The BANNER of BLUE

by S. R. Crockett

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CHAPTER XXV—CONTINUED.

How I got Peden stopped and how or where I dismounted I never knew. I know that I heard the sound of a woman's voice somewhere and, it seemed to me, calling Rupert's name, but indeed everything swirled away in such a nightmare of confusion that I could be sure of nothing. I remember stumbling down the steep slope, holding on to the stems of chance-planted trees, and cutting and bruising myself against stones till, before I was aware, I stepped knee deep into the cool rush of the water.

That brought me to myself, though for a while I could see nothing. I could hear the clatter of a horse's hoofs on the hard road, growing fainter every moment. I could see through the silhouette of the leaves the tall and gloomly single arch of the bridge black against the sky.

I called on my brother by name. But the trees gave back only the word "Rupert!" The woman's voice I did not hear again, but once, when I was returning, it seemed as if I heard, very far off, a sound as of a young child crying.

I groped along the waterway, great boulders obstructing me at every step, and the swirl and surge of the water almost taking me off my feet.

Yes—there he was! He was lying limp, half in and half out of the water. How he had fallen I could not see. But I feared the worst, because the upper half of his body was not wet. Therefore he must have fallen on the stones.

With infinite labor at last I got him to the side and used what means I knew of for his recovery, but for a long time without effect. I laid him down and loosened his waistcoat. There was no wound, only a suspicious pliancy about the region of the ribs. I dashed water on his face and chafed his hands. I left him for a moment and ran toward the lodge, and was half way there before I remembered that my father had turned away the late tenant, his head woodforester, only the week before and that the house was empty. Therefore, being able to do nothing better, I had perforce to betake me back to my brother. I found that he had certainly moved during my absence. For one thing, his hand, which had been by his side when I left him, was now under his head, holding it as if to subdue an intolerable pain.

I spoke to him again and in the slowcoming light of dawn I saw him open his eyes slowly and look at me.

"Do not move, Rupert," I said, "you have had an accident—been thrown from your horse at the Green Dook. Lie still, I will go for Warner when you are a little better, and I can get you better established."

"Where is Kate?" he whispered, perfectly clearly and audibly.

"Kate?" I cried in astonishment, "what Kate?"

"Kate—my wife!" was the astounding reply. To me astounding at least, for I knew my brother—or thought I did.

"Kate—your wife?" I cried again, thinking more I fear of the fact which his words revealed than of the presence or absence of the woman he asked for.

"Yes, Kate," he exclaimed testily, "call her, will you! She was here a moment ago. Do not contradict me. I saw her, I tell you. I am going to die. Truth sits upon the lips of dying men, you know. I have something to say to her. Call her!"

I murmured that he was mistaken, as indeed I was sure he must be. Though I certainly would have taken my oath I had seen a white figure in the arch of the shrubbery pathway. But I judged it best to temporize.

"She is not here, Rupert," I made answer, "best let me go for Warner. I daresay I can catch either of the horses!"

"I do not want Warner—I have done with Warner," he said, "would to God that I had never seen him! My father cannot separate us now!"

And to satisfy him, I actually climbed up again and called the girl's name this way and that. But, of course, all in vain. Nothing responded save the solemn murmur of the water over its boulder-strewn bed far below the dry scaly rustling of the dead leaves under foot and of the dying ones still clinging to the branches overhead.

I never knew what a creepy place a plain Scottish wood may be till the night I spent there with my dying brother in the Green Dook.

Rupert appeared a little more contented after I told him that most certainly Kate was not there.

"Lay me higher on your shoulder, John," he said, in a strange, dreamy faraway voice. "I think I have been mad. At any rate I have dreamed a long and wicked dream. Perhaps I am about to come out of it. John, I want you to forgive me. I know Kate will. I am not very anxious about that. But I want you to find her and do her justice. I married her—Warner, the surgeon, and her sister, were the witnesses. We got the chaplain from the barracks to come for the wedding. You will be the heir now. We have arranged that. My father knew and was trying to get the certificate and a renunciation of all claims on me. That was what I was waiting for tonight. But something must have detained him!"

He wandered off again, murmuring scraps of love talk and faint, half-uttered tenderness.

"There is no one like you! Yes—yes—of course—at the old place! I will meet you. We will send word to Fairlie."

It struck me that it would be well that I should know where the girls were, and I asked him. But either his faculties were not clear or else a gleam of his old elfish spirit flashed up in his eyes.

"Ah, you would like to find that out, wouldn't you? Oh, I know! Fairlie Glendenning is all our joy. Well—I shall not tell you!"

"How then can I help Kate?" I said.

He came to himself at the words.

"Yes—yes," he murmured. "I must tell him. My father will try to spirit them away again. I say, John, he will want you to marry Miss Carslaw, the heiress, now. She is five-and-thirty and has a red nose. All the heiresses I ever saw had. But Warner and I have queered that game! Take care, John, that I do not queer yours, too! Don't let go my pocketbook, though. You will find that there, which will keep Warner quiet, if he is inclined to make trouble."

He laughed his low, musical laugh.

"Put your hand into my other pocket. I believe I have broken my flute," he went on. "No, not on that side—the other! Not that it matters. I am not going where they play much upon harps anyway!"

I drew it out and gave it into his hand.

"No," he said, "it is all right. It is not broke—only my ribs. Flute whole—bones gone! Praise be to whatever divinity presides over these things!—I will compose a hymn to that unknown god. Perhaps he may help me where I am going."

Rupert set the flute to his lips and out of that pit of darkness with only the white ripple of the water as it purled against a stone or glanced sideways for the root of a tree to break the gloom, there arose the strangest and weirdest melody the ear of man hath ever listened to.

Wavering and uncertain at first, gaining strength fitfully, almost dying into silence and then again asserting itself, that thrilling music rose and fell.

He broke off suddenly.

"I wish I could play at my own funeral," he said. "God—I could blow a lament better than any piper that ever fingered chanter. Flutes and recorders—flutes and recorders—these are your true instruments for the death music!"

"Who is there?"

The words came down abruptly as if the question had been flung at us from the dark ledge of the bridge. Possessed by the music, I had not heard a horseman ride up. Yet the voice was certainly my father's. In an instant Rupert was aflame with excitement.

"Take me to him! I must speak to him," he cried, and tried to rise. But the effort was too much and, sinking back with a terrible groan, he lay perfectly inert.

In the fewest words I told my father what had happened, and in another minute, as it seemed, he was standing before us. He seemed to have brought the day with him, for now we could see quite clearly.

He kneeled down and would have taken Rupert by the hand, but as he approached I could feel the dying man shudder, quivering with loathing and aversion.

"Did you get the papers?" he whispered, hoarsely, without looking at him. "You may speak before John. He knows all. Did my wife give up the papers?"

"She is not your wife any more," answered Gregory Glendonwyn. "I have seen the marriage lines burned and here is the paper of renunciation of all claims signed by both the women.

The young man raised himself on my arms as if to read it. I could feel him nerve himself for some tremendous effort. He tore the written words small with quick, eager fingers.

"You lie," he said to his father in a soft, hissing intonation like the hissing of a serpent, "she is my wife. I am a dying man and—you brought me to this of it. I would have been a happy man but for you—I might even have been a good one, as men go! You have broken two lives—it may be more than two! Goodby, father!"

And with a supreme effort he raised himself and struck his father full in the face with his hand, breaking the flute which he still held there and scattering the torn fragments of paper as he did so.

The next moment Rupert Glendonwyn fell back dead.

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(The end of the second narrative, written by John Glendonwyn.)

CHAPTER XXVI.

The Hewing in Pieces of Agag Before the Lord.

(In which the editor resumes his narrative of events from original papers and from unwritten information supplied to him.)

AND WITH A SUPREME EFFORT HE RAISED HIMSELF AND STRUCK HIS FATHER FULL IN THE FACE.

The last line of Fairlie Glendenning's report of her sister's escape from Inch Jonet tells also how it was that David Glendenning, lying tossing on a sleepless pillow early one mild November morning, heard outside the crying of a young child. And why, on going to the door, he stumbled against his lost Kate, sunk unconscious on the doorstep of the Cot of Flowers with a new blossom blooming freshly in her arms.

David Glendenning's lips did not quiver when he saw that which he had found. God, to whom he had prayed ,had given him his desire. There was nothing wonderful in that. The wonder would have been if he had not—though even that would not have shaken the man's faith. He bent and lifted up daughter and child both at once in his strong arms and carried them to his own chamber. He had no hesitation—no doubts. As the Eternal Father taketh in a wanderer at the door that is never shut, so bent this rugged, grim, old gray wolf whose hand was against every man, the Ishmael of many a camp, and gathered in his own unto him.

Was there sin? No matter—the greater the need of in-bringing. Outcasting never yet saved a soul. Was there shame? Well, her shame would be his.

But God pity the man who should cast up either sin or shame to David Glendenning's ewe lamb! For that old face which is now so tender can flash teeth like the wolf they named him taken in a trap. Beware—all ye whose tongues wag to your neighbor's hurt, have a care how ye speak of the Gray Wolf's litter. For none can wag a tongue with him—none follow so fast—none spring so far or bite so deep!

But though these thoughts were working in that proud old heart, he carried the girl and her babe up together as gently as a mother carries a sleeping child to its cot.

And his heart continually said, "Thank God—thank God—for one. The other—God who guided this, will guide her home as well!"

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It was upon the stroke of noon. Kate lay in her own bed above stairs still half unconscious, but warm and breathing. David Glendenning, whom a sickly wife had made acquainted with many things, appointed himself on the spot nurse to the baby, already making frequent declarations of being sound in wind and limb. He prepared cunning bottles as for a suckling lamb. He marched up and down between the kitchen and "ben-room" singing

"God is our refuge and our strength," arranged as a lullaby. Whatever might be the effects of her night venture upon the mother, the babe at least was healthy and safe.

Had he not stood on the tower's top looking toward that far country whence all wandering children of the Great Father return? There—there in his doorway this bleak November dawn, lo, the wanderer! Well, he had expected nothing else. Quick with the best robe! No matter if it be but a worn Scots blanket. Purple and fine linen were not better in the sight of the God who loves his folk to interpret his parables according to their havings. The ring for the finger? David Glendenning had no ring. Well, then, what say you to a jar of hot water wrapped in flannel for the bruised prodigal feet? Kill the fatted calf in time—in time! But just at present that teaspoonful of brandy administered with the dexterity and discretion of a nurse will do better than much fatted veal. The elder brother who would not come in? Lo, there he is in the yard—a whole group of him, triplets, indeed—Will, Harry and Dick the name of them.

They consult together. What is the meaning of this? Are they shamed forever? Shall eye and brow no more meet their neighbors', equal-fronted and calm? Listen to the crying of that child! Kate is come home. What? How? Whence? Will, the eldest, is dull and sullen. He loves his sisters—would cut off his right hand for them. Woe be to somebody! Harry is furiously angry—what will everyone think of Harry? Spicing of selfishness in Master Harry, evident to be seen. Dick, thinking mostly of what the boys will say at school, only shakes his head and mutters vague threats of vague vengeance.

To these three brethren, who would not go in, came out this father of the parable and thus entreating them in a single pregnant phrase.

"Boys, come in!"

The Old Gray Wolf was not used to offer many entreatments—commands and enforcements being more in his way, at least where his sons were concerned. Yet it was at this point that for the first time the parable failed.

For who had a better right than Will and Harry and Dick Glendenning to answer the answer of the parabolic elder brother, with the personal comments added thereto?

"Lo, these many years have we served thee, neither transgressed we at any time thy commandments (having indeed better judgment and a sounder regard for our skins). And yet thou never gavest us kids and hot bottles and condiments and tendance. But as soon as this thy daughter—" and the rest of it. No, they did not answer thus.

Instead they marched as silently in, as if they had been going to their places at "the Bulk"—every man of them with eyes fronted and subdued mein—Will and Harry and rebellious Dick. And the Old Grey Wolf held the door for them, with Kate's babe asleep on his arm.

Yet they had a kind of pride, too, because they knew that they were going to a family council—a council of one. For, so far as they were concerned, the government of the Flower Cot was a pure autocracy. David Glendenning signed them to precede him into the "ben room," and they involuntarily trembled—for generally that place was to them a very Throne of Judgment. Had he heard their murmurings? What did it mean? They were soon to find out.

A Scottish family in difficult circumstances takes council, arranges conjoint action, settles in private the pattern of the face it is to wear before the world. Once made, its resolutions are irrevocable. Death will not unseal the lips that are sealed in such conclaves. The long wear and tear of life, daily petty martyrdom cannot break down these resolutions. Will, Harry and Dick, come in and have your lives moulded! There is a sister asleep upstairs and a babe weeping in the kitchen. Come in, I say!

Set your lips. Firm your faces. Front the world iron-visaged. You are not boys any more—you are men. Sorrow and hardship have come upon you somewhat earlier than to most. But there is no disgrace, save only when cowards will have it so.

"Come in, boys!"

So came their father out and entreated them, and so they went in.

And David Glendenning said: "Lads, neither you nor I can shut folks' mouths, but—by Him that Rides in Heaven we can mak' them michtily carefu' about opening them! There is your sister. Here on my arm is a bairn-child. I have asked no questions. I will answer none. If any speer at ye once answer civilly that ye ken naething. Whilk is God's ain truth. If a second speer in a company, bid him mind his ain business. But if a third, mak' of him that which his ain mither would not recognize if she fell on wi' him in her parritch. Strike at him upon the cheekbone and the teeth, even as David struck at the Philistine—aye, were he ten times as great as that Goliah of Gath, he shall be to thee as wax in the furnace! 'They that use the sword perish by the sword'—it is dootless a great word and a true. But there is naething said again neives—naething again feet that I ken o'. And forbye lads, ye hae nae swords at any rate, and sma' skill in them if ye had. But as far as the natural weapons are concerned, gin ony man or boy cast up aught to ye, hew him in pieces before the Lord, even as Samuel the prophet did to Agag in Gilgal!"

"But if the man's a woman—or the boy a lassie—what are we to do?" inquired practical-minded Will, with superb indifference to the letter of logic.

And his father answered him cunningly, with the glint of the wolf ancestry in his eye.

"Answer them not at all at the first," he said, "but if she come at ye a second time, then consider if the woman hae a man or a son, the lassie a brither or a sweethearting joe—then, mak' a hand o' them! Never heed though ye are lickit. Mak' a hand o' them. Set a mark on their faces that they will carry to kirk and market for mony a day! That will mak' ye respectat! For the Lord sayeth, 'Unto the third and fourth generations.' And what's richt for Him canna be that verra wrang for us!"

Thus, in the day of its agony and shame, did the house of the Glendennings of Boatcroft take council together, listening to the voice of its priest and king as it interpreted the stern Mosaic law of tooth and tooth, eye and eye, from the open page of the Old Testament.

And after that David took off his boots and went on delicate tiptoe upstairs to peep at Kate as she lay, breathing slowly and heavily, upon her bed. He laid a peat upon the fire and twitched the curtains further over her eyes.

"In a deep sleep," he murmured softly to himself; "in a deep sleep, my bonnie. Bide ye so! Whoso speaketh a word against thee, let his children be far from safety, and his bishopric let another take!"

And out in the back yard the three sons of the house of Glendenning, stripped to the gray wincey shirting, and their arms peeled above the elbow, were practicing upon one another the hewing of Agag in pieces before the Lord.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Fairlie Makes Her Choice.

To a house thus fortified, and certainly not divided against itself, enter a light figure of grace, daintily and yet severely clad. Gloved and buttoned with her usual neatness, the Gretchen braid tied with the pale ribbon, the blue eyes deep as the sea of trouble through which she has come, Fairlie Glendenning walked at noon to her father's door, opened it and went in all unannounced.

"Fairlie!"

"Father!"

"Hush—she is there!"

The scarred old joiner's hand points upward. The blanched look dies off the face. He does not kiss his younger daughter. He does not catch her in his arms as he did that other. She, though well-believed as his eye-apple, does not need it. Very well able to care for herself, very definite and womanly, has Fairlie come back to the home she left a child-woman. David Glendenning knows in a moment that whoever has done wrong or forgotten the traditions of the house—that one is not his little Fairlie.

Presently they front one another in the little parlor. Fairlie's prize books stand as of old on the shelves of the inlaid cabinet her father had made for them. The girls' piano is in its own corner. Fairlie can see the dust on it from where she stands. All the familiar sights nerve her for what she has to say. The Old Gray Wolf watches her keenly. The unspoken question on his face, written plain to be read.

"Yes, father," she had caught and answered it, "but he is dead. Her husband, Rupert Glendonwyn, is dead—"

"Thank God!" said David, the carpenter, not in anger, but with a light in his eyes beyond telling in words.

"Is dead," repeated Fairlie, mechanically. "He was killed last night at the Green Dock bridge. John was with him. His father also at the last. I myself have seen him lie dead in the hall of Castle Gower. It was John who brought me to the corner of the road. And now let me go to Kate. I knew in my heart that she would find her way home!"

She goes upstairs, where in the little hushed familiar chamber is the babe and the mother of the babe. David Glendenning, with his chin bowed on his breast, sits thinking. His hands are clasped between his knees. He hears above him a moving of quiet feet—then a sharp cry, suddenly checked and then a prolonged whispering. He steps up to the door and opens it very gently.

"Thank God!" he says for the third time that day. Kate is awake. She is sobbing her heart out on her sister's breast. So far all is well. But he hears her ask about Rupert, her husband. How will it be when she knows that he is dead? David is wise, but he cannot answer that question.

Well at any rate, however, that may be, better it is than that he should on any terms be alive. And there comes a hard, bitter expression over the countenance of the Old Gray Wolf. What shall be done to those who have tried to rob and dishonor—to steal and to devour? He thinks of the two at Castle Gower, the proud father pacing the hall alone with the dead—and his soul exults.

"Babylon the great has fallen—is fallen," so his heart sings with a kind of uplift that is almost a chant. At the Green Dock it was. Ah, he knows the place. The proud is taken in his own snare. He remembers when Gregory Glendonwyn prevented the road from running straight and level—and now his son—the breaker of homes, the ravisher—! But wait. He must think this out. If Rupert were dead, John Glendonwyn would be the heir. He loved Fairlie—his Fairlie—. But no, a thousand times no. One of the cursed brood is enough. Fairlie shall never be given to a Glendonwyn. He always hated the breed—yea—as Joshua hated the Canaanites, so he has hated them.

Fairlie had said—her husband, Rupert! Fairlie spoke ever the truth and no lie. Fairlie would not speak without knowledge. Then not John Glendonwyn, but—could it be—this babe, Kate's bairn—whom he had nursed and hushed on his well-accustomed old father's arm that morning—he and no other was the heir of Gower, castle and cottage, title and pasturage.

"Ha"—said David Glendenning, a great thought flashing along his brain—a new idea striking like a thunderbolt into his soul, "then shall the house of the proud be indeed cast down. The child of his body shall sit in the mansion that was his father's. Kate Glendenning's child—his grandchild—heir of the heritage his grandfather flung away!"

But, stay, not so fast! Has it come to this, David Glendenning, that you who have never accepted a favor from any man should take the greatest one from the son of Gregory Glendonwyn? Bow the stubborn knees! Kiss the extended hand of your house's enemy!

Sir, your son did me the honor to blacken the name of my daughter—to steal her from her father's house, to keep her concealed for months till these gray hairs blanched to whiteness and the soul sickened with the deferring of hope—therefore, because you have done these things, I, David Glendenning, take with gratitude and thankfulness the crumbs of belated repentance that fall from your table! Out—begone, get thee behind me, Satan! Never, by God's grace, shall I own for me or mine any connection with the name of Glendonwyn—never take art or part with them, past, present or to come. So help me God!

This beginnning of resolutions made David Glendenning as he sat listening to the soft to and fro of Fairlie's feet above his head, and the heir of the ancient Glendowyns proclaiming his right to a yet older heritage, that mother's milk which is the after-solace of the Eden sin.

There comes a knocking at the outer door and straightaway to his feet rises the Gray Wolf. Surely there is a gleam of strong canines as he lifts his grizzled upper lip. Has the battle begun? Well, then have at it; I will be avenged of thee, O, mine enemy!

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David Glendenning opened the door—half opened it, rather, and peered out from under shaggy brows. On the doorstep stood John Glendonwyn, very pale and grave. He held out his hand, but as he did so David slowly put his behind his back.

"What would you with me or any in this house, John Glendonwyn?" he asked, bitter as vitriol dropping upon copper.

"May I come in and speak with you, sir?" pleaded John, humbly.

"I will have no converse with you or yours for ever and ever," the words came very low, but perfectly clear to be understood; "say what you have to say on my doorstep and be gone'

"My brother was killed last night," said John Glendonwyn, "but before he died he told me that your daughter—your eldest daughter—was his wife and that—"

"That he had robbed the poor man at his gate," hissed David Glendenning, with a concentrated hatred, slow and calm. "Taken his neighbor's ewe lamb at unawares—this he told you ere he went down to his own place—well—what more?"

"He bade me care for her. I—promised him that I would!" stammered John Glendonwyn, who had come unprepared for such an attitude on the part of Fairlie' father.

"I thank ye, John Glendonwyn—kindly I thank ye!" the words of the Grey Wolf were few and bitter, "but my daughter needs neither care nor succor—least of all from one of your name. From you and yours I and mine claim nothing, will receive nothing. Go your ways! That is the gate of my dwelling. See that you do not again cast your shadow across it. That is all I ask from you and yours. Of marriage and heirship, care, protection, compensation—all your fine phrases I reck not a jot. I am the man that was robbed, but I have gotten mine own again. And by the Lord I will keep it! Get forth from me before I lift the broad ax to ye, John Glendonwyn."

"But," argued John, standing his ground like the valiant man he was, "I ask for justice. I am not my brother's keeper. His errors are not mine, nor their consequences. I have told you that I love Fairlie Glendenning sole in all the world—I hold myself bound in honor to your daughter. Though I have never spoken a word of love to her, and (from my lips, at least) she knows not that I love her. Yet neither you nor any man has a right to stand between us if she does. More than that, by my brother's death I am now my father's heir, and I claim the right to do justice to his widow!"

And above at the little stairhead Fairlie Glendenning, listening to the earnest voice of her lover and the stern sentences of her father, hurriedly clutched at the door handle and shut the door gently.

"They have not told him about the babe," she murmured, "he does not know. He thinks he is the heir. And he shall not know—no, not if I have to take the babe to myself—to be my own."

She stood there fixed, held rigid as marble by the intensity of her thought. She was hardly conscious of her father's voice calling to her to come down. Yet as she came to herself she obeyed mechanically and with all the lifeblood tingling to her fingertips at her lover's words she descended the little staircase.

John was still standing without upon the doorstep and her father held a large muscular arm across the portal as if to bar his entrance. At sight of her pale face John made an impulsive leap forward, but David Glendenning held his ground.

"Stand back!" he cried, "there are no dealings between the Jew and the Samaritan. Fairlie, I give you your choice. God forbid I should be hard with you this day of all days. If you needed it, would I not take you up in my arms as I did Kate this morning? But here is a man who says that he loves you. Against himself I have nothing to say. But those of his house have made my heart old and hateful before its time. Among them they have broke the peace of the happiest house in Scotland. They have killed your sister. Now, lass, there stands a Glendonwyn. Will you go with him, or will you stay with your father? Answer!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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