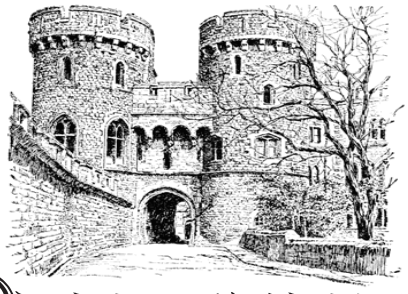

The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne

BY ANN RADCLIFFE

Chapter 4

MEANWHILE the Earl remained a solitary prisoner in the tower; uncertain fate was yet suspended over him; he had, however, a magnanimity in his nature which baffled much of the cruel effort of the Baron. He had prepared his mind by habitual contemplation for the worst, and although that worst was death, he could now look to it even with serenity. Those violent transports which had assailed him on sight of the Baron, were, since he was no longer subject to his presence, reduced within their proper limits; yet he anxiously avoided dwelling on the memory of his father, lest those dreadful sensations should threaten him with returning torture. Whenever he permitted himself to think of the sufferings of the Countess and his sister, his heart melted with a sorrow that almost unnerved him; much he wished to know how they supported this trial, and much he wished that he could convey to them intelligence of his state. He endeavoured to abstract his mind from his situation, and sought to make himself artificial comforts even from the barren objects around him; his chief amusement was in observing the manners and customs of the birds of prey which lodged themselves in the battlements of his tower, and the rapacity of their nature furnished him with too just a parallel to the habits of men.

As he was one day standing at the grate which looked upon the castle, observing the progress of these birds, his ear caught the sound of that sweet lute whose notes had once saved him from destruction; it was accompanied by the same melodious voice he had formerly heard, and which now sung with impassioned tenderness the following air:

When first the vernal morn of life
Beam'd on my infant eye,
Fond I survey'd the smiling scene,
Nor saw the tempest nigh.

Hope's bright illusions touch'd my soul,
My young ideas led;
And Fancy's vivid tints combin'd,
And fairy prospect spread.

My guileless heart expanded wide,
With filial fondness fraught;

Paternal love that heart supplied
With all its fondness sought.

But O! the cruel quick reverse!
Fate all I loved involv'd;
Pale Grief Hope's trembling rays dispers'd,
And Fancy's dreams dissolv'd.

Lost in surprize, Osbert stood for some time looking down upon an inner court, whence the sounds seemed to arise; after a few minutes he observed a young lady enter from that side on which the tower arose; on her arm rested an elder one, in whose face might be traced the lines of decaying beauty; but it was visible, from the melancholy which clouded her features, that the finger of affliction had there anticipated the ravages of time. She was dressed in the habit of a widow, and the black veil which shaded her forehead, and gave a fine expression to her countenance, devolved upon the ground in a length of train, and heightened the natural majesty of her figure; she moved with slow steps, and was supported by the young lady whose veil half disclosed a countenance where beauty was touched with sorrow and inimitable expression; the elegance of her form and the dignity of her air, proclaimed her to be of distinguished rank. On her arm was hung that lute, whose melody had just charmed the attention of the Earl, who was now fixed in wonder at what he beheld, that was equalled only by his admiration. They retired through a gate on the opposite side of the court, and were seen no more. Osbert followed them with his eyes, which for some time remained fixed upon the door through which they had disappeared, almost insensible of their departure. When he returned to himself, he discovered, as if for the first time, that he was in solitude. He conjectured that these strangers were confined by the oppressive power of the Baron, and his eyes were suffused with tears of pity. When he considered that so much beauty and dignity were the unresisting victims of a tyrant, his heart swelled high with indignation, his prison became intolerable to him, and he longed to become at once the champion of virtue, and the deliverer of oppressed innocence. The character of Malcolm arose to his mind black with accumulated guilt, and aggravated the detestation with which he had ever contemplated it: the hateful idea nerved his soul with a confidence of revenge. Of the guard, who entered, he enquired concerning the strangers, but could obtain no positive information; he came to impart other news; to prepare the Earl for death; the morrow was appointed for his execution. He received the intelligence with the firm hardihood of indignant virtue, disdaining to solicit, and disdaining to repine; and his mind yet grasped the idea of revenge. He drove from his thoughts, with precipitation, the tender ideas of his mother and sister; remembrances which would subdue his fortitude without effecting any beneficial purpose. He was told of the escape of Alleyn; this intelligence gave him inexpressible pleasure, and he knew this faithful youth would undertake to avenge his death.

When the news of Alleyn's flight had reached the Baron, his soul was stung with rage, and he called for the guards of the dungeon; they were no where to be found; and after a long search it was

known that they were fled with their prisoner; the flight of the other captives was also discovered. This circumstance exasperated the passion of Malcolm to the utmost, and he gave orders that the life of the remaining centinel should be forfeited for the treachery of his comrades, and his own negligence; when recollecting the Earl, whom in the heat of his resentment he had forgot, his heart exulted in the opportunity he afforded of complete revenge; and in the fullness of joy with which he pronounced his sentence, he retracted the condemnation of the trembling guard. The moment after he had dispatched the messenger with his resolve to the Earl, his heart faultered from its purpose. Such is the alternate violence of evil passions, that they never suffer their subjects to act with consistency, but, torn by conflicting energies, the gratification of one propensity is destruction to the enjoyment of another; and the moment in which they imagine happiness in their grasp, is to them the moment of disappointment. Thus it was with the Baron; his soul seemed to attain its full enjoyment in the contemplation of revenge, till the idea of Mary inflamed his heart with an opposite passion; his wishes had caught new ardor from disappointment, for he had heard that Mary had been once in the power of his emissaries; and perhaps the pain which recoils upon the mind from every fruitless effort of wickedness, served to increase the energies of his desires. He spurned the thought of relinquishing the pursuit, yet there appeared to be no method of obtaining its object, but by sacrificing his favourite passion; for he had little doubt of obtaining Mary, when it should be known that he resolved not to grant the life of the Earl upon any other ransom. The balance of these passions hung in his mind in such nice equilibrium, that it was for some time uncertain which would preponderate; revenge, at length, yielded to love; but he resolved to preserve the torture of expected death, by keeping the Earl ignorant of his reprieve till the last moment.

The Earl awaited death with the same stern fortitude with which he received its sentence, and was led from the tower to the platform of the castle, silent and unmoved. He beheld the preparations for his execution, the instruments of death, the guards arranged in files, with an undaunted mind. The glare of externals had no longer power over his imagination. He beheld every object with indifference, but that on which his eye now rested; it was on the murderer, who exhibited himself in all the pride of exulting conquest: he started at the sight, and his soul shrunk back upon itself. Disdaining, however, to appear disconcerted, he endeavoured to resume his dignity, when the remembrance of his mother, overwhelmed with sorrow, rushed upon his mind, and quite unmanned him; the tears started in his eyes, and he sunk senseless on the ground.

On recovering, he found himself in his prison, and he was informed that the Baron had granted him a respite. Malcolm mistaking the cause of disorder in the Earl, thought he had stretched his sufferings to their utmost limits; he therefore had ordered him to be re-conveyed to the tower.

A scene so striking and so public as that which had just been performed at the castle of Dunbayne, was a subject of discourse to the whole country; it was soon reported to the Countess with a variety of additional circumstances, among which it was affirmed, that the Earl had been really executed. Overwhelmed with this intelligence, Matilda relapsed into her former disorder. Sickness had rendered Mary less able to support the shock, and to apply that comfort to the ambitions of her mother, which had once been so successfully administered. The physician pronounced the malady of the Countess to be seated in the mind, and beyond the reach of human skill, when one day a letter was

brought to her, the superscription of which was written in the hand of Osbert; she knew the characters, and bursting the seal, read that her son was yet alive, and did not despair of throwing himself once more at her feet. He requested that the remains of his clan might immediately attempt his release. He described in what part of the castle his prison was situated, and thought, that by the assistance of long scaling-ladders and ropes, contrived in the manner he directed, he might be able to effect his escape through the grate. This letter was a reviving cordial to the Countess and to Mary.

Alleyn was indefatigable in collecting followers for the enterprize he had engaged in. On receiving intelligence of the safety of the Earl, he visited the clan, and was strenuous in exhorting them to immediate action. They required little incitement to a cause in which every heart was so much interested, and for which every hand was already busied in preparation. These preparations were at length completed; Alleyn, at the head of his party, joined the assembled clan. The Countess for a second time beheld from the ramparts the departure of her people upon the same hazardous enterprize; the present scene revived in her mind a sad membrance of the past: the same tender fears, and the same prayers for success she now gave to their departure; and when they faded in distance from her sight, she returned into the castle dissolved in tears. The heart of Mary was torn by a complex sorrow, and incapable of longer concealing from herself the interest she took in the departure of Alleyn, her agitation became more apparent. The Countess in vain endeavoured to compose her mind. Mary, affected by her tender concern, and prompted by the natural ingenuousness of her disposition, longed to make her the confidant of her weakness, if weakness that can be termed which arises from gratitude, and from admiration of great and generous qualities; but delicacy and timidity arrested the half-formed sentence, and closed her lips in silence. Her health gradually declined under the secret agitation of her mind; her physician knew her disorder to originate in suppressed sorrow; and advised, as the best cordial, a confidential friend. Matilda now perceived the cause of her grief; her former passing observations recurred to her memory, and justified her discernment. She strove by every soothing effort to win her to her confidence. Mary, oppressed by the idea of ungenerous concealment, resolved at length to unveil her heart to a mother so tender of her happiness. She told her all her sentiments. The Countess suffered a distress almost equal to that of her daughter; her affectionate heart swelled with equal wishes for her happiness; she admired with warmest gratitude the noble and aspiring virtues of the young Highlander; but the proud nobility of her soul repelled with quick vivacity every idea of union with a youth of such ignoble birth: she regarded the present attachment as the passing impression of youthful fancy, and believed that gentle reasoning, aided by time and endeavour, would conquer the enthusiasm of love. Mary listened with attention to the reasonings of the Countess; her judgment acknowledged their justness, while her heart regretted their force. She resolved, however, to overcome an attachment which would produce so much distress to her family and to herself. Notwithstanding her endeavours to exclude Alleyn from her thoughts, the generous and heroic qualities of his mind burst upon her memory in all their splendor, she could not but be conscious that he loved her; she saw the struggles of his soul, and the delicacy of his passion, which made him ever retire in the most profound and respectful silence from its object. She solicited her mother to assist in expelling the destructive image from her mind. The Countess exerted every effort to amuse her to forgetfulness; every hour, except those which were given to exercises necessary for her health, was devoted to the cultivation of her mind, and the improvement of her

various accomplishments. These endeavours were not unsuccessful; the Countess with joy observed the returning health and tranquillity of her daughter; and Mary almost believed she had taught herself to forget. These engagements served also to beguile the tedious moments which must intervene, ere news could arrive from Alleyn concerning the probable success of the enterprize.

Misery yet dwelt in the castle of Dunbayne; for there the virtues were captive, while the vices reigned despotic. The mind of the Baron, ardent and restless, knew no peace: torn by conflicting passions, he was himself the victim of their power.

The Earl knew that his life hung upon the caprice of a tyrant; his mind was nerved for the worst; yet the letter which the compassion of one of his guards, at the risque of his life, had undertaken to convey to the Countess, afforded him a faint hope that his people might yet effect his escape. In this expectation, he spent hour after hour at his grate, wishing, with trembling anxiety, to behold his clan advancing over the distant hills. These hills became at length, in a situation so barren of real comforts, a source of ideal pleasure to him. He was always at the grate, and often, in the fine evenings of summer saw the ladies, whose appearance had so strongly excited his admiration and pity, walk on a terrace below the tower. One very fine evening, under the pleasing impressions of hope for himself, and compassion for them, his sufferings for a time lost their acuteness. He longed to awaken their sympathy, and make known to them that they had a fellow-prisoner. The parting sun trembled on the tops of the mountains, and a softer shade fell upon the distant landscape. The sweet tranquillity of evening threw an air of tender melancholy over his mind: his sorrows for a while were hushed; and under the enthusiasm of the hour, he composed the following stanzas, which, having committed them to paper, he the next evening dropp'd upon the terrace.

SONNET

Hail! to the hallow'd hill, the circling lawn,
The breezy upland, and the mountain stream!
The last tall pine that earliest meets the dawn,
And glistens latest to the western gleam!

Hail! every distant hill, and downland plain!
Your dew-hid beauties Fancy oft unveils;
What time to shepherd's reed, or poet's strain,
Sorrowing my heart its destin'd woe bewails.

Blest are the fairy hour, the twilight shade
Of Ev'ning, wand'ring thro' her woodlands dear,
Sweet the still sound that steals along the glade;
'Tis fancy wafts it, and her vot'ries hear.
'Tis fancy wafts it! — and how sweet the sound!
I hear it now the distant hills uplong;

While fairy echos from their dells around,
And woods, and wilds, the feeble notes prolong!

He had the pleasure to observe that the paper was taken up by the ladies, who immediately retired into the castle.