conflict.

"Duncan is in his grave," he whispered, shuddering. "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well. Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison, malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing can touch him further."

Gruoch strove to rouse him. "Come," she urged, "these are but wild words which should have no place in our endeavor. Let us shut away the past and watch the sun rise on future greatness. Be bright and jovial amongst your guests tonight. We must laugh, my lord."

Her seeming gaiety helped to rally him. Quickly as ever his mood changed. Was he not the king, whose every ambition was crowned by success?

"So shall I, love," he cried, kissing the flushed cheek so near his own. "I will be merry and so, I pray, be you. And specially I would urge that you hold Banquo in high honor. Flatter him with sugared compliment and smile. We must bind him to us, since he could be a dangerous foe."

Gruoch smiled. "Leave this to me," she replied, and fell to thinking of the rosy boy she had coveted. But Macbeth had resumed his quick pacing, with the irresolute step of one whose nerves are on the rack.

"Oh, full of scorpions is my mind," he muttered. "Banquo and his Fleance live. Thou knowest that, dear wife? Yet . . . there's comfort coming, so do not fear. Before this night hath run its course a deed of dreadful note shall be done. A deed . . . of blood."

He raised his hands, looking first at one, then the other. Thus had he looked when in that midnight hour he had stolen red-handed from Duncan's chamber, clutching the murderous daggers.

There had been blood on his hands then . . . but

now these hands were white . . . there were rings upon them . . . the hands of a king—not a murderer.

“What’s to be done?” breathed his wife, shivering as she fixed a startled gaze on her husband.

Macbeth only laughed harshly as he drew her arm through his.

“Better be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, till thou applaud the deed. Come, you shall ask no questions till later. Do we not go to be merry? To feast, to laugh, to sing. The king holds revel—all his chiefs around him. *All* that is—save one. And he a traitor. Well! as Duncan said—traitors must die. It was his sentence on Cawdor, little guessing that another Cawdor should sentence him. You grow pale, love? Then we’ll not talk of traitors, but only of how the king shall grow greater in his office. And so—to feast.”

CHAPTER XVII

ANOTHER DEED OF BLOOD

BANQUO was right in his prophecy. Night had overtaken him in his ride, since business, not pleasure, had taken him to the little village of Findhorn, which was the port of Forres, as Leith is the port of Edinburgh. There he had conferred with a certain Flemish captain, who was about to set sail for England, and his talk had been prolonged beyond his intention.

So night found them riding back across the Hard Moor, preceded by a servant, who carried a torch. Stars shone overhead, but there was no moon. Banquo was in a silent mood, his mind busy with many crowding thoughts.

He had come to Forres not wishing to be at open enmity with one whom he dubbed usurper and most foul murderer. Yet Banquo was shrewd of head—and he had not forgotten the promise those weird women of the moor had made him.

Should Fleance, his son, or sons of Fleance indeed be kings? If so, it behooved a father to guard well such embryo sovereigns. So he would go softly, thinking rather of Fleance than of exiled Malcolm, whose cause he might the more warmly have espoused had not ambition knocked at his own door.

“Father.”

It was Fleance himself who interrupted Banquo’s meditations.

"Father," repeated the boy. "I do not love the king of Scotland, do you? His eyes are cruel, methinks. And . . . and no more do I love Lulach, whom I shall beat one day for his insolent speech."

Banquo roused from his reverie.

They were nearing their destination now, and before them lay the blacker outline of the forest.

"Softly, little son," said he. "You may not speak so of the king, whatever you think."

"Well," replied Fleance with determination, "I shall think it then—always, for I could never love him, since I do not think he loves thee, father. His eyes are cruel. He looked cruelly at both of us—and the queen looked sadly. Why is she so sad, my father?"

"I do not know, little son. But come, tell me who has won your fancy, which methinks is too critical for a babe?"

"I am no babe. I am *almost* a man. And I love Bethoc. When I am *quite* a man I shall wed with her."

Banquo laughed.

"Go to, prattler," he said; "but I like your choice. Bethoc is good and true. She will be your friend, Fleance, if ever you need one."

"But I do not need one," protested the boy, "since I have you."

His father's laughter changed to sighing. What sudden presentiment did those words provoke? What sense of impotence in protecting this cherished life—sole legacy of a great love?

"Heaven spare me for long to be your guardian, child," said he; "but who can tell what the future holds?"

Who could tell indeed—least of all Banquo, who never

dreamed that crouching figures awaited his coming yonder at the head of a dark glade leading towards the castle.

Tonight surely he was safe! A guest but rarely arrived who had shown no hint of a rebellious spirit. So Banquo argued, forgetting that guilt sees threatening danger where no danger is.

And if presentiment had touched the soul of Macbeth's old companion-in-arms, it was as some far-off fear which he meant to escape from in good time.

Tomorrow—the next day—he and Fleance would leave Forres. At present he meant to mask his mind and join in feasting at a board he would prefer to have been absent from.

Thus, proud of his own diplomacy, and with the dream of Fleance's future greatness haunting his deeper consciousness, Banquo reined in his horse at the outskirts of the forest.

There were so many pitfalls that in so close an undergrowth it became dangerous to ride at night along the narrow track.

Dismounting, therefore, from their steeds and holding the bridles in their left hands, the trio proceeded on foot, the servant going first with a lighted torch. It was a slow progress, and Banquo was about to urge a quicker pace, afraid that the feast would be already in progress, when a rustling at the right of the path caught his quick ear.

“Halt!” he cried to the servant, who instantly wheeled about, thrusting his torch towards the clump of hollies which grew close to the path.

But it was from the opposite side that two men instantly leapt out with so sudden a movement that

Banquo had no time to draw his sword, though with the instinct which ever comes in a moment of crisis he pushed Fleance from him.

"Treachery," he gasped, as the burning pain of a dagger thrust stabbed deep into his side. "Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly. Thou . . . may'st revenge . . . Fly"

The servant, who had been three or four paces ahead, had been struck down as he rushed to his master's defence, and as he fell the light became extinguished.

Instant blackness enfolded them, hiding tragedy's ghastly face.

Banquo had sunk to the ground. A crushing blow upon the head had felled him. But Fleance had fled.

"Who struck out the light?" growled Cedric with an oath, as he stumbled over the body of one victim in search of another. "Where's the boy?"

"There's but one down," replied the companion; "the son is fled."

"Then we've lost best half of our affair."

"Well, let's away and say how much is done."

"No, no. Not yet. I fear the king. What, ha!— a light."

There came the sound of scraping of tinder on flint, and again the torch flared.

The second man held the light high, whilst Cedric, with utter callousness, turned over the body of the unfortunate Banquo.

"Lesser than Macbeth and greater . . . not so happy, yet much happier."

Was the weird sister's prophecy thus fulfilled? There was a tranquillity upon the noble features, surprising to see in one who had died so violent a death.

Had Banquo, in the dread parting of soul and body, realized that Fleance had escaped?

Surely that mercy must have been vouchsafed, since one might have said the dead man smiled in spite of ghastly wounds, which seemed to gape in twenty different places through his rent raiment and about his head.

Dead? Why, yes! Macbeth need fear Banquo's accusing eyes no more—might rest secure indeed, since the one man he dreaded would speak no more on earth, however he might arraign him before another judgment seat.

Dead! One task complete indeed. The servant was dead too. Cedric had not scrupled to silence the faint groaning proceeding from that quarter, and in a trice the villains had bundled their poor victims into the nearest ditch, and then stood, with arms akimbo, looking round.

"The boy hath fled," growled Cedric, cursing, "and as well seek a rabbit in its burrow as a fugitive in this darkness. However, we'll do our best."

He snatched at the torch and plunged first into the undergrowth, followed by a grumbling comrade whom murder had made thirsty.

But Cedric was the master, nor would he leave the search till common sense warned him of its uselessness. The night, made blacker underneath these trees, played the friend to Fleance, and his enemies searched for him vainly. Perhaps the reason was that Fleance, who would certainly have betrayed himself if he could in the terror of his flight, was saved from discovery by having fallen down a bramble-covered pit, at the bottom of which he now lay, in merciful oblivion of all that had happened and was happening around him.

"The king awaits our return. It waxes late," grumbled Alan. "We shall never find that fry in this wilderness. Come, I'll not delay."

And this time Cedric did not demur.

Lights blazed from the grim old castle in which King Duffus had died so tragically over a hundred years before; busy servants hurried to and fro in preparation of the great banquet at which King Macbeth was to preside.

A night of revelry it was to be. A night of song, dancing, music and wine quaffing. A night for laughter and mirth.

And who to guess that the dead body of the chief guest, whose honor the king had so much *desired*, lay gashed and bleeding by that king's command in a ditch not a mile distant from the castle?

By the king's command.

And he had been obeyed. Already on the threshold of the banqueting hall stood the man who had vowed so recklessly that he was ready for all hazards of life or death.

The king had seen him too, and moved aside to where, in an adjoining recess, he might learn the news which should gladden him through the coming feast.

Cedric stood in the shadow. He had stolen hither alone and was breathing fast. There was more danger in this business for the king's *tool* than for the king himself.

Macbeth regarded him earnestly.

"There's blood upon thy face," he breathed, and glanced back over his shoulder. Soon the banquet would be ready, and he would have to take his place amongst those who laughed and jested.

"'Tis Banquo's then," answered the grim messenger. The king stooped nearer, his dark eyes glowing.

"Is he dispatched?" he whispered, and the words came in a hiss which told of fear.

"My lord," quoth Cedric tersely, "his throat is cut. That I did for him."

A moment's silence. So Banquo was dead! Ilda, the witch, could be a false prophetess after all. But what of his son? Macbeth's face was gray with apprehension as he put that second question.

"Thou art the best of cut-throats. But what of Fleance—what of the boy? Did you perform the like for him as you bestowed on the father? If so——"

The speaker's lips twitched visibly beneath the short, dark beard.

"My liege," retorted Cedric, more gloomily this time, "the boy escaped."

The king's raised hands fell to his side as though weighted by despair.

"Then comes my fit again," he moaned. "Had Fleance died tonight I had known peace. A perfect safety had been mine. But now—the son of Banquo lives, and doubts and fears whirr bat-like around me. He lives—but he must die. I'll see to that. A child shall not escape where a father's wisdom failed to protect his own life. And Banquo's safe?"

"Aye, my good lord. Safe in a ditch he bides, with twenty gashes on his head and body—each in itself a death to nature."

"Thanks for that. There the grown serpent lies—the worm that's fled hath no teeth for the present. Get thee gone, fellow. Tomorrow seek me out, you shall not fail of reward. A king's promise. And Fleance

fled! You shall not leave the task incomplete. Now go—else we shall be marked in converse.”

Cedric needed no second bidding. The king's haggard countenance, his disjointed sentences, the evident terror that shook him, warned the murderer that his own reward might be other than he expected. So, raising the curtain behind him, he slipped away.

The murmur of voices in the banqueting hall beyond told the king that his merry guests were assembled. With a supreme effort after self-control he turned from the alcove and walked with firm step towards the seat at the head of the central table near which the queen was standing.

A queen—his queen—Scotland's queen. How many more deeds of blood would be necessary for establishing that honor he had claimed so treacherously for himself and this woman he loved?

CHAPTER XVIII

A STRANGE BANQUET

THE king held revel. Torches flared and smoked from the iron cressets on the walls, the great hall was crowded with guests, whilst hounds and falcons lay or strutted about over the reed-strewn floor, gnawing at bones or pecking the stray grains of corn.

It was a gay and busy scene, not lacking in animation, though possessing none of the splendor of later reigns. At the central table, which ran down the greater length of the hall, were seated the principal guests of the nobility, the chieftains, long-haired and stately, the rich and variegated colors interwoven in their plaids, making brave display with their saffron shirts; and yet more splendid in their array were their wives, round whose necks hung many jeweled chains, whilst jewels sparkled in the great buckles of the belts which girded their plaids below their breasts. At the head of this central table were the two seats reserved for the king and queen.

In a wider circle were the benches, occupied by servants and dependents, whilst in and out, hurrying to and fro, were the boys and girls who waited alike on all the guests, carrying dishes heaped with viands of all descriptions, fish from the lochs, flesh from the rich pastures, fowl from the moor-side and forests. Liquor, too, flowed freely and was brought in drinking vessels of horn and timber, the latter named *methir*, being two-handed and

holding from one to three pints. Standing to the right of the central table was a white-haired bard, his harp before him. His was the task of singing brave songs of noble deeds and gallant fights to stir the blood of Scotia's sons and daughters, whilst lighter music for dancing and merry-making would be supplied in the skirl of pipes, which should provoke laughter, shouting, all the mad turmoil of revelry, when liquor had fired the blood, and the banquet should be at its height.

Oh, but it was to be a merry feasting in the palace of Macbeth the king tonight! A merry feasting in that grim castle, once the home of other murdered monarchs.

And who to laugh more gaily than Queen Gruoch, as she stood, radiant in her mature loveliness, to bid her husband's guests welcome?

Beside her stood the king—a proud figure of majesty, who gazed around with the lordly eye of a conqueror as he saw flushed faces raised to him and his queen, tankards and drinking vessels raised, whilst from hundreds of throats came hails to the king.

"All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter."

He was king indeed tonight—now Banquo was dead. He raised a cup to his own lips—his hand shook.

Now Banquo was dead.

But he would not think of the dead tonight. Gruoch was smiling joyously on all around. How beautiful she was—how happy!

Was it possible this was she who lay by his side all night moaning and weeping in her sleep because of the horror that haunted the darkness?

Hugh the bard struck the strings of his harp; long, rippling cadences, which soon resolved themselves into stirring melody.

A splendid voice, a splendid theme, both ringing up to the low rafters of the great hall.

How the blood even of the lowest serf was stirred by such tales of victory. But be sure the heroes of Hugh's song were not Malcolm the Victorious or Duncan the Gracious, but rather Kenneth the Grim and his stern father before him.

Brave battles fought, gallant victories won—of such sang Hugh the bard, and his song was echoed by the shouts of the revelers, so that Bethoc looked from her seat beside Lennox to gaze with half-frightened eyes around.

She was looking for Banquo, Malcolm's friend, who, above all others, she was ready to count her friend in that noisy crowd of feasters.

But Banquo came not, and the king had risen, passing to and fro between his guests with that pleasant familiarity by which he set himself to win popularity.

How the world laughed tonight—and he with it. What matter if the moonlight was cold without where Banquo lay?

In a ditch was it that yon black-browed murderer showed the corpse to lie hid?

Again—what matter, so long as he were dead? If only Fleance were with his father.

The king gritted his teeth, and then laughed at the jest of a red-bearded Thane who hugged his brimming *methir* as though it were his sweetheart encircled by loving arms.

Laugh! Why, yes, of course he laughed! Was he not merry? Gruoch was merry too—he paused to watch her as she leaned forward to address Rosse. How gracious was her gesture; the flare of torches showed the

whiteness of her swan-like neck and the ruddy crown of her hair.

Ah! he would sin again to hell for such a woman. And there would be no need for further sin—now Banquo was dead. That last had been necessary. Banquo had learned the way of ambition, as he himself had learned it.

An ambitious subject is a king's danger.

Had Duncan known that truth he might have been alive today, sitting in the king's seat.

Sitting . . . in . . . the king's . . . seat. . . .

Macbeth, having made a tour of the hall, had turned and was pacing slowly back. He did not laugh now, and his brow was clouded.

"Would that Banquo were here," he lied aloud, thinking how well the memory of such words would sound upon the morrow. "Is it unkindness or mischance that keeps him from the feast? We are tempted to fear the former."

"His absence shames his promise," replied Lennox, the glib courtier. "Please it your highness to grace us with your royal company?"

"The table's full," smiled the king—and his restless gaze traveled slowly up the board, seeing faces that smiled back sleekly to his own regard, masking all feeling to that of smooth courtiership.

"There's a place reserved, my liege," murmured Rosse, and glanced towards the empty seat beside the queen's. But what had seized Macbeth? What fear was this which suddenly convulsed features which a second before had been smiling urbanely round upon his friends?

He was looking towards that empty seat—and as he gazed he appeared to fall into some strange catalepsy.

His dark hair seemed to move and stand on end, splashes of froth showed upon his beard, his clenched hands were raised as though to ward off the leap of some deadly, crouching foe, his eyes were fixed in horror as they gazed.

Gazed upon what? Thus each startled guest whispered to his neighbor as he or she glanced first at the empty seat—then at the trance-like figure of the king, whose fixed gaze seemed riveted on some vision of horror. But none of those who looked, whispering and afraid, as a sudden awe and hush fell on all around, saw the shadowy thing which had filled the king's seat.

A thing which, out of nothing, slowly gathered the semblance of a man. Yes, a man. Macbeth could have sworn that he beheld each fold of the pleated plaid, the jeweled belt, the saffron shirt, with wide sleeves falling aside from the strong arms—knew, too, the features of that terrible apparition—noted how blood flecked the gray beard, whilst gaping, hideous wounds had torn the features and showed red rents upon the head where gray locks lay matted in gore.

A thing of dread—of terror—showing death's tragic face; but—strangest of all—the eyes were fixed, not in death's unseeing stare, but in bright and terrible menace upon the shrinking king.

Eyes of blue fire which accused a murderer and arraigned him to the judgment seat of God. The eyes of Banquo.

An age seized Macbeth, he put out a cold hand and clutched at the shoulder of his nearest neighbor to steady himself, whilst all the time he looked towards that empty seat.

“Which of you have done this?” he panted. “Which of you?”

His wife had risen and was hurrying towards him. She saw no ghost, yet feared as much as though she had, seeing how near the king was to self-betrayal.

"What is it that moves your highness?" asked Lennox.

All echoed the question.

But Macbeth did not reply—he only muttered as a delirious man might do, pointing towards his seat.

"Thou canst not say, I did it," he mouthed. "Never shake thy gray locks at me."

The words ended in a scream, as the speaker hid his face in his sleeve.

"Gentlemen, rise," quoth Rosse, springing to his feet. "His highness is not well."

But the queen, having reached her husband's side, and twining one arm about him, faced their startled and uneasy guests.

She still smiled in perfect self-command.

"Sit, worthy friends," she urged. "My lord is often thus, and hath been from his youth. I pray you, keep seated. He will soon be well again. Feast on and regard him not, for such notice but increases his spleen and irritates the passing malady. He'll soon be well."

As she spoke, calming jangled nerves and satisfying the curious, she drew the king apart.

He yielded to her touch, but kept his wild eyes still fixed upon the seat which, to his vision alone, was not empty, but filled by that dreadful thing which might be Banquo's self—a blood-stained, murdered self, whose eyes accused him, though he had sworn that never in this life should he again read their reproach.

"Are you a man?" murmured the queen, meaning to lash him by her scorn.

But he was past the shame of scorning.

"Aye, and a bold one," he retorted huskily. "Who dares look on that which might appal the devil."

A violent shudder shook him.

"Oh, proper stuff!" sneered the woman at his side, desperate to make him realize his folly. "This is the very painting of your fear; this is the air-drawn dagger which, you said, led you to Duncan. Shame! Shame! These tremors and starts, blanchings and cries, would better suit a woman. Shame on great Macbeth! Why do you make such faces? When all's done, you look but on a stool."

Her husband's clutch tightened on her arm till she could have cried out with the pain.

"See there!" he gasped. "See there! Behold! Look! Lo! How say you *now*? Why, what care I"—a sudden frenzy shook him, mockery in league with terror, as he watched that strange thing which to him seemed tangible enough—blood-stained, menacing. The ghost of murdered Banquo. "If thou canst nod, speak too!" he adjured, babbling towards the empty seat after the fashion of a man demented. "If charnel houses and our graves must send those that we bury, back, our monuments shall be the maws of kites."

Slowly, very slowly, that which had sat within the king's seat faded back into the shadows from which it had resolved itself. Mists mingled with mists. The seat was empty. Only the memory of those accusing eyes remained to bring a sweating horror on their seer.

"What!" giped the fierce queen, "quite unmanned in folly."

The king looked at her. The color returned but slowly to his cheeks. "If I stand here, I saw him," he avowed. She only mocked, crying shame on weak

fancies, seeing how their guests looked askance towards the spot where they stood in whispered converse.

Macbeth passed his hand across his brow as though striving to brush away an ill-omened memory.

"Blood hath been shed ere now," he muttered. "Cruel murders have been committed, aye, crimes too monstrous to be told again. Yet such victims, dying, there was an end. But now the dead rise again, with twenty mortal murders on their crowns and push us from our stools. What means this? Tell me—tell me—for here is something more strange than murder?"

The queen herself was pale enough by now. Was this mere fantasy or had Macbeth indeed seen some ghastly vision such as haunted her own slumbers? But danger rallied her courage—was not the blood of Kenneth the Grim in her veins?

"Come," she urged, "our guests await us. They ask what ails you."

Macbeth started as a man rousing from a dream to find the instant need of wit to save himself from some threatened danger.

As Gruoch had said, all eyes were turned towards them—many of the assembled company whispered together; it was apparent that the keenest curiosity was roused.

And might not tonight's curiosity be tomorrow's suspicion? With a firm step and clearing brow Macbeth approached the seat which had lately held so gruesome a tenant. If he felt sickly qualms in filling such a place he masked his distaste with a boisterous laugh.

"Pardon me, most worthy friends," he cried aloud, glancing around, his hand in that of his wife, "and think no more of this slight break in our carousing. I have . . . a strange infirmity, which is nothing to those that

know me. Come, love and health to all. Then . . . I'll sit down. Give me some wine. Fill full. I drink to the general joy of the whole table!"

He raised the great *methir* he held in both hands, and quaffed the wine it held with great gulps—a long, deep draught to fire his veins and bid mock at his own fears. Ah! the generous wine. He was better—bolder—now. Terror had fled. There were no ghosts amongst the dregs of the wine cup. So he proceeded with a defiant gaiety which impressed his hearers, "and to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss," cried he, raising the cup again. "Would he were here! To all, and him, we thirst, and all to all."

The assembled company were on their feet, shouts and laughter echoed the king's jovial toasts. Flagons, tankards, horns were raised, wine was quaffed, cheers and hails were called. It was to the king they looked—the king who, with laughter at his fears upon his lips, found those fears return to haunt him once again.

Was it a shadow which slipped from behind the pillars round the hall? Ah! if so, never might such shadows fall across his path!

A shadow which gradually took shape and form. The form of Banquo—dead Banquo, murdered Banquo, which flitted in and out around the hall, brushing unsuspecting guests with shadowy raiment.

Was it a fancy? Had fancy such a shape? He saw the clotted gore about the broad temples, the matted hair, the gashed and bleeding features, noted the disordered dress, the gallant bearing of a noble form; but above all, he saw those eyes. Eyes which were ever fixed on his with weird, compelling gaze. Eyes which henceforward must always haunt his memory—be with

him when he ate or drank or rode, be with him in battle and in peace, prosperity and adversity, haunt his couch at night, so that he would fear the horrid darkness which hid the features from which those eyes shone forth. Those hateful eyes, whose glance would never leave his, till he, like Banquo, was launched into dread eternity.

A cold numbness bound the king in its icy spell as, with the great tankard still in his hand, he turned to watch that flitting, wraith-like figure which glided in and out amongst the living company, unseen by any but himself.

"Avaunt!" his parched lips muttered, "and quit my sight! Let . . . the earth hide thee. Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood . . . is cold. Thou hast no speculation in those eyes . . . which thou . . . dost glare with."

The risen guests stared in new amaze.

What fit was this? Had any seen the king so before?

Why! this was some strange madness of the brain, descending like a pall in midst of merriment.

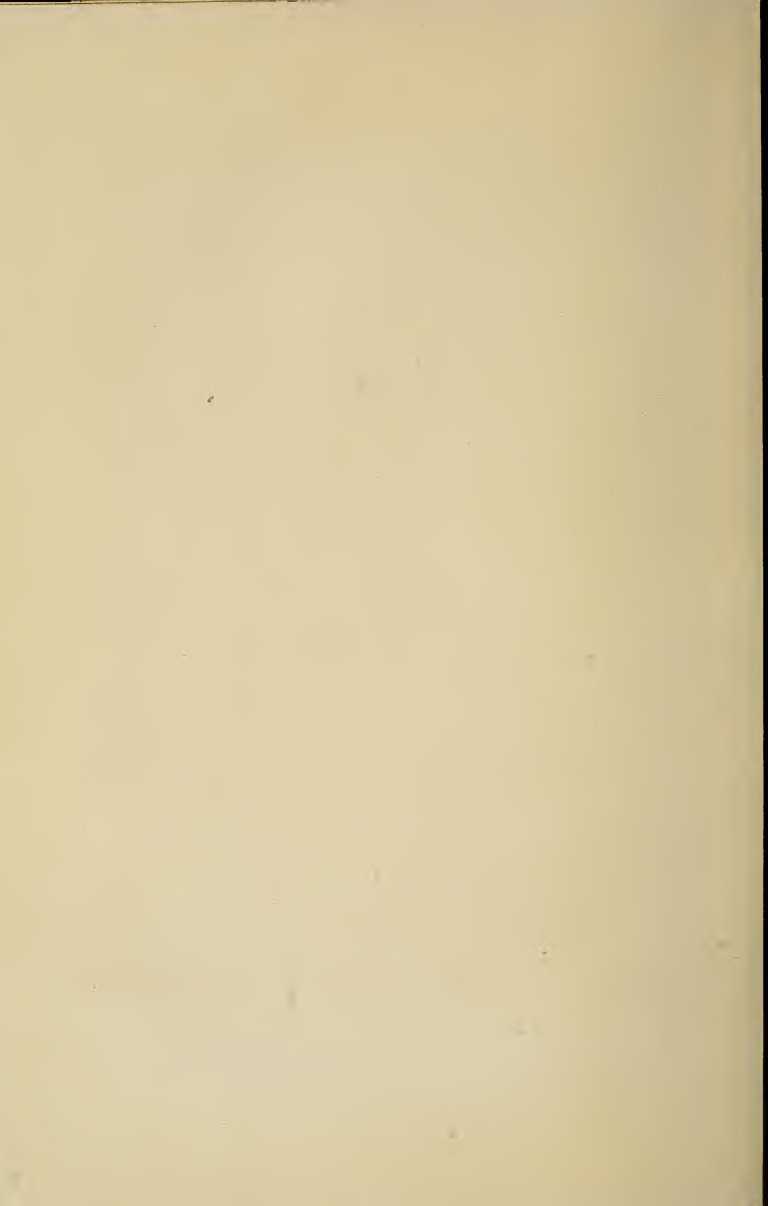
"Think of this, good peers, but as a thing of custom," urged the queen, barely retaining but calm dignity; "'tis no more. Only it spoils the pleasure of the time."

"Who would dare approach thee?" muttered Macbeth, his haggard face convulsed, whilst, though he clung to his wife, his askance glance still wandered round the hall, compelled by the ghastly menace of a dead man's eyes. "If thou wast but alive again—I would slay thee with my sword, and have no fear. It is this shape which makes me tremble—this horrible shadow which beckons on a road. A road to grim despair. Yet how unreal a mockery. Avaunt!"

His lips frothed, his whole figure shook.



“Avaunt! and quit my sight.”



This was illness indeed—and the guests, now thoroughly alarmed, had left their seats, and stood grouped about the hall, whispering and talking together of what this might portend, what might best be done.

But even as they spoke, glancing towards the pale king and queen, the former appeared to grow calmer, the tense muscles of his face relaxed, his eyes grew less fixed in their regard, and he drew a deep breath of relief.

“Gone!” he cried. “Gone! And so—being gone—I am a man again. Pray you, friends, sit still.”

But the queen interposed. Another such frenzy might betray the truth, which, as yet, she alone had guessed.

“Nay, my lord,” she replied. “You are too ill, and, being ill, all mirth has fled the feast, and all the pleasure of it gone. So, having out-stayed pleasure, we are best to bed.”

“Can such things be?” sighed the king; “but to me, friends, the greater wonder is that you should have all beheld such sights unmoved, whilst my cheeks were blanched in fear.”

“What sights, my liege?” questioned Rosse, across whose nimble brain suspicions flitted bat-like.

Again the queen, growing more nervous as she saw the lurking doubt in the young chieftain’s eyes, interposed.

“I pray you, speak not to the king,” she pleaded, with wifely solicitude; “he grows worse and worse. Questions enrage him. I will bid you good-night, my lords; stand not upon the order of your going—but go at once.”

She could not conceal all her agitation, for which, however, she found sufficient excuse. She longed to be

alone with her husband, knowing that in his present state of frenzy he might betray both himself and her by some wild allusion to the death of Duncan.

Her command was obeyed—and lacking the usual pomp of ceremony, which, like all usurpers, Macbeth insisted should be observed in his court, the king and queen were escorted to their apartments. On the threshold Lennox lingered.

“Good-night, your majesty,” he said, with deep reverence, bending to kiss the trembling hand the queen extended. “And better health attend the king.”

He glanced past the stately figure before him, noting how Macbeth had sunk into a chair, where he lay cowering, his face shrouded by his arms.

It was, indeed, a strange illness.

“A kind good-night to all,” answered the queen. But her voice shook as she spoke.

CHAPTER XIX

FLEANCE ESCAPES

THE king had risen from his seat as the door closed upon courtiers and attendants, and as his wife hastened back to his side, he put out his hands with a groping gesture, as though to push something from him.

"It will have blood!" he wailed, with the plaintiveness of a sick man, "they say, blood will have blood. Stones have been known to move and trees to speak. Dread augurs of every kind and nature have betrayed the most secret criminal."

"Hush," urged the queen, growing timorous in her turn as fear clutched at her heart, and with startled gaze she looked over her shoulder, as though for her too dead Banquo's eyes haunted the shadows. "When you have slept, these sick fancies will pass."

She dared not frame the question which trembled on her lips. Did she not know by her lord's wild mood that Banquo was dead—most likely Fleance too.

Ah! the heaping of these dread crimes! Each fresh one necessary to hide that first which was her doing.

When attendants came she dismissed them, repeating that the king was ill and grew delirious at sight of many faces. Surely all would be marveling at this! And yet—better surmises than certainty! Every moment she expected her husband to shriek out confession of some past guilt.

"How goes the night?" he asked wearily as, half unrobed, he lay back, his head pillowed against the queen's shoulder, lack-lustre eyes fixed on hers.

"The dawn will soon break," she answered, and stared drearily into the darkness.

Out there lay the quiet dead. Banquo and Fleance dead.

Ah, God! would the horror of these deeds never end?

"Tomorrow," muttered Macbeth, "I will seek out those weird sisters. They shall tell me more. I must know all that the future holds—all. By the worst means, I'm bent to learn the worst—for mine own good. Do I wade deep in blood? Why! if so, I must wade deeper. To return now would be as tedious as to reach the farther shore. I will go on—on—. I will act, not think how or why I act, till it is done. I am the king—all must give way to that. Listen, Gruoch. A purpose stirs within me which I have scanned many a time. A purpose to prove the loyalty of these Thanes of mine and to accomplish a yet deeper design. In Perthshire is a certain hill known as Dunsinane, situate in Gowrie, which rises to so proud a height that a man standing aloft thereon may behold beneath him all the counties of Angus, Fife, Stermond and Ernsdale. Upon Dunsinane's high hill, therefore, I will build me a strong castle, and so that the charges be less, I will cause the Thanes of such shires within the realm to come and help towards that building—each man his course about. So in this way I will gain a stronghold and know the temper of my vassals."

"It is well thought of," soothed the queen, glad that his mind should be diverted. "So, in building, you will set firmer foundations to your kingdom."

“My kingdom,” echoed her husband. “My kingdom—mine. But whose thereafter? Why have I no son to whom that so dearly won should descend? Thus should I found a mighty line of kings. Why have I no son?—but stand, a barren tree, which may be blasted by any breath of outraged Heaven. There is no peace in this, Gruoch. But, by Sinel’s death! I’ll make my own peace. Those who hailed me king shall show me my sons’ sons upon the throne, which hath cost me dearly, I vow it.”

The restless fit was on him again, his dark eyes brooded gloomily upon the fair face of his wife.

“Is not Lulach as a son to you, my liege?” pleaded Gruoch, clasping her hands above her heart to still its fierce beating. “Lulach, my son—by your love and guardianship, son to you likewise. Shall he not be your heir?”

“Better he than Fleance,” muttered Macbeth; “better he than Malcolm. These are worms who will grow to serpents if we do not scotch them. If they were dead”

The queen paled.

“Then Fleance is not dead?” she breathed, and could almost feel relief as she thought of the rosy-faced boy who had seemed so full of life and joyance a few hours since.

“Not dead,” replied Macbeth; “but he shall die. It must be so. Did not the woman—weird prophetess of hell—cry ‘*thou shalt get kings.*’ If Fleance dies, that prophecy shall fail. So he must die. I’ll see to that.”

Muttering, cursing, with occasional deep-drawn breaths as of one who grows weary in seeking what he cannot hope to find, the king slept at last, worn out by his

excitement and fear; but the woman who sat by his side, resting back against the wall, did not sleep. Wide-eyed, she watched the blacker shadows of the night flee and the gray dawn break. The dawn that showed the queen of Scotland as a wan-faced woman, her gaze fixed in blank despair upon the void before her, her ruddy locks streaming in dishevelment about her bowed shoulders.

It was the same dawn which found Bethoc standing ready-gowned on the threshold of her room.

The young girl had quitted the banqueting-hall on the preceding evening long before her stepfather's strange seizure had brought an abrupt conclusion to the revelry.

Truth to tell, Bethoc had been in no mood for gaiety, though she was not unhappy. Her earlier meeting with Banquo, the welcome news concerning Malcolm, which had stirred her hungry desire for a lover's presence, had given her food for sweet meditation which could not be indulged in in the midst of loud-voiced mirth.

She had waited for a time, hoping to see Banquo, but when he came not, she took an early opportunity to rise and steal away to her own chamber.

Not that she slept. For hours she had lain wakeful on her couch, her thoughts busy—thoughts of Banquo—Macbeth—Malcolm. a strange trio from whom stranger fears were bred.

And when Bethoc slept, her dreams were ill—so ill that she was glad to rise and escape from that night-mare-haunted room out into the morning sunshine.

Oh, it was good to wander alone at dawning, through autumn woods, and dream of a love which had come to her in a spring-tide—so long ago, as it seemed—so long ago.

Memories were busy, stirred by Banquo's tale, so that the woods around seemed lighter with a new glory to the eyes of a maid who dwelt on a lover's tale of vows remembered, hopes still cherished.

A blackbird cried its warning to all the woodland tribe from a bank near. Bethoc paused, her hand upon the lobe of a giant beech.

Footsteps were coming up the path towards the castle — men's footsteps — slowly shuffling — slowly shuffling. Knowing not wherefore, the girl's heart filled with vague foreboding.

What footsteps were these that came towards Forres? Laggard steps, as though their owners dragged weary limbs under a weary burden.

Workpeople perchance, carrying timber towards the courtyard, where it should be hewn into logs for winter fueling.

Oh, the coldness of the winter—and the chill; but why should such strike at a girl's heart as she watched two men come into sight carrying a burden between them.

It was at the burden Bethoc looked, and knew it to be no weight of timber. It was a man's body, and as she gazed, half swooning in terror, she noted how a man's hand hung down over the side of the improvised litter.

There was a ring on that hand which she recognized. She had seen it last upon the finger of Banquo.

With a supreme effort she forced herself to step forward, facing the men—rough kernes whose names she knew not.

“Who is that you carry between you?” she asked, and her voice sounded then as the whistling of wind through dry reeds.

The foremost fellow blinked at her owl-like, for the

morning sun was in his eyes and he did not recognize the speaker.

"It is the Lord Banquo," said he, "who we found foully murdered in the forest but now, aye, and his servant beside him. An' ye be a woman, look not on so woeful a sight, for many sore gashes has the lord, and in each a death." But his warning came too late, for Bethoc had looked and seen that from which the screening plaid had fallen back.

A woeful sight indeed, as the kerne had said—a woeful and bloody sight. And this was Banquo! Banquo! Malcolm's friend, Duncan's faithful servant, Macbeth's . . . Macbeth's . . . Bethoc caught her hand to her throat to force back a scream of agony.

In a flash she had seen another picture beside that of the hacked and murdered man lying there so broken and helpless—and the other picture was that of a dark passage, lit only by the flickering beams of a lantern, and a man and woman creeping back like guilty shadows, with blood-smear'd fingers and frightened eyes.

The men passed on—wondering, when they saw that young maid, with her black uncovered tresses and wide blue eyes, leaning there against the tree trunk, but neither screaming nor swooning at sight of that which had made strong men shudder.

The lass would be the mother of gallant sons one day, they told each other, when they were out of ear-shot—but Bethoc stood there in the sunlight, and behold, the world was black before her!

Presently, however, she roused herself. A voice called her—no human voice, but that of a dead man's demand. What of Fleance? Had she not promised Banquo to be his friend should ill befall?

And ill *had* befallen. Had Banquo known it might? Had he seen the danger which had stolen upon him in a forest—no longer fair to Bethoc as the home of singing birds, but terrible as the stalking-ground of black-hearted murderers.

And behind those murderers—*Who?*

The girl shivered, drawing her plaid about her.

Had Banquo died because he had once been the king's friend? Had the king hated him, as she heard he hated the Thane of Fife, who had ridden from Inverness immediately after King Duncan's murder, and refused to come to court or swear fealty to King Macbeth?

Who could answer these things?

Not Bethoc, indeed; and the young girl, rousing at length from her lethargy, raised her head, as though answering that voiceless call.

She must find Fleance—if Fleance were alive—and save him. Instinctively she knew he would need to be saved. He who had deemed it necessary to slay the servant would not spare the son.

But before she started on this wild search, which had no definite goal, she knelt down and joined trembling hands in prayer.

God would guide her if she asked him. God would guide her and save Fleance. Yes, yes, she prayed that Fleance might be saved—that she might help to save him.

Was the prayer heard? Sceptics may laugh, mockers may answer, "Nay, the matter was fated so to chance"—but Bethoc, looking up through the leafy canopy of trees towards the blue vault above her, thanked God with the simplicity of a grateful child, as she spied Fleance on the path before her.

Then, rising, she went to him, knelt again and twined strong, loving young arms about him.

Poor child! he was himself but a ghost of the rosy, happy little lad who had filled the queen's heart with envy yesterday. His hazel eyes were red-rimmed with weeping, his cheeks were white and there was a great swelling on his left temple where he had struck against a rock in falling.

He was dazed, too, with long unconsciousness and preceding shock.

"Where am I?" he asked. "What has happened?" Then, seeing Bethoc's sad and pitying face, he laid his curly head down on her breast, and long sobs shook him.

"It is not true," he moaned. "Bethoc, dear Bethoc, say it is not true that my father is dead? It was only a dreadful dream I had, that men leapt out to strike him down to death. Only a dream, that he cried out bidding me fly—so that I might live to revenge."

His eyes dilated as he raised his quivering face to hers, seeking consolation, which, alas! she could not give.

"My little Fleance," sobbed Bethoc; "oh, my little friend! If I could but give thy father back to thee."

The boy clung to her in a paroxysm of dread.

"You will not say he is dead?" he cried. "It was only an evil dream, dear Bethoc. I have often had bad dreams before, but *he* has been near to comfort me. Take me to him now. He is all I have—and I love him. I love him so."

"Hush," implored Bethoc. "Fleance, thou must not weep. Think of thy father, all he would bid thee do and be. Be brave, as he was brave. Oh! do not cry, poor lad. It is true he is dead. The noble Banquo is dead—God avenge his murder. But be sure his dying prayer was for thy escape. He bade thee fly, Fleance."

The boy closed his eyes.

"Dead!" he whispered. "My father dead! My brave and gallant father! How could he go—leaving me behind? And yet—help me, Bethoc, help me to escape. I *will* escape. I will not be murdered too; and one day I will revenge as he bade me."

A burning spot of color dyed each of the boy's pale cheeks; a sudden, unchildlike flash gleamed in his eyes. He quivered from head to foot, either in fear or hate—Bethoc could not determine which.

But she was glad he understood that his father was dead—and he in personal peril.

"Do not let them kill me too, Bethoc," he entreated. "My father told me often you were his friend."

"Yes," said the girl, "your friend and his, and—and also the friend of Malcolm Canmore, he who should be . . . should be But no! You would not understand *that*, poor babe—and all my heart aches for the wonder of how and where I shall safely bestow you."

"I would I were in England with Prince Malcolm," sighed Fleance. "Yesterday, my . . . my father and I went down to the little village near here. There was a Flemish captain who was sailing for England today. My father gave him messages for Prince Malcolm; and when we rode away he said to me, half jesting, 'Shall we sail in yon ship tomorrow, boy? I think it would be safer.' Then he grew grave and would speak no more. And . . . and now he will *never* speak, because he is dead, and I would I were dead too, for I am so lonely—and so afraid."

Nor could Bethoc hope to comfort him, for here was a wound beyond her healing—a wound which had riven deep into the child's heart, so that he would carry the scar to his grave.

But all these words of Fleance's had given Bethoc an inspiration which grew to definite shape, though many a difficulty hedged it round and threatened her with danger. Could she but contrive to get Fleance safely aboard the Flemish ship, all would be well. Its captain was evidently known to both Malcolm and Banquo; he would undertake the charge—and she was very sure that the orphan child would find safe asylum under Malcolm's protection.

Those who had searched and found the father over night would be searching for and finding the son this morning. Within this forest, even now, the footsteps of murderers might be approaching.

What if such foul-hearted villains found them as they stood here and leapt upon this pretty boy, slaying him before her eyes?

So fear grew in her heart and had to be hidden for the child's sake. He must not know she trembled at the rustling of every dead leaf upon the pathway. She must hearten him by the proof of her own courage.

"Listen, chick," quoth she. "How would you like to sail in that same ship to find Malcolm Canmore? Be sure he will save you from your enemies and teach you . . . teach you the way of revenge."

The boy's eyes sparkled and he caught Bethoc's hand.

"Let us go now," he urged. "You and I. Let us go now before our murderers come."

But Bethoc shook her head.

"Not now—or thus," she said. "Your enemies may be abroad, searching for you, poor babe. You must go secretly, if you go at all—and in other care than mine."

Yet as she spoke, her heart ached with longing. Ah! if she could but go to England—and Malcolm Canmore.

But that was impossible; and so, with brave resolution, she who was scarcely more than a child herself, set to the task before her.

“You remember one Kenneth called Swift-foot?” she asked Fleance. “He brought the message of my stepfather’s victory to King Duncan; thus much he told me, aye! and more too, for he, this honest kerne loves Prince Malcolm and your noble father. When he hears what I would claim of him in service he will be ready to do it. Thus you shall go to England.”

But Fleance, being very weary, hungry and sick with the pain of his aching head, only flung himself into Bethoc’s arms weeping drearily, because she had said that she, his friend, could not come with him—and also because his dear father being dead, he was a very lonely and desolate little boy.

CHAPTER XX

A MESSAGE TO ENGLAND

“KENNETH!”

The kerne, squatting upon a stack of dried bracken, looked up with a start.

It was a woman who spoke to him—but what woman? He was not the man whom bonnie-faced lasses were likely to come a-trysting, and there were shadows where he sat, so that at first he did not see her face.

When he did, however, he was instantly on his feet, bowing before the Lady Bethoc.

Such a proud little slip of a girl was this—a chieftain's daughter every inch, with her slender build and erect carriage.

And there was something in the flash of the blue eyes that told Kenneth Swift-foot service would be demanded of him.

Well! he would serve, it was a necessity of his state—but, if he prayed o' nights, the soldier's prayers were that he might be Malcolm Canmore's man.

Bethoc seated herself on the stack of bracken, as though it were a royal throne, and beckoned Kenneth back to kneel beside her.

“Lord Banquo is dead,” said she in an undertone.

Kenneth's rugged face grew grim.

“Lady, I have seen him,” he replied.

“He was murdered,” went on Bethoc, finding speech more difficult than she expected.

"That, too, I know," retorted Kenneth.

The girl's eyes hardened. "'Twas because he served Malcolm Canmore," she said; "but Kenneth—his son lives."

The kerne glanced cautiously around.

Rumor was already buzzing about the palace, and Fleance's name had been whispered.

"The little lord," muttered the man; "the little lord."

"Must escape," urged Bethoc, clasping her hands; "he has enemies, Kenneth. Those who sought the life of the father seek that of the son. But he must escape—and you must help me. Will you do this, Kenneth, for the sake of your old leader, Lord Banquo? for the sake of one who may be your new leader one day, Prince Malcolm, son of murdered Duncan."

"They say," mouthed Kenneth, gaping, "that the son slew the father, but I wot it is a lie."

"A lie!" Bethoc's tones were scornful. "Oh! very truly is it a lie," she mocked. "But tell me, Kenneth, you will do this thing, even if death repays discovery?"

"Death and I have been bedfellows too often, lady, for me to fear his shadow. What shall I do, who am but a poor kerne, with little wit, but for the slaying of foes and the carrying of a message?"

"It shall be a living message you carry to the court of the English king. Fleance shall tell Prince Malcolm how his father died. I think one day red vengeance will flame upon a guilty land. But now there is haste. Canst have horses yonder by the blasted beech at the head of the glen tonight at eight? If so, we'll come at the appointed hour. Not before, since searchers will be

abroad, looking for the colt which fled when its sire fell."

"I will be there," lady.

"I thank you, Kenneth. Thence you shall ride to Findhorn, taking the circuit of the moors to avoid being seen. A Flemish captain, to whom Fleance will guide you, shall take charge of him. Having seen him aboard, on his way to England, return and tell me how you sped. You understand?"

"Lady, no word has 'scaped me. Three years ago the noble Banquo saved me at risk of his own life in a fierce fight with certain gallowglasses from the western isles. The life he saved shall be offered in service to his son. There's naught in that but common gratitude."

Bethoc smiled sadly. "A too uncommon virtue, good Kenneth," she replied. "Well, I must be going, for suspicion-flies buzz noisily in yonder castle, till I long to be some humble serf in a hut of wattle, yet in peace, rather than resting a weary head beneath a palace roof. There's disquiet at Forres."

"They say a king was murdered there, lady."

"Peace, fellow. I'll hear no talk of such. Shall Forres be haunted as Inverness was? O Banquo, Banquo! Nobler than many kings, how ill a fate was thine! But we'll save the son, Kenneth, and he shall be our messenger to the prince."

The fire of her enthusiasm inspired the soldier, who, stooping yet lower, raised a corner of her embroidered robe and pressed it to his lips.

"Lady, I am ready," he replied huskily.

Yet when Bethoc had gone, flitting stealthily back to the castle for fear of meeting those who might inquire her errand, Kenneth Swift-foot did not immediately

resume his seat on the stack of bracken. Instead, he slipped quietly round it and pounced like any mousing owl upon the man who crouched in deeper shadows.

"So, so," he muttered, hauling at Cedric by the collar; "so you play the eavesdropper, friend. What business have you in this matter?"

The villain he held twisted beneath his grip.

"Have a care!" he squealed, "or you will be reckoning with the king."

That set Kenneth thinking, and though he was no subtle arguer, he was a straightforward actor, so, seeing King Macbeth and Prince Malcolm at opposite ends of his duty, he made this matter safe by dealing Cedric such a blow as would have sent an ox down in the shambles.

"Safe bind, safe find," muttered Kenneth with a chuckle, as he surveyed the unconscious figure of the glib threatener.

"And till the little lord be fled, thou are best dumb. Heigh!"

With a grunt he unfastened his own belt and that of his victim and lashed arms and legs securely; then, having fixed a gag in the fellow's mouth, he succeeded in pushing the limp body on to the top of the bracken stack, where he covered it carefully.

"An' this were good shovelfuls of earth and that bed thy last resting place, it were better for the world," he apostrophized into deaf ears. "Well! sleep sound and awake thirsty. That's a benison which, being uttered, I'll remember what's like to follow and contrive to quit Forres for good and all before the king calls me to account. The king! The king—and Banquo. Why, I saw them fight side by side against the Norsemen, brothers in

heart and love. Yet today Banquo lies dead and murdered, whilst it is necessary the *king* should not know whither Banquo's son be fled. Well, well, well. I like not these murders and talks of murders, remembering Inverness and good King Duncan. Ah! if Duncan's son were king, I'd be a more loyal soul than now I am. As for yon hulking lumber, my dirk is hungry to let daylight into him. But it may not be done i' cold blood. Now for horses and a prosperous happening when Banquo's son seeks English shores."

What a day that was! Poor Bethoc was not likely to forget it. With a boldness which a wiser intriguer would never have dared venture on, she had brought Fleance to the castle and concealed him in her own room—that very room which her stepfather had once occupied and wherein King Duffus had been murdered.

Here Fleance slept, outworn by weariness and pain, whilst Bethoc made plea of sickness to excuse her coming forth.

And Nature abetted the trick, since wan enough was the poor girl after her vigil and distress, whilst dread brought sick faintness to her heart at times when any approached her room.

Lulach was the most importunate, and had to be driven away with sharp complaining words, so that the boy went pouting and grumbling at his sister's unkindness. But Bethoc need not have feared suspicion, for who could have dreamt that the eagerly sought Fleance was hiding within the lion's den itself?

So night's welcome mantle spread itself at last over the world. A friendly, quiet night, with glimpses of waning moonlight to show the way to two who sought it. No easy task for Bethoc, since none had yet thought of retiring to their couches within the castle.

Excused from supper by plea of illness, the girl waited till all had assembled in the hall below before creeping from her room. Fleance was beside her, his head and face concealed by a plaid, lest even a casual glance from some passer-by might betray him. Tiptoe they stole together towards the postern. What sentry might be on guard! If it were Colin, Kenneth's friend, all would be well. If not . . . if not. . . . Bethoc gripped her dagger and wondered if for dead Banquo's sake she could strike a coward blow to save his son.

From the hall near came the skirl of pipes. The king must be in gay humor tonight, and the whoop of dancers and the padding of light heels drifted to where two drew back into the darkest shadows of the passage.

What was Bethoc's dread? Why did she make so sure that for the king to know Fleance were here, must mean the signing of Fleance's death-warrant?

Her attendant had told her, when earlier she had brought her food, that the king was in bitter grief over the murder of Lord Banquo.

Bethoc, recalling the same expressions of woe for a murdered king, felt her heart grow hard and scornful. So she hid Fleance closely, and none dreamed of where he lay or what tryst he would keep with Kenneth Swift-foot, since Cedric the black-souled had lain all day under the bracken on the top of the stack, raging and cursing in impotent and dumb fury at his plight and the knowledge that Macbeth would have given a large fee to the one who told him whither Fleance rode that night. A sentry stood by the postern. Bethoc pushed her companion back against the wall and advanced alone.

"Good Colin?" said she, and gripped her dagger, wondering what it would feel like to stab down through

flesh and muscle, praying such stabbing—if necessary—would not be fatal.

But Heaven spared her the necessity.

“Kenneth is without,” muttered the sentry, opening the door. “Go swiftly, return swiftly. There’s death abroad this night.”

Hand in hand the two glided by, leaving a soldier who had loved Duncan to curse a tyrant.

Bethoc’s arms were around Fleance as they stood close to the blasted beech at the head of the glen. Beside them were Kenneth and the horses. The moon sank low. It would be a dark journey.

“God and His fair saints keep you, little friend,” whispered Bethoc, kissing the boy passionately. “When . . . when you see Malcolm Canmore tell him all you know of what has passed, and the part poor Bethoc has played. Tell him . . . I wear the ring . . . he gave me. I do not forget.”

Fleance drew his head back the better to gaze into the speaker’s face.

“Yes,” he replied, “I will tell him all, dear Bethoc. And he will love thee as I love thee, for all thou hast done. One day, too, we shall return—and I shall still be thy little sweetheart grown big, since a sweetheart never changes in his love for his lady, however long the years are, does he? And I love thee, Bethoc.”

His warm young lips clung to hers till Kenneth interposed by lifting him bodily on to his horse’s back—a proceeding which hurt the boy’s pride woefully. But Bethoc stood watching them out of sight as they rode very slowly and carefully down the glen, watched through a mist of tears, whilst one hand rested against the bosom of her gown where a bronze ring with interwoven serpents forming a delicate spiral lay concealed.

CHAPTER XXI

AMBITION FOILED

“LADY, beware!”
It was Colin the sentry who warned.
Bethoc drew back.

“Wherefore?” she breathed.

It was still dark—the dawn would not break for an hour. Kenneth would have returned—to tell her how his mission had sped.

But Colin thrust his face close in the gloom of the passage.

“An hour since,” he breathed, “a man sought the castle. One Cedric, a devil-tarred rogue, who had—for what purpose I wot not—business with the king. So urgent was he, and so threatening, that I let him in—and scarcely was he on his way to rouse other guards to tell the king his business, than Kenneth came to the door.

“Tell the lady,” he said, “that the cat is on the track of the mouse, but the last-named is safe aboard and on his way ere this to England; but, since I helped the mouse out of the cat’s claws, I’d best away to my own hole. So the lady may not see me in this life again. God rest her and give her peace at least concerning that poor mouse. So he went in a flash, lady, and I have given the message, though I pray you say no word of me if the matter’s told abroad.”

He was back at his post as he spoke, whilst Bethoc,

all in a tumult of joy and fear, in which joy weighed the heavier, groped back towards her room. What meant this riddle?

Some rogue who knew or guessed too much was here to see the king. To tell him how Banquo's son escaped, maybe! If so, what would happen?

There could be no rousing of the palace. No swift pursuit. These were secret doings—and if the king knew and approved Banquo's murderer, he could not set him openly after the son.

Well, well! The new day would show many things—and at last she could sleep now that Fleance was safe. Ah! her little friend—how tender had been his kisses. And she had fulfilled her trust : . .

“Halt!”

A lantern's light flashed across her eyes from the open door of her chamber, and only the commanding grip on her arm checked the scream which rose to her lips. It was Macbeth himself who stood there, wrapped in a long dark cloak, his hair unkempt, his dark eyes wild with fear.

He had been searching her room—the room where a king had died—but he had not found what he wanted—had not found what Cedric had told him he might possibly discover. The murderer of Banquo had not heard *all* that Bethoc said to Kenneth Swift-foot when he played the eavesdropper, and the hastily aroused king had come for a swift vengeance, thinking and caring for nothing but the frustration of Ilda the witch's prophecy.

Fleance must die. Banquo's only child should die—even if his own royal hand dealt the dagger thrust.

But he had not found the victim for whom he came in

search. The room was empty. Half crazed by nervous fears and anger he turned to see his young stepdaughter before him.

Bethoc, the frail instrument of fate, who had frustrated his will! How his dark eyes gleamed as he caught her shoulder.

"Where is the boy?" he hissed. "Where is he? He—Banquo's son, whom I must guard—guard and cherish. Fleance—where is he?"

What devilment of mockery was in his glance! How his face convulsed. Self-betrayed he stood, and Bethoc paused, cold in horror before him as suspicion shot up into swift certainty of condemnation.

But she had inherited her parent's reckless fierceness of spirit in addition to a tender womanhood, and answered the angry king at once.

"Fleance is safe," quoth she. "Safe!"—she laughed mirthlessly—"from those who murdered his father. Are you not *glad*, my liege?"

Macbeth's grasp relaxed, his swart face grew gray with anguish, as a man who hears the sentence of fate against himself. He shrank back from the girl who faced him like some bright accusing spirit.

But he did not reply. What use indeed? He had read on her face that she spake truly. Fleance had escaped. He who was Banquo's son lived in spite of pursuing enemies. Nay! was already beyond his power.

The king turned slowly away; for the time despair had gotten him too fast about the throat for him to be able to curse this fragile child who had outwitted and defied him.

Did he ask *why* Bethoc's eyes accused him? Did he ask how much was known to her of his dark deeds—and if to her, to whom besides?

It was a black hour for Macbeth, King of Scotland, lord of all his desire.

But away across the Hard Moor traveled Kenneth Swift-foot. He would not dare to return to Forres, since Cedric the murderer had succeeded in reaching the king before the quietus of death had been dealt him.

Kenneth regretted that he had not dealt that quietus at first, but the idea of dirking an unconscious man had been repugnant.

And now the tables were turned. It was Kenneth who must travel south, seeking the country of Fife and its friendly Moormor Macduff.

Did not all Scotland know how great in love were this Macduff, Prince Malcolm and the dead Banquo?

It was dark as the soldier crossed the desolate heath, where the mists gathered thickly, only to be scattered by the rising wind. A moaning, sobbing wind—no storm-blast, but a weary complaining as of a lost soul's crying there in the gloom.

Kenneth hastened as swiftly as he might across those haunted moors—where fear lurked for him even more than in the danger-fested precincts of the castle. Were they shapes that stole out of the darkness as he passed—swift coming, swift going? Were those whispers that the wind bore across the desolate heath—if so, whither had they come?

From far, mayhap—if peasants were to be believed when they spoke of this moor as the meeting place for witches.

Hark! Was that a laugh, weird and eerie-like, that traveled down the wind? A laugh which echoed on the haunted sands of Seville or beneath the not tree of Benevente, or shrilled perhaps in demoniac glee from

the heights of the Blocula and the Brocken, where witches and evil spirits danced in wildest revelry, mocking and cursing in uproarious mirth when ill had been successfully wrought on fellow men and women.

Laugh who laugh will—but surely it were better to weep than to laugh like that with the agony of lost souls ringing through the mirth with a death-stab. Laugh who laugh will—but witches' glee is an evil thing and only hides the horror of self-damnation, with the shriek of some dread familiar to echo it. How the wind moaned and 'plained as it swept down the pine-crested ravine, from which mocking whispers were tossed back towards the boulder-strewn heath. Whisperings, mutterings and the nameless fear of some giant, bat-winged death brooding around. Gray forms merged themselves in the gray shadows, uncanny, shapeless forms, tossing lean arms upwards with the writhing mist-wraiths. Groveling, cringing forms, which crouched like beaten hounds before that bat-winged death, which in the darkness towered majestic—a queen of hell, perhaps, some pale-browed Hecate, come to call her servants to account. How the whispers grew! Yet the moors seemed empty. Kenneth the soldier had gone on his way. It was the dark hour before the dawn—no stars shone overhead. In such an hour the pale queen of hell might well arraign her subjects.

Had they failed in her death-dealing command? Where was Macbeth? Still a king? A king poised on the giddy heights of ambition, but trembling on the brink of a fathomless abyss. Still—a king! Proud in his self-security. So secure that he never looked to spy a threatened danger. And hell-hounds were on his track. What whispers were these? Why! had not a

whisper damned Macbeth already? "*All hail, thou that shalt be king hereafter.*" What fruit those words had borne already. Lo! were they not the seed from which had sprung the murder of a noble king?—the bloody end of brave Banquo?—the hell-fires which already lapped the soul coveted by the realms of darkness?

But the lure was not complete. Macbeth was king; but even now felt the sting of fear lest—himself an arch plotter—he should be in turn plotted against. So there must be a further tale told to lull him to a false security, yet inspire blacker deeds, before hell yawned and pale Hecate claimed him for her own.

And who should tell the tale so well as the three weird sisters who had met Macbeth, the triumphant general, on his return from loyal battling for his king, and by their hailing made him traitor, damned by his own acts of murder and regicide.

So now again the snare must be set, the lure spread for one who should spurn fate, defy death and so press on, wading through the blood of the innocent to his own confusion.

No wonder the wind wailed over that evil-haunted heath, sobbing and moaning as it swept on towards the black outline of forest, where it scattered autumn leaves in a golden rain upon the sodden turf beneath, and thus onward still further to where the grim old fort of Forres stood stark against the starless sky, and where, at sound of those moaning wails, a man roused himself from the nightmare of his dreams to see a white figure crouched against the stone wall near the unglazed windows, ruddy tresses streaming over its bowed shoulders, whilst a wan face looked out into the black night with wide eyes

which saw, mirrored in the darkness, a dead man's figure lying upon a bed, with the peaceful, noble features of Duncan—the murdered king.

Oh! it had seemed so easy a thing, that swift revenge, and yet with what noiseless, hounding steps another vengeance had pursued those who had planned it.

And Gruoch the queen moaned in echo to the moaning wind, whilst Macbeth the king thought of dead Banquo and shuddered—then of Fleance fled—and cursed.

Yet why should he fear? Was he not the king who was ready to crush all foes beneath his tyrant heel? But yonder on the blasted heath the mists had melted into a clearer darkness, out of which a gray light broke presently to eastwards, whilst with the mists had fled those gray, intangible forms with their fluttering rags, streaming hair and wildly tossing limbs. Aye, fled as the mist wraiths—but whither? To some dark pit of Acheron perhaps, to cast their witches' spells by which Macbeth the king was to be snared to his bitter undoing and Hecate—the pale queen of hell—appeased.

And, as it were, from some dim distance still shrouded by night, floated back the echo of a mocking and very evil laugh.

So had Ilda the witch laughed when she and her sisters had hailed Macbeth and Banquo.

So Ilda the witch laughed again now that Macbeth was king—and Banquo dead.

But it was of Macbeth alone she thought.

The man who had won his ambition.

CHAPTER XXII

“MACDUFF MUST DIE”

“**W**HAT of Macduff?” asked the king gloomily, as he leaned back in his chair, surveying the young officer—Seyton by name—who stood before him. “Hath the Thane of Fife obeyed my command?”

Seyton looked up quickly.

“My liege,” he replied, “the Thane of Fife has sent his men, commanding them to use every diligence so that no occasion of complaint might be given to your majesty, but—the Thane came not himself.”

Macbeth rose to his feet and began pacing to and fro. He was thinner than of yore, and the stormy years of kingship had served to streak his dark locks with premature gray hairs. His eyes appeared sunken, and burned with a strange inward fire; the hand which clutched at his mantle was claw-like in its emaciation.

Yet the indomitable will was the same as ever. The will which caused his subjects to fear him though they hated him for a tyrant.

He had long since put his cherished scheme into execution, and the strong castle built on high Dunsinane hill was very near its completion.* And he had been rigorous in exacting the help of his Thaness in the building of his mountain eyrie.

* See Raphael Hollin Shead's *Scottish Chronicle*.

The carrying of the necessary materials to such an eminence was in those days a mighty labor, but difficulties had not daunted Macbeth, and though his lords and their dependents might curse his behest, they were forced to obey it.

But now for the second time it was the turn of the Thane of Fife to bring his serfs to assist in this matter of building, and though Macduff had sent his men, it appeared that he himself had not responded to his overlord's bidding, since well the crafty Thane knew that Macbeth suspected him as a sympathizer and secret adherent of the still exiled sons of Duncan.

To and fro paced Macbeth, working himself up into one of those fits of passion which were becoming of more and more frequent occurrence, since he was keen enough of wit to realize that his was a waning authority and that everywhere his subjects cried out in secret against the tyranny of his government.

And now an ugly note had been struck, which might be the prelude to a sudden and dangerous upheaval unless it were nipped in the bud.

The Thane of Fife, a powerful and popular chief, had dared to openly defy his authority and set his command at naught.

For reasons best known to himself, the king had set his heart on Macduff coming in person to obey his behest.

And Macduff, alleging no reason for not complying, had simply refused.

“I perceive this man will never obey my commandments till he be ridden with a snaffle,” he muttered; “but I shall provide well enough for him,” and as he spoke he cast askance glances towards young Seyton, who stood motionless awaiting permission to withdraw.

But it was the king's pleasure he should wait, since he had more to say on this matter.

Macduff had disobeyed his implicit command. And disobedience meant rebellion—rebellion meant a traitor.

These were conclusions soon arrived at, and Macbeth came to an abrupt halt opposite Seyton.

"He has not obeyed me," he said hoarsely. "He has not obeyed the king."

Seyton flinched. He would have liked to point out that the erring Thane had sent his men and so was almost within the strict letter of obedience, but he understood his master's every mood and knew that it was almost as much as his own life was worth to argue now.

So he waited—guessing what was coming.

"To fail in obedience to a king," went on Macbeth, drawing himself up to his full height, "is treachery—and the reward of treachery—death."

A knell seemed to strike with the words. Was it his own?

"The reward of treachery—death."

That sentence had once been pronounced on a Thane of Cawdor. What of that Thane's successor, who now sat on the royal throne of Scotland?

He went on more hurriedly.

"A king must see far and wide," said he; "personal feeling has nothing to do with his duty. Traitors to him are traitors to his country—and for his country's sake they may not be spared. Macduff hath merited death."

Seyton was not subtle at argument—and he was one of the comparatively few who were really loyal to the king. So he still waited for Macbeth to proceed, without showing any particular signs of dismay at such drastic sentence on the erring Thane of Fife.

"Yes," continued Macbeth, more loudly, as he resumed his nervous pacing, "Macduff must die. Aye! nor shall the sentence be long delayed. He is the canker-worm within this fair realm of mine who holds traitorous intercourse with young Malcolm, the bloody parricide who shelters himself in the English court. I have been too lenient, Seyton, and my kingdom suffers through it. But this must end, aye! shall end with this conspiring traitor. But we must walk warily. Summon him hither with smooth words; bid him to our council—and so by guile trap the red fox before he seeks some safe burrow. We'll write our commands presently, and you shall take them to the Thane's castle. We'll go softly in this—but none the less surely. Macduff must die."

His anger seemed to have cooled, and he even laughed quite mirthfully when he dismissed Seyton. As the young officer went out he did not observe how a boy shrank back from the curtain screening the door towards a dark alcove. Had he done so he would have recognized Lulach, the queen's only son and his stepfather's heir to the Scottish throne.

Macbeth sat pondering after Seyton had left him. He felt a great relief at his decision. He had never favored Macduff, who, more than any other of the great moormors, had stood aloof after his accession to the throne, apparently forgetful of former friendship.

Macbeth never doubted that the Thane of Fife had his suspicions, but after Banquo's death he had felt sure that suspicion could never be backed by proof. Nevertheless he decided that on the first opportunity he would again seek out those weird sisters who had appeared to him on more than one occasion since he mounted the throne, and in whom he placed implicit trust.

“Macduff shall die,” he kept muttering; “afterwards I do not think Rosse and Lennox will be so fond of whispered converse and aloof looks. *I am the king*. If they do not love me they shall fear me—as I—merciful saints . . . as I . . . fear myself!”

And he passed a trembling hand across his lips. But Lulach, lingering in the dark alcove, was wondering what the Thane of Fife had done to merit that condemnation. For himself the lad had a pleasant remembrance of the big, burly Thane, who had come on more than one friendly visit to Inverness in the old days, which were growing remote to Lulach and yet still pleasantly tinged as days when he had romped and played more freely than now, since Bethoc had been so much gayer and more light-hearted and his mother had taken more notice of him, and herself had been far brighter and more interested in the life of every day. Of late years Bethoc had grown so grave and silent, and even when she played it was with the half-heartedness of one who finds no amusement in the sport.

Such listlessness vexed the high-spirited Lulach, who scolded his sister with all the displeasure of a spoiled child, but when she stole away weeping he would be sorry and wish he were back at Inverness again, and that life went on as it did in happier days before his stepfather was King of Scotland or Bethoc had learned the way of tears.

Poor Bethoc! She was seated on a low parapet of the stone bridge spanning the woodland burn, where her brother found her presently. It was a favorite spot of hers when she wandered forth to indulge in those long reveries of which the impatient Lulach complained.

Sad years had these been for the girl, who watched

with wistful eyes to see how friends and loyal countrymen were hounded from their native land, driven forth by a tyrant whose harsh rule grew ever more oppressive.

Surely the time had come for Malcolm Canmore, son of a well-loved king, to return and claim his own?

Yet Malcolm still remained at the English court, whither so many of his compatriots had lately gone.

The prince waited for the time to be ripe to strike his blow for regaining a kingdom. If the English king would but help him in that task, all might indeed be well.

If England would but help.

That was the cry which rose not only from the lips of an exiled prince, but from those many loyal friends who planned and plotted for his restoration to his rightful throne. If England would help! Bethoc echoed that wish as she sat there, wrapped in thought, her dark head bowed, her face—grown older, sadder than of yore—bent to gaze into the rippling waters below.

So Lulach found her when he came running through the woods, searching for one he knew would be ready to listen to his news.

“Bethoc,” he said, panting, as he reached her side, and resting his arm on the parapet, whilst he stared up into her face. “Just now I lost my ball playing with young Culen—so I ran within, fancying it had fallen through the window into the passage, and I was right. It had rolled almost to the door of the king’s room—I should never have believed it.”

“Yes?” murmured Bethoc absently. She was wondering whether Malcolm recalled as clearly as she did the spring day when she had stood on the banks of the Ness amongst purple and yellow iris.

“And,” went on Lulach, dropping his voice to a lower

key, "as I stood to search for it among the folds of the curtain, I heard the king speaking to Seyton within. They were strange words, sister. They made me afraid."

Bethoc started, bringing her gaze back to look into gray eyes—so like what her mother's had once been.

If Lulach were afraid he did not appear to be so—and his sister was half inclined to refuse to listen to tale bearing. But Lulach gave her no chance.

"He said," he went on breathlessly, "*Macduff must die*. And there was more too, about summoning the Thane hither with smooth words, bidding him attend the council. And then again—quite clearly, *Macduff must die*. And I was sorry, sister, because the worthy Thane was kind to me when I was a little lad."

He was not a very big one now, this ill-fated son of an ill-fated mother, with his ruddy curls and handsome features; but Bethoc was in no mood to smile over those last words. There was the one sentence drumming in her ears in sudden clamor of sound.

"*Macduff must die.*"

Her lips compressed, her eyes dilated as she sat there immovable looking down upon her brother.

It was characteristic of them both that Bethoc put no question as to Lulach's having made some mistake. It was not Lulach's way to make mistakes—he had the ears of a hare and a retentive memory; moreover, he never embroidered a tale. And this tale needed no embroidering.

It was a single lightning flash casting lurid brilliance over a tragic picture of the near future. In Macduff centered the keystone to the kingdom's fate.

And . . . *Macduff must die*.

Bethoc's voice sounded far off and unnatural to her

own ears as she spoke presently, rousing herself as from the effect of some stunning blow.

“Lulach,” she said, “you must not repeat what you have heard to anyone—not to anyone. You must, above all, not let the king know you have heard his secret words. If he knew I . . . I think something terrible would happen.”

Lulach gave a low cry and caught his sister’s hand. He had seen her weep many times, but he had never seen such tragedy as he now read in her eyes.

“Do not say that,” he implored. “I thought it dreadful that the kind Thane should die; but do you think there might be worse?”

Somehow the shadow which had crept into being on a terrible night at Inverness cast its bane upon his innocent soul. Things *did* happen in these days which were enough to make fear come.

But for once Bethoc was glad to inspire dread. It was thus only that she could hope to save a dear friend. If Lulach chattered of what he had heard, the king would act precipitately and—

Bethoc shivered as she reiterated her command.

“No, no—nothing ill will happen if you are silent. But I dare not think of the terrible things which may come about if you talk—or tell the king—or even the queen, our mother.”

Lulach shook his head.

“I do not *want* to tell anyone but you,” he replied. “It was because I was sorry and I thought we might . . . might have asked our lady mother to entreat the king for the Thane’s life. But I do not suppose she would, for she will not often listen now when I ask her things, but weeps and mutters as though she were very sad at being a queen. Why is it, Bethoc?”

But Bethoc could not answer. All she could do was to hold the boy by both shoulders and repeat again and again—

“No, you must tell no one—not even our lady mother, or something very dreadful will happen—so dreadful it would almost break my heart.”

And at this Lulach promised with tears and protestations that he would tell no one at all of the words the king had spoken to Seyton—for he loved his sister dearly, though, through early over-indulgence, he would be masterful and dictatorial with her at times.

Then Bethoc, having won her way and knowing she could trust the boy, smiled with the gladness of one who, after long waiting, has a task to perform.

Yes—a task to perform for friendship, country—and love’s sake.

Love’s sake—and purple and yellow iris bloomed amongst the rushes near the river bank.

CHAPTER XXIII

A GIRL TO THE RESCUE

ALARK sang a melody of spring and sunshine as it beat its way upwards on small brown wings towards the blue vault of the heavens. There was a gladness around which brought frisking rabbits from their burrows to disport themselves on the slope of the glen, where bluebells spread a dainty carpet for the straying deer, which went timidly in dread of some whirring shaft of death. Presently a twig snapped and the rustling of last year's leaves sounded under a man's stealthy footfall.

Enough for rabbits and deer, which vanished as though by magic, the rabbits tumbling headlong back to their burrow, the dappled deer fleeing up the length of a springtide glade long before the man came into sight. A man who by dress and bearing was a chieftain of proud position; yet he walked carefully, if not stealthily, glancing to right and left as he emerged from the glen with its fairy-like beauties of fern, foliage and flowers, and came out upon the moor.

To his right rose a steep hill with great boulders, piled into the semblance of a rude cairn, about the lower part of the slope.

Towards these piled rocks the man hastened, glanced round once more as he reached their shelter, then vanished from sight as mysteriously as scurrying rabbits or fleeing deer had done.

The moments slipped by. Then a blackbird uttered its warning cry to all the woodland creatures, and another man, appearing on the outskirts of the trees, swept the moors with a long, careful glance and ran light-footed towards the rocks.

So, at brief intervals, came some half-dozen or more from different directions, but all converging towards the same spot.

The last to arrive was Rosse, who of late had lost the suave, gay air of the born courtier, and wore an expression of strained anxiety—not unnatural, since, being cousin to the Thane of Fife's young wife, some measure of the Thane's ill favor at court had fallen on him—a jealous humor of the king's, which the nobleman resented bitterly.

He stepped nimbly across the loosely-piled boulders, bending low to creep within the cave, which, hidden by the craft of Nature, made an excellent meeting-place for those who would converse in secret. A goodly gathering of proud lords was here, amongst them Lennox, Caithness, and Menteith, all of whom had sore grievance to declaim in having in turn been put to the heavy charges of helping to build Macbeth's strong fortalice on Dunsinane Hill.

But today there was more definite and more serious talk going forward than mere grumbling.

Things had reached a climax, as all these chieftains knew, in Macduff's refusal to attend the work in person, and though the king's purpose had not reached their ears, they knew Macbeth's humor well enough to understand he would not overlook the slight to a command meant to break his nobles' pride.

"Macduff did well and ill," quoth Lennox, as the

assembled chiefs fell to discussing the situation. "Well, in that the king hath no right to treat his great nobles as though they were base-born serfs and must be taught the tenure on which he holds his crown; *ill*, in that he risks his life now in coming to explain the deed and his reason for it—an explanation which should only have been made from the front ranks of young Malcolm's army."

The speech was received by a murmur of dismay from most of those assembled, whilst Rosse started forward.

"The Thane of Fife comes *hither*?" he questioned, "after refusing to adventure his person in the king's vicinity at Dunsinane?"

"There is no mistaking the message or doubting the messenger, who reached me last night," replied Lennox. "But Macduff is not quite so reckless as you may suppose. It is *hither* he comes. Here he will await news as to whether it is safe to proceed to the palace. If he receives warning of danger he will return to his own castle, whither even Macbeth's vengeance cannot follow him, since the king knows that to strike *openly* at a Thane of Macduff's standing would be to strike a damning blow at his own throne."

A murmur of assent rose from the rest of the nobles with the exception of Rosse, who exhibited signs of the liveliest uneasiness. He was personally devoted to Macduff and loved the latter's beautiful young wife—his own cousin—with a brother's tender affection. And he, more than the rest, had Macduff's confidence, so knew how gravely his cousin-in-law regarded the king's malice and secret hostility.

"There is some other reason for Macduff's coming," he exclaimed. "Maybe he has had intelligences from

England. It is possible that Prince Malcolm has gained King Edward's ear and won English allies, who shall strengthen our faint hearts in shaking off the oppression of a tyrant."

"Hist," whispered Menteith, catching at the other's elbow. "Who comes?"

There was a breathless pause of suspense as those—who were little less than conspirators—heard the scraping of rock against rock without, as though beneath some heavy tread; then, as all within shrank back against the walls of the cave, instinctively drawing their dirks, a whisper was heard naming the name of Rosse.

"It is Hay," cried the latter nobleman, stepping forward. "Have no fear, comrades, this is a friend."

He broke off sharply as two figures emerged into the light of a single torch thrust into a rocky niche at the back of the cave.

"A woman?" growled Lennox—and ungallantly cursed a sex which, from the days of Eve, had never learned discretion of tongue.

But before more inquiries could be made the woman had flung back the plaid which she had drawn over her head.

It was Bethoc, the queen's daughter.

Varied exclamations broke from those assembled. Surprise and vexation were the dominant notes, since, though Bethoc's sympathies were known, she was too closely allied by blood to the usurper to win full confidence in the ranks of the disaffected.

One, however, who knew more of her love to Malcolm than the others, stepped to her side, and Bethoc, looking up, half-frightened by the stern glances of those around, saw Rosse's keen blue eyes fixed kindly on her.

"Lady Bethoc," he questioned, "what errand brings you hither?"

Young Hay sprang impetuously forward, feeling no doubt answerable at having betrayed the secret of his friends' meeting place. The lad was a strapping youth, barely twenty, but carrying himself with a man's courage. He was one of those Hays of Errol who, fifty years before, had left their ploughbeam to lead their fleeing countrymen back upon pursuing Danes, and thus, by their gallant rally, winning victory from defeat. He spoke eagerly now.

"My lord," said he, "the lady has news which she insisted on bringing to you all at once. When you hear that which she tells you shall judge if we acted well in coming."

He stepped back—and Bethoc, her hands clasped, her face showing flushed and resolute in that yellow flare of light, spoke high and clear, as became Gilcomgain's daughter in a moment of crisis.

"The king hath told Seyton," said she, "that Macduff must die. Already that messenger will be setting out for Kennowney to trap the Thane into coming hither. And . . . and to come will be to die—as Banquo died . . . as others have died."

The tragedy in the young voice rang clear, whilst the girl turned piteous but steadfast eyes on the gathered group of men.

"You ask yourselves," she went on, "if you shall trust my news. Did Banquo trust me? I ween he did; if not, he would not have asked me to befriend young Fleance. Did Fleance trust me? I wot it well, else had he never 'scaped to England. Does Malcolm trust me? Why! if you doubt it, see this ring with which we

plighted troth the day before his father died. I tell you without shame or maiden hesitance that I love Malcolm Canmore, and would use all my wit, my strength, my very life to help him back to a throne which has been seized by one whose deeds make me grow faint and sick in horror remembering he is my mother's husband."

The passionate words went home to the hearts of her listeners. The girl's beauty and evident sincerity, her simple but bold statements could not be mistaken. And the news of the part she had played in saving Fleance—heretofore only known to Macduff—further inspired their confidence.

So tongues were loosened, discussions, arguments and suggestions were brought forward, to be checked by a sinister hint from Hay.

"If the king plots a fresh deed of treachery," said he, "he will have open ears and eyes for the plots of others. Even when we left the castle he was sending for you, my lord—and you—"

He turned to Rosse and Menteith. "It may be he will send for others—and if he discovers so many are abroad, is it not possible he may hear the whisper of our rumor—Macduff comes hither? So shall we be undone, and the Thane of Fife sacrificed to indiscretion."

"It is too late to stop the Thane in coming," sighed Caithness; "but it shall be our business to see he doth not reach the palace, now we know what *welcome* awaits him there, thanks to this fair lady."

He raised Bethoc's little hand and kissed it in graceful homage, and so busy were all with their praise of this brave messenger that they did not turn to see a shadow fall across the threshold of the cave or a man's face peer

suddenly in upon them. Both shadow and face had gone a second later, and when Menteith—the first to leave the cave—came out into the sunlight, he saw no trace of human creature, only in the distance some cattle wandering over the moors and a red deer raising its antlered head as it paused on the outskirts of the wood. But Cedric, the murderer, crouched low between two mighty boulders—and he smiled when he saw the young chieftain Rosse come forth, leading by the hand Bethoc, the queen's daughter.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MIGHT OF LOVE

“**S**ING!” commanded Queen Gruoch—and her daughter obeyed.

Sweet songs of soothing melody, with rippling cadences and tender sentiments, such as Bethoc always chose when she perceived her mother’s troubled mood was on her.

Thus David sang of old to demon-haunted Saul, but it needed sweeter melody than Bethoc could produce to bring comfort to the queen’s storm-tossed soul today.

She was leaning back in her great carved chair, a splendid tapestry for background, her own gown rich in splendor, a gold fillet fastening the white head dress, which covered her ruddy tresses. But the beautiful face was worn and wasted, the great gray eyes had a haunted expression of fear and unrest in their wandering gaze, her whole expression and attitude was of one who seldom sleeps the deep, peaceful sleep of health. She closed her eyes as Bethoc sang, resting her head wearily against the carved back of her seat. In her lap lay embroidery work, scarcely attempted. She was too tired to interest herself in anything—and yet at night she knew little rest.

Only when her husband consulted her in affairs of state or spoke of disaffection amongst his nobles did she show that she was queen of Scotland still, a fierce, quenchless spirit born to rule, if necessary to destroy.

Kneeling on a velvet cushion near was Lulach, turning over with mischievous fingers the contents of a carved box. Being behind his mother's seat she did not notice his occupation, and Bethoc was dreaming as she sang of I ve and greenwood trysting.

But presently the ever-restless queen checked her.

"Stop," she commanded. "My head is burdened by pain. Leave me alone. I would sleep . . . sleep Yes, leave me alone; bid Fenella that no one comes anigh me—not even the king."

She fell to whispering beneath her breath. and Bethoc fancied she caught the name of Macduff.

Had the king told her mother of his intention towards the Thane of Fife? She was about to curtsy and retire, beckoning to Lulach, when the latter scrambled to his feet and ran fearlessly to his mother's side, holding something in his extended palm.

"See, lady mother," he cried, "how it sparkles. May I have it for my own? It was only in yonder old box."

Bethoc was standing near and gave a low exclamation of admiration. It was a diamond ring which glittered as it lay in the boy's hand—though neither he nor his sister knew that it was a king's dying gift to the woman who should be answerable for his murder three hours after its bestowal.

But the effect on their mother was startling. The queen's hands slid forward, gripping the arms of her chair till her knuckles gleamed like ivory. She half rose, whilst her eyes, fixed on that glittering gem. seemed literally to start from her head in terror.

"The ring he gave me," she muttered, whilst a moisture broke over her brow and a gray pallor spread in her

cheeks. "See how it winks its solemn eye at me. A gift of death—from death. A gift of doom. How well I see the donor now! Blood on his kindly face, blood about his heart. He slept—but he did not waken. See—it winks at me—the ring he gave. What message sent Lord Death by thee? A curse! Yes—see, there's blood upon it. Blood!"

Her voice rose to a scream—a frenzy seemed to shake her. She rose, still clutching at the chair, her eyes fixed on the ring which Lulach held with shaking fingers.

"Mother!" gasped the boy. "What ails you? It is naught but a ring. See, I will put it back. What can frighten you in a ring? Oh, I am sorry I took it. But—Bethoc—see our lady mother is ill—she swoons."

He flung down the ring, which seemed to burn him now as some bauble of fate, and ran to summon the faithful Grizel, whilst Bethoc, stretching out her arms, caught the swaying figure.

The girl was almost as white as the unconscious queen as she laid the latter gently down upon the ground. What did such sudden terror portend? Had her mother, *her mother*, played some active part in the tragedy at Inverness—and, if so . . . if so

But Bethoc fiercely put the suggestion from her. No, no, no. Whatever part Macbeth had played in that grim tragedy, which had robbed Scotland of a king, her own mother could have had no cognizance or share in it. Though—too late—she might have guessed the truth—for Bethoc was thinking of the two figures which she had seen stealing back along the dark passage to their rooms on the night of the murder. There . . . had been blood . . . on her *mother's* hands. Grizel came, summoned by the frightened Lulach, and leaving

the queen in the care of the faithful attendant and a leech, Bethoc crept away, glad to escape from the room—anxious, if possible, to escape, too, from the torment of her thoughts. As she crossed an ante-chamber Rosse met her.

The nobleman appeared to be in haste, for he was breathing heavily and his face was very gloomy. He halted at sight of Bethoc, hesitated, and then with small ceremony drew her aside into a small alcove.

“We have been betrayed,” he muttered gloomily.

Bethoc started. Was that suspicion in Rosse’s eyes?

“What do you mean?” she questioned. “Tell me quickly.”

“Yes,” replied Rosse. “I will tell you because I trust you, Bethoc. But what shall I say? There must have been indiscretion somewhere, for at least the king knows Macduff rides hitherward this evening.”

“The king . . . knows!”

“Aye, which is more important than searching, as some would do, as to where he got his knowledge. But certain it is he *does* know—and prepares accordingly. With only partial knowledge of our trysting-place, he plans to keep us from our friend. A council is summoned—it were death not to attend it. That council will sit all night, and Macduff, believing all to be safe, will seek his absent friends at the palace according to agreement.”

“He must not come.”

Rosse became yet gloomier.

“It is impossible to prevent it. None will be able to quit the palace and reach the cave where we were to have met with him. The king watches us all. Not even Hay escapes his vigilance. In an hour’s time the council is

summoned. Before dawn Macduff will be here. He will not go forth."

Bethoc drew herself up resolutely.

"The Thane of Fife will not come here," said she. "I swear to that. I myself will go and keep vigil in yon cave, whilst my woman, who can be trusted, will give the king intelligence of my sickness. The queen, herself being ill, will not trouble to inquire too closely as to my complaint."

Rosse stared at her. Suspicion had gone from him, but he was skeptical.

"Lady," said he, "you could not go alone through yon woods to such a trysting-place. You would swoon with terror ere you had traversed half the way."

But the color flamed in Bethoc's cheeks as she smiled.

"You do not know me if you speak so," she replied. "I go, my lord. Do not fear. If the Thane of Fife reaches yon cave before cock-crow he shall learn why he may not proceed to the palace."

Still Rosse hesitated.

"You are brave indeed," said he, "to conceive so daring a thought—but it is impossible you should perform this thing. A hundred dangers——"

"I would face a thousand for such an object," answered Bethoc, her voice vibrating in subdued passion. "Think what is at stake, my lord—and rather call me coward if I should shrink for an instant from such a task. Let me prove the trust, for which I thank you, and carry my message to your friends. She whom Prince Malcolm loves does love's service. You understand?"

Perhaps he did, or it may have been that time pressed too hard for Rosse to stay in argument. He must take this girl at her word and thank some watchful saint

for the inspiration, which he was half convinced she would obey.

And on that half conviction Macduff's hopes of salvation from a tyrant's vengeance rested, since it would be impossible for any of the Thane's friends to quit the palace that night.

Yet Rosse went heavily on his way, even though he carried with him the picture of a proudly drawn young figure, firmly compressed lips and blue eyes which shone with high resolve and courage.

"If her strength permits, Macduff may yet ride to safety," thought the young noble; "but he will ride with death's hounds at his heels till he is out of Scotland. The king plays a desperate game—and behold the crisis!" It did not inspire him with comfort to know the crisis was for the moment in a woman's hands.

But what man ever yet has fathomed the secret of a woman's strength when love inspires it?

Bethoc, the queen's daughter, thought less of the horrors of that perilous walk than of a lover's face when he should hear what she had done to save his friend.

And it was her part to send brave Macduff with the message of Scotland's chiefs to Malcolm, son of Duncan. Aye, had they not sworn that the time for vengeance and for justice was ripe?

Macbeth the tyrant should be dragged down from the high place he had reached by such murderous means and Scotland's rightful king be proclaimed in his place. But the chief concern of blue-eyed Bethoc was that that king was he who ruled her heart.

Malcolm! She had been but a child when he bade farewell to her under the shadow of frowning Inverness. She was a woman now. Yet the marvel was that the

seed of love had grown to a fair and beauteous blossom in her heart, inspiring and filling her whole starved nature.

Who else but exiled Malcolm loved poor Bethoc?

And tonight she served Malcolm in saving the Thane of Fife and all those rebellious chieftains who went so unwillingly to the king's council chamber.

It was untimely of Lulach to wish her to sing to him that hour of all others, and the boy was persistent too, irritable at being gainsaid. He would not believe his sister's plea of weariness or sickness. She was idle, that was all. Bethoc escaped his importunities at length, but left the lad sullen—and, what was worse, suspicious. Fenella, one of the queen's younger women, had spoken in his hearing of the possibility of Bethoc having a lover whom she trusted in her solitary wanderings. Lulach thought of this speech now and nodded a wise head. How brightly Bethoc's eyes had shone—and her cheeks were rose-red. It had been a lie to say she was weary. And Bethoc must have had strong reason to lie.

Thus it was that Lulach, rendered spiteful because his whim had been refused, spied later, a slim, muffled figure creep down the dark, winding passage and out through a side postern, where a soldier named Colin kept sentry guard.

"So after all," whispered Lulach to himself, "Bethoc the virtuous hath a lover. I think I shall go and tell Fenella, and we shall see what teasing will best torment my good sister. A lover! And who will he be? Scarce worthy of Gilcomgain's daughter, I ween; so the matter shall be searched out."

And the boy strutted back along the passage, aping the swagger of his elders in ludicrous fashion as he went

in search of pretty Fenella, who, as it chanced, was forlorn and cross-grained herself that evening since young Seyton, her lover, was in waiting on the king instead of in attendance on his mistress.

CHAPTER XXV

THE THANE OF FIFE

SPECTRAL boulders, gray and grim, only dimly seen by starlight—but even such outlines were welcome to behold after the frantic groping through darkling woods.

Bethoc's hands were still knit in prayer as she glided along over the stretch of heathery waste towards the spot where those shapeless stone sentinels showed her the place of watching.

Would he come—this Thane of Fife, who was Malcolm's friend? Aye! and was, if persuasion could move him, to be his comrade's messenger to the deliverer to whom Scotland looked for rescue in her bitter throes of thralldom. Long moments of suspense were those for Bethoc. A terrible vigil, here in this lonely place of which ill tales were told. Those were days when some superstitious legend clung to every hillock, every glen, every valley of a wild land, and Bethoc had heard of the three weird sisters who held orgies of terrible nature out on these waste places. She could have wept for very relief when through the silence came the dull thud of horse-hoofs cantering over the heather.

Whence came the rider—and whither bound?

Bethoc stood upon the broad slab of granite rock, looking southward. A secret traveler she might opine, since no escort preceded him with flaming torch.

For an instant she hesitated, then drawing the lantern from beneath her cloak, she held it high in signal.

She had found the lantern as Rosse had promised in the cave. It was to be the beacon, beckoning Macduff thither.

Having shown the light, she covered it again with her cloak and stood waiting.

If it were not he who should come she might thus escape. A stranger would not know of the cave and might count the brief flare of light some phantom flicker.

The horse-hoofs had ceased to beat their rhythmic measure. Silence brooded in the darkness around. Bethoc, crouched now behind the tallest crag, listened for the word which told of a friend.

It came, stern, clear, monosyllabic.

“Inverness.”

Scarcely suppressing a cry of joy, she rose, raising her lantern again as she stepped forth.

“The prince,” she answered, giving the countersign. Macduff stood amazed.

He had expected to see a gathering of stern men who should meet him in council. Instead, the yellow rays showed him a girl, pale, beautiful, her dark tresses only partly concealed by a heavy plaid, her blue eyes clear and steadfast, her lips a-quiver like those of a frightened child.

“Lady Bethoc,” gasped the Thane. “*You* here? What means this? Where are the others?”

He did not name the latter, for was not this the queen’s daughter?

She stretched out a slim white hand, touching his shoulder. “Come within the cave,” she replied. “I’ll tell you all. I, who am the messenger of Rosse, Lennox, Caithness, all the rest of your leal friends, who should

have been here to plead as Heaven grant I, one poor maid, may plead—for Scotland.”

Macduff was still silent through sheer amaze, but he took the little hand, holding it in his own strong ones with the protective fondness of a father, whilst he blamed himself for recalling who had mothered this brave child.

“Wait till I secure my steed against straying,” he said, “and I will come. There should be news indeed since it needs such a messenger.”

Bethoc sighed. There was too much tragedy in this trysting to permit of smiles. Yet her heart was warm as she thought of Malcolm’s approval.

The next moment Macduff was beside her. He waited for her to speak.

At first Bethoc’s tongue halted over the tale. It was so hard to tell it, knowing that he who again would play the treacherous murderer was her mother’s husband. Yet it had to be told—and Macduff listened.

“So,” he muttered, “I too was to have gone the way of Duncan and noble Banquo. Aye! and of others whom this cruel tyrant suspected of knowledge. Ah, Scotland, Scotland, what evil days are these for thy sons. Murdered! with no right or chance to strike blow for blow. Swept aside into the dark abysm, leaving my sweet wife husbandless, my pretty chicks without a father’s care. Yet I grow selfish in my anger. What were *my* death against our Scotland’s greater wrongs?”

Bethoc wept softly. “Oh! heed you not,” she pleaded, “what all this tale voices? Or must I repeat the message which should by this have reached your heart? Those who should have been here this night would have cried it more convincingly, yet you shall

listen to me, forgetting my parentage, hearing in my weak words the voice of Scotland. Fly you must, worthy Thane, but not in selfish or purposeless flight. Make your feet wings till they reach that English court where Duncan's son, Scotland's rightful king, pines in long exile. Macbeth's days of power are numbered by his own tyranny. The end must come, aye, and with the end, a new beginning which you shall show Prince Malcolm how to make. Scotland calls. But she must call by *your* voice, Thane. In seeking safe asylum, you go but to bid Malcolm prepare to claim his own. The time is ripe. Nobles and people with one voice cry to be freed from this oppressor, whose secret murders blot our history's page. You shall not linger on your way, Macduff. Scotland has need of you, the flaming torch to light the darkness of Scotland's night and proclaim the dawn."

She ceased and silence followed.

When Macduff spoke, his voice was deep and stern with emotion.

"What of my wife and babes?" he asked. "Would you have me leave them protectorless? Macbeth plans my destruction, yet he seeks it by the assassin's dagger. He dare not arraign Macduff and smite him in broad light of day because he will not labor, as sweating Israel did of yore, to pile bricks and stone for the palace of his tyrant foe. In my own castle and province I can defy the king, but, having fled to England, what of those I leave without a head and guard? Tell me, lady, what answer you can make here?"

"Alas!" sighed Bethoc, "if you could measure the king's treachery I would measure my answers to your plaint. All I can do is to point you to the past, Thane.

Banquo knew the king's mind towards him and had no desire to die. Yet he died. Others, too, have likewise died. Macbeth's anger is a poisonous breath which slays unseen. And if you fall beneath it, what then of wife and babes? There would be no mercy shown to a dead foe's family. But if you reach England there's another chapter before you. Sir, in serving Scotland—ever the wider duty and greatest claim to Scotland's sons—you will draw the curtain of safety, not only above your own wife and bairns, but those of others too. Under a tyrant's rule none can be safe. When Malcolm's crowned at Scone there'll be no haunting whispers to chill men's hearts; no tale of secret murders and black treachery."

Macduff sighed.

"You reason well, sweet maid," said he. "And plead Scotland and young Malcolm's cause as my own heart does. Whence was such loyalty bred?"

He looked curiously at the face which the faint rays of lantern light showed him. A face noble in its integrity, as well as fair of feature. Moreover, the face of one who knew the meaning of suffering.

Bethoc's clear eyes met her questioner's without flinching.

"In years gone by," she replied, "Prince Malcolm was my lover. I love him still."

Ah! the faith, the constancy of such a love—which might have seemed merely the fancy of a child.

Macduff stood mute before such a confession. He understood now, for had not Marjorie, his wife, shown him the sweet nobility of true womanhood?

And what of Malcolm himself? Did he, in exile, cherish a deepening affection for the girl who was ready to champion his cause against Nature's own dictates?

The Thane of Fife held out his hands and took those of his young companion.

"Lady," said he with emotion, "forgive me for having put such a question. Yet I'll not regret it, since this mutual love shall bind us closer in a cause which has personal devotion to egg the love of country."

She answered by her tears, yet pressed her point with true womanly persistence.

"Then you will go," she urged. "At once you'll ride for the coast, and there take ship for England? For your own life's sake—so fiercely sought—for those you love and who love you—for Scotland and for justice, you'll flee but to return—with Malcolm?"

Her voice rose joyously. It seemed so easy to bridge the abyss and gain the farther shore of desire. Already, for Bethoc, her lover stood, crowned King at Scone. She forgot herself in the glory of that vision. Forgot—for a brief space—the secret fear which stole panther-footed upon her during sleepless nights, concerning the doer of that deed of regicide at Inverness.

"Aye!" cried Macduff, fiercely. "I'll flee but to return. Not the base coward, slave to his own fear, but the messenger of those who travel in sore bondage. The hour has come at last when Macbeth shall learn the justice of heaven is sure though it hath seemed to tarry. I will go and voice these cries in young Malcolm's ears, so that with England's ready aid we may return in strength and firm resolve to execute judgment on a traitor. Tell my friends this, lady, so they be prepared when Malcolm's trumpet-blast summons them to his banner, to come to the work they plead to be accomplished."

Bethoc's breast rose and fell in deep-drawn breath

of excitement, her eyes kindled, her cheeks flamed. Truly was she daughter to Gilcomgain the Fearless that night! Had she been called to it, she would have snatched shield and broadsword in her own hands, and gone forth to battle for him who came to save Scotland. He whom she ever thought of as the straight-limbed gallant lover of a brief spring-tide. Oh! how her pulses leapt at the thought; how her heart sang as the Thane of Fife reared his shaggy head and swore by a great oath to do his task, however hard.

And hard it was, as Bethoc might have guessed. Since in far Kennoway this man had a fair and well-loved wife and dear babes, for whom he feared as those fear over whom intangible presentiment flings her sombre shroud.

But there was no time for such thoughts as Macduff might have cherished as he stood there, resolved, yet diffident, roused to action by the clear call of this young girl's message and news.

Macbeth was prepared to slay the man who had dared to disobey his command. And the Thane of Fife knew that the parting of the ways had come.

"See!" gasped Bethoc suddenly, as they stood together at the entrance to the cave. "What lights are yonder? Men come this way with torches. They come in search—of you—of you, my lord. We are betrayed!"

CHAPTER XXVI

MACDUFF ESCAPES

THE Thane of Fife looked in the direction his companion pointed. Sure enough, the flare of torches showed men, some on horseback, others running, all moving in a direct line towards the cave.

The search, if search it were, was definite, the danger immediate. Some one must have betrayed them. Yet Macduff never once suspected the faith of his companion. He knew her to be true when she told him she loved Malcolm Canmore. He recalled the parting between a boy and girl on the shores of Inverness years ago. Yes, the daughter of Queen Gruoch was no traitress, whatever ambition had made of her mother.

But Bethoc continued to speak rapidly.

"We are betrayed," she said; "the saints know by what means. But you must escape, Thane. See, it is not too late. Ride, ride, for love of Scotland, love of truth, love of your own dear ones who perish through you. Ride, ride—and the dawn shall find you safe, by heaven's grace."

Macduff had reached his horse's side.

"They will pursue," said he grimly. "Little hope I wot for escape."

"Nay," moaned Bethoc, "*I will detain them. Whilst you ride under cover of this blessed shroud of night, I will keep the lantern a-flicker, and as they come will play will-o'-the-wisp in yonder woods, thus luring them from the scent.*"

"And you?" he asked, bending from the saddle.

She did not answer directly.

"When you see the prince," she pleaded, "tell him the tale and show him how Bethoc only grieves that the service is so small. My life would be but a poor offering for my love. Also—if you remember—tell him I wear his ring, though, if . . . if he hath forgotten me, say nothing at all—of me."

"Could he forget," replied Macduff, raising her fingers to his lips, "I'll bring the torch to flame in the dark cells of his memory and show him the lodestar which must help draw his feet to Scotland and a kingdom which all men covet."

But those last words Bethoc did not hear, since the speaker was already spurring away into the darkness, carrying with him a tender thought of the kingdom of his own heart, where fair Marjory reigned supreme.

As for Bethoc, she stood alone, yet undismayed, watching the flickering lights which danced hither and thither over the dark moors.

It was Cedric, the murderer of noble Banquo, who led the king's sleuth-hounds; but it was young Seyton, Macbeth's most trusted officer, who commanded the company.

Alack for the best ordered schemes! Bethoc's extreme of caution had been thwarted, because she could not spare time to sing an idle song to a captious brother.

For thus it had fallen out. Lulach, agog with the news of Bethoc's secret flitting, had carried his tale to pretty Fenella, who, delighted to find a demure lady could play the coquette in such fashion, had repeated the story with pretended horror and dimpling smiles to Seyton, who had, however, read a very different meaning into the Lady Bethoc's adventure.

Inquiries had resulted in further proof of plotting, and Bethoc's woman had to confess that her mistress was not lying sick a-bed as was supposed, but had gone out into the night. With this came Cedric's story of the lady being seen in company with Rosse and others near a moorland cave, so that in less than an hour Seyton had unraveled as much of a tale as sent him hot-foot on the track of the queen's daughter and the man who almost to a certainty was the Thane of Fife.

Bethoc watched the flare of smoking torches growing ruddier and brighter, showing the figures of those that held them. Running kernes and cantering horses moved forward out of the darkness like some procession of Fate, and the girl, with her little lantern beside her, watched their progress.

She knew that that single ray at the cave's entrance was the common goal of all who approached. They never so much as dreamed of the man who had slipped away into the darkness, traveling southward.

Presently, however, wrapping her plaid about her, she ran, lantern in hand, towards the woods. They would follow, she knew, and the delay meant a longer start for Macduff.

She could hear the hoarse shouts and oaths of men as they reached the cave, and, finding it empty, followed her, having caught a glimpse of the twinkling, will-o'-the-wisp light. She must keep up the chase as long as possible!

Yet, alack, in this she was not very successful.

A hasty flight up a narrow glade brought her face to face with a group of men standing on the outskirts of the wood. She heard Seyton's exclamation and turned to retrace her steps—but it was too late. Two of the

kernes had caught at her plaid and Seyton himself was beside her.

"Lady," he said sternly, whilst the men started off down the glen in search of her suspected companion, "the king hath news of a strange trysting. Where is he who shall give explanation of this business?"

She was unnerved and spoke hurriedly.

"The Thane of Fife is not here," said she. "You waste your time in vain search. Let us return to the palace."

"The Thane of Fife!" echoed Seyton, in well simulated surprise. "Surely it was not *he* who came hither as a thief in the night?"

Bethoc's eyes blazed.

"Speak truth, sir," she retorted. "Was it not he you came to seek? He whom your master has commissioned you to slay?"

He looked at her curiously. What did all this accusation mean? It seemed that others beside the king had spies in the palace.

But if Macduff were warned, there must be hotter pursuit, and if talk rose concerning the Thane's death, there would be the scandal of this midnight tryst to hang excuse for swift vengeance upon.

"You speak strangely, lady," he replied. "In truth we came to bid *you* return to the palace, since your brother spoke of how you stole forth unprotected and alone."

So Lulach was at the bottom of the betrayal. She herself had blundered in permitting his suspicion.

Bethoc could have wept in sheer dismay. But for what purpose?

Seyton was already in the saddle, calling his followers

about him; the grouped torch-bearers showed a strangely fantastic scene, with black-browed Cedric, chief amongst the sleuth-hounds, in the midst.

"The Thane must have ridden south," said the latter hoarsely; "but not long since."

Seyton nodded.

"His strange discourtesy must be explained," he replied. "To come thus far to such a tryst, and then return without word of explanation or act of homage to the king, smacks of the traitor. In the king's service, friends, we must ride in haste and induce Macduff to return with us, so that the king may hear the meaning of such wayward conduct to one who has ever held him in love and esteem."

"And the lady," suggested a younger officer; "she cannot return alone to the palace."

Seyton's smile was enigmatical.

"Nay," he retorted smoothly, "that is very true. You shall be her escort, Eocha, and on return, if the king is not a-bed, you shall crave audience and tell him of the night's adventure. Tell him also that by morn I hope to bring the Thane of Fife to tell him in person the reason for such a visit as he has paid tonight. For the rest, you shall all keep your tongues from wagging, lest they hereafter forget the way of speech."

The last words had an unpleasant significance in them which was not lost on the hearers.

But beneath her plaid Bethoc clasped cold fingers in wordless prayer.

If Macduff were taken! If Macduff were taken! The four fateful words beat in upon her weary brain with the monotonous rhythm of galloping horse-hoofs which gradually died away into silence.

Southwards the grim chase was pursued. Hunters and hunted fled through the dark night—but lo, yonder, a new dawn broke.

A gray dawn for the woman who must play the weary part of waiting—not knowing what the end of that night's drama might be.

CHAPTER XXVII

A DREARY VIGIL

“**P**OOOR, gallant beast,” muttered Macduff sadly, “thou hast given the most thou hadst to give for thy master—life itself. And I claimed it—for Scotland. Is the claim vain?”

He was stooping as he spoke over the dead body of his horse, whose heart had broken under the stress of that wild night’s ride.

Dead! Aye, poor Viking would never gallop more over those purple moors where he now lay stretched in the rigid stiffness of death.

Macduff straightened himself, casting a quick glance around. Morning light showed him the distant pursuers, as, from the heather-crowned hillock, he could see far over the moors. Was there no escape? If so, he must find the means quickly.

The Thane of Fife knew enough of Macbeth’s vengeful tyranny to understand that failure now meant failure for all time. Death as swift and far less merciful than that which had overtaken poor Viking here would be his reward for a reckless defiance of the usurper’s authority.

In that flight from the neighborhood of Forres he had burned his boats.

And now this final disaster had befallen him. Without a horse, how could he hope to flee oncoming Fate? Close by towered the great cliff known as Kinraig

Point. If he had been here an hour since, he might have hoped to take boat and safely reach the southern shores of the Firth of Forth. But before this could be accomplished Seyton and his men would have reached the coast.

A song sang in musical, rollicking tones sounded incongruous enough to the desperate man, yet he turned instantly to see the singer—a lean-limbed, sun-blackened fisherman, who came pattering bare-footed from the shore.

The fisher stopped short at sight of the man standing beside a dead horse and eyed the twain suspiciously.

Macduff moved forward.

“Good fellow,” said he, with that winning grace so at variance with his rough exterior, “will you serve a man in need? An’ you have a wife and bairnies you will.” And he glanced as he spoke towards the little valley where the tiny fishing village was shown in a cluster of untidy huts.

“Who are you who ask?” questioned the man, watching as a lynx to read the riddle of the speaker’s eyes.

There are moments when caution is a dangerous superfluity.

“I am the Thane of Fife,” answered Macduff. “I fly from the unjust vengeance of the king.”

The man’s whole expression changed, suspicion vanished, though the hot anger of sympathy flashed over his face. He dropped to one knee, raising a corner of the Thane’s plaid to his lips.

It was enough—Macduff had no leisure to listen to deep-throated curses on a tyrant.

“The anger,” said he grimly, “which even now overtakes me. Nor will I seek the shelter which would be vain against such searchers as *yon*.”

And he pointed to where some seven riders could be seen approaching over the moors.

But Ian the fisher sprang to his feet.

"Come," he bade, assuming command, "and I will show you a hiding place which will baffle the keenest eyes and yet jeopardize no one's safety."

He led the way down a winding path, and Macduff followed him, since the instinct for self-preservation is strong in all, and this man had others to think of beside himself. Yet he could not help wondering whether it would not have been better to wait and face his foes, since what possible hiding-place was to be found on that bleak coast?

But Ian drew him on hastily, bidding him follow up the rocky cliff known as Kincaig Point, till to his astonishment he found himself standing at the mouth of a small natural cave in the rock.

"You will be safe here," quoth Ian confidently, "till I and my fellows can procure a boat to take you across the Firth. Do not fear discovery, lord. The king's men will not learn the secret of the gulls and a few poor fisher-folk who love the name of Macduff."*

Again he stooped to kiss the Thane's plaid, then went leaping down as nimbly as some mountain goat, so that when Seyton and his followers reached the headland nothing was to be seen but a single fisher busy with his nets—and a dead horse stark on the moorland. But the sight of that horse was welcome to Seyton, who might well fear a bootless ride and the carrying of an empty tale home to Forres.

* The cave is called Macduff's Cave to this day. It is said that on the accession of Malcolm to the throne, Macduff induced him to make this little village into a royal burgh to be named Earlsferry.

"Here lies his horse," said he to one of his followers; "be sure the rider is not far off, since he would not be finding a second mount in these wilds."

Ian the fisher was singing at his toil, and silver fish lay gleaming on the sands. He merely gaped when a soldier caught him roughly by the shoulder, demanding whither the rider of yon dead horse had gone.

Ian shook his head.

"Nay," quoth he, "there was no rider on his back, that will I swear by St. Fillan's self. The poor brute came staggering across the moors, and fell just where you see it be. Doubtless, the master who rode it to its death lies back upon the moor in some deep gully or upon the heath—though you are like to know more of the matter than I am."

For answer the soldier dragged the speaker back to where Seyton stood frowning as he directed his men to commence their search. But Ian knew well enough that to falter in his tale might mean his own death, and he had no fancy for an early grave. So he played the simpleton well enough, stating his facts and drawing his conclusions, so that almost against his will Seyton was fain to believe him.

"Though we will search yon village," said he, "and return once more after seeking proof of what you suggest. You have reason to tremble, fellow, till the Thane of Fife is in our hands."

Ian jerked his head in affirmation, but he showed no dismay, only the quiet stoicism of the wholly innocent.

But he sang no more songs that day, and not for several hours did he return home to seek a safe comrade to help him in a perilous task; and by then Seyton and his men were assured that the Thane of Fife was

nowhere near Kincaig Point, the little fishing hamlet whose inhabitants were left all a-gape at the madness of the king's men.

And during those long hours, Macduff had spent a dreary vigil in a drear spot—the home of nesting cormorants and gulls, but of no living human being before now.

Thought was busy in the Thane's breast during that long prisonment as he looked first back then forward into past and future.

What pictures were those set before his musing eyes?

A picture of a strong man and brave soldier led astray by ambition's snare. The friend of Banquo had been his hero too—the gallant Macbeth, leader in many a victorious fray. A son for Scotland to acclaim. Yet now, how high he sat and how low he had fallen! Was ambition satisfied? The Thane of Fife thought of the face of the terror-haunted man who had peered at him through the shadows of an early dawn that morning at Inverness, and told himself—*no*.

Ambition, fed by crime, had become a ravening harpy, destroying her nourisher.

And to the Thane of Fife that harpy's eyes were the eyes of the woman, now queen of Scotland. A woman's doing! *Aye*, thrice *aye*, quoth Macduff to his own heart, for he looked still farther back and thought of the work of Kenneth the Grim and Gilcomgain perishing in flames before his young wife's eyes. But wherefore should the woman's vengeance have fallen on the innocent? Naught could excuse the ruthless murder of gracious Duncan, his murderer's guest.

Then from such thoughts of a black past, Macduff fell to painting the future after the colors of his choice.

Malcolm Canmore should be king. The tyrant should fall. All should be peace and happiness in fair Scotland.

A sigh shook the Thane's lips. Again he dreamed—a dream nearer his heart this time. Strong and rugged as was his nature, there was a deep underlying tenderness, which showed itself in devotion to his beautiful young wife and children. He loved them, aye! how he loved them, and felt his heart-strings wrung at thus leaving them alone without being able to take farewell.

But such farewell, besides bringing danger on these dear ones, would also endanger the mission entrusted him by his fellow nobles. The mission to bring Malcolm Canmore and, if possible, English aid to drag a usurper and tyrant from his throne.

Duty's clarion voice called. The lives and safety of other wives and children besides his own, the welfare of his fellow-countrymen, all hailed him to England. Marjory herself would have bade him go, but he could not keep indulging in a fair dream of his return when he should come, a victor, beside a conquering and rightful sovereign, with duty performed and naught but reward to be accepted. Then what reward would Macduff ask but to ride in hot haste to the Maiden Castle and take sweet Marjory and his children in his loving arms!

Without the cave came the monotonous murmur of waves, the shrill shriek of the sea-mew presaging storm. Ah! his vision of golden peace had not been realized yet. Between it and the present rolled days of danger and exile.

Brave man though he was, the fugitive sighed to think of the near future.

A figure blotted out the faint light at the entrance to the cave. It was Ian's voice that reached him.

"Your enemies will return, lord. Even now they are watchful, but the fishing boats lie ready for the launching. If you will dress quickly in these clothes, carrying your own in a bundle with these nets, we could hope to reach the boat where my comrade waits. Thus without suspicion will you reach the southern shores of the Firth."

"I thank you," replied the Thane with dignity. "Should the day dawn when I and Malcolm Canmore return in honor to Scotland, I will prove the gratitude which now must be content to clothe itself in words."

"The honor of saving the Macduff from a tyrant's malice is enough for us, lord," retorted the fisher sturdily. "Nor other reward would we take since in this your thanks overpay us. But we must go cautiously, since your enemies have sworn to take you."

So, cautiously they went, creeping down the cliff path to stand upon the golden sands and see the Firth blood-red in the setting sun and fishers grouped about by their brown-sailed craft. Away over the moors Seyton and his men scoured the land in search of a fugitive dead or alive, and none but a single sentry to see the bundle-laden fisher who stalked so resolutely to his place in Ian's boat.

The water lapped softly on the shores. From a hut of wattles near came the sound of a girl's clear voice singing a crooning ballad of her land.

The words sounded sweetly in the ears of the man who, from the prow of the boat, looked back with tear-dimmed eyes towards the shore. His heart cried farewell to wife and children, whilst a bitter sorrow weighed down his gallant spirit that he, the dauntless Macduff, should be thus driven to exile. Better would it have suited his

indomitable spirit to shout defiance on the usurper from his castle keep. But how, then, would Scotland be served?

So Macduff bowed his head, praying that this which he did might be for Scotland's weal. He was smiling when presently he raised his face and watched Ian point to where he should land in safety.

"I shall not forget, my friends," was his farewell, as he clasped the hands of his humble saviours, and the men laughed as they returned later with silver fish glistening at the bottom of their boat to find a gloomy-eyed man standing upon the shore close to where Macduff had embarked. A man who held in his hand a small jeweled dagger which had slipped from the bundle that the Thane had carried to the boat.

Seyton knew at last that his search was vain. But he asked himself whether the devil in person had not helped to convey the Thane of Fife across the Firth under his very eyes. It seemed impossible to believe the task accomplished by these stolid and simple-minded fishers; yet, by aid of fishers or devils, Macduff had made his escape—and it was a grim errand to take the news back to the king.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SISTERHOOD OF EVIL

A ROLL of thunder. Silence. No peaceful silence though, but rather a hushed suspense. The terror of Nature at her own enigma. Again the roar of tempest and shrill whistling of winds, which searched the wide moors till they found the secret of that dread ravine.

Deep, deep, the secret lay, hidden by jagged crags, which showed to the casual observer naught but a rift in the earth, a yawning chasm, deep and terrible. Few, if any, knew of the winding path which led so far beneath that only the whimpering of the distant hurricane, only the muffled roar of thunder, could be heard in the cavernous depths, where, on this fateful night, figures could be seen gliding to and fro, hideous phantoms concerned in a yet more hideous devil-pact.

Yes, here was the secret of the cavern into whose dim depths none dared penetrate. None saving the three who formed the weird sisterhood of evil.

A faint phosphorescent light was shed around, emanating from a mighty caldron set in the midst of the cave, shadowed by beetling crags. Around this caldron a wide circle had been described by the blood-stained weapon once handled by a murderer, whilst mystic devices had been traced around this ring together with sacred names.

Beyond its circumference was a polished slab of rock,

on which lay a bundle of dried herbs, close to the skeleton of some animal, round part of which a kind of red clay had been moulded, as if by a statuary; a staff, with the tail of a fish, was fastened to one end and the wings of a raven to the other. In another corner of the den was a large wooden trough, in which live fish splashed, sentineled by a black cat. A horror brooded over the ill-omened den, accentuated by the terrible figures of the three witches themselves as they moved with slow, measured tread about the steaming caldron, from which rose lurid smoke, showing the twisted features of those whose figures remained half in shadow amongst the many shadows of that dark and gloomy place.

But the glare of pale light shone on Ilda's beautiful features, death-white and mocking, with the blood-red line about her neck and her long fair hair hanging in Medusa-like strands over her shapely shoulders, shone, too, on gray Graith's baleful eyes as she blinked them, smiling malevolently as she trod her weird measure, whilst Maurne hugged scraggy arms against her own withered breast, gloating over the evil which her warped brain plotted, so that at sight of those three sinister countenances a secret observer might have well shrank back appalled, feeling he had intruded into some dark corner of hell itself. Suddenly Graith's shrill voice rose in the opening words of her diabolical incantation.

"Thrice the brinded cat hath mewed."

Maurne hugged herself the closer.

"Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined," she mouthed. Ilda flung back her head with mocking laughter, tossing her white arms aloft.

"Harper cries: 'Tis time, 'tis time!" she shrieked. Graith stooped yet lower over the bubbling caldron.

Amongst the deeper shadows of the cave fleshless phantoms seemed to flit, eyes peered out, mocking, terrible, eager eyes; skeleton hands were outstretched, clawing the empty air. All that was evil, terrible, haunted, seemed to fill the cave as Graith's cracked voice rose in a high-pitched chant, which shrilled against echoing thunder.

Round about the caldron go,
In the poisoned entrails throw;
Toad, that under coldest stone
Days and nights hast thirty-one
Swelter'd, venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first in the charmed pot!

As the old hag flung in her hideous tribute to the charm, the others caught her by the hand and they began whirling round, faster and faster in the ecstasy of their wild orgy, singing as they danced:

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire, burn; and caldron bubble.

Slowly their song died away, though its echo haunted the corners of the direful cavern and the shadows were more thronged than ever with ghosts. Then Maurne thrust out one skinny hand, adding her share of the devil's brew they concocted together in that awful place. In a hoarse undertone she chanted as they moved slowly round:

Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
Wool of bat, and tongue of dog;
Adder's fork, and blind worm's sting,
Lizard's leg, and owlet's wing;
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

Then once more joined hands, a mad swirl of footsteps
and shrill, mocking song.

Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire, burn; and caldron bubble.

It was Ilda's turn now. Youngest of the three by many years was Ilda, but far surpassing her companions in devil's mischief and hatred to her kind. Was it the stinging memory of what life had once promised to be to her that made this creature the evil and malevolent thing she was? Her beautiful eyes were bright with cruel purpose as she swayed over the seething caldron, flinging in the dreadful morsels she enumerated so glibly,

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witches' mummy; maw and gulf
Of the ravin'd salt sea shark,
Root of hemlock, digged i' the dark.
Liver of blaspheming Jew,
Gall of goats, and slips of yew,
Silvered in the moon's eclipse;
Nose of Turk, and Tartar's lips,
Finger of birth-strangled babe,
Ditch-delivered by a drab,
Make the gruel thick and slab;
Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,
For the ingredients of our caldron;
Cool it with a baboon's blood,
Then the charm is firm and good.

Weird laughter rang high to the topmost crags, echoing, echoing, through the tumult of the storm, so that a man, striding alone across the darkened moors, shuddered, drawing his cloak more closely about him.

But within the dark cavern the three terrible figures of degraded womanhood danced and swayed in giddy gyrations about that frightful caldron.

The shadows were deeper if possible in the farther corners of the cave, but gradually they took shape, intangible, indefinite shape. Yet Ilda, glancing towards them first, paused in her mad revelry and slowly dropped crouching to the ground. Graith and Maurne huddled themselves beside her. How cold the air blew! Was it the queen of death herself who stood there? Pale Hecate—dread mistress of fate, and these her trembling servants? The cave was very chill, and the silence was complete save for the ceaseless bubbling of the caldron and the deep, panting breaths drawn by those three crouching figures. Even the fish in the tank were quiet, the sentinel cat was rigid in its place. Then faint, mocking laughter filled those haunted depths, laughter to freeze the springs of mirth rather than inspire gaiety, whilst from the darkest shadows the echo of song rose in strange melody:

Black spirits and white,
Red spirits and gray;
Mingle, mingle, mingle,
You that mingle may.

The spirit of enchantment brooded everywhere. The gray-clad figures of the three sisters rose silently up. They knew their work approved. Their business on the eve of accomplishment. Eagerly they eyed each other, drawing close together. A weird coterie, evil of heart, evil of thought, evil in deed, yet possessed, by their devil-pact, of that power which all mankind secretly covets. The unholy power of showing the future to too curious eyes, which fail to see the angel with drawn sword of vengeance standing in the way of such unlawful rites.

Maurne blinked red-rimmed eyes, peering round.

“By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes,” she breathed, and all three drew yet closer to hear and watch.

The dark crags hid the vault of midnight skies from view. Deep lay the cavern, deep and mysterious.

Macbeth himself stood on the moor at the head of the secret path which had been shown him; yet he hesitated. The storm around, the memory of that haunting laughter, the over-powering sense of evil, checked him. But only for a few moments. Ever since that fateful meeting of the three weird sisters on the Hard Moor he had been obsessed by the craving to know his destiny. Had not those strange prophetesses proved themselves right again and again? He must know, therefore, the end. Be confirmed in the assurance that his throne was firm beneath him, that many years of a victorious reign lay before him. Doubts, premonition, the fear which ever dogs the days and nights of an usurper, might be banished if these weird women promised him immunity from his foes. For his final satisfaction he had conquered natural superstitions and ventured forth to know his fate.

It was as if some force outside himself drove him along this track as it had driven him from the moment when Ilda the witch hailed him as Thane of Cawdor and future King of Scotland.

From that hour his whole nature seemed to have changed. Ambition had taken the bit between her teeth and run away with him—though all the time his wife had held the reins, goading him ever to a more reckless pace. Now, standing at the summit of his goal, he clung there with desperate, yet palsied hands. Fearful, yet reckless, resolved that at all costs, at any price, he must retain what he held, that no man should snatch from him what he had given his soul to win.

His soul. Standing there at the entrance to the witches' cavern, tempest without, tempest within, he cursed wildly—yet dared not curse his foes by name, knowing whom, alas! he must needs name. And she for whom so much had been given, what of her? He saw her as she had been, proud, beautiful, queenly—his wife. He saw her as at present, wild-eyed, despairing, vainly hiding the canker-worm of misery as her head drooped under weight of a blood-bought crown.

With a groan of anguish and remorse the king set foot upon the secret path. He would fling such vain regrets aside, forget the past and learn that the future held for him a glorious and triumphant destiny. Was he not the King of Scotland? He could laugh at fate, even did it wear the brow of Duncan and speak with Banquo's voice bidding him beware.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WITCHES' WARNINGS

THE depths at last! There they lay beneath him, dark and gloomy, lit only by the lurid light of yon smoking caldron.

Macbeth, pausing on the path above, looked down to see three faces raised to his, two hideous in their degradation, the third more evil than that of its companions, with its devil's beauty.

Folding his arms across his breast Macbeth looked, disdaining to show the fear he felt.

"How now yon secret, black, and midnight hags," he demanded contemptuously. "What is it you do?"

They tossed their arms aloft, beckoning him.

"A deed without a name," they whispered, but the whisper rolled through the cavern like a long hiss and brought an irrepressible shudder to its listener.

Yet he mastered his emotion as best he could. The awesomeness of his surroundings impressed him—as was intended—by a sense of these creatures' power. Devil-sold they might be. What matter? He believed they could tell him that which he craved to know.

"I conjure you," he said, his tones sounding hollow and unnatural to himself, "by that which you profess, however you come to know it, answer me. Though you untie the winds and let them fight against the churches; though the tempests swallow up the staggering ships and sweep poor mariners to purgatory; though castles

reel and fall, burying their inmates in a speedy death; though desolation howls throughout all lands and even destruction sickens of its own lust, answer me to what I ask?"

Silence followed the passionate appeal. Only the distant artillery of the heavens above him sounded its ominous warning in the listener's ears.

But though his brain reeled in horror, Macbeth stood rooted to where he waited, defying Heaven and hell, so long as he won his answer and was satisfied that he might cling to what he had so recklessly gained.

"Speak," cried Graith at last, pointing up at him.

"Demand," echoed Maurne, blinking and mouthing as one in the last stages of senile decay. Ilda laughed shrilly, looking boldly at the speaker as though tempting him by her beauty.

"We'll answer," quoth she; "but say, Macbeth, if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths or from our masters?"

She pointed a long white finger towards the caldron. Macbeth clenched his hands tightly. With all his sins he was no coward, nor would he draw back now, so fiercely did he crave to know the future.

"Call them," he commanded hoarsely; "let me . . . see them."

The women drew together like roosting bats, stooping over their bubbling caldron, which hissed monotonously as though Eden's snake itself lay writhing there.

"Pour in sow's blood," whispered Graith gloatingly, "with grease from a murderer's gibbet."

Ilda obeyed, then once more the trio moved slowly around their Satanic brew.

Come, high, or low;
Thyself, and office, deftly show,

they breathed, and as the words of the incantation died away they parted, drifting back into the shadows.

Macbeth stood motionless, gazing down at the smoking, reeking caldron. He did not glance towards the darkened corners of the cave or see the watchful, mocking eyes that peered out at him. Wrapt in the wonder of a fearful anticipation he gazed, till gradually the twisting coils of smoke seemed to part and a shape, indefinite at first, rose from the caldron's depths. Then, as the watcher looked, breathless and spell-bound, the vision resolved itself into the unmistakable outlines of an armed head.

No body or limbs were visible, but the eyes of the vision returned glance for glance as Macbeth, rigid in his place, gazed.

"Tell me," muttered the king, barely articulating the words, "tell me, thou unknown power——"

"He knows thy thought," rebuked the voice of gray Graith. "Hear his speech, but say thou naught."

The king was silent, his heart seemed to cease to beat, the horror of the moment was only equaled by its fascination. He felt he would fain fly, yet must at all hazard remain to hear the words spoken by that awful vision.

The eyes of the latter were still fixed upon him, reading his very soul. Slowly the wraith-like lips opened and a solemn voice pronounced its warning:

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff.
Beware the Thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough!

Slowly the twisting coils of smoke curled about the phantom, which blended, melted, vanished from sight,

whilst the smoke wraiths wreathed round, mounting upwards towards the roof of the cave.

The king drew a deep breath and strove to rally his courage.

"Whate'er thou art," he muttered, staring into the now shapeless smoke-wreaths, "I give thee thanks for thy good caution. Thou hast harp'd my fear aright. But one word more——"

"He will not be commanded," croaked Graith's voice from the shadows. "Here's another more potent than the first."

The king shrank back.

It was even as the witch had said. Once more the twisting vapors had parted and slowly from the depths of the boiling caldron up-rose a vision more terrible than the other—for this was a child, young, fair, but marred and stained by clouts of blood, so that the man who gazed sickened at the sight.

"Macbeth!" it cried in shrill tones as the blast of some winter's gale screaming a-down draughty passages. "Macbeth! Macbeth!"

"Had I three ears, I'd hear thee," whispered the king.

"Be bloody, bold and resolute," mocked the strange apparition; "laugh to scorn the power of man, for no man born of woman shall harm Macbeth."

The waters of the caldron seethed and bubbled, thick vapors of smoke rose, hiding the vision, which seemed to sink once more into charmed depths.

Macbeth's face was ghastly, but his lips curled in a smile of triumph.

"Then live, Macduff!" he exulted. "What need I fear of thee? But yet I'll make assurance doubly sure

and take a bond of Fate. Thou shalt *not* live, that I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies—and sleep in spite of thunder.”

Distant peals reverberated overhead. A zig-zag flash of lightning shone down into the depths, showing high, gray crags around. Then darkness, silence, waiting—but not for long.

A third time the smoke, ascending in giddy gyrations, swayed and parted as by some unseen hand, showing the clearly defined figure of a child rising from the caldron, a crown set upon his fair locks, a tree clasped in his little hand.

“What is this?” whispered the king, and from every corner of the cavern his words were echoed. “What is this—is this . . . is this?”

“A child-king,” murmured Macbeth, awed and perplexed. “A crown upon his baby brow”

“Listen, but speak not,” urged the musical tones of Ilda the witch. “Speak not, speak not,” adjured the echoes.

The eyes of the phantom babe were raised to the gray-faced man, who had braved hell’s mystery to know himself secure. “Be lion-mettled,” cried a child voice, “proud too, and take no care who chafes, who frets or where conspirers are. Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him.”

The vision passed, clouds of hissing steam rushed up; silence ensued.

The king brushed a trembling hand across his brow, whilst he twisted his features into a would-be confident smile. Was he not satisfied that his throne was firm beneath him?

“That will never be,” he retorted in reply to that last

prophecy. "Can the trees unfix their roots and move at man's decree? Sweet bodements, good! If rebellious heads shall never rise till the wood of Birnam moves from its appointed place Macbeth shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath to time and mortal custom. Secure! Secure! Yet . . . my heart throbs to know one thing more."

Slowly he descended to the threshold of the cavern, approaching the three cowering forms which clustered in the shadow.

"Tell me," he urged, made bold by such clear answers to his wish, "if your art can tell so much, shall Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?"

The secret jealously guarded found voice at last. Impatiently his ambition awaited the answer.

"Seek to know no more," was the unanimous warning.

But the king was importunate, and at the rebuke merely struck his fist fiercely down upon the ledge of rock with its weird freight.

"I will be satisfied," he stormed. "Deny me this and an eternal curse fall on you! Let me know."

With fierce, burning eyes he peered into the darkness where his elusive companions had hidden themselves, but, as he would have reiterated his command, a sudden harrowing sound echoed through the cave, combined with fierce hissing, as though angry serpents rose in battle in their native marshes.

He turned to see the great caldron slowly sink downwards into the depths of the earth.

With a cry of horror he pointed to the phenomenon.

"Why sinks that caldron?" he gasped. "What noise is this?"

He glanced above him as though fearing the very crags

were about to fall, burying him and his sin-stained companions in that place of doom.

But, as if in answer, the voices of the weird sisters rose one after the other, uttering the one command: "Show!" "Show!" "Show!"

Then, as the king stood, wondering if there were time to flee before some awful damnation overtook him, the sound of a mournful chant wailed through the cave:

Show his eyes, and grieve his heart,
Come like shadows, so depart.

Macbeth stood still. Fate seemed towering like some mighty genii of fabled lore above his head—a hand stretched itself forth, pointing to where on the farther side of the cavern a figure had risen, slowly moving across the open space to where gray rocks showed a narrow passage.

With stately tread the ghostly apparition glided past in regal robes, crowned with the crown of Scotland. As it came into line with Macbeth it slowly turned its head and gazed with calm and lofty eyes at the man who shrank against the wall, sweating in his terror.

"Thou art, too, like the spirit of Banquo!" groaned the king. "Down! down! Thy crown does sear my eyeballs . . . and . . . thy hair . . . ah!"

A second, third and fourth crowned and sceptered monarch paced in spectral procession past him.

"The other gold-bound brow is like the first," whispered Macbeth in anguish. "A third . . . is like . . . the former! Filthy hags! Why do . . . show me this? *A fourth?* Start, eyes! What! . . . will the line stretch out to the crack of doom? Another yet? A seventh? I'll . . . see no more . . . and yet the

eighth appears, who bears a glass, which shows me many more . . . and some I see that carry two-fold balls and treble sceptres. Horrible sight! Aye! now I see 'tis true; for Banquo himself, gory in death, smiles upon me and points at them for his. What!—is this so?"

He sank back, staring into the now empty darkness, but none answered him. He was alone—alone here in this terrible place of sights and visions which only the hands and breath of sin could conjure up. In vain he searched each dismal corner for the skulking sisterhood, upbraiding, adjuring, even cursing them in his terror of fury. No one did he find, only upsetting the tank of fish in his wild seeking, whilst the sentinel cat turned to spit upon him, her green eyes showing like sparks of light in the gloom.

From somewhere amongst the deep recesses the echo of mocking laughter reached the distraught monarch, upon whom a frenzy of terror had seized.

Groping, half-blindly, he reached the hidden path and fled up it, the echo of laughter in his ears, laughter which reminded him of the mirth of Ilda the witch, when she fled from him across the Hard Moor. Were they deceiving him, these terrible creatures who lived apart, accursed by their sinful pact with the enemy of mankind? Was it their hands which seemed outstretched even now to drag him down into some abyss of shame, whilst they filled his ears with the tale of satisfied ambition?

Great beads of sweat poured down the king's face as at last he reached the upper moor again and found that the dawn had broken and a new day was born.

Vainly, however, he scanned the horizon for those weird comrades of the night.

"Where are they?" he groaned, sinking exhausted upon a boulder some few yards from the mouth of the cavern. "Gone? Aye! gone—as I would this nightmare might go. Let the hour I listened to their foul prophecies stand forever accursed. Had I never sought to raise the veil of the future I should not be the tortured man I am now. Black deeds, black dreams, black past and blacker future. Yet, away despair! Am I not still the King of Scotland?"

With a sob of self-mockery he rose, moving as a man in a dream towards Forres.

Two men came from behind a rounded hillock on the left, bowing low before him. They were Lennox and Caithness, who masked their faces to courtier-like servility, even whilst they watched cat-like to note the perturbation on their sovereign's face.

"What is your majesty's will?" questioned Lennox, for he had heard the king cry out.

Macbeth stared from one to the other; he was still dazed by the horror of last night's visions.

"Saw you the weird sisters?" he asked breathlessly. The two nobles exchanged glances. Lennox shook his head.

"No, indeed, my lord," he replied.

"Came they not by you?" urged the king, laying his hand on Caithness' wide sleeve.

"No, indeed, my lord."

Macbeth relinquished his hold. He was ashen-cheeked and his limbs shook.

"Infected be the air whereon they ride and damned all those that trust them," he cursed. Then, seeing the curiosity of his companions' look, he strove to free himself of his panic.

"What is the news?" he asked sharply. "Why look you so askance?"

"Nay, your majesty," replied Caithness reluctantly, "we bring no tidings, though, as we are told, Seyton searches for you to tell how the Thane of Fife hath fled to England."

Macbeth halted abruptly. He had given Seyton definite and repeated orders concerning this Macduff, whom he hated for his integrity, powerful influence, defiance of his authority and, as he guessed, suspicions concerning the murders of Duncan and Banquo.

"Fled to England," he repeated. "Indeed, fled."

"Aye, my liege."

With difficulty the king masked his features as he caught the intent gaze of the chieftains, whose allegiance and faith he had reason to doubt.

He must be careful to keep his chagrin out of sight. Yet the task was a difficult one, for he could very readily have cursed not only Seyton, but himself.

Aye! his was the fault. He had let this powerful chief—his enemy from the moment of his accession—live too long. Procrastination, fear of too bold a step, too outrageous a crime, had brought the disaster, which is ever apt to overtake a weak man who is only a villain by circumstance—not nature. And now Macduff had escaped his vengeance. Alone in the private chamber of his palace the king paced to and fro, gnawing his finger nails, casting rapid glances to right and left, as if he in turn feared the assassin's knife, which was his own antidote for haunting fears.

"I should have struck," he muttered, "when the purpose first suggested itself to my mind. Macduff should have died when first his eyes met mine with un-

spoken challenge. A murderer? Aye! I should have given him cause to know me as such. Seyton is a fool, a blunderer. I'll hear his excuse for this. But in the meantime Macduff shall not go unpunished. What! I'll not play with vengeance this time, or halt to debate on swift action. His wife and babes remain in Scotland. I'll take my vengeance thus—surprise his castle, ravage Fife, give to the sword all who trace his line. So shall I kill greedy ambition and strike death to Macduff's proud heart through those he loves. Why, 'tis well conceived and shall be better executed. For the rest I'll see Seyton and learn how this wily fox escaped his grasp. There's more treachery to be unraveled, nor will I fail to take warning of that phantom babe who bade me spare not my enemies."

He clapped his hands to summon Donald, his faithful attendant, commanding him to seek out Seyton, who came, reluctant for once, to his sovereign's presence, since in telling his tale he could not fail to accuse a woman.

And that woman no other than Bethoc, the fair young daughter of Queen Gruoch.

CHAPTER XXX

DAME MARJORY

SLOWLY rode a solitary traveler that autumn evening towards the gray old fortalice known as the Maiden Castle, situated on the boundaries of Kennoway and Scoonie. It was here that Macduff, Thane of Fife, had lived in comparative retirement for the first year or two after the death of Duncan. It was here that his wife and young children still resided in daily anticipation of their lord's return.

But it was not the rugged Thane himself who rode thitherward that evening, but a younger man, the red-headed, red-bearded Rosse, cousin of Dame Marjory, Macduff's fair wife.

Slow of pace the steed, heavy of heart its rider, for it was ill news Rosse brought his well-loved cousin. Yet how glad a welcome she gave him presently, when he came striding into her presence—shaggy, red-locked Rosse, who was, nevertheless, her dear cousin and friend.

She made a pretty picture seated there at her spinning wheel, her wealth of fair hair lying in great plaits down to her waist, with a single ribboned love-lock nestling in the white arch of her neck. A true daughter of Scotia was she, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed, fair-tressed, with the light of laughter flashing over her face like sunshine on a summer's landscape.

By her side, nestling up against her gown, was a small,

curly-haired lad of some six years old, bright-faced and handsome, carrying himself with a rare steadiness which minded his cousin of the child's absent father, though his features were his mother's, with big blue eyes, which looked out in a happy confidence at a world their owner had found a very pleasant place.

Dame Marjory was on her feet in an instant, and running to her cousin's side, more with the eagerness of a girl than the stateliness of a matron.

"News?" she cried. "You bring me news?"

Of whom she did not say, since heart, mind and soul were bound up in that rugged lord who was ever so tender to her.

"Why, yes," said Rosse, "I bring news, sweet coz." And he placed his arm around her slender waist, hesitating to bring a cloud to mar the sunshine of that lovely face.

But love is eagle-eyed, and already Marjorie's red lips were quivering and she stooped to draw little Indulph closer to her, as though she feared . . . she knew not what.

"My lord is well?" she faltered.

Rosse bowed his head.

"Why, yes," said he, "he is very well, as I believe." Marjory clasped her hands.

"And he will soon return?" she continued. "Ah, coz, when he is absent I . . . I am much afraid."

Rosse tried to smile.

"What! with such a protector," he protested lightly, patting Indulph's curly head. "But you must learn to be brave, dear Marjory, since—it may be long ere Macduff rides hither."

Again her lips quivered, seeing which little Indulph

tip-toed, so that he might slip plump hands within her arm.

"Where is he?" questioned Marjory—and there was naught for it but Rosse must answer straightly.

"He has fled to England," he said, almost curtly, since he could not bear the pathos of her eyes.

"To England?" gasped the young wife. She could not believe the words at first—but Rosse's face was convincing. With a low cry she slipped from his side and flung herself on to a couch. Indulph, frightened at her grief, knelt beside her, trying, with childish fingers to pluck his mother's hands from her face. But Marjory would not be comforted. The horror of desolation was upon her.

What! her husband fled, leaving wife and babes with never a word of farewell, never an explanation? It was as if some knell had rung in her ears, and not all Rosse's entreaties or her little son's pleadings would drown the sound.

"You tell me he has gone!" she sobbed. "Gone! leaving his wife, his babes, his castle, his estate, in a place from whence he himself does fly. Oh, I'll not believe it of his love. Did fear outrun affection? Why Macduff and fear were ever strangers. And he loves us, Rosse. Wherefore then has he gone?"

Rosse was by her side, perplexed in argument, distressed at sight of her grief, knowing, alas! there was cause for such.

Yet he could not let her blame her husband, whose heart and duty had tugged such different ways.

"Dearest coz," he begged, "I pray you, school yourself. But for your husband, he is noble, wise, judicious and best knows the fitness of the seasons. I dare not

speak much further; but cruel are the times, when we are traitors and do not know ourselves; when we hold rumor from what we fear, yet know not what we fear."

She raised herself, one arm clasping her little son to her breast, whilst she looked with tear-drenched eyes towards her cousin.

"You speak in riddles, coz," she answered, in low tones, "but you bid me have faith in my husband, which thing I will do. He leaves me here, I and his babes, who I know well share all his love. But you men strive ever, I think, to prove that there is something greater in this world than love, and so go forth to seek it, leaving us women to break our hearts at home. Yet, I repeat, my husband hath a noble soul and loving heart. So we will wait in what patience we may for his return."

The submission in the gentle voice was infinitely more appealing than the wildest upbraidings could have been.

But Rosse took a cheerful note. He did not conceive that his cousin or her children were in any personal danger, though he doubted whether Marjory would see her lord again for a weary time.

Yet, as he kissed her hand and patted Indulph's head, he tried to be reassuring.

"Brighter days may be, even now dawning for Scotland," he said, "days whose glory you shall share, brave coz. And though I must needs leave you in haste today, it will not be so long before I return to see how it fares with you and these sweet protectors of yours."

And he laughed as a younger boy pulled aside the heavy curtain, and after one prolonged stare of amazement at the red-headed visitor, rushed to his mother's side, burying his own curly poll in her skirts.

"Fie, chick," rebuked the mother, "thou shouldest know a friend, since—alack—thou mayest yet have need to weep at sight of enemies."

And she sighed so that Indulph, with the superiority of two years' seniority, struck in.

"Odo is but a babe," quoth he; "*I* did not fear my cousin of Rosse. I like him and I would we might ride away with him, mother, to join my father."

She smiled very tremulously into the bright little face, then turned to Rosse.

"You were right, cousin," she said, "in telling me I had a protector. See how like his father he carries himself. I shall welcome you thus when you come again."

Rosse looked down at her kindly and pityingly. Little Odo had raised his face, though he nestled very close against his mother's knee, whilst Indulph, having climbed to the back of the couch, stood with chubby arms wound round his mother's neck in protective fashion.

Reluctantly, indeed, did the young noble take his leave. Presentiment, affection, innate chivalry for a lonely woman who was called to what in those days might prove a perilous task, all urged him to remain. But these were days when events began to move fast in Scotland. If Macduff succeeded in convincing Prince Malcolm that now was the time to claim his father's throne, and should bring the prince with English allies northwards, the discontented nobles of Scotland must be ready with a simultaneous rising to arms, and it was to ensure this that Rosse rode east, west, north and south through the land with his fiery message.

Under the circumstances, therefore, it was necessary to bid a hasty farewell to his cousin, assuring her that if she had need of either help or advice, she must contrive to send to his castle by trusty messenger.

"Be sure that I shall come," he repeated again and again, "and in the meantime, little lad, you shall stand guardian to this sweet mother."

Indulph regarded him with solemn eyes.

"I will kill all my mother's enemies," he averred, "*if* I can but reach the big sword that hangs upon the wall. Never fear, cousin."

"Nay, who could fear with such a champion?" laughed Rosse. "My pretty cousins, blessing on you."

So he left them, striding away across the low-raftered dismal hall and through the courtyard, till he reached the cliff-side beyond, but ever with him he carried the vision of a fair woman, golden-haired, blue-eyed and very wistful, her white veil floating to the hem of her green gown, against which one curly-haired babe nestled, whilst another flung his protective arms around her neck.

Well could Rosse understand the bitter reluctance with which the Thane of Fife had quitted his native shores.

CHAPTER XXXI

A STRANGE VISITOR

LAUGHTER and tears, laughter and tears! Autumn sunshine and autumn tempest, but the sun shone that day when Lady Macduff stood in the orchard, watching her bright-haired laddies gathering apples as rosy as themselves, whilst in her arms she held wee baby Joan, the flower of the flock in her tender father's eyes.

A rare group of beauty and happiness for those gloomy days, but Marjory was blithe-hearted and young, since she had been but a child when her lord won her to wife and brought her from the lowlands to this gray old fortress, which stood on rising ground overlooking moor and valley.

Presently Indulph set up a shout from a more distant part of the orchard and came running back to his mother as fast as sturdy legs could bring him.

"It is a man," he panted, tossing back the fair curls from his eyes. "A stranger, lady mother, so I am come to stand by thee and protect thee as my cousin gave command."

And he drew a wooden sword from his belt and looked mighty valiant, standing there with legs wide apart and blue eyes very fearless.

But Lady Macduff, measuring the distance from orchard to castle, gave a faint moan of fear and held her babe very fast in her arms, whilst Odo, curling him-

self on the grass at her feet, began to munch an apple with the air of a philosopher.

Meantime, there was nothing very alarming in the aspect of the man who, with his plaid wrapped close around him, drew near with an air of humble respect.

His hair hung long and matted on his shoulders, his beard was ragged and unkempt, but the eyes he raised to the lady's frightened face were mild and pitying.

"Bless you, fair dame," said he, raising his hands, "I am not known to you, though yours is a name I have had cause to bless for kindness showered upon one I love. Therefore, I come, a stranger, yet withal a debtor, because I doubt some danger does approach you nearly. If you will take a homely man's advice, be not found here."

The lady gave a little cry, and kneeling on the grass, made as though to draw all her children into her embrace, whilst raising fear-stricken eyes to the speaker, whose simple earnestness carried weight in spite of shabby raiment and ill-kempt appearance.

He continued now, with rapid glances around and a husky note of pity in his voice. "Heaven forgive me for frightening you thus," said he, "yet that same heaven knows that for the love of your goodness and the kindness of your noble lord I would have you and your little ones escape hence. Nay, I dare abide no longer, lady, as you would understand, did you know my name. But I should have been damned as an ingrate had I not come. Take my advice, flee whilst there is yet time, since pity dwells not in the hearts of those who ride this way."

But Lady Macduff, weeping, buried her face against little Indulph's shoulder.

"Whither should I fly?" she sobbed, "I have done no harm. But I . . . I remember now I am in this earthly world, where to do harm is often laudable; to do good, sometime, accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas, I have no plea to make, and since I cannot fly must wait to meet this evil which you, good friend, have warned me of. At least, I give thee thanks for such."

"Would I could do more," replied the stranger; "had I known before, I might have essayed a more sure deliverance. Now, alas, the danger steals at my heels—and I must away."

Marjory looked at him. He was quite unknown to her, but his eyes were filled with a pity which made her more afraid as she thought of his warning.

"I thank thee," she repeated. "If indeed, thou wouldest serve me, let the noble Rosse know of this need and threatening. He is my cousin and bears a cousinly regard to me and mine. He would help me if he could."

The messenger turned away.

"Gladly, gladly," he muttered. "That is an errand for willing feet. If I am in time, you shall thank me hereafter, lady. But I would you could have 'scaped to some safe hiding-place till your friends could reach you."

"In that too," replied the dame more cheerfully, "I am not despairing. Yon castle has secrets known to few."

The man lingered.

"Make the best use of such secrets, lady," he commanded, "though 'tis said Macbeth hath spies fee'd in every castle in the land. But if you have a secret in safe hiding, why, hide in it by all means, whilst I'm away to tell your kinsman of your trouble."

"Thanks, thanks. Heaven's saints protect you. Heaven's mercy bless you," cried Lady Macduff, as she watched the lean and shabby figure steal stealthily back across the orchard, as though the man feared even now that spies might be watching his progress.

Indulph turned his chubby face towards his mother.

"I am glad my cousin of Rosse is coming, mother," said he, with a quaver in his voice; "but till he arrives I will protect thee from bad men."

And he clasped her neck in vigorous embrace.

Tears stood in Marjory's blue eyes. She felt so lonely in the midst of this surging tempest of fear. If she knew whence and when this danger was coming it would have been easier to face. But now foes, to her haunted vision, seemed stealing upon her unawares and from all sides. Again her mother arms went round her three babes.

"If he had not left me," she made moan, "if he had but taken us to England too!"

Little Odo began to cry. He did not like all this strange talk, and his mother's distress made him weep in sympathy. Perhaps it was the surest way to dry her tears, for she rose, trying to smile as she bade them gather up their flowers and fruit and return to the castle.

But when they were all a-bed and she alone in the gloomy, torch-lit chamber where she usually sat with her women, employed in broidering, her fears returned, and she sent for Alan the seneschal. He came, a white-haired old man, shrewd of wit but deaf of hearing, so that the lady must needs raise her voice as she told her tale of the messenger and his warning.

"We must be prepared, Alan," quoth she. "Guard well the door and walls, let the drawbridge be up and a

keen watch kept. If foes come and we are doomed, there is the passage which leads by subterranean way to my lord's castle at Dalginch. We must flee thither if the worst befall."

"Which heaven's saints forbend, lady," replied the old man, with raised hands and puckered brow. "Indeed, I know not what enemies could rear their heads against so sweet a lady."

Lady Macduff sighed as she toyed with the long chain about her neck.

"The fellow hinted at the king's vengeance," she whispered. "Since my lord refused his service in the building of the stronghold on Dunsinane hill, Macbeth hath held a grudge against him. Methinks he would have prisoned him had he not fled. Yet surely, it is no kingly part to war against a weak woman and her babes."

"So little kingly," said Alan hopefully, "that I'll not believe it of the king. Heaven send your ladyship quiet repose. Indeed, I think that messenger was mad or foolish; but good watch shall be kept, rest assured there, lady. Good watch shall be kept."

Being hard of hearing, Alan did not note the stealthy footsteps that receded down the dark passage before him as he quitted his lady's presence.

Night came, in the dark vault of heaven the stars blazed, dawn broke and evening shadows fell once more, and in and round the Maiden Castle no ill drew near.

Dame Marjory was smiling as the day wore on. Surely her next visitor would be Rosse himself, and in his council and advice she might rest satisfied.

So that night she laid down to sleep with little fear at her heart, to be awakened, poor lady, by shouts without

and the crashing as of some great tree trunk driven against the outer door.

Marjory sprang from her couch, dressed hastily and opened her door.

A man with a lighted torch in his hand, his face blanched in terror, was running down the stone passage.

Seeing his lady he paused.

"The king's soldiers," he gasped, "surprise the castle. They hold no parley; give no reply to questions save that of arrows' flight. As Alan stood to ask the meaning of the assault an arrow struck him in the neck. In death he strove to tell me, lady, that you must flee, though whither, I know not. We are betrayed . . . betrayed."

On he fled, terror-stricken, to rouse slumbering comrades, leaving his mistress to stare after him in horror.

The castle surprised! Alan killed! Herself and children in grievous peril. And could this be the king's doing? The king's vengeance on a disobedient subject? Oh, cruel, cruel doctrine—the innocent for the guilty. Cruel tyranny that glutted its appetite on the lives of women and babes.

Wringing her hands, the lady sped on towards the room where her treasures lay. Indulph was already awake, a flushed and rosy cherub with curls tumbling into sleepy eyes. Yet the little lad, hearing the loud laments of the women about him, remembered the part his cousin had jestingly given him. His baby-soul was ardent to show himself his mother's protector, and as she stood wan and fear-stricken in the doorway, he flew towards her.

"If I could but reach my father's sword," he panted, "I would slay them all."

She stooped to kiss him. "Brave chick," said she,

“how like thy father wouldst thou run. Alack-a-me! How fearsome are those sounds. But we may yet escape.”

She gathered sleeping Joan into her arms and beckoned the nurse to bring drowsy Odo.

“There is a way,” she whispered, “known to few, by which we may reach Dalginch in safety. Quickly, quickly.”

The flare of fire showed ruddily without, but Macduff’s men were fighting valiantly in the courtyard and from the wall. They knew, poor kernes, that to let the enemy in meant death, for the king’s soldiers made no secret of their purpose, which was to slay all.

From the seven-walled tower of the Maiden Castle the defenders looked out upon a grim foe. Alan was dead, and they had discovered a traitor in their ranks on whom bloody death had fallen too late. Yet hearts ached as their owners thought of their beloved lady and her babes.

Lady Macduff wept no longer, as she and the nurse, preceded by one man who acted as torch-bearer, hurried down the winding passages till they came to the spot where a trap door showed a spiral stair leading downwards to unknown depths.

The nurse who carried little Odo drew back with exclamations of alarm. She dared not trust herself to such a passage. But Indulph, biting his lips and clenching his hands, took a resolute step forward.

“I am not afraid,” said he, and the child’s courage shamed the woman’s fears.

“We shall be safe,” breathed Dame Marjory. “None will dream of seeking us whither we go.”

But even as she spoke, the torch-bearer gave a cry of

alarm and leapt to one side. The passage before them was blocked by some four men, who stood mocking and prepared, their long dirks drawn.

"Treachery," moaned Dame Marjory, as she clasped her baby daughter to her heart, whilst the nurse, allowing Odo to fall from her embrace, fled shrieking back towards the staircase.

Her mistress knew that flight was vain. The flickering torchlight showed her the murderous glances of the men who crept forward towards her, two hugging the slimy walls of the passage, the others creeping side by side in a straight line towards the little group which the lurid flare of light showed them.

"Where is thy husband, lady?" asked the foremost mockingly, as he looked boldly into the lovely, anguished face before him.

She answered calmly, as one prepared to die, who in death remembered the noble name she bore.

"Where you will not find him, knave."

"He is a traitor," quoth a second, leering at his victim.

Indulph sprang forward.

Poor babe. Even now he scarcely realized his danger, so obsessed was he with his desire to protect his mother.

He stood there, the flicker of the torchlight showing his fair curls and bonnie face, with its wide blue eyes and defiant lips.

"He is no traitor, thou shag-eared villain," cried he; "he lies who says so."

The foremost murderer stooped and thrust the child through the body.

"What, you egg!" he mocked. "Young fry of treachery."

Indulph stretched out his arms.

“He’s killed me, mother,” he wailed. “Fly, fly, or he’ll kill thee too.”

Did she obey that piteous appeal? Could she have moved from that spot, where her bright-haired darling lay bathed in his life-blood.

At first, in frozen horror, the poor lady could not stir, but gazed in fascinated terror at the scene before her, whilst her arms circled her other babes.

But as the ruthless murderers crept nearer to her she uttered a piercing shriek and fled back towards the stairs, thinking not of herself, but the little ones who clung wailing about her neck.

In fiendish cruelty those behind allowed her to reach the stairs, to go stumbling blindly up them—then, ere she reached the passage beyond, they leapt upon her, driving their murderous knives home to her wildly throbbing heart.

Dead she lay there, her golden tresses streaming in loosened masses over her shoulder, a dead child clasped in each arm.

It was the vengeance of Macbeth! A mad, insensate, heartless vengeance, which pursued every living creature in and around the wrecked and ruined castle.

Death everywhere, so complete, so entire, that there was no need to burn the castle to the ground. Perhaps those who, lacking all bowels of compassion, had committed these awful crimes, preferred to leave the bloody witnesses of vengeance to strike awe into the hearts of all or any who might come that way.

Certain it is that when the dawn broke, the Maiden Castle stood intact—a tomb only for those who yesterday had been a blithe and contented household.

But the emissaries of Macbeth had not completed

their task yet. The Thane of Fife, if ever he returned, should gaze upon wasted territories and burned homesteads, upon desolation complete and entire!

So the men who had come to play the part of midnight assassins for a tyrant, went blithely to complete their work, nor did they see or heed a man who rode with loose reins towards the deserted castle an hour after the break of day.

Rosse flung himself from his horse in the courtyard. His face was deathly pale and his eyes were very grim.

From afar he had spied the castle still standing gaunt and clear against the sky-line and had told himself he was in time to bring his cousin succor.

After the tale told by the mysterious messenger he had resolved at any risk to convey Lady Macduff and her children to England.

He had never dreamed that the rancor of Macbeth could mark such innocent quarry down for destruction.

And now?

His pulses drummed fiercely, his breath came in short gasps as he marked the dead who lay about the courtyard and saw broken doors and hacked stairs.

What was the tale the night could tell?

Even yet he would not believe that this work of vengeance had been carried against a weak woman and her babes. But for all that, he staggered in his walk across that dismantled hall, seeing destruction on every side.

And presently, alas! alas! He stood in that dim passage where lay a mother, young and lovely, yet with the indelible stamp of horror on her glazed blue eyes, stretched on the stones in death, with a dead bairn clasped in each arm.

With a sob which shook him from head to foot, Rosse

knelt beside the dead woman, whilst, as if in mockery, his thoughts flew back to the last words she had spoken to him as she sat grouped with her fair babes about her.

"I shall welcome you thus, when you come again."

Welcome you thus.

What torture to recall the vision of the beauteous woman, radiant in her youth and tender motherhood, with those fair buds clustered about her parent stem, little Indulph rearing his curly head so proudly in the rôle of protector.

Indulph! Ah, the boy was not here. Yet, was it likely those foul fiends had spared Macduff's heir?

A heavy sigh burst from Rosse's lips as he prosecuted that melancholy search still further. And at last he found the child he sought. Aye, and guessed something of the story, as he bent over the little dead lad, whose arms were stretched wide, as though his last conscious act had been to bar the way against his mother's murderers. Kneeling there beside young Indulph, Rosse vowed a stern vow of vengeance. Nor rest nor peace would he know till these foul deeds were avenged.

For this alone would he have been ready to strive with heart and soul, brain and muscle, to drag a tyrant from his throne and smite him to the dust in which such innocent victims lay.

Yet a heavy sigh broke from the man's quivering lips as he thought of the tale he must bear with him to England and tell in the ears of the Thane of Fife.

How would Macduff hear such news as this? Would not that noble heart break in the knowledge of how wife and children had suffered in his stead? Or would the hearing of such a deed serve as the torch to tow, setting hearts in such a blaze as should confound the murderer of these poor sufferers to lowest hell?

Rosse rose from his knees, his hand sought his sword, his curses rolled deep and stern from his lips.

"Beware, Macbeth," he muttered, "when Macduff shall stand before thee and demand payment for these sweet lives which thou so bloodily hast destroyed."

Then, turning, he quitted the passage, passed once more through the deserted castle and mounted his horse.

No time should be lost in useless lamentations and weeping; he must reach England at the earliest moment, the dire messenger of dreadful news.

Yet he told himself fiercely as he rode, that in the deliverance of that news, one great purpose at least was served. There could be no delay in saving Scotland from the remorseless fiend who ruled as her king.

CHAPTER XXXII

LOST HOPES

A LOG fell with a crash, and showers of sparks on the open hearth flared ruddily, and went out, leaving a trail of blue smoke behind it.

The great deer-hound stretched before the blaze, rose, yawned and stalked with grave dignity across to where a man stood in an alcove of the hall, looking out through the high, narrow window. His head rested back with careless grace against the stone-work of the wall; his gray eyes were pensive, with a lurking sadness in them little in accord with his years, for he was still young, though his whole expression was that of one who has found his strength in repression.

Little indeed remained in outward show of the gay young Prince Malcolm of Scotland, who had hunted the wild boar and red deer in his native forests. Here was an exile who had grown stern and dominant during the years of waiting. There were deep lines about the once smiling mouth, a proud aloofness in his bearing which, with his Highland dress, marked him as one apart from others in that quiet English court over which the gentle, saintly king known as Edward the Confessor reigned.

Malcolm allowed his hand to rest on the hound's noble head; they were in sympathy, those two, with a silent bond of friendship between them.

Did not Faithful know when the other's thoughts went drifting away in passionate longing for his native land?

Ah! the weariness of that desire, the hunger, the longing, all vain, all vain.

Malcolm sighed impatiently, chiding himself as he had done a hundred times for ingratitude.

Had not the kindly English king proved almost a father to him during these lonely years? Had he not given him love, sympathy, council—all in fact but that which the exile longed for—his home, his country? Even Bethoc, though a sweet and tender memory, was but a shadow compared to Scotland.

Poor Bethoc! Could she have guessed that? Might she not have known it?—since love fills a woman's whole life and is but an episode in that of a man. So, though Malcolm remembered the little maid he had loved one joyous spring-tide, it was Scotland he dreamed of, Scotland he hungered for.

And all that long desire had been re-kindled with the coming of Macduff a few days previously.

Aye, the Thane of Fife had come, as others had come, to the English court. Emissaries of treacherous Macbeth, these others, sent to have Duncan's son back into an usurper's power.

But Malcolm, grown cautious against treachery, had evaded the pitfalls and remained in the safe shelter of the English court, biding his time, with Scottish caution, till the time to strike was ripe. And now Macduff had come, with the same invitation on his lips, the same smooth appeal for Malcolm to return. Should he trust him?—this man who in former years had proved his friend.

Exile had given a touch of scepticism to Malcolm's frank and open nature. So often nearly deceived, he learned to tread warily, receiving love with the open

arms of friendship, though his heart yearned towards this man whose rugged face and speech brought a breath of his native moors with it.

So now he stood pondering, weighing every consideration in his mind, seeing this way and that, as one who has all to gain or all to lose upon a trust.

Footsteps, light and soft, came pit-a-pat across the fire-lit hall. There was but an after-glow of the sunset to shine on little Margaret's fair curls and blue eyes. She stood there, the light making a halo about her childish brow, a quaint little figure in her long white frock, wide sleeves and soft veil.

"Malcolm," she faltered, "Malcolm."

He turned and looked at her. They had always been such friends, the little Princess Margaret and he, and she was not shy with him as her brother Edgar and younger brother Christian were, and would protest indignantly when they called him gloomy and disagreeable.

"It is only that he is sometimes sad," she would say; "but always he is kind, and I love him."

She did not know what that childish love had meant to him then any more than she could guess what her woman's love was to mean to him in after years.

As for Malcolm, he looked tenderly now at the pretty child, whose gentle serenity and sweet disposition were so like her father's.

He came from the alcove with Faithful beside him and crossed to a great carved chair beside the hearth.

Margaret followed, climbing up on to his knee, with the confidence of a proved friendship, resting her fair little head back against his shoulder, so that she could gaze up into his grave face.

"Why are you always sad?" she asked—she had never

put that question so plainly before, but Edgar had been teasing her for her devotion to so glum a playfellow, and she was minded to have an answer for him next time.

Malcolm looked into the serious little face and thought suddenly of another pair of blue eyes which he had found passing fair. What of Bethoc? he wondered. How had it been with her during these long years?

He stifled a sigh as he gazed down at the child-princess.

"I grow sad, Margaret," said he, "when I hear the voices calling to me."

She wrinkled her white brow. "What voices?" she asked. "Who calls to you, prince?"

He turned from her to gaze thoughtfully into the depths of burning logs. "Have you ever seen a captive eagle, little one?" he asked, "how he beats vain wings in hope to be free from his chain. His captors may be kind, lavishing all upon him but his one desire—leave to mount on free wings to his native eyrie."

"But you wear no chain," protested the child. "You are no captive, Malcolm, but my father's friend—the friend of us all."

Malcolm bowed his head. "Such friends and friendship as bind my heart in the chains of gratitude for all time," he replied. "Nay, I meant not that, little friend, but I would fain excuse my grave looks by showing you their reason. It is Scotland I crave for—Scotland."

"And the man with the rugged face and kind eyes has come to take you there," said Margaret tearfully. "Oh, Malcolm, will you go?"

He was silent. Would he go? Would he go? Ah! if he could but prove that this last messenger voiced Scotland's appeal in his call!

"I do not know," he muttered. "How can I tell? Perhaps—it might be so."

Margaret tried to circle his wrist with her tiny fingers.

"If you go," she whispered, nodding her head wisely, "I shall follow you when I am bigger. Yes, all the way to that Scotland of which you have told me so many lovely tales, for I would see your purple moors and blue lochs and tall, snow-capped mountains. And oh, but I shall want to see you too, for I love you and shall grieve when you go away."

Malcolm smiled tenderly. How sweet those words sounded to the lonely man.

"But what would you do?" he asked, "if you made all that long journey? I think you would be fretting very soon to be home again."

Margaret looked up into the fair, handsome face from which the sternness had vanished.

"Oh, no," she retorted with childish simplicity. "I should stay and be your little wife, and we should always love each other and be happy."

Malcolm did not reply. Once more he was gazing into the fire.

"Tell me," went on his little companion, with quite womanly persistence, "would you not be *glad* to see me again?"

"Of course," he agreed. "Very glad, Margaret, very glad. You have been my friend—a dear and precious friend."

"That is well," she nodded. "I knew you would be glad, though when I told Agatha of my purpose she laughed and said no doubt you had left a lady-love in bonnie Scotland, or you would have had better eyes for beauty and women's smiles at the English court. Tell me then, prince, what was her name? What color were her eyes?"

"Bethoc," quoth Malcolm slowly. "And her eyes were as blue as thine, little princess. But long ago she forgot me, I am very sure of that—since her mother is Queen of Scotland."

"Oh!" murmured Margaret, in awe-struck tones. "Oh!—then . . . then . . ."

But instinct—and a glimpse of her companion's set features checked her inquiry, and instead, she put both arms about his neck.

"Never mind," she whispered, "I will not forget, even if it is many, many years that we are parted. One day I will be your little wife and make you happy. But now, come and play with me and forget all these sad things."

She slipped from his knees and began pulling at his wide sleeve, urging him to a game of play in some distant gallery, where Edgar and Christian would be awaiting her; but Malcolm shook his head, for he had caught sight of the stalwart figure of the Thane of Fife standing in the shadow against a faded arras, and knew that an hour of crisis and destiny was at hand.

Yet he stooped to kiss the child, whose flower-like face was raised to his.

"Presently, little one," he promised, "presently—but not now. See, it is the man with the kind eyes who comes to talk to me."

With one hand still resting against Malcolm's arm, Margaret turned to view with resentful eyes the big stranger who, Edgar prophesied, had come to take her friend away.

But resentment vanished under the influence of Macduff's kindly smile.

He was thinking of his little sons at home as he stooped to kiss the English princess' baby hand.

“Ah!” said he, “I think, little lady, that you follow your sainted father in his gift of healing, though you mend hearts instead of bodies.”

Margaret shook her head.

“I do not understand, lord,” she replied; “but when you have talked to Malcolm here, will you bring him to join our play in the great gallery, and will you come too, and tell me how your little Indulph helped to shoot the wolf?”

Macduff promised; but as he spoke kindly to the petitioner a cloud gathered over his brow. Thoughts of wife and children engendered disquiet, since he was so far from them.

Yet Scotland must be served—and in serving Scotland, did he not serve these dear ones too?

When Margaret had gone, carrying the last rays of sunshine with her, the Thane turned impetuously to the prince.

“You have thought of what I spoke on when last we conversed together?” he asked eagerly.

Malcolm had risen from his seat and stood stirring the glowing embers with his heel.

“A strange and terrible picture you showed me,” said he. “A picture of oppression, tyranny and crime. Yet how shall I know whether the colors wherewith you paint are those of reality? Plainly, Thane, I look with caution on your picture. All this may be true—it may be false. I do not know, and belief goes halting on many questions. This tyrant—my sworn enemy—the usurper of my rights, was once thought honest; you have loved him well. He hath not touched you yet. Will you serve him in coming with this message to me?”

Macduff’s face grew very stern; there was resentment in the low tones of his reply.

"I am not treacherous," he said shortly, reading distrust both in the prince's speech and manner.

Malcolm proceeded calmly, as though trying to argue out the matter with himself.

"But Macbeth is," he replied. "I crave you pardon, Thane, but must use caution to the uttermost, since I cannot read the riddle of your thoughts. We may not always judge as we desire. Our eyes grow dim, groping beneath the surface. How can I tell your purpose in coming hither?"

Macduff turned away with a groan; his was a nature to be ruled by impulse before caution, and he read in the prince's suspicions the failure of his mission.

"I have lost my hopes," he muttered.

But Malcolm made a gesture of dissent, speaking more fiercely, as though still at argument with his natural instinct.

"Perchance you lose your hopes," said he, "where I found my doubts. Why did you leave wife and babes without leave-taking? I pray you forgive plain speech. You may be rightly just, whatever I shall think."

But Macduff's hot temper could not stand the implied hint of treachery.

With flashing eyes he stood there, half across the hall, his clenched hands raised heavenward as though in appeal against this injustice.

"Bleed, bleed, poor country," he groaned; "great tyranny shall march in triumph to its goal, since the hand that might have checked it lies inert, afraid to trust the way which friends have shown. Farewell, lord. I would not be the villain you think for the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp and the rich East to boot."

He would have flung away in despair and rage had not Malcolm again checked him.

The younger man's face was sphinx-like, his eyes were veiled from the other's indignant gaze.

"Be not offended," he urged. "I will speak more plainly, showing I have no fear of you. Listen then, Macduff. I think our country sinks beneath the yoke. It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash is added to her wounds. I think if I raised my banner on my native soil that loyal friends would rally round me hailing me as deliverer, whilst here, from gracious England I have the offer of goodly thousands to march at my direction. But for all this, mark well, Macduff, when I shall tread upon the tyrant's head or wear it on my sword, yet my poor country shall surely find the exchange bitter bondage, for me more bitter still—looks to a tyrant whose vices far outrun those of her present ruler."

"What mean you?" asked Macduff, perplexed at such an argument. "Who shall outdo Macbeth at his own trade?"

Malcolm laid his hand upon his own breast.

"It is myself, I mean," he replied. "What, you know me not, Thane? So long have I been absent from my native shores, who was but a lad in quitting them. Yet here I do confess that compared with my black sinfulness of heart, Macbeth appears white and pure as snow."

"Nay," replied Macduff vehemently, "that I'll not believe. In all the legions of hell there is no devil so damned in evils as Macbeth."

Malcolm laughed bitterly, whilst from beneath lowered lids he watched the fiery indignation of the other's glance.

"I grant you," he admitted smoothly, "that he is bloodthirsty, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, malicious, smacking of every sin that hath a name; yet add to each and every separate vice ten-fold and call it Malcolm's. So you see me stand. So intemperate that none dare oppose my will, so full of avarice that justice could have no claim for me so long as I could make my greedy gains."

Macduff groaned aloud. Yet he answered earnestly: "Such sins of nature are great, but yet against them you shall weigh many graces, prince, so that Scotland shall not fear to hail you king."

"Graces?" echoed Malcolm. "Nay, I will be honest. I have none. I have no relish for any of those virtues which so become the kingly state. Justice, verity, temperance, bounty, mercy, lowliness, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude, I have no love or taste for. Nay, had I the power, I should pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, and destroying peace, confound all unity on earth."

Macduff listened aghast to the shameless confession. As the prince paused he moved aside, covering his face with his hands.

"Oh, Scotland! Scotland!" he lamented.

Malcolm watched him, a faint smile playing about his firm lips.

"If such an one be fit to govern, speak," he replied. "I am as I have spoken."

Macduff faced the speaker in a blaze of sudden fury.

"Fit to govern?" he thundered. "No, not to live. Oh, miserable nation, what fate is thine? Governed now by a blood-stained usurper, with no hope of future freedom from such a curse, since Scotland's rightful

heir stands self-accused, self-damned, unshamed in thus blaspheming his own breed. Thy royal father was a most sainted king; the queen that bore thee oftener upon her knees than on her feet—whilst thou—” Slowly he raised his hands above his head.

“Fare thee well, prince,” he groaned. “These evils have banished me from Scotland. Alas, my heart, thy hopes end here.”

As a man stricken by premature age the Thane staggered towards the door, but Malcolm was before him, his head thrown back, his whole face alight with joy, gladness, a great hope, a brief compunction.

“Macduff,” he cried, seizing the other’s reluctant hands, “forgive my doubts, those black scruples which a traitor’s malice bred in me. Your noble passion reconciles my thoughts, and being freed from fear of hidden craft and wily trap, I yield you henceforth full trust and confidence as heretofore you had my love. What, you wonder at this change? Shall I tell you how devilish Macbeth hath oftentimes sent by such means and messengers to lure me to his net? But God above deal between thee and me, for even now I put myself under thy direction.”

There was a noble yet almost boyish zeal in the rapid speech, so that Macduff from the abyss of despair looked at him with curious eyes. Looked and saw a man, strong-faced and fearless, with nobility of heart stamped like some hall-mark of integrity upon his face.

Could this be the monster of iniquity he had heard confessed to by those very lips that hailed him comrade?

Malcolm was smiling at his friend’s perplexity.

“Here I abjure these taints and blames I laid upon myself,” he continued. “Never yet have I been for-

sworn, scarcely have coveted what was mine own, at no time broke my faith, would not betray the devil to his fellow, and delight no less in truth than life. My first false-speaking was to prove thy truth. Now proved, I own I am thine, loyal friend, thine and my poor country's, to command whither."

Macduff's grip was like a vise about the hands which held his own; his face worked convulsively, his eyes were suffused in happy tears. He had no words to express the wild up-leaping of hope and joy in his breast.

Malcolm saw his emotion and smiled with all the gladness of youth, which sees the victory ere the battle be fought.

"The King of England," he continued, "hath already granted me ten thousand soldiers, generated by the Danish Earl of Northumberland, the gallant Siward. What, good Macduff, shall we not march together? Oh, great, glad day that sees us on our way to Scotland! To Scotland!"

His voice ran trumpet-like through the hall, as he raised his head, a leader born, who should presently marshal his own countrymen to the battle for right, freedom—and his own.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FULL MEASURE

THE days following the coming of Macduff, with his message of invitation from Scotland's chiefs to Scotland's rightful heir, were full of excitement to Prince Malcolm, and well for him that he had the shrewd and temperate advice of such men as the Thane of Fife and Earl Siward to keep the new impulsiveness of a long repressed nature in check.

In the first flood of enthusiasm Malcolm might have acted with fatal impetuosity. Those were days when preparations for war and invasion went slowly—all too slowly for hot-headed ardor, and the prince chafed sorely as autumn days merged into winter, and both Macduff and Earl Siward were unanimous in their advice to await the coming of spring.

With winter snows lying thick upon the mountains and drifting dangerously on every northern track, it would have been impossible to march into Scotland with their English allies.

So, though the task was hard, it was inevitable, and Malcolm guessed indeed that the heaviest burden was that of the Thane of Fife, who must spend those intervening months in anxiety and fear as to the well-being of wife, children and lands. Bitterly must Macbeth have resented his flight. So much Macduff had guessed by the implacable pursuit of the tyrant. But surely even Macbeth would not take vengeance upon the

innocent wife and children of his enemy? The Thane consoled himself again and again with such assurances, yet they failed altogether to satisfy, and as Christmas passed and the long days succeeding it drifted by all too slowly for his patience, his cheeks grew hollow, his eyes were haunted by that unnamed dread which even the blandishments of little Margaret could not drive away.

At first the little princess had been inclined to look severely on this rugged countryman of her friend Malcolm, who was going to carry the latter off back to that Scotland which he had taught her to regard as the home of fairies and dancing elves, flowery glens and purple moors.

But Macduff's kindness and tales of little Indulph, Odo and baby Joan soon won the small princess into a ready listener and sympathizer.

"I like Indulph the best," she would say; "and please tell me the tale of how he helped to slay the wolf over again?"

She had heard all the tales of that happy family life in distant Kennoway, not once, but many times, before the first green shoots began to show on the bare twigs and branches and Malcolm once more grew eager and impatient for the full springtide.

The Thane of Fife had had time to learn the true worth of the exiled prince by now, and his love and admiration were deep and sincere, though silent.

It was a strange court, that of England at this time, more—as many averred with some discontent—like a cloistered monastery than a ruler's palace. Prayer and penance were the chief occupations of the saintly king, who added to his virtues that of a mysterious healing

power, so that daily the courtyard of his palace was thronged by the sick and suffering of all classes, over whom he would pray, hanging a golden stamp about their necks, placed there with holy prayers. And all England rang with the wonder of his cures, whilst wise physicians wagged their heads over the power of faith and could offer no reason or explanation why their royal master's patients should be so miraculously cured.

With this strange healing power the king was also possessed at times by a spirit of prophecy, so that he ruled his subjects in truth by the influence of his virtues rather than by the brain of a diplomat or the courage of a soldier.

Yet they loved him, this simple people who fancied they saw a halo about their monarch's kindly head, and therefore worshipped him as a saint of God.

Malcolm was not without reverence too for the generous benefactor of these years of exile. If his hot blood and eager spirit were out of sympathy with the gentle dreamer, he was ever ready to kneel humbly at the feet of the English king and crave his blessing. And in his turn, Edward loved the high-spirited Scotchman, son of his well-loved friend, whose tragic death had filled him with grief.

"You will not let the wicked men kill Malcolm as they killed his father?" urged little Margaret, as she clung to Macduff's hand one day in early February, as the three paced the long low gallery of the palace.

Malcolm would have made some tender rejoinder, but checked at sight of the stranger who appeared at the other end of the gallery and came striding towards them.

The Thane of Fife, also espying the newcomer,

loosened his clasp on Margaret's hand and hurried forward with joyful welcome.

The little princess stood hesitating for a moment, eyeing the man with the long red locks and beard; then deciding that she did not like him very much, slipped away, leaving the three alone.

"My countryman," murmured Malcolm, "but yet I know him not."

He would have drawn back, ashamed of that ignorance, whilst vague memories began to stir in his mind of that lean, florid face and ruddy locks, but Macduff jogged memory by his eager introduction.

He and the stranger had returned after their first greeting, and, as Macduff named his cousin, a light of welcome flashed in Malcolm's gray eyes.

"Ah, Rosse," said he with some emotion, "I know you now; good God, betimes remove the means that makes us strangers."

"Sire, amen," replied Rosse, bowing low over the prince's outstretched hand.

A brief silence followed, though thought was busy in the minds of those three who sought for calmness to fashion question and answer.

"Stands Scotland where it did?" asked Macduff—yet it was not of Scotland first and foremost that he thought.

Rosse heaved a weary sigh. Here, face to face with his deeply-wronged kinsman, he scarcely knew how he should find strength and courage to voice his heavy news.

"Alas, poor country," said he, "almost afraid to know itself. It cannot be called our mother, but our grave; where nothing but who knows nothing is once seen to smile. Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend

the air are made, not marked. If a dead man's knell is sounded none question as to his name, and good men die ere they have time to sicken, passing out of existence as a flower withers in an oven."

"And this is true—too true," echoed Macduff gloomily, his eyes fixed on Malcolm's quivering face.

"What is the newest grief?" asked the prince hoarsely, for it seemed to him that this envoy from his native land reeked of the charnel house rather than bonnie Scotland, whilst every word was a knell sounding hollow, hollow as death's voice itself.

"The newest grief," replied Rosse, growing nervous in his despair of a nearing confession. "Why, sir, every minute is fraught with some direful news, so that after many weeks' absence I cannot tell where last a widow wept, an orphan moaned."

Macduff moved forward. He, too, felt a dread oppression of spirit clutch him, so that for the moment Scotland's woes were nothing.

Fixing his keen eyes steadily on the flushing and pale face of his kinsman, he put his question: "How does my wife?"

Rosse flinched and courage failed him as two pictures rose before his eyes. Poor Marjory! Poor husband!

"Why, well," he muttered with averted eyes.

"And all my children?"

There was a note of fear in the speaker's tones, for Rosse's face played traitor to his words.

"Well, too," echoed the younger man.

Macduff drew a deep breath—but not of relief.

"The tyrant has not battered at their peace?" he asked.

"No," replied Rosse huskily, "they were—well, at peace when I did leave them."

He turned away as he spoke, covering his eyes with his hand, though that gesture did not shut out the vision of sweet Marjory, bathed in her own blood, her babes close pressed against the heart which would never beat in love for husband or child again.

"Be not a niggard of your speech," commanded Macduff more fiercely. "How goes it?"

Rosse raised his head. So much of news he had—yet long had been the delay in bringing it.

"'Twas months ago that I would have answered that question had fortune served," said he; "but when I left Fife, hot-foot for England, a cruel sickness struck me down and kept me tossing upon my fevered couch for many weary weeks. The report went forth that I had journeyed to England, and thus report, running ahead of truth, served me well, for had Macbeth known to the contrary, he would never have left go his clutch on me save to let me drop into some bloody grave. However, after a time I was sufficiently recovered to continue my journey. And as I went secretly on my way, rumor reached me of many worthy Thanes and lesser chiefs who stand in a rebellion against the usurper, who will listen to no appeal to mercy, but from bad leaps to worse, and from worse to worst, ruling by fear and the long sword of vengeance which spares neither for age, youth or sex. So, sire,"—he turned to Malcolm—"I bid you know that now is the time to help. Your eye in Scotland would create soldiers, aye, and make our women fight to free themselves of their distresses."

Malcolm smiled.

"Be it their comfort," he replied. "We are coming thither. Gracious England has lent us good Siward and ten thousand men. You know the Danish earl

by his repute, so need it not be said that no better soldier could be found in Christendom."

"Good news indeed," said Rosse, "and as I stand viewing the future I see hope golden-winged upon the far horizon beckoning us to Scotland. Your father's son will be welcome to your country, who soon shall learn to hail you for your own noble sake. Yet, alas, alas, I may not gaze towards the future without first raising the dark curtain of a fearful past to smite you to the heart with such a sight as wrings my heart to speak of."

"A tale of tragedy?" questioned Macduff. "Then tell us, Rosse, if it concerns the general cause or is rather to the grief of some single breast?"

"Whoever hears my tale must weep for pity's sake," replied Rosse in low tones of misery. "Yet the main part pertains to you alone."

The stalwart frame seemed to stiffen, the rugged face of the iron-nerved Thane became a mask from which expression appeared blotted out.

Thus might a man look who sees instant and terrible death before him.

"If it be mine," he answered. "Keep it not from me. Quickly let me have it."

"Then be prepared for the heaviest tidings your loving heart may conceive," said Rosse, his voice trembling.

Macduff flinched. This hesitation was unendurable. Already he guessed what this news must be, and even his utmost fortitude quivered before the expected shock.

"Your castle was surprised," continued Rosse, seeing how futile and cruel was further delay. "Your wife and babes savagely slaughtered. Do not ask me more, since my heart is wrung with anguish at the very thought

of all I saw when, some few hours after, I reached your castle—too late to bring succor to those who even then must have been importuning eternal justice for vengeance against the slayer, who still lives to plan other murders as cruel and remorseless as these.”

Macduff staggered back as though he had been struck a mortal blow. His face became gray, his dark eyes glazed. He could not speak, but leaned against the wall as a man suddenly stricken by paralysis.

“Merciful Heaven,” gasped Malcolm, horrified at such terrible tidings, which struck a personal and intimate note of suffering into the tale of common woe. “Can these things be? Nay, friend, give sorrow words, lest grief’s heavy load bears too heavily upon your heart. Alack the day such tidings came to one I love so well.”

He stretched out his hand and took that of Macduff, but the latter’s lay cold and inert in his clasp. All color had drained from the Thane’s cheeks, his breath came in painful gasps. It seemed that this blow had shattered all power of thought, word, action.

“My children, too?” he whispered presently, as he stared before him, seeing in horrible fancy the picture which so haunted Rosse.

The latter bowed his head.

“Wife, children, servants, all that could be found,” he replied.

A shudder shook Macduff’s powerful frame.

“My . . . wife killed too,” he reiterated, and there was pathetic pleading in his tones as though imploring these, his friends, to undo the work of fate. Alas! who could undo such a past as that which showed hideous and lurid before their mental vision?

“I have said,” replied Rosse. He dared say no more

just then, knowing full details of that massacre of the innocent might well bring madness to a brain so overwhelmed by grief.

"Be comforted," urged Malcolm; "there yet lives revenge—shall not that be the medicine of this deadly grief?"

Slowly Macduff shook his head, whilst great tears rolled down his rugged cheeks.

"He has no children," he muttered, looking from Malcolm to Rosse. "All my pretty ones? Did you say *all*? Oh, hell-rite! All? What, all my pretty chickens and their mother at one fell swoop?"

An agony of grieving wrung the speaker's heart and beads of sweat gathered on his brow as realization came to further increase his despair.

"Dispute it like a man," urged Malcolm—not unsympathetic, but longing to aid his sorely-stricken friend by inspiration of rage against the foul perpetrator of this malice.

But Macduff only sighed, too crushed by woe as yet to feel the kindling of the other's fire.

"I shall do so," he replied with a groan, "but I must also feel it as a man. I cannot but remember such things were—that were most precious to me. My home, my wife, sweet, loving Marjory, my pretty babes, the gallant little Indulph, curly-headed Odo, my daughter Joan—her mother's image. Nay, nay, nay. Did Heaven look on and would not take their part? Sinful Macduff, they were all struck for me. Innocent in their loves, their thoughts, their love; *mine* was the life the tyrant sought, but failing mine, took theirs, hoping to strike me thus. Oh, monstrous crime! My sweet ones. Heaven rest them now."

Brokenly he spoke, moving his hands as one that gropes to thrust aside the black and hateful pall of night and call his thoughts the mad delirium of tortured sleep.

Yet this was no delirium, but the truth. Did not Rosse's haggard face and Malcolm's distressful bearing tell him as much? They grieved for him, these friends, yet in that hell in which he lay their pity touched him not. Did he not see those dear, dead loves, his sweet-eyed wife, the laughing, gallant little lads, his sons, his darling daughter, all standing in the sunlight, near the drawbridge of the old gray castle, bidding him welcome whenever he rode within earshot of their glad cries?

How they had been used to cling to him, him whom they loved—their protector, stay and prop!

Alack! Alack! A protector who had failed to hear their bitter cries, a stay and prop which had left them to fall in the sad throes of dreadful death. No wonder the anguish of such thoughts drove the bereaved husband and father near to madness.

"Be this the whetstone of your sword," pleaded Malcolm, intent on rousing him from this abyss of grief. "Let anger take the place of sorrow. Stir your bruised heart to vengeance."

Macduff raised his shaggy head and at last a fierce light leapt in his dim eyes.

"Oh, I could play the woman with mine eyes and braggart with my tongue," he cried thickly. "But gentle Heaven give me grace in this. Bring this fiend of Scotland face to face with me. Set him within my sword's length; if he escape, Heaven forgive him too."

He raised his hand aloft as though in the enactment of a solemn oath; then, covering his face with his plaid, he abruptly quitted the gallery.

But the news brought by Rosse had proved the trumpet call for action. There should be no longer delay. Here was clear proof—if proof were needed—that some insensate fiend of cruelty possessed Macbeth, so that he, who at one time had been a brave soldier and loyal subject, was now the worst and most bloodthirsty tyrant. Ambition and remorse, diverse motives, joined hand in hand in one man's soul, had lashed him along a slippery ascent stained with his victims' blood.

Now the measure of his crimes was full. The avenger was ready to march to his overthrow.

Bitterly though he deplored this latest act of cruelty, sorely as he grieved with his friend, Malcolm Canmore would have been less than human had not his heart beat high and his pulses leapt joyfully as he quitted the land of exile to win, with these good allies' aid, a kingdom which was rightfully his own.

A kingdom! What dreams were those the prince dreamed that last night when he kept vigil through the long hours of darkness in eager anticipation of the morrow.

A king, a deliverer, the one his people would welcome when he set them free of cruel bondage. What vows he vowed, what high hopes he held, nor amidst such thoughts was a yet tenderer one lacking.

Had not the Thane of Fife told him the story of Bethoc and given him her message?

Sweet Bethoc! How he had loved her; and though the music of that springtide had grown faint in his ears, the haunting melody was very sweet.

Would it be possible to take up the broken thread where it had snapped? To recall an idyll of spring since springtide again was here?

He smiled whimsically as he thought of the little Princess Margaret and her simple statement that she meant to be his wife one day.

Ah! tomorrow he would be saying farewell to Margaret, to her sainted father, to all this English court, these English scenes and friends. It was Scotland he wanted, Scotland for which he pined, hungered, thirsted.

Scotland—and Bethoc. Again—Scotland!

Ah! what voices called him to that dear land of his birth!

Love, duty, patriotism, revenge. They called—and he was answering! Did not the joy of that moment almost make up for the long years of waiting and exile?

But on the morrow little Margaret's arms were fast about his neck and her tears fell hotly on his cheek.

"I do not want you to go," sobbed the child. "You are my friend. I love you very much, and . . . and Edgar says you will *never* come back, because . . . because you are going to kill the wolf which . . . which killed poor little Indulph and Odo. I want the wolf killed, and I cried because their poor father is so sad . . . and Indulph was very brave . . . but please, Prince Malcolm, I . . . I want you to remember when the wolf is dead I shall come to Scotland and be your little wife."

He kissed her quivering lips and smiled into the tear-drenched blue eyes, comforting her as best he could, promising that he would always be very glad to welcome her to Scotland when the wicked wolf was dead.

Was the father's spirit of prophecy given to the child—or was it merely the chance words we so often find fulfilled in after life that prompted Margaret's reply?

"I shall come," she said, stretching out her small

arms to him from the palace steps as he sat mounted on his great black horse before her. "And I shall be your little wife and love you very much, always—always."

The spring breezes blew the long white veil like a streamer about her and tossed her golden curls into picturesque confusion.

It was a dainty picture which Malcolm Canmore carried away with him in his memory as he turned his horse's head northwards.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE UNHAPPY QUEEN

“**W**OULD we were hence,” sighed the weary queen, and let her thin hands drop listlessly against the gray parapet of the castle wall as she stood there alone, staring with lacklustre eyes across the plain, to where, beyond the forest of Birnam, rose the jagged and rocky heights of great mountain peaks. Spring had come and the king was here established in his strong castle of Dunsinane, built with the sweat of vassals and the subjugation of proud chieftains who had been forced to help in the work at their own charges and with the tribute of their own men’s labor.

Thus the king ruled—a sovereign feared by all—loved by none, saving it were such as Seyton, his loyal officer, and Donald, his servant. Even they, however, had reason to look askance at the king’s commands of late, for Macbeth, urged by his fear to his own destruction, clung with childish faith to the letter of the commands issued by those dread visions in the witches’ cavern.

Had he not been bidden to be bloody, bold and resolute, taking no care where conspirers were?

Well! he had obeyed, and here he ruled from his strong fortalice of Dunsinane, dealing out vengeance on all rebels—when he could track them, though of late it had needed all his faith in the faithful prophecies to believe his throne was still firm beneath him.

Many of the Thanes had followed Macduff's example and crossed the border. Others were locked in their impregnable fortresses of the north, defying siege, whilst rumors grew thick that Prince Malcolm with an English host moved northwards against him.

Macbeth ignored the rumors, scoffed at warnings and secretly cherished the promises made to him by Fate.

Had not the weird sisters shown that their art was to be relied on most securely? Again and again their prophecies had come true—and they, by the mouth of conjured spirits, had declared that no man born of woman should hurt Macbeth. Yet the spring found the king gloomy and passionate, knowing himself hated, yet resolved to trample hatred under the bloody heel of fear; feeling the acute agony of remorse, though stifling it under a vaunting pride of satisfied ambition.

Satisfied! Why, who should not be? Was he not king of Scotland, able to slay his enemies by a nod of his head, to conquer rebellion at the point of the sword, and command obedience by the tyranny of terror?

Yet, loudly as he might prate, the king's brow was dark, and many a black vigil he kept when blood-stained ghosts thronged beside his bed. Dig he ever so deeply, climb he ever so high, he could not escape those haunting visions. Nor was this all.

For many months past the queen's health had caused him much anxiety. Proudly though she played her part, clever in her scheming, shrewd in probing secret depths of disaffection, regal though she was in all her duties and entertainments, none knew better than her husband of those sleepless nights, those haunting dreams, the dreary moanings of a mind diseased, when none but he was nigh to hear and see.

Month by month, too, the proud beauty of her face was fading; she grew thin, haggard, her dark eyes restless, fear-filled.

The haunted queen, some called her—and called her aright.

Yet never, even to her husband, did she unclothe her lips to tell him the secret of her malady.

Only since coming to Dunsinane the malady had seemed to grow apace. She was depressed, nervous, always wandering from room to room or pacing to and fro on the battlements, staring out over the surrounding country, whilst she whispered to herself in an undertone over and over again the same words which none could catch.

She was whispering now as she stood there leaning over the parapet, making a vivid patch of color in her close-fitting gown of crimson cloth, her plaid fastened by a jeweled clasp upon her bosom, her long veil floating in the wind, whilst with her chin resting on her hand, she gazed towards the spring-time woods.

“Would I were hence,” she reiterated, “where they could not mock me. See . . . how they throng from out those woods—the ghosts which will not rest—nor let me sleep either.”

A voice sounded shrill and clear. The queen started, whilst her breaths came in short gasps.

Who called?

After all it was only her son, Lulach, who came racing up to the tower-top. He searched for Seyton and scarcely heeded the wan mother who crouched yonder, startled by his clatter.

It was the king himself who came next, gloomy and forbidding, since rumors grew black and could not all be denied. Was his kingdom in revolt against tyranny?

Nay! he would not credit it. Only it was plain that he must show a greater firmness, less tolerance with revolting subjects. The iron heel of the monarch should crush down the rebels—down, down.

And if Malcolm came, why, that was all he asked for.

Once slay the viper and the poison of rebellion would die. And with Malcolm, Macduff should perish.

So the king swore, storming as he paced to and fro, whilst the pale queen leaned back against the battlements, eyeing him with vacant stare, gaping at him with parted lips. She who had been the inspiration of those deeds which set him first upon the slippery ladder of ambition.

And because her wan apathy brought fear to his heart, the king had need to vent his anger on the girl who presently climbed the winding stair to gaze, as was her secret wont, southwards and dream of him who might be journeying hither from far-off England.

Since the day when Bethoc had defied and foiled him by carrying warning to the Thane of Fife there had been little love or liking in the king's warped heart for his stepdaughter.

Now he turned savagely upon her, cursing her in his ill-humor.

"What!" he cried, "you would spy upon me then, creeping adder that you are? But have a care. Spies meet with ill-fate at my hands, nor will I spare because you are a woman and my kin."

Bethoc faced him calmly. She had no fear just now, since life was chaotic here at Dunsinane and a black dread cast ever its shadow on her sunshine.

"Nay," she retorted with spirit. "I know, sire, you would not spare because I am a woman and your kin."

Macbeth paled.

Did the jade accuse? Was there threatening in her eyes? Again he cursed.

"Beware," he warned. "I know how to deal with spies. I'll run no risks, girl."

She moved away, having noted how her mother swayed, clinging to the gray stone behind her.

The queen shuddered as she felt her daughter's touch.

"Take me hence," she moaned. "I am sick. Where is the physician? I would have his tendance. Do you not see that I am very sick?"

Bethoc looked into the wan face and a great fear lay cold upon her heart.

Whence came this sickness which bowed a proud head in the dust?

In silence she led her mother away. Macbeth cursed as he watched them go. Why did he fancy mocking laughter was in the air above him?

The laughter of Ilda the witch.

* * * * *

The queen was abed. She was very weary, she complained. When she had slept she would be better. Thus night fell upon the Castle of Dunsinane.

The king had withdrawn to his separate apartment.

He could not rest for listening to his consort's weary tossing—so the queen slept—or waked—alone.

Poor soul!—was sleep any better than wakefulness?

Grizel, her faithful gentlewoman, often asked herself the question. She was distressed for her mistress' sake, while the same haunting dread with which this Castle of Dunsinane seemed filled oppressed her too.

So great was her anxiety that she had made a confidant of the wise leech who had been summoned hither by Macbeth to attend the queen.

"At night," she told him, "her Majesty will rise from her bed, throw her cloak over her nightgown, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon it, read it, afterwards seal it and again return to bed; yet all this while in a most fast sleep."

The doctor wagged his gray head most sagely. Here was a case to try his utmost skill. Yet he would not show himself baffled at the onset.

"A great perturbation in nature," said he. "And besides this watchfulness, this walking, does she speak?"

Grizel hesitated.

"Why, yes," she admitted, "I have heard her speak."

"What does she say? Do you find a clue to this malady in her talk? Some weighty care which, hidden by day, finds voice at night?"

But the other shook her head, while her brow clouded,

"What she saith," replied she, "I will not report after her."

The doctor frowned. This was a case for discretion, caution and much interest. And since his ears, like those of the rest of his profession, were kept pricked for news, he admitted to curiosity, remembering certain rumors. So he assumed his most professional air.

"It is most meet and necessary you should tell me," he argued, tapping his forehead; "till the disease is known, of what use is it to prescribe medicines?"

But Grizel snapped her lips viciously.

"Neither to you nor any one," she retorted, "having no witness to confirm my speech, will I confide the tale."

The physician shook his head. "I must know," said he, "for there is no doubt the queen is ill."

His companion sighed—she was attached to her mistress and, being harsh of nature, overlooked her faults with rugged concern.

"That much I could have told you," said she, and moved across the inner court towards a closed door, in whose shadow she paused as though harkening to some far-off and familiar tread.

Neither the doctor nor the queen's lady noticed a slim figure dressed in a dark green gown crouching down in the shadow between the stair and castle wall.

But Bethoc waited, having played eavesdropper by chance alone, since she had stolen from her room to the tower, where a friendly sentinel took no heed of the drooping figure which nightly leaned against the rampart, looking out over the moonlit landscape which spread in a gleaming panorama below her.

Thus it was that Bethoc was witness, unseen and involuntary, of that meeting between her mother's gentlewoman and the doctor. Aye! and whilst her pulses beat in swift hammering of premonition, she heard Grizel's low exclamation of horror as she stretched out her hand and caught at the doctor's long black sleeve.

"Lo you, here she comes," cried the attendant beneath her breath.

"See, as I told you, she is fast asleep. Observe her—stand close."

The two shrank back against the closed door. From where they stood they were in shadow, so that Bethoc no longer saw them, though from time to time their whispers reached her. She herself, from a yet safer hiding-place, had a clear view of the figure already descending the winding stair.

Moonlight fell athwart the shadows, the cold, white rays shaming the yellow glare of the little lamp the queen carried in one hand while shading the flame with the

other. She was dressed in a white nightgown, over which was flung a long cloak, her tawny tresses lying warm and ruddy about her shoulders; there were streaks of silver in the red-gold tresses, though the fact was scarcely noticeable from a distance. But it was her face whereon time and ceaseless care had stamped the greatest change within a few short years.

Bethoc had hardly realized the fact till now, when the flare of light showed her that haggard and emaciated countenance peering down upon her with unseeing eyes.

The rounded contour of a perfect beauty had gone, there was sagging flesh about the lean throat, a pinched pain round the trembling lips, hollow cheeks and quivering nostrils. But the eyes themselves held those three watchers dumb in horror, so fixed were they, so piteous in their agony; startled, too, as though listening to some voice of doom ever echoing in their owner's ears. Eyes which had gazed on tortured death might look so, but wherefore had such an expression fixed itself into the gaze of Scotland's queen?—the woman whose highest ambition had been gained, her triumph absolute, her revenge secured!

"How came she by that light?" asked the doctor, and Bethoc started at sound of the whisper. Not so the queen. Slowly she continued to descend, the lamp she carried illumining her face and figure, whilst the moonlight lay in patches upon the stairs and inner courtyard beneath.

Where neither moonlight nor lamp shone was black darkness.

"Why," answered Grizel, replying to the whispered question, "it stood by her couch. She has light by her continually; 'tis her command."

"You see," said the doctor, "her eyes are open."

"Aye, but their sense is shut."

Silence again. The sleeping woman had set down the lamp and advanced into the fuller circle of moonlight.

Ah! those eyes, those eyes! Bethoc would fain have hidden her own, would fain have screamed out and fled. Why was she here? Was it that now, now in this unexpected hour, she was to hear confirmation of those fears that had haunted her for years past.

What part had her mother had in Duncan's death?

How she had crushed the torment of that question down within her breast, answering wildly, "Nothing, nothing, nothing!"

What part had her mother had in Duncan's death?

Would she be able to answer "nothing" after that night's drama had been played before her eyes? And if not, what then? What then—remembering Malcolm was Duncan's son and avenger.

Her mother.

The figure in the moonlight was standing still, twisting and clasping thin hands together.

"What is it she does now?" asked the doctor in a low whisper. "Look how she rubs her hands."

White hands, frail hands. But Bethoc recalled how she had seen them stained and dyed in blood.

"It is an accustomed action with her," Grizel was replying, "to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour."

The queen turned, stooping her head as though to gaze at something.

A curious thrill shook Bethoc from head to foot. Her mother was speaking.

How the sound of that monotonous, complaining voice

stabbed the air, bringing swift agony to one listener's heart.

"Yet here's a spot," said the queen, raising her right hand and staring in vague horror upon its lily whiteness, "Out, damned spot! . . . out, I say! One . . . two Why, then 'tis time to do it. . . ."

She broke off with little sobbing breaths of excitement, as one who waits in dread suspense.

Bethoc huddled closer to the wall, conscious of a numbness about her heart, a chill in every limb.

Her mother!

Suddenly the queen uttered a discordant cry of mockery which echoed weirdly in the surrounding silence, whilst she drew her wrap around her as though the chill of night touched her blood.

"Hell is murky," she moaned, then laughed in a shriller key.

"Fie, my lord, fie!" she rebuked. "A soldier, and afraid? What need we fear who knows it when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought there would have been so much blood . . . so much blood—"

She swayed a little, stretching out her hands, then once more recommencing imaginary washing as she mumbled on.

"The Thane of Fife had a wife," she sighed. "Where is she now? . . . What! will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this starting."

Bethoc shuddered. There was winter cold about her. Her fears had taken shape and towered like some great barrier above her. A barrier!—and on the other side—Malcolm. Alas! Alas! She could never reach that

other side now—never. Did she not *know* as clearly as though she had been an eye-witness of all the part her mother had played in her husband's crimes which paved the way to fulfilled ambition?

While moonlight had shown her the truth as clearly writ as in a book.

And at the moment the heart-broken girl had no shred of pity for the unhappy creature whom fear and remorse had crazed.

In the farther corner the doctor and lady-in-waiting were whispering together.

The queen's speech had been unmistakable.

"She has spoken what she should not," declared Grizel, self-reproachful that there should have been a witness to those strange actions and words. "Heaven knows what she has known."

Surely heaven knew, indeed—but the tragedy was that the innocent suffered with the guilty.

Again the queen spoke in slow, detached tones, which told how utter weariness of the body fought with restlessness of spirit.

"Here's the smell of blood still," she complained. "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."

She fell to sobbing in helpless self-pity.

"This disease is beyond my practice," whispered the doctor. "It will be hard to find a cure for it, indeed."

Aye—his other listener agreed right heartily there. What cure could there be for such remorse? What power could bring back the dead or strike down that barrier which had sprung up between the queen's daughter and King Duncan's son?

"Wash your hands, put on your nightgown," com-

manded the sleeper, more shrilly fretful; "look not so pale! I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried . . . he . . . cannot come out of his grave."

Could he not? Could he not? The king might have told a different tale.

"To bed, to bed," cried the queen excitedly; "there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, give me your hand; what's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed."

With hasty, swaying steps she reached the stairs, snatched up the lamp and hurried away—a flitting ghost which had all unwittingly told over the tale of the crimes of waking hours.

She had gone—but the sound of some dreary knell still tolled in Bethoc's ears.

Did she not know now at whose whisper, by whose instigation, Duncan had died that fearsome night at Inverness?

It was all so plain now. Motive and action were clear. Child though she had been, she still recalled the moment when she had crouched by her young mother's side and watched the blazing castle in whose flames her gallant father had perished.

That had been the deed of Kenneth the Grim.

And Duncan was Kenneth's son.

The sins of the fathers upon the children. Inexorable decree!

The sins of the mothers upon the daughters! No less sure a curse.

With burning eyes Bethoc gazed from her hiding place and saw that phantom barrier standing between her and the man she loved so passionately.

A barrier none could break.

She set her lips firmly, biting them till the blood came, to keep back the wild cry which surged in her heart.

“Malcolm! Malcolm!”

Fierce by nature, passionate in love and hate was Gruoch, granddaughter of Kenneth the Grim.

No less passionate was this her child—the child she had never loved, whose life she had blighted, yet who had so much of her own nature.

Passionate in love was Bethoc, without her mother’s fierce vindictiveness of temper, and that passionate nature was on the cross now, suffering as only such hearts can suffer.

And the barrier rose high before her mental vision.

Malcolm, son of Duncan, was on the other side.

The doctor and his companion were re-crossing the courtyard towards the stairs. Grizel was in haste to return to her mistress with whom she slept.

“The queen,” said the doctor very gravely, “more needs the divine than the physician. God, God, forgive us all. Look after her, remove from her the means of all annoyance and still keep eyes upon her. I dare not think of all that we have heard, yet a great pity grows within me. It is amazing, incredible. Yet we shall do well to forget all if we can. Forget all!”

Those two words lingered mockingly in other ears than those of Grizel, the queen’s favorite gentlewoman. Though neither she nor the worthy physician had seen the girl who, crouching there in the shadows, saw love pass out of her life—forever.

CHAPTER XXXV

A DIZZY SUMMIT

RUMOR had crystallized into certainty at last. More than one courier had come exhausted to Dunsinane with the news that the English force, under the Earl of Northumberland, with Prince Malcolm and the Thane of Fife in their company, already approached the castle, and that their ranks were being joined by most of the Scottish nobles, such as Menteith, Caithness, Angus and Lennox, all of whom hailed Malcolm as their rightful king and declared that the day had arrived to break a tyrant's power.

Such news might well have struck dismay into the hearts of the most confident. But Macbeth, though his mood was black, laughed at the fears of the few remaining supporters who had gathered about him at Dunsinane, whilst at the same time he talked threateningly of the bloody vengeance he would take on all traitors.

That such vengeance would well nigh leave him subjectless if taken he pretended to ignore, though every messenger brought the tale of fresh defaulters, and it was clear that his enemies, confident in their strength, intended to besiege his impregnable fortress.

The castle it had been his pride and pleasure to build was well situated indeed, standing on the summit of high Dunsinane Hill, about 1,012 feet above the level of the sea. The building occupied an oval area 210 feet

long and 130 feet wide, and was defended both by a rampart and by fosses quite round the upper part of the hill.

From the walls a magnificent panoramic view was obtained of Angus, Fife, Stermond and Ernedale. Mountains, rivers, moors and forests gave their varied touches to the beauty of the scene and might well have inspired a patriotic fervor in the mind of any monarch.

But Macbeth's gaze was jaundiced as he gazed out over that fair scene, scarcely noting the loveliness of Nature's springtide.

Before him stood the latest courier, a man who sweated and gasped with the speed in which he had come.

"Bring me no more reports," stormed the king, his wild eyes roving restlessly around; "let them fly all. I have no fear. What was it that was said? Till Birnam wood removed to Dunsinane, my crown should rest secure upon my head. Till *Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane.*"

He glared upon the fainting courier, who staggered away, deeming the king was mad.

Poor, credulous king! Even now, aye, more than ever now, he clung to the word of those who had been charged with his damnation.

So now he laughed, though, as he turned and saw Bethoc seated near with Lulach beside her, he scowled. The indifference he had always felt for his stepdaughter had ripened into something like hatred since the day she had defied him and saved the Thane of Fife from his vengeance.

Now, catching a look of interest and curiosity in her quiet gaze, he cursed her for a spy, threatening her as he had often threatened before, till Lulach, who was the

stepfather's favorite and who, for all his wilfulness, was fond of his sister, flung his arm protectingly about her. With a last curse, Macbeth turned from them both and reached the parapet from which he leaned, viewing the strength of his fortifications with satisfaction.

"What's the boy Malcolm?" he muttered, reassuring himself. "Was he not born of woman? Ha, then, he'll touch me not. How said those dread spirits which read the future of we mortals with clear eyes of truth? *Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman shall e'er have power on thee.* Then fly, false Thanes! Join forces with the English; I fear you not. I have no doubt of the conflict's issue. I laugh at threats and omens, knowing the truth of all the future holds."

He tossed back his lank locks, folded his arms, standing there, defiant though alone.

Lulach, curious to hear more of what that jaded courier had to say, had descended from the tower. Bethoc yet lingered, gazing curiously at the man who stood with his back towards her, his face raised as he stared in the direction of Birnam woods, beautiful now in the fresh greenery of full springtide foliage.

Bethoc was repeating to herself those words which Macbeth had given utterance to.

Rumor had long been busy about a court where tongues wagged fast in idle gossip concerning the weird sisters on whose council and prophecies the king set such account.

So *this* was what had been said by those hell-hags who had sold their immortal souls for a devil's fee. Macbeth was not to be vanquished till Birnam wood came to Dunsinane, nor should he be conquered by man born of woman.

Bethoc trembled. If this were true prophecy, then Malcolm would be marching to his death, and though Prince Malcolm was no longer lover of her, she loved him well. Aye! loved him better than life itself.

So Bethoc lingered, wondering by what means she might give warning to one whose danger might be imminent, since his enemy lived in such security.

A servant's hurried entrance checked her thoughts.

This was a poor kerne, grimed and no less sweating than his predecessor. But there was more fear in his eyes. A terror which was sufficient to subjugate the fear of his angry lord.

Macbeth had turned scowling upon him. The air just now had seemed full of laughter—mocking laughter. And the voice had been that of Ilda the witch.

"The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon," he cursed. "Where didst thou get that goose look?"

The man's knees were trembling under him.

"There be ten thousand—" he stuttered.

The king raised a mocking laugh.

"Geese, villain?" he gibed.

The man shook his matted locks vigorously.

"Soldiers, sire," he gabbled.

"Thou lily-livered boy!" raged Macbeth. "Death of my soul! Those linen cheeks of thine are counselors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?"

The poor fellow was almost speechless between fear of his master and fear of his news.

"The English force, so please you, sire," he mouthed.

The king turned his back on him, and it was Bethoc who beckoned the scared menial away, telling him to go below and get wine, since there was no immediate fear.

Yet did she not doubt her own words?—since fear seemed to haunt the very atmosphere of Dunsinane.

Meantime, Macbeth, more sick at heart than he would have chosen to admit, descended from the tower and hurried to the queen's apartments. He had not seen her lately. Truth to tell, her sick fancies disturbed him, her haunted eyes had a power to reproach him such as naught else possessed.

Was this the goal his soul had coveted? This the summit of ambition?

Rather it seemed to the moody monarch that his feet had found some arid and desolate plain where no breath of human love or sympathy could live. Here, in place of warm friendship's glances, his eyes beheld the wan and terrible faces of those ghosts which were his crimes. Murder and oppression were the very atmosphere of this chill place, for which he had bartered honor, esteem, his very soul.

Aye, and for what? The heavy circlet that made his throbbing temples ache as he counted up the cost by which it had been bought? The woman he had loved so passionately that at her prayer he had killed his master, liege and king?

Well, here she sat to requite him; here, wild-eyed, fear-haunted, glancing in timid terror from right to left, shrinking at sight of him, moaning and beating her thin breast, whilst she raised a haggard face, from which all trace of former beauty had been erased.

Alas! in spite of all the despair to which he only yielded when alone and even pride had left him, he could not curse his wife.

Though it had been her sin and his weakness, he loved her still.

This was an added pang to all those demon thrusts of dread retribution. He loved her, yet saw her suffering more pains than he had felt heretofore. Saw her terror and her agony, but could not soothe her or scare that fear away.

Silent footed through his strong castle walked a foe he could not bar out nor barricade against. Nor might he pray, seeing only visions of blood between himself and mercy's altar.

So, foolish king, he defied instead. Defied all power but the devilish one whose aid he had sought.

The weird sisters had been true prophets in the past. He held to them now and sought out the queen's physician, persuaded that he, the king, might hope to triumph still over life and death, the evil and the good.

He found the doctor in an ante-chamber talking to Grizel, but the gentlewoman quitted the room at the king's entrance, after one deep obeisance and swift, pitying look.

Somehow the pity angered Macbeth.

"How does your patient, doctor?" he asked curtly.

The old man glanced up quickly from the mixing of some draught.

"Not so sick, your majesty," he answered, "as she is troubled with thick-coming fancies that keep her from her rest."

The king frowned, rapping with his knuckles upon the table.

"Cure her of that," he commanded. "What! canst thou not minister to a mind diseased; pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow; raze out the written troubles of the brain; and with some sweet, oblivious antidote, calm all the troubled nerves so that the burdened heart knows peace again, and health be thus restored?"

The other sighed. Here, indeed, was a task which, if he could accomplish it, should win him fame and blessing throughout the world. But it was beyond human skill.

Yet he answered cautiously, knowing the fury of the king's sudden passions.

"My liege," said he, "in such matters the patient must minister to himself."

Macbeth laughed bitterly. Could none help their need? Were he and his queen alone, shipwrecked in the ocean of their success and glory?

"Throw physic to the dogs," he mocked. "Unless, good doctor, thou canst find some drug or draught to purge my sick land from its fell disease and restore it to a sound and pristine health. If thou couldst do this I would applaud thee to the very echo that should applaud again. What medicine is there which should scour these English hence? Hearest thou of them?"

He leaned across the table, his burning gaze seeking the startled one of the white-haired old man, who trembled as he marked the mad fire of the speaker's glance.

"Aye, my good lord," he faltered; "your royal preparation makes us hear something."

Macbeth straightened himself, still mocking.

"Preparation?" he echoed. "Yes, they shall find us prepared—What? Did one talk of fear? I tell you, doctor, that was a scurvy knave who for his cowardice shall hang high from the battlements. Macbeth knows no fear. Is it not decreed that no foe shall stand as victor over him till Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane?"

The doctor started, turning pale.

The king eyed him suspiciously.

“What now, sirrah?” quoth he. “Why should you blanch as though you grieve to hear that my foes shall quail?”

The other shook his head.

“Nay, my liege,” he replied. “I started because methought I heard laughter in the air above me, and by my soul, its sound was very evil.”

Macbeth knit his brows in a frown of displeasure.

“See to it that her majesty rests,” he commanded. “And let not her fancies reproduce themselves in your own imagination.”

The doctor looked after the king’s retreating figure with grave eyes. Then he returned to the preparation of his draught with a heavy sigh.

“One thing is very sure,” he murmured. “If I could but be away from Dunsinane, neither command nor bribe would draw me hither again.”

“Why, there am I at a mind with you, sir,” replied a voice, which so startled him that he spilled half his carefully concocted draught as he looked up to encounter the mournful gaze of the Lady Bethoc.

His eyes grew kindly in expression, however, as he listened to her faltering apology.

“I but came,” said she, “to hear how the queen progressed. Will she see me this evening?”

The old man looked pained.

“Nay, dear lady,” he replied, “’tis a visit I must forbid. Strange though it seemeth, your coming, more than that of any other, brings these fevered fancies upon your mother, so that she grows excited and distraught. You must not grieve at this, for when the mind is sick and troubled, our dearest oft become as though they were our enemies. It is not her love, but her health

which is ill-attuned. And so it will be best that you should not go within."

Without a word Bethoc turned away.

Was the doctor mistaken in fancying he could trace relief in the expression of her face?

CHAPTER XXXVI

BETHOC GOING BRAVELY

“**I** MUST leave Dunsinane, aye, and at once. I may not stay here when duty calls me hence.”

So Bethoc spoke to herself as she stood in the tiny apartment appointed for her use.

But, though she clamored of duty, her conscience tore her this way and that, for she had heard the many whispers rife amongst Macbeth's adherents gathered at Dunsinane, and knew that their prophecies were gloomy as to the ultimate issue should Malcolm and his English allies really appear before Dunsinane.

And if disaster, defeat, death, were before the inmates of this strong castle, she could not help remembering that it contained her mother and brother.

But, alas! What comfort would she give the former, since the very sight of her brought on a paroxysm of those nervous terrors which left the queen faint and exhausted? What connection the crazed woman saw between the daughter and the terrible past was an enigma even to Bethoc; but thus it was, and she knew it would be impossible in any event to help console or cheer her unhappy mother.

And away across the darkened landscape the man she loved but must renounce marched to the bringing of grim and righteous retribution. And did she not hold the key to the king's defiance? Could she not tell Malcolm of his danger?—or at least, recount the warning, if he

chose to call it so—of those weird prophetesses who had shown Macbeth that he was safe until Birnam wood removed to Dunsinane?

Cradled in that atmosphere of superstitious belief common to the day, Bethoc herself attached much significance to those words.

And if Macbeth sheltered behind so strange a promise ought she not to risk all in searching Malcolm out and telling him how vain was his strife?

Risk all. Ah, yes, but was there not self-deceit in this? Would she not fain escape to friends, guessing her own peril?

Well did Bethoc know the suspicion with which the king regarded her. Easily she guessed what desperate and blood-thirsty methods he might take to ensure himself against betrayal at her hands.

But there was Lulach. Could she leave her brother? Nay, at least not without farewell!

Undecided, irresolute, fearing her own motives, yet irresistibly drawn towards this daring venture which should afford the means of enabling her to help the man she loved, Bethoc commenced her search for her brother.

Yet she searched vainly, and grew much perplexed as she questioned one after the other, hearing denials from all lips. The young prince—as he was called—had not been seen for some hours. At last, when Bethoc was on the point of braving the anger of the king himself in telling of her brother's loss, she came upon Fenella, the youngest and prettiest of the queen's gentlewomen, half-hidden in an alcove, sobbing her heart out.

It was some time before any coherent speech could be won from the poor girl, but at last, after patient questioning, Bethoc learned a startling tale. It appeared that

many of Macbeth's adherents did not share their master's optimism with regard to the outcome of an approaching fray, and so, after due deliberation, had stolen off, carrying Lulach with them, having determined that, should Macbeth be vanquished and perish in the coming conflict, they would proclaim young Lulach as king and strive to rally the tribes to his standard.

"Three hours since," sobbed Fenella, "they rode hence secretly, not daring to tell his majesty, who vows that no human power can overthrow him. I pray the saints it may be so, and yet I fear. Alas! I would I were far from hence in safety. Yet I could not fly leaving Seyton here. Ah, lady, if you knew how my heart is riven. There will be a battle perchance, and many slain. I grow faint with dread, hearing already the horrid screams of dead and dying. Fair St. Fillan send my lover may be safe. I could not live without him."

Bethoc looked pityingly at the pretty child, who found the stern realities of life so hard and terrible. Heretofore, little Fenella had troubled little about the sorrows of others; she was so happy, her lover was brave, gallant, devoted, she ever dreamed of a rose-lit future.

Now?

Bethoc sighed. She had too many cares of her own to give more than passing consideration to those of Fenella. And this news concerning Lulach filled her with amaze, whilst it forced the truth of a nearing crisis more vividly before her.

Nearer, yet nearer drew Malcolm the avenger. Alas, she could no longer dream of him as Malcolm the lover.

"Lulach gone," she breathed, "and with no word of farewell? No parting kiss? But whither have they taken him?"

"To Strathbogie,"* replied Fenella, "and Lulach would have sought you, lady, if he had been permitted. He even wept when they told him he must come at once. Methinks he would fain have stayed to see the fighting, full sure indeed that the king must be victorious."

"Left he a message?" asked the sister wistfully; for though Lulach had always been a domineering and wilful brother, she loved him tenderly.

Fenella nodded. "He bade me tell you he should soon return when the king triumphed, and that he hoped all the fighting would not be over. He said he envied us both because we should see traitors hang whilst he vainly awaited a chance to fight them. Those with him laughed at his words, vowing Macbeth's own son could not have spoken more gallantly. But—I wept," concluded little Fenella with a sob, "for indeed I am afraid of all this fighting and talk of killing. Why cannot there be peace in Scotland as there used to be when I was a child and good King Duncan ruled the land?"

Bethoc shook her head.

"Would to Heaven King Duncan still reigned," she whispered. "How fair the world would then seem, whilst now—now it is desolate."

Fenella looked at the elder girl, her hazel eyes wet with tears.

"You do not think we shall all be killed?" she questioned, timidly, "even if this terrible Malcolm comes against the castle."

"Nay," replied Bethoc gently, "he is not terrible at all, but a most noble prince. Alas, sweet Fenella, the terror will come from within rather than from without."

* Immediately after Macbeth's decease his adherents proclaimed Lulach king; but they were quickly overthrown, Lulach himself being killed at the battle of Essie, in Strathbogie.

The girl shuddered.

"They say the queen is mad," she whispered, "and the king scarcely less so, since he believes the report of witches before that of his own senses and wisdom. Thus said those who carried Lulach hence. Oh, this place is dreadful and I am afraid!"

She rocked to and fro in a paroxysm of terror, nor was there great wonder, poor child, since attendance on the queen had unstrung her nerves, and the approaching danger was very real without being distorted by the busy tongues of cowards, who had prated in her hearing of coming doom. Bethoc longed to seat herself beside her and strive to bring comfort to the timid sufferer, but her own daring purpose was growing strong now. If she could quit Dunsinane now she would—since the ties which bound her here were severed.

She had a message for Malcolm, even though she dared give him but scanty welcome.

Stooping, she kissed Fenella on the lips.

"Pray to God and have no fear," she advised. "None will harm you, child."

The girl clung to her.

"Nor Seyton?" she echoed. "Ah, if they kill him I would rather die too, for what is life without love?"

What indeed? thought Bethoc fiercely as she looked back on the years which the beacon of her own love had lighted, then forward and saw the future, dark and lonely.

Yet she reared her head bravely.

"Life is but a gift," she replied, "to be rendered back one day to the giver. If love fails, Fenella, in this life, remember there is life beyond. So we must go bravely, even if we go lonely."

But Fenella, having not yet learned her lesson, wept.

* * * * *

Night had come, a moonlit night on which, no doubt, the fairies of moor and glen held revel. A night for lovers' dreams, glamour and delight. A night for sweet poesy of thought and pleasant wanderings.

Yet Bethoc found it a night for none of these things, since the pall of tragedy wrapped itself about the high hill of Dunsinane. But it was in her heart to escape. The purpose was firm now; all that remained was to find a way.

Not so difficult either, since Lulach, whose business it was to pry into every secret, had shown her the hidden stairway which led from one of the castle chambers to an outlet below the fosses. More than one of these stairs had been contrived in the thickness of the wall, and were meant to serve for swift and secret sortie upon any unsuspecting enemy. To Bethoc it occurred that one such would serve now to free her from what she might almost regard as a prison.

Going very cautiously, her plaid drawn closely over her head and shoulders, she stole along the stone passages till she reached the heavy arras which hung before a door. Raising it, she slipped within, finding herself in a small room, sparsely furnished and hung with arras.

Yonder in the left-hand corner she would find the stair.

Quickly she hurried across the room, but not so quickly but that she heard the sound of voices and tread of heavy steps without.

Others also were on the point of entering and there was no time to find the secret of the stairs or escape by that way. All she could do was to creep hastily

behind the arras and crouch low back against the wall, half suffocated in the confined space, as the door was opened and the king, followed by Seyton, entered the apartment.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE SPY DISCOVERED

THE king flung himself down into a chair, motioning his companion to a seat near.

Here, alone with the one man he could safely trust, he yielded to one of those fits of utter depression which were wont to assail him, but which, as a rule, he hid from curious or unsympathetic eyes.

Tonight, however, he was too weary to mask his face with frown or smile, but sat with one arm trailing against the carved back of the chair, his other hand shielding his eyes.

"Seyton," he groaned, "I am sick at heart."

The younger man did not reply; perhaps he would have lieber echoed the words, and only checked fearing to add to his master's depression.

Macbeth let his hand fall, staring gloomily across at the other. The room was unlighted save by the moonlight, which fell in long white beams from the high windows.

"Aye, Seyton," resumed the king, "the crisis is here. I shall be victor hereafter or dethroned. The conqueror or the conquered. After all, does it greatly matter which? I have lived long enough. My way of life is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf, and that which should be mine, as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have."

There was something tragically pathetic in the admission, which stirred a new cord of pity in Bethoc's breast.

Here was another and a different Macbeth to the bloodthirsty tyrant she had learned to dread and shudder at. Involuntarily she thought of the kindly stepfather of long ago, who had taken her on his knee and been good to her in the days before deadly ambition destroyed his better nature.

Now, through that moonlit room seemed to toll the knell most dread to human ears, "Too late! too late!" Aye, she heard it clearly—so did Seyton—so did the king himself, as he crouched there, a man gray-headed before his time, worn, bent, despairing, almost alone, loveless, deserted.

Ah, bitterly though he had sinned, desperate though his crimes had been, the girl hidden behind the arras could find it in her heart to pity the man whose own hand had brought this misery upon him.

The goal reached! Ambition satisfied! Well might the weird sisters laugh as they gloated in their success, their victim's damnation.

Seyton was still silent. Dogged as his devotion was, he had no answer for these self-accusations.

"In place of love," resumed Macbeth, "curses—not loud, but deep. Mouth-honor, breath, which the poor heart would fain deny but dare not."

Too true! Too true! Did not Seyton himself know of those escaping Thanes who, on pretext of carrying young Lulach hence, had placed themselves in safety from threatening peril?

The young man sighed. He had no good tidings to give when they should be asked, fain though he was to bring cheer to this broken man, whose piteous despair touched him more deeply than any raging defiance of fate would have done. Macbeth sat silent for a time.

He was terribly depressed; the firmly gathered reins of government seemed slipping from between nerveless fingers. He had lost heart for the moment and looked out from an abyss where hope was dead.

Presently he roused himself. Wherefore should he fear? Had it not been foretold that no man born of woman should overcome him?

"Seyton," he asked harshly, "what news more?"

The officer looked at him askance.

"All is confirmed, my lord, which was reported," he said reluctantly.

Macbeth cursed with grim fervor.

"I'll fight," he vowed, "till my flesh be hacked from my bones. Come! give me my armor."

The other hesitated. Upon the stone floor the moonlight lay chill.

"It is not needed yet," he hinted.

"I'll put it on," retorted the king fiercely. "Send out more horses, scour the country round. Hang those that talk of fear."

He sprang to his feet, a sudden thought striking him. Had he not concealed more than one secret stair leading beyond the fosses? He would see that these were clear and—

He had torn aside the arras, pausing now with the heavy tapestry in his left hand, his right upon his sword.

White as the moonlight that fell upon her pale face stood Bethoc, leaning back against the wall, her blue eyes raised to his with the look of one who expects little less than instant death.

With a savage cry Macbeth caught his stepdaughter by the arm, dragging her into the room. The heavy arras fell back with a dull swish into its place.

"A spy," whispered the king beneath his breath.
"A spy!"

His eyes were terrible, so that even Seyton shuddered.

Bethoc stood dumb; it seemed that she was beyond fear, beyond hope, knowing death was near. Aye! death was near—so near that the king, drawing his dirk, would have struck her down in the frenzy of his rage had it not been for Seyton, who sprang forward and, regardless of consequences, caught the upraised wrist. "Your majesty!" he gasped.

Macbeth turned upon him savagely.

"A spy!" he reiterated. "A crawling, creeping traitress, too long nourished to my bosom. Out on you then! She shall die. Death be her portion. What, man! Has she not betrayed us before? But for her the Thane of Fife would have died instead of his wife. More ghosts? Nay, I do not fear ghosts. I fear naught, since none shall overcome me. But spies die. She shall die."

He was delirious in his rage, the froth white upon his beard.

Bethoc closed her eyes, praying inarticulately. But Seyton was desperate.

"Nay, my liege," said he, "if you commit this crime, your friends, adherents, those who shall help you smite down and conquer all your foes, would desert you. It must not be. In destroying this lady you destroy yourself."

"Rather I save myself," growled Macbeth—but he had lowered his weapon and relaxed his hold on Bethoc's arm.

"She is a traitress," he reiterated. "Was she not listening to our most secret counsels? Her foot upon

the stair which should lead her to our foes? Death hath she deserved. Death shall be her portion."

"But not now," urged Seyton, intent on his object of salvation, "the crisis is too imminent. Your adherents must be thought of, their whims considered. The lady, if she be a traitress, shall not escape her fate, but she must not die here and now. The risk to your cause would be too great. There is more than one safe prison in Dun-sinane, my good liege. Let me myself take her thither, bolt and bar her in, so that later her fate shall be decided when conquest crowns your arms and peace the country."

"Conquest and peace," muttered Macbeth. "Aye, aye, I am the victor. Take her away, Seyton, lock her safely in the deepest dungeon, draw bolt and bar to keep here there. She shall not escape my vengeance any more than others, less my kin."

Seyton did not need to be commanded twice. Taking Bethoc by the arm he hurried her from the room and down many passages till they came to a long, narrow flight of steps leading to a part of the castle unknown to the girl. She was still numb, in the horror which showed her death's face. That she had escaped it by a friend's intervention she scarcely yet understood. But at length, after what seemed interminable wanderings, Seyton halted before a door, raising the lantern he had taken from the sentry at the head of the passage.

"This underground chamber," he said in low tones to his prisoner, "is no dungeon, but by a second entrance leads out below the fosses, almost at the foot of the hill. See, we will come within together and I will discover to you the secret. Wait here in this chamber till within an hour of dawn. Then you shall seek the passage and freedom beyond."

Bethoc drew a deep breath.

Was this the truth to which she listened with such bewildered senses?

"You understand?" continued Seyton, since his companion had not replied. "The king is not himself. In his present frenzied mood, wrought in him by the deeds of those who oppose themselves to his authority, he may commit acts for which hereafter he would be in bitter grief and vain remorse. In saving you, lady, I save my master from himself. See, here is the iron ring which, when twisted thus, discloses a secret door; pass on without fear till you shall find a second outlet, barred from within. Loose the bolts and you are free."

Bethoc's lips moved at last, though with what words she thanked and blessed him she did not know. It was all a dream—from which she would awaken presently.

But perhaps her deliverer understood the gratitude which she could not voice, for he raised her little hand to his lips.

"For sake of one I love, all women are sacred in my eyes," he said softly, and thought of hazel-eyed Fenella, whom he would so gladly have carried far from Dun-sinane, had not duty held him to his master's side.

"Heaven bless thee, sir," faltered Bethoc. "I . . . I think but for you the king would have killed me just now."

She shuddered violently as, in the moment of realization, reaction set in.

But Seyton could not linger, deeply as he pitied this poor girl, whose danger was still great enough, since in leaving the shelter of the castle he knew she launched herself amongst many unknown perils.

Yet there was no alternative. At any moment the

king's fury might be impossible to stay, and what amounted to the murder of his stepdaughter would certainly alienate many remaining adherents.

Left alone, however, in her dark prison, Bethoc gradually recovered her wonted calm. She was fearless by nature and the emergency found her ready. Wisely she strove not to dwell on the past tragic hours, but devote her thoughts to the immediate future. The future to which, in two or three hours at most, she would be passing.

Behind her loomed the gigantic figure of some haunting doom, which looked upon her with the queen's wild eyes and cried to her in the king's threatening voice. From this she fled. Had not Seyton himself shown her the way? But to whom . . . to what . . . did she go?

With a gesture of final renunciation she drew from her finger the bronze ring, with its exquisitely worked spiral formed by a double serpent, which, years ago, a happy lover had placed there, and laid it down in a corner of her prison.*

No longer had she any right to wear that pledge of a love she was banned from accepting even if again it were offered her.

The parting with that ring, her most treasured possession during long years of waiting, seemed to Bethoc the final act which severed her life from that of Malcolm Canmore.

Bitter indeed that moment, only distantly touched

* Excavations made on the site of this castle in 1857 led to the discovery of an underground chamber, and of an exquisitely worked bronze finger ring in the form of a spiral serpent.—*Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland*.

by the eternal glory of self-sacrifice. The past, with its hopes, its fears, its passionate desire, was buried here in this secret chamber which lay within the hill of Dunsinane.

But the sacrifice, the renunciation, were not yet complete. She must still play her part in devotion to the lover to whom her heart had already bidden farewell. She must find him and warn him by what secret promises Macbeth was assured of victory over his enemies.

With resolute fingers she groped and found the iron ring which Seyton had shown her, pulling it back towards her till she felt a yielding that told her some opening yawned in the darkness.

Without fear she glided into the low and narrow passage.

It was easy to set forth upon this perilous journey, compared with the suspense and horror of the waiting time.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN BIRNAM WOOD

BEFORE expectant eyes lay the wide woods, fair indeed in their fresh greenery and springtide. Dawn had come, dawn which showed Malcolm Canmore his goal—the Thane of Fife, the stronghold of his enemy.

In a long line, stretching back over the plain, marched the English host, swelled by many a powerful Scottish chieftain who led his tribesmen against a hated tyrant.

Menteith was there, Caithness, Angus and Lennox, whilst shaggy Rosse rode close to Macduff's side. Macduff the avenger, whose wrath and heart of vengeance were as hot within him as on the day when he first learned of the sacking of his castle, the murder of wife and babes.

White-bearded Siward, one of the finest generals known in that warlike age, rode beside Malcolm, his keen soldier's eye making note of every point in the landscape, which to all seemed bounded by the distant hill of Dunsinane. Beside Northumbria's earl rode his son, a fair-locked lad, ruddy and joyous, big-limbed and mighty for battle, which he thirsted for, since this was to be his first campaign. Malcolm Canmore, bronzed and hardened by the long march northwards, pointed towards Dunsinane, and his gray eyes flashed.

"Cousins," quoth he, turning to the attendant Thaness, "I hope the days are near at hand when chambers will be safe."

Menteith smiled. Like the rest of the Scotchmen who were in revolt against Macbeth, he had learned to like if not to love this quiet man, whose strength was in self-repression.

"We doubt it not," he replied.

"What wood is this before us?" asked Earl Siward. "Methinks it were well to break our fast within its shade, ere we set out for Dunsinane."

"The wood of Birnam," answered Malcolm, and shaded his eyes with his hand as he spoke.

Was it a woman's form that stood on the outskirts of the forest, her blue-clad figure framed by the soft green of clustering trees? A woman whose sheltering plaid had fallen back from her dark locks, leaving her shapely head bare.

The prince caught back his breath in a gasp of surprise. Strange, indeed, did it seem to see any woman standing thus alone, facing an oncoming army. Stranger still, since even the distance showed her to be young and passing fair.

Memory stirred the exile's pulses. For an instant his thoughts flashed back to another springtide and a maid awaiting her lover on a river bank, with gold and purple flowers about her feet.

Macduff had ridden forward and reached his leader's side. He, too, had seen that waiting figure and thought to see a woman, importunate in her welcome of a lover. Yet to Macduff this one woman's importunity was permissible.

"It is Bethoc—the queen's daughter," he murmured in Malcolm's ear. "She who saved me from Macbeth's murderous hands and sped me to England with my message from your waiting subjects."

Malcolm's eyes flashed. Without answering the speaker he spurred forward, springing lightly to the ground before the woman, who had waited for his coming with such sternly repressed emotion.

Not herself—not herself—but of him she must think. This task must be performed, this message given, ere she went out of his life altogether.

So when Malcolm took her hand, and would have drawn her back towards the shelter of the trees, so that he might give her a welcome more suited to lovers long absent, she held her ground.

This was Duncan's son, come to play the avenger on those who had wronged him. Those . . . who . . . had wronged him! *And one her mother.*

A swift stab of pain drove its way deep into Bethoc's heart as she looked at the man who would have made so noble a lover, the man who had won her heart and proved himself worthy of keeping that priceless gift. But no! The barrier rose between them.

And he, being a man, looked down with perhaps the faintest shadow of disappointment to find that grief and pain, vain waiting and regret, had touched and marred the perfect loveliness of the child-face he had been recalling more often of late. Still—her blue eyes were those of a woman now, beautiful in their steadfastness, though shadowed by a sorrow she could not wholly hide.

"Bethoc," he whispered, and, in taking the hand from which his ring had been plucked but a few hours since, realized that love was destined to play a lesser part in his life than the sterner issues of destiny.

He thought of his just cause against a tyrant, his country's need and call, even whilst he took that little hand and gazed deep into blue eyes. And she? Why! had she not been praying to fulfil her part?

So she smiled as she stood there in full sight of the Thanes and English officers who approached. This was to be no love tryst, no importunate welcome of the man whose devotion she had a right to claim for service rendered.

"Aye," she replied, "I am Bethoc, my liege. Come to welcome you to your own. Nay, is that so? You shall answer me presently, since I come for another purpose, which you and these good friends of yours shall hear. Macbeth keeps still at his strong castle of Dunsinane, and though the service of his friends sits lightly upon them, and they shall fight more in fear than love of their lord's cause, yet the king is confident of success against your arms."

They were not alone now.

Earl Siward, the Thane of Fife, Rosse and Menteith were gathered near, since Bethoc spoke clearly, glancing at them all before her gaze returned to Malcolm.

"Strange confidence," muttered Earl Siward, "if all reports be true of how his kingdom falls from him."

"Yet, my lords," replied Bethoc, her tones faltering a little, "he hath cause and reason which he vaunts to justify his faith in victory, for you must know how many times he hath consulted certain witches, who, at the price of their immortal souls, have learned many spells by which they read the future. In this way, as I have heard it said by no less than Banquo himself, these hell-hags hailed him as Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland before ambition's voice prompted him to ill-deeds by which to fulfil his destiny. These same women since have told him that till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane no arms brought against him shall prosper. For this cause he laughs even when he hears Earl Siward's mighty host marches to Dunsinane."

The little group of men remained silent about the speaker. Each glanced at his fellow, pondering the weird prophecy, for none was there who could boast himself untainted by superstition. Then suddenly Malcolm Canmore laughed, the loud, triumphant laughter of youth, which sees a way across an obstacle looming before his path.

“Nay,” said he, “we will ourselves fulfil the prophecy, damn Macbeth’s false security to lowest hell and win our easy victory. Come, let every soldier hew him down a bough and bear it before him. Thereby we gain two ends. We shall both shadow the numbers of our host, thus making the king’s spies err in report of us, and at the same time show Macbeth’s jaundiced sight great Birnam wood—coming to Dunsinane.”

Clouded brows cleared as if by magic. All were in accord with this suggestion, and soon a busy scene was being enacted in those quiet woods, where nesting birds flew in affright to see their strongholds, sheltering dainty homes, fall crashing to the ground beneath fierce blows. Thus at last the task set by Prince Malcolm was completed, and weary workers sat to rest a space, eating their morning meal with the appetite brought by toil and the fresh, keen air, whilst very confident became the talk of all as they spoke of the dismay their strange mode of march would strike in their enemy’s breast.

But Malcolm walked apart with sad-eyed Bethoc.

“Tell me,” said he, “by what words I can thank thee for thy courage in thus coming? In the telling of this tale I see the seeds of instant victory.”

Bethoc did not look towards the speaker. Alas! had not her heart burden enough to carry without stabbing it afresh with crowding memories?

"If you would thank me," she whispered, "you would say no word—but leave me here—and now."

The prince smiled.

"Why, so I must," he answered, with only half regret, "since the drums sound and bugles call. But you, sweet lady, I cannot leave you here alone and unprotected."

She pointed to where, between the trees, they could catch a glimpse of the gray walls of a little chapel.

"Yonder," she replied, "I shall find both sanctuary and a friend. An hour ago, as I wandered through these woods, I came upon yon chapel wherein knelt a holy priest who prayed for Scotland. I go to join my prayers to his. In Heaven's keeping I shall be safe, and, as I hope, bring safety to those—I pray for."

Almost she had added, "those I love," and the color burned in her wan cheeks as she thought how near had been her self-betrayal.

She need not have feared, poor maid, since her companion listened more attentively to the roll of drums than to her.

Yet he lingered till he saw her reach the side of the man who stood upon the threshold of the chapel. An old man, wearing the tonsure of a priest, whose pale, ascetic features bore the impress of Heaven rather than earth. But as Bethoc approached, he smiled, raising his hands in blessing, which both knelt to receive, whilst they prayed—the man for Scotland, the woman for the man.

CHAPTER XXXIX

APPROACHING DOOM

WHAT did the dawn show King Macbeth? Anxious faces, pale cheeks, followers who muttered with faint hearts, telling that naught but doom and disaster lay before them.

They did not love the king who claimed their service, but fear kept them at his side. Fear engendered by his own apparently causeless confidence in victory. If they deserted him and Macbeth was conqueror in the coming conflict, they trembled to think what their fate might be. So they remained—weak-kneed fighters in a failing cause.

But what else did the new dawn show the king as he stood with folded arms and frowning brow upon his ramparts? Was it possible those white clinging mists were taking form and shape? Twisting, writhing mist-wraiths, which floated towards him, eddying and whirling in the morning breeze. What phantoms of his brain were these? Mist-wraiths? Was that all? Or were those Ilda's fair tresses streaming in the wind? Were those eyes? Mocking, wicked, yet beautiful eyes which met his in a gloating triumph from out of nothingness. Could it possibly be gray Graith's shrunken features which met his gaze, twisting and mouthing in hideous contortions, whilst Maurne herself blinked at him with red-rimmed eyes and croaked a bitter gibe telling him he had been fooled? With a groan Macbeth

turned away, slowly descending the tower steps into the castle. A distant wail as of women weeping in some apartment near startled him, and he paused, waiting till he caught the sound of hurrying feet and went forward to meet Seyton, whose blanched cheeks and nervous manner told of ill news.

"What is it?" asked the king; but he spoke listlessly, as one who has drained a bitter cup to its last dregs and can be moved no further by the tide of grief.

"The queen is dead," muttered Seyton. He dared say no more, nor attempt to detail the tragedy of that swift action by which a crazed woman, maddened by the phantoms of her brain, had taken her own life.

Nor did the king inquire. This news was on a piece with all the rest. The knell of doom was in his ears, fierce passion such as might bid him fight against outnumbering foes was not awake in him as yet to urge to desperate deeds.

The queen was dead. Why did he feel no grief at such dire news? He had loved her well. Aye! loved her so well that he had allowed her to damn his soul.

Well, well, well, he could not blame her now that she had joined the throng of pale ghosts haunting every room and passage in this his castle which he had builded to be free of them.

Ghosts? Had those been ghosts or devils who had mocked him but now beyond the castle walls? So he passed on, followed by Seyton, whose cheeks had failed to recover their natural hue, though he listened attentively to the king's commands. Today was to see fierce strife at Dunsinane, he knew, since there was no longer room for doubt that Malcolm and his allies were rapidly nearing the castle.

“Hang out our banners on the outer walls,” cried the king, mocking in his harsh defiance of onrushing fate. “The cry is still, ‘*They come.*’ Yet our castle’s strength will laugh a siege to scorn. Here let them lie till famine and the ague eat them up. Were there not traitor Thanes within their ranks I would rather have met them in open combat and driven these English fools back to their own land. What!—another messenger?”

A young soldier, pale and trembling, stood before them. His knees knocked together as he saw the fierce regard the king bent upon him.

“Come, use thy tongue,” Macbeth commanded, snarling at him. “Thy story, quickly!”

The youth raised both hands with the helpless gesture of one whose fears have sent his wits astray.

“Gracious, my lord,” he stammered, “I shall report that which I say I saw, but know not how to do it.”

Seyton laid a reassuring hand on the poor fellow’s shoulder. “Speak thus,” he answered. “State simply all you saw; it will suffice.”

The messenger gulped as though hoping to swallow his terrors.

“As I did stand my watch upon the hill,” he quavered, “I looked towards Birnam, and anon, methought, the wood began to move.”

The words produced instant effect. The king’s apathy had gone, his face became gray, his lips twitched; in an outburst of unreasoning fury he struck the speaker across the mouth.

“Liar and slave!” he roared.

But the soldier grew more assured, now he had begun his tale.

"Sire," said he, "let me endure your wrath if it be not so; within this three mile may you see it coming. I say, a moving grove."

Macbeth was shaking as though in an ague.

"If thou speakest false," he replied huskily, "thou shalt hang alive upon the next tree till famine claim thee. If thy speech be sooth"—he turned away with a groan—"I care not if thou dost as much for me."

The soldier hurried away, glad to escape from such uncomprehended wrath and return to his post. Macbeth drew Seyton to an inner room. He still trembled, but the light in his eyes was that of a wild boar at bay. Savagely he cursed, then gasped as though exhausted by the blasphemies at which his follower stood appalled.

"Seyton," said the king at length, "I am undone by some equivocating fiend who hath sought to bring me to perdition by lies which sounded like to truth. Hark! Their laughter is in the air. Yet I cannot touch them. Oh, cursed be the day they first showed me the road to hell! What did they say? Come—your ear—bend lower. They did bid me '*Fear not, till Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane.*' And now a wood comes towards Dunsinane."

His eyes—haunted by unnamable things—held Seyton's. Then suddenly his mood changed. Once more he was the wild boar at bay. The tyrant who would die fighting with his face to the foe. He had never showed himself a coward in battle—and the old spirit of former years returned to him in his despair.

"Arm! Arm! And out!" he cried aloud. "We will not await a siege. If that last messenger spoke truly, what use to wait, what need to fly? Sound the bugle. Summon all the garrison of fighting men. Death we

may have to face, since it comes to this. Yet at last we'll die with harness on our back."

Seyton's face brightened. This was good news indeed, for, whatever were the issues of that fight, he knew enough of the enemy with whom they dealt to be assured that Fenella at least was safe. Had it been otherwise—had Macbeth decided to allow the inmates of the castle to endure the horrors of a siege—he would have despaired indeed, since he knew enough of his master's stubborn nature to be assured that he would have held out in spite of all the tortures of famine.

But this was not to be. Heaven was merciful. A few hours would decide the fortunes of the day, and since death always seems far from the young, even to the soldier fighting his desperate battle, Seyton looked forward to a future in which he might yet win sweet Fenella for his wife. Thus, with light step and eager heart, the young man hurried to the walls from whence a full view of the enemy could be obtained. Earl Siward, who himself prepared to lead the first battle, was busily disposing his troops about the plain. From where he stood Seyton could easily distinguish his own countrymen from their English allies by their dress, and he could not forbear a heavy sigh. Loyal as he had remained to his master, he could not but deplore this fight against fellow-countrymen, and as he looked he vowed to raise his sword against none but the English adversaries in the coming battle.

"And the end?" he muttered, "the end? Why, surely there can be but one. Yet Macbeth is my liege, and in this his last fight I'll not forsake him."

It was the resolution of a brave man, since none knew better than Seyton that he fought in a cause already lost.

Yet if he sighed it was for Fenella—not himself.

CHAPTER XL

IN THICK OF BATTLE

EVENING had come. Evening to what a day! No wonder that in the castle itself weak women sought strength in prayer, and none were found who dared climb deserted ramparts to watch how the battle ended. Earlier by many hours the garrison had crept forth by secret ways to fall upon an enemy they hoped to catch unprepared. But they had found the English earl's men ready at every point to receive them, and the battle had rolled away over the plain, which echoed and resounded with the tumult of fighting men.

No wonder that women prayed whilst death stood near, taking toll of many victims in the strife. But one had as yet escaped the dread claimant. Macbeth had seemed to wear a charmed life. Through the thick of the combat he had emerged untouched, to find himself towards evening on the borders of a blue loch, in whose clear waters were mirrored the graceful forms of trees which clustered upon the banks.

Kneeling by the water Macbeth bathed his head and face, quaffing greedily the refreshing drink, which seemed to bring new life and strength.

What though his kernes and gallowglasses fled before victorious foes and their English allies? He himself, he, the king, was safe. Had not those weird sisters, traitresses though they were, told him that no man born of woman should overcome him?

Even though one seeming miracle had been performed, and Birnam wood had come to Dunsinane, he could still stand defiant against those who would have his life, since what man had ever yet come unmothered into this world?

So the king stood alone, defeated, yet fiercely defiant. His star would yet rise upon a victorious field. His destiny was sure. Poor fool! even though the echo of devils' laughter reached him where he stood, bringing the sweat out upon his brow, he yet told himself that he was not overcome, that still he would be hailed as King of Scotland, still take vengeance for an hour's despair.

A man came crashing through the undergrowth and stumbled out upon the path not far from the bank.

A man, young and blue-eyed, with giant limbs and a frank, boyish face, battle-stained, but flushed with the pride of one who has borne himself gallantly on a first field.

It was the younger Siward, who stood with drawn and reddened sword, looking curiously at the man whose dark locks hung matted upon his shoulders, his head still dripping with water, his eyes at once despairing and threatening.

"What is your name?" asked the boy, wondering if this were an enemy, yet making less doubt as Macbeth crouched, his weapon at rest, ready for a swift leap and thrust.

The king mocked, still confident.

"Thou'lt be afraid to hear it," said he.

The youth smiled. After so much victory his pride swelled to high vaunting.

"No," he retorted, swinging his weapon with a gay laugh at prospect of more killing, "though thou callest thyself a hotter name than any in hell."

"My name is Macbeth," quoth the other shortly, and marked how the ruddiness died from young Siward's cheeks, whilst a slow horror and loathing crept into his eyes.

"The devil himself," replied the boy, "could not pronounce a title more hateful to my ears."

Macbeth fell to gibing. "No, not more fearful," he taunted.

The other's blue orbs blazed. He had never known fear—only abhorrence.

"Thou liest, tyrant!" he roared; "with my sword I'll prove the lie thou speakest!"

And he rushed like a young lion in his strength upon the gray-haired man before him.

But the fight was silent which was fought there at eventide by the blue loch, where swaying figures struck and leapt, thrust and defended in fierce struggle, whilst around them lay God's world, beauteous in its springtide glory, green foliage overhead, carpeting of bluebells beneath.

Oh! the world was fair and life was sweet—so young Siward would have told you, since the hot blood of youth was in his veins and his manhood unsullied by sins that might have seared and damned his white soul. Yet it was he whom death took by the hand that hour, passing by the other who knew life as a tragic and terrible thing, who saw a fair world blackened and mournful by reason of his own vileness.

Dead lay young Siward amongst the flowers, his fair locks straying over a mossy root, his blue eyes wide yet fearless even now when he had looked on the dread vision of one he had deemed should have tarried from his side for many years. There was blood on the lad's breast—

his shield was still clenched in the hand flung out across the moss and flowerets. Dead! How his mother would weep when she heard the news. How another's heart would break for the gallant boy lover.

And he who had none to weep him had he died instead stood leaning against a tree gazing in gloomy triumph down at that fair young corpse.

"Thou wast born of woman," muttered Macbeth. "But swords I smile at, laugh to scorn all weapons brandished by man that's born of woman."

A raven croaked near. Was it in warning that even now Nemesis approached?

All through the day's conflict the Thane of Fife had searched for his enemy in vain but tireless quest. He could not strike down the wretched kernes who fought as hirelings fight, merely in duty bound to the man who had bought their service with silver—not love.

So, amidst scenes of bloodshed strode Macduff, with sword-edge unblunted and unstained, vowed to kill none saving the one—his bitter enemy. Yet still he searched in vain.

Not once had he caught a glimpse of the tyrant who had so cruelly wronged him, and a great fear crept into the seeker's heart that Macbeth had fallen and lay under the heaps of slain—thus only beyond his vengeance.

And if so, surely the wan ghosts of wife and children would still haunt the man who ever heard their voices calling, calling through the night on husband and father to avenge them.

Where was Macbeth?

Evening had come—the question remained unanswered.

The battle was over at last. The remnant of Macbeth's followers, deeming their lord dead, had made haste to

yield the impregnable fortalice of Dunsinane to the conquerors. Already Siward, with Prince Malcolm beside him, was proceeding thither, glad to stay the battle in which again and again they had found their foes turn to fight beside them.

No longer fearing the dread vengeance of a tyrant, Macbeth's people were only too ready to hail the new king by that title. It was rather the entry of a welcomed master to Dunsinane than the arrival of a victorious enemy.

Yet whilst already the shouts which proclaimed Malcolm as Scotland's lord cleft the distant air, the Thane of Fife still sought in growing frenzy for his one and only foe.

And at last, when he had well-nigh yielded the quest in despair, he saw him come from a sheltering thicket about a loch, and pause irresolute as a man who does not know his way.

Swift as a panther leapt Macduff and stood in the other's path, his sword drawn, his rugged face hewn as it were in rock, so firm was its stern purpose, whilst in his eyes gleamed that which should have made the most reckless foe to fear.

"Turn, hell-hound, turn," he cried, and his tones rang deep and hollow as the voice of fate.

Macbeth shrank back. Some might have pitied him, so wild were his eyes, so gaunt and despairing his features, whilst his graying locks hung damp and matted about his brow, straggling over his shoulders. Here was a man who had stood upon the heights of unsatisfying ambition and heard the fiends mocking him for having found so drear and cursed a goal.

Here was the man who had taken fate by the throat

striving to force her to his will or die. Here was the man who now stood alone, loveless, forsaken, uncrowned, his soul damned in seeking that which had turned to dust and ashes before him.

He gazed at the foe who had no shred of pity in his heart—and shuddered.

“Of all men else, Thane, I avoided thee,” he replied. “But get thee back. My soul is too much charged with blood of thine already.”

Macduff’s brow grew yet blacker.

“I have no words,” he muttered hoarsely. “My voice is in my sword. Thou bloodier villain than terms can give thee out.”

He sprang to the attack as he spoke, and the blades crossed. Young Siward’s blood was still wet upon that of Macbeth—the other’s was white and unsullied—a silver streak which only reddened when it caught the flare of the setting sun.

The sword of the avenger! Yet not so thought Macbeth, who spoke as he caught a deadly thrust upon his shield.

“Thou lovest labor,” said he, “thou mightest hope as easily to smite the air as make me bleed. Keep thy blade for vulnerable foes. I bear a charmed life, which must not yield to one born of woman.”

A brief silence, then, solemn as a tolling bell came the reply, which echoed like a knell in the vanquished king’s ears.

“Despair thy charm,” replied Macduff, “and let the angel whom thou still hast served tell thee Macduff was from his mother’s womb untimely ripped.”

Beads of sweat broke upon Macbeth’s brow. Fate had spoken. In that moment he knew death stood near

him. Knew in bitter anguish of spirit that he had been tricked, cheated and betrayed by the vile creatures, who had robbed him of honor, manhood, love and now life itself.

“Accursed be the tongue that tells me so,” he panted. “And damned be the juggling fiends that weave their subtle trickery about our ears with double sense of speech, keeping the letter of their promise and breaking its spirit to our own undoing. Come—I’ll not fight with thee.”

But Macduff, still remorseless, pressed him with his blade, taunting him so that the other could have no choice but continue the conflict.

“Then yield thee, coward,” cried the Thane, “and live to be the show of the time. We’ll have thee, as our rarer monsters are, painted upon a pole and underwrit, ‘*Here you may see the tyrant.*’”

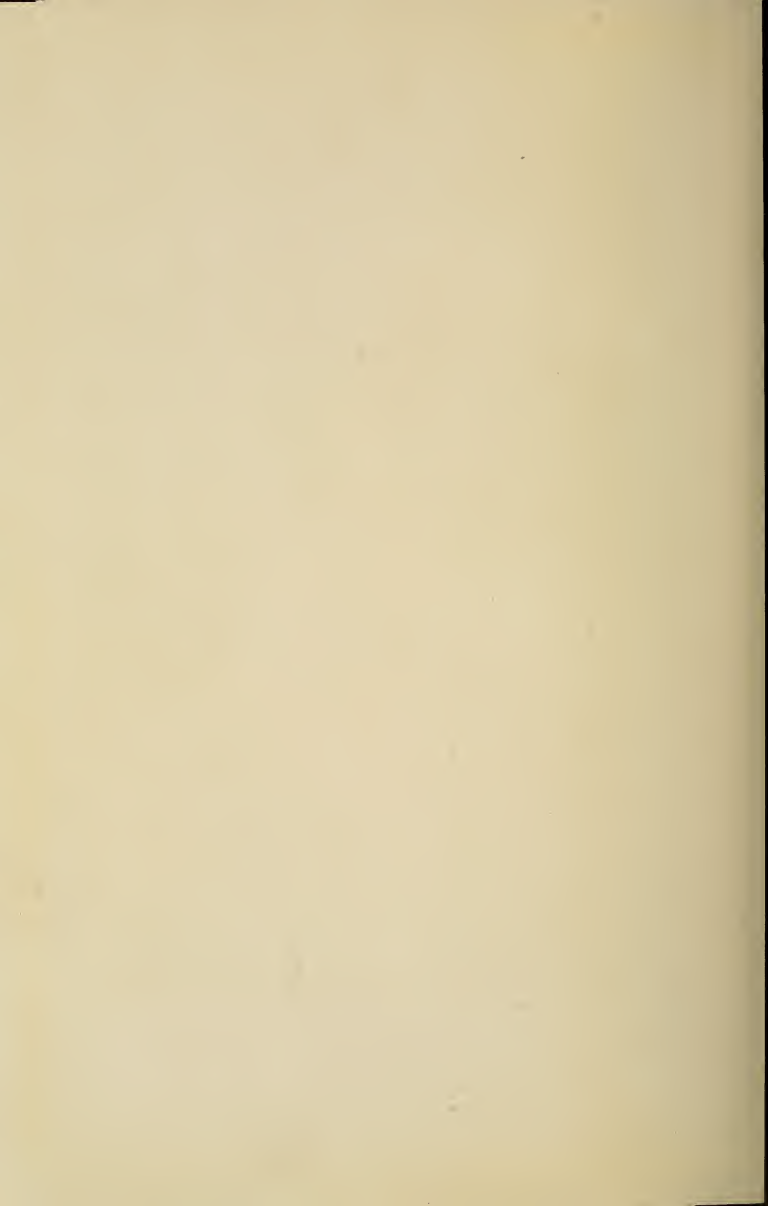
Macbeth flinched, his pride leaping to a last flare.

“I’ll not yield to lick the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,” he panted, “nor be baited with the rabble’s curse. Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane, and thou my foe being of no woman born, yet I’ll fight to the last. Lay on, Macduff, and damned be he that first cries, ‘Hold, enough.’”

So they fought, silently now, wary, desperate, vengeful, watchful. Crouching like wild beasts about to spring, leaping as though to overtop an enemy’s guarding shield. And as they fought, the sun went down amidst clouds of golden glory—and gray mists crept upwards over the death-haunted moors.



"Lay on, Macduff."



CHAPTER XLI

MALCOLM CANMORE

THE battle was over. Brave men lay dead out there upon the plain and on the hill slope. Within the castle of Dunsinane women wept for those who would return no more, though little Fenella thanked listening saints, since Seyton, though wounded, still lived, aye, and might well live to be Malcolm's trusted soldier and Fenella's loving husband.

But Malcolm turned with a shadow on his handsome face to greet Earl Siward.

"Macduff is missing," said he anxiously, "and your noble son."

Rosse, who had entered behind the earl, stepped forward.

"Alas," he replied, "your son, Earl Siward, has paid a soldier's debt. He only lived till he was a man, confirmed his prowess by noble deeds of war, and like a man he died."

The old general hid his eyes for a moment with his hand.

"Then he is dead?" he questioned, and in his heart knew there would be for him a desolate home-coming, since many hopes were bound and centered in that bright-haired lad. Yet stoicism was the virtue of the age. As Rosse bowed his head in sad affirmative he put another question.

"Had he his hurts before?" he asked, a quiver of anxiety in his firm voice.

"Aye," returned Rosse, "on the front—every one."

"Why, then," said Siward, more quietly, "God's soldier be he! Had I as many sons as I have hairs I would not wish them to a fairer death. And so his knell is tolled."

"Alack," sighed Malcolm, who had had a brother's fondness for the lad, "he's worth more sorrow, sir. And that I'll spend on him."

The old earl smiled wistfully, yet bravely spoke.

"He's worth no more," he replied; "they say . . . he parted well—and paid his score. So, God be with him. Why—who comes here?"

All turned. Upon the threshold stood the Thane of Fife, stern, rugged, inexorable as fate. Yet triumphant too, for by its hair he held the head of Macbeth the tyrant, hacked within that hour from his dead body.

Aye!—he was dead—dying as 'twas said with mocking, fiendish laughter ringing in his ears, for the last sound they should hear on earth. Macduff, heedless of crowding Thanes, saw only Malcolm, standing before them all, and at quick strides reached his side, kneeling before him, whilst, laying his blood-stained trophy on the ground, he raised his right hand aloft.

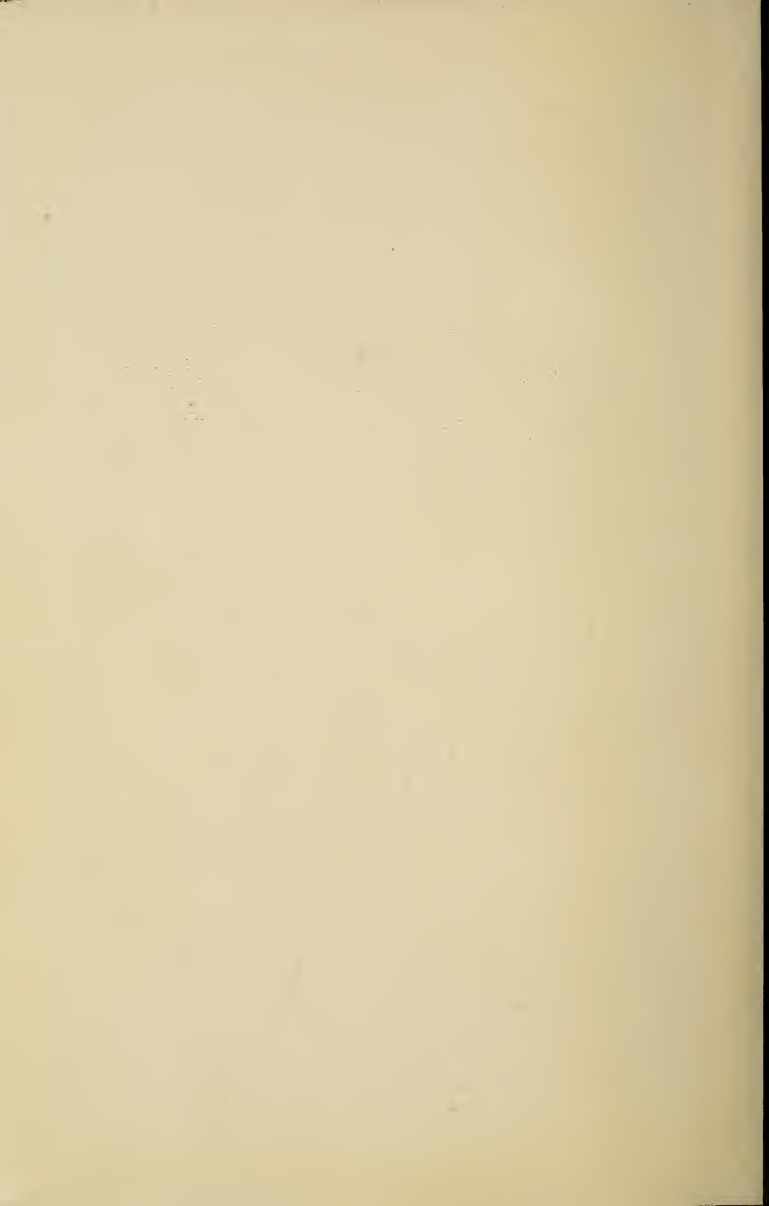
"Hail, king!" he proclaimed, "for so thou art. Behold the usurper's head. The time is free! I see thee compassed with thy kingdom's pearl, hailing thee in their hearts by the same salutation which first passed my lips. So here I voice their glad acclaim, 'Hail, King of Scotland!'"

The enthusiasm of the words inspired and stirred the stern breasts of all who thronged the great hall; from hundreds of welcoming throats the cry rang out:

"Hail, King of Scotland!"



“Behold, the usurper’s head.”



Here in the stronghold his cruel foe had built in hopes of false security, the shout which welcomed Duncan's son to his father's throne echoed and re-echoed. Strong men wept, knowing the days of tyranny were passed, and that the dawn would break upon a free and happier Scotland. "Hail, King Malcolm!"

Swords leapt from scabbards, shields were flung aloft. High on their shoulders they bore their uncrowned monarch, whom already they crowned with their love.

"Hail!"

The exile was over indeed—patience rewarded—the goal in honor reached.

"Hail, King of Scotland!"

And Malcolm Canmore smiled through his tears.

* * * * *

How hushed was all around.

In the neighboring greenwood the birds had sung their vespers. Night was near.

An old priest stood on the threshold of the woodland chapel and watched.

Nor did he watch in vain. The dying daylight had not wholly faded from the land when a man came striding up the long glade. He came alone, and the priest went to meet him.

Malcolm Canmore looked into the mild eyes, his own bright with eagerness. The acclaims of his people still rang in his triumphant ears. Here, in Birnam wood, a great hush of eventide had fallen. Though only green canopy of leaves was above their heads, it seemed as though they stood in the dim aisles of some lofty church and knew God's presence near. So Malcolm's tones were hushed as he put his question.

"Is she safely here?"

The old man pointed towards the chapel. Was it pity that shone in his kindly eyes?

"I am her messenger," he replied.

The young king looked surprised.

"Night draweth on apace," he said. "My horse is tethered yonder. I came to bring her to the castle."

"Where her mother died," added the priest. "Nay, sire, yon poor maid will never more return to Dunsinane, but rather seek at once some convent shade, where she shall yet perform her part for Scotland by prayer."

Malcolm frowned.

"You talk in riddles, father," he replied. "Years ago that sweet maid and I plighted our troth. She hath served Scotland nobly; much of my present victory and the freedom of our land is owed to her. I come to claim her as my bride—what could I less?"

"You speak fairly, son," said the priest, shaking his head. "Yet even I can read between the words of that same speech. You owe this maid much, and so, being, as I believe by your presence here, the king, you feel that you must needs be royal in the guerdon you bestow. So would you give yourself—your hand, your throne to this sweet maid, holding your heart for Scotland. Thus men look on life and duty—but women otherwise. To them there is but one transcendent need and craving, Love."

"That would I bestow," quoth Malcolm hotly. "Indeed, this maid is very dear to me."

Yet, as he spoke he remembered again that faint thrill of disappointment at having found Bethoc so changed from the vision of his dreams.

"A woman's eyes look deep," said the priest. "I am the maid's messenger. She could not tell the tale

herself, nor read the pain grow in your eyes as she showed you how love, being no strong and lusty passion, but rather its paler sister gratitude, would wither at its roots when you had time to think of how she was the queen's daughter and how ill a part that queen had played in your life. Aye, from what the daughter, weeping, told me, that part was yet more ill than you had deemed. Therefore it is that she, this maid who loves you, sees here the parting of the ways. You, King of Scotland, ride no doubt to Scone to receive the allegiance and, as I believe, the love of all your people, whilst she becomes the bride of Heaven, henceforth devoting all she has of life to prayer and intercession for those who, sinning through self-love, have died, and also and most chiefly for you, her king, the man she loves too well to claim as aught but one who, as she says, touched her life to glorify it, and leaves it the sweeter for that brief knowledge and eternal love."

Malcolm bowed his head.

Here was the fiat, decreed by Heaven, though a woman's love and sacrifice had spoken it.

And it was true.

Duty, sweet memories, gratitude, had brought him to claim the maid he thought to love in youth's early glamour. But love had never stirred the deeper depths of his manhood—and the woman, watching him with wise eyes had known it—perhaps she was glad too, since it made the sacrifice, so inevitable, easier.

"Shall I see her?" he asked, seeking the priest's face with dim eyes.

The old man pointed to where on the chapel steps Bethoc was standing.

The long hours of prayer spent by yonder altar had

strengthened and exalted the woman who had fought no less sore a battle than that waged upon the distant plain.

And Malcolm, seeing her standing there in the dim twilight, wondered that he could have thought her beauty fled.

Yet the beauty did not stir his heart with passion but rather awed it with reverence, so that he looked at her as though already she were one of God's fair saints.

Her dark hair lay about her shoulders uncovered, her face was pale, her beautiful lips parted in a sad, sweet smile, but her eyes, blue as the waters of some fathomless loch, were clear and steadfast, fixed in a gaze which saw beyond this world to the very shores of eternity.

Slowly Malcolm approached and took her hand, raising it to his lips.

"Bethoc—farewell," he breathed, "farewell, truest and most noble maid. Never shall I forget all that I owe thee—all the debt Scotland can never pay. Pray for me, sweet, so shall I be worthier to meet Heaven's dear saint one day in paradise."

She looked at him—one last, long look, such as we cast upon the dead who hold our heart. What was this farewell?

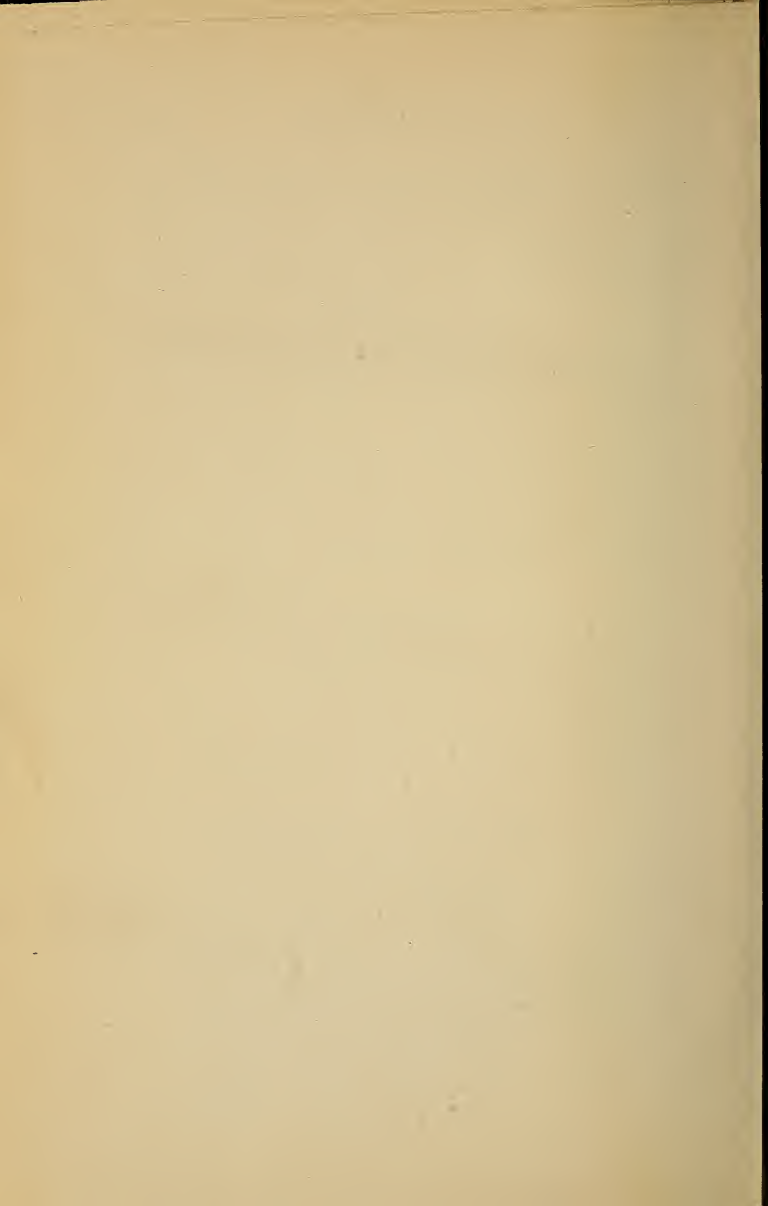
Perhaps she saw it as a very little thing. A swift passage of fleeting years which drifted on towards the changeless æons of eternity. And seeing it thus, she smiled for all the weary aching of her woman's heart.

"Farewell, my king," she answered very clearly. And then—when he had gone, passing still with slow, measured tread back down the glade towards the outskirts of the wood—"farewell, dear love—farewell," she whispered in a lower key.

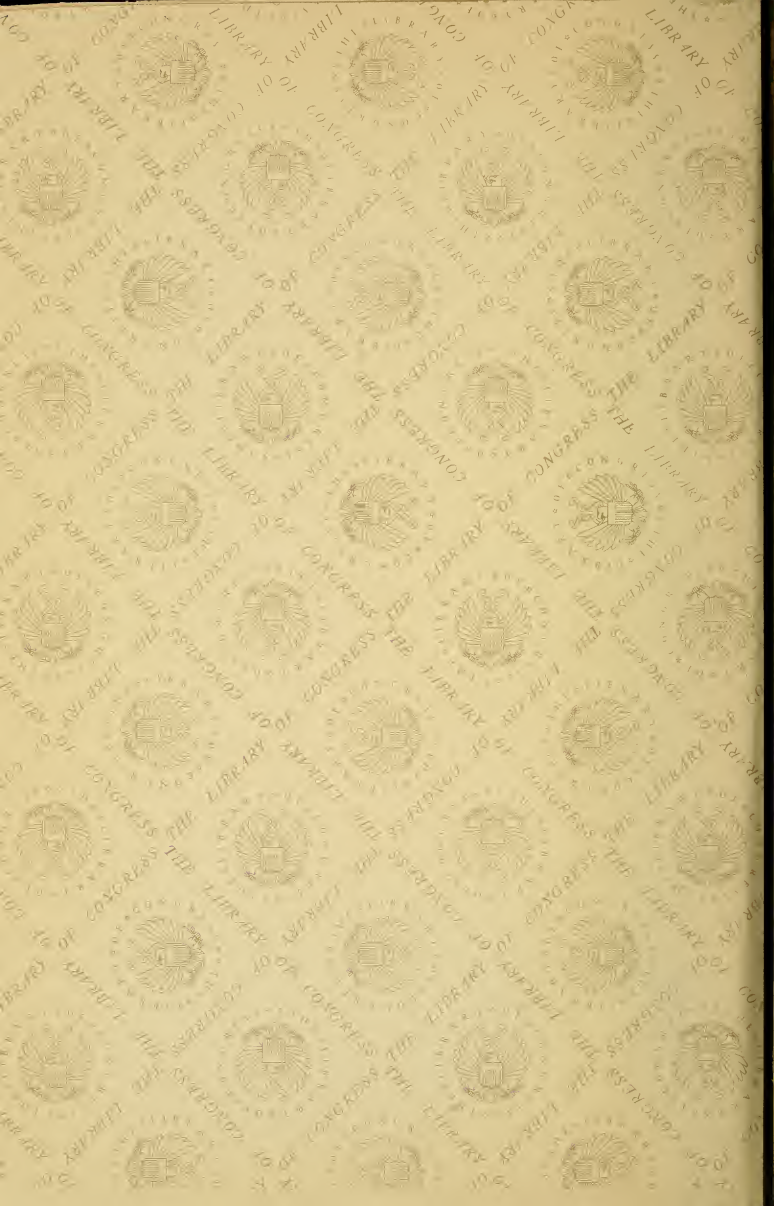
So passed King Malcolm out of the sight and life of Bethoc, Queen Gruoch's daughter, to return to his welcoming people, thence to Scone to be crowned the King of Scotland.

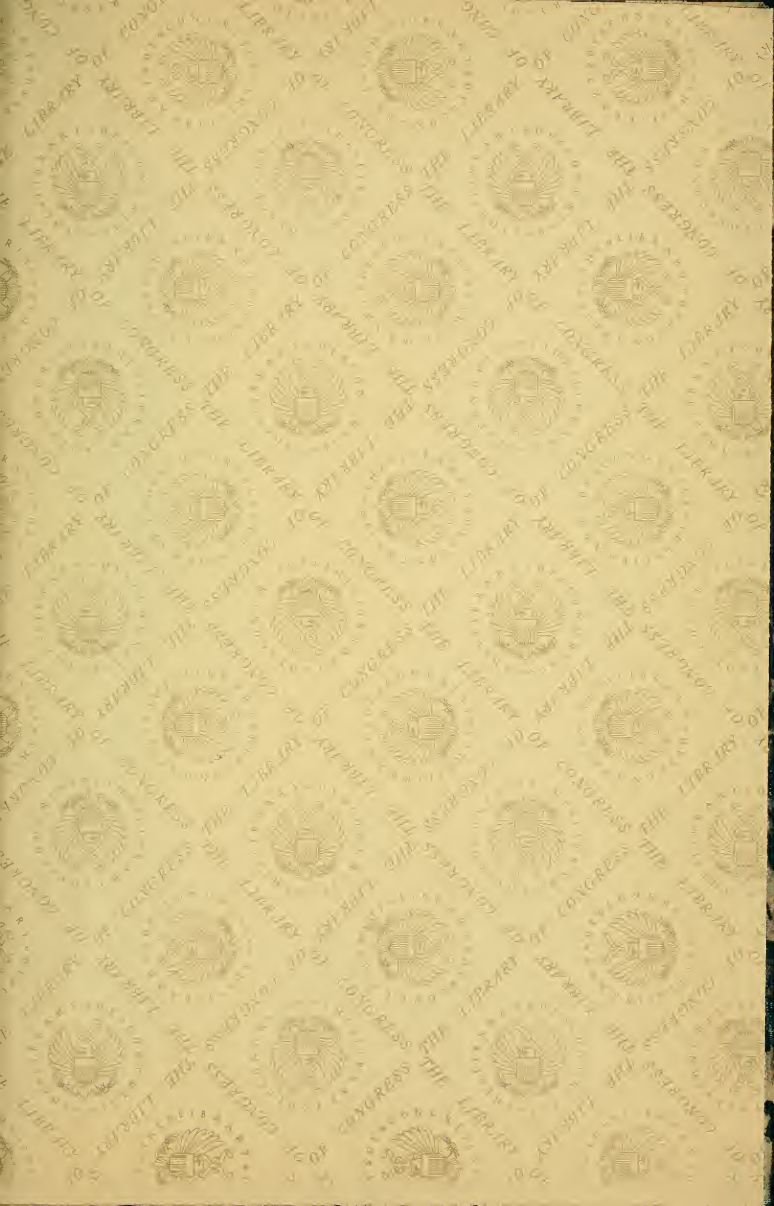
But Bethoc knelt before the altar of a woodland chapel through the dark hours of night.

The dawn found her there still—but she was smiling when the first rays of sunlight touched the great crucifix on which was imaged the bowed figure of the world's Saviour.









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