



The CASTLES *of*
ATHLIN AND DUNBAYNE
BY ANN RADCLIFFE

Chapter 6

THE castle of Dunbayne was still the scene of triumph, and of wretchedness. Malcolm, exulting in his scheme, already beheld Mary at his feet, and the Earl retiring in an anguish more poignant than that of death. He was surprized that his invention had not before supplied him with this means of torture: for the first time he welcomed love, as the instrument of his revenge; and the charms of Mary were heightened to his imagination by the ardent colours of this passion. He was confirmed in his resolves, never to relinquish the Earl, but on the conditions he had offered; and thus for ever would he preserve the house of Athlin a monument of his triumph.

Osbert, for greater security, was conveyed from the tower into a more central part of the castle, to an apartment spacious but gloomy, whose gothic windows partly excluding light, threw a solemnity around, which chilled the heart almost to horror. He heeded not this; his heart was occupied with horrors of its own. He was now involved in a misery more intricate, and more dreadful, than his imagination had yet painted. To die, was to him, who had so long contemplated the near approach of death, a familiar and transient evil; but to see, even in idea, his family involved in infamy, and in union with the murderer, was the stroke which pierced his heart to its center. He feared that the cruel tenderness of the mother would tempt Matilda to accept the offers of the Baron; and he scarcely doubted, that the noble Mary would resign herself the price of his life. He would have written to the Countess to have forbidden her acceptance of the terms, and to have declared his fixed resolution to die, but that he had no means of conveying to her a letter; the soldier who had so generously undertaken the conveyance of his former one, having soon after disappeared from his station. The manly fortitude which had supported him through his former trials, did not desert him in this hour of darkness; habituated so long to struggle with opposing feelings, he had acquired the art of managing them; his mind attained a confidence in its powers; resistance served only to increase its strength, and to confirm the magnanimity of its nature.

Alleyn had now joined the clan, and was ardent in pursuit of the necessary intelligence. He learned that the Earl had been removed from the tower, but in what part of the castle he was now confined he could not discover; on this point all was vague conjecture. That he was alive, was only judged from the policy of the Baron, whose ardent passion for Mary was now well understood. Alleyn employed every stratagem his invention could suggest, to discover the prison of the Earl, but without success: at length compelled to deliver to Malcolm the message of the Countess, he demanded as a preliminary, that the Earl should be shewn to his people from the ramparts, that they might be certain he was still alive.



Alleyn hoped that his appearance would lead to a discovery of the place of his imprisonment, purposing to observe narrowly the way by which he should retire.

The Earl appeared in safety on the ramparts, amid the shouts and acclamations of his people; the Baron frowning defiance, was seen at his side. Alleyn advanced to the walls, and delivered the message of Matilda. Osbert started at its purpose; he foresaw that deliberation portended compliance: — stung with the thought, he swore aloud he never would survive the infamy of the concession; and addressing himself to Alleyn, commanded him instantly to return to the Countess, and bid her spurn the base compliance, as she feared to sacrifice both her children to the murderer of their father. At these words, a smile of haughty triumph marked the features of the Baron, and he turned from Osbert in silent joy and exultation. The Earl was led off by the guards. Alleyn endeavoured in vain to mark the way they took; the lofty walls soon concealed them from his view.

Alleyn now experienced how strenuously a vigorous mind protects its favourite hope; wayward circumstances may shock, disappointment may check it; but it rises superior to opposition and traverses the sphere of possibility to accomplish its purpose. Alleyn did not yet despair, but he was perplexed in what manner to proceed.

On his way from the ramparts, Osbert was surprized by the appearance of two ladies at a window near which he passed: the agitation of his mind did not prevent his recognizing them as the same he had observed from the grates of the tower, with such lively admiration, and who had excited in his mind so much pity and curiosity: In the midst of his distress, his thoughts had often dwelt on the sweet graces of the younger, and he had sighed to obtain the story of her sorrows; for the melancholy which hung upon her features proclaimed her to be unfortunate. They now stood observing Osbert as he passed, and their eyes expressed the pity which his situation inspired. He gazed earnestly and mournfully upon them, and when he entered his prison, again enquired concerning them, but the same inflexible silence was preserved on the subject.

As the Earl sat one day musing in his prison, his eyes involuntarily fixed upon a pannel in the opposite wainscot; — he observed that it was differently formed from the rest, and that its projection was somewhat greater; a hope started into his mind, and he quitted his seat to examine it. He perceived that it was surrounded by a small crack, and on pushing it with his hands it shook under them. Certain that it was something more than a pannel, he exerted all his strength against it, but without producing any new effect. Having tried various means to move it without success, he gave up the experiment, and returned to his seat melancholy and disappointed. Several days passed without any further notice being taken of the wainscot; unwilling, however, to relinquish a last hope, he returned to the examination, when, in endeavouring to remove the pannel, his foot accidentally hit against one corner, and it suddenly flew open. It had been contrived that a spring which was concealed within, and which fastened the partition, should receive its impulse from the pressure of a certain part of the pannel, which was now touched by the foot of the Earl. His joy on the discovery cannot be expressed. An apartment wide and forlorn, like that which formed his prison, now lay before him; the windows, which were high and arched, were decorated with painted glass; the floor was paved with marble; and it seemed to be the deserted remains of a place of worship. Osbert traversed, with hesitating steps, its dreary length, towards a pair of folding doors, large and of oak, which closed the apartment: these he opened; a gallery, gloomy

and vast, appeared beyond; the windows, which were in the same style of Gothic architecture with the former, were shaded by thick ivy that almost excluded the light. Osbert stood at the entrance uncertain whether to proceed; he listened, but heard no footstep in his prison, and determined to go on. The gallery terminated on the left in a large winding stair-case, old and apparently neglected, which led to a hall below; on the right was a door, low, and rather obscure. Osbert, apprehensive of discovery, passed the staircase, and opened the door, when a suite of noble apartments, magnificently furnished, was disclosed to his wondering eyes. He proceeded onward without perceiving any person, but having passed the second room, heard the faint sobs of a person weeping; he stood for a moment, undetermined whether to proceed; but an irresistible curiosity impelled him forward, and he entered an apartment, in which were seated the beautiful strangers, whose appearance had so much interested his feelings. The elder of the ladies was dissolved in tears and a casket and some papers lay open on a table beside her. The younger was so intent upon a drawing, which she seemed to be finishing, as not to observe the entrance of the Earl; the elder lady, on perceiving him, arose in some confusion, and the surprize in her eyes seemed to demand an explanation of so unaccountable a visit. The Earl, surprized at what he beheld, stepped back with an intention of retiring; but recollecting that the intrusion demanded an apology, he returned. The grace with which he excused himself, confirmed the impression which his figure had already made on the mind of Laura, which was the name of the younger lady; who on looking up, discovered a countenance in which dignity and sweetness were happily blended. She appeared to be about twenty, her person was of the middle stature, extremely delicate, and very elegantly formed. The bloom of her youth was shaded by a soft and pensive melancholy, which communicated an expression to her fine blue eyes, extremely interesting. Her features were partly concealed by the beautiful luxuriance of her auburn hair, which curling round her face, descended in tresses on her bosom; every feminine grace played around her; and the simple dignity of her air declared the purity and the nobility of her mind. On perceiving the Earl, a faint blush animated her cheek, and she involuntarily quitted the drawing upon which she had been engaged.

If the former imperfect view he had caught of Laura had given an impression to the heart of Osbert, it now received a stronger character from the opportunity afforded him of contemplating her beauty. He concluded that the Baron, attracted by her charms, had entrapped her into his power, and detained her in the castle an unwilling prisoner. In this conjecture he was confirmed by the mournful cast of her countenance, and by the mystery which appeared to surround her. Fired by this idea, he melted in compassion for her sufferings; which compassion was tinctured and increased by the passion which now glowed in his heart. At that moment he forgot the danger of his present situation; he forgot even that he was a prisoner; and awake only to the wish of alleviating her sorrows, he rejected cold and useless delicacy, and resolved, if possible, to learn the cause of her misfortunes. Addressing himself to the Baroness, “if, Madam,” said he, “I could by any means soften the affliction which I cannot affect not to perceive, and which has so warmly interested my feelings, I should regard this as one of the most happy moments of my life; a life marked alas! too strongly with misery! but misery has not been useless, since it has taught me sympathy.” The Baroness was no stranger to the character and the misfortunes of the Earl. Herself the victim of oppression, she knew how to commiserate the sufferings of others. She had ever felt a tender compassion for the misfortunes of Osbert, and did not now withhold sincere

expressions of sympathy, and of gratitude, for the interest which he felt in her sorrow. She expressed her surprise at seeing him thus at liberty; but observing the chains which encircled his hands, she shuddered, and guessed a part of the truth. He explained to her the discovery of the pannel, by which circumstance he had found his way into that apartment. The idea of aiding him to escape, rushed upon the mind of the Baroness, but was repressed by the consideration of her own confined situation; and she was compelled, with mournful reluctance, to resign that thought which reverence for the character of the late Earl, and compassion for the misfortunes of the present, had inspired. She lamented her inability to assist him, and informed him that herself and her daughter were alike prisoners with himself; that the walls of the castle were the limits of their liberty; and that they had suffered the pressure of tyranny for fifteen years. The Earl expressed the indignation which he felt at this recital, and solicited the Baroness to confide in his integrity; and, if the relation would not be too painful to her, to honour him so far as to acquaint him by what cruel means she fell into the power of Malcolm. The Baroness, apprehensive for his safety reminded him of the risk of discovery by a longer absence from his prison; and, thanking him again for the interest he took in her sufferings, assured him of her warmest wishes for his deliverance, and that if an opportunity ever offered, she would acquaint him with the sad particulars of her story. The eyes of Osbert made known that gratitude which it was difficult for his tongue to utter. Tremulously he solicited the consolation of sometimes revisiting the apartments of the Baroness; a permission which would give him some intervals of comfort amid the many hours of torment to which he was condemned. The Baroness, in compassion to his sufferings, granted the request. The Earl departed, gazing on Laura with eyes of mournful tenderness; yet he was pleased with what had passed, and retired to his prison in one of those peaceful intervals which are known even to the wretched. He found all quiet, and closing the pannel in safety, sat down to consider the past, and anticipate the future. He was flattered with hopes, that the discovery of the pannel might aid him to escape; the glooms of despondence which had lately enveloped his mind, gradually disappeared, and joy once more illumined his prospects; but it was the sunshine of an April morn, deceitful and momentary. He recollected that the castle was beset with guards, whose vigilance was insured by the severity of the Baron; he remembered that the strangers, who had taken so kind an interest in his fate, were prisoners like himself; and that he had no generous soldier to teach him the secret windings of the castle, and to accompany him in flight. His imagination was haunted by the image of Laura; vainly he strove to disguise from himself the truth; his heart constantly belied the sophistry of his reasonings. Unwarily he had drank the draught of love, and he was compelled to acknowledge the fatal indiscretion. He could not, however, resolve to throw from his heart the delicious poison; he could not resolve to see her no more.

The painful apprehension for his safety, which his forbearing to renew the visit he had so earnestly solicited, would occasion the Baroness; the apparent disrespect it would convey; the ardent curiosity with which he longed to obtain the history of her misfortunes; the lively interest he felt in learning the situation of Laura, with respect to the Baron; and the hope, — the wild hope, with which he deluded his reason, that he might be able to assist them, determined him to repeat the visit. Under these illusions, the motive which principally impelled him to the interview was concealed.

In the mean time Alleyn had returned to the castle of Athlin with the resolutions of the Earl; whose resolves served only to aggravate the distress of its fair inhabitants. Alleyn, however, unwilling to crush a last hope, tenderly concealed from them the circumstance of the Earl's removal from the



tower: silently and almost hopelessly meditating to discover his prison; and administered that comfort to the Countess, and to Mary, which his own expectation would not suffer him to participate. He retired in haste to the veterans whom he had before assembled, and acquainted them with the removal of the Earl; which circumstance must for the present suspend their consultations. He left them, therefore, and instantly returned to the clan: there to prosecute his enquiries. Every possible exertion was made to obtain the necessary intelligence, but without success. The moment in which the Baron would demand the answer of the Countess, was now fast approaching, and every heart sunk in despair, when one night the centinels of the camp were alarmed by the approach of men, who hailed them in unknown voices; fearful of surprize, they surrounded the strangers, and led them to Alleyn; to whom they related, that they fled from the capricious tyranny of Malcolm, and sought refuge in the camp of his enemy; whose misfortunes they bewailed, and in whose cause they enlisted. Rejoiced at the circumstance, yet doubtful of its truth, Alleyn interrogated the soldiers concerning the prison of the Earl. From them he learned, that Osbert was confined in a part of the castle extremely difficult of access; and that any plan of escape must be utterly impracticable without the assistance of one well acquainted with the various intricacies of the pile. An opportunity of success was now presented, with which the most sanguine hopes of Alleyn had never flattered him. He received from the soldiers strong assurance of assistance; from them, likewise, he learned, that discontent reigned, among the people of the Baron; who, impatient of the yoke of tyranny, only waited a favourable opportunity to throw it off, and resume the rights of nature. That the vigilant suspicions of Malcolm excited him to punish with the harshest severity every appearance of inattention; that being condemned to suffer a very heavy punishment for a slight offence, they had eluded the impending misery, and the future oppression of their Chief, by desertion.

Alleyn immediately convened a council, before whom the soldiers were brought; they repeated their former assertions; and one of the fugitives added, that he had a brother, whose place of guard over the person of the Earl on that night, had made it difficult to elude observation, and had prevented his escaping with them; that on the night of the morrow he stood guard at the gate of the lesser draw-bridge, where the centinels were few; that he was himself willing to risque the danger of conversing with him; and had little doubt of gaining him to assist in the deliverance of the Earl. At these words, the heart of Alleyn throbbed with joy. He promised large rewards to the brave soldier and to his brother, if they undertook the enterprize. His companion was well acquainted with the subterraneous passages of the rock, and expressed himself desirous of being useful. The hopes of Alleyn every instant grew stronger; and he vainly wished, at that moment, to communicate to the Earl's unhappy family the joy which dilated his heart.

The eve of the following day was fixed upon to commence their designs; when James should endeavour to gain his brother to their purpose. Having adjusted these matters, they retired to rest for the remainder of the night; but sleep had fled the eyes of Alleyn; anxious expectation filled his mind; and he saw, in the waking visions of fancy, the meeting of the Earl with his family: he anticipated the thanks he should receive from the lovely Mary; and sighed at the recollection, that thanks were all for which he could ever dare to hope.

At length the dawn appeared, and waked the clan to hopes and prospects far different from those of the preceding morn. The hours hung heavily on the expectation of Alleyn, whose mind was filled with solicitude for the event of the meeting between the brothers. Night at length came to his wishes.

The darkness was interrupted only by the faint light of the moon moving through the watery and broken clouds, which enveloped the horizon. Tumultuous gusts of wind broke at intervals the silence of the hour. Alleyn watched the movements of the castle; he observed the lights successively disappear. The bell from the watch-tower chimed one; all was still within the walls; and James ventured forth to the draw-bridge. The draw-bridge divided in the center, and the half next the plains was down; he mounted it, and in a low yet firm voice called on Edmund. No answer was returned; and he began to fear that his brother had already quitted the castle. He remained some time in silent suspense before he repeated the call, when he heard the gate of the draw-bridge gently unbarred, and Edmund appeared. He was surprized to see James, and bade him instantly fly the danger that surrounded him. The Baron, incensed at the frequent desertion of his soldiers, had sent out people in pursuit, and had promised considerable rewards for the apprehension of the fugitives. James, undaunted by what he heard, kept his ground, resolved to urge his purpose to the point. Happily the centinels who stood guard with Edmund, overcome with the effect of a potion he had administered to favour his escape, were sunk in sleep, and the soldiers conducted their discourse in a low voice without interruption.

Edmund was unwilling to defer his flight, and possessed not resolution sufficient to encounter the hazard of the enterprize, till the proffered reward consoled his self-denial, and roused his slumbering courage. He was well acquainted with the subterraneous avenues of the castle; the only remaining difficulty, was that of deceiving the vigilance of his fellow-centinels, whose watchfulness made it impossible for the Earl to quit his prison unperceived. The soldiers who were to mount guard with him on the following night, were stationed in a distant part of the castle, till the hour of their removal to the door of the prison; it was, therefore, difficult to administer to them that draught which had steeped in forgetfulness the senses of his present associates. To confide to their integrity, and endeavour to win them to his purpose, was certainly to give his life into their hands, and probably to aggravate the disastrous fate of the Earl. This scheme was beset too thick with dangers to be hazarded, and their invention could furnish them with none more promising. It was, however, agreed, that on the following night, Edmund should seize the moment of opportunity to impart to the Earl the designs of his friends, and to consult on the means of accomplishing them. Thus concluding, James returned in safety to the tent of Alleyn, where the most considerable of the clan were assembled, there awaiting with impatient solicitude, his arrival. The hopes of Alleyn were somewhat chilled by the report of the soldier; from the vigilance which beset the doors of the prison, escape from thence appeared impracticable. He was condemned, however, to linger in suspense till the third night from the present, when the return of Edmund to his station at the bridge would enable him again to commune with his brother. But Alleyn was unsuspecting of a circumstance which would utterly have defeated his hopes, and whose consequence threatened destruction to all their schemes. A centinel on duty upon that part of the rampart which surmounted the draw-bridge, had been alarmed by hearing the gate unbar, and approaching the wall, had perceived a man standing on the half of the bridge which was dropped, and in converse with some person on the castle walls. He drew as near as the wall would permit, and endeavoured to listen to their discourse. The gloom of night prevented his recognizing the person on the bridge; but he could clearly distinguish the voice of Edmund in that of the man who was addressed. Excited by new wonder, he gave all his attention to discover the subject of their conversation. The distance occasioned between the brothers by the suspended half of the bridge, obliged them to speak in a somewhat higher tone than



they would otherwise have done; and the centinel gathered sufficient from their discourse, to learn that they were concerting the rescue of the Earl; that the night of Edmund's watch at the prison was to be the night of enterprize; and that some friends of the Earl were to await him in the environs of the castle. All this he carefully treasured up, and the next morning communicated it to his comrades.

On the following evening the Earl, yielding to the impulse of his heart, once more unclosed his partition, and sought the apartments of the Baroness. She received him with expressions of satisfaction; while the artless pleasure which lighted up the countenance of Laura, awakened the pulse of rapture in that heart which had long throbb'd only to misery. The Earl reminded the Baroness of her former promise, which the desire of exciting sympathy in those we esteem, and the melancholy pleasure which the heart finds in lingering among the scenes of former happiness, had induced her to give. She endeavoured to compose her spirits, which were agitated by the remembrance of past sufferings, and gave him a relation of the following circumstances.

