



The CASTLES *of*
ATHLIN AND DUNBAYNE
BY ANN RADCLIFFE

Chapter 11

ALLEYN was no where to be found. The Earl went himself in quest of him, but without success. As he returned from the terrace, chagrined and disappointed, he observed two persons cross the platform at some distance before him; and he could perceive by the dim moon-light which fell upon the spot, that they were not of the castle. He called to them: no answer was returned; but at the sound of his voice they quickened their pace and almost instantly disappeared in the darkness of the ramparts. Surprized at this phenomenon, the Earl followed with hasty steps, and endeavoured to pursue the way they had taken. He walked on silently, but there was no sound to direct his steps. When he came to the extremity of the rampart, which formed the North angle of the castle, he stopped to examine the spot, and to listen if any thing was stirring. No person was to be seen, and all was hushed. After he had stood some time surveying the rampart, he heard the low restrained voice of a person unknown, but the distance prevented his distinguishing the subject of the conversation. The voice seemed to approach the place where he stood. He drew his sword, and watched in silence their motions. They continued to advance, till, suddenly stopping, they turned, and took a long survey of the fabric. Their discourse was conducted in a low tone; but the Earl could discover by the vehemence of their gesture, and the caution of their steps, that they were upon some design dangerous to the peace of the castle. Having finished their examination, they turned again towards the place where the Earl still remained; the shade of a high turret concealed him from their view, and they continued to approach till they arrived within a short space of him, when they turned through a ruined arch-way of the castle, and were lost in the dark recesses of the pile. Astonished at what he had seen, Osbert hastened to the castle, whence he dispatched some of his people in search of the unknown fugitives; he accompanied some of his domestics to the spot where they had last disappeared. They entered the arch-way, which led to a decayed part of the castle; they followed over broken pavement the remains of a passage, which was closed by a low obscure door almost concealed from sight by the thick ivy which overshadowed it. On opening this door, they descended a flight of steps which led under the castle, so extremely narrow and broken as to make the descent both difficult and dangerous. The powerful damps of long pent-up vapours extinguished their light, and the Earl and his attendants were compelled to remain in utter darkness, while one of them went round to the habitable part of the castle to relume the lamp. While they awaited in silence the return of light, a short breathing was distinctly heard at intervals, near the place where they stood. The servants shook with fear, and the Earl was not wholly unmoved. They remained entirely silent, listening its return, when a sound of footsteps slowly



stealing through the vault, startled them. The Earl demanded who passed; — he was answered only by the deep echoes of his voice. They clashed their swords and had advanced, when the steps hastily retired before them. The Earl rushed forward, pursuing the sound, till overtaking the person who fled, he seized him; a short scuffle ensued; the strength of Osbert was too powerful for his antagonist, who was nearly overcome, when the point of a sword from an unknown hand pierced his side, he relinquished his grasp, and fell to the ground. His domestics, whom the activity of their master had outran, now came up; but the assassins, whoever they were, had accomplished their escape, for the sound of their steps was quickly lost in the distance of the vaults. They endeavored to raise the Earl, who lay speechless on the ground; but they knew not how to convey him from that place of horror, for they were yet in total darkness, and unacquainted with the place. In this situation, every moment of delay seemed an age. Some of them tried to find their way to the entrance, but their efforts were defeated by the darkness, and the ruinous situation of the place. The light at length appeared, and discovered the Earl insensible, and weltering in his blood. He was conveyed into the castle, where the horror of the Countess on seeing him borne into the hall, may be easily imagined. By the help of proper applications he was restored to life; his wound was examined, and found to be dangerous; he was carried to bed in a state which gave very faint hopes of recovery. The astonishment of the Countess, on hearing the adventure, was equalled only by her distress. All her conjectures concerning the designs, and the identity of the assassin, were vague and uncertain. She knew not on whom to fix the stigma; nor could discover any means by which to penetrate this mysterious affair. The people who had remained in the vaults to pursue the search, now returned to Matilda. Every recess of the castle, and every part of the ramparts, had been explored, yet no one could be found; and the mystery of the proceeding was heightened by the manner in which the men had effected their escape.

Mary watched over her brother in silent anguish, yet she strove to conceal her distress, that she might encourage the Countess to hope. The Countess endeavoured to resign herself to the event with a kind of desperate fortitude. There is a certain point of misery, beyond which the mind becomes callous, and acquires a sort of artificial calm. Excess of misery may be said to blast the vital powers of feeling, and by a natural consequence consumes its own principle. Thus it was with Matilda; a long succession of trials had reduced her to a state of horrid tranquillity, which followed the first shock of the present event. It was not so with Laura; young in misfortune, and gay in hope, she saw happiness fade from her grasp, with a warmth of feeling untouched by the chill of disappointment. When the news of the Earl's situation reached her, she was overcome with affliction, and pined in silent anguish. The Count hastened to Osbert, but grief sat heavy at his heart, and he had no power to offer to others the comfort which he wanted himself.

A fever, which was the consequence of his wounds, added to the danger of the Earl, and to the despair of his family. During this period, Alleyn had not been seen at the castle; and his absence at this time, raised in Mary a variety of distressing apprehensions. Osbert enquired for him, and wished to see him. The servant who had been sent to his father's cottage, brought word that it was some days since he had been there, and that nobody knew whither he was gone. The surprize was universal; but the effect it produced was various and opposite. A collection of strange and concomitant circumstances, now forced a suspicion on the mind of the Countess, which her heart, and the



remembrance of the former conduct of Alleyn, at once condemned. She had heard of what passed between the Earl and him in the gallery; his immediate absence, the event which followed, and his subsequent flight, formed a chain of evidence which compelled her, with the utmost reluctance, to believe him concerned in the affair which had once more involved her house in misery. Mary had too much confidence in her knowledge of his character, to admit a suspicion of this nature. She rejected, with instant disdain, the idea of uniting Alleyn with dishonour; and that he should be guilty of an action so base as the present, soared beyond all the bounds of possibility. Yet she felt a strange solicitude concerning him, and apprehension for his safety tormented her incessantly. The anguish in which he had quitted the apartment, her brother's injurious treatment, and his consequent absence, all conspired to make her fear that despair had driven him to commit some act of violence on himself.

The Earl, in the delirium of the fever, raved continually of Laura and of Alleyn; they were the sole subjects of his ramblings. Seizing one day the hand of Mary, who sat mournfully by his bed-side, and looking for some time pensively in her face, "weep not, my Laura," said he, "Malcolm, nor all the powers on earth shall tear you from me; his walls-his guards-what are they? I'll wrest you from his hold, or perish. I have a friend whose valour will do much for us; — a friend-O! name him not; these are strange times; beware of trusting. I could have given him my very life-but not-I will not name him." Then starting to the other side of the bed, and looking earnestly towards the door with an expression of sorrow not to be described, "not all the miseries which my worst enemy has heaped upon me; not all the horrors of imprisonment and death, have ever touched my soul with a sting so sharp as thy unfaithfulness." Mary was so much shocked by this scene, that she left the room and retired to her own apartment to indulge the agony of grief it occasioned.

The situation of the Earl grew daily more alarming; and the fever, which had not yet reached its crisis, kept the hopes and fears of his family suspended. In one of his lucid intervals, addressing himself to the Countess in the most pathetic manner, he requested, that as death might probably soon separate him for ever from her he most loved, he might see Laura once again before he died. She came, and weeping over him, a scene of anguish ensued too poignant for description. He gave her his last vows; she took of him a last look; and with a breaking heart tearing herself away, was carried to Dunbayne in a state of danger little inferior to his.

The agitation he had suffered during this interview, caused a return of phrenzy more violent than any fit he had yet suffered; exhausted by it, he at length sunk into a sleep, which continued without interruption for near four and twenty hours. During this time his repose was quiet and profound, and afforded the Countess and Mary, who watched him alternately, the consolations of hope. When he awoke he was perfectly sensible, and in a very altered state from that he had been in a few hours before. The crisis of the disorder was now past, and from that time it rapidly declined till he was restored to perfect health.

The joy of Laura, whose health gradually returned with returning peace, and that of his family, was such as the merits of the Earl deserved. This joy, however, suffered a short interruption from the Count of Santmorin, who, entering one morning the apartment of the Baroness, with letters in his hand, came to acquaint her that he had just received news of the death of a distant relation, who had bequeathed him some estates of value, to which it was necessary he should immediately lay claim;



and that he was, therefore, obliged, however reluctantly, to set off for Switzerland without delay. Though the Baroness rejoiced with all his friends, at his good fortune, she regretted, with them, the necessity of his abrupt departure. He took leave of them, and particularly of Mary, for whom his passion was still the same, with much emotion; and it was some time ere the space he had left in their society was filled up, and ere they resumed their wonted cheerfulness.

Preparations were now making for the approaching nuptials, and the day of their celebration was at length fixed. The ceremony was to be performed in a chapel belonging to the castle of Dunbayne, by the chaplain of the Baroness. Mary only was to attend as bride-maid; and the Countess also, with the Baroness, was to be present. The absence of the Count was universally regretted; for from his hand the Earl was to have received his bride. The office was now to be supplied by a neighbouring Laird, whom the family of the Baroness had long esteemed. At the earnest request of Laura, Mary consented to spend the night preceding the day of marriage, at the castle of Dunbayne. The day so long and so anxiously expected by the Earl at length arrived. The morning was extremely fine, and the joy which glowed in his heart seemed to give additional splendour to the scene around him. He set off, accompanied by the Countess, for the castle of Dunbayne. He anticipated the joy with which he should soon retrace the way he then travelled, with Laura by his side, whom death alone could then separate from him. On their arrival they were received by the Baroness, who enquired for Mary; and the Countess and Osbert were thrown into the utmost consternation, when they learned that she had not been seen at the castle. The nuptials were again deferred; the castle was a scene of universal confusion. The Earl returned home instantly to dispatch his people in search of Mary. On enquiry, he learned that the servants who had attended her, had not been heard of since their departure with their lady. Still more alarmed by this intelligence he rode himself in pursuit, yet not knowing which course to take. Several days were employed in a fruitless search; no footstep of her flight could be traced.