

Repentance Tower

By H. Pease

SCENE I. TEMPTATION

Late one spring evening not long after the disaster of Solway Moss, Sir Robert Maxwell was walking to and fro within the Tower of Lochmaben—a heavy frown upon his brow—cogitating his reply to a letter from my Lord Arran—now governor of Scotland under the regency of the widowed Queen, Mary of Lorraine.

Amongst other matters touched upon Arran made mention of his purpose to find the right suitor for the hand of Agnes Herries—daughter and heiress of the Lord Herries of Hoddam Castle. A hint was delicately conveyed that possible Maxwell himself might be eligible—if he gave up his ‘assurance with England.’

Now Sir Robert’s late father—the Lord Maxwell—had been made prisoner at Solway Moss, but had been set free on ‘taking assurance’ with England and giving twelve hostages of his own name to the opposite warden—Lord Wharton at Carlisle.

In addition there was a suggestive allusion to the Scots Wardenry of the Western march, which was vacant at the moment.

The offer was most tempting, but—*there were the twelve Maxwell hostages, his cousins, in Wharton’s hands.*

Sir Robert grew wroth as he read and re-read the letter. ‘*Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?*’ he questioned angrily, as he sat down to indite a peremptory refusal.

He found his task very difficult, for he had little skill in writing. Shortly, he determined to send over to Dumfries first thing in the morning for the notary public to come and write the letter for him, and be a witness to his signature.

This he did, but the messenger brought word back that the notary was ill with the spotted fever and could not come.

Sir Robert’s anger increased, for the temptation beckoned insistently. He had already had thoughts of the fair and well-dowered Agnes, but he knew ’twas hopeless unless he was reconciled to Arran.

He determined to ride out and rid himself of black care by a gallop. Mounting, he let the horse choose his aim gait, and shortly found himself in the airt of Hoddam, whence he rode up to the grassy fells above Solway. Then he let his horse out on a gallop, and away he sped like a curlew—sweeping over the short grass, and drinking in the breeze like wine.

Maxwell rode till his horse was white with sweat, and the rubies in his nostrils red as fire.

Then he turned and came back at a slow trot to the point of starting. Pausing here, Maxwell gazed down on the one hand to the rich fields and well-timbered lands of Hoddam; on the other hand across Solway to where below the deep-piled, purple masses of Helvellyn and Skiddaw lay ‘merry Carlisle’—the abode of my Lord Wharton.

Maxwell shook his fist across Solway, as though in defiance. Then he turned about and rode slowly home.

SCENE II. THE RAID

As soon as he was back again at Lochmaben he dispatched a special messenger to Arran in Edinburgh with the brief assurance that he himself would follow on the morrow and explain in person the difficulty of accepting the Governor's proposals.

On the evening of the day that Sir Robert Maxwell arrived in Edinburgh a ball was held in Holyrood—the first ball since Solway Moss had overwhelmed Scotland with gloom. The Queen-Dowager was to be present, and Arran insisted on Maxwell's attendance, though against his will. A gay and brilliant assembly filled the great galleries of Holyrood that night.

After a minuet had been paced to the gentle music of the lute and clavichord, a schottische succeeded to the martial skirl of the pipes.

For this dance Arran had craftily arranged that Maxwell should have as partner the fair Agnes Herries, and as he watched them his brow relaxed its tension. His policy was to strengthen and consolidate Scotland, and to this end he would break Maxwell's assurance with England. 'The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,' he muttered to himself as he watched the couple dancing with animation, 'are gey guid baits.' As the company departed in the early dawn Arran took the opportunity of walking back with Maxwell to his lodging. 'Ye partnered ilk ither fine,' said the Governor; 'time and step suited ye bonny. Wed,' he added slowly, 'ye hae to decide. Wull ye tak her?' Maxwell hesitated a moment, then impulsively, 'I will. Here's my hand on 't.'

'Dune!' cried the Governor triumphantly. Then he added by way of an evasion from any difficulty with Wharton. 'I'm thinking ye might emulate Douglas in his raid on the eastern march:

*"And he has burn'd the dales of Tyne,
And part of Bambroughshire;
And three good towers on Reidswire fells,
He left them all on fire."*

That is, if ye hae any fash wi' Wharton,' said Arran in conclusion. 'Juist pit the fear o' auld Scotland intil him, for I'll uphau'd ye.'

No sooner had Maxwell returned home than he found a menacing letter from Wharton, who had evidently heard of the reconciliation. Maxwell's dark face glowed hotly as he made a vow to terrify Wharton into inaction. He would instantly give him a 'handsel' of harrying to stay his proud stomach. So he caused warn the waters far and wide. Nith he summoned, and Annan, and then with his whole 'name' rode rough the debatable land, and crossing the Eden by the ford above Rockliff proceeded to harry and burn through the English march. He drave his foray throughout the day; horses and nowt, sheep, goats, and swine he collected, and made the 'red cock crow' on many a peel and bastlehouse.

Then as evening drew on and his messengers announced the approach of Wharton's men-at-arms he withdrew with his spoil, repulsed with slaughter his opponent's forces, and safely guarded his spoil, till all the 'gear' was across the Eden water.

Then Maxwell himself and his bailiff—Sandie Irvine—rode down to Solway where his lugger was awaiting by his orders the chance of their return by water.

Maxwell himself was 'forefaughten,' his horse was foundered; he sank gratefully into the stern of the boat, and Sandie took the tiller.

SCENE III. THE STORM ON SOLWAY

The lugger shot ahead for Scotland, the swift wind upon her beam. Suddenly its strength increased, and a storm swept down upon Solway. Clouds gathered above, and on the incoming 'bore' Maxwell saw with dismay the 'white horses of Solway' shaking their manes.

Darkness lowered about them; then a jagged flash of lightning rent the murky air, and Sandie as he wrestled with the tiller saw a face white as foam and 'unco ghash' beside him.

'Hae ye onything on your conscience, Laird?' cried Sandie in his ear, 'ony bit adultery or murder? If ye hae, mak a vow instantly to St. Nicholas, or we're lost.'

Maxwell made no reply, but groaned as he looked wildly through the storm.

Twelve forms—well kent to him—did he not see them pointing their accusing fingers against him? There was Ian—there Alastair, next Hamilton—he could look no further. *God in Heaven! Wharton had hung his pledges.*

Maxwell sank backwards, his hands to his eyes. 'Mak the vow, Laird,' yelled Sandie again in his ear, desperately.

'I'll mak a vow to Saint Nicholas,' murmured the other brokenly, 'to build a tower to his honour, and put a light into it nightly for all poor sailors on Solway.'

Heartened by this, Sandie thrust all his strength upon the tiller and kept the lugger straight 'twixt Scylla and Charybdis.

But 'the white horses' were now upon them, their streaming manes enveloping the gunwale, and Maxwell gave himself up for lost. The lugger shivered, then grated violently. 'What's on?' he cried in terror.

'Yon's the first stone o' Repentance Tower,'¹ cried Sandie triumphantly, as he drave the lugger high upon the beach.

¹ Tradition commonly holds that the builder of the tower had thrown his captives overboard to lighten the boat, when returning from a raid into England; but if the writer remembers aright, Dr. Nielson in one of his erudite articles, seemed able to prove that Sir Robert Maxwell—who married the Herries heiress and became Lord Herries—was the builder. In this case the above tale gives the truer version of the tower's origin.