

Savoy Hotel
London, W.C.

January 17th 1898

My Dear McClure,

Mr Watt has been pestering me for some time to send you some notes about "The Black Douglas" which I am glad you are to have.

It is a story which I have been thinking of and arranging in my mind, at intervals, for the last ten years. The fall of the great House of Douglas constituted the one romance of my boyhood. Their Castle of Thrieve stands on an island in the midst of the river Dee. Its grey walls are still over seventy feet high, and to this day defy even the storms of Galloway. I am not yet able to tell you on what lines of hero and heroine I shall run out the story but the backbone of the book will be culmination of the great family in the person of William Douglas, the boy of 21, who held all Scotland south of the Tay in the hollow of his hand, who coined money at his own mint and rode abroad with a more than regal train. Nor was William Douglas altogether the rude Border Baron the historians have represented him to be. He was Duke of Touraine, and the finest gentleman at one of the gayest courts France ever saw. Yet in Scotland he seemed almost to change his nature, becoming headstrong, arrogant, almost savage in his contempt for King and Law. Had it not been for Scott's use of a similar title, I should have called the book "The Fair Maid of Galloway" that having been the name universally given to the young girl for the sake of whose great inheritance and wondrous beauty Princes came from far lands to seek her favour, who married in succession two brothers of the Douglas House and who, even while the cannons of the King were bringing down her castle about her ears, stood up to pledge her husband as the true King of Scotland. There are certain local heroes famous in the annals of the great siege who must also come into the story, the most popular of these being brave [McKimm] the historical Samson of Scotland, who will be a most useful person in getting hero and heroine out of their difficulties. He and his seven sons constructed the vast cannon known as Mons Meg (vast for those times) and then with horses dragged it to the top of the hill Knockcannon, from whence it dominated the Black Douglas and his fortress. I may say that this final tragedy of the Douglas is the only Galloway romance comparable in popularity with that which I have already told in the pages of "The Raiders". There will, however, be less dialect in the book, because the date of the tragedy is from about 1450 to 1500, the historic time of Scottish literature which contains the names of Dunbar, Gavin Douglas and Sir David Lindsay.

Now though this gives you little idea of what the book will be, it may afford some indication as to the stormy and desperate age which I mean to try to fix upon paper. It was a time also of infinite personal adventure when Kings quite commonly took the beggar's cloak about them, and with staff and script went out to seek both for adventures and for information as to the condition of their people. The monks and friars rode Scotland rough-shod save within the dominions of the Douglases. Now I always object to such a sketch as this being considered in any way representative of the story I shall write. I find it quite impossible to tie myself down to any details of plot or incident till the book is finished and off my hands. Often the characters take the situation completely away from the lines I have laid down, so that I cannot tie myself to more than the poorest and baldest outline. However I hope to deliver to you about the end of March a very large part of the MS, if not the whole. I do not know what your experience may be on your side of the Atlantic but here we find that a good chapter of the book itself, or even a stirring incident, is much more telling as an advertisement than an account of the plot.

I hope to see you this spring when you are in town.

With kind regards,

Believe me,

Faithfully yours,

(signed) S.R. Crockett