

The Thirsty Sword eBook

The Thirsty Sword

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CHAPTER II. THE DARK FOREST OF BARONE.

When Lulach heard a shrill whistle from afar and saw Kenric, he tarried a while that the cattle might begin to browse upon the lush grass that grew on the marshes beside the sea. Then he went forth to meet him, and threw himself on his knees before him, for Lulach was a thrall, and it was his custom thus to pay homage to the sons of the brave lord of Bute.

"Rise, Lulach, rise!" said Kenric, speaking now in the Norse tongue that the lad might better understand him. "And tell me, what manner of men were the three strangers you saw landing in the bay of Scalpsie this forenoon?"

"They were men out of the North, my master. I heard them speaking in my own tongue," said Lulach, throwing back his long red hair that had fallen over his suntanned face.

"And were they men of peace?"

"I know not, my master; but much did I fear them, for never knew I a Norseman yet who was not cruel to me; and seeing them I hid myself behind a rock."

"Cowardly hind! You are but fit to drive a herd of kine. Of what aspect were these men?"

"The one who led them was even as a king," said Lulach. "He was tall and strong, and his footing was firm upon the heath. He wore a helm crested with a golden dragon, and a great sword at his side. I thought that surely it was the Earl Hamish of Bute himself, for were it not that the stranger's hair was of the colour of the fox's coat, never saw I a man that more resembled your father."

"And his followers, what of them?"

"One was an aged man with a silver beard. The other might be his son. Ah, I wot they are come for no good purpose, my master, for they landed when the tide was low, and that bodes ill for Bute."

"Heaven forbend!" said Kenric, growing uneasy at the thought.

"And now," added he, loosing the dead birds from his girdle, "take me these grouse to the abbey, and tell the good abbot that I come not to St. Blane's this night, but that I go home to the castle to see who these strangers may be, and to learn their purpose."

But as Lulach was taking the game into his hands, he drew back and pointed with trembling finger to the green path that led towards Rothesay.

“See!” he exclaimed, “there is ill luck before you! Turn back, my master, turn back!”

“Ah! a magpie, and alone!” cried Kenric, seeing the bird in his path. “That is ill luck indeed! Give me some salt from your wallet, Lulach, for if this sign reads true then it were unwise in me to go farther without some salt in my pocket.”

“Alas!” said Lulach, “I have none. My wallet is empty!”

“Then God be my protection!” said Kenric, and with that he went on his way, feeling a dread foreboding at his heart.

The light of day had faded from the sky as he passed by the black waters of Loch Dhu; but there was a silvery glare above the jagged peaks of the Arran fells, and he knew that the moon was rising, and that he would soon have her friendly light to guide him through the dark pine forest of Barone.

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All was calm and still, but through the stillness the hollow sound of a waterfall among the far-off mountains came to him like the moaning cry of a dying man. At that sound he felt his heart beating uneasily against his side, for that same cry, which rises from all mountain streams towards nightfall, was beforetime held to be of ill omen when heard from a distance, and Kenric was in a likely mood to be impressed by such a sign.

When he came to the borders of the forest he was almost afraid to venture among the gloomy shadows of the trees. Therein, as he believed, dwelt many strange and mysterious elves, that were wont to lead travellers astray to their destruction. But he must pass through that forest or else go round many miles across the hills; so he braced his girdle tighter about him and boldly plunged into the darkness. As he went forth the plaintive cry of the curlew high up above the treetops startled him more than once, and the sudden movement of every wild beast and bird that his own footsteps had frightened filled him with new fears.

In the broad daylight neither man nor beast could have had power to daunt him. He was, when put to his mettle, one of the most courageous and daring youths in the island, and, saving only his elder brother Alpin, who was the bravest swordsman of his own age in all the land, there was none who might attempt to draw arms against Kenric. And, in truth, had it not been that he was sorely troubled in spirit concerning the strange words of Elspeth Blackfell, and also that so many omens had foretold disaster, it may be that even on that same night he would have passed through the dark avenues of the forest with neither doubt nor tremor.

But in an age when the meaning of nature's work was little understood, when even religion was not yet strong enough to conquer the superstition which found evil in things which were only mysteries, it was small wonder that young Kenric of Bute should wish himself safely at home in his father's castle, or regret that he had not gone back to the abbey of St. Blane.

Nevertheless it was not alone the thought of trolls and elfins that disturbed him. At that time the wild boar and the wolf were denizens of the forest wherein he walked — animals which would indeed be welcomed in the daylight by a band of hunters with their spears and hounds, but which might give some trouble to a youth appearing alone in their midst on a dark night.

At one moment when he was deep within the heart of the forest he thought he heard hurried footsteps behind him. He felt for his dirk and turned round. The moon's beams pierced the trees and fell upon a glistening pool of water where a wildcat was slaking its thirst. There was naught else that might cause him alarm.

But in a little while he heard the same sound again — this time in advance of him. He stood still. In the shadow of a great bare rock he saw two staring eyes that shone like gleaming fires, now green, now red, and he knew that they were the eyes of a wolf.

There was a low growl as of distant thunder. Then the moon's light shot through a rack of cloud, and he saw the form of the wolf standing out clear and black against the grey rock. He fixed an arrow to his bowstring; but at the sound of the creaking bow the wolf gave a sharp yelp and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

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Kenric, bolder now, unbent his bow and stepped towards the rock that he might see whither the wolf had fled. In an open glade that was behind the rock he saw, instead of the wolf, a strange tall figure standing in the moonlight. It was the figure of a woman, wondrously fair and beautiful. Her long hair, that fell over her shoulders, was as the colour of blood, and her white bare arm, that shone like marble in the pale light, seemed to be pointing the way to Rothesay Castle. In her other hand she held a long bright-bladed sword.

Now whether this figure appearing so mysteriously before him was indeed that of a woman of human flesh, or, as he feared, the vision of some ghostly dweller in the pine forest, Kenric could not at that moment have told. Even as he stepped farther into the glade a dark cloud again obscured the moon and all was black night around him, and no sound could he hear but the beating of his own heart and the whispering of the wind among the trees.

CHAPTER III. HOW EARL RODERIC SPILLED THE SALT.

On that same June evening, in the year 1262, whilst Kenric was at the stream side with Ailsa Redmain, the three strangers who had landed earlier in the day on the shores of Bute were feasting in the great banqueting hall of the castle of Rothesay. For although to the tired lad Lulach and to Ailsa they had appeared in the guise of enemies, yet each of the three was known to the Earl Hamish. Their leader was, in truth, none other than his own brother, the Earl Roderic of the Isle of Gigha. The other two were Erland the Old of Jura, and Sweyn the Silent of Colonsay.

What their unexpected mission to the lord of Bute might be had yet to be learnt. But when, betimes, they came to the gate of Rothesay Castle they found Earl Hamish and his steward, Sir Oscar Redmain, on the point of setting out on a hunting expedition into the wilds of Glen More. And of the band of hunters were Kenric's elder brother Alpin and young Allan Redmain.

So when the strangers entered the castle and had broken bread and refreshed their deep throats with wine, they left their swords and dirks in the armoury and took bows and hunting spears. Thus equipped, they set off with Earl Hamish and his merry men and long-limbed hounds. And they had great sport that day, coming back at sunset with a wild boar that Earl Roderic had slain, and three antlered stags and other spoil.

In their absence Kenric's mother, the Lady Adela, had made prepare a feast for them all, with much venison and roasted beef and stewed black cock, with cakes of bread, both white and brown, and many measures of red wine and well-spiced liquors. A silver drinking bowl was set down for each of the kingly guests, and a goblet of beaten gold for the king of Bute.

The hall was lighted with many cruse lamps that hung suspended from the oaken joists, and, lest the evening should be chill, there was a fire of fragrant pine logs blazing on the open hearth. Round the walls of the hall, that were panelled with black oak boards, there were many glittering shields and corselets, with hunting horns and various trophies of the chase.

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At the fireside there sat an aged minstrel, whose duty it was to fill in the intervals of the feast with the music of his harp, or, if need were, to recite to the company the saga of King Somerled and other great ancestors of the kings of Bute.

Earl Hamish — a tall, courtly Highlander, with sad eyes and a long brown beard — sat at the head of the board, that with his own strong hands he might carve the steaming venison. At his right hand sat the earl of Jura, Erland the Old, and at his left Earl Sweyn the Silent. His beautiful wife, the Lady Adela — attired in a rich gown inwoven with many devices of silk, and spun by the Sudureyans — sat facing him at the far end of the board. At her right hand sat Earl Roderic of Gigha; and at her left Alpin, her son.

So the feast began, with much merry discourse of how the men had fared that day at the hunting in Glen More.

Now Erland and Sweyn, kinglings of Jura and Colonsay, though owing yearly tribute to their overlord, Alexander the Third of Scotland, were both men of the North, and they spoke with Earl Hamish in the Norse tongue. Their discourse, which has no bearing upon the story, was mainly of cattle and sheep, and of the old breast laws of the Western Isles. But Roderic of Gigha spoke in the Gaelic, which the Lady Adela, though an Englishwoman born, could well understand.

“Ah, but,” said he, addressing young Alpin, who had been boasting of the manly sports that might be enjoyed in his father’s dominions, “you should one day come to Gigha, for there, I do assure you, we have adventure such as you never dream of in Bute.”

“I marvel, my lord, how that can be,” said Allan Redmain scornfully, “for the kingdom of which you boast is but a barren rock in the mid sea, and methinks your beasts of the chase are but vermin rats and shrew mice.”

“The sports of which I speak, young man,” said Roderic, frowning and wiping his red beard with his broad hand, “are not such bairns’ play as you suppose. Our beasts of the chase are burly men, and our hunting ground is the wide ocean. I and my gallant fellows carry our adventures far into the north to Iceland and Scandinavia, or southward even into the land of the Angles, where there is sport in plenty for those who would seek it.”

The Lady Adela looked up in shocked surprise.

“But,” said she, “you do not surely count the Angles among your enemies, my lord? The Scots are at peace these many years with my country England.”

“I should be grieved to call any man my enemy who is your friend, my fair Lady Adela,” said Roderic gallantly. “But though the Scots be indeed at peace with King Henry, yet the brave Easterlings of Ireland do oftentimes find the need of slaying a few of your proud

countrymen; and if I help them — well, where there is aught to be gained what matters it who our victims be, or what lands we invade? I am for letting him take who has the power to conquer. Let them keep their own who can.

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"What say you, Sir Oscar? Am I not right?"

"I am a man of peace, Earl Roderic," said Sir Oscar Redmain gravely. "I have no enemies but the enemies of my king and country. And methinks, my lord, that a loyal subject of the King of Scots is but a traitorous hound if he stoop to take arms in favour of either Easterling or Norseman, and against our good friends of England. You, my lord, may perhaps pay fealty to King Hakon of Norway, as well as to his majesty Alexander of Scotland. It is not all men who can make it so easy to serve two masters."

"A traitorous hound, forsooth! You surely mistake me, Sir Oscar," cried Roderic, reddening at the reproach. "I said not that I paid truage to any king but our own King of Scots, God bless him! And though, indeed, King Alexander is but a stripling, knowing little of kingcraft, yet, even though he were a babe in arms, he and no other is still my sovereign lord."

And at that he raised his goblet to his lips and drank a deep draught of wine. Then, lightly turning to the lady of Rothesay, and helping her to cut up the venison on her platter, that she might the more easily take the small pieces in her dainty white fingers, he said:

"After the rough roving life that I have been leading these many years, my lady, 'tis truly a great joy to come back once more to the peaceful Isle of Bute. Much do I envy my good brother Hamish, in that he hath so beauteous a partner as yourself to sit before him at his board. Truly he is a most fortunate man!"

Adela's fair cheeks blushed rosy red at this compliment, but she did not smile.

"Methinks, Lord Roderic," said she, nervously breaking the white bread cake at her side, "that with so small a distance between Bute and Gigha, you might surely have come to visit your brother long ere this present time. For although Earl Hamish hath oftentimes spoken of you, yet never until this day have I seen you; and 'tis well-nigh a score of years that I have lived in Bute."

"Alas!" said Roderic, looking uneasy, "since my poor father, Earl Alpin, died, I have had little spirit to come back to these scenes. It was in anger that my brother and I parted, when, as you well know, the lordship over the two islands was divided. The larger dominion of Bute fell to the share of Hamish. I, as the younger son, was perforce content to take the miserable portion that I now possess. Gigha is but a small island, my lady."

"Our happiness need not depend upon the extent of our dominions, Lord Roderic," said Adela; "and I doubt not you are passing happy, notwithstanding that you have but a younger son's inheritance."

“Not so,” said Roderic, planting his heavy elbows on the board; “for where can a man find happiness when those who are dearest to him have been torn away?”

“Then you have had sorrows?” questioned the lady.

“When I went forth to take the kingship of my island home,” said he, “my life was indeed most bright and joyous; and on a time it befell that I went north to Iceland, and there I met one who (with submission I say it) was not less beautiful than yourself, my lady. She was the most beauteous damsel that ever came out of the Northland, and her name was Sigrid the Fair. I married her and we were happy.”

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Roderic again filled his drinking bowl and looked across the table at Alpin's handsome brown face.

"We had two children," he continued sadly. "The girl would have been of the years of your own son there, the boy was two summers younger than she."

"Oh, do not tell me that they are dead!" cried Adela.

"Alas! but that is so," he sighed. "One sunny day they went out hand in hand from our castle to play, as was their wont, among the rocks and caves that are at the south of our island. Never since then have they returned, and some said that the water kelpie had taken them and carried them away to his crystal home under the sea. Others whispered that the kraken or some other monster of the deep had devoured them. They said these things, believing that Sigrid had no heart for her children, and that she was unkind to them. But many days thereafter I learned that a strange ship had been seen bearing outward between Gigha and Cara; and it was the ship of Rapp the Icelander, the cruellest sea rover that ever sailed upon the western seas. Then did I believe that neither kelpie nor kraken had taken my bairns, but Rapp the Rover.

"So I got ship and followed him. For three long years I followed in his track — to the frozen shores of Iceland, and into every vic and fiord in Scandinavia. Southward then I sailed to the blue seas of England — always behind him yet never encountering him. But at last there came a day of terrible tempest. The thunder god struck my ship and we were wrecked. Every man that was on board my ship was drowned saving only myself, for the white sea mew swims not more lightly on the waters than I. So I was picked up by a passing vessel, and it was the vessel of Rapp the Icelander. Instead of killing him I loved him, in that he had saved my life. Then he told me, swearing by St. Olaf, that never in all his time of sea roving had he touched at the little island of Gigha, and that he knew naught soever of the dear children I had lost."

"Greatly do I pity you, Earl Roderic," said Adela, clasping her hands. "And you have not yet found trace of your little ones?"

"No," said Roderic. "And now do I believe that they are still at play in the crystal halls of the water kelpie, whence no man can rescue them."

"And your wife Sigrid, what of her?" asked Sir Oscar Redmain.

"When I got back to Gigha," murmured Roderic, "they told me that in my absence she had gone mad, and that in her frenzy she had cast herself from the cliffs into the sea. Whithersoever I have gone since that sad time, there have I found unhappiness."

The Lady Adela looked upon the man with gentle pity in her dark eyes. She felt how different had been his lot from hers and her dear husband's. For notwithstanding that

she dwelt in a country not her own, and among people who spoke a foreign tongue, yet she was very happy. The Earl Hamish loved her well and was ever good to her. And their two sons, Alpin and Kenric, growing up into manhood, were very dear to her heart.

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She was the daughter of a proud English baron, who had wide dominions near the great city of York. Twenty years before, Earl Hamish of Bute had been sent with other wise counsellors by King Alexander the Second on a mission to the court of the English king, Henry the Third, concerning the great treaty of peace between England and Scotland, and also to consider the proposal of a marriage between the daughter of the King of England and the son of the King of Scots. The treaty established a peace which had not yet been broken, and the Princess Margaret of England was now the Queen of Scotland. But while on that embassy to York Earl Hamish of Bute won more than the gratitude of his sovereign, for he won the heart of the Lady Adela Warwick, and, making her his wife, he brought her to his castle of Rothesay, where she had lived happily ever since.

She was thinking of these matters as she heard Earl Roderic's story of his great unhappiness, and her eyes were fixed dreamily before her.

Now Roderic, to whom the presence of this sweet and beautiful lady was a new experience, observed her pensiveness and wondered thereat. His roving glance presently fell upon her plate.

"Ah!" said he, "you have no salt, my lady."

And thereupon he took her knife and dug its point into the salt horn.

"Nay, nay!" she cried in alarm; and she grasped his wrist so that he spilled the salt upon the table.

"What have you done?" he exclaimed. "This is the most unlucky thing that could have happened! Alas, alas!"

"Would you, then, have helped my lady to sorrow?" cried Sir Oscar Redmain, rising wrathfully. "By the rood, but you are a thoughtless loon!"

Earl Hamish at the head of the board, hearing his lady's cry, rose hastily and approached her, and saw that she was very pale.

"I will retire," said she, "for the hall is over warm. I am faint and uneasy."

Earl Hamish led her to the door. There he kissed her fondly on her white brow and she went to her chamber.

CHAPTER IV. THE DARKENING HALL.

The lord of Bute sat not down again, for the feast was at an end. Sir Oscar Redmain, minding that he had to travel all the way to Kilmory that night, went to his master and

spoke with him aside. While the earl and his steward were thus engaged, a tall seneschal with his serving men came into the hall to clear away the remains of the banquet; and as the old minstrel left his place at the fireside to continue his harping in the supping room of the guards, the two lads, Alpin of Bute and Allan Redmain, stepped to the hearth to hold converse with the three guests.

Alpin and his young friend were both about nineteen years of age. They were almost full grown, and manly exercise had made them strong. They wore their rough hunting clothes — loose vests of leather, homespun kilts, and untanned buskins. They carried no weapons, for it was held in custom that none should sit armed at table in the presence of strangers.

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"Tell me, Earl Roderic," said Alpin, running his fingers through his long hair — "you have, you say, been in far-off Iceland — tell me, is it true that in that land there be many mountains that shoot forth fire and brimstone?"

"Ay, that is quite true, my lad," said his much-travelled uncle, "for I have myself seen such mountains. Higher than Goatfell they are, with streams of fire pouring down their glens."

"A most marvellous country!" exclaimed Alpin. "I wonder much if I shall ever behold that land."

"There you will have no such lordly feast as that we have just risen from," added Roderic, picking his teeth with his broad thumbnail.

Alpin and Allan watched him, hoping he would tell them something of his roving life. Roderic, finding that he could not easily dislodge the piece of meat from betwixt his teeth, picked up a twig of pine wood from the hearth, and took from the table the large knife with which his brother had carved the venison, and as he began to sharpen the little twig to a point he continued:

"No roasted beef there nor venison, but good tough whale flesh, black as a peat, or else a few candle ends — for the Icelanders are fond of fat. Once when I was ship-broken on their coasts naught could my shipmates find to eat but reasty butter. Disliking that alone, we took our ship's cable, that was made of walrus hide, and smearing the cable with butter we bolted morsels of it, by which means we managed to exist for fourteen days.

"There," he said, finishing his toothpick, "that will serve. 'Tis strange, is it not, Master Alpin, what a piece of steel can do?"

And then, first looking at its point, he laid the long knife carelessly upon the shelf above the hearth.

"Why, in Norway, where I have also been, your man can take his knife and two slips of wood nine ells long, and he will so shape the wood that when the two slips are fitted to his feet he can outstrip a bird, a hound, or a deer."

"Does he, then, fly with them in the air, as a witch on her broom?" asked Allan Redmain.

"Why, no; he skates along the ice or snow," returned Roderic. "With such instruments and a snowy ground, master Redmain, you might be back at your castle of Kilmory in two flickers of a rush light. Go you to Kilmory tonight?"

"Yes," said Allan, "we go at once, for now I see my father is ready. Give you goodnight, my lords."

“Goodnight, boy,” said the three guests.

And Allan, with his father and Alpin, then left the hall.

Two of the cruse lamps had by this time spent their oil, and their flames had died out. Earl Hamish was now alone with his guests.

“Shall we,” said he, “retire to the smaller hall, Roderic? I have ordered Duncan to take some spiced wine there for us.”

“I like the odour of the log fire here,” said Roderic, exchanging glances with Erland the Old. “I pray you let us remain here a while.”

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Earl Hamish and his brother stood side by side, looking into the fire, while Sweyn the Silent and Erland the Old sat them at either corner of the hearth. The two brothers were much alike in stature, both being tall and broad; but Hamish was gentler, and his every movement showed that he was accustomed to the company of those who deemed a courtly bearing of more account than mere bodily prowess, though in truth he lacked not that either. His hair and beard, too, were dark, touched here and there with the frost of age; while his brother's long hair was red as the back of the fox.

"Well, Hamish," began Roderic, moving uneasily on his feet, "you have, as I have heard, won your way into the good graces of our lord the King?"

"I trust," said Hamish, "that I may never be accused of disloyalty. I am ever at my sovereign's service in whatsoever he commands me to do."

"What, even though the doing of that service be to your own great disadvantage?" said Roderic, looking aside at Earl Sweyn and smiling grimly.

"Naught can be to my disadvantage that is done in dutiful service of my country and King," answered the lord of Bute proudly.

Roderic laughed scornfully, and his laugh was echoed by Sweyn and Erland.

"There may be two thoughts as to that," returned Roderic. "As for myself, I'd snap my fingers in the King's face ere I would go on a journey such as you have newly undertaken, my brother. Think not that we have no eyes nor ears in the outer isles, Earl Hamish; for it is known in every castle between Cape Wrath and the Mull of Kintyre that you have but now returned from a mission to King Hakon of Norway."

"And what though it were yet more widely known?" said Hamish in surprise. "Am I, then, the only lord in all the isles who remains true to his oaths of fealty? And are they all as you are, Roderic, who have failed these many years to pay due tribute to the King of Scots?"

"You are the only one among us," croaked Erland the Old, "who pays not homage to our rightful lord and sovereign the good King Hakon."

"I owe no sort of fealty to Norway," said Hamish. "Nor do I know by what right Hakon claims sovereignty over any one of the isles south of Iona."

"Methinks," said Sweyn the Silent, looking up under his dark brows, "that Harald Fairhair settled that matter a good four hundred years ago."

"Right well am I aware that at such time Harald did indeed conquer the Western Isles — ay, even to Bute and Arran" — returned Earl Hamish. "But methinks, my lord of Colonsay, that my own ancestor the great king Somerled (God rest him!) did at least

wrest the isles of Bute, Arran, and Gigha from the power of Norway. Those three island kingdoms do to this day owe truage to no overlord saving only the King of Scots, and to Alexander alone will I pay homage.”

At that Earl Roderic’s eyes found their way to the shelf that was above the hearth, and his two friends, following his glance, saw the knife upon the shelf and smiled. From the halls below, where the guards and servitors were feasting, came the strains of the minstrel’s harp and a henchman’s joyous song of triumphant battle.

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"Tis then no marvel," said Roderic, "that the young King of Scots, like his father before him, has made of you a willing cat's-paw. On what fool's errand went you to Norway?"

"That," said the lord of Bute, "is quickly told;" and he looked round for a moment, observing that all the lamps save one had burned out their feeble lights. "I went to Norway, bearing letters to King Hakon from the King of Scots and his majesty of England, King Henry the Third."

"His majesty of England!" exclaimed all three.

"Henry of England is no more a friend to the Norseman than is Alexander," said Hamish, as he pressed down the burning logs with his foot. "And I do assure you, my lords, that both are well prepared to resist the incursions of King Hakon's vassals."

"And what manner of princely reward got you for your trouble as letter bearer?" asked Roderic in a tone of injured envy.

"Ten score head of Highland cattle, I would guess," muttered Erland the Old.

"Nay, twenty score, rather," chimed in Sweyn the Silent.

"Methinks, brother Hamish," said Roderic hoarsely, as he stepped nearer to him and looked with an evil scowl into his face — "methinks it had been your part to have sent me word, that I might also have been of that journey. It had been but reason that I had the honour as well as you. Selfish man that you are, you are ever ready to win worship from me and put me to dishonour!"

At this moment the last remaining cruse light flickered, burned blue, flickered again, and then went out. The hall was now in darkness, saving only for the feeble light of the fire, and the moonbeams that slanted in through the mullioned windows and shone here and there upon some burnished helmet or corselet upon the walls.

As Roderic of Gigha ceased speaking, Erland the Old coughed thrice and stroked his silvery beard. Sweyn the Silent echoed the fatal sign, and Roderic drew back, resting his right hand upon the mantel.

"Had I tarried till I had sent for you, Roderic," said Earl Hamish, "I must first have wasted much precious time in suing with King Alexander for his pardon for my brother who has betrayed him!"

"You lie! base slanderer! you lie!" cried Roderic in jealous fury, snatching the knife from off the shelf. And then, springing forward and raising his right hand above his head, he plunged the blade deep, deep into his brother's heart. The good Earl Hamish staggered and fell.

“Treachery!” he groaned. “Adela! Adela!” and with the name of his loved wife upon his lips, he died there upon the stone of his own hearth.

Roderic and his two companions approached the dead man, gazed upon him, and then at each other with satisfaction in their dark looks. But there was fear, too, in Roderic’s face, for he was craven of heart. He drew back into the shadow, where neither moonbeam nor firelight could fall upon him and reveal him.

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And all the while the henchman's song of triumph reached their ears from the halls below.

CHAPTER V. A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

Kenric tarried not long in search of the ghostly figure that had appeared before him so mysteriously in the dark forest of Barone. Whence that figure had come and whither it had gone he could not tell. Nor did he exercise his mind in fruitless questionings concerning her. Leaving the rock behind him, he set off at a brisk pace through the shadows of the trees, more timid than ever, and came out upon the high ground that is behind Rothesay Bay.

Down by the water's brink, outlined against the moonlit waves, stood the dark towers of Rothesay Castle. A light shone dimly in his mother's chamber window; but the great banqueting hall wherein his father was wont to entertain his guests was dark, and Kenric thought this passing strange. Where were the strangers of whom he had heard? If they were not in the banqueting hall, then they must surely have already left the island.

Hastening down the hillside, he hied him to the castle, and as he neared the little postern in the western walls, a burst of boisterous song reached his ears from the guardroom. Taking up a stone from the ground he was about to knock three loud knocks, when the door was opened from within, and a tall man with a thick plaid over his broad shoulders slipped out, almost overthrowing Kenric as he ran against him.

"Duncan!" exclaimed Kenric, perceiving his father's seneschal, "whither go you at this late hour of night?"

"Ah, master Kenric, and that is yourself, eh? And you are here, and not at the abbey of St. Blane's? Well, sir, it's a bonnie night, you see, and I even thought I would take a quiet saunter along the side of Loch Fad."

"Then," said Kenric, "I warn you, go not near to the forest of Barone, Duncan; for I have but now come through, and therein I saw a sight that would raise your hair on end. It was, as I believe, none other than the werewolf that I saw. First there was an old gray wolf with a white patch on its breast, and then, even as I looked, that wolf was spirited into the form of a fair lady, and I was like to sink into the ground with fear."

"'Tis the first time that I have heard of a son of the house of Rothesay knowing fear," said Duncan, smiling and showing his great yellow teeth in the moonlight. "'Twas but the maid Aasta of Kilmory that you saw."

"Aasta? Then it is true that the maid has been bewitched? It is true that she has that power of turning herself at will into the form of a wolf?"

“Men say so,” answered Duncan. “But methinks ’tis no more true than that other thing they say of her — that though she looks but a girl of eighteen, she is yet full five score winters old. ’Tis idle talk, Kenric. But where saw you this sight? Was it not by the Rock of Solitude, in the heart of the forest?”

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"'Twas even there. But in an instant she disappeared, and I saw her no more."

"If she be not there now," said Duncan, heaving a great sigh out of his deep chest, "then will I return into the castle; for now do I mind me that mine eyes are wanting sleep after the weary day that I have had among the hills, running high and low as though I were but a dumb hound made only to scent out game for those who know less of hunting than I do of building a ship. That lazy old graybeard, the lord of Jura, may bring his own gillies with him the next time he comes to the hunting in Bute. Never again shall he get me to fetch and carry for him!"

"The lord of Jura?" said Kenric. "It is then true that there are strangers in the castle."

"And is it not for that same cause that you have come home?" asked Duncan.

"Methought you knew that they were here — three gallant kings out of the west they are, and one of them is your own uncle, Earl Roderic of Gigha, whom, when he was but a bairn as high as my girdle, I taught to bend the bow and wield the broadsword. They are but now in the feasting hall with my lord your father; for Sir Oscar and young Allan have gone home to Kilmory, and my lady and Alpin have gone to their chambers."

"Have you then left my father alone with these three strange men?" asked Kenric as they entered the postern.

"My lord's own brother, Earl Roderic, is with him," said Duncan, looking at Kenric in surprise. "You would not surely have me mount guard over my lord's own guests! By the rood, that were strange hospitality!"

"Where are their dirks and swords?"

"Under my own keeping in the armoury, where 'tis right they should be; for men of peace, as these most surely are, encumber not themselves with the instruments of war."

"'Tis well," returned Kenric, much relieved. "Old Elspeth Blackfell was but playing me with her groundless forewarnings of danger. Well, get me some meat and a bowl of milk, Duncan, while I go up and see this uncle of mine. He has seen much of the world, and methinks his discourse must be full of instruction for a home-keeping youth."

So Duncan went into the guardroom, where two score of noisy retainers were making merry over their cups, and Kenric went upstairs to the great hall.

Up the steep stone steps he climbed, making little noise with his deerskin buskins. Hearing footsteps at the head of the stairs, he glanced along the north corridor, whose lancet windows looked out upon the quiet sea.

Suddenly in the midst of the moonbeams that streamed in through the western window, lighting the corridor with a clear silvery light, he saw three men steal out of the

banqueting hall. The last of the three moaned grievously as they passed beyond into another apartment.

“Oh, Hamish, Hamish my brother!” he moaned, and his voice was as the wailing of the wind, “what is this evil thing that I have done!”

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Kenric drew back into the shadow of the stairway, and not seeing his father with the three guests, he began again to fear some ill.

“What!” croaked the old man with the silvery beard, “and is this your resolution? Is this your courage? I fear me, Roderic, you are but a weak craven thus to deplore the fulfilment of our most righteous mission!”

Then the door of the smaller hall closed behind the three earls, and Kenric was left alone. He still heard the rumour of their voices as he walked with quick steps along the moonlit corridor, and he paused to listen at the door.

“And now that we have done so completely with the fox,” said a voice, “what say you, comrades, to our making equal despatch with the vixen and her cub? ’Twere easy doing, could we but discover in what corner we might entrap them.”

Kenric did not understand the purport of these words. He did not guess that the “fox” meant his own father, and the “vixen and her cub” his mother and Alpin. But he listened yet again.

“Wait, wait, my lord of Jura,” said another voice. “’Twere better we tarried until all the watchdogs are sound asleep. Fill me yon drinking horn, Sweyn, for my hand trembles, and my mind is strangely cloudy.”

Silence followed this speech, and Kenric crept along the corridor until he came to the entrance of the great hall. He drew aside the arras hangings and peered into the deserted room. All was silent as the grave. The crackling embers of the fire gave but a sorry light, with only a fitful glimmer that rose now and again from some half-consumed pine log. But with the feeble moonbeams, that shone through the thin films of skin that in those days — except in the churches — did service for glass, there was still light enough in that vast room to show what terrible deed had been enacted upon the hearthstone.

Kenric had taken but a few strides into the hall when his eyes rested upon the form of his murdered father. He started back aghast at the horrible sight.

“Oh, my father, my father!” he cried, flinging himself down upon the bloodstained floor. “Father? father? It is I, Kenric — your son. Tell me, I beseech you, tell me, what foul villain has done this thing?”

Then he took hold of the earl’s cold right hand and chafed it tenderly, as he still tried to arouse him. But there was no response. He knelt down closer and bent his head to his father’s bare throat, and, putting out his tongue, he felt with its sensitive touch if there was sign of breathing, or if the pulses were beating in the veins.



As he rested his hand on the dead earl's chest he touched the haft of the weapon that had worked this cruel deed. He knew the knife and guessed how all had happened. He grasped the handle in his fingers and tried to withdraw the long blade; but the blood gushed out from the terrible wound, and the lad grew faint at the sight.

"Dead! dead!" he moaned, rising to his feet, and then from the halls below came the shouts of the retainers as they pledged "waes hael" to the lord of Bute.

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Kenric hastened out of the hall and crept down the stairs to summon the guard and station them in the corridor, that none of the three traitorous guests might escape. He met Duncan the seneschal at the foot of the stairs carrying the food that he had ordered, and by the light of a lamp in the lower passage Duncan saw the lad's pale and terrified face.

"God assoil me!" cried Duncan, "what has happened?"

"A terrible thing, Duncan. My dear father has been brutally slain under his own roof tree."

"Slain! My lord, the Earl Hamish slain? Nay, boy, it cannot be!"

"Alas, 'tis true! One of those miscreant traitors who came hither today has plunged a knife into my father's heart. Take back the food. I will neither eat nor sleep again until I have discovered the villain who has done this foul crime. Turn out the guard this instant. Station them without the door of the room wherein those three wicked men are now carousing. And now to call my brother Alpin."

Kenric went softly to his brother's room, which was next to the chamber of the Lady Adela, and he knocked gently at the door. Alpin was sound asleep upon his couch, for his day's hunting had wearied his limbs. Kenric went within and awoke him.

In the darkness Alpin did not see his brother's pallid face, and he turned over with many complaints at being so roughly disturbed.

"Nay, Alpin, 'tis for no light cause that I disturb you," urged Kenric.

And hearing his husky, trembling voice, Alpin roused himself with sudden terror.

"What brings you back to the castle?" he cried; "and wherefore do you call me at this late hour?"

"It is that our father has been entertaining enemies unawares," said Kenric. "Entering the hall but a few moments ago I found him lying dead upon the hearth with a cruel knife in his heart."

Alpin gave a piercing cry of sudden grief and sprang up from his bed.

"No, no, it cannot be!" he exclaimed, recovering himself as he threw on some clothing. "You have made some strange mistake. These friends could not have harmed our father. They were not armed. And what could our uncle Roderic gain by such treachery?"

Kenric drew his brother out into one of the dark passages, not observing that their mother's chamber door had opened and that the Lady Adela, roused from her slumber by Alpin's cry of grief, had taken the alarm and was preparing to follow.

"Alas, he has but too much to gain," said Kenric. "Had he been left to carry out his base plot to the end, you and I, Alpin, must surely have fallen as our father has fallen — victims to Earl Roderic's ambition to make himself lord over Bute."

"If this be so," returned Alpin, raising his voice in wrath, "then with my own hands will I take a deadly vengeance. I swear it now, Kenric — by our holy faith I swear that if Roderic of Gigha has indeed slain our father, then Roderic shall die by my hand!"

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“Will such vengeance give back the life that has been taken?” asked Kenric solemnly. “Will vengeance restore to our dear mother the happiness that she now has lost? Methinks it had been wiser in you, Alpin, to have stayed by our father’s side instead of slinking off to your bed and leaving him thus exposed to danger. Come, let us arm ourselves and confront these evil men, that we may learn which one of them has dealt this fatal blow.”

“With what weapon, say you, was my father slain?” asked Alpin, as, being now in the armoury, they proceeded to don their coats of chain mail.

“With the great knife wherewith he was wont to carve the venison and meat,” said Kenric, taking down a sword.

“Ah!” cried Alpin with swift recollection, “now do I perceive the reason wherefore Earl Roderic took that same knife from off the board and placed it so cunningly above the hearth. Oh, villain that he is! He designed even then to do as he has done.

“Now,” he added, snatching up a great two-handed sword, “I am ready. Let me but meet him — let me but face him for a moment, and I will slay him like a dog.”

“Think well ere you strike the blow you contemplate,” said Kenric as they ascended a side stairway that led to the upper floors of the castle. “Remember that you are now the rightful lord over Bute, and that you will have power to inflict due punishment upon this man without taking a personal vengeance that would surely lead to an endless blood feud.”

“Tush! You are but a timid boy, Kenric. What priestly precepts has the old Abbot Thurstan been cramming you with? Would you pardon the man who has slain our own father?”

“Pardon him?” exclaimed Kenric. “No, never will I do that. If you slay him not, Alpin, then, by the holy rood, I myself will do so. But it shall be in fair fight that I will overcome him, and by no mean subterfuge.”

The two lads were now at the entrance of the larger hall, wherein the good Earl Hamish lay dead. Alpin went within, and there, bending over his father’s body, he was overwhelmed by his grief. He staggered to a seat and sat down with his head in his hands, weeping piteously.

Kenric heard loud voices in the corridor, and grasping his sword he hastened to where the guards were stationed. Duncan Graham, of the long arm, was holding parley with the three earls within the smaller hall. His broad frame filled up the half-open doorway, so that the presence of the armed guard was not yet known to Roderic and his two companions.

“More wine it may be you can have,” said Duncan; “but as to bringing you your swords, that I cannot do without orders from my master.”

“I am now your master!” said the gruff voice of Roderic of Gigha; “and again I command you to bring us our swords and dirks.”

“You are no master of mine, Earl Roderic,” said Duncan; “and now for your insolence shall you have neither wine nor weapons,” and with that he slammed to the door.

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"Insolent varlet!" growled Roderic within the room.

"Nay, calm yourself, good Roderic," said the voice of Erland the Old; "we had better have tarried till daylight. It may be that they have already discovered what you have done. Truly you were an arrant simpleton to leave the weapon in your brother's breast. 'Twould have served our further purpose well."

Kenric heard these last words, and though they were spoken in the Danish, yet full well did he understand that the further purpose of Earl Roderic was indeed the slaying of the Lady Adela and Alpin.

Assured that the three miscreants were unarmed, he drew Duncan aside and whispered his commands, which were that four of the guards should follow him into the room and make prisoners of the three island kings. Thereupon Duncan went back to the door and forced it open, and Kenric, with buckler on arm and sword in hand, marched in, and standing firmly upright faced the three men defiantly.

"Which man of you is Earl Roderic of Gigha?" said he.

CHAPTER VI. ALPIN'S VOW OF VENGEANCE.

Erland the Old, with an empty drinking horn in his bony hand, sat by the hearth looking vacantly into the dead embers of the fire. Sweyn the Silent stood beside him with his thumbs stuck in his leathern girdle; while Roderic of Gigha sat upon the table facing the door and swinging his legs to and fro. The light of a hanging cruse lamp shone upon his long red hair and beard. His strong bare arms were folded, one within the other, across his broad chest, and the back of his right hand was splashed with blood that had been partly wiped off upon his under jerkin.

"Which man of you is Earl Roderic of Gigha?" repeated Kenric.

The three looked one to the other with evil smiles. Roderic drank off what remained in his wine cup.

"I am he," he said coolly as he again folded his arms. "And who, then, are you who demand to know?"

"Then if you be he," said Kenric, "you are the vilest man that ever breathed within these walls. Oh, Roderic MacAlpin, unworthy son of a noble and good prince, you have brought the guilt of blood upon your father's name! You have slain your own brother, our dear lord and master; you have shed his life's blood within his own hall. Deceitful traitor that you are, you came to this peaceful island in the semblance of a friend. But, by all that I hold sacred, you shall not leave it again ere you have been duly judged for your foul crime."

A burst of mocking laughter from Roderic greeted this speech.

“And now,” added Kenric, turning to the guard, “take me this man as prisoner to the deepest dungeon. For though he were King Hakon himself he should not longer remain as a guest in the castle whose shelter he has abused.”

“Let one of those varlets but touch me with his hand,” said Roderic, “and I will break his back across my knee. And you, who are you, my young knave, that dares to threaten his betters? By St. Olaf, but you are passing bold to speak of prisoning me in the walls wherein I was born. Away with you to your couch; this is no hour for bairns to be awake.”

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Then turning to the lord of Colonsay he said: "Slip you out behind the young whelp, Sweyn, and bring me the knife you wot of. This is surely the stripling of whom we heard. He barks passing well; let us see if he can bite. A few ells of cold steel will speedily settle him, I warrant me."

Earl Sweyn stepped towards the door, but one of the men of Rothesay bounded forward and caught him in his strong arms, struggled with him for a moment, and then flung him heavily to the floor.

Roderic, seeing this and waxing wrathful, sprang lightly from his seat, and ere Kenric could well understand his intention he had caught hold of the youth and gripped him by his sword hand. He wreathed his other strong arm round the lad's lithe body. Long he wrestled with him, but at last he drew him down by main force with his back across his thigh and his right hand set hard at his throat. With his left hand he again gripped Kenric's sword hand and tried to wrest the weapon from his grasp. But Kenric's wrist was of mighty strength and he held with a grip of iron to the handle of his sword. Then Roderic dragged the lad's hand forward and got it between his teeth, that by biting it he might force him to loosen his hold of the weapon. And now Kenric must surely have been overcome had not Duncan of the long arm at that moment come behind Earl Roderic and rushed upon him and caught him up in his arms. With all the force of his giant strength the Highlander lifted the man high in the air and shook him fiercely. Kenric, freeing himself, drew back to the door, and he saw Duncan fling Earl Roderic upon the table and grip him by the throat.

"Spare him!" cried Kenric as the seneschal drew his dirk.

Then Duncan, thrusting his knife in his garter, turned Roderic over with his face downward, and holding him there with his bare knee on his back, he took off his great plaid and twisting it ropewise he bound the earl's arms tightly together, so that he could no longer move them.

The earl of Colonsay had already been pinioned in like manner. But Erland the Old, when he saw Kenric stand free and unharmed, fearing to be ill treated, rushed out into the corridor. There he was met by Alpin, who, with drawn sword, was about to kill him. His sword was raised in the act of smiting him when, from the banqueting hall beyond, there came a loud and plaintive cry that echoed throughout the castle like the cry of a wounded eagle. Alpin lowered his weapon and, leaving old Erland to be arrested by the guards, he sped towards the hall. Kenric, hearing that scream, followed after him.

In the hall they found their mother. A crowd of the men and women of the castle were there with her, holding torches and lighted cruse lamps over the body of the dead lord of Bute. The Lady Adela was wringing her hands in frantic grief.

“Who is the villain that hath done this wicked thing?” she cried as Alpin and Kenric entered.

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"Roderic, Earl of Gigha," answered Kenric.

"Ah, unhappy hour that ever brought him within these walls! Where is he now?"

"He is made prisoner with his two companions," said Kenric.

"Prisoner — not slain! You have not slain him? Oh, my sons, where is your spirit? Why have you let him live thus long? And you, Alpin, wherefore did you suffer your father to be left alone with these men?"

"Alas, my mother, was it possible I could foresee this crime?" said Alpin. "Even my poor father could not have seen treachery through the mask of his brother's friendship."

"There has been some quarrel," said Dovenald the bard. "Heard you aught of a dispute between them, young man?"

"Methinks there is little need to seek for a cause of quarrel," said Kenric. "Roderic of Gigha is even now meditating how he can make himself the lord over Bute. No farther shall he go, for he cannot now escape the penalty that is his due."

"And what penalty is that?" asked the Lady Adela.

Kenric turned to Dovenald for reply, knowing well that Dovenald was better learned than any other man in the breast laws of that land.

"My lady," said Dovenald, "he must be judged and punished for his crime as the wise men of Bute shall direct. Justice will be done. Fear not for that."

"Justice?" cried she. "I know well what justice means with your wise men. It is not the worthless fine of a few score of cattle that would repay me for the loss of my dear husband. No, no. A life for a life. Earl Roderic has cruelly slain our good and noble lord, and now I demand a speedy vengeance."

She flung herself on her knees before her son Alpin.

"Oh, my sweet son," she cried, clasping his two hands, "I charge you upon my blessing, and upon the high nobility you inherit, to be revenged upon this traitor for his crime;" and thereupon she took up the bloodstained weapon and forced it into her son's hand.

Alpin started back and grew pale.

"Fair mother," said he, "what may this mean?"

"Take this fatal knife," said she, "and before the blood is dry upon its blade drive it into the murderer's black heart."

Then Alpin, holding the knife, raised his mother in his arms.

“Dear mother,” said he, “you have given me a great charge, and here I promise you I shall be avenged upon Earl Roderic ere long, and that do I promise to God and to you.”

“Nay, mother,” appealed Kenric, stepping forward. “In mercy I beg you, charge not my brother with so terrible a mission. Withdraw it, I beseech you, for you know not what you do in thus exposing Alpin to both danger and dishonour. For if he take vengeance by stealth, then is his treachery as evil as that of the murderer whom he would punish. If he challenge this man to mortal combat, then most surely he will be slain, for Roderic, as I have seen, is most powerful of arm, and it is his heart’s desire that he should slay my brother, whose death he has already planned. If you would indeed have this man die, then I entreat you let me, and not Alpin, fulfill your behest. Alpin is now our rightful king, and his life is of more value than mine.”

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Now while Kenric was thus speaking his mother remained in Alpin's arms, with her head upon his shoulder. And when Alpin drew away his arm that she might answer Kenric face to face, she turned not round, but sank down at Alpin's feet, and it was seen that she was in a swoon.

So Alpin carried her away in his strong arms to her chamber, where the women of the castle tended her. But for three long days and nights she lay on her couch in a strange sickness that none could understand. For those three days she was unconscious, speaking never a word.

CHAPTER VII. THE ARROW OF SUMMONS.

How the three island kings fared in the dark dungeons of the castle of Rothesay on that fatal night need not be told. Earl Roderic of Gigha had doubtless in his sea roving slept on many a less easy couch. But it may be that in those dark hours of solitude his mind was more disturbed than were his hardy limbs. He had come to Bute full of a guilty design, by the fulfilment of which he had hoped to at last gain possession of the rich dominions that he had coveted for twenty years. His own inheritance of the small island of Gigha was not enough to satisfy his vaulting ambition, and the growing power of the King of Norway, who was year by year extending his territories in the west of Scotland, offered a further inducement to Roderic, who believed that by slaying his brother Hamish, and taking his place, he might bring the island of Bute under the protection of the Norwegian crown.

His design was clumsily planned, for though subtle as a fox, Roderic was yet an ignorant man, even for those uncultured times, and he had failed to take into account the two sons of Earl Hamish, both of whom stood between him and the coveted earldom, and who now appeared to him as an obstacle not easy to overcome.

But for the unexpected appearance of Kenric, however, even this obstacle in his path might have been cleared, for he had planned that in the darkness and quiet of the night he would steal into the sleeping chamber of Alpin and so deal with him that he would never again waken to claim his dead father's lands. Roderic had learned from the Lady Adela that her younger son, Kenric, was but a boy of sixteen, living with the learned abbot of St. Blane's, and to the wicked earl of Gigha it seemed that Kenric might be disposed of by very simple means.

But now, even after having slain his brother, he had failed in his object. Instead of being king in Bute, he was a prisoner in the deepest dungeon of Rothesay Castle.

The moor fowl had scarcely shaken the dew from off their wings ere the two sons of the dead Earl Hamish were climbing the heathery heights behind Rothesay. With them went the aged Dovenald, bearing in his arms a young goat, white as the driven snow.

When they were upon the topmost knoll they stood a while. Dovenald laid down the bleating kid, whose little feet were tethered one to the other, and he bade the two youths go about and gather some dry twigs of heather and gorse that a fire might be made.

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A soft breeze from over the moorland played with the silvery locks of the old man's bare head. He turned his face to the east and looked across the gray waters of the Clyde, where above the hills of Cunningham, the dawn was breaking into day. Southward then he gazed and watched the giant mountains of Arran that were half shrouded in rosy mists. Very soon the golden light of the rising sun kissed here and there the jagged peaks of Goatfell, and Dovenald bent his head and murmured a prayer, calling upon God to shed His light into the hearts of men and to guide them in the solemn work they were called upon to fulfil that day. Then he turned to Alpin.

"Now kindle me the fire," he said. "Here are flint and steel.

"And, Kenric, give me the arrow."

He took the arrow in his hand and waited till the fire was well alight. With the arrow's point he stirred the flaming twigs, and the two youths looked on.

"And now take your dirk, Alpin," said he, "and slay me the kid. Give as little pain as may be, for it is not well that the innocent thing should suffer."

Kenric held the animal while his brother drove his sharp dirk into its white and throbbing throat. The kid turned its soft blue eyes upon him and gave a plaintive bleat. Its warm breath rose visible in the morning air and then died away.

"'Tis done!" said Kenric, and Dovenald brought the burning arrow and extinguished it in the kid's blood. With the innocent blood he smeared the arrow's shaft.

"Fly now as speedily as your feet can carry you to the castle of Kilmory," said the old man to Alpin, giving him the arrow, "and you will give this burnt arrow into the hands of Sir Oscar Redmain. No need have you to tell him the meaning thereof. It is a summons ordained by ancient custom, and well known to all the wise men of Bute. Sir Oscar will despatch it to our good father the abbot of St. Blane's. The abbot will in like manner send it to Ronald Gray of Scoulag. So, in turn, will it pass round to each of the twelve wise ruthmen, calling them one and all to hasten to the Seat of Law on the great plain beside Ascog mere, that they may there in solemn assize pronounce judgment upon the traitor who hath slain our king.

"Haste! haste! my son. Why do you tarry?"

"Have I not sworn an oath on my mother's blessing that I will have this man Roderic's life? Why, then, should this assize be assembled?"

"Go, do my bidding, rash boy," said Dovenald sternly. "Seek not to oppose the customs of your ancestors, and let not your thirst for vengeance now blind you to the folly of violence. Go, I command you; and believe me the earl of Gigha shall not escape just retribution."



Alpin, then, taking the arrow in his right hand, ran off at a brisk pace down the hill. Kenric took up the dead kid and walked at Dovenald's side towards Rothesay.

"Rash, rash that he is," murmured the old man. "Much do I fear that he will make but a sorry king. He is over hasty, and his judgment is oftentimes wrong. He will not rule as did his father. The Lady Adela hath spoiled him with her caresses."

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"You are over hard upon my brother," said Kenric. "There lives not a man in the Western Isles better fitted than Alpin for the great office of kingship. He is just, and noble, and trusty. No man in all Bute can say that he ever broke a promise or told an untruth. Think you that because he is hasty with his dirk he is therefore a thoughtless loon, who knows not when a gentle word can do more service than a blow? When did he ever draw dirk or sword without just cause? You do not know him as I do, Dovenald, or you would not breathe a word in his dispraise. And if my gentle mother loves him above all else next to my father, whom she has now lost, who shall say that Alpin is not deserving of her great favour?"

The old retainer walked on in silence.

Presently he turned to Kenric and said: "What has your brother done with the weapon wherewith my lord was slain? He tried in the dead of night to gain entrance to the traitor Roderic that he might use that fatal knife even as my lady so weakly charged him to do. Where is it, I say?"

"I know not," said Kenric. "But methinks 'tis a pity he did not drive it into the villain's heart."

"My son! my son! let me not hear you utter such evil thoughts again. It ill becomes a pupil of our holy abbot to speak thus. And yesternight you were disposed to leave the guilty earl to whatever punishment the wise men should appoint."

"Reflection has changed me, Dovenald; and were Roderic before me at this moment I would willingly lay him dead at my feet. Should Alpin fail to slay him, then will I fulfil my revenge. In fair fight or by stealth Roderic shall surely die."

"Alas, that I should ever hear such words from one so young!" murmured Dovenald.

And the old man continued his complaints until they had entered the castle gates.

CHAPTER VIII. AN ERIACH FINE.

Under the clear sky of high noon the people of Bute had assembled on the great plain of Laws, at the margin of Loch Ascog. They had come from all parts of the island, for the word had travelled round with the swiftness of a bird's flight that their good king, Earl Hamish, had been cruelly slain by his own brother, and all were eager not only to see the man who had done this treacherous deed, but also to hear judgment passed upon him for his crime.

At the foot of the great standing stone Sir Oscar Redmain, as steward or prefect of Bute, took his seat as judge. Noble and comely he looked, holding his great glittering sword, point upward, waiting for the prisoner and his accuser. At his right stood Godfrey

Thurstan, the good abbot of St. Blane's, with his cowl drawn over his reverend head to shield him from the warm sun. At his left Dovenald, most learned in the laws of the land, ready to explain and discuss the ancient legal customs; and round them in a circle were the others of the twelve ruthmen. The witnesses or compurgators stood in an outer ring within a fencing of cords running from stake to stake. Without the verge of the sacred circle of justice were gathered a great crowd of islanders — herdsmen and husbandmen, tribesmen, fishermen, and thralls — who had left their labours on hill and in vale, or on the sea, and come hither crying out loud for speedy vengeance.

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Duncan Graham the seneschal and his guards of the castle had already gone amongst these onlookers to see that no man carried weapons, for it was held in strict custom that none should bear arms or make disturbance at such a time on pain of life and limb.

These hardy islanders, as they stood in silence, were a rugged set of men, with sunburnt faces and bushy beards. Many of them were clothed in garments of sheepskin, others of a better condition wore a plaid or mantle of frieze. They had buskins made of rawhide, and a knitted bonnet, though many of them wore no covering for their heads but their own shaggy hair tied back with a leathern strap.

The assize being sworn and admitted the abbot stepped forward and called upon the God of the Christians to punish the peace breaker. Then the crowd opened and young Alpin came in, stalwart, handsome, noble, and bowed before the judge.

He wore a mantle of tartan, clasped at the shoulder by a silver buckle. His legs were swathed in fine cloth and cross-gartered below the bare knees, and his feet were encased in brogues with silver clasps. His long hair was well combed, and it hung about his broad shoulders in dark brown locks. A deep hum of praise rose in greeting from many throats as he stood in the light of the noonday sun.

“Hail to Earl Alpin, king of Bute!” cried one.

“Long life to the king!” cried another; and the cries were taken up by the whole assembly, dying away in echoes among the far-off hills.

Then Alpin raised his hand and asked that the chain of silence should be shaken; and when one of the guards had shaken the rattling chains and all were listening with bated breath he took up and made his plea, demanding prompt justice on the slayer of his father.

“And whom do you charge with this foul crime?” asked Sir Oscar Redmain, though indeed none needed to be told.

“I charge Roderic MacAlpin, king of Gigha,” said Alpin, and at that there was a great yell of execration.

“Down with the traitor! Death to him!” was the cry as the crowd opened.

And Alpin turning round saw Duncan Graham — taller by a head than the tallest man there present — leading in the criminal, followed by his two companions of Colonsay and Jura.

In a moment Alpin sprang forward at his enemy. He raised his right hand and all saw that he held the bloodstained knife.

“Die, slayer of the just!” he cried, bringing down the weapon upon Roderic’s breast.

But Roderic of Gigha laughed a mocking laugh, and catching Alpin by the wrist he threw him backward. Duncan Graham broke his fall and tore the weapon from his grasp.

“Oh, foolish lad!” he murmured, “to attempt such a thing within the very fences of the court!”

“Alpin of Bute,” said the judge gravely as he rose from his seat, “you have done that which no other man in this land might do without the severest punishment. You are here to plead the cause of justice, and not to insult those whom you have summoned to this place to do justice for you. Bear yourself discreetly, or resign your cause into the hands of those who can control their wrath.”

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Alpin scowled as he again took his place before the judge, and then when silence had been restored he proceeded to state the whole case concerning the killing of his father.

By his side stood Kenric, who helped him when he faltered in his narrative. The two brothers might almost have been mistaken for master and serf, so much did their appearance differ. Kenric's face was unwashed and streaked with the traces of tears. His brown hair, lighter than Alpin's, was rough and tangled, and now, as always, he wore no covering on his head. His coarse buckskin coat looked mean beside the richer apparel of his brother, and his buskins were ill-tied and his kilt was dusty and tattered. The elder brother was taller and more lithe of body; but Kenric's bare arms and legs were thick and strong, and despite his coarse clothing he bore himself no less nobly upright than did Alpin.

"Roderic, son of Alpin, what have you to say in defence for this grave crime whereof you are accused?" asked Sir Oscar Redmain when Alpin had told his tale.

The two lads stepped back and Roderic took their place. His long golden hair as the sunlight fell upon it shone scarcely less bright than the well-wrought dragon that twined its scaled form upon his burnished helm of brass. He looked towards his judge with bold defiance in his blue eyes.

"What the boy says is true," said he. "I slew my brother Hamish. I slew him upon his own hearth stone. But it was in fair fight that I did it; and I call my two friends, the lords of Jura and Colonsay, to bear me out in the truth of what I say."

There was a loud howl of rage from the crowd as he spoke these false words, and no one tried to stifle those outbursts of popular feeling.

"'Tis a lie you tell!" cried Kenric furiously as he pushed his brother aside and confronted Earl Roderic. "You say it was in fair fight you smote my father his death blow. Oh, perjured villain! Where, then, was my father's weapon? Had he been armed with a knife such as the one you used, methinks you would not now be here to utter your false words. Your own arms were left in the armoury hail, where 'twas right they should be; and you took up the knife from the board, knowing full well what you meant to do with it. Oh, Roderic MacAlpin, may your tongue shrivel in your throat ere you utter such base and wicked lies again! You came to this island, the land of your fathers, with the evil purpose of climbing over our dead bodies to the kingship that you covet —"

Roderic bit his lips with rage and doubled his great fists as he stepped forward to smite young Kenric to the ground. Kenric drew back.

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"I know it," continued Kenric with full and sonorous voice that might have been heard at the further side of Ascog mere. "I know your purpose, Roderic of Gigha. Think you that there are none of us that can understand the Norse tongue in which you spake to your two base comrades? I know that tongue. I heard your craven moans of anguish when you came out from that darkened hall wherein my father lay dead. I heard you tell of how you meant to slay the vixen and her cubs. And who are they? My mother and Alpin and me! My mother, whom you flattered with soft speeches — my mother, in whose presence you were not worthy to breathe, and whose noble heart you have now broken by your murderous treachery. And you would have slain her as you slew our father. I thank the great God who stayed your hand from fulfilling such devil's work to the end. May He punish you as you deserve to be punished for the evil you have done!"

A deep silence followed upon this speech, and then a thousand lusty voices broke out in a prolonged groan of imprecation. But Roderic of Gigha only turned to Erland the Old and smiled.

Kenric looked to the crowd that stood behind the judge's seat, and there he saw Ailsa Redmain standing with her brother Allan; and Ailsa's eyes glistened with approval of what Kenric had just spoken, and he took new courage.

"Men of Bute," said Sir Oscar Redmain, turning to the ruthmen, "ye have heard what has passed. It is now for you to pronounce judgment upon the accused man. What say you?"

"That Earl Roderic is guilty of the crime," said Ronald Gray, their spokesman, "and that he shall pay the highest penalty that our laws can impose."

"Then," said Alpin, "I claim that Roderic of Gigha shall die the death."

But at that the wise men shook their heads.

"In the time of my father, the good king Alpin," said Roderic with a voice of triumph, "it was ordained, as all of you must surely know, that no man should die for the slaying of his enemy unless he were caught red-handed and with the weapon in his hand; but that for taking the life of a man in hot blood he should be assoiled or cleansed on payment of the eriach fine, which is nine score of kine, to the kin of his victim. And I ask Dovenald Dornoch if this be not so?"

At this Alpin held speech with Dovenald the lawman, and his face grew sullen in disappointment.

"Alas!" said Alpin to Sir Oscar, "what Earl Roderic hath said is indeed true; for it seems that my grandsire, king Alpin, and also my father, who is dead, did in their mercy so ordain that crimes of violence should be dealt with in such manner that the traitor might

have time in which to repent of his ill deeds and commend himself to God. But for the slaying of a king the fine is not nine score, but six times nine-score of kine, or three thousand golden oras. And if that fine be not paid within a year and a day, then shall the traitor die the death. And now, oh men of Bute, since that I cannot see this man die — as, would that I might! — I call upon him for the due payment of my eriach fine. And moreover, oh judge, you and the wise men of Bute whom I see here present are guarantees for the full payment, and you shall see that it be paid within a year and a day.”

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Now this was far from being what Roderic wished, for well he knew that no man in all the Western Isles would spare him if he failed to pay the price of his liberty. But also he knew that neither in cattle nor in other movable wealth was it in his power to pay the value of a thousand head of cattle in so short a time. So he up and told this to Sir Oscar Redmain.

"I cannot pay the fine," he said; "for not in all my lands and ships do I possess such wealth nor know I any man who would be my broch, or bail."

"Then," said Sir Oscar, "if that be so, I now pronounce you an outlaw in the Western Isles and in Scotland, and our sovereign lord, King Alexander, shall ratify that sentence upon you forthwith. You shall be an outlaw for the term of three years and three days. For those three days you shall live within the sanctuary of Dunagoil and under the protection of the good abbot of St. Blane's. On the third day, or before, you shall take ship and depart hence whithersoever the holy abbot shall direct you."

Then turned Sir Oscar to the crowd.

"Men of Bute," said he, "I charge you all that if within three years to come any of you shall see this man Roderic MacAlpin within the isle of Bute, or within his forfeited lands of Gigha and Cara, or in any other land in the dominions of the King of Scots, you shall put him to the sword and slay him."

There was a loud cry of assent; and Roderic, wrathful at his position, felt at his side for his absent sword.

Here again were his plans defeated. The sentence passed upon him required that during his three days of grace in the sanctuary of the church lands no man should molest him or hold speech with him. How, then, could he hope to compass the death of the two lads, Alpin and Kenric, who stood in the way of his ambition? Turning his eyes with fierce malice upon the two brothers he stepped boldly to the front.

"There is yet another way for me," he cried aloud. "Think you that I, a king, am to be hunted about by a set of wolves like these? No, no. Now, on this spot and before you all, do I claim wager of battle, for that is my due. Let any man of you stand forth and meet me in fair fight, and I will fight him to the death."

Then Duncan Graham, the seneschal, came forward in his towering height, and said he:

"I will fight you, treacherous earl, for you deserve to die!"

"You!" exclaimed Roderic, awed at the man's giant height. "Not so. An earl may hold such combat with none but his equals. I will not cross swords with a low-born churl like you. Show me a man whose blood is worthier of my steel."

“Coward!” cried Duncan; “you are afraid to cross arms with me. I would slay you at the first passage.”

“There is but one among you who is of my own rank,” said Roderic, “and there he stands;” and he pointed to Alpin.

“And I am ready,” said Alpin. “I will engage with you to the death. And God defend the right!”

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CHAPTER IX. THE ORDEAL BY BATTLE.

While Duncan Graham and one of the guards went back to the castle of Rothesay to bring the swords of Alpin and Roderic, Sir Oscar Redmain pronounced the assize at an end; and such as wished not to witness the deadly combat — the abbot Godfrey and some few women — went away.

Then Roderic stood apart with Erland the Old and Sweyn the Silent, bidding them not wait for their weapons, but to slip away out of the crowd and get them to their ship, and so away to their island homes.

“Our project has so far failed,” said he; “but be assured that I shall yet gain the lordship over Bute. They have made me an outlaw, and I fear me that Redmain will most surely communicate this whole matter to the King of Scots. Well, be it so; we shall see what Alexander can do. Methinks it will not be long that he will hold his own against us. When these three years of my outlawry are over you shall see such things as will surprise you. Farewell, good Erland, and you, dear Sweyn! Hold you both fast by King Hakon. That is our highest game; and so we serve him well there is no fear but we will reap a good harvest of power.”

“God grant it may be so!” said Erland; “for if his Majesty of Norway fail in conquering Scotland, then are we all lost men. Farewell, then!”

When Sir Oscar Redmain had left the seat of justice his daughter Ailsa crept within the circle of the court, and there she found Kenric.

“As I came hither,” she said, “I saw Elspeth Blackfell; and she bade me ask you, Kenric, if what she spake had aught of sooth in it?”

“Ah,” said Kenric, “right truly did she tell what was to befall. For even as it was with your nest of ouzels, Ailsa, so has it been with the castle of Rothesay. This man Roderic, is he not even as the stoat that harried the nest?”

“Even so,” said Ailsa. “But the stoat also slew the fledgling as well as the parent bird. Elspeth, when she heard that the good Earl Hamish had been so cruelly slain, looked grave, and, said she, ‘Hasten, Ailsa, to the sons of Rothesay and bid them still be wary of this man. Not until he is dead will all danger from him be past.’ Those were her words, Kenric; and lest there should be truth in them I have come to you as speedily as I might. Alpin is about to engage in mortal combat. Bid him be wary, bid him arm himself well; for I heard one of the shepherds say that Roderic is clothed in a shirt of iron network, and that if it had not been so the knife wherewith Alpin smote him would have slain him where he stood.”

“Ailsa,” said Kenric, “much do I fear me that there is ample need of this warning. Help me, I beseech you. Run to the castle and bid Duncan not fail to bring my brother’s coat of mail.”

Then Ailsa disappeared and like a lapwing ran across the moorland.

Not long had she been gone when Duncan appeared, bearing two great claymores. But he had not brought the coat of mail; and Kenric seeing this drew his brother aside and bade him tarry until Ailsa should return, that he might protect his body with the chain shirt, and so be equal with his foe.

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The men of Bute then went in a vast crowd to the lower march beside Ascog mere, for it was against the ancient custom that any blood should be shed within the sacred circle reserved for the administration of the laws. And they formed a great ring upon the level ground, in the midst of which stood Earl Roderic alone, with his great two-handed sword in his hand, and the sun glancing upon his helm as he held his head proudly aloft.

And the cry went about:

“Alpin! where is Alpin? Is he then afraid?”

But soon a gap was made in the circle and Alpin strode boldly forward with a light step.

Kenric, who had sent Ailsa away, telling her that it was no sight for a girl, stood beside Sir Oscar and Allan Redmain, and he told how Ailsa had brought Alpin’s armour.

“Then am I much relieved,” said Sir Oscar. “Nevertheless there is no man I know, unless it be Sir Piers de Currie, who can handle a sword as your brother can; and methinks Earl Roderic will not easily bear up against him. Look at them both. Alpin is fresh and lithe as a young stag. Ah, Roderic, methinks your hour has surely come!”

Alpin dressed the end of his plaid about his left arm and pulled out his sword. He stood at five paces from his foe. Then both swerved about with their heads bent forward. Still keeping apart, eyeing one the other, round and round they traversed. Then Alpin got his back to the sunlight, drew himself up, and flung back his sword. With a fierce cry they rushed together and their swords clashed with mighty strokes. Then they both reeled backward two strides to recover. Tracing and traversing again they leapt at each other as noble men who had often been well proved in combat, and neither would stint until they both lacked wind, and they stood a while panting and blowing, each grasping his weapon ready to begin again.

When they had rested they went to battle once more, tracing and foining and hurtling together, so that none who beheld them could know which was like to win the battle. Their clothing was so far hewn that the chains of their coats of mail could be seen. Alpin had a cut across his knee, Roderic’s arm was bleeding.

Roderic was a wily man of war, and his wily fighting taught Alpin to be wise and to guard well his bare head, for it was ever at his head that Roderic aimed. Often he smote such strokes as made Alpin stagger and kneel; but in a moment the youth leapt lightly to his feet and rushed at his foe, until Roderic’s arms and face were red with blood.

The crowd about them hailed Alpin’s dexterous fighting with lusty cries of approval, and none doubted that he would soon make an end of his boastful antagonist. But neither had yet gained the upper hand.

So for a full half-hour they fought, until Alpin at length sorely wounded Roderic on the shoulder. At that Roderic was wroth out of measure, and he rushed upon Alpin, doubling his mighty strokes. Their swords clashed and clanged and flashed in bright circles through the air. But at last, by fortune, Roderic smote Alpin's sword out of his hand, and if Alpin had stooped to pick it up surely he would have been slain.

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He stood still a moment and beheld his weapon with a sorrowful heart. There was a deep groan of anguish from the crowd, and Kenric, seeing the peril in which his brother was placed, would have rushed forward to Alpin's help had not Duncan Graham held him back, fearing that he too might find himself in Earl Roderic's power. Then Allan Redmain was about to run in to Alpin's aid, but his father caught his arm and bade him stand back.

"How now?" cried Roderic. "Now have I got you at an advantage as you had me yesternight. But it shall never be said that Roderic of Gigha would meanly slay any man who was weaponless. And therefore take up your sword, Earl Alpin, and let us make an end of this battle."

Roderic then drew back that Alpin might without hindrance take up his sword. Then into Roderic's eyes there came a look of fixed fury, and in that look Alpin read his doom.

Again they took their ground, and this time neither seemed so eager to spring at the other. But at last young Alpin leapt wildly at his foe, with his sword upraised in the grip of his two hands. Down came his weapon with a mighty swing, and all thought surely that blow would be Roderic's end. But Roderic sprang lightly aside, so that the young man's aim was spent upon the soft ground. Roderic's sword flashed in a circle above his crested helm. There was a dull crunching sound, and then a deep groan.

Kenric promptly rushed to his brother's side and tried to raise him from the ground. But the sword of Roderic of Gigha had done its work. Earl Alpin was dead.

Then the men of Bute, seeing what had befallen their young king, raised a wailing cry that rent the sunny air, and they closed in their ranks around their fallen chief.

Earl Roderic looked but for a moment at Alpin, and then swinging his bloodstained sword from right to left he passed through the crowd of men. For the islanders, having just left the court of the moot, were none of them armed. So when Roderic made his way into their midst they fell back beyond the range of his swinging blade.

They saw that he was making his way towards the shores of the lake, which was but a few paces from where the battle had been fought. Many of them picked up great stones and flung them after him and struck him on the back.

"Down with the base traitor!" they cried.

But he little heeded either their missiles or their menacing cries. On he sped until his feet were ankle deep in the mere. Then he turned round for a moment and saw young Kenric, armed with his brother's sword, with Sir Oscar Redmain, Allan, Duncan Graham, and many others pursuing him.



He sent up a hollow mocking laugh as he lightly sheathed his sword. Then he waded farther into the loch and threw himself into the deeper waters, so that only his glancing helm could be seen above the surface. As the antlered stag, pursued by men and hounds, swims swiftly over the mountain tarn to the safety of crag and fell, so swam Earl Roderic before the fury of the men of Bute. And none dared follow him, for it is said that that loch is deeper than the hills are high.

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So many ran round to the farther shores that they might there meet him and assail him with showers of stones. In the brief time that had passed between two settings of the sun this man, this traitorous sea rover, had taken the lives of two kings — the well-beloved Hamish, who had ruled over that little nation for a score of peaceful and prosperous years, and Alpin, his son and successor, who had fallen ere yet he had known the power of his kingship. And forgetting that by the sentence of outlawry which their judge had passed but two hours before, Roderic had been allowed three days of grace, during which it was a crime to molest him, they were driven to the extremity of wild rage; they thirsted for his blood.

It was not now enough that he should quit their island with his treachery unavenged; they wanted to strike him down that the world might no longer harbour a villain whose evil deeds were blacker and more terrible than any the oldest man in Bute had ever known.

But ere they had turned either point of the lake Roderic had already gained the firm ground on the western shore, and now he shook the water from him and sat down on a large stone to rest his limbs and to dress his bleeding wounds.

Soon he heard the rumour of men's angry cries coming nearer and nearer, like the yelping of a pack of wolves. Rising and looking about him he saw many men running towards him from north and from south through the dingle of Lochly; and now most surely he might think that he was entrapped, for he was upon the strip of land that divides Loch Ascog from Loch Fad.

His deep voice rang out across the moorland like the bellowing call of the stag that challenges his rival in the glens. Bracing his long sword about his back he crossed westward over the rising ground until he came in view of the quiet waters of Loch Fad, where a flock of wild swans, startled at his approach, flew over towards the forest of Barone.

The two companies of islanders closed in upon him, believing doubtless that he would be speedily overcome. The one band was led by Sir Oscar Redmain and his son, the other by Duncan Graham and Kenric.

Roderic ran onward to the water's edge, and ere the first stone that was thrown could reach him he had plunged into Loch Fad, and as he swam outward stones and clods of turf fell in showers about his head. A stone thrown by Kenric struck him on the helmet. He sank deep down, and all believed that the water would be his death. But, like the diver bird of his native seas, he went under but to appear again many yards away beyond the reach of any weapon but the arrow, and of arrows there were none in all that company.

Now Loch Fad, which is the largest of the lakes of Bute, is full two miles long and but four furlongs wide, and it was useless for any to think of meeting the fugitive earl on the farther shore. So at the bidding of Sir Oscar Redmain the men all gave up the chase and turned back to where the dead body of Lord Alpin lay prone upon the turf, and thence they bore him to the castle of Rothesay.

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CHAPTER X. AASTA'S CURSE.

Roderic of Gigha, for all that he had been absent from Bute for a score of years, had not forgotten the old landmarks that had been familiar to him in boyhood. After swimming across Loch Fad he found himself among the tall pine trees of the forest of Barone. Wet and weary after his escape from his pursuers, and smarting sorely of his many wounds, he passed through the forest glades and emerged at the point where, on the evening before, Kenric had entered.

As he skirted the lands of Kilmory he saw a herd of shaggy long-horned cattle browsing there, with many sheep and goats. He looked about for their shepherd that he might ask him concerning the earls of Jura and Colonsay. He began to regret that he had so lightly dismissed his friends, who might better have waited to carry him in their ship to Gigha.

Presently he heard voices from behind a great rock. A young sheepdog appeared, but when it saw him it turned tail and slunk away as if it were afraid of him. Then from behind the rock came young Lulach the herd boy, and with him a most beautiful girl. Lulach stood for a moment looking at the strange man.

"Ah, 'tis he! 'Tis he whom we were but now speaking of!" he cried, and dropping the brown bread cake that he had been eating he ran away down the hill in terror.

But the girl stood still, with her hand resting on the rock.

Now this girl was the same strange maiden who had appeared so mysteriously before Kenric on his night journey through the forest. Tall she was and very fair — tall and graceful as a young larch tree, and fair as the drifted snow whose surface reflects the red morning sun. Her eyes were blue as the starry sky, and her long hair fell upon her white skin like a dark stream of blood. Men named this wondrous maiden Aasta the Fair.

Earl Roderic started back at sight of her great beauty as she stood before him in her gray and ragged garments, for she was but a poor thrall who worked upon the lands of Kilmory, minding the goats upon the hills or mending the fishermen's nets down on the shore.

"Fair damsel," said he, "tell me, I pray you, if you have seen pass by an aged man and his companion towards the bay of Scalpsie?"

"'Tis but an hour ago that they passed hence," said Aasta. "Cursed be the occasion that brought both them and you into this isle!"

Then she pointed across the blue moor of the sea where, under the shadow of the high coast of Arran, a vessel appeared as a mere speck upon the dark water.

“Yonder sails their ship into the current of Kilbrannan Sound.”

“Alas!” said Roderic, “and I am too late.”

“Alas, indeed!” said Aasta. “Methinks they had better have tarried to take away with them the false traitor they have left upon our shores. What manner of foul work detained you that you went not hence with your evil comrades? But the blood that I now see flowing from your wounds tells its own tale. You have slain Earl Alpin in the fight. Woe be upon you!”

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“Even so,” said Roderic, “for hard though he pressed me with his vigorous blows, yet my good sword was true to the last, and I clove his young head in twain.”

“Woe to you, woe to you, Roderic of Gigha!” cried Aasta, shrinking from his approach. “Curses be upon you for the evil work that you have done. May you never again know peace upon this earth. May those you love — if any such there be — may they be torn from you and slain before your eyes. Worse than brute that you are, meaner than the meanest worm that creeps, curse you, curse you!”

Then as Aasta drew yet farther back her hand was caught by another hand which drew her gently aside, and from behind the rock appeared the gaunt figure of old Elspeth Blackfell. And Lulach the herd boy, having overcome his fears, crept nearer and stood apart.

Roderic paused at seeing the old crone, and his face grew pale.

“Unworthy son of Bute!” said Elspeth, pointing her thin finger at the island king, “you have heard this good maiden’s curse. Even so do all the dwellers in Bute curse you at this hour. But the great God who sees into all hearts, and in whose hands alone must rest our vengeance — He will surely repay you for the sorrows that your wickedness has caused. Go, Roderic MacAlpin. Go, ere it is too late, and before the high altar of St. Blane’s pray to Him for the mercy and forgiveness that you sorely need.”

Roderic bowed his head and nervously clasped and unclasped his hands.

“Go while there is yet time and confess your sins,” continued Elspeth. “And if there is aught of penitence in your black heart then seek from our good and holy abbot the means whereby you may fulfil your penance during the days that remain to you on earth.”

It seemed that a great change had come over him as he walked away, for his step was halting and his head was bowed. He walked along by the cliffs that are at the verge of the sea; southward past Scalpsie and Lubas and Barr, then inland to the little chapel of St. Blane’s. And ever at his heels hobbled Elspeth Blackfell.

When Earl Roderic had entered the holy place to open his heart in confession to the abbot, Elspeth waited on the headland above the bay of Dunagoil. In that bay there was a ship, and the shipmen were unloading her of a cargo of English salt and other commodities of the far south. Presently the old woman went downward to the beach, and there held speech with the shipmaster, who, as it chanced, being a man of Wales, could make shift to understand the Gaelic tongue, and from him she learned that the ship was to leave at the ebb tide for England.

Now Elspeth had seen young Ailsa Redmain as the girl was passing to her father's castle, and Ailsa had told her how the wicked lord of Gigha had been made an outlaw. So Elspeth questioned the shipmaster, asking him if he would be free to carry this man away from Bute.

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"My good dame," said the mariner, "that will I most gladly do, for your holy bishop or abbot, or whatever he be, hath already paid me the sum of four golden pieces in agreeing that I shall do this thing — though for the matter of that, this man is a king in his own land, and methinks the honour were ample payment without the gold; so if the winds permit, and we meet no rascally pirates by the way, I make no doubt that ere the next new moon we shall be snug and safe against the walls of our good city of Chester."

So ere the curtain of night had fallen over the Arran hills the outlawed earl of Gigha had left behind him the little isle of Bute, and it was thereafter told how he had in secret confessed his manifold sins to the abbot of St. Blane's, and how in deep contrition he had solemnly sworn at the altar to make forthwith the pilgrimage of penance to the Holy Land, there to spend the three years of his exile in the service of the Cross.

CHAPTER XI. THE SWORD OF SOMERLED.

Now when Kenric, following sadly behind the body of his brother, came within sight of the castle of Rothesay his heart sank heavy with the woe that was upon him. He thought of how his mother had pressed upon Alpin the charge of vengeance, and of how that charge had ended. He would far rather have given up his own life than face his mother and tell her the terrible tale of how the man whom Alpin had sworn to slay had himself slain Alpin. And he was sorrowful beyond measure.

They bore the body of their dead young king into the great hall, and laid him on a bier beside the body of his father, the good Earl Hamish, and the curtains were drawn and many candles and torches were lighted and set round the two biers, while two of the friars of St. Blane's knelt there in solemn prayer.

Then Kenric went to the door of his mother's chamber and knocked, and old Janet, a retainer of many years, came out to him.

"Alas!" said she, "my lady your mother is passing ill, and she hath spoken never a word these many hours. We have sent forth a messenger to Elspeth Blackfell, who is skilled beyond all in Bute for her craft in simples. But Elspeth was abroad, and the messenger returned without her."

"Then will I go myself and find her," said Kenric.

So he went down into the courtyard and called his favourite hound Fingall, that he might have companionship in his quest. But the dog gave no answer to his call, and searching for it he found the animal lying moaning in a corner of the yard and writhing as in pain.

"The dog well knows that our master, Earl Hamish, is dead," said one of the servitors. "Grief is killing him."

“Not so,” said Kenric. “The dog is ill. What manner of food has he eaten?”

“Naught save the few scraps of venison that my lady left upon her plate after the feast,” said the servitor.

“Methinks, then,” said Kenric, “that I must even go alone. But see you that my poor friend is well tended, for even though he be but a dumb hound, he is a true and a faithful one, and I would not that he should die.”

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Now, as he walked over the hill of Barone, Kenric thought upon this strange illness that had befallen his dog; and suddenly, as though a light had flashed into his mind, he remembered how Alpin had told him of the feast, and of how Earl Roderic, sitting at my lady's side, had cut up her venison for her; and also of how my lady, ere she had eaten but a few pieces of the venison, had left the board. It was the same plateful of venison that the dog had eaten, and now both the Lady Adela and the dog were ill.

Then Kenric saw clearly that this was but another of the base schemes of his treacherous uncle, who, not yet certain by what means he should compass the death of Earl Hamish, had taken this poisonous course to assure himself that the Lady Adela should be ill on that night, and powerless to interfere in the crime that was in his mind.

"Oh, devil's messenger, or devil himself that thou art!" he cried. "Cursed be the hour that brought you in our midst, Roderic MacAlpin. You have slain my father, you have slain my brother; my dear mother is now by your cruel hand laid helpless on her couch. But by my father's soul and by my mother's blessing, I swear that you shall die. By my hand and none other you shall perish! Oh, God in mercy give me strength — give me power to kill this man of blood!"

Then at high speed he ran down the hillside, and the grouse birds lying low in the heather rose with startled cries and flew off to the further heights, uttering sounds as of mocking laughter.

Between Loch Dhu and Kilmory, as he crossed towards the marshes, a flock of lapwings rose in alarm, and Kenric knew by their cries that some other than himself was near. He turned his course, thinking that old Elspeth might be there, passing homeward from the peat casting.

Beside the rock where, three hours before, Earl Roderic had stood, he found Lulach the herd boy, and on the height of the rock sat Aasta twining a wreath of daisies in her blood-red hair. When they saw Kenric they both stepped forward, and together they threw themselves upon the ground before him, pressing his coarse garments to their lips.

"Give you good day, my lord the king," they both said.

Thus did it chance that these two humble thralls, Lulach and Aasta, were the first of all the dwellers in Bute to hail Lord Kenric as their king, and not till then did Kenric remember that by the death of Alpin he was now indeed the rightful lord of Bute, and he thought of the prophecy of Elspeth Blackfell. Disturbed in mind at the so early homage of Aasta and Lulach, he bade them rise.

"For your courtesy I thank you," he said. "But tell me, I pray you, where is Dame Elspeth gone, and where may I find her? For my mother, the Lady Adela, is passing ill."

“The Lady Adela ill!” echoed Aasta. “Alas! alas!”

“Elsbeth has gone these two hours past towards Dunagoil,” said Lulach. “So please you, my lord, I will run after her and bid her hasten to my lady’s aid.”

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"Yes, Lulach, run, run like the wind!" cried Aasta, and the lad ran off.

Kenric was about to follow him, when Aasta drew him back.

"One will serve as well as two, my lord," said she, "and methinks it were better that you sped back to Rothesay. Lulach will not fail."

"But I have yet another purpose, Aasta," said Kenric. "I would find the base villain, Roderic of Gigha."

"'Twas he whom Dame Elspeth followed," said the girl, "and he has gone to the abbey of St. Blane's, there to confess his sins."

"Alas!" said Kenric; "then if he has taken sanctuary I am powerless to molest him, for even though I would willingly lay him dead at my feet, yet it were sacrilege to spill blood in the precincts of the abbey."

"But you are weaponless, my lord."

"I have my dirk," said he, showing the weapon in his belt.

"As well take a hazel wand as that poor thing," said she. "This man in his late contest with your noble brother has slain a sprightlier swordsman than yourself, Earl Kenric. Ah, had I but known of his coming, this traitor had not served our island as he has done! 'Tis true, I might not have done aught to save the life of Earl Hamish your father, but had not yon churl Duncan Graham failed me yesternight Earl Alpin at least might have been spared."

"Now, with what grim sorcery has Dame Elspeth been bewitching you?" he exclaimed, drawing back a pace.

Aasta's fair cheeks and towering white neck blushed crimson, and she looked down at the grass about her feet.

"Yesternight," continued Kenric, "in passing through the shadows of the forest I suddenly encountered a wolf, and as I was about to draw my bow, lo! the wolf disappeared, and in its place it was you, Aasta, that I beheld."

"Ah, it was you, then, that appeared?" said Aasta. "Alas, my lord, I mistook you for one of the Norsemen of Earl Roderic's following, and I fled."

"Methinks it was a strange fancy that led a maid into the dark forest at such an hour," said Kenric sternly. "What manner of witchery led you there? But you spoke of Duncan Graham, and now I mind me that he too would have gone forth to the Rock of Solitude had I not warned him against so bold an adventure."

“My lord,” said Aasta, growing very red, “there is no man in all your castle more faithful than Duncan, and I trust that you will deem him no less true when you know that twice ere yesternight he has held tryst with me. It was his purpose, had not these misfortunes befallen your house, to have sued with my lord your father that I might be freed from the bondage of my thralldom, and if that boon had been denied him, he would even have purchased my liberty, that I might thus have been more worthy to become his wedded wife.”

“Aasta,” said Kenric, “I sought not to draw these secrets from your heart. And if it be that Duncan loves you and would have you to wife, then, believe me, it is not long that you shall remain in thralldom.”

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"God give you thanks, my lord the king," said Aasta softly.

And as the morning dewdrop shines upon the harebell, so shone the tears of gratitude that filled her deep blue eyes.

At that moment as she turned away the cry of the cuckoo was heard from the woods, and the girl kissed her hand and said in the Danish, "Cuckoo, cuckoo, when shall I be married?"

But the bird answered not at all, and Aasta grew very sad.

Kenric, leaving her behind, then wended his way back towards Rothesay. But not far had he gone into the wood when he found that the girl was following him.

"My lord," said she, coming to his side and walking near him, "when yesterday I heard that these three strange men had come to Bute, and Elspeth told me what manner of wicked men they were, now is the time, I thought, when the mighty sword of king Somerled must be unearthed, for most surely will that sword be needed. And methought I would send that sword by the hands of Duncan Graham. But Duncan came not to the tryst. And now that Earl Alpin is slain — now that, as it seems, my lord, you have resolved to bring this false traitor of Gigha to his merited death, methinks it is you who should bear that sword, that by its aid you may fulfil your vengeance."

Kenric looked at the maiden in blank surprise, and he thought that either there was something strange and mysterious in her nature or that her mind was wandering.

"The name of my great ancestor, king Somerled, God rest him! is indeed as well known to me as my own," said he; "but of this sword of which you speak I have heard nothing. Truly, I know not what you mean, Aasta."

They were now passing through the pine forest, where athwart the tall trunks of the trees slanted the rays of the evening sun, and there was no sound but the cooing of the wood pigeons and the crackling of the dry twigs and cones as Kenric and Aasta stepped upon the velvet turf.

"Long, long ago," said Aasta, "as Elspeth has oftentimes told me, there lived in Norway a great and ambitious king named Harald Fair Hair, who, for the love of a proud maiden, put the whole of Norway under his feet; and being lord over that great country by right of conquest he laid claim to every man's odal, or lands, in such wise that his realm was no longer a place in which a freeborn man could live. So many men of that land took ship and went forth upon the seas to seek other homes, and they came to the land of the Scots. They were adventurous and valiant men, who took to conquest and sea roving as a cygnet takes to the water. Now these vikings were soon such a thorn in the side of King Harald, that he resolved to quell the evil by following his old enemies to their new

abodes and hunting them across the western main, and he passed down among the Western Isles, and harried and wasted those lands farther than any Norwegian monarch before him or after him. So it befell that the Western Isles, that had belonged to the Scots, were peopled and ruled over by the Norsemen.”

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Kenric listened to the girl's soft voice as it rippled in sweet music, but he heeded little this oft-told tale.

"Now there arose a great man in Argyll, who was mightier than any of the Scots that had so lightly allowed their lands to be torn away from them, and this was king Somerled. He waged war against the Norsemen of the Western Isles, and he made conquest of Bute, Arran, and Gigha, with the Cumbraes and other smaller isles that still remain in the hands of the Scots, for he was a most powerful warrior, and it was said that no man ever crossed swords with him but to be slain. His enemies fell before him like ripe grain in the swath of the mower's sickle. And his sword —"

"Yes, his sword?" said Kenric, growing interested now.

"His sword had drunk so often and so fully of men's blood, that it seemed to take new life into itself out of the hearts of all who fell before its sway, and men named it the Thirsty Sword, for it is never satisfied. It was said beforetime that if a sword be the death of five score of men, it comes to be possessed of a lust for slaying. But the sword of Somerled had drunk the life's blood of twice five score of men, and none might take it in his grasp and lay it down again ere it had killed a man."

"Such a weapon were surely a great danger in the land, Aasta," said Kenric. "I would not willingly touch it if any but my enemies were near. But by reason of the desire for vengeance that is now upon me, gladly would I know where that sword is to be found, that it may be ready when the time comes to drink the blood of the falsest heart that ever beat, and that is the heart of Earl Roderic of Gigha."

"Then, methinks it will not be long ere you have that weapon in your hand, my lord," said Aasta, quickening her steps. "For it befell that I had a dream vision, and I saw where long ago the men of Bute had buried the sword, swathed in sheepskins that the blade might not be eaten by rust. So I unearthed it, and hid it under the Rock of Solitude, where we shall now find it."

Kenric and Aasta went onward through the forest glades, and when they came to the rock Aasta put her white arm into a deep cavity, and drew forth a bundle of sheepskins. Unwrapping them she revealed the glittering weapon. With her two hands she clasped its hilt, and raised the Thirsty Sword above the crown of daisies that was upon her hair.

Kenric drew back, for he was yet afraid of this strange witch maiden, whose fairness and beauty were regarded by the men of Flute as betokening the spell of her subtle sorcery. But seeing him recoil, Aasta lowered the weapon and smiled, showing her pearl-white teeth.

"He who would wield this weapon, my lord," said she, "must strip his heart of all fear and trembling. Take you the sword in hand, and I will stand before you while you try your



power with it. Not hard will it be to wield it, for it was forged by the hand of Munifican, and so well balanced is it, and so easy to grip, that a youth of half your strength, my lord, might swing it for many hours and not be weary."

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Then Kenric took the sword in his hard grip, and holding it out at arm's length he saw that its point was but a span's distance from Aasta's breast.

He bade the girl stand still. Aasta stood like a pillar of stone before him, with the sunlight upon her red-gold hair; nor did she stir a finger or blink an eyelash as young Kenric, firm on his feet, flung back his arms and swung the terrible weapon once, twice, thrice, to right and left in front of her.

Seeing the maiden's fearless courage, "Now do I in sooth believe," said he, "that you are in very deed a witch, Aasta. But what you have said of this sword is, methinks, nothing less than true; and, if you will it so, then will I take it, so that I may now confront this villain Earl Roderic, and slay him for my revenge."

"God be your guard! my lord the king," said Aasta, "and may you never use that sword without just cause."

And so saying she went her ways.

Now, when Kenric, armed with the Thirsty Sword, and with his heart full of bitter vengeance, came upon the rocky heights of Dunagoil, and held discourse with one of his friends, a friar of St. Blane's, he learned that his enemy had already quitted the island, and was now aboard the English ship on the first stage of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Not till then did Kenric remember his sick mother, or think of how he had set out to summon Elspeth Blackfell to the castle. He blamed himself beyond measure in that he had allowed his vengeful thoughts to so lead him away from his higher duty.

But as it happened, Lulach had served him well. When Kenric got back to Rothesay he found Elspeth already busy in her work of nursing his mother hack to health. So skilful was the old woman in this, that in the space of two days the Lady Adela was fully restored, and able to hear the sad news of how her favourite son had fallen under Roderic's sword.

Of the burial of Hamish and Alpin, and of the solemn rites attending that ceremony, there is no need to tell. Noble and true were they both, and well-beloved for their worthiness. But they are dead, and so, as the old scalds would say, have passed out of the story.

CHAPTER XII. HOW KENRIC WAS MADE KING.

On a day in June, Ailsa Redmain, well arrayed, went forth from Kilmory riding behind her father, Sir Oscar, on his sturdy horse. Beside them walked her brother Allan, with a long staff in his hand, a plaid over his broad shoulder, and a tall feather in his bonnet.

It was one of the calmest of summer days. The warm sweet smell of the whin bloom was in the air. The lark sang merrily in the clear sky, and across the smooth, glassy surface of Ascog loch the herons flew with heavy, indolent wings.

Seeing a pair of these birds flying near, Sir Oscar turned to his son.

“Were we not otherwise employed,” said he, “this were a glorious day, Allan, on which to fly our young hawks at these herons. The birds will lose their cunning if they be not better exercised. Know you if poor Alpin had set aside a pair of gerfalcons for his Majesty’s tribute?”

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"'Tis but seven days ago that we were out together, Alpin and I," said Allan, "and never saw I a better trained pair of hawks than those that are now in keeping at Rothesay against the time when the tribute must be paid. We took seven birds that rose from the heronry of Barone. Alas! had Alpin but lived I had hoped to accompany him into Scotland that I might see King Alexander. But 'tis ever so with me. Never yet have I been able to make that journey."

"But," said Ailsa, "when Kenric has been throned, will not he also need to pay yearly homage to the King of Scots, even as his father was wont to do?"

"Assuredly," said Sir Oscar. "The king of Bute is so bound by his vassalage, and it were a sorry day for him if he should fail to observe the usages which custom has ordained. So soon as Kenric can do so, he will take his tribute of falcons to King Alexander, and Allan might even accompany him."

"But are there no falcons in Scotland, father?" asked Ailsa.

"Plenty there are, my child. 'Tis but the form of tribute, showing that the lord of Bute acknowledges his vassalage. In like manner, the lord of Arran delivers each year two dead eagles, and the lord of Islay a roll of homespun cloth. So may his Majesty know that his subjects remain true to him."

"Ah, heard you those lusty shouts?" broke in Ailsa, as the hum of many voices reached their ears. "'Tis surely the young king that they are hailing. Spur on the horse, for I would not willingly miss the sight of his arrival."

"'Tis but some wrestler thrown," said her father. "We shall be at the Stone of Destiny long ere Kenric leaves his castle gates."

Nevertheless, he urged on the horse, and soon they were in the midst of the vast crowd of islanders who had assembled on the great plain to elect their new king.

Sir Oscar, dismounting, took his place by the throne, and when the court was duly fenced and the ruthmen had taken their places, each at his particular stone, the islanders crowded round in a circle that all might see. Ailsa and Allan were behind their father, and near them were Lulach and Aasta the Fair, with Elspeth Blackfell and many hillmen and dalesmen, with their women. And nearest to the fence cord, so that their elders could see above their curly heads, were the little children of Bute, who had been brought from far and near, to the end that when they were old and gray headed they might have it to say, "When I was a child, so high, my mother carried me to Loch Ascog side, and there I saw young Kenric made king of Bute, and it was the lordliest sight that ever was seen in the island; for Kenric was a true-born king, and the wisest and noblest of all our rulers, and all who saw him on that great day foretold that it would be so."

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Not long had the people waited when they saw a stately company of men-at-arms advancing, and at their head rode Kenric, mounted on a white charger. Not now did he appear in the lowly garments of deerskin or with ill-strung buskins or tangled hair. He wore a helm of burnished brass, crested with a pair of golden wings; his well-combed brown hair fluttered in the breeze. Thrown over his shoulder, and half concealing his bright shirt of scale mail, was a plaid of silk. There were silver buckles on his tanned shoes, and below his bare knees his legs were swathed in fine lawn, cross-gartered with red silk bands.

A great cheer rose in the calm air and echoed and re-echoed far away among the crags of Loch Striven as Kenric sprang lightly from his steed. The crowd opened a place for him, crying "All hail to Kenric!" and he took his stand in their midst at the eastern side of the court. No farther did he venture, but stood there with bent head and sober, sunburnt face, resting his left hand upon his sword.

Then when the abbot had spoken a few holy words, Sir Oscar Redmain raised his voice and told what they had all come for to that place, and he asked the counsellors to name the man whom they would choose for their lord.

"Kenric, son of Hamish!" they all cried.

Kenric then stepped forward as though he were unwilling thus to be made ruler over the people of Bute, for the high honour had come suddenly upon him and he had never dreamed of being king, but only a faithful priest of St. Blane's, serving the Lord and His people.

Sir Oscar met him at the foot of the throne, and took from him his great sword and his dirk.

Then Kenric turned and faced the people, and spoke to them in a loud, clear voice.

"Men of Bute," said he, "much do I tremble at this great and solemn duty that you have thrust upon me. I am but a stripling, fitted better to play upon the hills in boyish sport than to rule over men who are my elders. If it be that I am indeed to be your king, then do I deem your choice made only because I am my dear father's son, and not that I have any virtue or prowess that would befit me for that high office. And now I ask you, men of Bute, whether you have ever found any fault with the manner in which the late king, Earl Hamish, ruled this land, and whether you know of anything deserving blame in myself, that should unfit me to be your lord and king?"

They replied as with the voice of one man that they knew no fault of any kind.

Then standing upon the Stone of Destiny, Kenric took from the steward a straight white wand, and the abbot and three friars anointed him king. At the same time old Dovenald,

clothed in a scarlet robe, advanced from the crowd, and bending low before the throne repeated the catalogue of Kenric's ancestors.

When these ceremonies were over, the young king swore upon his sword that he would continue his vassals in the possession of their lands and defend their rights with his own life, and do exact justice to all his subjects.

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“And now,” said he, “if there be any amongst you who would dispute my kingship, let him stand forward and I will prove myself with the sword.” And he threw down his gauntlet from his girdle.

No man stood forth. But an aged woman who was of the crowd let down from her arms a little child, and the child toddled forward and picked up the glove and handed it to the king. Kenric, bending his strong back, took up the child in his arms and kissing its two rosy cheeks, raised the little one on his shoulder, and carried it back to its grandam.

Then as he did so, many mothers held up their children that these too might share the honour he had done the first. So Kenric went round bestowing his kisses and his blessings upon the innocents. And the fathers and mothers thought well of their young king for this that he did, for it showed them that he had a tender and loving heart. Then they cheered him yet again, until their lusty voices grew hoarse.

At length, when all was done, the people went peacefully to their homesteads, talking of what they had just seen, yet little thinking how soon the time would arrive when they should owe the lives of their innocent children to the wisdom and bravery of this boy king.

CHAPTER XIII. THE “WHITE LADY” OF THE MOUNTAIN.

On the second morning after his throning, Kenric, assuming again his clothes of deerskin, walked over to Kilmory Castle, and there held counsel with his steward concerning the way in which he was to pay tribute to his overlord the King of Scots. As a newly-elected king it was necessary for him to offer homage to King Alexander in person. But he did not yet know in which of the royal castles his Majesty might be found, and he had need to cross over to Arran to make inquiries of Sir Piers de Currie, who, as he knew, had lately had audience with the King.

Sir Oscar Redmain, in giving him his instructions, asked him if his son Allan might accompany him to Scotland.

“There is no youth in all Bute whom I would rather take with me,” said Kenric, “for I have now no comrade of my own years since my brother Alpin is no longer alive; and methinks that Allan might well become to me the true friend that he ever was to Alpin. If he will come with me even now I will take him across to Castle Ranza, and we may then speak of our approaching journey.”

Allan was then out in the fields, but he was soon found, and the two lads, armed with bows and dirks, went together down to the bay of St. Ninian’s. Four fishermen there

launched a boat for them, and rowing out under the little island of Inch Marnock, they then hoisted sail and sped across the Sound of Bute with a fresh western wind.

Not long were they in crossing the channel between Bute and Arran, and at the northwest of the latter island they steered round into the beautiful and quiet Loch Ranza. At the head of this inlet of the sea, and standing out upon a narrow neck of land commanding the bay, was Sir Piers de Currie's castle. Like many of the smaller fortresses of that time, the castle of Ranza was built, not of stone, but of heavy oak timbers of double walls that were filled in between with stones and turf, and so wondrously strong and thick that fire alone might destroy it.

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Landing at a little stone pier, Kenric and Allan went up to the castle front. Allan blew his hunting horn. The guard ordered the drawbridge to be lowered, and the two lads entered. They were met at the inner gates by the Lady Grace de Currie and her five young boys and girls, who accompanied them into the great drinking hall. Then as they were taking the hospitality that was offered them, Kenric told of how the three island kings had come to Bute, and how his father and Alpin had been slain.

Much concerned was the lady of Ranza at all this — for she had heard but a fisherman's account of what had befallen the house of Rothesay — and more than all was she grieved at the late illness of her dear friend the Lady Adela.

“So now,” said Kenric when he had modestly spoken of his kingship, “I would see your husband, for, as I hear, he has newly been to Scotland, and can tell me where I may meet King Alexander.”

“Sir Piers,” said she smiling, “went forth at sunrise with his men, and is even now upon the mountains in search of sport. I fear he will not be back ere morning, for you know his habit of wandering for days together among the hills. So I beg you, my lord Kenric — and you also, Allan — rest you here in our castle until Sir Piers returns.”

“Yes, Kenric, stay, and I will show you my new bow, and you shall see how well I can now aim,” said little Fergus (the same who in the aftertime fought so valiantly at Bannockburn).

“No,” said Kenric, “I cannot stay, for on the morrow I must even be back in Bute to take my seat at the assize that has been called, and I would not willingly neglect the first duty that has fallen to me.”

“Why, then,” said Allan Redmain, “let us both to the mountains, my lord. There is no pass or crag in the north of Arran that my foot has not trod, and it will go hard if we find not Sir Piers in a few hours' time.”

Thereupon Kenric and Allan, leaving their four men at the castle, walked round by the shore side to Glen Catacol, and through a gloomy pass that led far up into the craggy mountains, where the eagle reigned on high and the red deer ran wild and free.

Now Allan Redmain was a most venturesome youth. He was taller by a head than Kenric, strong of limb and surefooted as a mountain goat. Heedless of the danger into which he was taking his king, he led the way into the wildest fastnesses of Ben Bharrain, by paths that even the hunted stag might fear to tread.

In vain did they search for any sign that would bring them to Sir Piers de Currie and his band of hunters. No sound of rallying horn, no voice of man reached their ears, but only the drumming cry of the wild grouse or the short sharp bark of the fox; and when, after

much scraping of bare knees, they scaled the steep mountain's peak and stood upon the lofty height, where the heather grew crisp and short, they sat down and let the cool wind blow against their flushed faces. Then with keen eyes they scanned each crag and fell, searching in gully and glen, in hollow and on height. But though they saw many herds of deer, yet of huntsmen they saw no sign.

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"Methinks, Allan," said Kenric, "that 'tis but a foolish thing we have done to come on this fruitless journey. One might wander for a week upon these barren wastes and yet never encounter those whom we seek. Better had we remained in Castle Ranza. What say you to our returning?"

"Could we but get a shot at a good stag," said Allan, "our journey might yet be well repaid."

"And wherefore kill a stag, if we must needs leave his carcase for the carrion crows? If 'tis practice with your bow you want, why, have we not that in abundance on our own island?"

"Ah, but to be up here as it were among the very clouds!" said Allan. "Beats not your heart with quicker joy, Kenric, when you breathe the keen mountain air — when your eyes rest upon so vast a stretch of sea and land as we now behold? I know no pleasure so sweet as this."

"Methinks," said Kenric, "that were Sir Piers de Currie here, and I had fulfilled my purpose in crossing to Arran, then this joy you speak of were not greater than my own. But when I go out hunting, Allan, I like to hunt; when I come over to ask a question of our neighbour, it is not to my humour to be thus stranded upon a hilltop. So now, if it please you, we will return to Ranza."

"Nay, I go not from these mountains ere I have once drawn the bow," said Allan. "'Tis a chance that I do not have too often; and now that we are so far I would go to yonder gully where but a while ago we saw that vast herd of deer enter. Come."

"Methinks, Allan Redmain," said Kenric, "that 'tis you who have come with me to Arran, not I with you, and I beg you to at once return with me."

Allan was about to turn round upon Kenric with an angry word, when suddenly he minded that the lad was his lord and king.

"Oh, my lord, my lord!" he cried, "pardon me — I beg you pardon me, for in truth I had forgotten your kingship. It was wrong in me thus to oppose my will to yours."

"Nay, Allan, believe me, I would not have you thus regard me at all times as your master, but rather as your friend. Nevertheless, if my office is to be remembered, then methinks it is well that we should search for Sir Piers, and not think of hunting after stags. Now take me back to Castle Ranza by the nearest way."

Allan then turned and led the way across the eastern shoulder of the mountain and down a wild ravine towards Glen Catacol. In the bed of the ravine there coursed a turbulent torrent, swollen by the rains of the night before. They walked along a narrow

goat track from which the rocky ground sloped sharply downward into the stream. From beyond a turning in this path they heard the swelling roar of a waterfall.

Scarce had they made this turning, when, above the noise of the cataract, they heard the yelping of a deer hound. Kenric was now in advance of his companion, and they were just above the point where the waterfall turned over into a deep chasm.

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"A stag! a stag!" cried Kenric as he promptly took an arrow and fixed it to his bowstring.

Allan followed his example. Kenric knelt down on one knee and levelled his arrow. Allan made ready to shoot over Kenric's shoulder. A noble stag, with wide-spreading antlers of twelve points, seemed almost to be flying towards them along the narrow path. An arrow was half buried in his bleeding flank; a pair of shaggy deer hounds were behind in mad pursuit.

"Now!" cried Kenric.

The bowstrings twanged, and the two arrows speeding in their deadly flight plunged side by side into the stag's broad chest. The noble animal stumbled, regained his footing, and ran on. Nearer and nearer he came, panting, moaning, glaring with wild and frightened eyes. To his right was a steep wall of rock, to his left a fall of thirty feet into the surging waters below the cataract. At his heels were the dogs, in front of him the two youths ready with another charge of arrows. There was no way of escape.

"Lie down, my lord! — quick, lie down!" cried Allan, firing his dart.

The arrow rattled upon the stag's antlers. The stag bounded forward with one of the hounds upon his back, then stumbled upon his knees. Kenric rose and ran to dirk him ere he should have time to regain his feet.

"Comeback, come back!" shouted Allan.

But Kenric, little heeding the danger, or not hearing the cry of warning amid the roaring of the water, was about to draw his dirk, when the stag fell over with the weight of the second hound. One of his antler points caught in the string of Kenric's bow.

Then Allan Redmain saw a sight that filled him with dismay. Kenric, still holding his bow that was entangled in the stag's horns, lost his footing; the stag rolled over; and Kenric fell, with his legs astride of the animal's belly. Then all four — Kenric, the stag, and the two dogs — struggling each with his own purpose, slipped swiftly down the sloping precipice, and plunged into the deep and surging linn below the foaming waterfall.

Allan Redmain, alone now upon that narrow path, uttered a loud cry as he saw his young master disappear through the mist of spray that rose from below the cataract. Well did he know that even if Earl Kenric had not been killed, he yet was unable to swim.

Thoughts more dreadful than he had ever known coursed through Allan's mind at that moment. Kenric the young king, the only hope of Bute, killed? and he, Allan Redmain, had not saved him!



He looked around for help. In that desolate place what help could he expect? But he tarried not long to think of how he should act. At the risk of his own life he was bound to do what he could. Grasping his longbow in his two hands and using it as a skid, and digging his heels firmly into the stony ground of the sloping precipice, he went down foot by foot, now swaying this way and now that as the loose stones slipped before his feet. Down, down he went until he came at last to the level top of a steep rock that stood over the brink of the deep linn.

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In the eddying water that swirled and boiled as in a cauldron at the base of the cataract he saw one of the stag hounds struggling, trying vainly to keep its head above the surface; but nowhere Kenric, nowhere even the stag. He lay down upon the rock and drew himself to its edge that he might look below into the water at its base. But the water rushed past in bubbling sweep, and yet there was no sign.

Then, still in hope that he might yet find the young king, he rose to his feet and threw himself headlong into the linn. Deep, deep he sank, and the strong undercurrent tossed about him, seized him in its fearful grip, and swept him downward in its course. Rising to the surface he tried with all his strength to swim against the current to the spot where Kenric had fallen in.

Not long had he thus endeavoured when his strength failed him. He felt himself being drawn under. It came to be a matter of saving his own life now — saving it that he might live to carry the sad news home to Rothesay. So he turned round with the stream and swam towards a great flat rock in mid-current. As he neared it a strange sight met his eyes.

On the rock was the dead stag. A stream of crimson blood trickled down from its broad chest, staining the white rock. Sitting upon the stag, with folded arms and dripping hair, and eyes fixed in dreamy admiration upon the tumbling waters of the White Lady Falls, was Kenric the king. The great cataract curled over the topmost rocks in a smooth brown volume, turned into pure white foam as it fell and bounded with roaring noise into the deep chasm below. A cloud of spray rose from the depths, and where the sunbeams crossed it there was a beautiful arc of light showing all the colours of the rainbow. Kenric seemed to be lost in contemplation of the wild scene.

Suddenly he turned his head and looked up the frowning hillside. Above the noise of the falling water he had heard his name called. He stood up, and holding on with one hand to the stag's spreading antler, with the other he shaded his eyes and searched for a sign of Allan Redmain. The goat track was hidden from his view; but at the spot where he had first seen the stag running he now saw a party of five men, who, with their leader, Sir Piers de Currie, were following the trail of the wounded animal.

Kenric then knelt against the dead stag, and, thrusting his fingers into his mouth, gave a shrill whistle.

At that moment Allan Redmain clambered upon the rock at his side, emptied his horn of the water that was in it, and blew as lusty a blast as his enfeebled breath could send forth.

Kenric started back at the sound like one who had seen a ghost, for he had known nothing of Allan's movements until this moment. But now he quickly understood what his friend had done for his sake, and he put his hand upon Allan's shoulder lovingly.

Within a little while the two lads were rescued from their perilous situation. With the help of the ropes that the men of Ranza had brought to bind the deer upon their ponies' backs, first Kenric, then the dead stag, and lastly Allan Redmain, were taken off the rock. The two hounds were, however, lost.

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Saving for a few bruises and scratches, neither Kenric nor Allan had received much hurt. But this accident, which might have proved so disastrous to the isle of Bute, bound the Earl Kenric and Allan Redmain together in a close fellowship, which lasted until they were both gray-haired old men.

CHAPTER XIV. IN SOLEMN ASSIZE.

On the day that followed that of his adventure among the Arran mountains, Kenric went to the seat of judgment at Ascog, there in solemn assize to administer the laws of his dominions. The men of Bute were peaceful, and the offences and charges that were brought forward on that day were of no great gravity.

On taking his seat before the twelve wise men, he opened the assize and called for the first charge, whereupon an odaller from one of the farmsteads of Ardbeg accused one of the islanders of having made theft of a young steer. Kenric asked whether the thief had driven the young ox away or carried it, and explained that the stealing of such prey as required to be driven was a higher offence than if it were carried off. A witness then proved that the thief, being a strong man, had bound the steer's legs with thongs and thrown the animal over his shoulder, and so made off with it. And being proved guilty, he was made to pay a fine of twenty pence.

Then there came another who charged his enemy with having hunted hares and wildfowl on lands that were not his own. But the accused man was held guiltless, for, said the young judge, they had there no tyrannous forest laws, and every man was free to hunt wheresoever he wished, and to take what game he might. And again, a fisherman was accused of having charged two pennies for a basket of fish worth only half that sum; and Kenric said that the fisherman was poor and hard working, and that he who bought the fish was over greedy, and the case was dismissed. Next a poor cattleman of Kingarth came forward, showing a knife wound in his arm, and saying that another had stabbed him and also struck him in the mouth, knocking out a tooth; and Kenric ordered that the man's wound should be measured with a rule, and it was three inches in length and a half inch in breadth. Then for the length of the wound a fine of twenty-four pence was imposed upon the wrongdoer, for its breadth six pennies, and for the tooth twelve other pennies.

Then Kenric asked if there were any further matters to be judged.

"Yes, my lord," said Duncan Graham, entering the circle of the court. "There is a boon that I your servant would humbly ask."

"And what boon is that?" asked Kenric, already guessing what it might be.



“It is,” said Duncan, standing to his full height and growing very red — “It is that there lives with Elspeth Blackfell, over at Kilmory, one whom men name Aasta the Fair, and she is a thrall. The boon I ask is that you will in your mercy remove from her the yoke of bondage, for she is a passing worthy maid, and it is no fault of hers, but only her misfortune that she is a thrall; and, so please you, my lord, I love her well, and would make her my lawful wife, for a freeman may not wed a bondmaid and claim her as his own.”

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"Show me this maiden, that I may speak with her," said Kenric.

And Aasta stood forth, looking very beautiful in a robe of white, and with her eyes downcast, and her hands clasped before her.

"Tell me your name and history," said the young king.

"My name, my lord, is Aasta, and nothing else," said she. "I am a thrall to Sir Oscar Redmain, who claimed me as his bondmaid when I was but a little child, for it was upon his lands that I was found. Whence I came I cannot tell; but men say that it was with the wild north winds that I was brought to Bute, from the regions of frost and snow. Of my parentage I know naught, saving only that Elspeth Blackfell has oft declared that my parents were of noble station, and that they dwelt in the land of the Norsemen."

"That you are of gentle blood I can well believe," said Kenric softly, as he regarded her surpassing beauty. "But do you then remember nothing of your earliest life?"

"All that yet lingers in my mind, my lord, is the memory of my mother," said Aasta. "She was wild and unruly as the winter storm, and cruel as an angry wolf."

"And your father?"

"He was a viking, who, though he loved me passing well, was ever on the sea, roving and fighting in his great ship."

"Whosoever you be, Aasta, and whencesoever you came," said Kenric, "I now declare you to be free of your bondage. For the space of a year and a day you shall remain upon Sir Oscar Redmain's lands as his paid servant, but not as his thrall, and at the end of that time the Abbot of St. Blane's shall give you in marriage to the brave man who will then claim you, and you shall be that man's lawful wedded wife."

Then, when Duncan Graham led the maid away, Kenric asked if there yet remained any man there present who had any claim to make, or grievance to be redressed; at which David Blair, a rich farmer of Scalpsie, called for judgment upon one who had done him a wrong.

"What is your suit?" asked the king.

"It is," said the farmer, "that, ten days since, my watchdog was cruelly slain. He was the best watchdog in all Bute, and never dared beast of prey or man of stealth come near my homestead but to his hurt. But, since my dog has been slain, three gimmer sheep, and two ewe lambs, and four young goats have been carried off by the wolves. And my good wife Marjory has lost seven of her best chickens, that have been taken by the foxes."

“Who is the man that so cruelly slew your dog?” asked Kenric.

“It was young Allan Redmain of Kilmory, and him do I charge,” said the farmer.

“Allan Redmain!” exclaimed Kenric, in alarm at the thought of sitting in judgment upon his own friend.

Then he stirred uneasily in his seat, and bit his lips in trying to see a way of escape out of his difficulty. He had sworn lasting friendship for Allan, and remembering the adventure of the day before, when Allan had risked his life for him, he could not bear the thought of giving sentence of punishment if it should be proved that Allan was guilty. Thrown thus betwixt friendship and duty, he sat for many moments in silent thought, wishing that he was no longer a king who had bound himself to do justice to all men. But at last he called aloud for Allan Redmain, and Allan promptly appeared, albeit with lowered head and guilty looks.

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"Now, David Blair," said Kenric with tremulous voice, "repeat your accusation, and woe betide you if in malice you say aught but the holy truth."

"My lord!" said the farmer in surprise. "Am I then to be doubted? And is my word less to be trusted than that of any other honest man of Bute? I repeat that it was Allan Redmain who slew my dog out of mere boyish sport."

Allan looked at his accuser with frowning brows.

"Allan Redmain, are you guilty or innocent of this offence?" asked the young judge.

"In that I slew the dog, my lord, I am guilty," said Allan. "But in that the act was not without just cause, I am innocent. It was in the hay field of Scalpsie, where with a companion I was walking. The dog ran up to us as it were to attack us. My comrade shook his fist at the dog, and thereupon it sprang at his throat, and I took out my dirk and slew the brute."

"Brute, say you?" exclaimed the farmer. "My lord, the dog meant no manner of harm, and it was a cruel thing to kill him so. I am now without a watchdog, and must I needs suffer my sheep to be devoured by the wolves because, forsooth, a hot-headed lad would use his knife upon my poor dumb friend? I ask for redress, and redress I shall have."

"Who was the comrade of whom you speak?" asked Kenric of Allan.

"I refuse to say, my lord," said Allan firmly.

"It was your own brother Alpin who is dead, my lord," said David Blair.

"What! and you would have me punish one who so defended my own brother?" cried Kenric. "No, David Blair, I cannot do it."

But at that the farmer protested warmly, and declared that he would have justice done him, and that it was his lord's duty to deal fairly by all men, notwithstanding that Allan Redmain was the son of the steward. So there was nothing for it but for Kenric to pronounce the penalty.

"It is an old law, held sacred by custom," he falteringly said, "that if one slays another man's watchdog, the slayer must himself protect for a year and a day the unwatched homestead. And he is accountable to the owner for any scathe that may befall within that period after the slaying of the dog. This, Allan Redmain, is the penalty you must pay, and less than this it is not in my power to impose, for law is law, and I am but its instrument."

Then after the assize was over, Allan went to Kenric and asked him what was now to be done concerning their projected journey into Scotland, for that now he was condemned to act for twelve long months as a miserable watchdog, it was no longer possible for him to leave the island, and be absent for a night.

The same difficulty had already presented itself to Kenric, who felt indeed that he would rather have cut off his own hand than pass that sentence upon his friend. He looked at Allan with pleading eyes.

“Allan,” he said, “how can you forgive me for this that I have done? And how can I now help you out of this miserable dog’s work? Methinks that on the cold frosty nights when you are out there, minding this churlish farmer’s sheep, it will not be easily that I shall lie in my warm bed. But how to help it, I do not know. Haply the law was made for vagabond thieves and cattle lifters, but it still is law, and in my place I could not well evade the judgment.”

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"Think not that I blame you, my lord," said Allan cheerily. "I am not the steward's son without knowing somewhat of a judge's difficulties in punishing his own friends. But, alas! I had set my heart upon being your attendant on this journey of homage."

"As to that," said Kenric, "you need not concern yourself. I will not break my promise to take you. As to Blair's flocks and his good wife's chickens, we can send the lad Lulach to watch them, and I warrant me they will be safe. So come you over to Rothesay at the time of the flood tide two days hence, and we will then set sail for Dumbarton."

CHAPTER XV. THE DOMINION OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

When Kenric met Sir Piers de Currie in the wilds of the Arran mountains, and spoke with that doughty knight of his need of seeing the King of Scots, he learned to his satisfaction that his expedition would not carry him farther into the mainland than the castle of Dumbarton.

"It chances well that you are to make this journey so soon," said Sir Piers, "for, having failed to see his Majesty on my late visit to the palace of Scone, I heard that he was to come westward to the Clyde in a few days' time, and if it so please you, we will go to Dumbarton together."

"I will make ready my best galley, then," said Kenric, "and await you in Rothesay."

"Agreed," said the knight, "and it may be also that his Majesty will wish you to go upon the mission that your father was soon to have undertaken to Islay and Mull. 'Tis passing unfortunate that you are so young, Earl Kenric, and so little experienced in the arts of diplomacy that so marked your good father. But methinks his Majesty will be well pleased to see you, and to know what manner of man he has now to depend upon in his future dealings with the Norsemen. Your youth will assuredly be no disadvantage in the eyes of one who was monarch over all Scotland at eight years old."

"Think you, Sir Piers, that we shall at last come to a war with these Norsemen?" asked Allan Redmain.

"Of that I have little doubt, Allan," said Sir Piers. "Methinks the time is not far distant when the possession of the Western Isles must be determined at the point of the sword."

This promise of coming strife was by no means unwelcome to Allan Redmain, for those peaceful and prosperous times gave but few occasions for the earnest exercise of the sword, though, indeed, the weapons of the chase were in constant use, and Allan felt

the young blood course through his veins with quickened excitement at the prospect of engaging in a pitched battle against the valiant vikings of the North.

As to Kenric, the one thing which made him somewhat less eager than Allan was his knowledge that there was now no immediate hope of meeting the slayer of his father in a hand-to-hand encounter. The outlawed Roderic was now far away on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and the vengeance might never be fulfilled. If war should come, and Kenric himself be slain, then Roderic was the next heir to the lordship of Bute, and whether King Alexander or King Hakon became the overlord and monarch, it mattered little, for Roderic would still make claim to his father's dominions.

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Earl Hamish of Bute had but a few days before his tragic death been into Scotland to render account to Alexander the Third concerning his mission to the King of Norway. That mission had failed in its object. The letters of Henry of England and His Majesty of Scots had not succeeded in persuading the Norse monarch to resign his claims to the dominion of the Western Isles. King Hakon claimed that those lands, from the Lewis in the north even to the Isle of Man in the south, were his by right of both conquest and possession, and that each and all of the island kings, or jarls, were bound in fealty and vassalage to Norway. On the other hand, King Alexander claimed that he held yet stronger rights of sovereignty, and that the islands were even by nature intended to be part of Scotland.

The Western Isles, and more especially that group lying south of the holy island of Iona, were at this time in a most prosperous condition. Together with a large tract of country on the northeast of Ireland, they formed a sort of naval empire, with the open sea as its centre. They were densely populated. The useful arts were carried to a degree of perfection unsurpassed in other European countries. The learned Irish clergy had established their well-built monasteries over all the islands even before the arrival of the Norse colonists, and great numbers of Britons, flying hither as an asylum when their own country was ravaged by the Saxons, had carried with them the remains of science, manufactures, and wealth introduced by their Roman masters.

The habits of the islanders were piratical — the natural result of the possession of ships — and their conquests extended along the east of Ireland, the coast of Cumberland, and a large part of the mainland of Scotland, including the whole county of Caithness.

The Norwegian king, an ambitious and despotic monarch, who had risen to power from the position of a poor comb maker's son, hoped by the help of these dependants to invade and conquer the whole of Scotland, and he was encouraged to the attempt by such self-seeking men as Roderic of Gigha and Erland of Jura, who made no scruple to enlist themselves in any cause that gave promise of increased power.

It was natural that the Scots kings, as they increased their strength, should wish to annex these districts. But the efforts of Somerled of Argyll in the twelfth century, and of King Alexander the Second in 1249, had done no more than secure the few islands lying within the shelter of the Firth of Clyde. Earl John of Islay and many of his neighbours were now paying homage to both Norway and Scotland. The isle of Gigha, which had been a possession of Alpin of Bute, had been bestowed at that chief's death upon his younger son Roderic. But Roderic, as has been told, had gone over entirely to King Hakon, and had refused to acknowledge his vassalage to his rightful sovereign of Scotland.

Thus, at the time when young Kenric became the lord of Bate, the whole of the isles west of the peninsula of Kintyre were in the hands of petty kings, who, holding lands of both crowns, were still uncertain to whom they should pay their paramount allegiance.

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During the minority of Alexander the Third all efforts to reduce the isles were abandoned. But now that the king was no longer a boy, he was resolved to compel all these vassals of Norway to renounce their allegiance and acknowledge their adherence to the Scottish crown.

On the appointed day Sir Piers de Currie crossed over to Bute. He was a man of middle age, tall and strong. His gigantic limbs were hard and stout as the trunk of an oak sapling. He wielded the longest sword and the heaviest battle-axe in Bute and Arran, and he was the best bowman in all the lands of the Clyde. His life among the mountains of Arran had given him a mighty power of endurance, for it was his habit to rove for many days over the craggy heights of Goatfell, climbing where none else could climb, slaying deer, spearing salmon, following the wild wolf to his lair, sleeping on the bare heather, drinking naught save the crystal water of the mountain burns, and eating the simplest food. His band of retainers, though scarcely less strong of limb than their master, were wont to say that their labours were even as those of the mythical Sigmund, who was condemned to make a new island in the ocean of the rocks that he clove from the topmost peaks of the Mountain of the Winds.

And yet they loved their master by reason of his strength and power, for he was the king's nephew in Arran, and would some day be the lord of that isle and of the great castle of Brodick.

Landing on the shores of St. Ninian's Bay, he strode with great strides towards Rothesay, and Lulach the herd boy, seeing him, thought him the most gallant warrior in all the world, and wondered what his business might be in Bute, and why he should have come over without a train of attendants.

It took the knight but a little time to cover the four miles between St. Ninian's and Rothesay, and on the sloping strand of the bay he found Earl Kenric busy with his retainers carrying stores down to a great galley that was moored against a stone pier in the little creek near to the castle gates.

This ship, which was built in the shipyard of Rothesay, was entirely of oak and of great dimensions, ornamented with richly-carved dragons overlaid with beaten gold. It had ten banks of oars, each of the twenty long oars being rowed by two sturdy islanders. There was also a stout mast, upon which, when the wind served, a wide-spreading square sail might be hoisted.

"A gallant bark, by my faith! a gallant bark, Kenric!" said Sir Piers as he stepped on board and walked towards the high poop. "Would that we had a dozen such vessels, and manned by as brave a set of islanders as you have here. Then might we hope to make a bold stand against any sea rover out of Norway."

“Five other galleys the like of this are now lying at safe anchor in the bay of Kames,” said Kenric; “and had we yet another half dozen, there are men-at-arms in plenty to man them — all trained in the use of sword and longbow, and eager enough, I warrant, to have a fling at Hakon’s valiant vikings.”

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"Right glad am I to hear it," said the knight, "for he who is prepared has half his battle fought.

"Ah, Allan," he added, seeing young Redmain already on board, "I was but now about to ask if you had not yet come across from Kilmory. Where is Sir Oscar this morning?"

"Hard at work in the fields," answered Allan. "And he bade me tell you that should King Alexander commission you on any dangerous enterprise, there are threescore of fishermen at your service over at Kilmory."

"'Tis well. And now I see you have not forgotten the king's tribute," said Sir Piers, as he observed the pair of gerfalcons that Allan was tending. "Could his Majesty receive a like tribute from other vassals, methinks there would be need to supply him also with a few score of herons to fly them against. But the tribute customs are well ordered. One sends a hart, another a hound, one a heron, and another a hawk. My lord of Arran's offering is but two dead golden eagles — and for the matter of that his Majesty might have all the eagles in Arran, and welcome, for we have over many of them."

"Stand by your oars, my lads!" cried Kenric, balancing himself upon the gunwale and stepping aft. "Now, Duncan, heave off the ropes, you laggard. So. Ready all!"

Then the boatswain, standing by the mast upon the centre gangway running fore and aft between the two sets of rowers, blew his horn, and the rowers pushed up their oars at arms' length that the blades might catch the water, then springing upon the thwarts which they gripped with their bare feet they threw themselves back with all their weight and strength, and the ship began to glide through the clear water. And so, springing up again as before for another pull, the men went to their hard work with a will, singing a wild Gaelic boat song in measured time with the strains of Dovenald's harp, and the galley, with ever-increasing speed, sailed out into the mid-bay. When there was a good way on her the work at the oars became easier and the song sank down into a subdued crooning sound that was soothing to hear.

The shipmaster steered them out into the broader sea past Toward Point, and two hours' good rowing up the firth brought them abreast of the fortress of Dunoon. When the course was turned eastward the oars were shipped and the great sail was set to catch the light western breeze, and then they went speeding up the Clyde to Dumbarton, whose strong-built castle stood upon a high steep rock on the northern bank of the river.

"Alas!" said Sir Piers de Currie, as he turned his clear gray eyes towards the battlements, "much do I fear that we are doomed to disappointment. The King has not arrived! Had it been so we should have seen the brave flag of the Scottish lion flying upon those towers."

“That were indeed a disappointment,” said Allan Redmain regretfully.

“Nevertheless,” said Kenric, “we can at least leave the tribute at the castle, and it may be that the warden can tell us when his Majesty is expected.”

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In a little time they had landed and mounted to the castle gates, where the lord warden met them and bade them enter. They gave up their weapons, and Kenric delivered his two hawks to the falconer. So when the warden had offered them all drink and food, he asked Sir Piers de Currie how it was that Earl Hamish of Bute had not accompanied him.

"Alas! he is dead," said the knight, telling of the treachery of Roderic.

"Woe, woe!" cried the old warden with tears in his eyes. "But this is surely the saddest thing that could have befallen, and a sorry blow for our country. And this is his son, eh? By the rood, a well-favoured youth, and a strong. Heaven grant that he prove as good and leal a man as his father before him!" and he rested his hand on Kenric's shoulder.

"And now, what of his Majesty the King?" asked Sir Piers.

"He comes from Stirling even now," said the warden, "and will be here at sunset. But 'tis a wearing ride from Stirling to Dumbarton, Sir Piers, and it may be you will not have audience with his Majesty ere morning. So bring in your shipmen, my lord of Bute, for methinks there will be rain tonight, and a cosy chamber in the castle were better lodging than an open boat. Doubtless, too, our own men-at-arms will welcome your retainers for the story they have to tell of this sad happening in Bute."

Accordingly the crew of Kenric's ship were brought within the castle, and with the men of Dumbarton and the bodyguard of the king they formed a merry company in the guardroom, while Kenric and his two companions remained as guests of the lord warden.

At the moment when the sun was sinking in the golden west, the King of Scotland arrived, accompanied by Queen Margaret and their attendants; but, as the warden had said, there could be no audience that night.

CHAPTER XVI. KENRIC BEFORE KING ALEXANDER.

Before a bright fire in the great audience chamber of Dumbarton Castle sat King Alexander the Third. By his side stood two youthful pages, one a lad of sixteen or so, whose delicate complexion and habit of dress proclaimed him to be English; the other a lad of perhaps the same age, whose clear blue eyes, flaxen hair, and ruddy cheeks betokened northern blood. Sitting apart were the King's justiciary and the sheriff of Dumbarton. At the far end of the hall at either side of the portal stood two Highlanders, armed with drawn swords.

The king, now at the age of three-and-twenty, was dressed in a long robe of brown velvet, trimmed with fur. He wore a heavy chain of gold about his neck, with the device of the thistle resting on his jerkin of purple silk. The jewelled haft of a dagger was seen

in his belt of crimson leather, and a long sword hung at his left side. His long thin legs were clothed in tight-fitting hose, and his feet — which were, perhaps, over large — were furnished with warm slippers lined with fur. He sat with his legs stretched out before him, and with his hands clasped behind his head.

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Presently he yawned, stretched his arms aloft, and stood up, walking to and fro about the apartment with his thumbs stuck in his belt. In person he was majestic, and although his figure was too tall and his bones over-large and ill-covered, yet his limbs were well formed, and he bore himself gracefully. His countenance was handsome, and it beamed with a manly and sweet expression, which corresponded with the sincerity of his character.

Pausing abruptly in his pacing, he addressed the English page.

"We will now see this young lord of Bute," he said. "Go, Edwin, and bid him enter, and with him our friend Sir Piers de Currie."

Edwin went out. His companion of the flaxen hair fixed his blue eyes upon the doorway, nervously expectant.

"Ah, my young Harald," said the King in Gaelic. "So, then, you heard the name of Bute, eh? Are you already weary of courtly life that you so prick up your ears at the name of an island?"

The youth blushed and looked ashamed, but still furtively watched the door as it was reopened to admit Earl Kenric. Sir Piers de Currie entering with him, remained within the doorway until the king should be ready to receive him.

Kenric was attired in the same fashion as on the day of his throning, but that he now wore no covering upon his head. He advanced towards the king, and prostrated himself humbly before him.

"God be your guard, my lord the king," he murmured in that pure English that his mother had taught him, and raising himself on one knee he took King Alexander's hand in his own and pressed it to his lips.

"I, your Majesty's humble vassal of Bute," he continued, "Kenric by name, and son of your Majesty's loyal subject, the late Earl Hamish, do now come to pay your Majesty dutiful homage for the lands I hold of the Scottish crown; and on your royal hand I swear to maintain fidelity to your Majesty as my liege lord and sovereign, and not to enter into any league with the enemies of Scotland, saving only in the case of unjust oppression. In token of my loyalty I agree, as the old custom of my fathers hath ordained, to deliver once every year at the castle of Dumbarton — as I have this day delivered — two well-trained gerfalcons, and — and —"

Kenric faltered, for he heard the rustling of a woman's dress very near him. The young queen had entered.

“Enough,” said the king. “And say, now, how does your sweet mother, the Lady Adela, and how bears she her grief at the sad loss that hath befallen her? The lord warden of this castle hath already acquainted us of the treachery of the man Roderic.”

“So please you, sire, she is now passing well recovered, and bears her sorrows most nobly,” said Kenric.

“And now,” said the King, “how happens it that Roderic of Gigha was allowed to leave your island alive? Had such a crime as his been committed within the realms of Scotland it is not thus that the criminal would have escaped.”

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"He was duly tried for his ill deeds, your Majesty," said Kenric, glancing aside at the queen. "He claimed wager of combat with my brother, whom, alas! he overcame and slew in fair fight. Our steward, Sir Oscar Redmain, finding him guilty, nevertheless passed sentence of outlawry upon him — a sentence which I crave you Majesty to ratify."

"That have we already done," said the King; "and should this villain again set foot in Scotland, or in any one of the Western Isles, ere his term of outlawry be duly passed, we shall hold no man guilty who puts him to the sword — nay, we shall reward him well. As to the lands of Gigha they are now forfeit, and the lordship over them, my young Earl Kenric, shall henceforth be yours."

Then the King drawing his sword touched Kenric on his broad back, saying:

"Earl Kenric, in right of your parentage and in virtue of the future service which we shall expect of you, we now pronounce you the rightful lord over the isles of Bute and Gigha, with the title of knight of the most ancient order of the Thistle."

Sheathing his sword the king then greeted his queen and presented Kenric to her. This honour so embarrassed the youth that when her Majesty asked him questions concerning his mother he could scarcely utter a word, but stuttered woefully.

Daughter of Henry the Third of England, and sister of Prince Edward — who afterwards gave such trouble to the realm of Scotland — Queen Margaret was at this time but one-and-twenty years of age. She was bright eyed and well featured, with a clear fresh complexion, and her every movement was of stately grace. She smiled upon Kenric with her sweet rosy lips, and bade him sit near her and tell her how his mother, accustomed to the life of the English court, contrived to live happily in so wild and dull a place as the little island of Bute. But Kenric in replying noticed only the coronet of pearls that the queen wore in her glossy hair, the surpassing whiteness of her neck and hands, and the rich splendour of her purple velvet gown.

Meanwhile the king had received Sir Piers de Currie.

"This young lord of Bute pleases us well, Ranza," said King Alexander, addressing the knight by the name of his castle; "and we doubt not that he will prove even as stalwart an adherent as his father, though, indeed, we had been better pleased had he been somewhat older. Take him under your care, Ranza, so that he may acquire some of your own skill at arms."

"Methinks, sire," said Sir Piers, "that there is little need of that, for since the death of Alpin, the lad's brother, there is none whom I could teach less to than young Kenric. A little more weight and strength, it may be, might serve him well. God alone can give him those. But of skill he requires no more than myself."

“Such praise from you is a recommendation that any man in Scotland might be proud of, Sir Piers,” said the King. “But there is one thing more. Know you if the lad speaks the tongue of these Norse varlets of the isles?”

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"Not speaking it myself, your Majesty, I am but a poor one to question on that matter."

The King then called Kenric to his side, and bade the young page Harald address him in his native tongue. At this the flaxen-haired lad leapt towards Kenric with glistening eyes.

"My good friend," said he in Norse, "be not alarmed at what I shall say. The King knows not a word of our tongue. Tell me, is it to set me free that you come hither? Do you come from my father?"

"Your father?" said Kenric. "I know not who your father may be. Methinks you make some strange mistake!"

"Alas!" said the lad, crestfallen, "then am I the most unhappy youth that ever lived! But stay; you come from Bute. I heard the King say so. You have come in your ship. I saw when you entered this room that you were an islander. My friend, I implore you to rescue me from the hands of these Scots. Take me away from this land, for I am well-nigh dying to breathe once more the free air of my island home, and to rove again upon the wide ocean. Say, will you help me to escape?"

"What!" exclaimed Kenric, "even in his Majesty's presence you ask me to do such a thing? By the rood, but you are passing bold!"

"Enough," said King Alexander, smiling as he signed to the page to retire.

Then he drew Sir Piers and Kenric nearer to him.

"The death of Hamish of Bute," said he, "is a sore calamity. We could ill spare him. But as concerning the matter of the Western Isles, the time has come for speedy action, and we must look to you, Sir Piers, and to you, Earl Kenric, for the help that we now need. We are about to despatch an expedition to the outer islands, and it may be that the mission will not be fulfilled without the spilling of blood. It is, therefore, necessary that you should gather together a goodly number of brave men and as many ships as may be available. With these you shall repair to Jura, Islay, Colonsay, Mull, and, indeed, all the isles that lie south of Morven; and there gather what knowledge may be gained touching the power held by Hakon of Norway in these districts. My lord of Ross will in like manner visit the more northern isles. You shall not want for help, for we will presently send over to Bute some two or three ships from Galloway and Cowall. As to the rest, we leave it in your hands, Ranza, who so well understand the situation. Should you, by forcibly invading the islands of the disaffected kings, succeed in conquering them, so much the more to your credit. All we ask is that you draw not the sword ere you have done all that is possible by the persuasions of the tongue."

Sir Piers bowed and exchanged glances with Kenric.

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"Fortunately for our plans," continued the King, "Roderic of Gigha is now out of our way. He held one of the smallest of the islands, but he was assuredly the greatest rascal in them all. Had it been otherwise we should have hesitated to authorize this bold attempt. But there are many of the island kings who may be very easily won over from their fickle allegiance to the crown of Norway, while many have already given us hostages for their loyal behaviour. Of these last is Earl John of Islay — one of the most powerful of the island chiefs. We claimed a hostage from him, and he sent his son Harald — the youth who has but now been speaking with you, my lord of Bute. Alas! the lad is a sorry scamp, and we can do naught with him. He is ever trying to escape, for he has the heart and spirit of a viking, and naught will please him but to be roving the seas. Now his father has of late shown a disposition to abandon all thoughts of King Hakon. He has duly delivered tribute to us. We would, therefore, have you visit him early, taking the lad with you, and on his solemnly engaging to maintain his faithful allegiance to Scotland you will permit his son to land."

"Then this young viking returns with us, your Majesty?" said Kenric.

"Even so," said the King.

At this point the lord warden of the castle entered the chamber and begged the King to repair to the banqueting hall, where the morning meal was now ready. So the King signed to Sir Piers and Kenric to follow him.

"So please you, sire," said Kenric, "we have with us a young man of Bute, one Allan Redmain, who, if I might be so bold as say so, would be passing well pleased could he have the honour of kissing your Majesty's hand."

"Bid the youth come in to breakfast with us," said Alexander.

And Kenric went out to search for Allan, who had begun to fear that he would after all miss even a sight of the King.

"Who is this Redmain?" asked Alexander of Sir Piers de Currie.

And at that the knight told of how Allan had dived into the linn of the White Lady falls to save Earl Kenric's life, and the King, who admired bravery in whatsoever form it was to be found, greeted Allan so kindly that the lad remembered that proud occasion all the rest of his days.

At noontide the men of Bute were again on board their galley, and when Kenric and his companions, together with young Harald of Islay, had come down from the high rock of the castle, the long oars were set in motion and the gallant ship swept down the Clyde, making the bay of Rothesay before nightfall.

CHAPTER XVII. HOW ALLAN REDMAIN KEPT WATCH.

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Sir Piers de Currie remained that night in the castle of Rothesay, discussing with Earl Kenric their plans for the coming expedition to the island kings. But Allan Redmain had to bethink himself of his unwilling task of acting as watchdog on the lonely farmstead of Scalpsie, for the judgment passed upon him in lawful assize was one which he dared not attempt to evade. To Scalpsie, therefore, he wended his steps without even going homeward to Kilmory to doff the fine attire which he had assumed for the occasion of his presentation to King Alexander, and there, drawing his plaid over his shoulders, he paced to and fro in the dark night — from the sheepfold to the steadings and from the steadings back to the sheepfold.

Weary work it was in sooth, and much did he deplore the laws that made it binding upon one of gentle blood to thus demean himself. He listened to the mournful sound of the waves on the shore, broken sometimes by the bleating of a restless sheep in the fold. Soon he began to feel his eyelids getting very heavy, and he sought about for a soft bed of heather to lie down upon for a while. As he was about to curl himself up — trusting that if any night-prowling beast should come to play havoc among the farm stock the noise of the sheep and goats would surely awaken him — he heard footsteps approaching.

“So, my young watchdog,” said the voice of the farmer Blair, “you have bethought yourself of your charge at last, eh? Well is it for you that you have not neglected my sheep this night as you did last. No more shall you send that sleepy-headed lad Lulach to be your proxy, for his sleeping cost me the life of one of my best ewe lambs. So look you well to your charge now. Here is a cake of bread to keep you from hunger, and a flagon of good posset to keep you warm — ’tis your nightly allowance. And if it so be that you get drowsy, why, sing yourself a song as do the shipmen in their night watches. But mind you this, young Kilmory, that for every beast I lose through the slaying of my dog, your father, Sir Oscar Redmain, shall pay me another of equal value.”

“Look you, David Blair,” said Allan warmly, “it is not thus that I will be your watchdog for many nights. The task, I well know, is but a lawful judgment upon me for my offence, but you have no manner of right to say that I shall send no proxy. If it please me to send Lulach, then the lad shall come, and I will pay him for his work. But to come here myself as often as you please, that I shall not do.”

“If Lulach lose me my sheep he cannot return full value for them,” said Blair, bethinking himself of his own interests, “whereas if they be lost by your unwatchfulness, then can I duly claim my own from your father.”

“Why did you refuse the better dog that my father offered you in place of the one I slew?” asked Allan.

“Because,” said the husbandman with simple pride, “it pleases me better to know that my homestead is nightly watched by a brave and gallant man-at-arms, who, I trust, will permit no marauding Norsemen or thieving wolf to come near me while I lie sleeping.”

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And so saying he turned away.

“A murrain on you and your cattle,” growled Allan.

And then he began to pace his rounds, leaving the cake of bread and the flagon of posset by the gate of the sheepfold.

Not long had he been thus engaged when the heavy dew made him feel cold, and he took a good drink of the posset. This mixture of strong wine and curdled milk made him strangely sleepy, whereupon, defying the law and David Blair together, he rolled himself up in his plaid and lay down upon the heather, to think of King Alexander and Queen Margaret and of battling Norsemen. The sound of the waves breaking upon the beach, and the sighing of the night wind among the neighbouring fir trees, soon lulled him into a heavy sleep.

It might be that he had slept full four hours when, feeling something cold against his cheek, he wakened with a start and sprang to his feet. There was a sharp yelp as of a frightened dog, and he heard the movement of footsteps upon the heather. Then the footsteps stopped and he saw the staring eyes of a wolf glaring at him through the black darkness.

Grasping his sword, Allan bounded off in pursuit. The wolf trotted away at an easy pace towards the woodland. Then as Allan approached nearer, off again it sped, leading him deep into a quiet dingle to the east of Loch Quien. But at each time the animal paused Allan came nearer and nearer than before, until at last it seemed that he had come within striking distance of the brute. He had not his bow with him, or he might have made short work of the wolf. But he did not shrink from a close encounter.

As he heard the low snarling growl before him he raised his weapon, swinging it round to strike. Lightly the wolf sprang aside and the sword blade whizzed through the air, striking nothing. And ere Allan, expecting to find the animal lying dead at his feet, could well understand how he had missed his aim, the wolf had bounded off and was lost in the darkness.

Then Allan rubbed his drowsy eyes and questioned if he had not been dreaming. But suddenly from behind him there came through the still air a strange, weird, human voice that startled him more than the sight of any wild animal might have done.

“Allan Redmain,” it said hurriedly, “is this you?”

“Holy Virgin!” exclaimed Allan, turning round, “who spoke?”

And against the darkness of the tree trunks he again saw two shining eyes, on a level with his own, and scarce a couple of yards’ distance away from him.

Now, whether it was that those eyes but reflected the wan light of dawn that was breaking above the eastern hills, or that they did indeed shine red and green by turns as did the eyes of the wolf, may not be told. But Allan shrank back at sight of them with a gruesome fear at his heart.

“Hush, hush!” said the voice in a whisper that was scarcely louder than the sighing of the wind among the trees. “It is I, Aasta of Kilmory.”

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"Saint Columba help me!" said Allan. "Aasta? Aasta the wolf maiden? What trick is this you have played me? It is you, then, and no wolf that I have been following? And I had nearly slain you!"

"Listen, Allan Redmain; and, I beg you, make no noise," said Aasta, drawing nearer. "Listen if you hear not footsteps on the moor yonder."

Allan held in his breath for a moment, and in the stillness he heard indeed the pat, pat of a pair of feet hurrying away.

"Well," he said, "I do in truth hear footsteps. But what of that? 'Tis but the tread of some wild boar or prowling wolf."

"Not so," said Aasta; "they are the footsteps of the fair-haired youth who came with you in Earl Kenric's ship from Dumbarton."

"Harald of Islay! He?"

"Even so," said Aasta. "Two hours ago he escaped by stealth from the castle of Rothesay. He is now seeking the means of flying from the island. I know not wherefore he was brought to Bute; but the manner of his escaping and his care to avoid being seen were such that I followed him. I had gone to Rothesay to learn of your return, and to get news for Elspeth. Setting out for Kilmory I saw this youth steal out by the west postern, cloaked and armed. Tarry not here; for if it be that the youth had no right to leave the castle, then he must even be forcibly taken back."

"Even so, Aasta," said Allan, "and much do I commend you for your timely warning of the lad's escape. Though how by your witchery you brought me hither I cannot well understand."

"Seek not to learn, then," returned Aasta, leading him forth upon the open land; "but come ere it be too late to arrest this fugitive."

With no further words the fair maiden led him southward towards the sea cliffs, skipping over the streamlets that crossed their path, and passing over wide stretches of barren moorland. And down into every creek and bay she turned her searching eyes. Suddenly she halted and drew back a few paces, then crouched upon the ground, bidding Allan do likewise. Thus she crept to the brink of the cliff that stands frowning above the bay of Stravannan.

The light of dawn had by this time chased away the shadows of night, and headlands and rocks stood out clear against the gray sky. Aasta pointed down to the stony beach below. The tide was at half flood, and lying above the water's edge was a small fishing boat. Young Harald of Islay had grasped the boat's gunwale and was pulling and

tugging with all his strength. A few more pulls and the little craft would be launched. Every effort he made brought it a foot nearer the water.

“Ah, had I but my bow and a good straight arrow!” whispered Allan, crouching down at Aasta’s side.

“Hush! Give me your plaid,” said she. “Let him not see you; but go you down by the farther side of the bay while I take this nearer path. When you hear me cry as the peewit cries, run as quickly as may be towards the boat. Methinks by his fair hair that the lad should be of the Norsemen. Is that so?”

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Throwing the plaid about her head and shoulders, Aasta went downward by the craggy rocks and was soon upon the beach. The boat was already half in the water. The young Norseman turned with a startled look at hearing footsteps on the shingle. Aasta walked towards him slowly, bending down now and again as though she were gathering shellfish. Seeing that it was only, as he supposed, some harmless fisherwoman, Harald took courage and waited.

"You are abroad betimes, my young master," said she, speaking in the Norse. "And methinks you have work that ill befits such white hands and comely apparel as yours. Let me, I pray you, help you to launch your boat."

"Your words, fair damsel," said the youth as he regarded her in wondering surprise, "surely betoken that you are not of the people of this land."

"And yours, my master, that you are equally foreign to these shores. But tell me, sir, where go you in your boat?"

"I go hence to Islay," said he, "if so be I may without help adventure so far."

"Methinks," said Aasta, "that it were at least wise in you to have the help of a pair of oars."

"There is a pair lying at the foot of the cliff there," said the youth, pointing up the beach.

"Go, then, and bring them," said she, "while I launch your boat; and it may be that, if you are bound for Islay, I will, if it so please you, accompany you."

"Sweet damsel," said he, "surely some strange good fortune hath sent you to my aid!" and at that he ran up the beach to the place where the fishermen had left their oars.

As he went the cry of a peewit rose in the morning air

"Pee-wit, pee-weet-weet!"

In a few moments Allan Redmain was at Aasta's side. She bade him stand behind her. Harald the hostage, not seeing him, walked back towards the boat bearing the two oars over his shoulder. Then suddenly Allan confronted him.

"So, my brave viking, you would escape, eh?" he said, smiling at the lad's discomfiture.

Harald frowning and with flashing eyes laid the oars across the boat's thwarts, and grasping the gunwale tried to launch her. Aasta, making pretence to help him, pulled the opposite way and the boat did not move. Then seeing that he was intercepted the lad promptly whipped out his dirk and sprang towards Allan with his weapon raised.

Allan stepped aside, yet did not attempt to unsheathe his sword. Harald followed upon him, but in an instant Aasta had leapt behind him and flung her plaid in a loop over his head. With a vigorous tug at the two ends of the garment she pulled him over and he fell upon his back. Allan seized the dirk that dropped from the lad's hand and threw it aside. Grasping Harald's two wrists he then turned him over, planting his knee upon his back.

"Now, Aasta," said Allan calmly, "methinks we had best secure his arms with my plaid. Give me an end of it that we may twist it; so. Now lace it well under his arms while I bring it round his legs. There; he will not readily draw himself out of that noose. I will leave him in your care until I launch Ronald Gray's boat."

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Then, as Allan pushed the little craft into the water, Aasta bent by the young Norseman's side, running her fingers through his flaxen hair.

"So bold a spirit," said she, "is not oft inclosed in so fair a head. But ah, my young master, beware how you let that spirit escape. 'Twill do you no manner of good to have thus avoided the castle of Rothesay, for there in that castle are dungeons deeper than Loch Ascog, and colder than the snowy peak of Goatfell."

"Oh, deceitful woman that you are!" muttered the youth, "to tell me that you were not of the people of this land. Had it not been for you I might even now have been afloat!"

"Had it not been for me," said Aasta, "you would even now have been dead, for if I had let you use your dirk as you intended, Allan Redmain, whose prisoner you now are, would certainly have slain you."

"That would I," said Allan, now bending down and taking hold of the lad in his strong arms and carrying him to the boat.

"'Tis a long pull round to Rothesay Bay," said Aasta, "and it may be that you will yet have trouble with your charge. Let me go with you."

Allan, standing knee deep in the water, held out his hand and helped her into the boat. Then as she sat down he pushed off and sprang on board, taking the oars.

Some four hours afterwards the boat rounded Bogany Point and entered the bay of Rothesay. By this time many of the men of the castle, led by Kenric and Sir Piers de Currie, were scouring the island in search of the fugitive Harald, and when the boat touched at the little pier it was as though it were one of the fishing craft returning after a night at sea. Allan carried his prisoner up to the castle gates, followed by a crowd of wondering children, and meeting the Lady Adela in the hail he told her how he had passed his first night as watchdog over at Scalpsie.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE EXPEDITION TO THE ISLAND KINGS.

It was on a day in the month of August, 1262, that the armament of twelve gallant ships of war, under Sir Piers de Currie and Earl Kenric of Bute, entered the sound of Kilbrannan on their voyage to the outer isles. There had passed six weeks of busy preparation, for there were stores to be got ready and put on board, small boats to be made trim, timbers to be caulked, sails to be mended, many hundreds of arrows to be cut, pointed, and feathered, and longbows to be strung, swords and battle-axes to be forged and sharpened, and bucklers to be stretched. And now, with all these matters duly completed, the twelve vessels, with their sails brailed up to the yards, and their

long oars moving with regular stride, crept down the channel between Kintyre and Arran. Leading them was the great Dragon — the same that had sailed to Dumbarton — commanded by Earl Kenric himself, who stood on the poop clothed in armour of iron network and with the sword of Somerled at his side, and wearing his shining brass helm crested with gold wings.

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The lion banner of Scotland, woven in silk, fluttered at his bark's masthead. In his ship's waist, toiling at the heavy oars, were two score of well-trained retainers, with a reserve of yet another two score and ten of his sturdy islanders crowded at the prow.

Side by side with the Dragon was the Eagle, the galley of Sir Piers de Currie, having on board young Harald the hostage; and in their wake sailed two other ships of Arran and four of Bute, one of Dunoon, and three of Galloway, and they were the stoutest and tallest ships that had ever sailed in those deep blue waters.

On the *Kraken* of Rothesay was Allan Redmain. Right proud was he of his command, for even until the fifth week he had dreaded that he might not be of this expedition by reason of his being bound as watcher of the farmstead of Scalpsie. Night by night, in starlight or rainstorm, he had duly fulfilled his unwilling charge, albeit he oftentimes slept through half the night, and it so befell that on each occasion that he had slept, on the next day thereafter the farmer claimed that he had lost yet another two or three of his ewe lambs, and Sir Oscar Redmain was perforce bound to make good the loss.

Now, as time went on this thing happened so often that Allan began to think strange thoughts, for never but on the first night of his watching had he seen aught of either wolf or fox. Seeking for a reason, he found that on those nights that he had slept it was then that he had drunk deepest of the crafty farmer's strong posset, and he was thereafter wary of that drink. One night, having thrown the posset away without tasting it, he made pretence of sleeping, and as he lay there on the heather and watched with one eye open, behold the wolf came and carried off two young goats.

Now it was not by any chance a four-legged wolf that did this thing. The marauder was indeed none other than the wily farmer himself, who carried the goats off to another place, there to keep them in secret, with the many lambs that he had in like manner stolen, until he might, just as secretly, take them over to Ayr market.

When Allan discovered the trick that had been played upon him he went straightway to Earl Kenric and told him of it.

"If this be so," said the young king, "then David Blair shall be severely punished, and you, Allan, shall be freed from this dog's work at the next assize. But methinks that long ere this you might have avoided this nightly watching. Know you not of that custom of old time which holds that an offender against the laws shall be assoiled, or set free from all penalty, on producing the heads of two wolves that he has slain? Now, why have you not brought me your wolves' heads?"

"Alas!" said Allan, "I fear me that until the winter time comes there is but one wolf in all Bute, and that is the werewolf Aasta the Fair. Would you that I should bring you that damsel's head, my lord?"

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"The saints forbid!" said Kenric. "But bide your time and you shall be set free, and the more speedily since I intend that you shall come with us on our journey to the isles."

Well, on that same day Earl Kenric went secretly over to the forest of Toward, in Cowall, with a few chosen men, and in the evening when Allan was setting forth for Scalpsie he found two great black wolves lying dead and bloody beside the granary of Kilmory Castle, and he cut off their heads and carried the same to Rothesay and delivered them to the king.

"Here, my lord, are the heads of two wolves," said he, "that were alive this morning and now are dead; and I cut off their heads with my own hands. For this I claim my freedom."

"Right so," said Kenric smiling. "You have well won your freedom, and so easily, that methinks it might even have been secured four weeks ago and more."

And now Allan Redmain was made master of the *Kraken* galley, with four score of skilful archers under him. And as the vessels sped down Kilbrannan Sound on this August morning he trod the deck with a proud firm step that made his long sword rattle in its sheath, and with his young heart beating quicker in anticipation of the battles that were before him.

By midnight the ships, with all sails set and oars inboard, were abreast of the Mull of Kintyre, and at sunrise the next morning, beating due north the voyagers sighted the little isle of Cara, with the higher land of the larger isle of Gigha rising boldly behind it.

Kenric brought his galley to the shoreward of her consorts, so that leaning over the bulwarks he might see this land of Gigha that was now his own. The coast was wild and barren, with black jagged rocks rising high out of a bed of foaming breakers, but sloping off from the steep headlands into green upland pastures, striped with glistening streams. Through a long rock tunnel that pierced the cliffs he could see the light of the morning sun rays, and the great Atlantic rollers, breaking in the midst of this tunnel, shot up in a cloud of spray through two open shafts and roared with thunderous noise.

At the middle of the island, which is but six miles in length, was the hill of Dunchifil, crowned with a strong fortress.

The ships, sailing up the western shores, came at last into the harbourage of a calm landlocked bay, whose waters were so crystal clear that one might see the pebbles and sea urchins at the bottom, many fathoms deep. So, when the anchors were all down a longboat was launched from the Dragon, and Kenric, with Sir Piers, Allan Redmain, and one William MacAlpin, a cousin to the late Earl Hamish, were rowed ashore.

From a castle at the head of the bay there came down an armed Norseman, followed by a dozen swordsmen.

“Whose are these ships?” said he with a loud voice, “and what men are ye who have brought them hither?”

“Methinks our banner might tell you that they are the ships of his Majesty of Scots,” said Kenric stepping forward. “As to myself, since you know me not, my name is Kenric, the son of Hamish. I am the king of Gigha, and so please you I am come to lay claim to my castles and lands.”

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At this the Norseman bowed his head.

"God give you joy of them, my lord," said he, and then he drew his sword and delivered it to his master. "Little care I what king I serve so long as I have food and drink, with God's good gift of peace. And since our Earl Roderic went hence to Bute we have daily expected some such happening as this. I trust, my lord, you will find that I, Olaf Grimm, have in the meantime taken good care of your lands and subjects."

Then Kenric and his companions went up to the castle and to the fortress upon the heights, to take formal possession of his little kingdom and to receive the homage of his people.

"And now," said he to Olaf Grimm, "if there be any in Gigha who have wrongs to redress or complaint to make to me, let them be called."

But Olaf told him that there were none, for, said he, "since Earl Roderic has been gone we have known naught but happiness and peace."

"Long may that peace abide," said Kenric. "And now do I leave my kinsman, William MacAlpin, as my chosen steward and governor over my lands and as the defender of my people."

Kenric then went on board Sir Piers de Currie's ship, taking a fisherman of Gigha to act as pilot, and they left the rest of their barks at anchor in the quiet bay under the care of Allan Redmain.

The Eagle galley then unattended made sail across the wide channel westward towards Islay, whose high hills could already be seen like blue mists upon the far-off sea line.

"Now, my young valiant," said Sir Piers to Harald the hostage, who sat upon the after deck looking wistfully over the tumbling waters, "know you the colour of your native hills?"

"Well indeed do I know that," said the lad, "and by your course I now judge that you are indeed taking me home, for which I am most truly thankful. My sojourn in your country has been little to my taste. Well will it be for the lord of Bute, ay, and for his Majesty of Scots also, if I take not a bitter revenge for all that I have suffered at their hands. But, prithee, turn your ship's head yet more to the southward to catch the current of Loch Andail, and so gain a few minutes' time. St. Olaf, how my heart beats at sight of those hills! Ah, how the moments lag! speed on, speed on!"

"Patience, patience, Harald, you are not landed yet," said the knight. "And should your good father not choose to agree to our terms, then back you go to Scotland as speedily as we came."

“Let me but see my father and he will agree,” said Harald.

“Let your father agree and he will see you,” returned Sir Piers.

“Look you,” said the lad with flashing eyes, “if you put me not upon the shores of Islay in two hours’ time, then by the soul of St. Olaf I will slay every man in your ship. As to the lord of Bute, I will haul him up by a rope’s end to your masthead!”

“So ho!” said Kenric, “methinks, Sir Piers, that this little dog might now have a chain about his pretty neck. What say you?”

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Sir Piers then ordered one of his men to take the lad below and keep strict guard over him.

Late that afternoon the galley entered the beautiful Loch Andail and sailed in between ranges of fertile hills, whose lower slopes were gold with ripening oats and waving barley fields. Islay was at that time one of the most wealthy and prosperous of the Western Isles, thickly populated, and famous over all Scotland for the rich produce of its looms and the beauty of its native pottery wares. It was important to Alexander that he should win over the complete and undivided adherence of the powerful ruler of so wealthy a country, and Sir Piers de Currie well understood the gravity of his mission.

The anchor was dropped in the middle of the loch where it widens above Bowmore. Sir Piers and Kenric, attended by six armed men, were taken ashore. A tall husbandman with a long golden beard and sea-blue eyes stood upon the rocks where they landed, looking out at their great ship from under his wide flapping hat.

"Say, my good man," said Sir Piers, addressing him, "say if we may hope to find my lord the Earl John in his castle of Bowmore?"

"That," said the man smiling as he swung his sickle from side to side, "must needs depend upon whether I enter that castle before you or behind you. But doubtless John of Islay will be right well pleased to give you entertainment this night, for 'tis long since he had news from Scotland, whence, if I mistake not, you are now come. How fares our sovereign lord the King — his Majesty Alexander?"

"Passing well," said Sir Piers, "for 'tis but a few weeks past that I had speech with him at Dumbarton."

"Ah, then you heard also of my son — my dear son Harald?" cried Earl John eagerly. "The saints grant that you bring me no ill news of him! But come, I beg you, for 'tis ill mannered in me thus to question you ere you have broken bread."

Then the lord of Islay led his visitors to his castle, and there they enjoyed a right lordly repast in the banqueting hall. And when the feast was over Sir Piers de Currie, as ambassador from the King of Scots, claimed the homage of Earl John, who solemnly swore upon his sword and by the soul of his Majesty the King that he would be true to his fealty to Scotland and abjure all allegiance to Hakon of Norway.

"My lord," said Sir Piers, "now that you have given us this assurance of your faithfulness, it is my pleasure to tell you that your son is on board our ship and will be at once restored to you. For these are his Majesty's instructions."

In another hour young Harald the hostage was released from the care of the guards who stood over him. But as the lad left the ship he shook his closed fist at Kenric and

swore an oath of vengeance upon him and upon all the men of Scotland whom he should ever afterwards meet.

Kenric thought little of this threat, but it was not long ere the hotheaded young viking put it into execution.

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Now so easily had Sir Piers de Currie fared at Islay, and so much did he pride himself upon the success of his first negotiation, that he thought surely he would meet with equal favour in the other islands. Returning to Gigha he ordered a division of his forces. Bidding Kenric proceed with a squadron of six ships to Colonsay, Coll, and Tiree, he took under his own command the six other galleys, namely, three of Arran, one of Dunoon, one of Galloway, and one of Bute, the last being the *Kraken*, of which Allan Redmain was the master.

With these six galleys Sir Piers, leaving Gigha in advance of Kenric, sailed for the isles that lie off the mainland of Argyll and Lorne, agreeing to rejoin Kenric in three weeks' time in the sound of Iona.

The first island Sir Piers went to after leaving Gigha was the isle of Jura. But there he soon found that Erland the Old was not so easily to be won over as his neighbour of Islay, for he had already renounced all allegiance to Scotland and was in open league with the King of Norway. So when he saw the six ships of the Clyde sailing along his rugged coasts he mustered all his retainers by the summons of the fiery cross and gave fight. There was a vigorous battle in the sound of Jura, with much slaughter on either side. The ship of Dunoon was captured by the men of Jura, and all on board were brutally slain.

Then Sir Piers de Currie and Allan Redmain with their remaining galleys sailed yet farther up the strait and landed on the north of Jura and sacked many villages till the burns ran red with blood. The men of Galloway fought as wild wolves, and much ado had their leader to stop them from breaking into the monastery and chapels and plundering them of the treasures that were therein stored.

In the midst of this bloody work Erland the Old again appeared with his army of islanders from the south, and at last drove off the invaders, capturing the galley of Galloway and dealing with her crew as the gallant men of Dunoon had already been dealt with.

Thus repulsed, Sir Piers drew off and crossed to the mainland, taking shelter in the loch of Crinan. The good master of Duntroon Castle, who was for the Scots, gave succour to the wounded men, and supplied reinforcements to the number of forty retainers.

After five days the four ships sailed off again, taking possession in the name of the Scots king of the isles of Scarba, Luing, Seil, Kerrera, and Lismore, besieging many castles and imposing oaths of fealty upon their lords, and lastly to the great isle of Mull, whose king was a true Scot and most friendly disposed.

By this time the three weeks were passed, and they sailed round the south of Mull and anchored in the offing between Staffa and Iona. So anchored, they waited for Kenric's squadron. But the days went by; the month of August passed into September, and

Kenric did not appear. A watch was kept both night and day, yet the six ships that were so anxiously expected came not to the appointed place.

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CHAPTER XIX. STORMING AN ISLAND STRONGHOLD.

One morning very early Allan Redmain was on watch. He had had his fill of fighting, and not few were the wounds he had received of both arrow and spear. Wrapped in his warm plaid, he paced the deck. The seagulls flew about the masthead and dipped into the blue water. The mountains of Mull were shrouded in white mist. Suddenly Allan paused his walk and looked northward towards the little isle of Staffa. On the sea line he saw what at first he took to be the Treshnish Islands; but soon these faint shadows loomed more distinct through the morning mist and took the shape of ships' sails. Six ships he counted.

"Kenric is safe!" he sighed.

Then ordering one of his small boats to be lowered, he went to tell the good news to Sir Piers on his galley hard by. But as together they looked across the sea they counted yet another ship.

"You mistake, Allan," said Sir Piers. "These are not Kenric's ships at all, but the galleys of my lord of Ross, who has, as you know, been upon an expedition similar to our own — to Skye and Lewis."

"Alas!" said Allan. "Then, where can Kenric be?"

"Where indeed?" sighed Sir Piers.

At this moment one of the men of Arran touched his master's arm.

"There is a fishing coracle coming alongside of us, my master," said he, "with two fishermen in her."

Sir Piers and Allan crossed the deck and saw a small boat bearing towards them, rowed by a brawny western islander.

"Saint Columba protect us!" cried Allan. "Look but at that man sitting in the stern! 'Tis none other than Duncan Graham of Rothesay, my lord Kenric's henchman. Whence comes he? and where is his master?"

"Duncan! Duncan!" he called.

Duncan raised his eyes. His face was haggard and wan. His cheeks were thin, his clothes torn and bloodstained.

Allan threw down a rope's end, and the boat was drawn alongside. Scarcely able to move his gaunt limbs, Duncan clambered up the galley's side and fell upon the deck, moaning. From under his ragged plaid he drew a formidable sword and held it towards Allan without speaking a word.

"The Thirsty Sword!" cried Allan in dread surprise as he took the weapon. "Alas! Kenric is most surely dead!"

"Not so!" moaned Duncan, lolling out his tongue. "Ah, food, food!"

Then Sir Piers de Currie bent down, and with the help of Allan took up the giant form of Duncan, and carried him below into the cabin.

For two long hours the man lay without uttering a word. But the warm wine with which they fed him brought back something of his strength. He put his hand to his chest to show that he was wounded. Allan Redmain drew away the garments and revealed a gaping sword wound.

"No; not dead," moaned Duncan. "He yet lives. But oh, my masters, hasten to his aid, for he is even now a helpless prisoner in the dark dungeon of Breacacha Castle!"

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"A prisoner?" echoed Allan.

"Breacacha?" said Sir Piers. "Where is that castle? In what isle?"

"Over in Coll," said Duncan, pointing westward across the sea.

Then from the ships of the Earl of Ross came the loud call of a clarion horn. Sir Piers de Currie moved to go on deck.

"Stay, stay, Sir Piers," said Allan Redmain. "Ere You go, give me, I implore you, the liberty to take two of our ships across to Coll, that I may save my friend and master and rescue him from out his dungeon."

"Little need have you to ask that, Allan," said the knight. "Would that I might accompany you! But I am in the hands of my lord of Ross, whose orders, by the King's instructions, I am now subject to. But ere I resign my command, let my last directions be to you, Allan. Take two of our galleys, with what men you will. Rescue our dear young friend even if need be at the cost of your own life, and God be with you. Farewell!"

Allan Redmain had Duncan carried upon the *Kraken* galley, and, taking also the *Seahorse* of Arran, with a full company of men upon each, he set out to cross the twenty miles of sea that divide Iona from the island of Coll; while Sir Piers de Currie repaired on board the flagship of the Earl of Ross.

"And now, Duncan," said Allan, when his two vessels were well under way, "take, I beg you, a little more food —"

"No, no," said Duncan, bracing himself up. "I have already taken what will serve me till I tell you all that has befallen my young master. Not another bite passes my lips until I have seen him again in life. But, lest by chance my own life's breath ebb out too soon, let me direct you to this stronghold wherein the Earl Kenric lies lingering to his death in bitter hunger. Know, then, that the castle of Breacacha lies at the southeast of Coll. Could I have got within its strong walls, as you and your men-at-arms may now do, haply I might have saved him. But I alone am left of those who followed him ashore, and I could not reach him without help. The great God be thanked that I have at last found it."

Then Duncan, groaning, threw back his head and closed his eyes.

"Men of Bute," said Allan, returning to his shipmates, "yonder, in that isle that you see across the waters, our lord Kenric lies perishing of hunger in a castle dungeon. No more need I say to you, my brave comrades, for well do I know that there is no man of you who will think of rest until we have saved him. Speed you, my lads, work well your oars, and God grant that we be yet in time."

“Kenric! Kenric!” they cried with one voice as they fell to their oars, and so the ship sped on over the chopping waves, leaving the companion galley of Arran to follow in the wake.

“Now, Duncan, if so be you have the strength,” said Allan, going back to his cabin, “I would hear what you have yet to tell.”

Duncan raised himself on his elbow and began. His tale was told with feeble, faltering voice, and not until afterwards did Allan hear it in all its particulars.

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Kenric, with his squadron of six galleys, left the little isle of Gigha ere the galleys of Sir Piers de Currie were well out of sight. Through the fierce sound of Islay his good ships sailed as with spreading wings, and the next morning he sighted the isle of Oronsay. Taking the western coast, he crept up to the more northern isle of Colonsay, and stood off a little village that had a castle in its midst. Above the gates of this castle, that was called Dungallan, waved the white falcon banner of the old Norse vikings. On seeing it, Kenric hoisted the banner of the Scottish lion.

Now the position held at this time by both Erland of Jura and Sweyn of Colonsay — vassals both of Hakon of Norway — was shown in the conversation that was the prelude to the murder of the good Earl Hamish of Bute. Of the attitude held by these two island kings towards Scotland, Kenric, however, knew nothing, and though it may be that he was eager enough to meet Earl Sweyn the Silent in mortal combat, yet he did not forget the caution of King Alexander against drawing the sword ere the tongue had done its work. He was loth to show battle, while he was careful enough not to venture ashore unprepared for a warlike reception.

As Kenric was making ready to land he looked towards the shore, and there came down some fourscore of the men of Colonsay. Fair-haired sons of the North they were, all well armed and ready to resist the strangers with a shower of their swift arrows. Then Kenric knew that there was to be no chance of a peaceful parley, and he made no more ado but drew his galleys inshore, and bidding his men crouch down in the shelter of their bulwarks he assailed the islanders with such volleys of well-directed arrows that they soon began to retreat towards their stronghold, leaving several dead and wounded lying upon the beach.

It so chanced that the island was at that time but ill protected, for Earl Sweyn had gone on a roving cruise upon the seas, leaving a weakened garrison to defend his people. By what means the remaining islanders had so promptly prepared themselves for the arrival of the invaders Kenric did not pause to conjecture, but that they had been warned of his coming he could not doubt. Had he by chance caught sight of young Harald of Islay standing apart on the heights the matter had needed no deep questioning. For that young viking had lost no time in crossing over to Colonsay, and though the lord of the island was absent he nevertheless warned the garrison that Kenric of Bute, with a squadron of twelve galleys, was about to make a raid upon their island, and that it behoved them to make speedy preparations to resist him.

His landing being now possible, owing to the retreat of the defenders, Kenric ordered two score of men from each of his ships to take their arms and follow him ashore. With two hundred and forty men-at-arms he then landed. His own retainers of Bute formed in a compact body upon the strand, and led by himself and Duncan Graham they at once marched towards the castle. But John Dornoch's men of Galloway waited not to give order to their ranks, neither stayed they for the word of command from Kenric, but rushed in hot pursuit of the islanders through the little street of their village.

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Now the wild Scots of Galloway, whom Alexander had sent as a contribution to the forces, were as yet little known to Kenric, and he was not long in discovering that he might have done far better without them. They had joined the expedition with minds bent upon pillage and slaughter. They were by nature a people of wild and ferocious habits, a fierce and ungovernable set of men who fought half naked, and were wont to commit acts of untold cruelty upon the inhabitants of the countries they invaded. Also, as both Sir Piers de Currie and Kenric discovered to their cost, they were never content but in leading the van in battle.

Ere Kenric and his well-ordered men arrived at the castle the Gallwegians had already assailed the gate, and in despite of many arrows that fell about them from the towers and loopholes, they hammered with great clubs and iron battering bars, clamouring for blood. The gate soon gave way before the assault of their vigorous blows. Then the Gallwegians, with cries of triumph, rushed in upon the defending garrison, followed presently by Kenric and his retainers of Bute. A guard of some fifty men met them within the fallen gates and boldly defended their stronghold with swords and pikes. The men of Galloway leading, mowed them down and passed over their dead bodies, until, finding no further resistance, they proceeded to their work of plunder.

Kenric, leaving his men with Duncan, and calling but a dozen to follow him, ascended to the battlements and tore down the Norwegian flag. He searched about for Earl Sweyn, believing he was in hiding. But neither Sweyn nor his steward could he find, nor any living man who could tell him where the lord of Colonsay might be.

His men, ranked in order now without the gates, awaited him, and, returning, he led them in the direction of the beach. But as he passed through the little settlement of wooden huts a fearful scene presented itself. The men of Galloway whom he had left upon their two galleys, had boldly followed their countrymen ashore, led by their under-captain. While Kenric, who had himself not yet struck a blow, was within the castle, these wild men had fallen upon the village. They had burst open the doors of the cottages and ferociously slain the innocent people. Every threshold was bespattered with blood. Before Kenric had time to interfere, or even to realize what had taken place, many of the homes had been plundered and laid waste.

On a little knoll above the village a band of the Gallwegians had gathered in a crowd. As Kenric went towards them he heard screams of terror and of pain. With his buckler on his left arm, and in his hand the Thirsty Sword that had not yet been used, he led his men onward and forced his way into the crowd. Three women, who had been with others escaping to the hills, now lay slain upon the grass, with their slaughtered infants by their sides. A shock of horror overcame Kenric as he saw two burly Gallwegians in their wanton fury raise each a small child upon the point of his spear, and shake the spear until the child, pierced through the body, fell down to his hands.

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"Fiends and dogs!" cried Kenric grasping firmly his sword. "Cowards and brutes!" and wielding his weapon with a mighty swoop he brought it down once, twice, upon the miscreants' heads.

"Now!" he cried yet again as he stood with one foot upon the bleeding head of one of the men he had slain. "Now, you vile dogs! let another of you touch one of these innocent children that remain and my sword shall cleave his head in twain."

He looked to some twenty fear-stricken children who with their mothers stood in a group at his right side.

"Back to your ships, ye brutes!" he continued. "Back this instant!"

"Who, then, are you that you so dare to command my men?" exclaimed John Dornoch, their captain, as with dripping sword and menacing looks he stepped forward and confronted Kenric.

"What? And you, the captain of these men, would excuse this spilling of innocent blood — this massacre of women and children!" cried Kenric, flushing crimson with just fury. "Who bade you thus to take the lives of the helpless? I am your leader here. By the King's own appointment do I lead you. It is I who will be held accountable for this most wicked slaughter.

"And now, John Dornoch, I do command you to return to your galleys and take your band of ruffians with you."

"Men of Galloway!" cried Dornoch, "heed not the mawkish cries of this upstart stripling. Obey my bidding and spare not, but kill, kill!"

Then Kenric, hearing this, gripped with both hands his ponderous sword, looked round for a moment to see that his own faithful men were near to defend the children, and said with loud voice which all could hear:

"Dornoch of Galloway, those men shall not obey your inhuman commands. Come on! stripling or man, 'tis not such mean cowards as you whom I would fear. Come on, I say!"

Dornoch advanced with a mocking smile on his lips and raised his sword. The crowd drew back. He was full ten inches taller than Kenric of Bute, and the muscles of his broad bare chest were as the roots of a tree that rise above the ground; as the nether boughs of the fir tree were his strong and hairy arms. Little cause did he see to shrink from combat with the youth who thus challenged him.

Their weapons crossed and clashed. It seemed to Kenric that his sword urged him with a force that he could not disobey. He made a few quick passes, then with the full

strength in his arms and his supple body he smote his antagonist a terrible blow upon the head, cutting down even to the collarbone. Then Dornoch fell to the ground and moved no more.

The Gallwegians, seeing the fire that was in Kenric's eyes and marvelling at his skill and strength, shrank back amazed and cowed.

"Now let one of you fail to obey me and I will serve him as I have served your captain," cried Kenric with stern menace. "Back to your galleys with you this instant!"

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And the men slunk off, crestfallen and dismayed.

“Right well have you served that hound, my lord,” said Duncan, “for he was indeed a very brute. Fear not that his curs will now disobey you, and trust in our faithful men of Bute, who will give their lives ere any further wrong be done. And now methinks ’twere well that we hastened to the priory, for when we came into the crowd I heard some of these scoundrels speak of the plunder some of their band are seeking in that holy place.”

“Infamous dogs!” muttered Kenric. “Oh to think that I should be doomed to be the leader of men so wicked!”

Leading the way to the priory, which was to the south of the village, he found that even this sacred edifice had not escaped sacrilege. The priory grange had been sacked and pillaged. Two of the friars had been slain whilst defending the villagers who had taken refuge in the sanctuary, and when Kenric appeared at the head of his troops a band of the men of Galloway were in the act of setting the chapel in flames; a heap of straw was piled before the arched door. But just as the flints were being struck to make a light Duncan Graham fell upon the men, throwing them aside, and the building was saved.

Many hours did it occupy Kenric ere he could, even in a small way, appease the wrath of the much-injured islanders and restore to them their devastated homes. His men of Bute returned to their ships without so much as a sword wound.

Twelve of the Gallwegians had been slain and many wounded, but even the most unruly now bowed before the commands of the young lord of Bute, and went back in submission to their posts.

The isle of Colonsay had been taken; but, saving only at the moment of landing, there had been no fair fighting, and with such forces behind him, Kenric might have taken the ill-protected island without the drawing of a sword.

The wanton massacre of the women and children was a thing which no man of honour could excuse, and Kenric felt that he had rather have been the vanquished than the conqueror under such conditions. His grief for those who had fallen victims to the wild Gallwegians was only partly softened by the remembrance that he had at least saved their brethren from further inhumanity.

Having taken formal possession of the island and gathered his forces together, he went on board the ships of Galloway. There he severely rebuked the men for what they had done, and threatened them with punishment if any should again prove unruly. Then he picked out two score of those who had been faithful to their posts in remaining on board instead of rushing after their companions, and these he left, under trusty officers of his own, with one of the galleys, in charge of the island.

This proceeding, made in the interests of the people of Colonsay, was in some respects unwise, for by this means the most savage and ungovernable were now quartered aboard one ship. But Kenric made no doubt that with his own four galleys and their crews he would have no further trouble.

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So indeed it might have been. But in crossing with his five vessels over the stretch of sea between Colonsay and Tiree he encountered a strong gale from the southeast. The Gallwegians, being indifferent seamen, fell off to leeward and lost control of their galley. In the nighttime they were driven out into the Atlantic beyond Skerryvore. When the storm abated they drifted northward, landed on many islands in turn, playing great havoc amongst the children of the old vikings, and so disgracing their own country Scotland that the Norsemen of the Hebrides vowed vengeance upon all Scots wheresoever they might encounter them.

CHAPTER XX. ALONE WITH DEATH.

Kenric with his squadron, reduced now to four galleys, voyaged to the isle of Tiree — a distance of about fifty miles from Colonsay. There, without drawing arrow from sheath or sword from scabbard, he prevailed over the lord of that land to give him surety of his adherence to King Alexander, and a solemn declaration that he would remain true to his oaths. And then the barks departed for Coll.

Now young Harald of Islay having warned the people of Colonsay of the approach of the invaders, bade his men take him at once to the isle of Coll, whither, as it chanced, Earl Sweyn the Silent had gone, and there the lad told the same tale of how Kenric of Bute was bent upon making conquest of the isles, yet breathing no word of how King Alexander had ordered the expedition. The men of Coll, thus warned, would not brook that the ships of Bute should touch at their island, so ere Kenric had yet arrived at Tiree they got their many galleys together, and joining with the forces of Earl Sweyn they stood off behind the little isle of Gunna, ready to make an onslaught upon the squadron that Kenric was leading.

“It was night,” said Duncan, in telling his story to Allan Redmain — “It was night when we came abreast of the isle of Coll, and we anchored in the wide bay of Crossapol. When the day’s light fell upon the sea my lord Kenric came to me, and, said he, ‘Duncan, launch me the longboat with a dozen men, and come with me, for I will now land upon this island and seek for the king’s castle.’ So thereupon we landed.

“Not long had we been ashore when from the top of a little hill we saw, above the next bay, the castle that men call Breacacha. And going down to it, we were near to its gates when behold there came out a full two score of armed men, and they fell upon us with swords and spears. Fourteen men we were against forty, and we fought for two long hours, until of the men of Bute there were left but three alive, John Campbell of Glen More, my master, and myself. I was sorely wounded in the chest and like to fall down from the loss of blood. Of the men of Coll five remained. Twelve of their comrades my lord Kenric had slain with his mighty sword, and with little hurt to himself, saving only that his breath had grown weak.

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"But one of our foemen, who was the tallest man my eyes have yet beheld, at last encountered my master. He smote him a sorry cut upon his arm and bore down upon him so that he fell as dead. Another man picked up the Thirsty Sword, as I could see, for his own had just been broken. And knowing what manner of weapon it was, I made a great effort and slew the man who was pressing upon me. Then I met him who now held my lord's sword in his hands. Scarce had he raised it against me when I snatched my dirk from my side and flung it at his throat, caught his hand, and, slaying him, rescued my lord's weapon.

"By this time John Campbell had fallen under the hands of the other three men of Coll, and I alone was left, standing over the body of Earl Kenric, to defend it against the three warriors who now remained. But as they came to assail me I fell down in a swoon beside my lord, and they wist that I was dead.

"Now when my wits returned to me I felt something move at my side, and then I saw that Earl Kenric was yet alive, and that he had but fallen from want of breath and strength. Two score and nine brave men lay dead upon the heather. In their midst, with their backs towards us, sat the three men of Coll, resting their limbs after that morning's battle.

"My lord Kenric looked about him for his sword, not knowing that it was lying under my own frail body. I could neither move nor give it to him, nor could I speak for the fear that the men would turn round and finish us.

"Earl Kenric boldly rose and went behind the men. Ere he was two yards from them they stood up, and seeing him they spoke. I know not what they said, for I understand not the Norse tongue, Master Allan, but the tall man went up to him, leaving his sword upon the heather, and took my lord up in his arms and carried him away. The two others followed. Then was I in a great agony of despair, thinking they meant to slay him by some terrible torture. And I had not strength to save him.

"Not far had they gone when in the morning silence I heard the tinkling of a stream near by. Thither I crept and took a draught of its cool water. So much was my strength renewed by that blessed beverage, that I could have gone through that battle once again if so be I might save Earl Kenric's life.

"I followed the three men to the castle. They had left the bridge down and the gates open. But scarcely had I got within when by the sounds I heard I knew that they were lowering my master into one of their dungeons. I heard him cry aloud. 'Ah, had I but my sword!' he cried in our own tongue. And then his voice sounded low down in the depths, and though I knew he was yet alive and strong, yet I knew also that it was no easy task to rescue him from that place.



“Ere I reached the chamber wherein the dungeon opened out, the three men met me. They had left their weapons outside. Grasping my lord’s sword and calling upon Saint Columba, I assailed those three men in such wise that they soon lay dead at my feet; for they could not pass me. ‘Kenric, my lord Kenric!’ I cried aloud. And I heard him answer my name.

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"But this uproar of fighting and shouting alarmed the people within the castle, and thinking full surely that a host of the reserve garrison were coming to avenge the death of their comrades slain, coward that I am, I retreated without the gates, leaving my dear master within.

"Now it befell, Master Allan, that, as I had slain those three men who alone knew where my lord had been imprisoned, and as I had not the wit to speak with any of those Norse folk, it was little that I could do —"

"You have done well, Duncan, in coming for what aid we now can give," said Allan Redmain. "But say, how long time is it since my lord was thus made captive?"

"Five days as I count," said Duncan, "and had it not been for the thing that I next discovered he had not been there five hours. When I found myself outside the castle and with the bridge drawn up, I hied me over the hill towards the ships. Alas! they were no longer there in the bay where we had left them. They were standing out to sea, with seven great Norse galleys and as many fishing boats pursuing them."

"Alas!" said Allan; "and whose ships were those?"

"They were three galleys of Coll and four of Colonsay," said Duncan, "as I learned three days past when they returned to Breacacha. Our own four ships of Bute came not within sight again, and I fear they have gone back to Rothesay."

"Not so," said Allan confidently. "Our men would never return without truthfully knowing how it had fared with Earl Kenric. But what of the four galleys of Colonsay?"

"They left for the north two days ago, and the men of Coll went some into the castle and some to their homes, leaving their ships at anchor in the shelter of the isle of Gunna."

"And say you that those in the castle know not that our lord is in the dungeon?"

"Even so, for who could tell them? Five days have passed since our fight in Coll. Like a beast of the field have I lived since then, feeding upon the wild roots and berries, and waiting that our ships might come back. But by good fortune I came across the poor fisherman who brought me over in his boat. He could speak the Gaelic, and with promise of reward I bade him bring me to the place where Earl Kenric had told me we were to rejoin Sir Piers de Currie. Had the man refused me I would have slain him; but now that he has kept his word, I beg you to give him the reward that is his due."

"That will I do," said Allan, "for well does he deserve it. A good boat with oars and sails shall be his reward."

By the time that Duncan had told his tale, Allan Redmain's two strong galleys were abreast of the isle of Coll, and steering into a beauteous bay that Duncan had told of, they were rowed far in until they stood under the strong-built fortress of Breacacha.

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The garrison had been reinforced by many men from the ships of Coll. But the men of Bute were desperate, and they said that though they gave their lives, and though they pulled down every stone and timber of which that castle was built, they would save their young king. So with their friends of Arran they landed in a great body with their machines and battering engines. Some attacked the raised drawbridge with great missile weapons, while their companions picked off with their arrows the archers who were on the battlements.

After a two-hours' storming of the gates the men of Bute forced an entrance and rushed within the castle, led by Allan Redmain. The defenders took timely refuge in the donjon keep. But Allan sought not to follow them. With lighted torches he led his men into the dark chambers that were in the heart of the castle, till at last he found a chamber whose floor was stained with blood.

"Methinks," said he, "that this should be the place wherein Duncan slew his three foes with the Earl Kenric's sword;" and then he called loudly upon Kenric.

Many times he cried out, but no answer came. Then he bade one of his men uncoil a rope that he had brought, and Allan, fastening a lighted torch in his helmet, let himself be lowered into the dungeon whose mouth gaped in the centre of the floor.

Deep down he went until his feet touched solid ground and he found himself in a large cavernous chamber. It was a dismal place. The rocky walls were damp and mouldy; the floor was of hewn stone. There was an odour as of death in the heavy air.

Holding his torch aloft he peered into the recesses of the dungeon. At last his eye rested upon what looked like a human form. He started back in horror as the light fell fuller upon it. Against the wall, crouched down with his head between his knees, and a few rags of mouldy plaid about his shoulders, was the grim skeleton of what had once been a living man.

Allan drew back the tattered plaid and saw the bare ribs and fleshless arms. And could it be that the young hope of Bute, Kenric the good, the brave, the true, had come to this?

Allan bent down. He was about to touch the ghastly thing. Then the awful silence of that black tomb was broken by the sound of a low moan. Allan listened again, but he heard only the drip, drip of water. Then again came the moaning sound. He turned round and bounded forward. By the light of his torch, that pierced the darkness, he saw a pale wan face, with hollow cheeks and round, staring, brown eyes. The lips moved.

"Allan? Allan?" they faintly said.

And then Kenric raised himself on his elbow.

"The great God be thanked!" gasped Allan, and he fell upon his knees at Kenric's side.

Kenric spoke not again: he was faint and sore of limb. Allan took off his plaid and spread it upon the damp, rocky floor. Then he raised Kenric in his arms, and wrapping him in the plaid carried him to the bottom of the shaft where hung the rope. Making a sling of his plaid and securing it to the rope he called to his men to draw up the line, and in a few minutes Earl Kenric lay in the upper chamber breathing the fresher air.

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Not long was Allan Redmain in following, and in the space of another hour they had carried Kenric on board the *Kraken* of Bute.

For six long days and nights no food had passed his lips, and had it not been that his frame was of uncommon strength he must have died in that noisome cell. For many days afterwards his mind wandered, his eyes stared blankly, his voice failed him, and not until two weeks after his rescue, when he was back again in the castle of Rothesay, did he recognize anyone.

Allan Redmain's two galleys were but a few miles outward from the coast of Coll when they fell in with the four galleys of Bute that Kenric and Duncan had left. They had been pursued about the seas by the ships of Sweyn of Colonsay, but having outdistanced him they were now returning to the island to search for their lost leader. Either alive or dead, he must, they said, be found. Had it not been for Duncan Graham, who alone, of all men, knew where Kenric was imprisoned, all search for him must have been fruitless. On some day long after he might have been discovered, as Allan had found the starved and forgotten prisoner in that dungeon, a grim and unrecognizable skeleton.

CHAPTER XXI. HOW KENRIC MADE HIMSELF STRONG.

This expedition against the island kings had been attended with small enough success. Many of the islands had indeed been invaded and some of the smaller ones conquered. Several of the kings, wavering between service of two masters, had quietly yielded to the persuasions of King Alexander's ambassadors. But it must be said that, despite their seeming compliance, they were ready to turn the other way again with equal ease, or even to evade their duties to either monarch and assume the dignity of independent rulers. In a political sense the result of the expedition was a failure, the conquests being incomplete, and the compliance of the less warlike kings being of the very shortest duration.

The misfortunes that had attended Kenric of Bute and Sir Piers de Currie were due almost entirely to the bad work of the wild men of Galloway, whose lust for slaughter and pillage, whose wanton plunderings of churches and slaying of women and children brought down upon the Scots the hatred of the Norsemen in whose lands these depredations had been made.

It was not long ere the word had travelled far and wide among the Western Isles that the barbarities committed by the Gallwegians were the work of young Kenric of Bute. It was said that Kenric of Bute alone had ordered the massacre of the children of Colonsay. It was said that he had wantonly ordered similar atrocities in Jura, in Barra, and indeed in all those isles which the unruly men of Galloway had invaded. Upon Kenric and his

people, therefore, the sons of the vikings swore deadly vengeance, calling upon their patron saint to aid them.

The Norsemen of the Western Isles lost little time in sending messengers to Norway, telling how the King of Scots had attempted to force their allegiance to his crown.

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Hakon, the Norwegian king, was roused to anger. He determined to revenge the injuries offered to his vassals, and at once issued orders for the assembling of a vast fleet and army, whilst he repaired in person to his great seaport of Bergen to make ready for an expedition which should not only restore his vassals to their lands and rights, but which should also sweep away every kilted Scot from the isles, and convert the great kingdom of Scotland itself into a dependency of Norway.

These great preparations for war commenced in the autumn of 1262. It was not until eight months afterwards that they were completed.

When Allan Redmain, with Earl Kenric and Duncan Graham lying ill in his cabin, rejoined the combined forces of Sir Piers de Currie and the Earl of Ross, he found these two chiefs on the point of separating. The Earl of Ross left the sound of Iona and sailed northward again, while Sir Piers, with the eight galleys of Bute and Arran, bent his course south to Colonsay, there to pick up the vessel that Kenric had left in guard over that island. These nine vessels thereupon returned to the Clyde, and Sir Piers made a journey into Scotland to make his report to the King.

For many weary weeks Kenric remained a helpless invalid in his castle, tended by his gentle mother and by old Janet the nurse. His wounds were of small account; but the six days spent in the noisome dungeon of Breacacha had weakened him and given him a fever, which was slow to leave him. His mind was strangely disturbed, and he talked wildly, and at random, fancying he was fighting against countless hosts of pirate Norsemen, and declaring deliriously that his Thirsty Sword would give him no rest, so great was its lust for blood. And once when Ailsa Redmain had come over with Allan from Kilmory, the young king began to laugh wildly, and to say how he had just been over to Colonsay to massacre many hundreds of children, and how the good men of Galloway had tried to stop him, and that for their interference he had thrown them all into dark dungeons, giving each of them a skeleton for a plaything.

But later, when his reason had returned, Ailsa came more often, and the two would sit for hours together, talking of the boats that could be seen from the window sailing on the blue waters of Rothesay Bay, of the dark hills of Loch Striven beyond, and of the trees across in the forest of Toward that were brown and gold in the autumn sunlight. Of all his nurses, Kenric loved best that Ailsa should thus come to him, for she was as a very gentle and sweet sister, and never did the Gaelic words sound so musical as when spoken by her rosy lips; never did sunlight shine more brightly than the light that shone in her beautiful eyes.

So the weeks went on; the autumn passed into winter, and soon all the land was white with deep snow.

On a cold wintry day Allan Redmain rode over to Rothesay on his shaggy mountain pony.

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"My lord," said he to Kenric, who was sitting in the great hall with the abbot Godfrey Thurstan, "I have a strange thing to tell of an adventure that befell me yestereve."

"Come, then, to the fire, Allan," said Kenric, "for on these cold days, when one cannot get out and about, a story is ever welcome. What says your reverence?"

"Even so," said the abbot, rising; "and methinks the sound of Allan's young voice, whatever his adventure be, will cheer you better than the croaking of an old man, so I will leave you together, my sons."

Then the two lads sat side by side before the great fire of pine logs, and each with his arm twined about the neck of one of the deer hounds that sat beside him.

"And now, Allan, what is your adventure?"

"Why, 'twas a wolf hunt we had, I and some of our men of Kilmory. The wolves, as you know, have been numerous in the island since the snow and frost came. We tracked a goodly pack of them into Glen More, and, running them to a corrie in the hill of Kilbride, we there slew three of them with our spears. But there was one dog wolf — a great gray fellow that we came upon at the head of the glen. He had a patch of white hair about his neck, and by that I knew that it was the same that had so frightened the widow Campbell; and being on my pony, I gave chase. He doubled, and ran south, leading me even to Kilmory. There I lost him. But I traced his steps in the snow, and where think you they led me?"

"Nay, how could I know?" said Kenric.

"Why, to the cottage door of Elspeth Blackfell.

"There I dismounted, and, pushing open the door, what should I see but the same wolf lying down at his ease before the fire that burned in the middle of the room! His long tongue was hanging out, and I could see his great white teeth. At his side was the old woman's black cat. At the other side of the fire sat Elspeth herself, calmly eating of a dish of brose. Even as I stood there, the old witch bent down and laid the dish before the wolf that he might finish the brose. When I leapt forward with spear upraised to slay the wolf, Elspeth stepped in between and roughly bade me put away my weapon. 'For,' said she, 'know you this, Allan Redmain, that he is not as other wolves, and I would not have you harm him by any manner of means;' and so I went away, marvelling much."

"Well," said Kenric, "and what make you of this adventure?"

"Why this: that Aasta the wolf maid, who was wont to prowl about in her wolf's guise only at dead of night, has now taken to her fancies by daytime also."

“If this be so indeed,” said Kenric thoughtfully, never doubting that the explanation was the truth of the matter, “then I would have you be very careful in your adventures, Allan. Spare that white-breasted wolf; for we know not what strange ill would befall you were you to slay Aasta by mistake. Say naught of this to any man. Duncan Graham, who knows more than others of Aasta the Fair, shall one day tell us what all this mystery means.”

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But for the rest of that winter, no more was heard of the wolf maid's wanderings, either by day or by night, and when the glad springtime came, there was no more thought of wolves.

In that springtime Earl Kenric, now well able to get about, busied himself upon his farm lands, and did all manner of hard and manly toil, so that by healthy exercise of his limbs he might regain his strength. In the early mornings he would sally out to the fields of Ardbeg, and there with the ponderous plough of those times, that was drawn by twelve shaggy, long-horned oxen — each with a wreath of rowan leaves round its neck as a charm against the spells of witchcraft — he would plough the stubborn ground for many hours together until the sweat bedewed his brow. And from the fields he would perhaps walk over to Ascog to sit in his seat of assize, and there, with the clods of earth yet upon his feet and his arms yet tingling from their work at the heavy plough, he would administer the simple laws before his people. Also he would often engage with Duncan his henchman — now recovered from his wounds — in the exercise of arms, or with Allan Redmain sail over to Arran to have a day's hunting among the fells. Every morning before he broke fast he was wont to undertake a curious exercise, which was that he took a young bull calf over his shoulders and carried it to the top of the hill of Barone; and each day as the calf grew older, so did its weight increase, and the burden become greater to bear. Thus did Kenric make himself strong, until, at the end of that summer of 1263, there was no man in all Bute who could excel him in the use of arms or overcome him in feats of bodily exercise.

Meanwhile, unknown as yet to the people of Bute, King Hakon of Norway had been busily preparing his forces for the projected invasion of Scotland. The extent of these preparations soon spread alarm even on the coasts of England. It was said that an overwhelming fleet of ships had bent their course against the Scottish islands, and the final destination of so vast an armament was conjectured with consternation.

It was on the 7th of July that the fleet set sail from Herlover. King Hakon commanded in person. His flagship was of great dimensions, having seven-and-twenty banks of oars. Countless banners, pennons, and gonfalons flaunted in the breeze from the masts and riggings of his many galleys. The decks were crowded with knights and soldiers, whose armour glittered in the sun. It was the most powerful and splendid armament that had ever set out from the fords of Scandinavia, and it bore proudly away with a light wind for Shetland and Orkney, where additional forces enlisted under the Norse banner.

Bearing down among the Western Isles, levying contribution of men and stores from all the chiefs who owed him tribute, Hakon was joined at the isle of Skye by the forces of Magnus, king of the island of Man. The combined fleet now amounted to a hundred and sixty dragon ships, with over twenty thousand fighting men.

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Now, on the ship of King Magnus of Man there was a mighty warrior, whom men called Rudri, and he was the most terrible pirate that ever roved upon the western seas, and all men feared him. There was not a vic or sound that he had not sailed into, nor an island upon which he had not drawn his sword.

He was the one man in all that host who could best instruct the Norse king concerning the invasion. So, taking many ships with him, Rudri went among the island earls and compelled them one and all to remember their duty, and to follow under the banner of their Norse master. Many of those who had taken oaths of loyalty before King Alexander's ambassadors demurred. But the power of the King of Scots was remote, the vengeance of piratical warfare was near at hand, and the islanders submitted, agreeing to pay fine of so many hundred head of cattle as punishment for their former desertion of Norway. And so, like an avalanche that gathers added weight as it descends, the invading forces drew nearer and nearer to their goal.

CHAPTER XXII. THE TWO SPIES.

On a certain morning in September, Aasta the Fair sat crouched at the door of the little cot wherein she dwelt. She was grinding oats in a small stone hand mill. Old Elspeth sat within doors spinning.

Presently Aasta raised her eyes and looked over towards the little isle of Inch Marnock, where on the green knolls some sheep were grazing. In the narrow channel that separates Inch Marnock from Bute she saw a tiny coracle with a man on board. The little boat drew to the beach of St. Ninian's Bay, where the man stepped out and began to run. Staggering in his gait, he fell; then rose again and again fell. Aasta, leaving her work, ran down towards the man, and when she got near him she saw that his clothes were torn, and his limbs bleeding from many wounds. He was lying on his back, groaning. She looked into his white face and saw that it was the face of the man whom Earl Kenric had left in Gigha as his steward and governor.

"What means all this, William MacAlpin?" asked Aasta, kneeling by his side; "and wherefore come you back to Bute thus covered with bleeding wounds?"

The man pointed westward, and with his dying breath said:

"Run you to Castle Rothesay, I beseech you; run and tell my lord Kenric that the Norsemen with their hosts have landed on Gigha, and have wrested the island from us. They tried to torture me to death, but I escaped to tell my master of this calamity —"

Then Aasta questioned him; but her words fell upon the ears of the dead; so she arose.

The swift-footed hart runs not more swiftly than Aasta ran that day across Bute. She found Kenric lounging on the little pier and throwing pebbles one by one into the green water. Near him were some fishermen unloading their herring boat.

“My lord,” said she, scarcely showing by her easy breathing that she had run the distance of four miles — “my lord, I have ill news to tell.”

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Kenric looked round at the tall fair maiden. She was radiant with the beauty of strength. Her long red hair streamed in the breeze, and her rosy cheeks glowed with the healthy blood that coursed under her smooth clear skin. Her eyes were limpid as the summer sky.

"What news may that be, Aasta?" asked the young king.

"It is," said she, "that your isle of Gigha has been invaded and conquered by the Norsemen, and that your kinsman William MacAlpin has but now given up his life in telling me the tale."

Kenric stood in troubled thought, a cloud upon his brow.

"Where is Lulach?" he presently asked.

"Over at Inch Marnock," she said, "and ill with his foot that he hurt in climbing the rocks two days since. He cannot walk but with pain, or I might have sent him to you."

"That is most unfortunate," said Kenric, "for saving Lulach and myself there is none in the island who can speak the Norse tongue. I would have sent him to Gigha to learn the truth of this you tell, and to discover if there be further danger."

"You forget, my lord, that it was I who taught Lulach the Norse tongue," said Aasta. "And cannot I do this mission as well as he? Give me your bidding, my lord, and though I die in fulfilling it, yet will I deem my life a small sacrifice if it be that I can serve you."

Then Kenric's eyes lighted up, and he looked admiringly upon the fearless girl.

"Aasta," said he, "I will take your service, and I will even go with you to Gigha this very day. Meet me at St. Ninian's two hours before sunset. Have ready a fishing coracle with some fish, and dress you as a fisher maid. These are my orders. Go."

At sunset that evening a little boat, paddled by a stalwart young man in the rough habit of a fisher, was crossing the waters of Loch Fyne.

He was singing a plaintive Gaelic song, and a fair maid, whose deep red hair was covered by a coarse blue cloak, joined in the wild strain with notes that were as the sweet song of the night bird of the far south. The youth was Earl Kenric of Bute; the maiden was Aasta the Fair.

Crossing from Ardlamont Point, they crept up the opposite shores of Kintyre until they came to a wide bay upon whose banks lies the little fishing village of Tarbert. In the growing darkness Kenric paddled the boat inward to the extreme end of this bay. Had he been in less hurry he might have reached the isle of Gigha by taking a larger craft and sailing down Kilbrannan Sound and so round the Mull of Kintyre, by the way he had

gone with the galleys. But he now adopted a speedier way and a much safer one. The great peninsula of Kintyre, which at the north joins to Knapdale, forms at Tarbert a narrow isthmus of but a mile broad. Landing at the head of Tarbert Bay, Kenric bade Aasta carry the paddles and her basket of fish, and himself taking up the little boat in his two strong arms and raising it upon his back, he thus crossed the mile of dry land. The boat was but a light one, built of pine ribs and covered with hide, and his task was less difficult than it might seem.

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In half-an-hour's time the two had arrived at another sheet of water which is called Loch Tarbert, and here launching the coracle again, they seated themselves and sailed down the narrow loch. It was now well upon midnight, and there was no moon; but there was little danger to be feared, unless, indeed, some of the Norse outposts might surprise them.

Kenric spoke little, for, in truth, he was yet doubtful of his companion, who might, he imagined, at any moment turn herself into the form of a wolf. But Aasta was very calm, and there was small need to doubt her, for Earl Kenric had done her a great service in setting her free from her thralldom, and she would have given her life for him at any moment.

When at last they emerged from the loch where it enters the open sea they paused a while by the shore to eat their bread cakes and drink the milk that Aasta had brought. They sat face to face. Once Kenric thought he saw the maid's eyes sparkle with a green flash of light and he drew back, though in sooth it was but the reflection of the planet Venus, shining in the clear mirror of her eyes.

The gentle rippling of the water against the boat alone disturbed the stillness. In that stillness Kenric looked fixedly at Aasta through the dim light. Aasta sank upon her knees, and obeying an impulse that was upon her she took his hands in her own and touched them with her warm lips.

Kenric felt a strange thrill of pity for this beautiful girl, so lonely was she, and so much despised of men, and in that moment he bent down and kissed her head. And at that the maid began to weep, and her hot tears fell upon his hands.

Neither spoke, but each felt that a new bond of sympathy had been formed between them. Presently Aasta rose to her seat, and Kenric took his paddle and drove the boat along into the deeper water.

Down the west coast of Kintyre they sailed until, out across the sea, they saw the light of a beacon fire shoot up upon the heights of Gigha. Outward then they steered until they came nigh upon the rocky shores of that island; and passing many little islets, they sailed between Gigha and the brownie-haunted island of Cara, just as the day was breaking in the east.

Here Aasta looked about her with strange bewilderment as though she were awaking from a dream. Kenric brought the boat inshore and took it through the long rock tunnel that he had seen many months before from the deck of his galley. The water was calm now and the tide high.

Aasta looked down into the clear depths where the long tangle of marine plants swayed with the motion of the light current. Upon the rocky bed below she saw many ruby-

coloured sea anemones, with emerald mosses, and pearly shells, and silver-scaled fish. From the water she looked to the vaulted roof. Her eyes were restless with strange wonderment.

“My lord,” she said at last, “what place is this that you have brought me to? And why seem these rocks so familiar to mine eyes? This clear green water — the lofty vault of this cave, where the voice echoes in merry laughter! ’Tis passing strange! Methinks I must have seen them in some childish dream!”

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But Kenric at that moment felt the boat grinding upon a sunken rock, and Aasta's question passed his notice.

Beyond the tunnel they searched for a safe landing place in one of the little bays. Aasta pointed to a high cliff that had many caverns hollowed out in its steep front, and she bade him steer into one of those caves. Kenric laughed and asked how she thought they could ever arrive upon the heights by that way. But when she suddenly put her finger to her lips, in token that she had heard voices upon the cliff, Kenric obeyed her and took the boat into the yawning cavern.

When they were far within Aasta said: "Heard you not voices up above us, my lord — the voices of many men?"

"Even so," said Kenric. "But methinks it will go ill with us here if we be discovered by some passing boat. We should then be entrapped."

"Not so," said she. "Follow me and you shall see that we have chosen a better point of landing than you could have hoped for."

And stepping upon the rocks at the far end of the cave she led him up a flight of rocky steps until suddenly they saw the light of day. At once they emerged into a wide ravine that clove the cliffs and led upward to the grassy heights of the island. Then Aasta drew back and held Kenric so that he might go no farther, and she pointed across the ravine where a dip in the opposite headland revealed a wide and sheltered bay.

"Look, my lord," she whispered.

Kenric saw an unexpected sight, for in the waters of that bay there lay at anchor a hundred and fifty ships of war with the falcon flag of King Hakon flying at each masthead.

The sight of so vast an armament appalled him. How it happened that these foreign ships were riding at anchor off his own island was a thing that passed his comprehension.

Aasta was the first to break the silence of wonderment.

"My lord," said she, "there is more in this than the dying words of your kinsman William foretold. And right wise were you to bid me put on this fisher maid's disguise. Give me your dirk, Earl Kenric, lest I meet misfortune, and I will take my creel of fish and offer it for sale among the people. It may be that in speaking with the islanders I shall hear that which the mere sight of these ships cannot explain."

Then Kenric returned to the boat, bringing back the basket of fish, which he gave to Aasta together with his dirk.

“You will trust me, my lord?” she asked.

Kenric smiled. “To the end,” said he. “But what is your plan, Aasta?”

“That you remain with the boat, my lord, while I journey to the village, wherever it may be found. Not long shall I be, and I beg you not to leave the cave till I return.”

Taking the fish creel over her back she went away. Passing up the ravine and mounting to the heights, she had not gone far when she saw a party of warriors sitting round a camp fire. She went boldly towards them.

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"So please you, my masters," she began in the Norse tongue, "I have brought you some good fresh fish if so be you would buy them from a poor body."

"Show us your fish, girl," said one of the men, rising. Then looking into the basket he added, "What want you for them?"

"Four cakes of bread," said she.

"Good," said the warrior. "Let us have them; for with so many mouths to fill all food is welcome."

Slowly Aasta took out the fish and laid them on the grass. Yet no man spoke. She touched the nearest man on the elbow.

"Lend me your knife, my master, that I may gut the fish," said she boldly.

The man took out his knife, and as he handed it to her she saw his face and recognized Earl Sweyn of Colonsay.

One by one she took up the fish and slowly trimmed them on a flat stone, waiting in the hope of hearing the warriors speak.

"When holds King Hakon his council?" one presently asked of another.

"Tonight — on Rudri's return," was the reply.

"And where?"

"Why, here on the heath, after sundown," said another. "'Tis no time for delay. Bute and Arran have yet to be conquered ere we assail the mainland of Scotland."

"Ay," said the first speaker, "methinks there will be few Scots left in Bute for the next moon to smile upon. Bairns, women, and men, they all are doomed!"

Aasta now began to work quicker — so quickly that in a very few minutes the fish were all ready for cooking. Then taking her four bread cakes she slung the basket over her head and sauntered away.

Suddenly she was conscious that someone was following her. Raising her wicker basket higher she half turned her head. Through the crevices of the basket she saw a youth with long flaxen hair. It was Harald of Islay. But soon he turned back, thinking no doubt that he had been mistaken in his recognition of the girl who had helped Allan Redmain to recapture him.

After an absence of less than two hours Aasta rejoined Kenric and told him all she had heard; and for the rest of that day the two remained in hiding, waiting until night should fall.

At last the dark night came. Kenric and Aasta, the one armed with his great sword, the other with her dirk, crept from their place of hiding and stole across the heath towards the campfire, round which a score of island kings were already gathered, awaiting the coming of King Hakon of Norway.

Within a hundred yards of the fire Kenric stopped and beckoned Aasta to go round the northern side, while he went the opposite way. This they did that they might discover by which approach they could best reach within hearing distance of the warriors. And they had arranged that the one who found a likely place should give signal to the other by means of the lapwing's cry.

Aasta had not well made the half circle when through the night air she heard faintly, as it were half a mile away, the cry, "Pee-wit! pee-weet!"

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Quickly she returned and followed the way Kenric had gone. Soon she found herself under a high piece of ground that obscured the firelight. Then nearer to the fire she heard the cry repeated, and she replied with the same call. She went towards the fire until she saw Kenric standing on the top of a high rock, outlined against the glow of light. She knew him by his fisher's cloak. She saw him lie down flat and creep nearer and nearer to the edge of the rock.

Suddenly, between her and Kenric, she saw another figure appear and stealthily follow behind the young king with drawn sword.

Now Aasta had the faculty of being able to see in the darkness almost as well as in the daylight, and it took but a hurried glance to prove that he who followed Earl Kenric was none other than the fair-haired Harald.

Like the bird whose cry she had but lately imitated she ran along the ground, drawing her dirk as she ran, and just at the moment when Harald of Islay was preparing to smite Kenric a blow that would have killed him, Aasta threw her hand over the young viking's mouth, dragged him over, and then plunged her dagger into his heart.

So quickly did this happen that Kenric, intent upon seeing what was passing around the fire, was quite unconscious that Aasta had saved his life. And Aasta never afterwards told a living being of the thing that she had done.

Leaving the body of Harald where it had fallen she followed Kenric yet nearer to the brink of the rock, until together they lay so near to the band of Norsemen that they could see their white teeth glisten in the firelight as they spoke. The fire was built against the rock. The warriors sat about it in a half circle.

Presently the men all rose to their feet to greet the arrival of the Norwegian monarch. Kenric could now see faces that had been hidden before, and amongst them were those of Sweyn of Colonsay, Erland of Jura, and, to his surprise, even the renegade John of Islay. None of the others did he know; but there were Magnus king of Man, Sigurd king of Lewis, John of Kintyre, and Henry the bishop of Orkney, with many more of the most trusted of King Hakon's vassals.

Then came King Hakon himself, the tall, grim-visaged, despotic old monarch of the North, who, having reigned for six-and-forty years, had now determined to win for himself and his descendants the complete dominion over Scotland.

"And now, oh, noble lords and faithful friends," said he when they were all seated, "now that we are assured of the adherence of all these outer isles of Scotland, it remains for us to arrange by what means our further conquests are to be made. Our right trusty and noble Rudri is yet away. But on his great help we may confidently rely in whatsoever course we pursue. This alone does he ask, that the invasion of the isle of

Bute shall be left entirely in his hands. We do therefore order that Rudri, with five stout ships, shall sail hence in two days'

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time and invade that island. Thence, with my lord Magnus of Man, he shall sail up the Clyde and lay waste whatever lands or castles may come in his path. Meanwhile Earl Margad shall invade Arran with five other ships. As to the rest, we shall remain in this isle of Gigha and complete our preparations for the final conquest of the mainland of Scotland. Say, now, my noble lords, does our plan meet with your favour?"

"It does, your Majesty!" they all replied.

Then Earl Sweyn the Silent opened his lips and spoke.

"Methinks," said he, "that as to the expedition against Bute, those who have most suffered by the atrocities committed by the young stripling lord of that isle should have the power to fulfil their own vengeance upon him. And I for one, your Majesty, will not rest content unless I be of those who are to invade his lands. With his own hand young Kenric of Bute slew a full score of the children of Colonsay, and in just revenge would I massacre with my own hands the children of Bute. No child shall escape our swords. We will slay every one, ay, even to the babe at the breast. We will raze every dwelling to the ground. And even their churches and their holy men shall not escape!"

On hearing these words Kenric waited not to learn more. He already knew enough, and his heart beat furiously in dread alarm. For a moment he felt impelled to take his sword and strike down the man who had last spoken; but the danger of revealing himself to those warriors was too great, and touching Aasta on the arm he drew her away.

Together they crept back to the ravine, found their difficult way into the cave, and regaining their boat returned to Bute by the same way that they had left it.

At daybreak on the following morning the fiery cross — the Highlanders' summons to arms — was sent round to every dwelling in Bute. Allan Redmain was despatched to Arran to warn Sir Piers de Currie. Other boatmen were sent on a like errand to Toward, Dunoon, Largs, and all other villages and castles upon the banks of the Clyde, while a special messenger was sent into Scotland to warn King Alexander.

For three days and nights there was not a man in Bute who was not occupied in some fashion in preparing to meet the expected enemy.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE INVASION OF BUTE.

The awful words that he had heard spoken by Earl Sweyn of Colonsay impressed Kenric with a terrible fear, and his knowledge of the overwhelming force of ships and men at the command of the Norse king assured him that the threatened invasion of Bute was no idle boast. Not for his own castle of Rothesay did he fear, although he

would defend his fortress to the end. The thought of the terrible vengeance that was about to fall upon Bute on account of the bad work of the wild Scots of Galloway was a matter for far graver consideration.

On his return from Gigha he passed many hours pacing the great hall of his castle, racking his brain to discover a means whereby he might protect the lives of the women and children who were under his care. He remembered how, on the day of his throning, those children had stood at the verge of the court to receive his blessing and to kiss his hand, and his heart bled at the thought that any of these little ones should be in danger.

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At last, after much hard thinking, he put on his sword and ordered his pony to be bridled. Then he rode south to the abbey of St. Blane's. Calling to the good abbot he bade him open the chapel and let him enter. There the young king threw himself down before the altar and fervently prayed to God for help in his hour of need, asking for the power to save the children from the wrath of their enemies. And in the quiet of that holy place God's spirit entered into his heart and he felt strong.

So when he had finished his prayers the abbot, hearing him, said: "My son, have faith, and our Father will give you His help. And now, tell me, I beseech you, what means you foresee of saving our people from the swords of our enemies?"

And Kenric said: "Holy father, it is by your help that I hope to do this thing. This day will I send into your grange all the meal and flour that now lie in my granaries at Rothasay, and you shall store it away in secret places. Ere the sun sets this night every woman and bairn now alive in Bute shall be brought to the abbey, and they shall live here, guarded by a band of our best men-at-arms."

"But, my son," objected the abbot, "is not your own castle a far stronger and safer refuge?"

"It may well be that it is stronger, my father," said Kenric; "but since it is the first place that our enemies will make for, 'tis not more safe than the abbey, which would be the last place that Christian men would attack."

"You speak wisely there," said the father; "but still do I doubt your wisdom in seeking to gather so many women and children together in one defenceless place. How will it be if our enemies forget the sanctity of this refuge, and discovering our children assail them all in the mass? Better it were, methinks, to let each family remain in their own home, for thus distributed over the island some, if not all, must surely escape."

"Father," said Kenric, "it is not without reason that I propose this course, and the two years that I passed under the care of the holy brethren of the abbey gave me some teaching of a practical sort. Wist you not that under this very chapel there is a strong, large chamber? And wist you not also that connected with that chamber there is a long vault running a full four furlongs underground, even unto the inclosed space that the men of Bute name the Circle of Penance?"

"Even so, my lord," said the abbot; "and now do I well understand your plan. It is in that underground passage that you would have our helpless people take refuge. Send me, then, a score of your men to make timely preparation and I will gladly receive the innocents into my care. God grant that we may be able to protect them, even at the cost of our own lives."

“Amen,” said Kenric, and then he rode away. Taking the green road that led westward, he stopped at every farmstead and cottage by the way and there bade all the women, from the aged crone to the young damsel, repair to the abbey of St. Blane’s, taking with them all their children.

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Soon he reached Kilmory Castle, where he had counsel with Sir Oscar and Allan Redmain concerning the protection of their fortress. It was probable that the enemy would land upon the western side of the island, but lest they should determine to make their first attack upon Rothelay it was deemed wise that Sir Oscar and Kenric should each defend his own castle, and that he who first descried the invaders from afar should send word of their approach to his neighbour.

Being assured that Kilmory was well guarded, and prepared to offer a strong resistance, Kenric asked to see Ailsa Redmain. Ailsa was in the fields.

"Ailsa," said he when he had found her, "you have heard of the great danger that threatens our island?"

"Who is there in all Bute that hath not already heard it, my lord?" said she. "Ah, would that I were a man that I might be of some service at this time!"

"It needs not that you should be a man, Ailsa, to be of very great service, and I will ask your help. You are no longer a child, and well do I know what wisdom there is in you. I would trust you in all things to act wisely."

Then dismounting and standing at her side he told her how the women and children were to be taken to St. Blane's.

"The Norsemen may arrive," he said, "even before another day be gone, and passing up Kilbrannan Sound they will doubtless make landing near your father's castle, where it were most unwise in you to remain. Go, therefore, to the abbey and make what womanly preparations may be needful. There will my mother join you. With her and you do I intrust the children of Bute, so that you may minister to their comforts until the danger be past. You shall not lack help, but 'tis well that there be some womanly authority whose word may be held as law in case of need. And now, Ailsa, since it may be that we shall never meet again in this world, fare you well!"

Then as he was about to remount he saw the tears gather in the girl's eyes, and he put his arms about her neck and drew her to him.

"Ailsa," he murmured, "never till this moment did I know how dear you are to me! But now when death faces me — when another day may see me slain — the thought of you, my playmate, my dear friend, my loved Ailsa, makes life on earth more precious. God watch between us in our danger. The holy Mother protect you, and on earth or in Heaven grant that we may meet again!"

Then holding her near him he touched her white brow with his lips and left her sadly.

Passing across the meadows of Kilmory he found Lulach the herd boy. Lulach was in great terror at knowing that the Norsemen were expected, for though he was himself by

blood and nature a Norseman, and was wont to speak their tongue rather than the Gaelic, yet he looked upon the Scots as his friends and upon every Norseman as his enemy. He was not trained in the use of warlike weapons, and it seemed to Kenric that he would be of little use. But Kenric stationed him upon the heights and bade him keep constant watch upon the sea, ready to sound the alarm on the enemy's approach.

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Night and day did the lad stand upon those heights overlooking Kilbrannan Sound, and on the third day he saw appearing a squadron of six ships with many gay flags flying and the armour of countless warriors glinting in the sunlight. The largest of the galleys sailed in advance, bearing the viking's flag, and having an array of knights and soldiers upon her decks and many archers at her prow.

Lulach ran in terror to Kilmory Castle, and straightway Sir Oscar Redmain prepared to meet the coming foe.

Lulach was then to have hastened to St. Blane's; but he thought he had yet time to run down and warn old Elspeth Blackfell, who had steadfastly refused to take the protection offered her in the chapel vaults, saying that she had a safe refuge of her own — though where that refuge was none sought to know. Lulach followed her down to the little point of land that juts out into St. Ninian's Bay.

Now it chanced that it was in that same bay that the invaders landed, and before Lulach could escape, the first ship was close upon the shore.

The first man to spring into the water and wade to land was the great pirate Rudri. Seeing Elspeth standing near, leaning upon her long staff, he accosted her.

"What, ho! thou witch of Satan!" he cried in thundering voice. "Speak, crone, your life is yours if you but tell me truly, by your sooth, the thing that I shall ask."

"Thou godless man, stand back!" cried Elspeth, seeing him draw his sword as though to slay her.

"Nay, tell me of your sooth — for I do believe you are a very witch — tell me, what shall the issue of this invasion be? Speak, thou vile hag! lest I release your black soul over soon!"

Elspeth stretched out her shrivelled arms and dropped her staff. Then she turned to the pirate and answered him. Her voice came hard and shrill from between her withered lips.

"Since thou wouldst know," she said, "the things that shall be, hear this, oh Rudri, that he shall be defeated upon whose side the first blood drop is spilled!"

A heavy silence fell after her words. It was broken by a loud laugh from the pirate's deep throat.

"Be it as thou wilt," he cried.

But Elspeth in that moment snatched a dagger from her girdle, and gathering her strength she made a lunge with it at the man's broad chest. The weapon turned upon

the strong armour that he wore, and, unhurt, he caught her by the wrist, raising his sword.

Now Elspeth had spoken in the Danish, and the chieftain, remembering her words of prophecy, and, it may be, thinking that she was of the Norse folk, lowered his weapon and flung the old woman away from him. Then seeing Lulach limping away, and taking him to be a Scot, he ran after the lad, eager that the first blood should be that of one born in Bute. Catching Lulach by the long hair he speedily slew him.

“Tis done!” said Rudri when he saw that the lad was dead. “And now have we forestalled our enemies and assured to ourselves the victory.

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"On, on, my men!" he cried, turning to his followers. "The first blood of our enemies hath been spilled! On! on! the victory is sure!"

One by one the ships dropped anchor in the bay, and from each there poured a vast number of warriors carrying bows and battle-axes, swords and spears. Behind their leaders, the terrible Rudri and the king of Man, they marched upward to the castle of Kilmory.

"Spare not!" cried Rudri, flourishing his sword.

"Death to the traitor of Bute, the slayer of our children!" cried Sweyn of Colonsay.

"On, on, men of Jura!" croaked Erland the Old.

"Down with the Scots!" thundered Magnus of Man.

From the topmost towers of his castle Sir Oscar Redmain watched the hosts advance. Nearer and yet nearer they came.

"Steady, my lads, and take good aim," he said coolly as he fixed an arrow to his bowstring. "Now!" he cried, and as the enemy came within bow shot a shower of well-aimed arrows met them, and many men fell. The shields of their companions bristled with the arrows whose flight they had stopped. But the long-haired warriors pressed on to the castle gates, behind which stood Allan Redmain with half the garrison at his back.

From the hilltop of Barone, Aasta the Fair had watched the ships approaching from afar, and at the moment of first seeing them she clashed a flint and steel and promptly lighted a bundle of dry twigs and straw. The signal fire was seen from Rothesay, and at once Earl Kenric, at the head of five score of men, marched across the island towards Kilmory. But so quickly had the invaders landed, so speedily had they stormed the stronghold, that ere Kenric and his followers appeared upon the heights, the castle of Kilmory was in flames.

The Norsemen, taking their machines to the rear, had stormed the building at its weakest point. The heavy missiles from their shot wagons soon succeeded in making a breach. Then a detachment of Rudri's men brought sheaves of new-cut corn and bundles of hay from the stackyard, and flinging them within the breach set them in flames. The stout walls of oak very soon caught fire, and Sir Oscar Redmain and his archers on the towers speedily found themselves inclosed in clouds of smoke. Their cries as they ran down the inner stairs and discovered the awful fate that awaited them were terrible to hear.

From the rear of the castle the Norsemen brought round their machines to the gates, and with their heavy battering rams they burst in the strong doors. Some of Allan Redmain's men rushed out, only to be cut down by the warriors who awaited them.

Twice did Allan call to his guards to follow him and cut their way through the barrier of swords and spears, and twice were they driven back into the burning castle. A third attempt was made. Allan valiantly encountered his foes, who now gave way, for at that moment they were attacked in their rear by the men of Rothesay.

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In the ranks of the Norsemen, Kenric espied Earl Sweyn of Colonsay.

“Traitor! slayer of my people’s children!” cried Sweyn, pressing forward. “Let me at you that I may smite you to the earth!”

Kenric stood on guard. Sweyn raised his heavy battle-axe; but, before he could strike, Kenric so wounded him on the shoulder that he dropped his weapon. Then a crowd of men pressing in between, separated them.

For an hour’s time the skirmish continued, Kenric and Allan Redmain fighting side by side. But meanwhile the Norse leader, Rudri, had called off the larger number of his men to the ships, leaving but a few score behind under Sweyn of Colonsay and another.

In the thick of the fight Duncan Graham sought his master’s side.

“Back, back, my lord!” he cried, “Back to the castle of Rothesay! The ships have already left the bay. In two hours’ time they will be round at Rothesay!”

Kenric then rallied his men and charged his foes most vigorously, and those who were not cut down took to flight. Earl Sweyn, retreating towards the hill of Quien with two score of his followers took ambush until the men of Rothesay had left Kilmory. Then, full of angry vengeance and intent upon slaughter, he led his small troop northward. Every cottage and farmstead that he could find he entered. But not in one of them did he discover man, woman, or child. The men were all under arms. The women and children were all in the safe refuge of the vaults of St. Blane’s.

Allan Redmain, finding that it was vain to attempt to save his father’s castle, remained for a time upon the scene of ruin and devastation. His father, Sir Oscar, had been slain by an arrow, and his body was devoured by the flames. When Allan had tended the wounded, both foes and friends, he took six of his best men-at-arms with him, and by devious ways marched south to St. Blane’s, there to remain on guard with three hundred others, whom Kenric had stationed at various points in the vicinity of the abbey.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE SIEGE OF ROTHESAY CASTLE.

With the loss of twelve men slain and twenty wounded in the skirmish at Kilmory, Kenric returned to his castle, and there completed his preparations to resist the invaders. He had drawn off his ships. Three of them were anchored in Dunagoil Bay, with many fishermen and husbandmen — untrained in battle — ready at hand in case Allan Redmain required them. A thousand men-at-arms were within the castle, while a band of the best archers were stationed on the battlements. Along the shoreline from Rothesay to Ardbeg five hundred archers were in ambush, and beyond Ardbeg, in the bay of Kames, lay four galleys of war, well equipped — ready to dash out upon the enemy as they passed, and, if possible, frustrate the landing of their forces.

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The castle of Rothesay was so situated that it commanded a long view of the waters through which the enemy's ships must approach from the north of the island. The fortress, which was constructed of stone, had been built in the year 1098 by Magnus Barelegs, king of Norway, who lived in Bute for three years. It was a circular building, 150 feet in diameter. The walls were nine feet thick and forty feet high, flanked by four round towers. As a fortification it was ill designed, even upon ancient principles. Though stronger than any other in all the Western Isles, it had neither moat nor drawbridge. Even the gate, though it was of strong oak, lined with iron bars, was ill protected. It was neither flanked nor machicolated, and it might have been mined or assaulted at any point. The enemy could approach under the walls without fear of being annoyed by showers of boiling lead or tar, and, if they kept close in, neither could arrows reach them with any certain aim.

But on the castle's heights there had been collected many tons weight of missile weapons, with machines for throwing them. One of these machines was a Norse skotvagn or shooting truck. It was made like a wagon, mounted on a pair of wheels. At its back end was a long shaft with an open box at its extremity. This box had to be loaded with heavy stones. Fixed to the axle of the wagon were two chains, one at either side, so strong as to be able to suddenly check and hold the carriage when it was running full tilt down a planked incline. As soon as the chains arrested its race, it would shoot out its load on those below. It was always best to load it with stones of different sizes.

Kenric was engaged in giving a last attention to this shot truck, when, from the heights of the battlements, he saw the figure of Aasta the Fair running towards the castle from the northward. It vexed him much to see the wild girl thus exposed to the dangers that might soon overtake her, and he bade Dovenald, the old bard, go down and unfasten the postern that she might enter. Duncan Graham had already been sent south to the abbey.

"How happens it, Aasta, that you went not to St. Blane's as you were advised?" Kenric asked, when he met her in one of the lower corridors.

"My lord," said she, "I went but to the hill of Kilbride to watch the ships in their passage through the Kyles, and I judge that they will be here in the space of another hour. As I came backward through Glen More I saw a band of men with Sweyn of Colonsay ravaging the farmsteads and setting them in flames. Twelve cottages did I pass that had been razed to the ground. The saints be praised, all our people are safe! But oh, my lord, Lulach, Lulach is slain! He was the first to fall."

"Lulach?"

"Yes, and more. Know ye who slew him? It was even the man of whom we heard speech in Gigha, Rudri the Rover."

“Since Lulach is dead, what boots it who slew him, Aasta? ’Tis but the misfortune of war,” said Kenric, turning away.

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"Wait, my lord," said she, holding him back. "Methinks you do not know this Rudri. But Elspeth Blackfell took little time to discover that much. The man Rudri is none other than he who so basely slew your father and overcame my lord Alpin in combat. Rudri the Rover is none other than Roderic MacAlpin!"

Kenric drew back amazed. "Roderic MacAlpin!" he exclaimed. "The saints protect us! Ah, simpleton that I have been to have faith that that villain ever meant to keep to his vows! And this is how he went on the pilgrimage! and all these months, while we have fondly believed that he was serving the Cross, he has but been serving his own ambitious ends! It was he, then, who led the Norsemen to Gigha! It was he who besought King Hakon to let him make the invasion of Bute, that he might murder our children and lay waste our lands — that he might claim the dominion he covets! But by my father's soul he shall yet fail!"

Then Kenric unsheathed his sword, and solemnly swore upon the cross of its hilt that never should that weapon leave him until either himself or Roderic the Outlaw lay dead.

The story of Roderic since the time of his quitting the isle of Bute may soon be told.

Scarce had he passed the rock of Ailsa Craig ere he had resolved to break his vows of penance and go his own chosen ways. Sailing southward in the English salt ship, he was still upon familiar waters. He lay quiet for three days, recovering from his wounds; then, when the vessel was abreast of the Isle of Man, he forcibly took the helm, and drawing his sword, threatened the life of any man who dared approach him, and he steered the ship into the haven of Peeltown. There he landed among the descendants of the Norse King Orry, and seeking out his friend Magnus, who was the lord and monarch of that land, with him he lived for many months, until on a time there came a message from Hakon of Norway, bidding King Magnus set forth with his ships of war to the Western Isles. When the Manx ships joined Hakon's navy at Skye, Roderic the Rover was welcomed above all other chiefs, and he offered that the isle of Gigha should be made the headquarters of the forces, from which they might easily swoop down upon Bute and Arran, and thence invade the mainland of Scotland.

"Methinks, my lord," said old Dovenald, as he stood with Kenric and Aasta, "that this outlaw will not now be satisfied until he hath compassed your death. Forget not, I implore you, that you alone stand between him and his ambitions. It would go ill with us all if he should succeed, and methinks 'twere well that you took timely refuge where he could not find you."

"My lord," said Aasta, "what Dovenald says is but wisdom; and now, if you would take safe hiding, I know of a little cave above the shores of Ascog Bay wherein you might be secure from all discovery."

“What? and would you counsel me to shrink from meeting this man? No, no, my friends. I am no craven, and it is not thus that I will desert my post. Here do I stand to defend our stronghold; and while I have a drop of blood in my body so long will I fight.”

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Soon from the battlements the six ships of Roderic were seen emerging from the Kyles of Bute, and as they passed Ardmaleish Point, the four galleys of Rothesay dashed out from the bay of Kames, and encountered the enemy. They met him with a rain of well-aimed arrows and showers of missiles. The two ships of Roderic and King Magnus shot ahead, leaving their four consorts behind to engage broadside to broadside with the vessels of Bute, and there followed a terrible sea fight hand to hand — Scots broadsword against Norse battle-axe — that lasted many hours, until the vessels of both sides, much damaged, and with the loss of four score of men and more, found themselves drifted into Rothesay Bay.

From the towers, as he watched the opening of the fight, Earl Kenric espied a band of men marching upon Rothesay from the northward. They were the men of Colonsay, led by Earl Sweyn, who had been reinforced by fifty men from the ships. It was this band whom Aasta had seen setting the deserted homesteads in flames. Sweyn was now bending his course upon Rothesay village.

But, as he came within bow shot, Kenric and his archers were ready. Kenric took careful aim and bent his bow as he had never bent it before. Swiftly the arrow sped with whizzing noise, and it curved in its flight, dropping lower and lower until it dived deep into the bare throat of the Earl of Colonsay. As Sweyn fell, his men saw that the dart had pierced through his neck even to the back of his collarbone, and, enraged at the loss of their master, they ran yet farther. But one by one they staggered and fell, each with an arrow quivering in his broad chest, and those who remained alive took flight beyond range.

And now Kenric turned to watch the ships of Magnus and Roderic, which, with the galley of John of Islay in their wake, were now well within the bay. Driven by their long-sweeping oars, they crept shoreward until their peaked bows grounded in the shallows. The warriors then swarmed over the bulwarks and dropped into the water, wading breast deep to the beach. Kenric's bowmen from the battlements and from the rising ground above the shore began to assail the bold invaders. But, little daunted, the Norsemen landed in great numbers, taking ashore their besieging engines and various instruments of war.

Then might be seen stones, arrows, quarrels, and other missiles to fly among them, and so effectively did those within the castle exchange their tokens with those without that in one short hour there were many scores of persons wounded, and I know not how many killed. The heaviest of the besieging engines were worked in throwing massive stones, which could be got in plenty and of every size upon the shingly beach. And when there was a good hit, a great shout arose among the invading host. Many shot wagons and three other machines were brought by the enemy — very large, of great power, and very destructive — which might be thought to cut down and crush whatever their missiles struck. But the walls of Rothesay Castle were strong and thick, and the stones that struck them only shattered into a thousand fragments.

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Many a well-directed arrow did he of Rothesay receive, but he placed before him his great white shield with a red cross engrailed. With his head protected by a strong brass helm, and his chest with a well-wrought coat of mail, he escaped all hurt. Nor did he lose courage, but cheered his men lustily as though it were but a boy's game he was playing. But ever he kept his watchful eye upon the Norsemen, eager to pick out the tall figure of his uncle and dreaded foe Roderic. Not once but many times did he see him standing with a dozen of his companions directing the siege.

Kenric many times took up his longbow and sent his arrow shafts swiftly towards the heart of his enemy. Roderic was clothed in complete armour, and though many of his nephew's arrows struck him, yet they but broke upon his breastplate and fell shivered to his feet.

For four long hours the battle continued, and at Kenric's side many brave men lay dead. On the plain before the castle seven score of Norsemen lay slain. Then, as the sun went down, and the evening clouds brought heavy rain, the enemy retired to their ships. By this time the three vessels that had been engaged with the ships of Bute were drawn alongside their consorts, and Kenric's four galleys had sailed out to sea, so that in the cover of darkness they might approach under the abbey of St. Blane's, and give ready succour should the enemy discover the retreat of the women and children.

Early in the morning the whole of Roderic's forces landed, and now they stormed the castle gates with all their strength. So stoutly did they assail them with their powerful battering rams that in the space of an hour the doors fell in with a loud crash.

In the wide hall stood Kenric with his sword in hand. Behind him were ranked a good three hundred fighting men. In their midst was the maid Aasta the Fair, wearing, as all the men wore, a coat of mail and a brass headpiece. In firm ranks they all stood with pikes and spears aslant to meet the inrush of valiant Norsemen.

The first man whom Kenric encountered was Erland the Old of Jura. Enraged to see this man, who had taken hospitality in the castle, now helping to storm it, he fought with his full strength and felled him with one blow. Cutting his way through the ranks of his foes he at last reached the fallen gates. But nothing did he yet see of Roderic. Many men did he kill, for none could stand against the terrible onslaught of his great sword. And ever at his side, fighting with fearless courage, was Aasta the Fair, and of the foemen a full half dozen did she slay with her sword, for she was most powerful of arm and feared not the sight of blood.

Well might Kenric seek in vain for the towering helm of Roderic. For even as the gates gave way that warrior, with Magnus of Man, had taken off a body of their Manxmen to the west postern. This little door, which, as Roderic well knew, was the weakest point in all the castle, they assailed with their ponderous battle-axes, and never did smith with his hammer strike his iron as Roderic struck there.

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While Kenric and his chosen men-at-arms were fighting against those who were pressing in by the main gates, Roderic thus gained an entrance into the castle. He slew with his own hand a full score of the garrison and passed over their dead bodies up the stone stairs. In a little time thereafter he stood upon the battlements, where Dovenald and his companions of the bow were showering their arrows upon the invaders without the walls. There, cutting down old Dovenald in a most cruel fashion, Roderic tore down the honoured red lion of Scotland and hoisted in its stead the blue and white falcon of the Norseman. This done, he returned with his many followers to the hall and charged upon the men of Rothesay in their rear.

Kenric, placed thus between two strong companies of his enemies, was taken at a sore disadvantage. He felt that the men about him were falling on every side. Soon those without the gates gave way, and the men of Bute were fairly driven out of the castle at the spear's point. Then Kenric and a few of his bodyguard, not knowing what had happened, and believing that the stronghold was still in the hands of their own garrison, pursued the retreating Norsemen to the ships. On the beach a vigorous engagement took place.

The Norsemen scrambled on board from one vessel to its companions alongside. Kenric, followed by Aasta and a crowd of their Scots, waded deep into the water, still pressing behind the men of Jura and Islay. They even climbed upon the first galleys' decks, and there stood fighting for many minutes.

In the midst of this battling Kenric observed the viking's flag flying above the battlements. He called his men off the ships, and as they returned to the castle Roderic and some of his warriors passed round by the rear of the building and regained their vessels. The galleys were then pushed off into the deeper water, and not till they were afloat did Kenric realize that he had not for some minutes seen the brave girl Aasta. In truth, the maiden was at that time struggling on board one of the galleys with Roderic the Outlaw, who soon disarmed her and thrust her as a captive into the cabin of one of his ships.

Kenric returned to his castle, only to find that it had fallen entirely into the hands of the enemy, who had put the remainder of the garrison to the sword.

Utterly defeated, but himself scarcely wounded, the young lord of Bute rallied what men he could and drew them off to the high ground where Roderic had stood. The arrows of a few Norsemen from the battlements pursued him, and seeing that there was now no chance of regaining possession of his stronghold, he could only think of the safety of his people and try to protect them from the ravages of the victors. The villagers of Rothesay had already deserted their homes, which so far had remained unmolested, though sadly battered about by stray stones and other missiles.

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And now did Kenric fully see the wisdom of what he had done in securing his helpless islanders under the safe keeping of the abbot of St. Blane's. Had he advised them to take refuge in the castle they would assuredly have fallen victims to the wanton swords of their enemies. Had he failed to act with prompt foresight upon the information gained in Gigha, the men of Colonsay, with other vengeful warriors, would have massacred every woman and child in the island, for such was assuredly their intent. Happily they had found every dwelling unoccupied, with its more valued contents safely removed; and though they had indeed brought many of those homesteads to the ground, yet the lives of the inhabitants were still secure.

It now remained for Kenric to assure himself that no prowling Norseman should by chance discover the place of refuge of those who had so timely abandoned their homes; and to this end he bade his remaining followers make pretence of taking shelter in the forest of Barone, whence they might move unobserved by the enemy to the south of the island and so guard the abbey of St. Blane's.

CHAPTER XXV. THE GREAT NORSE INVASION.

It were vain to look for good generalship in a time so remote as that of the reign of Alexander III. Wallace and Bruce had not yet appeared to teach the Scots the advantage of united action, and the methods of warfare were still of an unmilitary kind. Battles were little better than mere free fights, without order, without controlling discipline, without preconcerted plan. It may be that Kenric of Bute might, with a little more forethought in the disposal of his forces, have saved his castle from the hands of his enemies. But a lad of seventeen, with no better counsellors than a few peaceful men such as Sir Oscar Redmain and the Abbot Thurstan — men inexperienced in the arts of war, and ill qualified to repel an invader or hold a castle against a siege — what could he do? Sir Oscar Redmain was killed in the first engagement. The abbot was sufficiently occupied with the protection of his church lands, and the one skilful soldier who could have organized the defences — Sir Piers de Currie — was even now defending his own castle of Ranza against the forces of Margad.

Nevertheless, the manner in which Kenric defended the sacred buildings of St. Blane's redeemed the mistakes he had committed in a too great division of his forces at Rothesay. He protected the abbey lands from a possible approach of the enemy from the sea by stationing six of his ships, fully manned, at regular intervals along the south coast of the island from Glencallum Bay to the bay of Dunagoil. Thus disposed, the vessels formed a half-circle round the abbey and its demesnes. At Dunagoil he stationed a guard of five hundred men under Allan Redmain, with a like number in Glencallum, under Duncan Graham, ready at a moment's warning to form a connection across the neck of land. Within the walled inclosure known as the Circle of Penance, standing midway between these two stations, were two hundred other men under

Kenric himself. Thus the abbey and its grange with some forty cottages were entirely surrounded.

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The abbey with its chapel was a small building in the Norman style, inclosed by a high wall, and standing in a grove of birch and ash trees. In the crypt of the chapel and within the cottages the women of Bute, some hundreds in number, had made their retreat, and the Lady Adela of Rothesay had a most anxious four days attending to her numerous charges. Food there was in plenty, of a simple sort, and the wells within the abbey buildings provided abundance of pure water.

In the underground passage connecting the crypt with the walled inclosure of the Circle of Penance the children had been collected. Ailsa Redmain was with them, attending to their many wants, helped by some of the women.

All this had been Kenric's doing, and to him would be due the praise and the thanks of the people of Bute if his plan of defence should succeed. But Kenric was not at his ease, for he knew that should the Norsemen set aside thoughts of the sanctity of the place and make a successful descent upon the abbey, then surely the women and children would be discovered and an appalling massacre might follow. Little cared he for the loss of his castle and lands; little thought he of the value of his own young life. His one purpose was to make a strong defence and to save his people, for whose sakes there was nothing he would not dare to do.

And now his most earnest wish was to know whether the enemy would make their attack by sea or by land. He was equally prepared for either course.

It was wearing towards sundown, and yet there were no signs. The castle of Rothesay had been taken before noon. Where now were the enemy?

At last Elspeth Blackfell came to Kenric, who stood with the abbot within the thick walls of the inclosure.

"My lord," said she, "I hear the tread of many feet. It is by land they come. Oh, that I knew where my sweet Aasta hath gone, and if she be still in life!"

"Father," said Kenric to the abbot, "will you now do as I propose?"

"What would you, my son?" asked the abbot.

"It is that you would now go without these walls and boldly face our enemies, holding before you the crucifix. If Roderic be their leader, it may be that the sight of you will move him to a sense of the holiness of this place, and haply you may by your arguments turn him aside from his purpose. Were I to show myself — though, indeed, I would willingly face that man and fight with him to the death — he would be moved to wrath, and, slaying me, he would not rest any the more in his designs."

"I will adventure it, my son," said the abbot solemnly.

“God be with you, holy father,” added Kenric, crossing himself.

“My lord,” said Elspeth, “think you that Godfrey Thurstan can have power to move Roderic in this wise? How was it when he bade this man go upon the pilgrimage of penance? Did Roderic then obey his holy words? Not so. But there is one whose words Roderic MacAlpin will indeed take to heart, and that is your servant Elspeth. Let me then go, my lord. Open the gates that I may go forth and face this outlaw and his followers. And if it be that he turn not back, then may the massacre of our children rest upon my head.

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“Come, my lord abbot, let us then go together.”

Then some men removed the heavy stones from the gate and the abbot and his aged companion went forth to meet the advancing forces.

Now as Roderic, at the head of his army, marched upon St. Blane's he could see nothing of the defences that had been prepared. All was in appearance peaceful as it had been when as an innocent boy this pirate chief had gone in the early mornings to say mass with the good friars. Above the abbey the swallows lightly flew. The blue hills of Arran were calm and grand. The seagulls floated in mid-air above the sea, and the autumn trees waved their golden clusters in the breeze. From the chimneys of the abbey a thin film of smoke told only of peace.

There was nothing to show that within the small space between him and Garroch Head were collected together many hundreds of islanders with anxiously beating hearts — islanders whose happy homes had been laid waste, and who now dreaded the moment that might bring their death. Two figures alone could Roderic see. These were the abbot Godfrey and the old crone Elspeth Blackfell.

As the Norsemen advanced with clashing arms and regular tread the abbot looked up in seeming surprise, as though his meditations had been suddenly disturbed. Then he paused in his walk and turned to meet the dreaded foe. Elspeth followed him.

With loud voice Roderic called out to his men to halt. Then alone he went forward.

“What means all this that I see?” began the abbot with trembling voice, “and how comes it, Roderic MacAlpin, that I behold you here in Bute with all this strange following? Infamous man! Did you not but twelve short months ago solemnly swear before God that you would not set foot upon these shores again ere you had spent three years of penance in the service of the Most High. How come you here?”

Then Roderic smiled in derision.

“How came I here? And wherefore should I come if not to claim mine own? Wherefore should I come if not to destroy the young cub Kenric, who hath cruelly murdered many scores of innocent dwellers in the isles. Mine own have I already regained, for I have planted my banner upon the towers of Rothesay, and no man on earth shall now rob me of what I have so hardly conquered. Two other things remain; and then I go to make further conquests for my sovereign king. I shall have young Kenric's blood, and I shall have my full revenge for the injuries he has done to the people of Colonsay. And now, my father, you will go down upon your knees before me — for I am now your lord and king and will be obeyed — and you shall tell me truly where this young whelp Kenric is to be found, that I may slay him.”

“Earl Kenric of Bute shall never be slain by you, Roderic MacAlpin,” said Elspeth. “For though you follow him over half the world, as you followed Rapp the Icclander, yet shall you never draw one drop of blood from that brave youth’s body!”

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"And who shall stay me?" cried Roderic. "By the mass, but you speak bold words, Dame Elspeth!"

"I will stay you!" cried Elspeth. "Your right arm shall wither, your eyes shall grow blind, your life's blood shall turn to gall ere you touch a hair of Earl Kenric's head! Return whence you came, bold outlaw. Go, ere it be too late. Overmuch injury have you already done in this land of your fathers. And do you hope to rule in Bute — do you believe that there is one man in all this land who would accept you as his lord and master, and who would pay homage to you, after the ills you have done? Vain fool! be satisfied. Turn back to your ships and ask of Heaven the forgiveness which no man on earth will now accord you! Go, Roderic MacAlpin!"

"Miserable hag!" cried Roderic grasping his sword. "And think you that I would lead my brave men away ere they have had their full revenge upon this stripling? No, no! Listen now, how they cry for his blood! Hear how they cry out for the children whom you have spirited away! Elspeth Blackfell, you know where those children are hidden, and by Saint Olaf you shall now tell me where they are, or I will drive my blade into your shrivelled carcase. Tell me, I say!"

"My lord Roderic," said Elspeth, looking at him with glittering eyes, "you have lost your own two children. Do you still remember them? Do you still remember their rosy cheeks, their sweet blue eyes, their golden hair? Do you still hear the music of their laughter as they played among the pebbles on the beach? Ah, it was a sad, sad day for you when they were taken from you, my lord."

"A sad day indeed, Elspeth," echoed the sea rover, mechanically sheathing his sword, and speaking in an altered voice that had a touch of tenderness in it.

"And yet," added Elspeth, "there lives in Cowall one who might tell you what became of your little ones."

"What? You tell me this! Who is that man?"

"On one condition shall you know," said Elspeth. "Take your men away from Bute, and no more seek to learn whither our women and children are gone."

"Agreed," said Roderic; "for, believe me, 'tis no wish of mine that the people of my own lands should suffer. Tell me, who is this man?"

"When your followers are in their ships," said Elspeth, "when you are taking up your anchors, then will I tell you, Lord Roderic. And if you keep your word and leave us for a time in peace, most assuredly you shall yet learn more."

Now Roderic, who was a man of iron, had yet one soft place in his heart, and that was ever touched when he thought of his lost children. Doubtless Elspeth knew all this, and

whether it was true or false that she could give him the word he wished, she at least succeeded in turning him away from St. Blane's, and Kenric, half-wishing to take his sword and slay him where he stood, peeped above the wall where he and his men were intrenched and saw the pirate chief go up to his men and order them to turn back to Rothesay.

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In another hour thereafter, Roderic, having left the castle in charge of one of his captains and a full garrison of men, entered his ship and with his other galleys sailed away on his expedition of plunder on the banks of the Clyde.

Being joined by other ships from Kintyre, Islay, and Jura, together with the forces of Margad who had invaded and conquered the isle of Arran, his armament now numbered sixty galleys. They took the castles of Dunoon and Roseneath, and laid waste many villages and farmsteads. Farther still they went, up the waters of Loch Long, devastating the lands on either side. At the head of Loch Long they took their smaller ships and mounting them on rollers made of the trunks of larch trees, they dragged the vessels bodily over the neck of land that lies between Arrochar and Tarbet, and launched them on the great lake that is called Loch Lomond.

Now on Loch Lomond there are many small islands that were at that time thickly peopled, and many Scots of the invaded earldom of Lennox had taken refuge on those islands when they heard that the Norsemen were advancing. Their safeholds now became the scenes of plunder and bloodshed, the islands were wasted with fire, the shores of the beautiful lake were completely ravaged, and the houses on its borders burnt to the ground.

After this, Roderic and Magnus made an extended expedition into the rich county of Stirling, in which they massacred great numbers of inhabitants, and returned driving herds of cattle before them, and loaded with booty.

During his voyage up the Clyde, Roderic had paid little heed to the fair captive Aasta. But when, triumphant and gloating, he returned to the ships he had left in Loch Long, he discovered that his prisoner had escaped, and he was very wrathful, for, as he said, the maid was passing fair, and he had been minded to take her back with him to his castle. But no man could tell him how the girl had escaped, or which way she had fled.

Roderic, having filled his ships with plunder, then set out for Kintyre, where he was to join King Hakon. But entering the Clyde from Loch Long, he encountered a terrible storm. Ten of his vessels were completely wrecked, and his own galley was forced to steer clear of Bute, and take refuge behind the islands of Cumbræ.

The measure of the Norwegian success was now full. Hakon had gained possession of every island, great and small, on the west of Scotland. In the far north he had established his footing not only in the Shetlands and Orkneys, but he had made himself master of the whole county of Caithness. In the south, Kintyre had been unconditionally ceded to him by its timid lord. Bute, Arran, and the Cumbræes had been conquered; the rich county of Lennox — one of the most fruitful in Scotland — had been laid waste, and on the outer coasts of the mainland the Norsemen had planted their banner on many a well-built castle. Hakon was now intent upon conquering Scotland, so, gathering his

whole fleet of nearly two hundred ships, he sailed from Gigha round the Mull of Kintyre, and anchored in Kilbrannan Sound.

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In the meantime King Alexander, having received Kenric's early warning of the coming of the Norsemen, had with many Scots and English noblemen taken up his residence in Stirling Castle, there to await further news.

One day in September he was out with a hawking party upon the lands which, fifty years afterwards, became known to the world as the field of Bannockburn, when suddenly a most beautiful maiden with blood-red hair threw herself before his horse.

"May it please your Majesty," said she, "to hear your servant's petition?"

"Who, then, are you, my pretty maid?" said the King.

"I am a maid of Bute, your Majesty, and a faithful vassal of my lord Earl Kenric of that isle. And I have come to tell you that the Norsemen have landed on your shores. They have taken our castle of Rothesay. They have harried your lands of Lennox. They are approaching upon Stirling. And oh, your Majesty, of your mercy I implore you to give speedy succour to your injured subjects by driving this enemy from our midst!"

"How came you here?" asked the King.

"I was carried off as a prisoner from Rothesay by the tyrant Roderic of Gigha, who hath been sent by King Hakon to lay waste the shores of the Clyde. He carried me as far as Loch Long in his ship. But there I escaped and found my way hither to inform your Majesty of these disasters."

"Roderic of Gigha?" echoed the King. "So, ho, and 'tis he who hath taken Bute? By St. Andrew, but he shall not long enjoy his conquests."

"My lords," he added turning to his companions, "methinks the maid speaks truth. Now turn we back to Stirling and cease this sporting, for there are higher duties to perform. Come, my lords, let us at once muster a goodly army, and march against these bold sea wolves ere they have gone too far."

But ere the king had time to do more than learn the extent of the invasions, Roderic and Magnus had returned to their ships. Alexander, however, soon learned that Hakon himself had entered the Clyde with his armaments, and thereupon there ensued an interchange of messages between the two monarchs. A truce was agreed upon until terms might be arranged. It was the object of the King of Scots to so delay negotiations, that every day might give him more time to concentrate his army; and as the autumn was drawing to a close, it brought the Norwegians a nearer prospect of wreck and disaster from the winter storms.

Alexander made such moderate demands that it was apparent he was not fully prepared to resist the fleet and army of Norway. He had no standing army. He had never been engaged in any warlike affair. He sent word to the Norse king signifying that

he would be content to retain the mainland of Scotland and the islands inclosed by it — Arran, Bute, and the two Cumbraes — and it appears that he was willing to have given up to Norway the whole of the isles of the Hebrides. These terms, so advantageous to Hakon, were, fortunately for Scotland, rejected. The proud master of the invading force would give up nothing coming within his claims. It then was observed that Alexander became shy of further treating, and that a force was gradually collecting upon the heights overlooking the Cunningham coast.

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Hakon then proposed that Alexander should meet him, each at the head of his army, and treat concerning a peace. If the attempt at negotiation failed, then he would throw down the gauntlet from Norway and challenge the Scottish monarch to debate the matter with his army in the field, and let God, in His pleasure, determine the victory.

Upon this Alexander, in no wise unwilling to fight, pronounced the truce at an end, and war was declared.

CHAPTER XXVI. A TRAITOR KNAVE.

Earl Kenric, on seeing the outlaw and his troops march back in the direction of Rothesay, breathed a great sigh of relief.

The people of Bute were so far safe; much bloodshed had been avoided. The abbot and Elspeth Blackfell had by their simple words reversed the designs of an army. So when the abbot returned into the walled inclosure, Kenric took his hands and reverently kissed them.

"And now, holy father," said he, "let us all offer thanks to God for His great goodness at this time of our need, for God alone can have stayed the hands of these ruffians."

Then the abbot and his friars stood before the many children and moist-eyed women and brawny islanders who crowded into the circle, and all knelt down upon the grass. Never since the gospel of Christ had been introduced into that land had prayers been more fervently uttered.

In the midst of the prayers, Ailsa Redmain, kneeling by Kenric's side, suddenly touched him on the shoulder, and pointed over towards the Arran hills. There, in the direction of Ranza, he saw a great column of black smoke rising in the air.

"Alas for Sir Piers de Currie!" he murmured, and then again bent his head.

But when the prayers were said Kenric quickly rose and climbed the thick wall, and running with all speed to Dunagoil he ordered Allan Redmain to take two ships over to Arran, for that Sir Piers de Currie's castle was in flames.

Not long were the two galleys in crossing the sound. Entering Loch Ranza, they entrapped three ships of the Norsemen that had been sent against the castle while Margad their chief was attacking the castle of Brodick on the eastern side of the island. Attacking these ships, Allan Redmain speedily put the Norse warriors to the sword and took their vessels as prizes.

On the beach he found the gallant knight, Sir Piers, standing in the light of the flames that devoured his home. His wife and six children were clinging to his side piteously

weeping. His castle was completely wrecked, and as there was not another fit dwelling for many miles around, Allan Redmain, having driven off the enemies who were on shore, besought Sir Piers to bring his family on board, and with twelve brave men of Arran who had escaped, he was taken over to St. Blane's to such refuge as there remained to him. The beautiful Lady Adela and the Lady Grace de Currie fell into each other's arms, for in the hour of their adversity they were as sisters.

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At the time when Kenric was thus receiving his neighbours of Arran, the men whom Roderic had left in charge of the castle of Rothesay were making merry over their victories. A dozen of them, officers of the garrison, sat in the great hall — the hall in which the good Earl Hamish had met his death. On the bare board of the table there lay a cooked haunch of venison, with other viands that had been found in the buttery, with many cakes of brown bread and drinking horns filled with wine. For these men had not been long in command ere they had broached more than one wine cask with casks of other liquors of a stronger sort, and they grew ever more noisy and more boisterous, this one boasting of how many dogs of Bute he had slain, and that one vaunting that he had with his own hand struck the stripling lord of the island to the ground.

Often one of them would rise from the long bench before the fire and maul the venison with his bloodstained hands, turning it over this way and that; then taking his sword, which had been used that day for a very different purpose, he would cut off a great slice of the meat, and spreading a layer of salt upon it, clap it between two cakes of bread and sit down to enjoy the food. In eating, drinking, and singing wild battle songs, these warriors passed that evening, each thinking himself a king.

Some of the men were wounded, but little did they seem to care; nay, many a one even proudly displayed his bleeding cuts, to prove how sorely bestead he had been in the fight, and the man who had the greatest show of wounds was looked upon almost with envy. To be wounded was next to being slain, and to be slain on the field of battle was the most glorious death a man might die.

“Well, my brothers-in-arms,” at length said one who appeared to be their captain, “’tis a good day’s work that we have done. So let us drink and be merry. Here’s waes-hael to king Rudri of Bute. Long life to him!”

Then the men took up their drinking horns and drank deep to the last drop. But two there were who drank not at all, and they were men of Colonsay.

“Why drink ye not with me?” growled the captain, frowning.

“Because, Thorolf,” said one with flashing eye, “I am but ill-content with the way that Rudri broke his plighted word to us. When we set out on this journey, was it that we should but help him to gain his father’s island? No. Did he not solemnly swear that he would give us our full meed of vengeance upon the whelp who massacred our children? And what man of us has had that chance? Blood for blood, say I!”

“And so say I,” muttered his companion. “Methought when we came here that I should have the chance of driving my spear into a full half score of the children of Bute — that I might have served them even as the stripling Kenric served my little ones. Saint Olaf curse him!”

“It baffles me,” said the first, “to know by what means the women and children of this isle have been spirited away. Not since we landed yestermorn have I so much as seen a living child, nor woman neither, saving only that old witch.”

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"Ay, and the fighting maid who cut me this wound across my pate," added another. "Methinks this Kenric must surely have got wind of our intention; but how that can be, what man can tell?"

"What then of the thing we found on the moor of Gigha, after the council that King Hakon held?" asked Thorolf the captain. "What man would have slain the young Harald of Islay if it were not some spy of Bute? The lad was stabbed through the back; 'twas in no fair fight that he fell."

"True," said they all. "By St. Olaf, that is surely so!"

"Could we find out in Rudri's absence where these babes and wives of Bute have been so cunningly hidden," said one of the men of Colonsay, "methinks we might well pay out both Rudri and young Kenric. What say you, my bold brothers all?"

"'Tis my belief," said another, "that the old witch who spoke to Earl Roderic had some secret intention in turning us away from yon chapel at the end of the island."

At this the men were silent; but at last one said:

"I'd swear that it was even so. And what say you all if we go thence this very night and fall upon the chapel with fire and sword? 'Tis a straight road from this, and easily found."

At this moment there were footsteps in the outer corridor. Three men entered, dragging with them yet another who was bound with ropes. Their prisoner was David Blair, the farmer of Scalpsie. He had been captured, hiding like a frightened cur, among the rocks of Ascog.

The Norse captain, who could speak the Gaelic, on learning who he was, commanded him, on pain of instant death, to tell where Kenric of Bute had taken the women and children.

The farmer hesitated a moment; then, seeing the captain draw his sword, he gasped:

"Oh, spare me, spare me, my lord! Give me but my life, and I will tell you all. I will tell you where you may find these people, and how you can get at them. But, since death is the punishment wherewith you threaten my silence, tell me, then, what shall be my reward if I tell you this you ask?"

The captain smiled grimly. Then in Danish he said:

"You base inhuman craven! you ask what reward I will give you? Methinks the only fitting reward for such treachery were to have a cauldron of boiling lead poured down your guilty throat. Reward, forsooth!"

“Nay, but I cannot understand, my master. I am but a poor Scot who knows not the Norse tongue. Say, what reward do you promise?”

“Fear not, my man. You shall have your deserts,” said the captain. “Tell me, now, or I will even cut you down this instant where you stand trembling.”

“The families of Bute — men, women, bairns — are all in the abbey of St. Blane’s,” said Blair. “They are penned up like a vast flock of sheep in the abbey and the chapel, in the chapel vaults, and within the walls of the Circle of Penance. There you will find them, with my lady Adela of Rothesay, and young Kenric himself, and Allan Redmain that murdered my poor dog —”

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"Enough!" cried the captain sternly, "and now for your reward."

Then turning to one of the men who had brought in the captive, he added:

"Hundi, this man is a traitor, and as a traitor he must now be served. You will therefore conduct him to the topmost towers of the castle, and taking the rope that now binds him, you will tie a shipman's noose about his neck and let him hang in mid-air, that the carrion crows may taste the flesh of one of the meanest cowards in the isles."

Then, as the farmer was taken away to his death, Thorolf the captain paced the floor moodily, speaking not a word.

"What said this man, Thorolf?" asked one of his comrades. "Come, tell us where we may find these people."

"That will I tell to no man!" said Thorolf firmly, "and as I am captain here, these are my orders: that if any man seek to discover where these families are now harboured, or if any man does aught to further molest the people of Bute, he may expect a reward equal to that of the traitor who has now gone to meet his deserved death. There are ropes in Rothesay for all who dare to disobey me!"

"Coward!" muttered one of the men of Colonsay, rising and passing out of the hall, "think you that you alone could understand that man? I heard his answer, and by my sword, I mean to act upon it;" and thereupon they all stood up and followed, taking their arms and leaving Thorolf alone beside the fire.

Later on that evening, when Sir Piers de Currie with the friars of St. Blane's were sitting quiet in the abbey refectory, when the Lady Adela and the mothers of Bute were busy putting the little ones to sleep, Earl Kenric was walking to and fro in front of the gate of the Circle of Penance. He carried his naked sword in his arms, and he wore the heavy chain armour that had not been put aside for four long days. He was very weary, for he had had a long day's fighting, and no sleep had he known since the night of his adventure in Gigha.

He was thinking now of all that had passed, and of the many men, his companions and faithful vassals, who now lay dead. Also he was wondering what had become of the wild girl Aasta. She had done many things for which he owed her deep gratitude. Not only had she given him the great sword of Somerled, with which he had done so much in defence of his people; but it was she who had warned him of the coming of the enemy; it was she who had gone over with him to Gigha, and made it possible for him to learn the plans of the Norsemen. (She had there saved his life, though Kenric knew it not.) It was she who had told him that the great pirate Rudri was his own evil uncle Roderic. He was accordingly much concerned for her safety, and much troubled in his fear of what had happened to her.

Suddenly, in the midst of his musing, someone passed him like a rush of wind. In the dim evening light he saw Ailsa Redmain.

“Ailsa!” he cried, “where go you? Why do you thus come out here where you know full well that none but men may come?”

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"My lord," said she, "it is little Ronald Campbell that I seek, and his sister Rachel. We cannot find them, and they have not been seen by anyone since evensong. Methinks they must have crept under the gate and so wandered into the grove."

"Are there no men who could seek the children as well as you? Go back, Ailsa, and let me seek."

But as he spoke, he heard the sound of children's laughter from among the birch trees, and, believing that Ailsa was turning back, he ran forward towards the woods.

Now little Ronald Campbell was the same who had picked up Earl Kenric's gauntlet on the day of his throning on the Great Plain.

Scarcely had Kenric entered the grove when the laughter he had heard was changed into a scream of terror. Little Ronald, dragging his sister by the hand, came running towards him, pursued by a score of savage Norsemen. Kenric was about to snatch up the children in his arms when he saw it was too late. The Norsemen were upon him. He gripped his sword and stood his ground. At the same moment Ailsa Redmain brushed past him and took the little Ronald by the hand. One of the men of Colonsay darted forward, levelling his spear, and with its sharp point caught the little Rachel. The child fell down, and the spear was but caught in her woollen frock. In an instant Kenric had leapt forward, swinging his sword in air. His heavy blade crashed into the man's skull. Then other twenty men surrounded Kenric, menacing him and pressing forward to reach the children he defended. A man of Colonsay caught Ailsa by her hand, and with his dagger was about to take her life. With a great cry of furious rage Kenric sprang upon him and felled him.

Closer still the Norsemen pressed in upon him. But Ailsa lay down at his feet with the two little ones clasped tightly in her arms, protecting them as a moor hen protects her chicks under the cover of her spreading wings. Kenric, sweeping his blade from right to left, felled every man who came within a couple of paces of Ailsa, until at last the yelling warriors drew back, leaving the young earl standing in the midst of a circle of dead men, with Ailsa and the two children still unscathed.

Then as the enemy, reinforced by many of their comrades from among the trees, and ranking themselves shoulder to shoulder, drew in again, suddenly a shower of arrows poured upon them, and a troop of the men of Bute rushed forward from their ambush.

From another direction a warrior on horseback appeared and crashed in among the Norsemen, felling them with mighty strokes of his heavy battle-axe. Then followed such a slaughter of the Norsemen that in a few minutes not one was left alive.

The warrior on horseback threw his battle-axe upon the ground, and drawing rein, sat upon his saddle with folded arms, and Kenric saw by his armour that he too was one of the enemy, and he marvelled much.

The men of Bute were now eager to make an end of that stranger, for they thought that he was the leader of the men who had thus attempted to surprise the guard and make inroads upon the abbey. But, seeing the man sitting so calm upon his horse and unarmed, they lowered their weapons.

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This stranger horseman was Thorolf the captain, who had followed his rebel guards with intent to intercept them.

“Young man,” said he to Kenric, “I know not who you are, but by the circle of dead men now lying about you, and by the prowess whereby you have saved the lives of these three children, I judge that you can be none other than the young king of Bute.”

“That, sir, is so,” said Kenric, wiping his sword upon a mossy stone and sheathing it. “And who are you, my master?”

“The captain of these rebel scoundrels — Thorolf Sigurdson of Benbecula,” said the warrior, uncovering his head of ruddy curls. “I have been left warden of the castle of Rothesay by Rudri Alpinson; and now do I swear on mine honour, my lord, that this matter that hath just befallen is none of my doings, for I would fain have prevented it. But ’tis but an hour ago that one of your islanders was brought in a prisoner to Rothesay, and it was he who betrayed the harbourage of your people.”

“Who was that man?” asked Kenric with wrathful voice.

“His name, my lord, was David Blair. He is now, for his betrayal, dangling at a rope’s end from the western tower of Rothesay Castle.”

“Well have you served him,” said Kenric; “and now for your courtesy I thank you, Thorolf Sigurdson.”

Then Kenric bade Ailsa Redmain return with the two children to the abbey.

“And now,” he added, turning to the captain, “since you are here I would beseech you to grant me a few days’ truce, that we may have time to bury our dead.”

“For the matter of that,” said Thorolf, “I would willingly extend the truce until the return of Rudri. For there are, if I mistake not, many matters to attend to beyond the burial of the slain. The men of Colonsay, as I hear, have played sad havoc with your homesteads, and it were well that these were put again into decent repair.”

“Your terms are more favourable than I had hoped for,” said Kenric, “and I well see that you are a man of honour.”

“My lord,” said Thorolf, “much do I commend and admire you for what you have done in protecting your islanders. That protection, I do assure you, was much needed, for had your people remained in their homes not one of them would now have been alive. But I swear that they are henceforth safe from all further peril. And now, for my own curiosity alone, I would ask you how it happened that you were so timely warned of the danger that threatened you, my lord?”

Kenric told how William MacAlpin had come to Bute, and how he himself had spied upon the council of King Hakon in Gigha.

“Ah, then, ’twas you who slew the young son of John of Islay?” cried Thorolf, though not in anger. “The lad was found dead on the very rock you speak of.”

“Not so,” said Kenric; “I slew him not. And ’tis now for the first time I hear that he is dead.”

“But you had companions?”

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"A girl was indeed with me. But — ah, surely Aasta cannot have done this thing?"

"Aasta? That is a Norse name. Well, 'tis no business of mine," said the captain; "and now will I return to Rothesay well content that your people have received no greater injuries than they now suffer at the hands of my friends your enemies. Give you goodnight, my lord."

"By my faith, a right honest man!" said Kenric as Thorolf rode away.

"And a good Christian, if I mistake not," said the abbot, who had heard the conversation.

"Ay, and a gallant soldier to boot," added Allan Redmain. "But for his turning upon those ruffians, methinks it would have gone ill with Kenric and my sister Ailsa."

"God be thanked for our escape," murmured the abbot. "And now, if Roderic and his crew come not back over soon, all may yet go well with us. At sunrise we will all set forth with picks and shovels and give a true Christian burial to both friend and foe alike. And God rest their souls, one and all."

CHAPTER XXVII. THE BATTLE OF LARGS.

Two weeks of gloomy weather passed, with clouded skies and fitful winds. During that time nothing was heard in Bute of either Roderic the Rover or King Hakon of Norway. Kenric and his men, with the priests of St. Blane's, made busy work in burying the dead. Also, they got all their shipmen and fishers, farm workers and shepherds, to build up the devastated cottages and farmsteads, and one by one these dwellings again received their wonted inmates. The villages of Rothesay, Ardbeg, Kames, Ascog, and other settlements in the island had been roughly handled by the invaders, and many farms had been despoiled. But for the greater part the shells of the houses had been left standing, and there were many hands to make light work of restoring them.

The Lady Adela of Rothesay, Lady Grace de Currie, Ailsa Redmain, and the women of Rothesay Castle took up their quarters in the nunnery attached to the barony of St. Blane's, for none would return to the castle while yet a Norseman remained therein; and Kenric had passed his word that he would not attempt to regain possession of his stronghold until the kings of Norway and Scotland had settled their dispute.

On the last day of September Sir Piers de Currie, Kenric, and Allan — now Sir Allan Redmain, for the knighthood of Scotland was hereditary — were walking over from Ascog, when, looking towards the seaboard between Arran and the Cumbraes, they observed a great fleet of ships, with many flags flying from their masts, making across the Clyde. A hundred and fifty war galleys there were in all.

"The saints protect us!" cried Allan. "What means all this?"

“Tis even as I expected,” said Kenric. “They are the ships of Hakon of Norway, who now intends to invade the mainland.”

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"Then, if this be indeed so," said Sir Piers, "methinks it is now our place to be following under the banner of our sovereign. Too long have we already delayed. To your ships, Kenric! To your ships this very hour! Muster your men and let us at once hasten over to Cunningham, for, if I mistake not, King Alexander must even now be marching to the coast. 'Tis but small help that we can offer, but let it not be said that we shirked our duty in the hour of Scotland's need."

"Go, Sir Allan," said Kenric, "hasten to the headland of Garroch and there blow me on your horn the call to arms. Not long will our men be in answering that summons."

"And now, Sir Piers, to you do I resign the command of our forces. Give us your directions and we will promptly obey."

"Let every man who can draw a longbow, or wield pike or sword, be sent upon the ships," said the knight. "At noon, when the tide is at the half flood, we set sail for Gourock."

"Gourock?"

"Even so. The bay of Gourock is our best shelter, and thence we can march southward towards Largs, or to whatsoever spot the enemy determine to make their landing place."

"'Tis well," said Kenric.

"And furnish me with the best horse you can find," added Sir Piers, "for 'tis on horseback that I would fight."

So at noon that day seven galleys hove anchor in the bay of Kilchattan, with each a company of seven score men; in all a thousand gallant islanders sailed that day from Bute. Creeping up the shores of the island, past Kerrycroy and Ascog, they steered across by Toward Point. And by this time the fleet of King Hakon had disappeared into the channel that flows between the two Cumbrae islands.

As Kenric's ships crossed the Clyde a drizzling rain came on, and the wind began to blow in fitful gusts from the southwest. But they reached the safe harbour of Gourock without mishap, and there cast anchor.

That night the half moon that shone dimly through the scudding clouds lay on her back, with a great circle of light around her, betokening stormy weather.

The next morning, which was the 1st of October, was cold and windy. Sir Piers ordered his troops ashore, leaving but a few shipmen to watch the galleys. Landing amidst a shower of heavy hail he was met by a party of mounted Scots clad in complete mail, who told him that King Alexander had already started from Lanark with fifteen hundred mounted men-at-arms.

Sir Piers marshalled his islanders in order and gave the word to march, and ever as they moved southward they were joined by the villagers and parties of sturdy fighting men.

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Kenric and Allan, with Duncan Graham at their side, marched afoot, for both were wont to feel ill at ease in the saddle. Nevertheless Allan cast many an envious glance at the gallant knight who led them. Sir Piers was clothed in the most beautiful suit of armour that had ever been seen in that time. His horse was a powerful Spanish jennet that had belonged to Earl Hamish of Bute, and it was protected by a heavy breastplate and flank armour. The rider was splendidly armed from head to foot, his helm and coat of mail being inlaid with gold. At his left side there hung a long claymore, longer by three inches than Kenric's great sword. In his right hand he held a ponderous battle-axe of solid brass, and from his pommel there hung a spiked mace whose head was as large as the head of a man. His belt was studded with precious stones. Not in all his army had King Alexander a stronger or nobler warrior than Sir Piers de Currie; nor had he one, either strong or weak, who had a deeper hatred against the Norse invaders, for they had burnt down his castle of Ranza, and by them had his own uncle's castle of Brodick been razed to the ground and his uncle slain. He was to fight that day for his beautiful wife and his children, for the possession of his estates, for his revenge against his enemies, and for his King and country; and none who saw him could have doubted that he would prove a most valiant and powerful antagonist.

Kenric had on his crested helm of brass, and wore a shirt of steel mail. His knees and arms were bare, showing his firm muscles and the suntanned skin; on his feet he wore buskins of double hide, and his legs were protected by brass greaves. Over his back his longbow was slung beside his full arrow sheaf. At his right side was his dirk, at his left the sword of Somerled. On his arm he carried a small round shield studded with nails, though this was more an encumbrance than a defence, since his sword required the use of his two hands, and the shield might only be employed as a protection against arrows fired from a distance.

Sir Allan Redmain was attired in like manner. As to their islanders, some few of them of the better condition — as Duncan Graham and Ronald Gray — wore shirts of mail, but the larger number, so far from desiring armour when they came to close quarters with the enemy, even threw their plaids aside and fought in their shirts, bare legged, bare armed, bare headed. Many of them carried bows and arrows; all had either claymores or pole-axes, with daggers and targets.

They had marched some ten miles southward through the sheltered glens of Noddsdale when, mounting to the ridge of the range of hills that rise above the shores of Cunningham, they were met by a keen icy wind from the southwest. Below them stretched the wide Firth of Clyde, turbulent, angry with foam-capped waves. Far across the water rose the giant mountains of Arran, with their tattered peaks frowning in dark-blue blackness against the leaden sky, and through a rent in the clouds a long beam of sunshine shot, slanting down for a moment upon the soft green hills of Bute. On the nearer side were the two islands of Cumbrae, with a strip of gray sea between them, where lay the storm-tossed galleys of King Hakon the Old.

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These ships, which during the night had taken shelter in the harbour that is now named Millport Bay, were already making for the shores of the mainland below the village of Largs, for it was at this point that the Norse king had determined to land his invading forces.

Largs was not a spot which a modern general would have chosen for an invasion. It was ill suited for troops forming in strength after landing. There is a narrow strip of level ground, with bluffs rising right up from it. Troops marching along this strip, either north or south, would be flanked by the higher ground for many miles. To attempt to pass through any of the ravines which pierce the range of hills would have been perilous. Nevertheless Hakon had chosen this landing place.

"Methinks," said Sir Piers de Currie, as he watched the Norse galleys battling with the waves, "that our work is already half accomplished. Should the wind rise yet higher no easy task will Hakon find it to land his men on that lee shore."

"Had I been he," said Kenric, "it is not thus that I would have lingered among the isles ere I made a descent upon the mainland. Had Hakon pressed onward with all his forces, instead of despatching a squadron here and a squadron there for useless plundering, had he made straight for Scotland while yet the fair weather continued, and while yet King Alexander was unaware of his approach, he might even have made a successful conquest.

"But look eastward yonder across the hills at the fair troop of Scots advancing in battle array. Look down upon the plain of Largs, where a good two thousand men are waiting ready. Soon will King Alexander himself be here with his cavalry from Lanark. By my faith, the Norseman will have a warmer welcome than he looks for!"

"Let us then hasten downward," said Sir Piers, "that we may have a taste of the battle before the elements have entirely robbed us of our foe."

Troop after troop of Scots marched onward toward Largs. From Ayr they came, from Renfrew, Dumbarton, Stirling, Turnberry, and many another stronghold that had been warned of the enemy's nearness by means of beacon fires on the highest hilltops.

But of the forces that were making ready to meet them the Norsemen knew little. They were at present too much engaged in attending to the safety of their ships, and not any of them could make a landing that day. The wind rose higher, the tempest increased in fury, and at nightfall there came a deluging storm of hail and rain which continued until late next morning.

For this the Scots cared little. Curling themselves up with their plaids about them they slept soundly upon the heather, undisturbed by the howling of the wind and the raging of the waves upon the rocky shore. But with the invaders it was far from being such an

easy matter. Their anchors dragged. Many vessels had to have their masts cut away. King Hakon's own gallant ship, although secured by seven anchors, was driven from her moorings, and five galleys were cast ashore.

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And now when the tempest seemed to threaten the total destruction of their enemies, a mixed multitude of armed Scots on the surrounding heights watched every movement of the Norwegian fleet, ready to take instant advantage of its distress. So, when the five galleys with their armed shipmen were driven ashore, Sir Piers de Currie and the men of Bute rushed down from the heights and attacked the stranded vessels. Whereupon the Norsemen defended themselves with great gallantry.

The rest of the fleet were presently seen beating up the channel towards Largs, and, as the tempest had lulled, reinforcements soon landed in such numbers that the Scots were forced to retire towards the heights.

At sunrise King Hakon himself came ashore with a force of three thousand men, ordering an advance towards the higher ground. At the moment when the marching order was given the army of King Alexander appeared upon the hilltop. The sun's rays breaking through the ragged clouds sparkled upon spears and cuirasses. The cavalry made a noble appearance. Most of them were knights and barons from the neighbouring counties, armed from head to heel, and mounted on Spanish horses which were clothed in complete armour. With this troop of fifteen hundred horsemen was a vast body of foot soldiers.

Seeing all this, Sir Piers de Currie no longer hesitated to renew his engagement. Rallying his men he began to skirmish with the advance of the Danes and Norwegians. He pressed on both flanks with so much fury that, fearing they would be cut to pieces — as many were — the enemy began a retreat which soon changed into a flight. King Hakon and many of his best fighting men scrambled into the boats and pushed off into the safety of the deeper water, regaining their ships.

Everything now depended upon the landing of reinforcements. But at this critical moment a violent storm of hail came on; the wind rose again with such strength that it completed the ruin of many of the ships. In the midst of the fighting on land there was a still more furious battle upon the waves. Galley after galley was driven upon the rocks, and their crews had little spirit for meeting their overpowering enemies.

Between the anger of the elements and the ceaseless showers of arrows from the Scots, their army was greatly distressed. Their leaders, too, began to desert them, and in their frantic efforts to escape they overcrowded the boats, many of which went down.

Sir Piers de Currie now drew up his men in line on the hillside, and left them in charge of Allan Redmain and Kenric. Then he rode to meet the King, whose troops had by this time descended to the level ground.

“So, then, Sir Piers,” said Alexander, whose tall figure, as he sat on his brown jennet, was almost wholly covered by a great cloak — “so you have arrived before us? And are we then to have no share in this adventure? ’Tis passing unfriendly in you thus to

dismiss our enemy ere we have seen his face. Tarry awhile and let them land again. Our horsemen here are like hounds straining at the leash. What men have you, Sir Piers?"

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"A few hundred peasant lads, your Majesty, and some eight hundred men of Bute," said the knight.

"And are there then none of your own men of Arran?"

"Alas, sire, these Norse dogs have left me but a handful of followers, for my uncle has been slain, and our four castles have been taken. Our islanders have taken refuge among the mountains. I and my family, who, by God's grace, escaped, have been these two weeks past in Bute, where Earl Kenric has most heroically saved the lives of many hundreds of your loyal subjects. 'Tis true he has lost his castles of Rothesay and Kilmory, but —"

"Kenric of Bute has done well," said the King. "We have already heard of all that he has done for the people of Bute. It was from one of his own messengers that we first heard of Hakon's arrival on our coasts. Kenric shall not be forgotten. Our only regret is that he did not put an end to that villainous outlaw his uncle. But there may yet be hope that Roderic is in the field this day. So we pray you, Sir Piers, should you encounter him, deal him his death blow, and you shall have our eternal gratitude. And now to your work, and God defend the right."

Then as Sir Piers rode off to rejoin his troops, the King turned to a stalwart warrior at his side and bade him show King Hakon a lesson in defence. This warrior was Alexander the high steward of Scotland, a man bred in the use of arms, and, next to Sir Piers de Currie, the most valiant soldier that fought in that field. And with him rode three good English knights who were of the court of Alexander. With a full company of cavalry he rode across the plain and took up his position with Sir Piers de Currie.

During this interval the hailstorm had abated, and the Norsemen had again effected a landing in great numbers under the chiefs Ogmund Kraekidantz and Haffling of Orkney.

Sir Piers de Currie and the steward rode forward side by side, attempting in the chivalrous style of the time to provoke an encounter. But none would take this challenge, so Sir Piers rode back. Then the steward, riding in front of the ranks of the enemy who were drawn up along the beach, was speedily surrounded. Spurring his charger, he dashed forward, and wielding his great battle-axe he struck down the opposing Norsemen as the waving wheat falls before the sickle, leaving a row of slain men in his track.

The Norsemen then rushed forward with loud cries to meet the troops of peasants and men of Bute who charged them. But the horsemen galloped in between and drove the enemy along the shore. The fair-haired warriors of the North again and again rallied and behaved with the accustomed bravery of their viking ancestors, fearless of wounds and glorying in warlike death.

Many galleys were then brought nearer inshore, and though assailed by heavy stones from the Scots' machines and ceaseless showers of arrows, their men scrambled upon the beach. And now Sir Piers de Currie again rode forward, followed by Kenric, Allan Redmain, Duncan Graham, many men of Bute, and others of Lanark and Ayr. This was the one sortie of the engagement that was in the nature of a real battle. In numbers the two sides were almost equal.

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Sir Piers was met by five Norse chiefs, and he encountered them with fierce courage. One by one he felled them to the ground, cleaving their brass helmets with his heavy axe. And ever as they fell their places were taken by as many others. At his horse's left side fought Kenric, Allan, and Duncan; Kenric swinging his great sword and smiting right and left at those who tried to reach the horseman, Allan and Duncan in like manner fighting with steady blows. And thus they pressed their way ever farther into the ranks of the enemy, moving with Sir Piers, backward or forward, and defending his left side as he slew his assailants on his right.

Kenric heard the gallant knight's panting breath growing weaker.

"To the other side, Duncan," he cried. And Duncan Graham worked round behind the horse's tail to relieve Sir Piers of some of his foes who pressed upon him. Not long had he changed his position when Kenric saw the horse swerve and fall. A deep groan from Sir Piers was all that told of the terrible wounds he had received.

The Norwegian chronicle recording this fight says that Sir Piers de Currie was killed by a blow which severed his thigh from his body, the sword cutting through the greaves of his armour and penetrating to the saddle. Howbeit the brave Sir Piers was slain, and the man who slew him was the outlaw Roderic MacAlpin.

Duncan Graham, seeing who had done this thing, at once closed with Roderic, and the two fought with terrible vigour.

Now Duncan, ever since he had received that wound in his chest over at Coll, had lost the power to raise his right arm above his head, and it went ill with him. When Kenric, rushing to Sir Piers de Currie's right side, first saw his enemy, Roderic was in the act of smiting a fearful blow upon Duncan's bare and outstretched neck. Duncan fell, not even uttering a groan, so speedily fatal was the blow he had received.

But above the clang of the battle and the thunderous surging of the waves, there rose at this moment into the air a woman's cry of anguish. It was the cry of Aasta the Fair.

Wearing the same coat of mail and helmet that she had worn at the siege of Rothesay, and wielding a light broadsword, she had been fighting with as fearless bravery as any man there present. She had cloven her way through the battling men to the place where rose the towering head of her lover Duncan, and arrived at his side at the very moment when the sword of Roderic smote him down. Splashed with her lover's blood she gripped her sword, nor paused to see if Duncan were indeed dead. She leapt with a wolf-like howl upon Roderic MacAlpin, and so pressed him with her blows that he stepped back and back.

The maid, though strong, was ill-trained in the use of the sword, and her every blow was skilfully parried. But to Aasta's side came Kenric, his eyes gleaming with fierce hatred

of his foe. They were now at the very verge of the sea, and the spray from the surging billows fell upon them like heavy rain. Roderic struck at Aasta, muttering a curse, and Kenric in parrying that blow missed his chance. He saved Aasta's life, but before he could recover his weapon, Roderic had quickly turned round and plunged into the foaming waves.

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Promptly did Kenric thrust his sword between his knees and take his longbow from over his shoulder. Aasta as promptly handed him an arrow. He saw Roderic standing waist deep in the breakers sheathing his sword. He levelled an arrow at his throat, but quickly as the arrow flew Roderic raised his shield. The dart plunged into the hard board. Another and another arrow followed with the same result. Then Roderic, throwing himself into the deeper water, and holding his shield to defend his bare neck, swam outward towards the ships.

No other man in all that host could have breasted those great waves without being dashed to pieces on the rocks. But Roderic MacAlpin was as much at home in the water as upon the dry land, and though Kenric believed that he had but preferred a watery grave to being hacked to death by sword or axe, yet Roderic reached his ship in safety and lived to fight another day.

Kenric, returning with Aasta from the beach, found Allan Redmain, surrounded by many men of Bute, fighting still. There was a great sword cut across his cheek, but his strong arms waved about him unceasingly, smiting down at every blow one of the fair-haired warriors of the North. Then Kenric joined in the fray, swinging his trusty blade to right, to left, and forcing his way to Allan's side, where he stood his ground over the dead body of Sir Piers de Currie.

That good knight's splendid armour had caught the eyes of his covetous foes, who were also enraged at the thought of the many doughty Norsemen who had fallen under his mighty blows. Twelve of their best men were victims of his well-wielded battle-axe, and of the twelve were the Norse barons Ogmund Kraekidantz, Thorlang Bosi, Paul Soor, Andrew Nicholson, and King Hakon's own nephew, Hakon of Steini, all of them most gallant and brave warriors.

But not less enraged were the Scots on their side at the death of Sir Piers, whose body now became the centre point of battle. The Norsemen strove to gain possession of his armour, and piece by piece they carried it away. But ever the Scots bore down upon their foes. Swords, pikes, and axes dripped with the crimson drops of battle, arrows and heavy stones fell in the midst of the contending forces; the groans of the wounded, the lusty shouts of the deep-throated combatants sounded loud above the raging of the wind and the thunderous beating of the waves.

Very soon the foemen shrank away, leaving a great gap in their lines through which the Scots cavalry charged, driving the Norsemen to their ships, or forcing them into the turbulent sea.

At the head of the cavalry rode the Scottish King with his valiant steward at his side. But little did the horsemen do, for the enemy, already routed by the defenders, and further dispersed by the tempest of wind and hail, gave up the fight. Many scrambled

upon their boats and pushed off from land, and very soon there was scarce a living Norseman to be seen upon the strand.

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The steward of Scotland then drew up his forces to the heights, where they formed anew. There they remained for many hours in the shelter of the woods, for the storming of the elements was terrible to behold.

Towards evening the tempest lulled and the Norsemen, still undaunted, again ventured ashore in vast numbers, landing their boats through a tremendous surf. These new troops, led by Roderic MacAlpin and Haffling of Orkney, attacked the Scots upon two points, making a desperate charge, and with such success that they killed many and drove the whole army back into the farther valley. But here the Scots suddenly halted. Their left wing wheeled round, and taking the invaders in their rear they speedily brought to an end that battle of Largs.

The relics of this brave body of invaders, with their two leaders, again embarked in their boats, and although the storm continued, safely arrived at the fleet. The remaining ships of Hakon were woefully shattered; they drove from their anchors, many were stranded on the shore, others struck against shallows and rocks, or found equal disaster by running foul of each other.

The next morning presented a beach covered with dead bodies and a sea strewn with wreckage.

King Hakon himself had never so much as drawn his sword. His barons and officers had urged him to remain on board his ship. Defeated, and dismayed at his manifold disasters, he called for a truce for the burial of his dead, and five days were spent by friend and foe in consort in raising above the graves of the fallen warriors those rude memorials the traces of which still remain to mark the field of battle.

Of the twenty thousand followers of the Norse king scarcely as many hundreds remained alive, and of his splendid fleet but a score of dismantled galleys were left afloat to carry back the defeated invaders to their several homes.

Crossing to the outer seas, Hakon gathered about him the few pirate chiefs who had joined him in the hope of plunder, and upon them he bestowed as rewards for their service the islands of which he had made imaginary conquest. He gave the isle of Arran to Earl Margad, who had invaded it, and upon Roderic MacAlpin he bestowed the isle of Bute. These chiefs, however, did not at once take possession of their estates, but remained on the ships that they might help to replenish the exhausted provisions of the fleet by forcible contribution from the isles.

King Hakon now felt the vast change that had come over his armament during the few weeks since he sailed down among the Western Isles, conquering and winning to his side the island princes as vassals of his flag. He returned as a baffled invader, and encountered many severe rebuffs from the islanders as well as further disasters from the winter storms. The fatigues of that expedition and his bitter disappointments sank

deep into his old heart, and never again did he see the home that he had left. Landing in Orkney on the 29th of October, he remained in the palace of Kirkwall, and there died a broken-hearted man.

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So concluded this memorable expedition against Scotland, which began with high hopes, but ended only with disaster and the death of its royal leader. No more did the sons of the vikings attempt to take their stand upon the Western Isles.

Alexander III, freed from a restless and powerful enemy, could look forward to a continuance of peace and prosperity. But he lost no time in following up the advantages he had gained from the engagement at Largs. In the following year he sent a strong military force against those unfortunate chiefs who during the late expedition had remained faithful to Hakon. Some of the island kings were executed; all were reduced.

Three years afterwards, in 1266, the disputes with Norway were finally settled by a formal treaty with Magnus IV, Hakon's son, who agreed to yield to Scotland for ever after, all right and sovereignty over the Isle of Man and the Western Isles, specially reserving Orkney and Shetland to the crown of Norway.

In the year 1281 a bond of friendship was established between the two nations by the marriage of the Scottish princess Margaret, daughter of Alexander III, to Eric of Norway, the grandson of Hakon the Old. It was the daughter of this marriage, Margaret the Maid of Norway, whose sad death in 1290 brought about the disputes of Bruce and Baliol, and led to the great war of Scottish Independence.

CHAPTER XXVIII. AASTA'S SECRET MISSION.

Since the invasion of Bute, when Elspeth Blackfell's cottage had been laid in ruins, Aasta the Fair had taken up her abode with the old woman in a little cave that may still be seen opening out upon the wooded heights above Ascog Bay.

On an evening in late December the maiden sat in this cave. Her fair head, with its long flowing hair, was resting in her hands, and her deep blue eyes were fixed upon the glow of a peat fire that burned in the middle of the chamber, and reflected its warm light upon the deerskin curtain at the entrance. From without came the sighing of a bitter east wind that blew in biting gusts across the Clyde.

The three months that had passed since the battle of Largs had brought but little joy into Aasta's lonely heart. The destruction of the castle of Kilmory, and the coming of winter, had deprived her of her daily occupations upon the farm lands, and her work would not be renewed until Allan Redmain had rebuilt his castle and spring had softened the frozen fields. The frosts and snows had brought many hardships; food was scarce, and life in that rocky cave had few comforts. More than all, Duncan Graham, whom she had hoped to wed, was dead — slain in battle by the sword of the outlaw Roderic. Aasta almost felt that she had rather have been slain at her lover's side than live longer without him in a world that offered her so little joy.

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But in her despair for herself she yet was comforted by the knowledge that the Earl Kenric had been spared to his people, and that the Norsemen had finally left him in possession of his castle and lands. It was of Kenric that she was now thinking as she sat before the fire. Ever since that night in September, when she had journeyed with him to Gigha, she had felt a strange, close sympathy with him, an affection for him that was stronger than any other feeling she had ever known. Kenric's peaceful happiness was the one thing that she yearned for.

But now, when she had thought such happiness was surely before him, an unexpected danger had suddenly arisen. Roderic the Rover was still alive. The battle which had brought about the death of so many of his companions had spared him. The raging elements that had destroyed so many of the ships had left Roderic's galley unharmed. He had voyaged into the far north with the defeated King Hakon, and after Hakon's death he had returned to Gigha. On any day he might be expected again in Bute.

Aasta had just heard this unwelcome news from a fisherman who had come ashore at Ascog, and she was questioning in her mind how she might profit by the occasion and, unknown to Kenric, go secretly over to Gigha and compass the death of this powerful enemy of Bute. She hated Earl Roderic as the cushat hates the nighthawk, and if by some subtle means she could bring him to his death, then might she deem herself fortunate indeed, and her own life not wholly thrown away by a sacrifice that would be the means of ensuring lasting happiness to the lord of Bute.

A new light beamed in her large eyes as she determined at all hazards to attempt this thing.

Presently she rose from her little wooden stool and took down a heavy cloak that she threw about her shoulders. Then from under a sheepskin mat she drew forth a long sharp dirk, which she placed in her leathern belt. She went further into the cave and put some bread cakes into her wallet. Then drawing aside a curtain that shut off a side chamber in the rocky walls, she held up a lighted cruse lamp and looked for a few silent moments upon the sleeping form of Elspeth Blackfell.

"Fare you well, Elspeth," she murmured softly. "It may be that I shall never see you again — no, never again. But God will reward you for the great goodness you have shown to your poor Aasta. Fare you well."

As she sighed and dropped the curtain she turned to leave the cave, and there crept towards her the gaunt form of a great dog wolf, upon whose breast there was a patch of pure white hair. The animal lazily stretched himself and yawned, showing his long red tongue and his white fangs. Aasta bent down and patted his shaggy coat.

"No, Lufa, it is alone I go. Get back to your corner," she said coaxingly.

The animal turned tail, and with the obedience of a tame dog went back into the darkness and lay down on his mat of sheepskin, while Aasta, drawing her cloak about her, slipped silently out into the clear twilight and faced the keen east wind.

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Turning along a narrow path that led upward to the head of the bank, she followed the course of a little stream whose pure water was now turned into icy crystals. As she gained the level height the wind blew her hair about her pale and beautiful face. She drew her hood over her head and turned inland. To the south the giant fells of Arran, shrouded in snow, stood out white and distinct against a steel-blue sky, with the wan moon above them. But the ground that Aasta trod was bare and hard, and the drifted snow lay only in the deeper hollows crisp as ice. She crossed the Great Plain beside the Seat of Law, until she came to the wooded shores of Loch Ascog. She observed that the ruffled water of the little lake was of a deep blue, and she thought of the weird belief of that time which held that those waters claimed once every year a new victim, and that they only assumed that dark-blue colour in token of a coming death.

She looked upon Ascog Mere with a superstitious dread, for the people of Bute believed that it was a place of punishment for unhappy spirits, who might often be heard wailing in the dismal morass about its margin. She heard such a wailing even now, though perhaps it was but the whistling of the wintry wind among the frozen reeds, or the tinkling of the ice that was gathering in a film at the water's verge.

Hastening her steps, she sought the shelter of the tall fir trees, and made her way to the southern point of the lake that she might reach the western shores of the island, and so take a fisher's boat across to Gigha by the same easy course that Kenric had taken with her three months before. The journey must now be taken alone, for she meant that the vengeful work she contemplated should be secret, and that Earl Kenric should be rid of his dangerous enemy without knowing by whom or by what means Roderic had been slain.

Scarcely had Aasta emerged from among the trees and crossed towards the lake when she heard the beating of footsteps upon the hard ground. She stood still and listened. Nearer and nearer the footsteps advanced, and presently at the top of a bald knoll in front of her there appeared the tall figure of a man. He was covered by a seaman's great cloak, which he held partly over his face to shield him from the cutting wind. He came rapidly towards her, and when they were but a few paces apart he drew back his cloak, revealing his long red beard.

"Roderic of Gigha!" cried Aasta recoiling a step and feeling for her dirk, as she recognized the man she had set out to slay.

"Ay, Roderic it is," said he smiling grimly. "And methinks, fair damsel, that you are the very same who so cunningly escaped from my ship over at Arrochar — the same also who fought so bravely against me at Largs. By the saints, my pretty one, but you are a most courageous maiden; much do I admire you, and fain would I know you better.

"Nay, be not afraid of me," he added as he saw her draw back from him, "I will not hurt you.

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"What wicked schemes, my lord, have brought you yet again to Bute?" asked Aasta, making pretence to be very calm, and thinking that by seeming to yield to his humour she might be the better able presently to use her dirk.

"If you must know," said he as he stepped aside to the leeward of a great rock, "I come hither to see the old witch Elspeth Blackfell, to reproach her for her false prophecy. Where lives the old hag these wintry days?"

"In the cave of Ascog, if you know that place," said Aasta, promptly deciding how she might entrap him there, and knowing full well that the wolf Lufa would be a sufficient protection for Elspeth.

"I know it well," said Roderic, "and there will I go. And now, how fares the young lord of Bute since he has lost his castles and lands?"

"My lord Kenric's castles and lands are in no wise lost to him," said Aasta more boldly.

"How so? Not lost?" cried Roderic in surprise. "Where, then, is Thorolf Sigurdson, whom I left as warden over my isle of Bute?"

"Thorolf Sigurdson, Heaven bless his honest heart! has gone home these many weeks past to Benbecula, and taken his cowardly Norsemen with him."

"The traitor!" gasped Roderic. "And is the young Kenric again in possession of my castle of Rothesay?"

"The castle of Rothesay was never yours, Earl Roderic, and never shall be," returned Aasta firmly. "His Majesty of Scots hath given us full protection, and for you to seek to remove Earl Kenric from his rightful lordship were vain. If you value your life, my lord, go not near to Rothesay."

"Your warnings are useless, bold maiden," said Roderic with a sneer. "To Rothesay I will surely go, and Kenric, were he the strongest man in all the isles, shall not prevent me from taking my own. I have sworn to bring that whelp to his death, and by St. Olaf he shall die this very night!"

Aasta drew nearer until she stood close enough to touch him. The light of the moon shone upon her beautiful face, and Roderic, standing with his back against the rock, thought that surely she was the fairest woman his eyes had ever beheld.

"My lord," said she softly, as though she meant to help him to his coveted power, "if this be indeed your intention, methinks 'twere well that you should first reckon with me."

Her right hand now grasped the haft of her dirk, her left hand was ready to fly at the man's bare throat.

“Haply I am but a weak woman; yet a woman can oftentimes do that which men would shrink from.”

“Even so,” said he calmly. “And now if you would but help me in this project, I swear to you that I will love you always, and when I am in possession of my lands and castles, I will even make you my wedded wife, and you shall be right happy.”

“Villain!” cried Aasta. Then she flung back her cloak and sprang upon him, seizing his throat and raising her knife to strike it to his heart.

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Roderic saw her eyes flash like two fierce fires. He saw her weapon gleaming in the moon's pale light. With a wild cry of rage he caught her uplifted arm and arrested it.

"Deceitful witch," he cried, "is it thus that you would help me?"

"Even so," said Aasta the Fair. "For now your last hour has come. No mercy will I show you, base villain that you are!"

And then they struggled together in each other's arms, swaying and panting, gripping and twisting, like two furious animals. Aasta held him firmly with her left hand, burying her strong fingers in his thick throat. But at last he freed himself and forced her back. Then with fierce anger he caught her up in his arms and raised her from her feet, and carried her away.

Thereupon Aasta gave forth a loud and piercing cry that sounded far away in the keen winter air.

That cry was heard at the farther side of Loch Ascog, where, in the dingle of Lochly, Allan Redmain was walking northward towards Rothesay. Allan thought at first that it was the cry of some imprisoned spirit in the mere; but again he heard it, and no longer doubted that it was a woman's voice calling for help. He ran back to the southern point of the lake, and searched in the growing darkness for a sign that might tell him what had happened. Nothing could he see but the bare bleak land with its patches of frozen snow, the dark trees waving in the wind, and the still blue surface of the mere where the frost was swiftly congealing the water into transparent ice. And then he thought that his ears had deceived him.

He went onward to Rothesay over the ever-hardening land. The frost bit sharply. Every stream of water shrank into itself in firm clear ice and grew silent. Allan was full-blooded in his strong manhood, but when he reached the castle gates his fingers, toes, and ears were numb with the intense cold.

Before the blazing fire in the great hall he found Kenric with the Lady Adela and his own sister Ailsa.

Another also was there whose presence made Allan forget the cold. This other was sweet Margery de Currie, the eldest daughter of brave Sir Piers. She blushed as Allan entered, and made room beside her for him to sit down. She took his hands in hers and chafed them into warmth, at which the Lady Adela smiled approval, thinking how brave a pair they made.

Presently the servitors entered and made ready the evening meal. Allan rose and drew Kenric aside.

"Over at Kilmory two hours ago," said he, "I learned bad news, my lord."



“What news is that, Sir Allan?” asked Kenric. “Is it that your builders refuse to work in this cold weather? What matters it? Have you not a good home here, where you can see your lady love every day? Have patience, Allan; Margery will wait, and you will be wedded when the springtime comes, and when your castle will be better fitted to receive you —”

“Nay, Kenric, ’tis not such matters as these that trouble me,” said Allan gravely. “The news I speak of is that the rascal Roderic the Outlaw, has, as I believe, returned to Gigha.”



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"Roderic in Gigha!" cried Kenric in alarm. "Alas! and I thought him dead. Who told you this thing?"

"A fisherman of Gigha," said Allan. "But I understood him ill. Methinks we had better inquire of the maid Aasta the Fair, for the fisher spoke with her, and well I wot he told her all."

"Doubtless," said Kenric. "And on the morrow I will even seek Aasta and learn from her if this be true. It may be that there still is work for my sword to perform. Well is it that I have not already fulfilled my intention of casting the brave weapon into the sea."

CHAPTER XXIX. ELSPETH BLACKFELL.

Early on the following morning, which was the last of the year, Elspeth Blackfell awoke to find herself alone in the cave. Aasta was gone; even the wolf Lufa was no longer there, and the fire was dead out. Elspeth with some difficulty kindled the hard dry peats, and went to put some water into the pot to make porridge. The water in the well at the far end of the cave was turned to solid ice. At the cave's entrance there was a fringe of long icicles hanging like sword blades from the bare rock. All was cold and desolate. The black frost had penetrated everywhere, even, it seemed, to the old woman's bones, for she moved slowly and bent for many minutes over the little fire vainly trying to bring warmth into her shrivelled limbs.

When at last she was able to put some broken ice into her pot, she went out into the chill open air, climbed the slippery bank, and stood upon the height looking abroad for Aasta. She heard the tread of footsteps crunching upon the hard ground among the neighbouring trees; but the tread was strangely heavy. It was not that of the light-footed maiden.

Elspeth returned into the cave and began to prepare her meal. The sound of the footsteps continued to fall upon her ears; they came nearer. She went to the entrance and drew aside the deerskin curtain. She started back at sight of Roderic the Outlaw.

"You!" she cried, scowling. "What devil's work now brings you back to Bute? for evil it must surely be that tempts you hither."

"Cease your croaking, Elspeth Blackfell," said he, "and give me food. This cold has crept into my very marrow. Quick, give me food."

Elspeth stood aside and allowed him to enter. He went to the fire and snatched up a burning peat, moving it rapidly from hand to hand, and blowing it into a red glow with his misty breath. Then when he had warmed himself, he took out his dirk and cut up some wood for the fire, making the flames rise high about the pot until the water began to simmer.

Elsbeth, without speaking, brought him an oaten cake, which he ravenously devoured. By the time that he had eaten it the water was boiling. He thrust his strong red hand into the bag of oatmeal, and then proceeded to stir the porridge, while the old woman brought wooden bowls and a dish of goat's milk.

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They ate their meal in silence, each eyeing the other with suspicious glances of mutual hatred. Not until he had appeased his hunger did Roderic say more than a few casual words. Elspeth felt herself in his power, for she was alone, a frail and weaponless old woman against a strong healthy man, whose sword might at any moment be flashed forth to her destruction. She waited, anxiously hoping that Aasta would soon return with the wolf.

"And now, Elspeth Blackfell," said he at last, as he tossed his empty bowl into a corner, "you would know my reason for coming back to Bute, eh? Need you ask it? It is, in the first place, that I may bring my bold nephew Kenric to his account. I am, as you know, a poor defeated warrior. I am tired of battling; I would rest myself awhile. My late sovereign King Hakon of Norway is dead. To Alexander of Scots must I now turn for protection. 'Tis true he has made me an outlaw; but what of that? Bute is mine, Gigha is mine, and Alexander can ill afford to keep me his enemy. I will turn young Kenric from my lands which he usurps, and I doubt not all will yet go well with me."

"Methinks," said Elspeth, "that you will find it no easy matter to turn my lord Kenric from his seat, for Alexander loves him right well, and has assured him of his fullest protection."

"I care not that much for Alexander or Kenric," said Roderic, snapping his fingers. "Think you that I mean to wander about, a homeless vagabond, as I have wandered these few weeks past? Not so; Kenric shall die, and by fair means or foul I shall take his place."

Roderic here stood up to his full height and faced the old woman.

"And now, as to my second motive in returning hither," said he; "it is to have some words with you — a y, you, Elspeth Blackfell — concerning the false prophecy you made me. When, as I landed over at St. Ninian's three moons ago, with my gallant warriors, I besought you in your witchery to tell me the true issue of our invasion, you told me — false-tongued hag that you are — that if the first blood that was drawn should be that of a man of Bute, then my Norsemen should be victorious; and if it was that of a Norseman, then the Scots should win the fight. And I believed you. Now it was a lad of Bute that gave the first blood, and yet the Scots are free and the Norsemen are utterly defeated. Explain me this, thou harridan."

"My lord," said Elspeth, rising and putting the fire between them, "listen to me. What I said at that time may indeed seem passing strange. But though I claim no power, as you mistakenly think, to see into the future, yet nevertheless the words I spake have come true."

"True? How so?" cried he, handling his sword.

“The youth you slew, my lord Roderic, was not of Bute,” said Elspeth with a trembling voice. “Ah! you look with surprise! But wait. You knew not what you did; you knew not who it was that you so wantonly slew.”

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"What mean you? Who then was this youth? Of what land was he, and what was his name?"

Elspeth paused and stepped nearer.

"His name, my lord, was Lulach, and he was the son of Roderic MacAlpin and Sigrid the Fair."

"You lie, vile witch, you lie!" cried Roderic, recoiling as he heard her words, and pressing his hands to his brow.

"Not so," said Elspeth, "the youth you then slew was indeed your own son."

"God forgive me!" murmured Roderic, sinking to his seat and burying his shaggy head in his hands. "Oh, Lulach, Lulach! my son, my son!"

"Well may you weep, my lord; but methinks your punishment is full well deserved. Better had you obeyed our good abbot, and gone upon the holy pilgrimage; better still had you remained content upon your isle of Gigha, and never sought, in your ambition, to wrest from your brother Hamish the larger inheritance that you coveted. But you slew our good Earl Hamish; you slew his son Alpin. Blame now yourself alone in that your folly led you to slay also your own son Lulach. 'Twas an evil game you played, my lord, and your punishment is just."

"Taunt me no more," said Roderic sullenly. "Taunt me no more. But tell me, if it indeed be that my boy is dead — my dear son Lulach, whom I might have loved all these years had I but known he could be found — tell me, when came he into Bute?"

"Long years ago, my lord, when he was but a child, and at the time when you were roving the seas in pursuit of Rapp the Icelander. Had you, instead of following your life of plundering, but come as a friend and brother to Earl Hamish, it may be that you might have found your boy. 'Twas not for me to seek you out, or to send Lulach to the home of a father who was no better than a murdering pirate. The lad was happier where he was, even though he lived the life of a poor thrall."

"Alas! so near, so very near!" murmured Roderic. "And I believed that the kelpie had carried off my bairns, while all the time it was but a few brief miles of sea that divided us!"

"My bairns? Ay, there were two. And the other — the girl — what of her? What of my sweet, blue-eyed Aasta?"

"Aasta? She, my lord, is still in life."

"In Bute?"

“Ay, even in Bute.”

“God be thanked for that!” sighed Roderic. “There is yet some happiness in store for me. Where is she? Where may I see her?”

“This very day may you see her, my lord. Tonight the good abbot of St. Blane’s holds the festival of the New Year. Aasta will be within the chapel.”

“Alas! but I cannot show my face in the company of men,” said Roderic. “I am in hiding as an outlaw, and I am alone and ill-defended.”

“Be, then, upon the headland of Garroch at the midnight hour,” said Elspeth. “Wait there, my lord, and I will send to you either Aasta herself or else a messenger who will tell you all you may wish to know.”

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"Right so," said Roderic; "at midnight on the Garroch Head."

"And now I beg you, Earl Roderic, go hence from this cave. Go hence to your boat and remain there in hiding; for if it be that the maid, who knows you not as her father, should learn of your presence in Bute, your plans will most surely be frustrated."

"I will obey you, Elspeth," said the outlaw, rising.

And forthwith he left the cave.

Elspeth followed him to the heights and watched him journeying southward through the trees. Then when he was out of sight, she went back to the cave and sat down, meditating how she might prevent the meeting she had planned and turn the appointment to a very different account.

She waited for Aasta to return, intending to send the maid at once to Rothesay to warn Earl Kenric that his outlawed uncle was in the island. But as Aasta did not appear before midday, Elspeth took her cloak and staff and prepared to go herself to the castle.

She was putting some new fuel upon the fire, when the curtain at the cave's entrance was drawn aside, and there she saw Kenric himself. He wore an otter skin cap that covered his ears, and a great cloak of sheepskins.

"Give you good day, my lord," said the old woman, her eyes brightening as she offered him a seat beside the fire.

"Knew you ever so cold a day as this, Elspeth? By the rood, but the frost bites keenly! And you, how can you live in this cold cell? It grieves me to see you here. Better it were that you came to bide in our castle — you and Aasta. This is no place for a dog to live in in frosty weather. Where is Aasta? 'Twas her I came to see, for I hear that she has news from Gigha."

"News indeed, Earl Kenric. But not alone from Gigha. Roderic is even in Bute."

"In Bute! When came he?"

"Even this morning he was here in this cave. And he has come hither to do you injury, my lord."

"Doubtless; for when came he to Bute with other intent? Where can I find him?"

"That will I soon tell," said Elspeth, "and glad I am that so little time has been lost. You will find him, my lord, at midnight on the Garroch Head. Take with you your sword of Somerled, and meeting him, send him speedily to his deserved death. You will not fail.

If what I hear of your increased prowess with your weapon be true, assuredly you are now a match even for Roderic MacAlpin."

"What takes him to Garroch at that dread hour?"

"It is that he expects to meet Aasta."

"Aasta?"

"Even so, my lord."

"And wherefore should Roderic have aught to do with the maid?"

"You well may ask," said Elspeth, "and it is not willingly that I would have them meet. But 'twas the only plan I could devise for getting him from my presence and bringing him to a place where you, my lord, may encounter him. As to Aasta, of her and of Roderic I have something strange to tell."

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Kenric looked up at Elspeth in surprise.

“You are young, my lord,” she continued, and you know not the things that have been. But I am old. Not always has it been with me as you see me now. Time was, my lord, when I, who am now a poor infirm woman, decried as a witch, despised of men, was a fair and joyous young maid. My father was a king —”

“A king?” echoed Kenric.

“Even so. And he had his castle under the Black Fell that is in far-off Iceland. Men named me Elspeth White Arm, and my lord and husband was also a king. He was the noblest and truest of all the monarchs of the North, and he was the lord over the Westermann Islands. We had one child, and we named her Sigrid the Fair.”

“Elspeth, Elspeth, What is this that you are saying?” cried Kenric, partly guessing what was to come.

“Sigrid was a wild and self-willed child,” the old woman continued, fixing her blue eyes on Kenric, “but I loved her well. And on a time — ’tis a full score and four years ago — she disappeared, and we could find her nowhere, until my lord went out upon his ship and boarded the galley of a bold viking of the south whose name was Rudri Alpinson, or, as the Scots called him, Roderic MacAlpin. On Roderic’s galley was Sigrid found; but she would not return, for she loved this man Roderic passing well, knowing little of his evil heart. My lord, in trying to win her back, was slain by Roderic’s hand, and thereupon Roderic carried away my child as his willing captive to his island home in Gigha. There he made her his wedded wife. But not long had my lord been dead, not long had his younger brother taken his place as ruler in our land, when my heart so yearned for my fair Sigrid that I took ship and came south in search of her. By chance I landed upon your father’s isle of Bute, for it was of Bute that Roderic had spoken as the home of his fathers.

“The ship that brought me hither was the ship of my brother, Rapp the Iclander. Him I bade go over to Gigha and fulfil for me my vengeance upon my enemy Roderic, and rescue my daughter. But the people secretly told him that Roderic had been cruel to Sigrid, and that her love for him had vanished as the morning mist. My child had lost her reason, and in her mad despair she had gone out one day and cast herself from the cliffs into the sea. Now Sigrid had left two children, and it was said that they were unhappy. So Rapp, searching for them, with intent to carry them off and bring them to me that I might be revenged upon their father, found them one day playing in a great rock tunnel in Gigha.”

“I know the place,” said Kenric; “’twas there that Aasta —”

“Twas there that Rapp the Icelfander found Earl Roderic’s bairns, and from thence he carried them off. Those bairns, my lord, were Aasta the Fair and the boy Lulach.”

“Aasta? Lulach?” cried Kenric in astonishment, as he rose and began to pace the rocky floor. “And they were brother and sister? And they were the children of Roderic — my own cousins? This is a strange thing that you are telling me, Elspeth, and I can scarce believe it!”

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"'Tis none the less true, my lord," said Elspeth.

"And Lulach — it was then his own father who slew him! And it was her own father whom Aasta fought against at Largs!"

"Even so. And pity 'tis that she did not kill him."

"Pity indeed," said Kenric. "And now you say that Roderic is in Bute?"

"He is here with intent to slay you, Earl Kenric, in some such subtle way as he slew your good father. But I have told you where he will be at midnight. Go thither, I charge you, and take the Thirsty Sword that Aasta gave you. And may the blood of our enemy Roderic be the last that it will drink."

CHAPTER XXX. THE BLACK FROST ON ASCOG MERE.

Kenric took old Elspeth back with him to Rothesay, and there, as she would not agree to take up her quarters within the castle, he gave her a little cottage, bidding her remain there in comfort for the rest of her days. As to Aasta the Fair, he had no doubt in his mind that on being told that she was his own cousin, she would yield to him when he asked her to make the castle of Rothesay her home, and he at once besought his mother to make preparations to receive her.

Late in the evening, the moon being at the full, Allan and Ailsa Redmain, with Margery de Currie, set out, attended by two armed guards, for the chapel of St. Blane's, where midnight mass was to be celebrated for the dying year.

Kenric, less cheerful than his three companions, went with them but a little distance. Leaving them to continue their way through the dingle of Lochly, he branched off eastward towards Ascog. He wended his way across the bare hard land, walking with rapid strides, for the night was bitterly cold, and the wintry wind made his cheeks tingle as he bent before it. Under his sheepskin cloak that he held close about his body, he carried his terrible sword.

He kept to the leeward shelter of the rising ground, but at times he was obliged to cross the ridges of the bare hills, and there the wind, sweeping over the wide moonlit firth, was like the cutting of knife blades upon his face. His breath, that gathered as dew upon the down of his upper lip, was turned to beads of ice. The streams and pools of water had shrunk into solid icy masses, and the earth was unyielding as granite rocks.

Still keeping to the uplands, he at length entered into the woods of Ascog, and walked among the dark trees until he stood above the steep path leading downward to

Elsbeth's cave. He descended by the slippery ground, holding on by the dry tree branches.

At the mouth of the cave he stood awhile, stamping his feet that he might be heard. But there was no response. He drew aside the stiff hide curtain and looked within. All was black, cold desolation.

"Aasta? Aasta?" he called. But no voice answered him.

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He went inside the cave and felt about for the place where he had seen Elspeth leave the flint and steel. He lighted a rush candle and looked about him. Everything was as he had left it a few hours before. Aasta had not returned. He found, here a little cap, made of gay feathers and squirrel fur, that Aasta was wont to wear; and there a necklace of bright-hued seashells. In a corner there was a pair of small slippers, trimmed with odd bits of coloured silk, and lined with white hare skin, and beside them a girdle of crimson leather.

He looked upon these objects with strange reverence, but did not dare to touch them.

Then he went to the cave's entrance and stood with his shoulder leaning against the rock, and looking dreamily across the Clyde towards Largs. It was still two hours before midnight, and believing that he was soon to encounter his enemy Roderic in a hand-to-hand combat, he felt a gloomy, melancholy spirit come upon him. If Roderic should overcome him in the fight, how would it be with the people of Bute? They would never be happy under the tyrannical rule of the bold sea rover. What would become of his mother? She would have to leave the castle of Rothesay, and perhaps return, desolate and alone, to England. Sir Allan Redmain, who was now the steward of Bute, would never bend before the man who had brought so much misfortune upon the island. And Aasta, what of her? Would she, who had nursed a hatred against Roderic more bitter even than Kenric's, would she ever recognize this man as her father, however kind he might be to her? No, no. Kenric knew not a man or woman in all the land who would welcome his uncle as their king. No evil could befall them greater than this.

But if Roderic should fall in the fight, there might follow many, many years of peace and happiness in Bute. Kenric pictured what that happiness might be. He pictured his people living in safe prosperity, with thriving commerce and fruitful farms; himself ruling, with what wisdom or justice he possessed, over a contented and law-abiding people — his mother living to a ripe and happy old age in Rothesay Castle. Sir Allan Redmain, his trusty steward and loved friend, would be wedded to Margery de Currie. Aasta would be happy too; he would love her always as his very dear cousin, and who could tell but that some day, when all her past troubles were forgotten, she might marry some great and good nobleman of Scotland, who would restore her to such dignity as she deserved?

There was another of whom, deep in his heart, Kenric thought very tenderly, and that other was Ailsa Redmain. Both he and she were yet young to think of such matters, but he loved her right well, and in a few years' time he might even follow the example of her brother Allan and take unto himself a wife. And if Ailsa would yield to him — But he checked himself in his dreams. All this possible good fortune must depend upon the issue of his encounter with Roderic.

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Standing there at the mouth of the cave, he felt the sharp frost penetrating his limbs, and he turned away.

Regaining the higher ground he began to run, and soon his feet grew warm. Slackening his pace, he walked down towards Ascog Loch, listening the while for the sounds of Aasta's footsteps. Elspeth had told him that the maiden would surely return to the cave two hours before midnight. But she had not come. Had some disaster overtaken her? Whither had she gone?

The story that Elspeth Blackfell had told him had sunk deep in his mind. It explained many things that had before been mysteries to him. He saw in it an explanation of why he had been drawn in affection towards Aasta, and why, in spite of her having been a bondmaid, he had recognized that she was of gentle blood. He was glad that he had given her freedom from her thralldom. And now he thought of how she had bestowed upon him the great sword of his noble ancestor, and reflected that king Somerled was in truth Aasta's ancestor no less than his own. How sweet it was to think of the journey he had gone with her over to Gigha, the home from which as a child she had been carried off with Lulach! It was easy now to understand how she had recognized that rock tunnel through which the little coracle had been paddled. Aasta had thought that she had but seen the place in a dream vision, but haply she had many a time played among those rocky caverns in her infant days.

And now he was going forth with intent to kill Aasta's father, believing that to be the only means by which Aasta's happiness and the welfare of his people of Bute and Gigha could be secured. Aasta herself had tried to slay this man; she had fought with him upon the ships at the siege of Rothesay; she had engaged with him hand to hand in the battle of Largs. She did not then know that Roderic was her own parent; but Roderic had done nothing that could have power to change his daughter's hatred into love, and even if she were now restored to him, would she ever forgive him the injuries he had done?

Kenric turned this question over in his mind, wondering if Aasta would blame him if it should be that he brought her father to his death without first allowing her to speak with him, and for this reason he was ill at ease. But Aasta was nowhere to be found, and Kenric well understood what ills might follow if he missed this chance that Elspeth Blackfell had afforded him of encountering his dread foe.

He was presently upon the shore of Ascog Mere, whose surface was now frozen over with thick clear ice. The black frost of the past night and day had taken into its firm grip the waters of every lake and torrent in the island. Even the distant murmur of the waterfalls of Arran was hushed into silence now, and all around was deathly still. The wind had sunk into a whisper and the few fleecy white clouds up above glided like ghosts across the deep-blue sky. High over the snowy peaks of the Arran mountains the full moon shone like a great silver shield and cast its radiance upon the glassy

surface of the lake. The wintry night was almost as light as day, and every rock and tree stood out distinct and black.

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Kenric left the uneven ground and stepped upon the thick strong ice, which was so clear at the edge that he could even see the shadowy reeds below. He walked outward with steady steps, and bent his course southward in the shimmering track of the moon's light. The lake was very deep, but Kenric had no fear, for the ice was many inches thick and his foothold was sure.

As he reached the middle of the lake, where no sound came to him but the regular tread of his soft hide shoes and the tinkling ring of the ice, a feeling of awe came over him. He solemnly remembered that it was the last hour of the passing year — it might also be his last hour upon earth. He was not afraid; but the deadly silence, the wan light of the moon, the piercing cold, his lonely situation upon that shining stretch of ice, and his knowledge that he would soon be engaged in a mortal combat, whose results must determine so much for himself and for his people, oppressed his mind very strangely; nor could he dismiss from his thoughts the surprising things that he had heard that day concerning Aasta the Fair.

Suddenly, as he looked before him towards the shore that he was approaching, he was startled at seeing a black shadow upon the ice. It was as though some human being were lying there. He saw the figure move. Slowly, stealthily it crept towards him. Kenric stood still, taking off his fur gauntlets and putting his hand to his sword. Then the figure crept more rapidly. Nearer and yet nearer it came. He saw now that it was a large animal. Its glistening eyes and long legs showed that it was a wolf.

He drew his sword and went to meet it. The wolf growled as in hungry anger, and crouched down as though preparing to spring upon him. Kenric raised his sword to strike, the wolf bounded forward, and as his weapon was about to descend upon its head the animal swerved. The moon's light revealed a white patch of hair upon its breast.

Kenric staggered backward, unwilling now to strike.

"Aasta!" he cried. "Aasta? The werewolf?"

At the same moment he loosed his grip of the sword, and the weapon, impelled by the force his arm had given it, flew from his hand, and falling upon the slippery ice skated along for many yards, making a noise like the chirping of a vast flock of finches.

Kenric stepped back yet further and stood ready to meet the wolf, and, if need were, grapple with it. But the animal, startled at the sound made by the sliding sword, ran off towards the shore and quickly disappeared among the shadows of the trees.

What was the meaning of that wolf being there upon the ice? Kenric stood in confused wonderment. And if, as he half supposed, this white-breasted animal was not as other wolves, which fear to tread on ice — if it was in very truth the werewolf form which the

wild Aasta had power to assume, why had she not recognized him? Why had she run away? Was it that she had now taken to the cover of the woods, that she might presently reappear in her own maidenly figure? There was something in all this that passed his understanding.

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He followed a few paces in the direction taken by the wolf, then, remembering his sword, he turned aside. He looked about upon the clear icy surface for his weapon. The force that his arm had given it had sent it far away towards the margin of the mere, to the same spot, indeed, where the werewolf had first been seen. At last he saw the shining blade lying in the midst of the line of light shed by the bright moon upon the polished ice.

He went towards it and bent down to pick it up. The ice where it lay was smooth and transparent as a sheet of glass, and it seemed to Kenric as he bent over it that he saw in it the reflection of his own face. So distinct were the features that he recoiled in sudden alarm. Then he fell down upon his knees, resting upon his outstretched hands. He fixed his astonished eyes upon the face in the ice. A wild cry escaped him. The face was not his own!

Drawing back for a moment he looked once more at the strange image. The rounded cheeks were white as snow; the eyes were motionless and glassy; the beautiful bloodless lips, slightly parted, revealed a row of pearly teeth. It was the face of Aasta the Fair.

Kenric tried to touch her, to take her in his arms. But the intervening ice inclosed her as in a crystal casket. He saw that the stray locks of her long hair, floating in the clear water, had been caught by the quick frost, and that they were now held within the firm thick ice. Upon her fair white throat there were marks as of a man's rough fingers. She held her right hand upon her breast, and in its grasp there was a long sharp dirk.

Kenric rose and stood looking down upon the beautiful form of the dead girl. He was as one who had been stunned by a terrible blow. For many minutes he stood there mute and motionless, with folded hands and bowed head. Soon a snowy cloud passed before the moon and cast a dark shadow upon the ice. The imprisoned image seemed to melt away. Yet Kenric knew that what he had seen was no illusion, but that Aasta the Fair lay lifeless in her frost-bound tomb.

Then Kenric thought of his enemy — who was surely Aasta's enemy even more than his own — and he gripped his sword.

"I will come back," he murmured sadly as he cast once more a lingering glance upon the now indistinct figure beneath the ice. "I will come back, Aasta. And now, a truce to all fear. Let me now meet this man and slay him, for there is no one who can now mourn for his death. It is right that he should die, for the hour of retribution has surely come!"

CHAPTER XXXI. THE LAST DREAD FIGHT.

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Not long was Kenric in covering the few miles between Loch Ascog and Garroch Head. He feared to be too late, for it was already but one short hour before midnight. But his limbs were cold, and he had therefore a double reason for running. Soon, instead of being too cold he became over-hot; his heavy sheepskin cloak oppressed him, and he threw it off, leaving it lying upon the ground. Thus relieved, he slung his sword under his arm and ran on and on past the silent farmsteads, over hard ploughed fields and bare moorland, past the desolate Circle of Penance, and past the little chapel of St. Blane's, where many islanders were already gathered to join in the New Year service. Then for another short mile beyond the abbey he hastened, until from the rising ground he came in sight of the murmuring, moonlit sea.

Now he slackened his pace to a brisk walk, and skirting the line of cliffs he presently came upon the rocky headland of Garroch.

His whole body was in a warm glow; his breath came regular and strong from the depths of his broad chest. He felt himself better fitted for battle, more powerful of limb than he had ever done before, and never had he entered into combat with a fuller sense of the justice of the approaching encounter.

He looked about the bald headland to left and right, but Roderic was not yet to be seen. Kenric's heart sank within him in anxious disappointment. But as he approached the extreme angle of the cape, he saw a tall cloaked figure appear from behind the shelter of a dark rock.

Roderic came slowly towards him, blowing his warm breath into his cold, crisped fists. Kenric's face was in shadow, and the outlaw did not recognize him.

"So," said Roderic, "Elspeth Blackfell has not this time deceived me, eh? 'Twas she who sent you here, young man?"

"It was," Kenric replied.

"And how happens it that she sent not the maid Aasta?"

"'Twas beyond her power, Earl Roderic," answered Kenric in a quivering voice.

"What?" cried Roderic surlily, "beyond her power? Tell me no lies. The old crone is but playing some witch's trick upon me. Where is my daughter, I say? where is my child?"

"Aasta the Fair, Heaven rest her soul! now sleeps beneath the cold ice of Ascog Loch," said Kenric solemnly; "she is dead."

A sudden hoarse cry from Roderic followed these words.

"Dead?" he echoed, "dead, you say, and under the ice of the loch?"

“Even so,” replied the youth, keeping his eye fixed upon Roderic’s movements. “’Tis but a little time since that I saw her lying in the frozen waters.”

Roderic staggered back a pace, wildly. He tugged at the neck of his cloak as though it were stifling him.

“Ah, God forgive me!” he wailed. “Alas, ’twas she — ’twas then my own child who so wildly attacked me yesternight! ’Twas my own Aasta who so boldly fought against me at Largs. ’Twas she whom I took captive in my ship from Rothesay. And ’twas she also who cursed me over at Barone — ay, cursed her own father! Great God, the curse has come true! For my own two children have been slain before my eyes — first Lulach, then herself — and I their father slew them both!”

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"What means this?" cried Kenric, growing pale in the moonlight and grasping his sword. "You slew Aasta? you? Oh, villain!"

"Ah, that voice! methinks I know it," said Roderic, starting in surprise and turning upon Kenric. "So then 'tis you, young Kenric, that is Dame Elspeth's messenger? Much do I thank her for so promptly helping me. By St. Olaf, but this is most fortunate. Ha! no need have you to draw your sword. It will serve you no purpose now. As well might you seek to move Goatfell as think of holding your own against Roderic MacAlpin."

But Kenric, learning thus how Aasta had come by her terrible fate, felt his craving for battle grow stronger. He spoke no word, but stood with his naked weapon ready in his hands.

Roderic threw off his heavy cloak and drew his sword. The moonlight shone in his fierce eyes as he looked upon the strong young form of his antagonist.

From the shore at the foot of the cliff came the mournful sighing of the rising tide. For a few moments the two warriors faced each other in silence. Then like a pair of rival stags they stamped their feet upon the frozen ground. Roderic tried to get Kenric round with the moonlight upon him. But Kenric stood firm as a rock. Their weapons crossed, scraping each upon the other, pressing easily to right and left, and always touching. Then Roderic made a sudden step backward; the swords were point to point. Swiftly, at the same instant, each raised his weapon above his head, grasping its handle with his two strong hands, and flinging it back till his elbows were on a level with his crown.

They rushed together, each taking two steps forward. Their two swords swished through the air; but Kenric's glanced aside with a quick movement of his strong wrists, and caught Roderic's weapon in mid-blade with a ringing clash.

"Well guarded!" muttered Roderic grudgingly. "By the saints, but you are no weakling novice, young man," and he stepped back again to recover.

Now it was not without profit that, on that time many months before, Kenric had watched the fatal duel between Roderic and his brother Alpin, and he knew Roderic's invariable trick of aiming at his assailant's head. His successful guarding of the first blow gave him confidence.

Again the two combatants closed as before, tapping and scraping their blades together; and again they flung back their arms. This time Roderic was quicker in his onslaught, and he aimed from the right. But Kenric, instead of attempting to strike, promptly guarded his left and intercepted the blow as before. Ere Roderic could recover for a new attack, he felt a sharp cut across his bare neck.

He roared in pain and fury, and sprang upon Kenric with redoubled force. The swords clashed together with mighty strokes. Roderic, amazed at Kenric's skilful fighting, grew ever more rash in his attempts to smite him down and conquer him by superior strength; while Kenric, with steady watchful eye, marked every movement, coolly guarding each fearful blow, as though he knew as surely as did his assailant where Roderic intended to strike.

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At last, completely baffled, Roderic paused, drew back, and rested the point of his long sword upon the hard ground.

“To the death!” said Kenric solemnly, also lowering his weapon.

“Ay, to your death be it,” returned Roderic, wiping the blood from his wounded neck with his bare hand. Then again, breathing deeply, he took his ground.

Clash, clash went their mighty swords once more as they closed together in their deadly combat. And now Roderic threw back his weapon with a great swing, and bent his strong body to bring the blade down with a final swoop upon Kenric’s head. He made a furious spring forward. His sword flashed in a half-circle, whizzing through the air with frightful speed. It was a blow that might have felled an ox.

But the ponderous weapon met nothing until, slipping from his blood-wet hand, it fell with a crash upon the hard ground. At the same moment Roderic uttered a groan. He staggered forward with his empty hands outspread. He fell with a heavy thud upon his right shoulder, rolled over, and then lay stretched upon the turf with the point of Kenric’s sword buried deep in his heart.

A deathly silence followed, broken only by the moaning of the sea waves as they curled upon the beach. Kenric breathed a deep sigh. With difficulty he drew his terrible weapon from the breast of his dead foe. The Thirsty Sword had drunk its final draught.

Carrying the weapon away, Kenric stood for many moments upon the extreme point of the jutting headland overlooking the open sea. Taking the Sword in his two hands he swung it in a sweeping circle about his head, and stepping forward flung it far out into the frosty air.

Away it sped like a well-aimed arrow. The moonbeams flashed upon the bright blade as it turned in its descent, hilt downward, and plunged for ever deep, deep into the sea.

Then Kenric stood awhile with clasped hands, looking far across to the Arran fells, whose snowy mantles glanced like silver under the silent moon. From the distance behind him he heard the faint tinkling of the chapel bell, telling him that the old year, with its turmoil and trouble, was at its end; and he dropped down upon his knees and covered his face with his hands.

It was scarcely half an hour after midnight when Kenric walked towards the arched doorway of St. Blane’s chapel. As he drew near he saw the dim light within, shining through the narrow windows of coloured glass, and he heard the solemn murmur of prayer. He was about to enter when a hand was suddenly laid upon his shoulder.

“Tis you, my lord?” said the voice of Elspeth Blackfell. “Then it must surely be that you have fought and vanquished. God be thanked! I feared that it had gone ill with you, for I found your cloak lying upon the heath. Where is the villain Roderic?”

“Roderic is no more!” answered Kenric, taking his cloak from her hands. “And now I go within the chapel to give thanks to God, in that He hath deigned to make me the instrument of His vengeance.”

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“Stay. Ere you enter, tell me, my lord, have you news of my dear Aasta? She has not yet been seen: nor has our watch-wolf Lufa been found. Alas! I fear me the wild maid has gone off to Gigha.”

“Not so,” said Kenric. “But come with me within the chapel, good Elspeth, and when the service is over I will tell you all.”

He gently pushed open the door and drew Elspeth with him. They stood there, looking in at the many rough islanders with their heads bent in devotion. The sonorous voice of the venerable abbot resounded in the vaulted aisle. The cruse lamps hanging from the high rafters shed their dim light upon the bare stone walls, where branches of red-berried holly were entwined with tufts of larch and spruce and sprays of mistletoe. The flickering light of many tapers shone upon the embroidered vestments of the abbot and the gorgeous altar cloth.

Presently the prayer ended; the people rose with shuffling feet. Sir Allan Redmain from his seat in front of the altar looked anxiously round towards the door, as he had done many times during that service, in search of Kenric. He now saw the bent figure of Elspeth Blackfell, and behind her the young king.

As Kenric, leading Elspeth forward, walked slowly up the aisle, Allan did not fail to notice that his sword was not in its accustomed place. The abbot paused until Earl Kenric had taken his seat between Sir Allan Redmain and Ailsa.

Kenric caught Ailsa’s hand and drew it gently to him. He looked down into her eyes as she turned to smile upon him. Then from the choir of white-robed friars there rose the chant of the *Gloria in Excelsis*, swelling full and strong. To Kenric, as he stood by Ailsa’s side, the words came with a deep prophetic meaning — “Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.”

And on that first early dawn of the new year, as he left the holy place to return to his ancestral home, he repeated them again, looking round him on the land for which his sword had won tranquillity:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace towards men of goodwill.”