



The Black Douglas By S. R. Crockett.

CHAPTER XX.

In an hour Sholto followed them, having hidden last and furious across the long broomy braes of Boreland and wet the fringe of the silken covering of his horse by vainly-glancing swimming the Doe at the Castle pool instead of going round by the fords. This he did in the hope that Maud Lindsey might see him. And so she did, for as he came round by the outside of the moat, making his horse caracol and thinking no little of himself, he heard a voice from an upper window call out: "Sholto Mac-Kim, Maudie says that you look like a dragled crow. No, I will not be silent."

Then the words were shut off as if a hand had been set over the mouth which spoke. But presently the voice out of the unseen came again: "And I hate you, Sholto Mac-Kim. For we have had to keep in our chamber this whole day, because of the two men you have placed over us, as if we had been prisoners in Black Archibald." This very day I am going to ask my brother to hang Black Archibald and his brother, on the dule tree of Carlinswark.

"Yes, indeed, and truly," cried another voice, which made his heart flutter, "and set his new captain of the guard a-dangle in the midst, decked out from head to foot in peacock's feathers."

Sholto was very angry, for, like a boy, he took no little of himself, and he thought the harshness of hide which can endure the rasping of a woman's tongue nor the quickness of tongue to give her the counter-reort.

So he cast the reins of his horse to a stable varlet and stamped indoors, carrying his master's helmet to the armory. Then, all without speech to any, he brushed hastily up the stairs toward the upper floor, which he had set Andrew the Penman and his brother to guard.

At the turning of the turnpike David Douglas, the earl's brother, stopped him. Sholto moved his hand to salute and was passed by.

But David detained him with an impetuous hand. "What is this?" he said. "You have set two archers on the stairs, who have shot and almost killed the ambassador's two servants—Ponihou, the man-at-arms, and Hendrie, the clerk—because they wished to take the air upon the roof. Nay, even when I would have visited my sister, I was not permitted. None passes here save the earl himself, till our captain take his orders off us." That was the word they spoke. Was ever the like done in the castle of the Thrieve to a master of Douglas blood?

"I am sorry, my Lord David," said Sholto, respectfully, "but there were matters within the knowledge of the earl which caused him to lay a heavy charge upon me."

"Well," said the old quickly relenting, "let us go and see Margaret now. She must have been lonely all this fair day of thinking."

But Sholto smiled, well pleased, thinking of Maud Lindsey.

"I would that I had a lifetime of such loneliness!" he said to himself.

At the turning of the stairs they were stayed, for the earl advanced, his bow ready to deliver its steel bolt at the clicking of a trigger, stood Andrew the Swarthy.

From where he stood he commanded the stair and could also see along the corridor as well.

David Douglas caught his elbow on something which stood a few inches out of the eken panelling of the turnpike wall. He tried to pull it out. It was the steel quarrel of a cross-bow, wedged firmly into the wood and masonry; he cried:

"Whence came this? Have you been murdering any other of your adventures? The archer stands silent, glancing this way and that like a sentinel on duty. The two young men went on up the stair.

As their feet were approaching the sixth step, a sudden word came from the Penman like a bolt from his bow.

"Halt!" he cried, and they heard the gur-gur of his steel ratchet.

Sholto smiled, for he knew the nature of the man.

"It is I, your captain," he said. "You have done your duty well, Andrew the Penman; now get down to your dinner. But first give an account of your adventures."

"Do you relieve us from our charge?" said the archer, with his bow still at the ready.

"Certainly!" quoth Sholto.

"Come, Jock, we are eased," cried Andrew the Swarthy up the stair, as he held the bolt out of its grip with a little click. "Pah! my belly is toom as a fat year's beef barrel!"

"Did any come hither to vex you?" asked Sholto.

"Not to speak of," said the archer. "There were the two varlets of the Frenchman, and as they would not take a bidding to stand, I had perforce to send a quarrelling buzzard past their legs into the wall. You can see it there behind you!"

"Rascal," cried David Douglas, indignantly, "you do not say that first of all you shot it through the arm of the poor clerk Hendrie!"

come to visit us nor permit us to go down into the hall that we might speak with our gossip."

"How should we be responsible with our lives for the losses if we let them get about?" said Andro, preparing to salute and take himself off.

At this moment the little maid and her elder companion came forward meekly and knelt down before Sholto.

"We are your humble prisoners," said Maud Lindsey, "and we know that our offenses against your highness are heinous. But why should you starve us to death? Burn us or hang us—we will bear the extreme penalty of the law gladly—but torture is not for women. For dear pity's sake, a life of bread! We have had nothing to eat all day, and we require on the other."

"Lord of heavens!" cried Sholto, awing on his heel and darting down toward the kitchens, "what a fool unutterable I am!"

CHAPTER XXI. The Battles of Dumfries. The combat of the third day was, by the will of the earl, to be of a peculiar kind. It was the custom at that time for the meele to be fought between an equal number of knights in open lists, each being at liberty to carry assistance to his friends as soon as he had disposed of his own man.

On this occasion, however, the fight was to be between three knights with their several squires on the one side and an equal number on the other, and the squire on the other.

As the combat of the previous day had decided, young James Douglas of Avondale was to lead one party as the successful tilter of the day of single combat, while the earl himself was to head the other. The chances of battle must be borne and whatever happened in the lists was to be endured without complaint. But no blow was to be struck at either knight or squire lying on the ground or in any way disabled by wound.

To Sholto's great and manifest joy the earl's master chose the new captain of his guard to support him in the fray, and told him to make choice of the best battle ax and sword he could find, as well as arm himself with the shield which best suited the strength of his left arm.

By your permission I will ask my father," said Sholto.

"He also fights on our side as the squire of Alain Fleming," said the earl. "If Laurence had not been a monk he might have made a third Mac-Kim!"

Then was Sholto's heart high and uplifted with the thought of the victory he would achieve over his brother less than two days after they had parted, and he hastened off to choose his arms under the direction of his father.

The party of James of Avondale consisted of his brother William and young John Lauder, called Lauder of the Bass. These three knights, with their several squires, set out to arm themselves for the combat, when a trumpet announced the arrival from the castle of the ambassador of France, who, being recovered from his wound, had come in haste to see the fighting of the last and greatest day of the tourney.

As soon as he heard the wagger of battle the marshal cried, "I also will strike a blow this day for the honor of France. My quyness has altogether left me, and my blood flows strong after the rest. I will take part with James of Avondale!"

And without waiting to be asked he went off, followed by his servant, Pointou, toward the pavilion of the Avondale trio.

And as the Marshal de Retz was the chief guest, it was impossible for James of Avondale to refuse his offer. But there was anger and blamph in his heart, for he knew that what the Frenchman could do, and though he had undoubtedly been a gallant knight in his day, yet in these matters (as James Douglas whispered to his brother) a week's steady practice is worth a lifetime of theory. Still, there was nothing for the brothers from Douglasdale but to make the best of their bargain. The person most deserving of pity, however, was the young laird of the Bass, who, being thus dispossessed, went out to the back of the lists and actually shed tears, being little more than a boy and none looking on to see him.

Then he came back hastily and besought James of Douglas to let him fight as his squire, saying that as he had never taken up the knighthood which had been bestowed on him by the earl for his journey to France, there could be nothing irregular in his fighting once more as a simple squire. And after an appeal to the earl himself it was arranged much to Allan Lauder's content.

For his third knight the Douglas had made choice of his third cousin, Hugh, younger brother of his two opponents, and at that point William and James of Avondale turned their heads.

"He pushes a good tree, our Hughie," said James, "if he comes at you, Will, mind that trick of swerving that he hath. Aim at right gauntlet and you will hit his shield!"

The conflict on the Boastcroft differed much from the invaluable encounters of an earlier time and a richer country.

It chanced that on the borders of the crowd which that day begirt the great enclosure of the lists two burghers of Dumfries stood on tiptoe, to-wit, Robert Semple, merchant, dealing in cloth and wool, and Ninian Halliburton, the uncle of the young Maud Lindsey, master armorer, whose trade was only conditioned by the amount of capital he had to lay out and the probability he had of disposing of his purchase within a reasonable time.

It would give an entirely erroneous impression of the state of Scotland if the sagings and doings of the wise and shrewd burghers of the towns of Scotland were left without a chronicler. The burghs of Scotland were at once the cradles and strongholds of liberty. They were not subject to the great nobles. They looked with jealousy on all encroachments on their liberties and had sharp swords to enforce their objection. They had been endowed with privileges by the wise and politic kings of Scotland from William the Lion down to James I. of fate worthy memory. For they were the best bulwark of the central authority against the power of the great nobles of the provinces.

Now Robert Semple and Ninian Halliburton were two worthy citizens of Dumfries, men of respectability, well provided for by the success of their trade and the saving nature of their wives. They had come to the Thrieve for two purposes—to deliver a large consignment of goods and gear, foreign provision and fruit to the controller of the earl's household, and to receive payment therefor, partly in money and partly in the wool and cattle, hides and tallow, which had been the staple produce of Galloway throughout her generations.

Their further purposes and intents in venturing so far west of the safe precincts of their burgh of Dumfries may be gathered from their conversation hereinafter reported.

Ninian Halliburton was a rosy-faced, clean-shaven man, with a habit of constantly pursing out his lips and half closing his eyes, as if he were sorely grieved on the advisability of some bargain. His companion, Robert Semple, had a similar look of shrewdness, but added to it his face bore also the imprint of a shy and lurking humor not unlike that of the master armorer himself. He had kept his terms also at the college of St. Andrews, where you may find on the list of graduates the name of Robert Semple, written by the foundational hand of Bishop Henry Wardlaw himself. And in his body, as the baillie of Dumfries would often recall, he bore the memory if not the marks of the disciplining of Henry Ogilvy, master in arts, a wholesome custom, too much neglected by the present regents—as he would add.

"This is an excellent affair for us," said Ninian Halliburton, standing with his hands folded placidly over his ample stomach, only occasionally wandering in order to feel and approve the pile of brown velvet out of which the sober gown was constructed. "A good thing for you, I say, that there are great lords like the earl of Douglas to keep up the expense of such days as this."

"It were still better," answered his companion, drily, "if the great nobles would pay poor merchants according to their promise instead of treating them with the dute tree if they do so much as venture to ask for their money. Neither you nor I, baillie, can buy in the lowlands of Holland such goodly provision of the broad gold piece that are so hard to drag from the great nobles of Scotland."

The rosy gilled baillie of Dumfries looked on his friend with a quick expression of mingled hope and anxiety.

He bent with the anxiety of a generous enemy over the unconscious form of the Marshal de Retz, from whom they were stripping his armor. At the removal of the helmet the strain of the face was seen to be blue-black stubble beard was seen to be unusually pale and drawn. The upper lip was retracted and a set of long, white teeth gleamed like those of a wild beast.

The apothecary was just commencing to strip off his leathern under-doublet from the ambassador's body to search for a wound, when Ponihou, his squire, happened to open his eyes. He had been laid upon the floor,

the combat by throwing down his truncheon and proclaiming a drawn battle.

"False lion!" cried Sholto, shaking his ax at him in the extremity of his anger. "We have beaten them fairly. Would that I could get at thee! Come down and fight an encounter to the end. I will take any Maxwell here in my shirt!"

"Hold your tongue!" commanded his father briefly. "What else can you expect of a Border man but broken faith?"

The archer rushed in, as was their duty, and separated the remaining combatants. Hugh and his brother William fought it to the last, the younger with all his vigor and with a fierce energy born of his brother James' taunts, William with the calm courtesy and forbearance of an old and assured knight toward one who has yet his spurs to win.

The stunned knights and squires were conveyed to their several pavilions, where the earl's apothecaries were in attendance. William of Douglas was the first to revive, which he did almost as soon as the laces of his helm had been undone and water dashed upon his face. His head still hung, he declared, but that was all.

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