



“AND in proof of our loyalty to his Majesty, I offer, in the name of the town of Kinlochan, one hundred silver pennies to any citizen who brings in the head of Evan the Outlaw. The king's justiciar will bear me witness that I have refuted the lying malice of those who have accused us of giving aid and comfort to the pretender, Robert of Albany, and his bloodthirsty accomplice, Evan. God save his Gracious Majesty, Malcolm, King of Scotland!”

Duncan McIvor, rigid as a statue in his polished mail, scrutinized the speaker with shrewd blue eyes.

“There is no falsehood in this man, however many traitors there be in the town,” he decided, and turned his suspicious gaze on the crowd that packed the cathedral square to the very steps, where they were held back by the spears of McIvor's company of men-at-arms. With loud shouting, with waving kerchiefs, the townsfolk applauded their old provost's speech. Loyal? Show them the man who said they were not!

From them, the young captain's glance shifted to the balconies of the houses clustering about three sides of the square, the fourth side of which was formed by St.

Andrew's Cathedral. A few casements were shut; the rest were streaming with brightly colored banners and crowded with the heads of women and children. Gay and innocent enough it seemed, this suspected city; but Duncan McIvor had seen treason and murder let loose in peaceful cities before, and he trusted little to their outward show.

He remembered the bloody massacre of 1243, only two years before, when this very Evan the Outlaw had ridden with two hundred lances into Ardross, caught the regent's troops napping, and cut them to pieces. In that terrible night every soldier had been butchered, the regent himself escaping only by the grace of God and a swift horse. And the townsmen of Ardross had unbarred the gates to the murderers.

The applause burst forth again, reverberating deafeningly from the high walls of the houses. Still rigid in his saddle, Duncan shifted his eyes from the crowd to the cathedral portal. A tall, spare man in a stained surcoat of soft leather appeared beside Cospatrick, the provost, and acknowledged the citizens' welcome. This was Sir Hugh Kennedy, Earl of Carfrae, the king's justiciar. A terrible man was he, feared throughout Scotland for his grim gray sword and his

fierce gray eye; his visit usually boded little good to the city he honored with his presence.

Nor was Kinlochan the most conscience-free city in the land, either; when the old king died, its people had fought hard in the cause of Robert, his illegitimate son, and had been turned to loyalty only by the efforts of Ronald Cospatrick. All that was forgiven; but Evan the Headless, the blood-guilty outlaw, had not been forgiven, and Kinlochan's most respectable citizens were suspected of taking his pay. Certain it was that the young bloods had been known to toast Evan openly; and goods pillaged from the very outskirts of the capital had a way of showing up in Kinlochan. The townsfolk smelled blood in the air; wherefore they applauded the king's justiciar with all their might.

Duncan's heart swelled with pride in his stern old leader. There he stood facing hundreds of men who might be thirsting for his blood; yet he appeared among them unarmed and unarmored, fearless as was his wont. His hawk's eyes scanning them, the old earl stepped forward, smiling his tight-lipped smile, acknowledging their boisterous applause, and opened his mouth to speak. Then, before he could utter a word, Sir Hugh staggered, flung out both arms, and dropped dead at the provost's feet.

Horrified, the crowd stood stunned and silent, so that Duncan's cry burst on his own ears with a shock of terror. And well might he be terrified; well might the people stand rigid with horror; for, though not a hand in the crowd had been raised, though no one had stood near enough to strike at Sir Hugh, the hilt of a dagger now protruded from the dead man's breast! Instantly Duncan's eye swept every window facing on the square. If that dagger had been thrown from the pavement, he, sitting his horse a spear-length before the crowd, would have seen the hand that impelled it, would have seen its flash; but he

had seen nothing. The windows too seemed harmless as before; excepting those that were safely barred, by his own order, they were all too far away for the dagger to have been thrown from them by any mortal hand.

The people had found their voices now. Some fell to their knees, calling on the saints; some wailed aloud in terror; a white-haired beggar in the blue gown of his caste cried out that the devil had done the deed to bring shame on the good town of Kinlochan. With one accord, the crowd seized on his words, and howled aloud:

"'Tis the devil's work! 'Tis the devil has done it!"

"Jamieson! Post twenty men at the city gate! Let none pass till I give the word!" Duncan commanded crisply.

Jamieson caught the look in McIvor's eye, and obeyed at once. He was a dour, rangy Borderer on a stolen horse; though he had little liking for his young officer, he understood the consequences of disobedience at such a time.

"You, Kilbeggie," McIvor ordered, "take two-score men and search every house in the town. Arrest all who resist or can not give a good account of themselves. Henderson, mount a patrol, scour the district, and look sharp for signs of Evan's men. Seize all who go armed. Steenson, ride to the regent with the ill news and ask for thirty spearmen."

This done, McIvor dismounted, passed through the line of men-at-arms, strode up the cathedral steps, and touched the provost's arm.

"It grieves me much to do this thing, Donald Cospatrick," he said gravely, "but my duty requires me to place you under arrest. Now that the earl is dead, I am in authority here. If you will go with my fellows to the keep, I will see to my master."

THE provost bowed, and a squad of spearmen led him out through the chancel

door and up to the dark-walled keep that towered grimly above the close, steep-pitched roofs of Kinlochlan.

Duncan gently took the murdered justiciar in his arms, and plucked at the hilt of the dagger. With all his strength, he could not stir it.

"If I were as credulous as these townsfolk, I might believe it was indeed the devil's work," he muttered. "No man in Scotland could plunge a knife so hard into human flesh that I could not draw it out. It must have gone through a rib, as an old wife's paddle goes through new butter."

"Devil's work it was, you may lay to that," a hearty voice answered his musing. "Let me get hold of the hilt, Master Captain; I am a cordwainer by trade, and my fingers are strong."

Flushing at the implied slur, Duncan rose and faced him. The speaker was a heavy-shouldered, muscular man of about thirty, with handsome, hard features, and cold, black eyes that roved about with bold restlessness.

"What is your name, and who gave you leave to pass the guard?" Duncan demanded.

"Malcolm Carmichael, citizen of Kinlochlan, and of good repute. I was admitted because I brought a message for you. By your leave, I will pluck out this knife for you."

And suiting the action to the word, he seized the hilt with one brawny hand, laid the other against the earl's breast, and wrenched out the dagger.

Duncan caught up the man's hand, took the weapon from it, and examined the palm and fingers.

"Those callouses were made by a sword, not by a cordwainer's knife," he said sternly.

"All free citizens bear arms, and have occasion to use them against the king's enemies," the other replied carelessly.

"True," Duncan admitted; then, fixing

his keen eyes upon him, he asked:

"What was the message you spoke of? Speak quickly, for I have work to do."

"The provost bade me ask your leave to take his daughter, Margaret Cospatrick, into my house. Now that her father is in prison, she is homeless, poor lass."

A reasonable request, and a kindly one; but as Duncan searched the man's face, he felt less and less inclined to grant it. Cospatrick was held on suspicion of the most heinous offense: high treason and murder; and therefore, by the hard law of the time, his house and goods passed automatically and at once to the crown. His daughter was homeless, in a town overrun with men-at-arms and probably infested with dangerous characters; yet, to Duncan's eyes, Malcolm Carmichael did not look like a safe guardian for the girl. He did not trust the man; and he did trust his own ability to read men's hearts in their faces.

"I will not," he answered angrily. "You had best go home, Carmichael, and look well to your actions. It is an old saying that he who plucks the knife out may plunge it in."

The cordwainer shot a dark look at him; but before either could speak another word, a woman's shriek rang above the murmur of the scattering crowd and the threats of the soldiers, who were clearing the square. Carmichael darted past McIvor to the far end of the platform between the top of the steps and the cathedral door, and disappeared round the corner of the building.

Following swiftly on his heels, Duncan saw a young girl struggling in the grasp of two spearmen, upon one of whom Carmichael was leaping from behind.

Reaching out swiftly, Duncan swept the cordwainer off his feet, and flung him down; then he struck first one and then the other soldier across the face with his open palm. The men fell back, recognized him, and hastened down the steps in alarm.

"I ask your pardon," Duncan addressed the girl, "for the incivility of my men, Who-"

"Your men?" she exclaimed, her brown eyes opening wide with surprised alarm. "Then it was you that sent my father to prison!"

"If you are Margaret Cospatrick, I must own that I did send your father to prison," he answered with a trace of shame.

As he spoke, he surveyed her with as much admiration as was compatible with respect. She was dressed richly, as became the daughter of a wealthy burgess and one who held the high office of provost; tall, slender, and with the most exquisite features, she would have graced the regent's court. Her cheeks still glowed with the effort of her struggle, and in her disheveled garments, she seemed an offended queen.

"You must know that my father is innocent of this crime," she protested. "I saw you at your post as I came forth from the church; you must have observed all that happened, and seen that he could not have dealt the stroke."

Duncan flushed; he could not remove his eyes from the angry girl, and her very beauty seemed to argue the truth of her words.

"When the king's justiciar is struck down within the limits of a town," he answered, struggling for composure, "that town is held to answer for the deed, and its officers are under arrest until the murderer is found. I hope with all my heart that your father may clear himself. But I would not willingly bring hardship upon you. Your house is now the king's, but you have my consent to occupy it until the regent sends his deputy to take over the town and inquire into the murder."

With charming grace, but with unconcealed scorn, she swept him a low courtesy and majestically descended the steps. Duncan turned to Carmichael, who stood regarding him sourly.

"Henceforth you will take care not to lay hands on a soldier of the king," he warned the cordwainer. "This time I pardon you, for it was done in defense of a lady. The next time, it will mean death."

Without a word, Carmichael strode away down the cathedral steps. Watching him, Duncan saw him follow Margaret Cospatrick, and strike up a narrow street after her. Suspecting something vaguely evil in the man's purpose, he beckoned the nearest soldier to him, and pointed in the direction Carmichael had taken.

"A tall fellow in murray and black has just gone up that street yonder," he said. "Follow him, and report to me where he goes, with whom he speaks, and where he lives."

McIVOR established his headquarters in the keep, a small but thick-walled and easily defended castle that had once been the lonely stronghold of the cattle-lifting robber lords of Kinloch, the last of whom had died, with a lance through his body, a century since. Now that a city had grown up 'round the old castle, it served as a citadel and the arsenal of the town's train-band. The captain of that train-band, together with most of the other municipal officers, had been placed under arrest, for their loyalty was open to question, and Duncan was taking no chances of letting any man escape who might have an interest in the death of the king's justiciar.

His severity caused the townsfolk to mutter ominously, for it was plain that they regarded the murder as the work of some supernatural power. Had they not seen the dagger stand forth in Carfrae's breast, with no hand raised to plant it there? Then why were peaceful burgesses thrown into prison, when a thousand men had seen them standing innocently by at the commission of the deed?

Discontent was doubly dangerous in Kinloch, in the heart of the district infested by Evan the Outlaw, "the Head-less," as men

called him. The brigand was credited with uncanny powers; he had the entire countryside in terror of him; his raids were swift, irresistible. Though all that territory had suffered at his hands, no man had ever seen his face, for he appeared always in full armor, with his face concealed by the vizor of his helmet. The superstitious countryfolk said that he was an evil spirit, and whispered that there was no head within that helmet, nothing but a grinning skull. It was this superstition which had given him his title.

But cruel and uncanny as he was, he had stood by Robert, young Malcolm's unsuccessful rival to the throne, with a devotion which won him as much affection from the men of Kinloch as they dared show. He never raided this town, and he shared the proceeds of his pillage with the rash young townsmen who smuggled across the near-by Highland border. Moreover, if Kinloch was loyal to the boy-king Malcolm with its head, it was loyal to the defeated Robert with its sentimental heart, and Evan was a hero to the townsfolk, if he was something of a terror to them also.

Duncan McIvor knew that he and his company of spearmen stood in grave danger if Evan chose this all too opportune moment for a dash into the city; the grumbling citizens were almost certain to join hands with the outlaw. The king's men were too few to hold the walls against a numerous and determined enemy, with treason menacing them from within. Therefore, detaching just enough men to hold the city gate and patrol the streets at night, he called in the rest of his command at sunset and posted them in the keep. This, at least, he could hold, and keep the king's flag flying, till his messenger could summon reinforcements from the capital.

Standing in the red light that streamed in through one of the narrow slits pierced in the stone wall for archer's to shoot through, he examined the fatal dagger, "the devil's

dagger," as townsfolk and soldiers called it. Never in his life had he seen such a weapon. About twelve inches long, it had a simple cross-hilt that was flush with the sides of the thick blade. The blade itself was flat, and instead of tapering toward the point, it broadened out like a spearhead, so that it was very heavy near the point, which was ground both for piercing and for cutting. The haft had no pommel, but was blunt, square, and very rough at the end,

"A bad weapon for a fight," Duncan mused; "ill-balanced, but apt for throwing. Yet this was not thrown, at least not by any mortal man. But that Earl Carfrae was slain by the devil I will not admit, for there are too many in this town who would have been glad to do it."

He searched the steel for a smith's mark; and at last he found one, or the almost obliterated trace of one, near the guard. It had been nearly filed out, and then smoothed over skillfully. He could barely make out the letters "—rg—i."

"No Scottish mark that," he commented. "It is an outland weapon. Why should the devil use a foreign blade, when there are enough smiths here to supply him? If it had been made in Scotland, I should have laid the deed to Evan the Headless, or to one of his cutthroats."

An iron-studded door opened and a man-at-arms entered.

"There is a fellow here to speak with you, Captain," he announced.

"Who sends him?"

"Cospatrick's daughter."

"Bid him enter," Duncan commanded; and the soldier thrust a cringing servant into the room.

The fellow stood twirling his leather cap in his hands, plainly frightened.

"Well?" Duncan queried. "Say on, man; there's naught to fear."

"The lady Margaret commands me,"

the servant stammered, "to ask your lordship if you would see her."

Smiling at the unmerited title the scared fellow gave him, McIvor asked:

"Surely she would not come here? It is a poor place for a lady."

"She would have you come to her father's house, if your lordship pleases."

"I will come at once," Duncan answered, with alacrity that surprised himself. "Is it far, my lad?"

"Across the square, two streets down and up a wynd," the servant replied.

"AND you dare refuse to release my father, when you know him to be innocent?" Margaret's brown eyes flashed with a scorn that was near hatred.

"I did not say that I knew him to be innocent," Duncan protested. "I know that he did not strike the blow, and his face is that of an honest man; but the town has an ill repute, and I can not swear that any man in it may not have had a hand in the murder."

"But you believe in him?" the girl urged, almost tearfully.

"What I believe matters little. The king's regent will send his deputy to judge the case; I have nothing to do with his verdict, and most certainly I can not let the provost free except by the deputy's order. I will speak to him favorably concerning your father: that is all I can do."

"The whole town will speak for him; we have no need of your intercession," the girl replied, her lip curling. "I should not have expected a woman's word to move you, when mercy and justice will not."

"Mercy and justice are not hi my hands," Duncan remarked quietly. "Would you have me false to my duty to please you?"

"I see that you would not stir a finger to please me," she flashed back. "I can not ask you to go, for you have taken my very house from me, and allow me to remain in it only by

sufferance."

"You need not ask me; I am going. But if it will give you any comfort, I am doing all in my power to find the murderer; and if I succeed, and it is proved that the provost had no dealings with him, your father will be freed. I think I could name the villain now, but to lay hands on him is a harder matter."

Margaret started forward impulsively.

"Forgive me for my harsh words!" she cried. "I was beside myself with grief. In Heaven's name, who is the man?"

"If I am not mistaken, it was the one man who had most to gain by the justiciar's death. I do not yet know what devilish arts he used, but I feel sure that Evan the Headless slew him." "Oh, do not name that man!" Margaret cried, her face pale with terror. "His spies are in every household; to breathe a word against him is death!"

"Nevertheless, if he dares come within reach of my arm, I will do my best to bring the deed home to him," Duncan assured her. "He will be Evan the Headless in very truth if he shows himself in Kinlochlan."

The curtains parted, and Malcolm Carmichael's bold, sinister face smiled at them across the room.

"This is foolish talk," he gibed. "Evan knows more than to thrust his neck into the snare. He appears only when he is not looked for."

Duncan flushed angrily.

"Master Cordwainer," he said, "I have warned you twice not to interfere in the king's business. I warn you now for the last time. I know not who let you into this house, but it is the king's house for the present, and it is no longer open to you. If I ever find you in it again, I will put you in safe-keeping."

Carmichael did not so much as look at him.

"By your leave, Margaret," he addressed the girl, "I must find fault with you for dealing with this king's man, when you

have good friends to help you. I grieve much that your father is falsely imprisoned, and I will do all I can to bring him back to you safely. I ask but one reward if I succeed, and you know what that is. I leave you now, since I am forbidden to stay." And with a sneering smile at Duncan, he disappeared through the curtains.

Replacing his helmet, Duncan turned to follow him; but Margaret stopped him.

"My uncle, Martin Gillespie, will go with you," she said; and opening a panel in the further wall, she called twice.

In a moment a short, pousy man came in, puffing with exertion, his great stomach shaking at every step. He kissed the girl, bowed to Duncan, and took the young man's arm.

When they reached the darkest spot in the pitch-black wynd, Gillespie stopped, and drew Duncan toward him.

"It were best for all concerned, Master McIvor," he whispered, "if ye left the provost's door unbarred this night, and sent the guard away."

"What do you mean?" Duncan asked in indignant surprise.

"Not so loud," the fat man wheezed. "It may mean death if we are overheard. Are ye fond of the sight of blood, young man? Do ye like to see good men killed for nothing?"

"Are you mad?" Duncan replied.

"It is you who are mad. The townfolk love their provost; if ye hang him, they will throw themselves upon you. Then there will be a deal of killing, much harmless blood will be spilt, and the good town of Kinlochan will be laid waste. I love this town, young man, and I would not see these ill things happen. Therefore I warn you let the provost escape. Ye need not fear for yourself. When the deputy comes, you say that Evan the Headless surprised the guard and took him away. A few hacked swords and a little pig's blood will give color to the tale, and many men will

thank you for it."

Duncan took Gillespie's face in his hands, and held it close to his own.

"Look you," he said, "I have as much regard for innocent lives as you have. I would do anything honest to avoid bloodshed; I have given my men orders to keep peace with the townfolk at all hazards. But what you propose is not honest, and I will not listen to it. The provost stays in prison till the deputy comes."

"Who is the deputy?" Gillespie asked.

"I do not know; it will probably be the Earl of Ross, who is near by, and has the high, low, and middle justice."

The merchant groaned.

"Ross!" he cried. "Black' David! There is neither pity nor justice in him!"

"He is as just as he is stern," Duncan contradicted. "His verdict will be fair." And he turned to go.

The other dragged at his arm.

"Wait!" he pleaded. "If ye will do nothing for our sakes, consider yourselves! Though the townfolk are too weak to withstand you, they may not be alone! Let Cospatrick go!"

Duncan turned on him.

"So Evan the Headless is with you! It is unsafe to tell such treason to a king's officer!"

"I never spoke his name!" Gillespie protested. "I am no traitor, good sir!"

"Then you will do well to wait till the deputy comes," McIvor sternly admonished him.

The merchant's distress was pitiful.

"But I tell ye," he whined, "it is death to wait! The blood of many men will be on your head. Let him go at once! If ye wait till tomorrow, it may be too late!"

Duncan tore himself away.

"You are either mad or a traitor," he said scornfully. "For Mistress Margaret's sake, I will call you mad, and let you go, but

do not approach me again.”

Leaving Gillespie quaking in the darkness, the young captain returned to the keep. There he found a messenger from the capital, dusty with hard riding.

“The regent can not send reinforcements,” he reported. “The Islesmen are up in arms, and he needs every man; but the Earl of Ross will be here with a small escort by noon tomorrow. He bids you have a gallows built in front of the church before he comes.”

DETAILING Kilbeggie and three men to this task, Duncan went to his quarters and pondered over the things he had heard. At first he thought only of Carmichael’s strong, evil face and arrogant speech. There was something under the man’s boldness, or he would hardly have been so ready with his promises to free the provost; nor would he have dared show his ill-will so openly. And what was the reward he expected from Margaret?

“The man can not be in love with her?” he muttered. “A mere cordwainer!”

But the thought suited well with Carmichael’s insolent behavior; he was a man who would dare much, Duncan felt.

He shuddered at the idea of this fellow in possession of so lovely and spirited a girl; and suddenly it came over him that such a thing would be more terrible to him than any death.

“St. Andrew!” he cried to himself. “Am I to fall in love with the daughter of a man who may be swinging in a rope this time tomorrow?” And after a moment’s reflection: “What if I do?” he asked. “Whether he be hanged or not, I believe him honest, and his daughter is fair enough and good enough for any man. And come what will, I will not let that vile cordwainer have her!”

But he knew that the morrow might bring trouble; the sight of the provost at the

gallow’s foot might stir the already restless townsmen to fury. If it came to a fight, and there were anything in Gillespie’s implied threat that Evan the Headless would bring his outlaws into the battle, then Duncan himself would almost certainly die.

“If Carmichael is one of them—I” he cried.

Yes, if Carmichael was in Evan’s pay, then defeat for the king’s troops would mean that Margaret would fall into Carmichael’s hands. She was doubtless promised to the man as a reward of his treason!

“She shall know of it, however,” he resolved; and took inkhorn and parchment, thanking his stars for the chance that he had been brought up in a monastery. A little later, he dispatched the following letter by a trooper:

To MISTRESS MARGARET
COSPATKICK:

I, who have brought your father into peril of his life, who may yet be the instrument of his death, confess without shame that I love you. If your father is acquitted tomorrow, I shall ask him for your hand; if not, you shall hear of me no more. But whatever happens, I will not abate one jot of my duty to the king. Beware of Carmichael; I have reason to believe him a traitor and a spy of Evan’s. Farewell, and the saints be with you.

DUNCAN McIVOR, *Serviens Regis*.

His mind cleared by this confession, he reverted almost instantly to the interview with Gillespie. As he went over it in his mind, five words sang themselves in his ears with more and more significance—

“Morning may be too late!”

He sprang to his feet.

“Would to God I had questioned that fat dolt more closely!” he reproached himself. “He knows more than I gave him credit for! Here, Henderson!”

The lantern-jawed patrol leader had ridden in at sunset to report the district quiet and no sign of Evan and his outlaws. He now appeared promptly, though yawning and obviously saddle-sore.

"Take charge here," ordered Duncan, "I go to the city gate, to consult with Jamieson there on matters of importance* and may not be back till dawn."

Without waiting for an answer, he snatched up a black cloak to hide the gleam of his mail, and crossed the city to where his second in command kept restless watch at the gate.

"Best take a patrol with you, Captain," he urged, when McIvor told him of his suspicions and his intention to probe them personally.

"How many can you spare me, of your score?" asked Duncan.

"Not one—we are too few to hold the gate-house now—"

"The same is true of the keep," interrupted Duncan. "So I go alone—to question a fat old carle who could not harm a hare. Remember, your duty, and Henderson's, is to hold the town till the deputy comes. Farewell."

As McIvor readjusted his cloak and turned away, Jamieson saw that he was carrying, stuck through his belt, the devil's dagger—at midnight, too, when, as all men know, the Evil One has power! The superstitious Borderer crossed himself and gave up all hope of ever seeing his young officer alive again.

The moon was up, but the streets and houses of Kinlochan were otherwise dark, for the captain had given orders for all citizens to be at home and in bed by the curfew hour, now long past. As Duncan crossed a side street, a man stole out of a house-door, closely muffled. Duncan seized him by the arm. The man started violently.

"Where does Martin Gillespie live?"

Duncan questioned.

Trembling in his grasp, the man pointed up the street.

"Two turns to the left and at the end of a close," he answered.

"And now, what are you doing out at this hour?"

The fellow faltered.

"Back in with you, and do not stir outside your door again tonight, on pain of death!" snapped McIvor.

The other bolted into his house like a rabbit into its burrow.

As he entered into the close to which the culprit had directed him, Duncan heard a door creak on its hinges, and flattened himself against the high wall which formed the side of a tall, rambling house. Watching intently, he saw a hooded figure steal out softly and shut the door behind it. Straining his eyes, he made out a massive shape between him and the moonlight, a familiar shape, with the only stomach of its size in Kinlochan. It was Martin Gillespie.

But though he had come to question this very man, the citizen's illegal appearance at midnight changed the course of Duncan's intentions. He recognized at once that if there was any mischief afoot, Gillespie's nocturnal sortie was proof not only of his knowledge of it, but of his complicity. Clearly, however much he desired to avoid bloodshed, he was still more anxious to free the provost. For that there was a plot to free the provost, by force if necessary, Duncan no longer doubted.

Tiptoeing cautiously toward the street, he followed his man's portly figure to the turn, down a narrow, winding side street, to, the rear entrance of a large, six-story house with a high-pitched, many-angled roof and a wilderness of chimneys. Gillespie mounted the steps and looked about apprehensively. Duncan dropped to the cobblestones just in time, and heard the merchant knock at the door four times in rapid succession. Instantly

the door swung open, and closed again as soon as Gillespie was inside.

Waiting long enough to avert suspicion, Duncan wound his cloak about his face, loosened his sword in its scabbard, and judging that the knock was a signal, rapped four times, as Gillespie had done.

The door opened at once; the hall was dark. A hand fell on his, and guided him down a long passage. At last his guide knocked at an invisible door, and a blaze of light burst upon them. Stepping over the threshold, Duncan found himself in an interior room without windows, and ventilated only by a small air-shaft. Across the room a fire was burning in a grate, around which stood or sat a dozen armed men. Among them, Duncan recognized five of the most prominent and orderly citizens of Kinloch; the rest were obviously of the poorer sort, but all resolute-looking fellows. He noticed with disappointment that Carmichael was not among them.

IN HIS excitement, Duncan allowed the cloak to drop from about his head, and his polished helmet caught and threw back the firelight. Instantly confusion broke loose. Those who were seated leaped to their feet; some made for the darkest corners of the room, others pressed forward toward him, fumbling at their sword-hilts. At once Duncan drew his own sword, and prepared for defense. The room echoed with angry shouts of "Kill the king's man! Cut him to pieces!" Yet none seemed anxious to be the first to face his blade.

From the angle of the chimney, Martin Gillespie shouldered forward, thrusting his great stomach through the press. With an effort which left him gasping, he hoisted himself up on to the top of a massive table, and panting for breath, brought out a shout that made the conspirators pause.

"Harm him not!" he cried. "It was he who imprisoned Ronald Cospatrick! Seize

him, but wound him not; we will hold him as hostage for the provost's safety!"

Here was the moment on which Duncan had counted; when he might, by cool reasoning and his own promise to say no word of this meeting to the authorities, dissuade the citizens from violence and armed rebellion. But before he could speak, a panel opened in the wall beside the chimney; there came the clank of mail, a shrill whistle; and a gleaming, figure strode into the room. Duncan, his sword still outthrust in defense, stared at the newcomer in amazement. He was a tall, powerfully built man in shining mail, his face completely concealed by the vizor of his helmet.

"You crack-brained fools!" the armored man said quietly, but in a voice that pierced through and silenced the din. "You will have the troops here in a moment. Kill this fellow quietly, and be done with it."

"But, good Evan," Gillespie protested, "would it not be more prudent to hold him as a hostage? If we slay him, the king's spearmen will butcher us all!"

"The king's troops will have enough to do to save their own lives," the outlaw answered. "This lad here is both brain and heart to them; put him out of the way, and his men will offer small resistance tomorrow. Consider, men of Kinloch: if McIvor escapes, he will bring a charge of high treason against all of you, and then it will be hey for a short grace and a long rope. Now kill him quickly, or I will call my men off and leave you in the lurch."

Believing all his enemies were in front of him, Duncan had waited calmly until the outlaw furnished him with all the information he wished; but he was speedily undeceived. A light appeared at the far end of the corridor; the sound of many feet came toward him; and before he could dash for the street door, that too swung open, letting in two tall fellows in steel caps, who struck at him fiercely with

long knives.

Duncan had no room to strike back; besides, with armored men on both sides of him, his position was untenable. There was only one way out: forward through the crowded room. At least most of his opponents there were half-trained, peace-loving citizens. Swinging his sword, he plunged straight ahead, striking to right and left with the flat. Unused to desperate fighting, the townsmen made way before him, or fell headlong beneath his blows, until the captain stood within striking distance of Evan the Headless, with no one between to save the outlaw from his stroke. Duncan raised his sword, felt a weapon thud against the stanch steel rings on his back, and realized instantly that he had no time to fight.

Lowering his point, he dealt Evan a mighty blow with his left fist against the meshed mail covering the throat. The outlaw fell heavily, still struggling to release his sword from the scabbard in which it was jammed. Like a flash, Duncan leapt over the prostrate man, through the panel, and found himself at the foot of a secret stair, lighted with candles stuck in sconces on the wall. He slammed the panel shut, and dashed up the stairs, extinguishing the candles behind him as he ran. The stair wound in a spiral, without so much as a door opening from it, story up after story.

Behind him the well roared with the clatter of his pursuers' feet upon the wooden, treads. Clad as he was in complete chainmail, his breath came shorter and shorter, till he no longer blew out the candles, as he passed them but struck them out with his hand. If there were only a door through which he might dodge! What if this way led him into an impasse, a room from which there was no exit? But trap or no trap, he must go through it to the end.

Suddenly he shot out through an open door into a large, meagerly furnished room.

Slamming the door behind him, Duncan hunted for and found a bolt, and shot it, just as the first of the pursuers hurled himself against the other side of the door. Looking for something to barricade it with, Duncan laid hands on the large table, on which a candle was burning, in the center of the room. His eyes fell on a piece of parchment beside the candle. It was his own letter to Margaret Cospatrick!

But it was more than his own writing. Added to it, like a postscript, were the following lines:

MALCOLM CARMICHAEL:

I know by this that you are a traitor. For the sake of the love you say you have for me, I will not give you over to the soldiers; but I command you to leave Kinloch an at once and never look upon my face again. If you have had a part in the crime of which my father is falsely accused, and I ever obtain proof of it, I will denounce you.

MARGARET COSPATTICK.

The crashing impact of a heavy battle-ax on the other side of the bolted door, and the gleam of its edge through the splintering panel, recalled Duncan to a sense of his present danger. Hastily placing the parchment within his helmet, he thrust the table against the door leading to the secret stairs. Across the room was another door, with a great iron key in the massive lock. Bounding over to it, he whipped out the key, opened the door, sprang through, closed and locked it from the outside.

Looking about him, Duncan now found himself in a long, narrow attic, lit by the moonlight streaming in through a solitary dormer window at the far end. Half-way between him and the window, the head of a staircase rose through the dusty floor. Here was a possible means of escape to the street, and Duncan hastened to it eagerly. But even as he did so, there came a rush of feet on the

floor below, and a throng of men swept swiftly up the stair. Their leader, a tall fellow armed with sword and buckler, gave a joyous cry at the sight of the captain's figure outlined against the moonlit window.

QUICK as thought, Duncan dropped his own sword, and laid hold of a great iron-bound clothes-chest that stood beside him at the head of the stair. With the strength of desperation, he heaved it up at arms' length above his head. At the sight of the huge bulk poised, black and threatening, before him, the leader of the attackers crouched behind his upraised shield, but in vain. Like a stone from a catapult, the monstrous missile came crashing down, crushing the life out of two men, transfixing a third upon the sword of the man behind him, and sweeping them all into a tangled, shrieking heap at the bottom of the stair. A sudden thunder of blows on the other side of the locked door told Duncan that those who had pursued him up the secret stair would soon be through into the attic. Through the cries and curses of the wounded, he could hear more men coming up the lower flights of the staircase he had just cleared; obviously there was no escape for him that way, nor could he hope to hold the stairway against attack from both front and rear.

Running lightly to the far end of the attic, Duncan climbed through the narrow window out on to the steeply sloping roof. There he took up his position, to the right of the window and a half-step higher up the roof, his left hand resting on the ridge of the little dormer, his sword upraised and ready. Soon he heard the door of the inner room come crashing down. In an instant, the attic seemed full of men, shaking the house as they rushed back and forth across the floor, overturning chests and boxes, and thrusting their sword-points into every nook and corner.

Presently, a man wearing a steel cap went to the window and put his head out. Still

wearing the steep cap, his head rolled down the slope of the roof, fell over the edge, and lodged in a sort of valley between two lower gables.

Those within came thronging to where the headless trunk lay by the window in a widening pool of blood that looked like ink in the moonlight; but no man offered to step across it and beneath the terrible blade that they knew was waiting outside.

"Come, Evan the Headless," called Duncan in grim mockery. "What have you to fear?"

But Evan stirred not, nor made reply, till one of his followers suggested that some of them go out another window.

"This is the only window from which this part of the roof can be reached," Duncan heard the deep voice of the outlaw say decisively. "We have the young fool safely trapped now. Bar fast the shutter, post four to watch here and leave the rest to me."

A solid shutter of heavy boards was promptly placed in the unshaded window and made fast from within.

Thus left alone on the roof of the house, Duncan sheathed his sword, climbed to the high-pitched ridge-pole and looked about him, by the bright light of a nearly full moon. He was trapped indeed, on the top of a sort of tower that rose fully two stories above the rest of the house. There was not as much as a chimney-pot for him to take cover behind, and at any moment he might hear the twang of a bowstring from a dark corner of the roof below and feel a cloth-yard shaft tear through his shirt of mail. Listening apprehensively, he suddenly heard a voice, the voice of Martin Gillespie, speak these words, apparently in his very ear.

"Evan had best haste over the wall and ride hard, if he is to bring his two hundred lances here by tomorrow noon."

In his astonishment, Duncan nearly fell to his death in the street below. Looking about

him, he discovered a low, hooded opening in the roof, and realized that it was the top of the airshaft ventilating the room on the ground floor where the conspirators met. But the shaft was far too narrow for his broad shoulders ever to squeeze through. He must find some other means of escape.

Then there came to Duncan's ears the blessed sound of the tramp of disciplined feet, and he knew that one of his own patrols was passing by. A shout rose to his lips; but he checked it, realizing that to call out thus from the housetops would almost certainly rouse the town and start a general fight that otherwise might be avoided—for now he knew that the other side would not be ready to strike till tomorrow noon.

By the loom of St. Andrew's cathedral tower against the sky, Duncan saw that this great rambling house on whose roof he sat was much nearer than he had realized to the square; so much so that its front in all probability faced on it. If he could but work his way to that end of the roof, he might succeed in attracting the attention of the patrol without giving the alarm.

Swinging his right leg over the ridgepole, Duncan made his way down the moonless side of the roof, cautiously, for the slope was steep and the old, moss-grown slates were slippery. Half-way down, he turned and began to walk as fast as he dared along the slope toward the front. He was two-thirds of the way there when, without an instant's warning, a cracked slate snapped off and broke away beneath his tread; his feet flew out from under him, he fell heavily on his right side, and shot, feet foremost, down the slope and over the edge of the roof.

"St. Andrew, save me!" he prayed, as he fell through the dark.

Then he struck; not, as he had feared, on the pavement but on the lower roof. This also sloped so steeply that his fall was not broken abruptly; but again turned into a slide.

Down he shot with increasing velocity, for now he was in a sort of trough between two gables, slippery with slime left there by the rains of many winters. Vainly clutching for any handhold, he felt his legs shoot over the edge of the roof, and his body follow and fall once more straight down, this time to certain death. Then, miraculously, his hands touched and gripped something hard and round. Looking up, Duncan saw that he was hanging, at arms' length, from a long waterspout, with its mouth shaped like a dragon's head; just such a gargoyle as then projected from the eyes of any large dwelling, or may be seen grinning from the tower of a Gothic cathedral today. Thanks to his wearing chain-mail, his skin was untormented, and he was none the worse save for a few bruises. Silently thanking St. Andrew, Duncan began to pull himself up, to climb on the lower roof and there try his fortunes anew. But, before he had raised himself an inch, he saw something that so startled him that he nearly relaxed his hold on the waterspout.

Directly in front of him, as he hung, and perhaps a dozen feet away, the side of the house was built out at right angles. Through a window in this wing, Duncan could now look down into a lighted room, where, beside a table on which a candle was burning, loomed the mail-clad bulk of Evan the Headless. The outlaw appeared to be talking with some one who sat on the other side of the table. All that Duncan could see of this person was a lean brown hand, that rested on the table where the candlelight was brightest. What startled him was that this hand was clutching a duplicate of the devil's dagger!

“**W**HERE is Duncan McIvor, who should command here?”

Black David, Earl of Ross, sat on his horse in the city gate and glowered down at the unhappy Jamieson. Wriggling, under the merciless black eyes of the king's deputy, the

embarrassed Borderer stammered out a tangled tale of midnight and devil's daggers and black magic; the gist of which was that the captain had disappeared and that the search parties Jamieson had sent out had failed to find the slightest trace of him.

"Fool!" said Black David, contemptuously. "When you had the provost and half the other town-officers in the keep! A touch of hot coals to their feet or a few twists of a cord 'round their skulls, and they would have told all. Out of the way, there! Forward!"

Followed by his own scanty escort of ten mounted men-at-arms and forty archers, the Earl of Ross rode, unwelcomed, through the streets of Kinlochan. Contrary to the wont of folk whose town is visited by a king's deputy, the people had not assembled in the square to witness the spectacle and the trial. At every house-door, however, and at every street-corner, men were waiting in grim and ominous silence. Not a woman or a child was to be seen, except here and there at a high window, the shutters of which were half-closed.

Ross knew the signs and prepared for battle. In an incredibly short time after he had ridden in through the entrance to the keep, he rode out again, clad now in full armor. Behind him marched his own half-hundred and most of McIvor's company, the latter guarding the provost, the captain of the train-band, and the other municipal officers, in chains. Marshaling his men in battle array at the foot of the gallows, Black David ordered the hostages to mount the scaffold.

ONE other person was asking, in an anguish of suspense: "Where is Duncan McIvor?" It was Margaret Cospatrick, who sat watching the ominous preparations from the balcony of a window overlooking the scaffold. Not all her uncle's protestations could persuade her to withdraw behind the shutters.

"He said he would find the murderer,"

she insisted, "and unless harm comes to him, he will."

"I tell ye, lass, he must be dead," the merchant urged. "He would not fail to meet the earl otherwise. The town rings with rumors of his murder at the hands of the outlaws."

Prudent Martin was not the man to confess his own part in Duncan's disappearance.

"It would take more than a few cowardly outlaws to kill him," Margaret flashed, "and he is not the man to leave a helpless girl without comfort when her father is at the point of death."

The frantic Martin was moved to rudeness.

"One would say ye were foolish over the lad," he exploded. "It does not become a decent girl, whose father is about to hang, to waste grief on one of his murderers."

The girl turned on him, her face scarlet.

"Martin Gillespie!" she cried, the tears gathering in her eyes, "if you were twice my uncle, you have no right to talk of me thus, or to abuse a good man. Aye, he is a good man. He did but do his duty, and then threw himself into peril for my sake. For all we know, he may be lying dead for my sake this moment! He loved me, and if he comes back alive, I will not forget what he did for my love!"

Martin Gillespie became purple and choked.

"BET IT made known, in the name of the king, that the town of Kinlochan is held suspect of the murder of Sir Hugh Kennedy, Earl of Carfrae, Justiciar of his Majesty. Be it known that the said town is also suspect of making way with and murdering one Duncan McIvor, in command of the king's troops, occupying the said town. Wherefore, in the king's name, I, David, Earl of Ross, deputy for the king, do hereby

command that unless the murderer or murderers be produced within half the space of an hour, the provost and officers of the said town of Kinlochan be duly and well hanged, in satisfaction of the king's vengeance."

The herald's trumpet was drowned out by a prolonged howl of hate and fury from the grimly waiting men in house-doors and street-corners. Through their outcries rang another trumpet, blown three times, from without the wall. A cloud of dust, through which came the gleam of lance-points, bore down on the city gate. Out from the nearest houses came rushing a throng of townsmen, who had been waiting for this moment and signal. Before the startled Jamieson and his twenty could turn and strike a blow, they were overpowered and the gate-house captured. 'Round whirled the windlasses, down dropped the drawbridge, up creaked the portcullis, and open flew the gates of Kinlochan.

With thunder of hoofs and jangle of mail, two hundred horse swept through the city gate. Boot to boot they rode, in column of fours, with lances in rest. Over their armor they wore black tabards; at their head rode Evan the Outlaw, his face concealed by the bars of his vizor. At the sight of him, the jubilant townsmen burst forth from doors, streets and alleys, brandishing swords, pikes and Lochaber axes.

Black David, his face cold and stern, signaled to his herald, who blew loudly, just as the combined forces of the citizens and outlaws poured into the side of the square opposite the cathedral and the gallows. Thinking this the sign of surrender, the people stopped and listened eagerly.

"As an example to all traitors, let Ronald Cospatrick and his accomplices be hanged at once!" cried the earl.

The townsmen stared at each other aghast for a single moment; then frenzy seized them, and they surged toward the scaffold. Evan the Headless waved to his outlaws, who

were wheeling into line; down came the lance-points, couched for the charge. The Earl of Ross roared an order, his archers bent their bows, the men-at-arms locked shields and formed an unbroken hedge of spears. The hangman placed the noose 'round Ronald Cospatrick's neck.

"Hold! Stay the execution! Here is the murderer!" A voice rang clear and high through the startled square.

Duncan McIvor burst through the ragged disarray of the townsmen, half-dragging a little, dark man with frightened eyes, who held in one hand something large and cumbrous, wrapped in green cloth. In the other hand, held high over his head by Duncan's iron fingers round his wrist, he clutched a strangely shaped knife for all to see.

"The devil's dagger!" cried a hundred voices among the townsmen. "And look, the outlander has its fellow in his girdle!"

"Heed him not—it is but a trick of the king's men!" shouted Evan the Headless. "On—on, and save your provost!"

But the men of Kinlochan were now beginning to feel that their provost was saved already, without any need of their risking their own necks. They saw the deputy sign to the hangman to wait, and to the captain to bring his prisoner nearer. They looked at the troops, standing there so steady and silent—and instinctively they stood and grew silent themselves. They would not charge, and without them, Evan dared not.

Had he done so, had he hurled his two hundred wild riders across the square, he would certainly have trampled Duncan and his prisoner to death, and perhaps have broken the shield wall and won the day. No one there knew this better than the king's deputy, yet, for all the notice Black David took of Evan and his band, the outlaws might have been a week's ride away. And that, if Evan had but known Black David better, was a bad sign.

“Captain McIvor,” he said to Duncan sternly, “where have you been this long time, and who is this fellow you bring before me?”

“One whom I met up with on the roof of yonder tall house last night,” answered Duncan, gravely. “He was there for the purpose of putting one of those strange daggers of his into me, as he did into Sir Hugh Kennedy. But, being closer than he thought, I took him by the neck and held him over the edge of the roof till he confessed all. Then, there being no other way off the roof, I had him take me to his room—a secret room, which has a little round window or loophole most cunningly concealed among the carved stonework across the front of the house. There I waited till those others in the house, who would not have let me depart alive, rushed out into the street but now.”

“What is your name?” Black David demanded, but the accused made no reply

“Ridolfo is his name—he is a native of Genoa,” said Duncan, the other nodding assent. “Your lordship can speak with him in French, as I did, for he knows no Scottish.”

“Do you confess to the murder of the king’s justiciar?” Black David asked, in halting French, and received a calm affirmative.

“Being an outlander, you had no quarrel with the dead man,” Black David pursued. “Who suborned you to do it?”

Now with the gallows before him, the Italian instinctively looked for help to the source from which he had often received it before. He looked full at Evan, eyes beseeching the outlaw to rescue him. But Evan, fearful that the man would betray him, and glad of a chance to save his own face and retire with some show of dignity; cried out loudly:

“If yon outlander is the murderer, hang him and be done! I came here to see justice! Hang him!”

Ridolfo guessed the answer from his

master’s tone, and his dark eyes sparkled with hate.

“Wait!” Duncan protested. “If it please your lordship, let the man show how the murder was done.”

“Show!” Black David commanded.

Removing the cloth from his burden, Ridolfo displayed a short, thick steel bow set in a heavy stock, to which a small windlass was attached near the grip. At the fore-end was a steel stirrup; this Ridolfo planted on the ground, placed one foot in it, and with both hands revolved the crank that drew back the string to where it was caught and held by a trigger. Then setting the blunt rough pommel of the dagger to the drawn string, as if it were a bolt or arrow, the Italian held up to the gaze of deputy and people—a Genoese cross-bow, the first ever seen or heard of in Scotland. Thus holding it, with Duncan’s arm over his hand to prevent treachery, he whispered in Duncan’s ear; and Duncan said softly to the earl:

“It was Evan the Outlaw who ordered the crime. I beg your Grace to grant this man his life; he has dealt faithfully with me.”

With a cold smile, Black David nodded, touched Ridolfo’s arm, and pointed to Evan the Headless, whose horsemen were now commencing a steady and well-ordered retreat, secure in the knowledge that Black David had but ten mounted men-at-arms, and that he would be loth to risk loosing a volley of arrows across the crowded square, while the temper of the townsmen was still uncertain. For heavy-armed infantry to pursue and overtake retreating cavalry was, of course, impossible.

As the earl pointed, Ridolfo understood, and so did Evan. Fear clutched at his heart; with a wild cry he clapped spurs to his horse, even as Ridolfo took aim and shot. The dagger, cleaving two hundred feet of space too fast for eye to follow, struck the rider full between the shoulders with a sound

like the blow of an ax. The dreaded outlaw fell from his horse, and sprawled on the pavement. In wild disarray, his followers spurred their horses into a gallop and plunged, colliding and hurtling each other to the ground, for the city gate and through it.

"Go you," said Black David to a soldier, "and unlace his helmet."

The man obeyed; cutting the laces, he plucked off the steel head-piece, and held the dead man's head so that all could see his face. A loud shout of stupefaction rose from all parts of the square. Even the Headless was Malcolm Carmichael!

Signing for silence, Black David addressed the people:

"Justice is done," he said. "I restore Ronald Cospatrick to all his honors and offices, and I give freedom to his fellow officers. Some of them may have been a thought disloyal; but he who misled them is

punished, and I pardon them. Ridolfo the Italian is free to go and come where he likes, so long as he does not remain in Scotland. As for Duncan McIvor, who found the murderer and solved the vexed matter of the devil's dagger, I can promise him an ample reward at the king's hands. Henderson, strike off the prisoners' chains, and then go see how Jamieson and his fellows fare at the gate. McIvor will come back to Scone with me and tell the regent how he unearthed this business."

The townsfolk cheered themselves hoarse, tossing their caps in the air. They rushed toward Duncan, loading him with praise and admiration. But Duncan burst from them and ran to the scaffold, where Margaret Cospatrick lay sobbing on the rough planks, clasping her father's knees. Tenderly, Duncan raised her up; she turned, looked into his eyes, and threw her arms about him.