



THE STORY OF CASTAILLE DUBH

IN a hollow near the foot of the Athole hills there stand the ruins of an ancient castle. They have little beauty, these ruins; they are but high, thick, windowless walls with the remains of round towers at the corners, and the space within is filled with dark pine-trees. So old is Castaille Dubh, or the Black Castle, as it is now more commonly called, that tradition is almost silent as to its origin, though the villagers have much to tell of black deeds that were done in it, of the black fate which befell it, and of the curse that still clings to its very stones. Much treasure of gold and silver lies buried there, they say, but not the boldest nor the most covetous among them has dared to seek for it. The more timid will not venture to pass the castle by night; its name is spoken by them only to satisfy the curious stranger, or to terrify into obedience some wayward child. The scene around is peaceful enough. About the castle lie cultivated fields with rich, black, loamy soil; a rocky height rises behind it, a range of low, wooded hills in front, and through the valley a quiet river winds. But the fertile fields were once a treacherous bog, and valley and hillsides were one dense forest with here and there a clearing, where men daily disputed the soil with the wild boar, and toiled hard to protect their families and their flocks from the wolves.

For the valley where this ancient castle stands was once the very heart of the great Caledonian Forest, 'dreadful for its dark, intricate windings, its dens of bears, and huge, wild, thick-maned bulls.' Within the dingy halls of the castle itself the first Earls of Athole lived in security, and with a certain squalid splendour. They oppressed their own people, it is true, but they protected them from the oppression of others: so their people loved them, and what they had to give they gave freely, even to their lives, for was it not their Chief who had need?

As generations passed, more and more of the land was reclaimed from the forest; the struggle of man against wild beast became less keen; of the weak man against the strong harder, more hopeless than ever. All Scotland was convulsed with civil war; the Highlands were harassed with petty feuds; the Earl of Athole forfeited life and lands, and the earldom was bestowed upon an alien.

The people now were the slaves, not the children of their chief. They had to give up their sons for the service, their daughters for the pleasure of a tyrant, to whom they were bound by no tie of kinship, no link of love.

The powerful High Stewards soon found Castaille Dubh too strait for them, and they left its use to one of their many base-born sons. One sore winter Sir Walter Stewart held high revel there with boon companions from the South. There was constant coming and going, and the people's scanty stores were rifled again and again to keep Sir Walter's larder well furnished for his guests.

With the New Year came one Uninvited Guest.

Quickly the news spread through the valley that the Sickness had come, and that in the castle men were dying almost unheeded by their panic-stricken comrades.

That night the heads of the villages met, as was their wont, in a secret hollow far up a rocky glen. There were a score of haggard, hungry, desperate men, and with them the grey-haired priest, a gentle old man whom little children loved. The snow lay thick around them; the wind blew icily overhead. A single

pine-torch, sheltered under an overhanging rock, threw its fitful light over the scene, showing gaunt, half-clad figures, shaggy, unkempt locks, faces wild-eyed and wan. Long and earnestly the men talked, giving free vent, in this new terror, to the pent-up bitterness of years.

'Why should we,' the bolder among them cried, 'why should we risk our lives to succour those who have made life so hard for us? Why should our wives and our little ones be sacrificed for men who have robbed some among us of both wife and child? What are these Southerners to us? They are no kith nor kin of ours.'

'Nay, my children, speak not so,' said the old priest mildly; 'are we not all sons of the same Mother Church? And Sir Walter himself—is not he of your blood? Was not his father's mother—'

'Ay, his father's mother!' broke in a dozen angry voices. 'Have not our mothers told us how she was dragged by the Earl's men, on just such a bitter night as this, from the very arms of the man she had but newly wed. That man was of our blood; his wrongs are our wrongs!'

The good priest pleaded, exhorted, commanded—all in vain. The only answer was a dogged 'Nay, father, let them die; we will not go.'

'Then I must go alone,' said the old man sadly. 'To-morrow at daybreak I will go, that, if these unhappy men may not live, they may at least make their peace with the Church before they die.'

Sullen and half-ashamed the men dispersed to their miserable homes, all but three, who lingered, and, standing close together, muttered low—

'He will go to-morrow: then we must go to-night.'

Silently and resolutely the three made their way down the glen and strode towards Castaille Dubh.

It was the 'wolf's month,' and, as they skirted the forest, they heard the howling of the hungry pack, but they heeded not.

As they passed not far from the edge of a hidden tarn, the

dread white water-bull bellowed from his lair, but even that could not daunt them then.

The thin ice crackled under their feet as they stepped on the surface of the frozen swamp, but they held on their way, treading warily.

At length the castle towered darkly before them, its gates all unguarded, for the sickness within left little room for thought of foes without.

A red glow spread slowly over the sky and lighted up the dazzling snow. For a brief space the roar of the flames, the crash of falling masonry, and the shrieks of dying men mingled with the baying of the impatient wolves.

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