

THE BLACK DOUGLAS

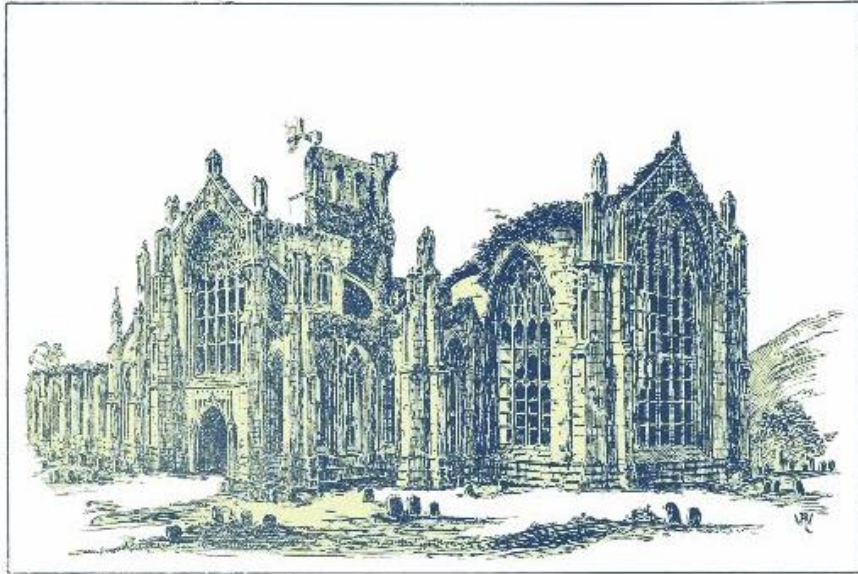
A Legend of Scotland



*A story, a story
Let it come, let it go
A story, a story
From long, long ago!*

Umntwana Izwa! Children Listen!

ONCE upon a time, long, long ago and far, far away, under the great eastern oriel at Melrose, where the high altar of the abbey once stood, lies buried the heart of King Robert the Bruce. Elsewhere, far off at Dunfermline, in Fife, the body of the Scots King was entombed.



Ruins of the abbey, Scotland

Some seventy years ago, when workmen in that ancient Scottish capital were repairing the ruined church, they came upon a marble monument, broken and defaced. Digging below, amid the mould of the sepulchre, they found the skeleton of a tall man. Fragments of cloth-of-gold lay about it, and the breast-bone had been sawn through; and by these signs the workmen knew that they had found the resting-place of the King. There, as one who was present has said, after the silence and darkness of five centuries, was seen the head that had planned and changed the destinies of Scotland; there lay the dry bone of the arm that on the eve of Bannockburn had at one blow slain the fierce De Bohun. But the Bruce's heart, embalmed and cased in silver, bearing its own strange romantic story, lies apart in the Border Abbey. Around the place of its rest, in that fallen and mouldering fane, lie the race that took from the heart their armorial cognisance—the lords of the great house of Douglas.

Hot and stirring was the Douglas blood, and hardly a battlefield of the Middle Ages in Scotland but was stained with some of its best. Derived far back amid the mists of antiquity, none could tell how the race arose, and it was wont to be a boast with the house that none could point to its "first mean man." There is a tower in Yarrow by the Douglas (dhu glas, black water) Burn which is said to have been the stronghold of "the Good Lord James"; and amid the fastnesses of Cairntable in Lanark there is another Douglas Water and Douglas Castle. From one of these, no doubt, in ancient Scots fashion, the family took its name; but when that happened, and what the story was of its early days, must remain a tale untold. The house's mediæval greatness began, however, with the rise of Robert the Bruce, and from that time onwards its deeds mark with stain or blazon every page of Scottish history. Lords of the broad Scottish Border, east and west, their hands were sometimes stronger than the King's. At one time a Douglas could ride to the field with twenty thousand spears at his back, and the gallop of the Douglas steeds sometimes was terrible alike on the causeway of Edinburgh and on the moorland marches of Northumberland. Douglas Earls and Knights fought as leaders through all the wars of David Bruce. A dead Douglas in 1388 won the famous fight with Hotspur on the moonlit field of Otterbourne. At Shrewsbury, in the days of Robert III., Henry IV. of England himself ran close to being hewn in pieces by the Earl of Douglas; and for gallantry on the battlefields of France this same great Earl was invested by the French King with the Dukedom of Touraine. The fame of Scottish chivalry for three hundred years was blown abroad under the Douglas name; for courtesies and blows alike were exchanged by the race on many battlefields besides those of the northern Borderland. Not that dark deeds are lacking in their history. Dark deeds belonged to their times. But in the tilting-yard or on the tented field were to be met no fairer foes. Nor was their heroism all of the sword-and-buckler order, or

confined to one sex. The finest thing recorded of the race, after all, was done by a woman. On that dark February night in 1437, when James I. was murdered in the Blackfriars Abbey at Perth, when the noise and clashing was heard as of men in armour, and the torches of the coming assassins in the garden below cast up great flashes of light against the windows of the King's chamber, was it not a Catherine Douglas who, for lack of a bolt, thrust her own fair arm into the staples of the door?



Catherine Douglas

The fortunes of the family culminated in the reign of James II. Whatever its origin had been, in that reign the race had attained an eminence more dazzling, perhaps, than that of any subject before or since. Earls of Douglas and Wigton, Lords of Bothwell, Galloway, and Annandale, Dukes of Touraine, Lords of Longueville, and Marshals of France, they had inter-married more than once with the Scottish Royal House itself. Members of the family also held the Earldoms of Angus, Ormond, and Moray. What wonder that they lifted haughty heads, and

began to look askance at the Royal power? Then it was that the Stuart King stooped to treachery, and then was done the darkest deed that ever sullied the Stuart name.

Already, in the boyhood of James, a youthful Earl of Douglas and his brother had been betrayed and slain by the King's Ministers. For this transaction, however, the King was in no way to blame. The young Earl was his guest in the Castle of Edinburgh, and when at the treacherous feast the black bull's head, the sign of death, was placed upon their table, James had wept piteously and begged hard for the lives of his friends. It was later, when another Earl was lord upon the Border, that the King made murder his resource. For this act, it must be said, James had strong provocation. Douglas had been honoured by him, had been made Lieutenant-General of the Kingdom, and had abused that honour. He had flouted the King's authority, and slain the King's friends, and, having been commanded by letter to deliver up to James's representative the person of a subject unjustly imprisoned by him, he delivered him up "wanting the head." Finally, with two great Earls of the North, he had entered into an open league against the King. All this, however, cannot palliate the King's resource, cannot absolve the tragic scene in that little supper-chamber in the Castle of Stirling. There the great Earl was under the protection of the King's hospitality, when James, bursting into rage at his taunts and at his refusal to abandon the treasonous compact, suddenly cried, "By Heaven, my Lord, if you will not break the league, this shall!" and, drawing his dagger, stabbed Douglas to the heart.

This deed brought the family fortunes to a climax, and for three years Scotland was blackened by the raging of the Douglas Wars. From Berwick to Inverness the country was wasted by the struggles of the partisans. Stirling and Elgin were burned, and, amid famine and pestilence, the

troubles of the wars of Edward seemed come again on Scotland: so great had grown the power of these Border lords. At last, however, the King and the Earl came face to face. Each led an army of forty thousand men, and only the small river Carron ran between them. By the combat of the morrow, it seemed, would be known whether James Stuart or James Douglas should wear the Scottish crown. But the Earl's heart was seen to fail, and on the morrow, when he awoke, he found his camp deserted. Of all his host of the previous day not a hundred



For three years Scotland was blackened by the raging of the Douglas Wars

followers remained. Nothing was left him but flight; and, turning his back, as a Douglas had never done before, he made his way to England. Twenty years later, having been captured by one of his own vassals in a petty skirmish on the Border, he was sent to end his days as a monk in the Fifeshire Abbey of Lindores.

Thus ended the great line of the Earls of Douglas, a race whose history for three hundred years had been the history of Scotland, and whose foot had twice, at least, been set upon the step even of the throne. From the house's latter days of turbulence and ambition there is pleasure in turning back to those earlier years when the Good Lord James rode at the Bruce's saddle-bow, and the patriotism of groaning Scotland rallied round the coupled names of Douglas and the King. No later deed can dim the lustre of those years, and nothing in history can outshine the last scene in the life of the Knight who strove to carry the Bruce's heart to the Holy Land. Himself hemmed round by the Moors on that Spanish plain, in his effort, it is said, to succour a friend, the Earl took from his neck the casket containing the King's heart. "Pass first in fight," he cried, "as thou wert wont to do! Douglas will follow thee, or die!" Then, throwing the casket far among the enemy, he rushed forward to the place where it fell, and was there slain. Well would it have been for the race of Douglas had they ever remained true as that ancestor to the service of their King!