

The Black Douglas by J.R. Crockett.

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

William, sixth earl of Douglas, falls in love with the beautiful and noble Lady Sibylla...

Scots, with Duke John, Pierre de l'Hopital...

Scots, with Duke John, Pierre de l'Hopital, and a score of officers stole toward the tower...

CHAPTER LVIII.

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CHAPTER LVIII.

The Tower of Death.

Throughout La Vendee and all the country of Retz ran a terrible rumor. "The Marshal de Retz is the murderer of our children. He has a thousand bodies in the vaults of his castle. The Duke of Brittany has given orders that they shall be searched. His soldiers are forsaking him."

And terrible as had been the gathering of the wretches in the dark forests around Macheocot upon the night of the fight by the hollow tree, far more threatening and terrible was the rising of the angry commoners.

In whole villages there was not a man left and mothers, too, marched in that mustered with choppers and kitchen knives, wild-eyed, angry-hearted, as lone glens and deeper woods of the country of Retz they poured. The Duke of Brittany, the Duke of the north, whether the greed and rapacity of their terrible lord had driven them.

Schoolmasters were there, with the elder of their pupils. For many of the children had been lost on their way to school and these men were in the power of losing both their credit and occupation.

Toward Tiffanges, Champocoe, Macheocot the angry populace, long repressed, surged tumultuously and with them, much wondering at their orders, went the soldiers of the duke.

But it is with the columns that concentrated upon Macheocot that we have chiefly to do. Our three Scots accompanied these, and with them went John of Brittany himself, with his councilor, Pierre de l'Hopital, by his side.

Night fell as they journeyed on, over joined by fresh contingents from all the country round. In the van pressed forward the folk of St. Philbert, fresh from the utter destruction of the houses of the witch who left upon another. Guided by the duke and his party made their way easily through the forest, even in the darkness of the night. And as they passed hamlet or cottage, ever and anon some frenzied mother would rush upon them and fall upon their knees before the duke, praying him to look well for her darling, and bringing mayhap some pitiful shred of clothing or lock of hair by which the searchers might identify the lost innocent.

As they went forward the soldiers paled on ahead and caused the people to flock to the rear, lest by their foreknowledge of their approach might reach the wizard and warn him to escape.

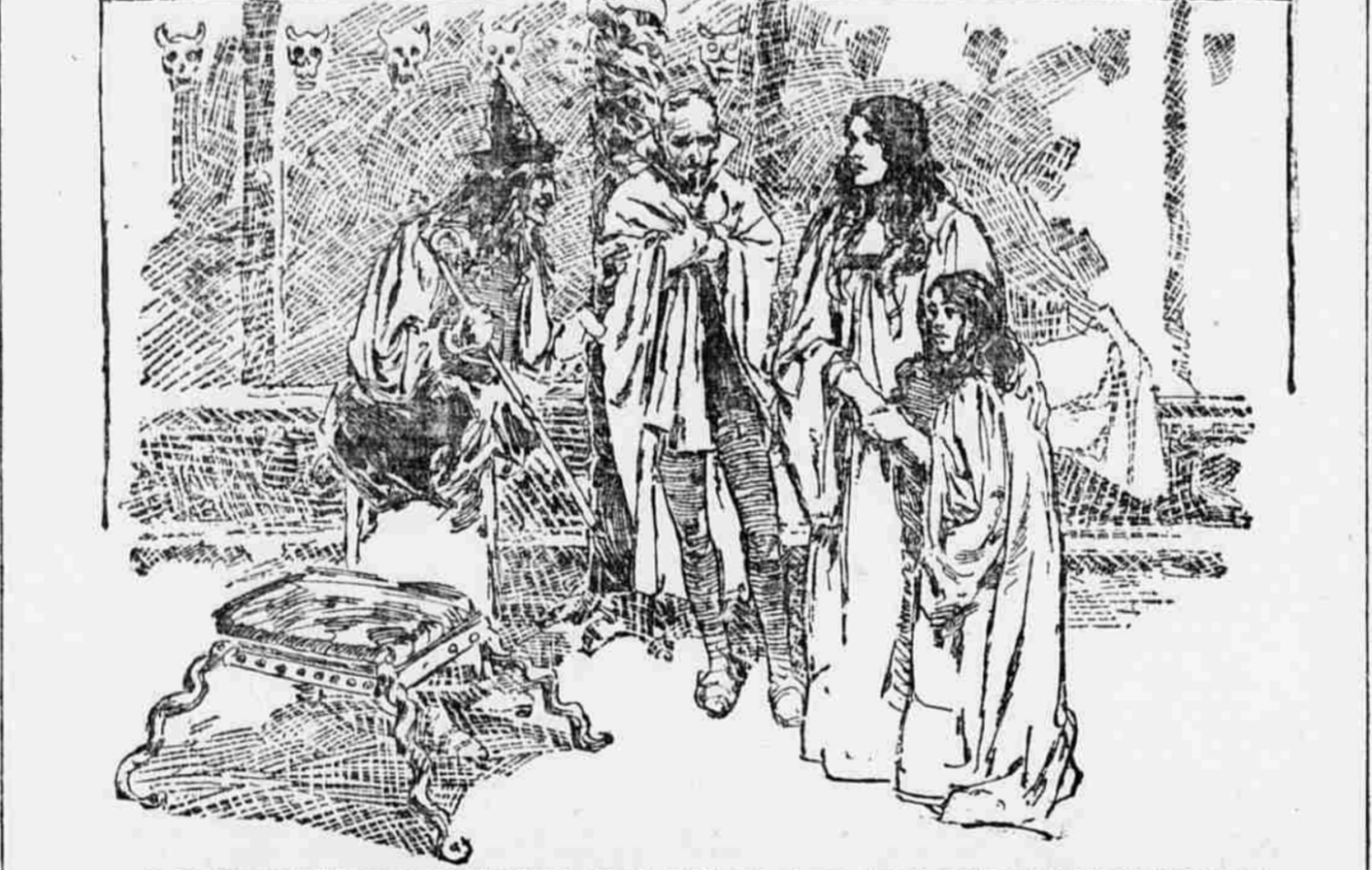
The woods of Macheocot were dark and silent that night. Not the howl of a questing wolf was heard. Not the howl of a questing wolf was heard. Not the howl of a questing wolf was heard.

As the storming party approached nearer and while yet they were several miles distant, they became aware of a great red light that gleamed forth above them. They could not see it, but the peasants of St. Philbert with frightened glances told how it beamed only after the disappearance of some little one from their homes, what strange cries were heard ringing out from that lofty tower and how for days after the smoke of a great burning hung about the gloomy turrets of devil-haunted Macheocot.

Fiercer and even fiercer above the red glare, and the faces of the soldiers were lit up so that Pierre de l'Hopital ordered them to keep to the gloomy arcades of the forest. Then by midnight the cordon was drawn so closely that none might pass in or out. And behind the soldierly the common folk lay crouched, anger in their hearts, and their cars turned toward the open windows in the keep of Macheocot, from which flared that ghastly light.

Then, covering their lanterns, the three "OVER A MILLION" Try Dr. Hilton's Specific No. 3. It Cures a Cold, The Grip and PREVENTS Pneumonia.

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"I, LA MEFFRAYE, WILL GLOAT OVER EACH DROP OF BLOOD THAT DISTILLS FROM YOUR NECK."

seemed a chance to flee with home in that horrible place in which they were doomed to abide. "Give me your hand, Maud, and tell me!" said little Margaret, nestling closer to her friend and laying her head against her arm, as she leaned on the low bedstead beside her.

Margaret was gowned in a white linen night-gown long ago for the marshal's daughter, little Marie de Retz, in the days before the setting up of the iron altar. Catherine, his deserted wife, had been kind to the girls at Ponsaugus and had given to both of them such articles of garmenture as they were sorely in need of.

"Tell on—haste you," commanded little Margaret, with the imperiousness of loving childhood, nestling closer as she spoke. "It helps me to forget. I can almost think when you are speaking that we are again at Thrieve and that if we looked out of the window we should see the trees running by and hear Sholto Mac-Kim drilling his men out in the courtyard. Why, Maudie, what is the matter? I did not mean to make you cry. But it is all so sweet to think upon in this place. O, Maudie, Maudie, what would you give to hear a whisp' whisp'?"

Then, drawing herself with her hands about Maud's neck into a sitting position, she took a kerchief from under the pillow and dried her friend's tears, murmuring the while: "Ah, do not cry. Maud, my vision will all come true, and you shall indeed see Ben Gavin and Thrieve—and all indeed as I was dreaming about it last night. Shall I tell you about it, sweet Maud?"

Maud Lindsey did not reply, not having recovered power over her voice. So the little Romancer went on unbidden. "Yes, I dreamed a splendid dream, Maud. Shall I tell it to you, all and all? I will—though you can tell stories far better than I."

"Methought that I and you—I mean, dear Maud, you and I—were sitting together in the gloaming at the door of a little house up on the edge of the marshland, where the heather is prettiest and longest. And we were happy. We were waiting for some one. I shall not tell you who, Maudie, but if you are good and stop crying you can guess. And there was a ring on your finger, Maudie. No, not like the old ones—not a pretty ring like those in your box, yet you loved it more than them all and never stopped turning it about between your finger and thumb as they were."

"They had let me come up to stay with you and the men who had accompanied me were drinking in the clachan. As we sat I seemed to hear their loud chorus sounding up from the change house. "And you listened and said, 'I wish he would come. He is very long. It is always long when he is away.' But you never said who it was who was long away. I shall not tell you, though I know. Perhaps it was old Jack Lackland, who used to be captain of the guard, and perhaps grouting Peter from the gate-house by the ford. But, somehow, I do not think so. Ah, that is better! Now, do not cry again! But listen else I will not tell you any more, but go to sleep."

"Perhaps you do not want to hear the rest. Yet—it was such a pretty dream and of good omen. "We do want to hear! Well, then, be good!"

"As we sat there we could hear the bumblebees scurrying home, and every now and then one of the big house bees would sail whirring past us. We could hear the sheep crying below in the little green meadow so lonesomely, and the snipe beating an answer away up in the sky above their heads, and you said, 'It is all so empty, and anxious to remove evidence from the precincts of his castle, had ordered this tower of death to be cleared. But truly his devil had once more forsaken him. The order had been given a day too late. "God's grace, I still. Let us get out of

"And he asked if you had missed him and you made a sign to me not to speak, just as you used to do at Castle Thrieve, and said: "No, not a little bit. Margaret and I were quite happy together. We hoped you would not come back at all this night, for then we could have slept together."

Maud Lindsey drew a long soft breath and looked out of the window of the White tower into the dark. "That is a sweet dream," she murmured. "Ah! I should think it were true and that Sholto—"

She broke off short again, for the maid clasped her hands gleefully. "You said it! You said it!" she cried. "You called him Sholto. Now I know, and I am so glad, for he is nearly as good to play with as you. And I shall not mind him a bit this night. She broke off short in her turn, seeing something in her friend's face. "Why are you suddenly grown so sad, Maudie?" she asked.

"It came to me, dear Margaret," said Maud, "how that we are but two helpless maids in a dreadful place without a friend, let us say a prayer to God to keep us."

Then Margaret Douglas turned and knelt with her face to the pillow and her small hands clasped in front of her. "Lend me your silver cross," she said. "I lent the little gold one that was William's to the Lady Sibylla, and she hath not given it back again."

Maud returned her the cross and she took it and held it in the palm of her hands, looking long at it. Then she repeated one by one the children's orisons she had been taught and after that she made a little prayer of her own. This is the prayer: "O God, who art the Father of all who are lonely and weak, and shut up in this place of evil men. Keep our lives and our souls and our bodies from harm. Make us not afraid of the dark or of the devil. For Thou art the stronger. And do not forget to be near us this night, for we have no other shield and surely do we need one to love and deliver us. Amen."

It was true. More bitterly than any two in the whole world these maidens needed a friend at that moment. For scarcely had the childish accents been lost in the night silence when the outer door of the white tower was thrown open to the wall and on the steps of the turret stairs they heard the noise of men coming upward to their prison room.

But first, though the inner door of their clachan was locked within, the bolts glided back apparently of their own accord. It opened and the hideous face of La Meffraye looked in upon them with a cackle of fiendish laughter. "Come, sweet maidens," she cried gleefully, "the friar and the girls slipped each other closer upon the bed, 'come away. The Marshal de Retz calls for you. He hath need of your beauty to grace his feast. The lights of the banquet burn in his hall. See old Jack Lackland, who used to be captain of the guard, and perhaps grouting Peter from the gate-house by the ford. But, somehow, I do not think so. Ah, that is better! Now, do not cry again! But listen else I will not tell you any more, but go to sleep."

"Make ready in haste—you are both to go instantly before my lord, who abides your coming!" said Gilles de Sille. "Poitou and I will wait without the door and La Meffraye here shall be your trowman and see that you have that which you need. But hasten, for my lord cannot be kept waiting!"

So they brought the Scottish maidens down from the White tower into the night. They walked hand in hand. Their steps did not falter, and as they went they prayed to God to keep them from the dangers of the night. As they went, the she-wolf, who must have stood beneath, standing at the gate end, and behind them they seemed to hear the hobbling crunch and cackling laughter of La Meffraye.

Across the wide courtyard they went. It

also was filled with the reflection of the red tide of light which ebb'd and flowed, waxed and waned above. Saving for that window the whole castle was wrapped in gloom and silence, and if there were any awake within that precinct they knew better than to spy upon the midnight doings of their dread lord.

The little party passed up the great staircase of the keep and presently halted before the inscribed wooden door by which Laurence had entered the Temple of Evil before them.

As Gilles de Sille opened it for the maids to enter the skirt of Maud Lindsey's robe, blown back by the draft of the chamber, fluttered against the cheek of Laurence Mackim, as he lay on his face in the niche of the wall. At the light touch he came to himself and looked about him with a strange and instant change in all the affections and movements of his heart.

With the coming in of the maidens fears seemed utterly to forsake him. A clarity of purpose, an alertness of brain, a strength of heart unknown before took the place of the trembling bath of horror in which he had swooned away.

It was like the sudden appearance of two white angels, walking fearless and unscathed through the grim dominions of the fiend of hell.

Incarinate good had somehow entered the house of the demon, ringed though it was in the slender periphery of a maiden's body, and evil, resistless and strong before, seemed in the moment to lose half its power.

CHAPTER LVIII. The Sacrifice to Barran-Sathanas. And as Laurence Mackim, crouching in the dim obscurity of the curtained doorway, looked forth, this is what he saw:

Maud Lindsey and Margaret Douglas advanced into the center of the temple, where was a slab of white marble set into the floor. As if by instinct the two maidens dropped their heads and stood hand in hand before the iron altar and the vast shadowy image which gloomed above them, and appeared to reach forward in the act to clutch

table, inhuman smile. He leaned against a pillar of strangely twisted design and contemplated the two victims at his ease. "Life is sweet to you, is it not?" he said at last. "You are truly happy, being young and have no need to be made young again."

"O, but I am very old," said the maid, gaining some confidence from the quiet of his voice. "I am nearly 80 years old. And our Maudie here, she is—O, a dreadful age! She is very, very old."

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