

The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne

by

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Chapter I

ON the north-east coast of Scotland, in the most romantic part of the Highlands, stood the Castle of Athlin; an edifice built on the summit of a rock whose base was in the sea. This pile was venerable from its antiquity, and from its Gothic structure; but more venerable from the virtues which it enclosed. It was the residence of the still beautiful widow, and the children of the noble Earl of Athlin, who was slain by the hand of Malcolm, a neighbouring chief, proud, oppressive, revengeful; and still residing in all the pomp of feudal greatness, within a few miles of the castle of Athlin. Encroachment on the domain of Athlin, was the occasion of the animosity which subsisted between the chiefs. Frequent broils had happened between their clans, in which that of Athlin had generally been victorious. Malcolm, whose pride was touched by the defeat of his people; whose ambition was curbed by the authority, and whose greatness was rivalled by the power of the Earl, conceived for him that deadly hatred which opposition to its favourite passions naturally excites in a mind like his, haughty and unaccustomed to controul; and he meditated his destruction. He planned his purpose with all that address which so eminently marked his character, and in a battle which was attended by the chiefs of each party in person, he contrived, by a curious finesse, to entrap the Earl, accompanied by a small detachment, in his wiles, and there slew him. A general rout of his clan ensued, which was followed by a dreadful slaughter; and a few only escaped to tell the horrid catastrophe to Matilda. Overwhelmed by the news, and deprived of those numbers which would make revenge successful, Matilda forbore to sacrifice the lives of her few remaining people to a feeble attempt at retaliation, and she was constrained to endure in silence her sorrows and her injuries.

Inconsolable for his death, Matilda had withdrawn from the public eye, into this ancient seat of feudal government, and there, in the bosom of her people and her family, had devoted herself to the education of her children. One son and one daughter were all that survived to her care, and their growing virtues promised to repay all her tenderness. Osbert was in his nineteenth year: nature had given him a mind ardent and susceptible, to which education had added refinement and expansion. The visions of genius were bright in his imagination, and his heart, unchilled by the touch of disappointment, glowed with all the warmth of benevolence.

When first we enter on the theatre of the world, and begin to notice its features, young imagination heightens every scene, and the warm heart expands to all around it. The happy benevolence of our feelings prompts us to believe that every body is good, and excites our wonder why every body is not happy. We are fired with indignation at the recital of an act of injustice, and at the unfeeling vices of which we are told. At a tale of distress our tears flow a full tribute to pity: at a deed of virtue our heart unfolds, our soul aspires, we bless the action, and feel ourselves the doer. As we advance in life, imagination is compelled to relinquish a part of her sweet delirium; we are led reluctantly to truth through the paths of experience; and the objects of our fond attention are viewed with a severer eye. Here an altered scene appears;—frowns where late were smiles; deep shades

where late was sunshine: mean passions, or disgusting apathy stain the features of the principal figures. We turn indignant from a prospect so miserable, and court again the sweet illusions of our early days; but ah! they are fled for ever! Constrained, therefore, to behold objects in their more genuine hues, their deformity is by degrees less painful to us. The fine touch of moral susceptibility, by frequent irritation becomes callous; and too frequently we mingle with the world, till we are added to the number of its votaries.

Mary, who was just seventeen, had the accomplishments of riper years, with the touching simplicity of youth. The graces of her person were inferior only to those of her mind, which illumined her countenance with inimitable expression.

Twelve years had now elapsed since the death of the Earl, and time had blunted the keen edge of sorrow. Matilda's grief had declined into a gentle, and not unpleasing melancholy, which gave a soft and interesting shade to the natural dignity of her character. Hitherto her attention had been solely directed towards rearing those virtues which nature had planted with so liberal a hand in her children, and which, under the genial influence of her eye, had flourished and expanded into beauty and strength. A new hope, and new solitudes, now arose in her breast; these dear children were arrived at an age, dangerous from its tender susceptibility, and from the influence which imagination has at that time over the passions. Impressions would soon be formed which would stamp their destiny for life. The anxious mother lived but in her children, and she had yet another cause of apprehension.

When Osbert learned the story of his father's death, his young heart glowed to avenge the deed. The late Earl, who had governed with the real dignity of power, was adored by his clan; they were eager to revenge his injuries; but oppressed by the generous compassion of the Countess, their murmurs sunk into silence: yet they fondly cherished the hope that their young Lord would one day lead them on to conquest and revenge. The time was now come when they looked to see this hope, the solace of many a cruel moment, realized. The tender fears of a mother would not suffer Matilda to risque the chief of her last remaining comforts. She forbade Osbert to engage. He submitted in silence, and endeavored by application to his favourite studies, to stifle the emotions which roused him to aims. He excelled in the various accomplishments of his rank, but chiefly in the martial exercises, for they were congenial to the nobility of his soul, and he had a secret pleasure in believing that they would one time assist him to do justice to the memory of his dead father. His warm imagination directed him to poetry, and he followed where she led. He loved to wander among the romantic scenes of the Highlands, where the wild variety of nature inspired him with all the enthusiasm of his favourite art. He delighted in the terrible and in the grand, more than in the softer landscape; and, wrapt in the bright visions of fancy, would often lose himself in awful solitudes.

It was in one of these rambles, that having strayed for some miles over hills covered with heath, from whence the eye was presented with only the bold outlines of uncultivated nature, rocks piled on rocks, cataracts and vast moors unmarked by the foot of traveller, he lost the path which he had himself made; he looked in vain for the objects which had directed him, and his heart, for the first

time, felt the repulse of fear. No vestige of a human being was to be seen, and the dreadful silence of the place was interrupted only by the roar of distant torrents, and by the screams of the birds which flew over his head. He shouted, and his voice was answered only by the deep echoes of the mountains. He remained for some time in a silent dread not wholly unpleasing, but which was soon heightened to a degree of terror not to be endured; and he turned his steps backward, forlorn, and dejected. His memory gave him back no image of the past; having wandered some time, he came to a narrow pass, which he entered, overcome with fatigue and fruitless search: he had not advanced far, when an abrupt opening in the rock suddenly presented him with a view of the most beautifully romantic spot he had ever seen. It was a valley almost surrounded by a barrier of wild rocks, whose base was shaded with thick woods of pine and fir. A torrent, which tumbled from the heights, and was seen between the woods, rushed with amazing impetuosity into a fine lake which flowed through the vale, and was lost in the deep recesses of the mountains. Herds of cattle grazed in the bottom, and the delighted eyes of Osbert were once more blessed with the sight of human dwellings. Far on the margin of the stream were scattered a few neat cottages. His heart was so gladdened at the prospect, that he forgot he had yet the way to find which led to this Elysian vale. He was just awakened to this distressing reality, when his attention was once more engaged by the manly figure of a young Highland peasant, who advanced towards him with an air of benevolence, and, having learned his distress, offered to conduct him to his cottage. Osbert accepted the invitation, and they wound down the hill, through an obscure and intricate path, together. They arrived at one of the cottages which the Earl had observed from the height; they entered, and the peasant presented his guest to a venerable old Highlander, his father. Refreshments were spread on the table by a pretty young girl, and Osbert, after having partook of them and rested awhile, departed, accompanied by Alleyn, the young peasant, who had offered to be his guide. The length of the walk was beguiled by conversation. Osbert was interested by discovering in his companion a dignity of thought, and a course of sentiment similar to his own. On their way, they passed at some distance the castle of Dunbayne. This object gave to Osbert a bitter reflection, and drew from him a deep sigh. Alleyn made observations on the bad policy of oppression in a chief, and produced as an instance the Baron Malcolm. These lands, said he, are his, and they are scarcely sufficient to support his wretched people, who, sinking under severe exactions, suffer to lie uncultivated, tracts which would otherwise add riches to their Lord. His clan, oppressed by their burdens, threaten to rise and do justice to themselves by force of arms. The Baron, in haughty confidence, laughs at their defiance, and is insensible to his danger: for should an insurrection happen, there are other clans who would eagerly join in his destruction, and punish with the same weapon the tyrant and the murderer. Surprized at the bold independence of these words, delivered with uncommon energy, the heart of Osbert beat quick, and "O God! my father!" burst from his lips. Alleyn stood aghast! uncertain of the effect which his speech had produced; in an instant the whole truth flashed upon his mind: he beheld the son of the Lord whom he had been taught to love, and whose sad story had been

impressed upon his heart in the early days of childhood; he sunk at his feet, and embraced his knees with a romantic ardor. The young Earl raised him from the ground, and the following words relieved him from his astonishment, and filled his eyes with tears of mingled joy and sorrow: "There are other clans as ready as your own to avenge the wrongs of the noble Earl of Athlin; the Fitz-Henrys were ever friends to virtue." The countenance of the youth, while he spoke, was overspread with the glow of conscious dignity, and his eyes were animated with the pride of virtue.—The breast of Osbert kindled with noble purpose, but the image of his weeping mother crossed his mind, and checked the ardor of the impulse. "A time may come my friend," said he, "when your generous zeal will be accepted with the warmth of gratitude it deserves. Particular circumstances will not suffer me, at present, to say more." The warm attachment of Alleyn to his father sunk deep in his heart.

It was evening before they reached the castle, and Alleyn remained the Earl's guest for that night.

Chapter II

THE following day was appointed for the celebration of an annual festival given by the Earl to his people, and he would not suffer Alleyn to depart. The hall was spread with tables; and dance and merriment resounded through the castle. It was usual on that day for the clan to assemble in arms, on account of an attempt, the memory of which it was meant to perpetuate, made, two centuries before, by an hostile clan to surprize them in their festivity.

In the morning were performed the martial exercises, in which emulation was excited by the honorary rewards bestowed on excellence. The Countess and her lovely daughter beheld, from the ramparts of the castle, the feats performed on the plains below. Their attention was engaged, and their curiosity excited, by the appearance of a stranger who managed the lance and the bow with such exquisite dexterity, as to bear off each prize of chivalry. It was Alleyn. He received the palm of victory, as was usual, from the hands of the Earl; and the modest dignity with which he accepted it, charmed the beholders.

The Earl honoured the feast with his presence, at the conclusion of which, each guest arose, and seizing his goblet with his left hand, and with his right striking his sword, drank to the memory of their departed Lord. The hall echoed with the general voice. Osbert felt it strike upon his heart the alarum of war. The people then joined hands, and drank to the honour of the son of their late master. Osbert understood the signal, and overcome with emotion, every consideration yielded to that of avenging his father. He arose, and harangued the clan with all the fire of youth and indignant virtue. As he spoke, the countenance of his people flashed with impatient joy; a deep murmur of applause ran through the assembly: and when he was silent each man, crossing his sword with that of his neighbour, swore that sacred pledge of union, never to quit the cause in which they now engaged, till the life of their enemy had paid the debt of justice and of revenge.

In the evening, the wives and daughters of the peasantry came to the castle, and joined in the festivity. It was usual for the Countess and her ladies to observe from a gallery of the hall, the various performances of dance and song; and it had been a custom of old for the daughter of the castle to grace the occasion by performing a Scotch dance with the victor of the morning. This victor now was Alleyn, who beheld the lovely Mary led by the Earl into the hall, and presented to him as his partner in the dance. She received his homage with a sweet grace. She was dressed in the habit of a Highland lass, and her fine auburn tresses, which waved in her neck, were ornamented only with a wreath of roses. She moved in the dance with the light steps of the Graces. Profound silence reigned through the hall during the performance, and a soft murmur of applause arose on its conclusion. The admiration of the spectators was divided between Mary and the victorious stranger. She retired to the gallery, and the night concluded in joy to all but the Earl, and to Alleyn; but very different was the source and the complexion of their inquietude. The mind of Osbert revolved the chief occurrences of the day, and his soul burned with impatience to accomplish the purposes of filial piety; yet he dreaded the effect which the communication of his

designs might have on the tender heart of Matilda: on the morrow, however, he resolved to acquaint her with them, and in a few days to rise and prosecute his cause with arms.

Alleyn, whose bosom, till now, had felt only for others' pains, began to be conscious of his own. His mind, uneasy and restless, gave him only the image of the high-born Mary; he endeavoured to exclude her idea, but with an effort so faint, that it would still intrude! Pleased, yet sad, he would not acknowledge, even to himself, that he loved; so ingenious are we to conceal every appearance of evil from ourselves. He arose with the dawn, and departed from the castle full of gratitude and secret love, to prepare his friends for the approaching war.

The Earl awoke from broken slumbers, and summoned all his fortitude to encounter the tender opposition of his mother. He entered her apartment with faltering steps, and his countenance betrayed the emotions of his soul. Matilda was soon informed of what her heart had foreboded, and overcome with dreadful sensation, sunk lifeless in her chair. Osbert flew to her assistance, and Mary and the attendants soon recovered her to sense and wretchedness.

The mind of Osbert was torn by the most cruel conflict: filial duty, honour, revenge, commanded him to go; filial love, regret, and pity, entreated him to stay. Mary fell at his feet, and clasping his knees with all the wild energy of grief besought him to relinquish his fatal purpose, and save his last surviving parent. Her tears, her sighs, and the soft simplicity of her air, spoke a yet stronger language than her tongue: but the silent grief of the Countess was still more touching, and in his endeavours to sooth her, he was on the point of yielding his resolution, when the figure of his dying father arose to his imagination, and stamped his purpose irrevocably. The anxiety of a fond mother, presented Matilda with the image of her son bleeding and ghastly; and the death of her Lord was revived in her memory with all the agonizing grief that sad event had impressed upon her heart, the harsher characters of which, the lenient hand of time had almost obliterated. So lovely is Pity in all her attitudes, that fondness prompts us to believe she can never transgress; but she changes into a vice, when she overcomes the purposes of stronger virtue. Sterner principles now nerved the breast of Osbert against her influence and impelled him on to deeds of arms. He summoned a few of the most able and trusty of the clan, and held a council of war; in which it was resolved that Malcolm should be attacked with all the force they could assemble, and with all the speed which the importance of the preparation would allow. To prevent suspicion and alarm to the Baron, it was agreed it should be given out, that these preparations were intended for assistance to the Chief of a distant part. That when they set out on the expedition, they should pursue, for some time, a contrary way, but under favour of the night should suddenly change their route, and turn upon the castle of Dunbayne.

In the mean time, Alleyn was strenuous in exciting his friends to the cause, and so successful in the undertaking, as to have collected, in a few days, a number of no inconsiderable consequence. To the warm enthusiasm of virtue was now added a new motive of exertion. It was no longer simply an attachment to the cause of justice, which roused him to action; the pride of distinguishing

himself in the eyes of his mistress, and of deserving her esteem by his zealous services, gave combined force to the first impulse of benevolence. The sweet thought of deserving her thanks, operated secretly on his soul, for he was yet ignorant of its influence there. In this state he again appeared at the castle, and told the Earl, that himself and his friends were ready to follow him whenever the signal should be given. His offer was accepted with the warmth of kindness it claimed, and he was desired to hold himself in readiness for the onset.

In a few days the preparations were completed, Alleyn and his friends were summoned, the clan assembled in arms, and, with the young Earl at their head, departed on their expedition. The parting between Osbert and his family may be easily conceived; nor could all the pride of expected conquest suppress a sigh which escaped from Alleyn when his eyes bade adieu to Mary who, with the Countess, stood on the terrace of the castle, pursuing with aching sight the march of her beloved brother, till distance veiled him from her view; she then turned into the castle weeping, and foreboding future calamity. She endeavoured, however, to assume an appearance of tranquillity, that she might deceive the fears of Matilda, and sooth her sorrow. Matilda, whose mind was strong as her heart was tender, since she could not prevent this hazardous undertaking, summoned all her fortitude to resist the impressions of fruitless grief, and to search for the good which the occasion might present. Her efforts were not vain; she found it in the prospect which the enterprize afforded of honour to the memory of her murdered Lord, and of retribution on the head of the murderer.

It was evening when the Earl departed from the castle; he pursued a contrary route till night favoured his designs, when he wheeled towards the castle of Dunbayne. The extreme darkness of the night assisted their plan, which was to scale the walls, surprize the centinels; burst their way into the inner courts sword in hand, and force the murderer from his retreat. They had trod many miles the dreary wilds, unassisted by the least gleam of light, when suddenly their ears were struck with the dismal note of a watch-bell, which chimed the hour of the night. Every heart beat to the sound. They knew they were near the abode of the Baron. They halted to consult concerning their proceedings, when it was agreed, that the Earl with Alleyn and a chosen few, should proceed to reconnoitre the castle, while the rest should remain at a small distance awaiting the signal of approach. The Earl and his party pursued their march with silent steps; they perceived a faint light, which they guessed to proceed from the watch-tower of the castle, and they were now almost under its walls. They paused awhile in silence to give breath to expectation, and to listen if any thing was stirring. All was involved in the gloom of night, and the silence of death prevailed. They had now time to examine, as well as the darkness would permit, the situation of the castle, and the height of the walls; and to prepare for the assault. The edifice was built with Gothic magnificence upon a high and dangerous rock. Its lofty towers still frowned in proud sublimity, and the immensity of the pile stood a record of the ancient consequence of its possessors. The rock was surrounded by a ditch, broad, but not deep, over which were two draw-bridges, one on the north side, the other on the east; they were both up, but as they separated in the center, one

half of the bridge remained on the side of the plains. The bridge on the north led to the grand gateway of the castle; that on the east to a small watch-tower: these were all the entrances. The rock was almost perpendicular with the walls, which were strong and lofty.

After surveying the situation, they pitched upon a spot where the rock appeared most accessible, and which was contiguous to the principal gate, and gave signal to the clan. They approached in silence, and gently throwing down the bundles of faggot, which they had brought for the purpose, into the ditch, made themselves a bridge over which they passed in safety, and prepared to ascend the heights. It had been resolved that a party, of which Alleyn was one, should scale the walls, surprize the centinels, and open the gates to the rest of the clan, which, with the Earl, were to remain without. Alleyn was the first who fixed his ladder and mounted; he was instantly followed by the rest of his party, and with much difficulty, and some hazard, they gained the ramparts in safety. They traversed a part of the platform without hearing the sound of a voice or a step; profound sleep seemed to bury all. A number of the party approached some centinels who were asleep on their post; them they seized; while Alleyn, with a few others, flew to open the nearest gate, and to let down the draw-bridge. This they accomplished; but in the mean time the signal of surprize was given, and instantly the alarm bell rang out, and the castle resounded with the clang of arms. All was tumult and confusion. The Earl, with part of his people, entered the gate; the rest were following, when suddenly the portcullis was dropped, the bridge drawn up, and the Earl and his people found themselves surrounded by an armed multitude, which poured in torrents from every recess of the castle. Surprized, but not daunted, the Earl rushed forward sword in hand, and fought with a desperate valour. The soul of Alleyn seemed to acquire new vigour from the conflict; he fought like a man panting for honour, and certain of victory; wherever he rushed, conquest flew before him. He, with the Earl, forced his way into the inner courts, in search of the Baron, and hoped to have satisfied a just revenge, and to have concluded the conflict with the death of the murderer; but the moment in which they entered the courts, the gates were closed upon them; they were environed by a band of guards; and, after a short resistance, in which Alleyn received a slight wound, they were seized as prisoners of war. The slaughter without was great and dreadful: the people of the Baron inspired with fury, were insatiate for death: many of the Earl's followers were killed in the courts and on the platform; many, in attempting to escape, were thrown from the ramparts, and many were destroyed by the sudden raising of the bridge. A small part, only of the brave and adventurous band who had engaged in the cause of justice, and who were driven back from the walls, survived to carry the dreadful tidings to the Countess.

The fate of the Earl remained unknown. The consternation among the friends of the slain is not to be described, and it was heightened by the unaccountable manner in which the victory had been obtained; for it was well known that Malcolm had never, but when war made it necessary, more soldiers in his garrison than feudal pomp demanded; yet on this occasion, a number of armed men rushed from the recesses of his castle, sufficient to overpower the force of a

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