

AGUILAR GRACE

THE DAYS OF
BRUCE, VOL. 1

Grace Aguilar

The Days of Bruce. Vol. 1

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Grace Aguilar

The Days of Bruce Vol 1 / A Story from Scottish History

PREFACE

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

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

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

Sarah Aguilar.

May, 1852.

CHAPTER I

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

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

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

Originally a hunting-lodge, it had been continually enlarged by succeeding lords, without any regard either to symmetry or proportion, elegance or convenience; and now, early in the year 1306, appeared within its outer walls as a most heterogeneous mass of ill-shaped turrets, courts, offices, and galleries, huddled together in ill-sorted confusion, though presenting to the distant view a massive square building, remarkable only for a strength and solidity capable of resisting alike the war of elements and of man.

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

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

The deep embrasures of the casements were thus in a manner severed from the main apartment, for even when the curtains were completely lowered there was space enough to contain a chair or two and a table. The furniture corresponded in solidity and proportion to the panelling or tapestry of the

walls; nor was there any approach even at those doubtful comforts already introduced in the more luxurious Norman castles of South Britain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Give us but a king for whom to fight—a king to love, revere, obey—a king from whose hand knighthood were an honor, precious as life itself, and there are noble hearts enough to swear fealty to him, and bright swords ready to defend his throne," said the young heir of Buchan, as he brandished his own weapon above his head, and then rested his arms upon its broad hilt, despondingly. "But where is that king? Men speak of my most gentle kinsman Sir John Comyn, called the Red—bah! The sceptre were the same jewelled bauble in his impotent hand as in his sapient uncle's; a gem, a

toy, forsooth, the loan of crafty Edward. No! the Red Comyn is no king for Scotland; and who is there besides? The rightful heir—a cold, dull-blooded neutral—a wild and wavering changeling. I pray thee be not angered, Nigel; it cannot be gainsaid, e'en though he is thy brother."

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

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

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

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

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

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

were yet conscious of its existence; and for them it was enough to own her power, bow before it, and fear her as a being set apart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"My own, my beautiful, to what have I doomed thee!" she cried. "To death, to woe! aye, perchance, to that heaviest woe—a father's curse! exposing thee to death, to the ills of all who dare to strike for freedom. Alan, Alan, how can I bid thee forth to death? and yet it is I have taught thee to

love it better than the safety of a slave; longed, prayed for this moment—deemed that for my country I could even give my child—and now, now—oh God of mercy, give me strength!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile an event approached materially connected with the Lady Isabella, and whose consummation the late Thane of Fife had earnestly prayed he might have been permitted to hallow with his blessing. Alexander Comyn, Earl of Buchan and High Constable of Scotland, had been from early youth the brother in arms and dearest friend of the Earl of Fife, and in the romantic enthusiasm which ever characterized the companionship of chivalry, they had exchanged a mutual vow that in after years, should heaven grant them children, a yet nearer and dearer tie should unite their houses. The birth of Isabella, two years after that of an heir to Buchan, was hailed with increased delight by both fathers, and from her earliest years she was accustomed to look to the Lord John as her future husband. Perhaps had they been much thrown together, Isabella's high and independent spirit would have rebelled against this wish of her father, and preferred the choosing for herself; but from the ages of eleven and nine they had been separated, the Earl of Buchan sending his son, much against the advice of his friend, to England, imagining that there, and under such a knight as Prince Edward, he would better learn the noble art of war and all chivalric duties, than in the more barbarous realm of Scotland. To Isabella, then, her destined husband was a stranger; yet with a heart too young and unsophisticated to combat her parent's wishes, by any idea of its affections becoming otherwise engaged, and judging of the son by the father, to whom she was ever a welcome guest, and who in himself was indeed a noble example of chivalry and honor, Isabella neither felt nor expressed any repugnance to her father's wish, that she should sign her name to a contract of betrothal, drawn up by

the venerable abbot of Buchan, and to which the name of Lord John had been already appended; it was the lingering echoes of that deep, yet gentle voice, blessing her compliance to his wishes, which thrilled again and again to her heart, softening her grief, even when that beloved voice was hushed forever, and she had no thought, no wish to recall that promise, nay, even looked to its consummation with joy, as a release from the companionship, nay, as at times she felt, the wardance of her kinsman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the custom of the time, which would have deemed the questioning a guest as to his name and family a breach of all the rules of chivalry and hospitality, he remained unknown.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The task of instilling patriotic sentiments in the breast of her son had been insensibly aided by the countess's independent position amid the retainers of Buchan. This earldom had only been possessed by the family of Comyn since the latter years of the reign of William the Lion, passing into their family by the marriage of Margaret Countess of Buchan with Sir William Comyn, a knight of goodly favor and repute. This interpolation and ascendancy of strangers was a continual source of jealousy and ire to the ancient retainers of the olden heritage, and continually threatened to break out into open feud, had not the soothing policy of the Countess Margaret and her descendants, by continually employing them together in subjecting other petty clans, contrived to keep them in good humor. As long as their lords were loyal to Scotland and her king, and behaved so as to occasion no unpleasant comparison between them and former superiors, all went on smoothly; but the haughty and often outrageous conduct of the present earl, his utter neglect of their interests, his treasonous politics, speedily roused the slumbering fire into flame. A secret yet solemn oath went round the clan, by which every fighting man bound himself to rebel against their master, rather than betray their country by siding with a foreign tyrant; to desert their homes, their all, and disperse singly midst the fastnesses and rocks of Scotland, than lift up a sword against her freedom. The sentiments of the countess were very soon discovered; and even yet stronger than the contempt and loathing with which they looked upon the earl was the love, the veneration they bore to her and to her children. If his mother's lips had been silent, the youthful heir would have learned loyalty and patriotism from his brave though unlettered retainers, as it was to them he owed the skin and grace with which he sate his fiery steed, and poised his heavy lance, and wielded his stainless brand—to them he owed all the

chivalric accomplishments of the day; and though he had never quitted the territories of Buchan, he would have found few to compete with him in his high and gallant spirit.

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

CHAPTER III

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

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

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

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

The sun, though sinking, was still bright, when the slow and dignified approach of the venerable abbot of Scone occasioned some stir and bustle amidst the joyous occupants of the palace yard; the wild joke was hushed, the noisy brawl subsided, the games of quoit and hurling the bar a while suspended, and the silence of unaffected reverence awaited the good old man's approach and kindly-

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

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

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

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

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

"No, good my lord."

"Ha! he tarrieth long," answered the noble, musingly. "Now heaven forefend no evil hath befallen him; but to thy mission, Athelbert, I must not detain thee with doubts and cavil. Ha! reverend father, right welcome," he added, perceiving him as he turned again to the table, on the esquire reverentially withdrawing from his presence, and bending his head humbly in acknowledgment of the abbot's benediction. "Thou findest me busied as usual. Seest thou," he pointed to a rough map of Scotland lying before him, curiously intersected with mystic lines and crosses, "Edinburgh, Berwick, Roxburgh, Lanark, Stirling, Dumbarton, in the power of, nay peopled, by English. Argyle on the west, Elgin, Aberdeen, with Banff eastward, teeming with proud, false Scots, hereditary foes to the Bruce, false traitors to their land; the north—why, 'tis the same foul tale; and yet I dare to raise my

banner, dare to wear the crown, and fling defiance in the teeth of all. What sayest thou, father—is't not a madman's deed?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I forgive thee thine undeserved taunt, Edward," answered the king, calmly, though the hot blood rushed up to his cheek and brow. "I trust, ere long, to prove thy words are as idle as the mood which prompted them. I feel not that repentance cools the patriot fire which urges me to strike for Scotland's weal—that sorrow for a hated crime unfits me for a warrior. I would not Comyn lived, but that he had met a traitor's fate by other hands than mine; been judged—condemned, as his black treachery called for; even for our country's sake, it had been better thus."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And thinkest thou, Robert—nay, forgive me, good my liege—thinkest thou, because I loved the poet's dream, because I turned, in sad and lonely musing, from King Edward's court, I loved the cloister better than the camp? Oh, do me not such wrong! thou knowest not the guidings of my heart; nor needs it now, my sword shall better plead my cause than can my tongue." He turned away deeply and evidently pained, and a half laugh from Sir Edward prevented the king's reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of as true, as firm-hearted a Scottish patriot, my liege, as ever lived in the heart of woman—one that has naught of Comyn about her or her fair children but the name, as speedily thou wilt have

proof. But in good time is my tale come to a close, for hither comes good Sir Robert, and other noble knights, who, by their eager brows, methinks, have matters of graver import for thy grace's ear."

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

CHAPTER IV

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

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

"And hath she lodging within the palace?"

"Yes, madam; an it please you, I will conduct you to her, 'tis but a step beyond the royal suite." She made him a sign of assent, and followed him slowly, as if musingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It would be well did others think with thee," replied Lady Campbell; "yet I fear me in such sentiments the grandson of the loyal Fife will stand alone. Isabella, dearest Isabella," she added, laying her hand on the arm of the countess, and drawing her away from her children, "hast thou done well in

this decision? hast thou listened to the calmer voice of prudence as was thy wont? hast thou thought on all the evils thou mayest draw upon thy head, and upon these, so lovely and so dear?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How could I, dearest? Hast thou forgotten thy anxiety that we should meet, when we were last together, holding at naught, in thy merry mood, my betrothment to Lord John—that I should

turn him from his wandering ways, and make him patriotic as myself? Thou seest, Mary, thy brother needed not such influence."

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

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

"Nigel!" repeated Lady Mary, much surprised.

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

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

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

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

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

"Were they most rich in eloquence, Mary, believe me, we yet should need them not, in confirmation of this most noble lady's faithfulness and worth," answered the king, with ready courtesy, and in accents that were only too familiar to the ear of Isabella. She started, and gazed up for the first time, seeing fully the countenance of the sovereign. "Rise, lady, we do beseech you, rise; we are not yet so familiar with the forms of royalty as to behold without some shame a noble lady at our feet. Nay, thou art pale, very pale; thy coming hither hath been too rapid, too hurried for thy strength, methinks; I do beseech you, sit." Gently he raised her, and leading her gallantly to one of

the cumbrous couches near them, placed her upon it, and sat down beside her. "Ha! that is well; thou art better now. Knowest thou, Mary, thine office would have been more wisely performed, hadst thou presented *me* to the Countess of Buchan, not her to me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I pray your grace excuse me for this night," answered the countess; "we have made some length of way to-day, and, if it please you, I would seek rest. Agnes shall supply my place; Mary, thou wilt guard her, wilt thou not?"

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

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

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

There was music and mirth in the royal halls: the shadow of care had passed before the full sunshine of hope; but within that palace wall, not many roods removed from the royal suite, was one heart struggling with its lone agony, striving for calm, for peace, for rest, to escape from the deep waters threatening to overwhelm it. Hour after hour beheld the Countess of Buchan in the same spot, well-nigh in the same attitude; the agonized dream of her youth had come upon her yet once again, the voice whose musical echoes had never faded from her ear, once more had sounded in its own deep thrilling tones, his hand had pressed her own, his eye had met hers, aye, and dwelt upon her with the unfeigned reverence and admiration which had marked its expression years before; and it was to him her soul had yearned in all the fervidness of loyalty, not to a stranger, as she had deemed

him. Loyalty, patriotism, reverence her sovereign claimed, aye, and had received; but now how dare she encourage such emotions towards one it had been, aye, it was her duty to forget, to think of no more? Had her husband been fond, sought the noble heart which felt so bitterly his neglect, the gulf which now divided them might never have existed; and could she still the voice of that patriotism, that loyalty towards a free just monarch, which the dying words of a parent had so deeply inculcated, and which the sentiments of her own heart had increased in steadiness and strength? On what had that lone heart to rest, to subdue its tempest, to give it nerve and force, to rise pure in thought as in deed, unstained, unshaded in its nobleness, what but its own innate purity? Yet fearful was the storm that passed over, terrible the struggle which shook that bent form, as in lowliness and contrition, and agony of spirit, she knelt before the silver crucifix, and called upon heaven in its mercy to give peace and strength—fierce, fierce and terrible; but the agonized cry was heard, the stormy waves were stilled.

CHAPTER V

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

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

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

On the right of the king stood the Abbot of Scone, the Archbishop of St. Andrew's, and Bishop of Glasgow, all of which venerable prelates had instantaneously and unhesitatingly declared for the Bruce; ranged on either side of the throne, according more to seniority than rank, were seated the

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

The color was bright on the soft cheek of Agnes, the smile laughed alike in her lip and eye; for ever and anon, from amidst the courtly crowd beneath, the deep blue orb of Nigel Bruce met hers, speaking in its passioned yet respectful gaze, all that could whisper joy and peace unto a heart, young, loving, and confiding, as that of Agnes. The evening previous he had detached the blue riband which confined her flowing curls, and it was with a feeling of pardonable pride she beheld it suspended from his neck, even in that hour, when his rich habiliments and the imposing ceremony of the day marked him the brother of a king. Her brother, too, was at his side, gazing upon his sovereign with feelings, whose index, marked as it was on his brow, gave him the appearance of being older than he was. It was scarcely the excitement of a mere boy, who rejoiced in the state and dignity around him; the emotion of his mother had sunk upon his very soul, subduing the wild buoyancy of his spirit, and bidding him feel deeply and sadly the situation in which he stood. It seemed to him as if he had never thought before, and now that reflection had come upon him, it was fraught with a weight and gloom he could not remove and scarcely comprehend. He felt no power on earth could prevent his taking the only path which was open to the true patriot of Scotland, and in following that path he raised the standard of revolt, and enlisted his own followers against his father. Till the moment of action he had dreamed not of these things; but the deep anxieties, the contending feelings of his mother, which, despite her controlled demeanor, his heart perceived, could not but have their effect; and premature manhood was stealing fast upon his heart.

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

The pealing anthem for a while had ceased, and it was as if that church was desolate, as if the very hearts that throbbed so quickly for their country and their king were hushed a while and stilled, that every word which passed between the sovereign and the primate should be heard. Kneeling before him, his hands placed between those of the archbishop, the king, in a clear and manly voice, received,

as it were, the kingdom from his hands, and swore to govern according to the laws of his ancestors; to defend the liberties of his people alike from the foreign and the civil foe; to dispense justice; to devote life itself to restoring Scotland to her former station in the scale of kingdoms. Solemnly, energetically, he took the required vows; his cheek flushed, his eye glistened, and ere he rose he bent his brow upon his spread hands, as if his spirit supplicated strength, and the primate, standing over him, blessed him, in a loud voice, in the name of Him whose lowly minister he was.

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

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

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

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

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

The calm, controlled, and somewhat thoughtful manner of those grown wise in war, their bold spirits feeling to the inmost soul the whole extent of the risk they run, scarcely daring to anticipate the freedom of their country, the emancipation of their king from the heavy yoke that threatened him, and yet so firm in the oath they pledged, that had destruction yawned before them ere they reached the throne, they would have dared it rather than turned back—and then again those hot and eager youths, feeling, knowing but the excitement of the hour, believing but as they hoped, seeing but a king, a free and independent king, bounding from their seats to the monarch's feet, regardless of the

solemn ceremonial in which they took a part, desirous only, in the words of their oath, to live and die for him—caused a brighter flush to mantle on King Robert's cheek, and his eyes to shine with new and radiant light. None knew better than himself the perils that encircled him, yet there was a momentary glow of exultation in his heart as he looked on the noble warriors, the faithful friends around him, and felt that they, even they, representatives of the oldest, the noblest houses in Scotland—men famed not alone for their gallant bearing in war, but their fidelity and wisdom, and unstained honor and virtue in peace—even they acknowledged him their king, and vowed him that allegiance which was never known to fail.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many an aged eye grew dim with tears, as it rested on the fair and graceful form, the beautifully expressive face of him, who, with eloquent fervor, referred to the ancient glory of their country; tears of joy, for they felt they looked upon the good genius of their land, that she was raised from her dejected stupor, to sleep a slave no more; and the middle-aged and the young, with deafening shouts and eager gestures, swore to give him the crown, the kingdom he demanded, free, unshackled as his

ancestors had borne them, or die around him to a man; and blessings and prayers in woman's gentler voice mingled with the swelling cry, and little children caught the Bruce's name and bade "God bless him," and others, equally impetuous shouted "Bruce and freedom!"

"Love, obey, follow me, for Scotland's sake; noble or gentle, let all private feud be forgotten in this one great struggle for liberty or death. Thus," he concluded, "united and faithful, the name of Wallace on each lip, the weal of Scotland in each heart, her mountains our shield, her freedom our sword, shall we, can we fail? No! no! Scotland shall be free, or her green sod and mountain flowers shall bloom upon our graves. I have no crown save that which Scotland gives, no kingdom save what your swords shall conquer, and your hearts bestow; with you I live and die."

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

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

CHAPTER VI

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

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

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

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

"So ho! my faithful lords and gallant knights," he exclaimed, after the preliminaries of courtesy between each noble and his sovereign had been more hastily than usual performed, speaking in a tone

so unusually harsh and sarcastic, that the terms "faithful and gallant" seemed used but in mockery; "so ho! these are strange news we hear. Where be my lords of Carrick, Athol, Lennox, Hay? Where be the knights of Seaton, Somerville, Keith, and very many others we could name? Where be these proud lords, I say? Are none of ye well informed on these things? I ask ye where be they? Why are they not here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Condemn me not unheard, my gracious sovereign," he said. "I speak not to a harsh and despotic king, who brings his faithful subjects to the block at the first whisper of evil or misguided conduct cast to their charge; were Edward such Gloucester would speak not, hope not for justice at his hands; but to thee, my liege, to thee, to whom all true knights may look up as to the minor of all that knight should be—the life and soul of chivalry—to thee, the noblest warrior, the truest knight that ever put lance in rest—to thee, I say, I am no traitor; and appeal but to the spirit of chivalry actuating thine own heart to acquit or condemn me, as it listeth. Hear me, my liege. Robert of Carrick and myself were sworn brothers from the first hour of our entrance together upon life, as pages, esquires, and finally, as knights, made such by thine own royal hand; brothers in arms, in dangers, in victories, in defeat; aye, and brothers—more than brothers—in mutual fidelity and love; to receive life, to be rescued from captivity at each other's hand, to become equal sharers of whatever honors might be

granted to the one and not the other. Need my sovereign be reminded that such constitutes the ties of brothers in arms, and such brothers were Robert of Carrick and Gilbert of Gloucester. There came a rumor that the instigations of a base traitor had poisoned your grace's ear against one of these sworn brothers, threatening his liberty, if not his life; that which was revealed, its exact truth or falsehood, might Gloucester pause to list or weigh? My liege, thou knowest it could not be. A piece of money and a pair of spurs was all the hint, the warning, that he dared to give, and it was given, and its warning taken; and the imperative duty the laws of chivalry, of honor, friendship, all alike demanded done. The brother by the brother saved! Was Gloucester, then, a traitor to his sovereign, good my liege?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And this to thy sovereign, madman? To us, whose dignity and person have been insulted, lowered, trampled on! By all the saints, thou hast tempted us too far! What ho, there, guards! Am I indeed so old and witless," he muttered, sinking back again upon the couch from which he had started in the moment of excitement, "as so soon to forget a knightly nobleness, which in former days would have knitted my very soul to his? Bah! 'tis this fell disease that spoke, not Edward. Away with ye, sir guards, we want ye not," he added, imperatively, as they approached at his summons. "And thou,

sir earl, take up thy sword, and hence from my sight a while;—answer not, but obey. I fear more for mine own honor than thou dost for thy head. We neither disarm nor restrain thee, for we trust thee still; but away with thee, for on our kingly faith, thou hast tried us sorely."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And wherefore should these tidings so disturb you grace?" interposed the Earl of Hereford, a brave, blunt soldier, like his own charger, snuffing the scent of war far off. "We have but to bridle on our harness, and we shall hear no more of solemn farces like to this. Give but the word, my sovereign, and these ignoble rebels shall be cut off to a man, by an army as numerous and well appointed as any

that have yet followed your grace to victory; 'tis a pity they have but to encounter traitors and rebels, instead of knightly foes," continued the High Constable of England.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It may be, it may be," answered Edward, impatiently. "We will see to it, and condemn ye not unheard; but in times like these, when traitors and rebels walk abroad and insult us to our very teeth, by St. Edward, our honor, our safety demands the committal of the suspected till they be cleared. Resign your swords to my Lord of Chester, and confine yourselves to your apartments. If ye be innocent, we will find means to repay you for the injustice we have done; if not, the axe and the block shall make short work. Begone!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The foul fiend take thy jesting!" exclaimed Buchan. "Natural, forsooth; aye, the same nature that bade me loathe the presence, aye, the very name of that deceiving traitress. And so that smooth-faced villain Carrick found welcome in the castle of a Comyn the months we missed him from the court. Ha, ha! thou hast done me good service, Lord of Fife. I had not enough of injuries before to demand at the hand of Robert Bruce. And for Dame Isabella, may the fury of every fiend follow me, if I place her not in the hands of Edward, alive or dead! his wrath will save me the trouble of seeking further vengeance."

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

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

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

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

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

with every requisite, save and except the trappings for their horses, from the king's wardrobe, and be treated with all solemn honor and distinction as best befitted their rank, and the holy vows they took upon themselves."

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

Glorious, indeed, to an eyewitness, must have been the ceremony of admitting these noble and valiant youths into the solemn mysteries and chivalric honors of knighthood. On that day the Prince of Wales was first dubbed a knight, and made Duke of Aquitaine; and so great was the pressure of the crowd, in their eagerness to witness the ceremonial in the abbey, where the prince hastened to confer his newly-received dignity on his companions, that three knights were killed, and several fainted from heat and exhaustion. Strong war-horses were compelled to drive back and divide the pressing crowds, ere the ceremony was allowed to proceed. A solemn banquet succeeded; and then it was that Edward, whose energy of mind appeared completely to have annihilated disease and weakness of frame, made that extraordinary vow, which it has puzzled both historian and antiquary satisfactorily to explain. The matter of the vow merely betrayed the indomitable spirit of the man, but the manner seemed strange even in that age. Two swans, decorated with golden nets and gilded reeds, were placed in solemn pomp before the king, and he, with imposing fervor, made a solemn vow to the Almighty and the swans, that he would go to Scotland, and, living or dead, avenge the murder of Comyn, and the broken faith of the traitorous Scots. Then, with that earnestness of voice and majesty of mien for which he was remarkable, he adjured his subjects, one and all, by the solemn fealty they had sworn to him, that if he should die on the journey, they would carry his body into Scotland, and never give it burial till the prince's dominion was established in that country. Eagerly and willingly the nobles gave the required pledge; and so much earnestness of purpose, so much martial spirit pervaded that gorgeous assembly, that once more did hope prevail in the monarch's breast, once more did he believe his ambitious yearnings would all be fulfilled, and Scotland, rebellious, haughty Scotland, lie crushed and broken at his feet. Once more his dark eye flashed, his proud lip curled with its wonted smiles; his warrior form, erect and firm as in former days, now spurned the couch of disease, and rode his war-horse with all the grace and ease of former years. A gallant army, under the command of Aymer de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, had already been dispatched towards Scotland, bearing with it the messengers of the Earl of Buchan, armed both with their lord's commands and Edward's warrant for the detention of the young heir of Buchan, and to bring him with all honor to the head-quarters of the king. The name of Isabella of Buchan was subjoined to that of the Bruce, and together with all those concerned in his rising proclaimed as traitors and a price set upon their heads. This done, the king had been enabled to wait with greater tranquillity the assembling of his larger army, and after the ceremonials of Westminster, orders were issued for every earl and baron to proceed with their followers to Carlisle, which was named the head-quarters of the army, there to join their sovereign

with his own immediate troops. The Scottish nobles Edward's usual policy retained in honorable posts about his person, not choosing to trust their fidelity beyond the reach of his own eye.

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

CHAPTER VIII

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

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

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

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

Cries, tears, and blessings followed this wisely-spoken appeal, one universal shout reiterated their vows of allegiance; those who had felt terrified at the mandate of their spiritual father, now

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it that thou fearest, love?"

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IX

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

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

The imaginations even as the feelings of the young men were already strongly excited, although their thoughts, perchance, were less akin than might have been expected. The form of his mother passed not from the mental vision of the young heir of Buchan: the tone of her voice, the unwonted tear which had fallen on his cheek when he had knelt before her that evening, ere he had departed to his post, craving her blessing on his vigil, her prayers for him—that tone, that tear, lingered on his memory, hallowing every dream of glory, every warrior hope that entered in his soul. Internally he vowed he would raise the banner of his race, and prove the loyalty, the patriotism, the glowing love of liberty which her counsels, her example had planted in his breast; and if the recollection of his mother's precarious situation as a proscribed traitor to Edward, and of his father's desertion of his country and her patriot king in his adherence to a tyrant—if these reflections came to damp the bright glowing views of others, they did but call the indignant blood to his cheek, and add greater firmness to his impatient step, for yet more powerfully did they awake his indignation against Edward. Till now he had looked upon him exclusively in the light of Scotland's foe—one against whom he with all true Scottish men must raise their swords, or live forever 'neath the brand of slaves and cowards; but now a personal cause of anger added fuel to the fire already burning in his breast. His mother was proscribed—a price set upon her head; and as if to fill the measure of his cup of bitterness to overflowing, his own father, he who should have been her protector, aided and abetted the cruel, pitiless Edward. Traitress! Isabella of Buchan a traitress! the noblest, purest, bravest amid Scotland's children. She who to him had ever seemed all that was pure and good, and noblest in woman; and most noble and patriot-hearted now, in the fulfilment of an office inherent in the House of Fife. Agitated beyond expression, quicker and quicker he strode up and down the precincts marked for his

watch, the increasing tempest without seeming to assimilate strangely with the storm within. Silence would have irritated, would have chafed those restless smartings into very agony, but the wild war of the elements, while they roused his young spirit into yet stronger energy, removed its pain.

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

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

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

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