

Highland Ballad

Christopher Leadem

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HIGHLAND BALLAD

For Natasha

Part One:

A Lingering Flame

One

The red sun rose slowly, aching across the high Scottish moor, touching with melancholy gold the patching hoar frost and purple heath. For this was a land of pain, and stark beauty, and restless dream. Here the spirits of the dead walked by night through grim castles of shadow and dust, their glory long past. Here the spirits of the living grieved by day for a proud and chivalrous time forever lost.

For now the English ruled the land. The battle of Culloden was three years lost and Bonnie Prince Charles, the drunken fool in whom they had placed such hope, was living in exile in France. For what then had the pride of Highland manhood shed their blood, leaving behind them the heart-broken wives, aging fathers, and uncomprehending child sisters? Was it to see the Lord Purceville establish his thieving court at the ancestral home of the MacPhersons? Was it to pay hard tribute in grain and goods which could not be spared, to an Empire already bloated and corrupt?

None felt the pangs of lost promise more deeply than young Mary Scott, aged sixteen years, with a future as uncertain as the fretting October wind. Her father had died before she could say his name, leaving their estate in the keeping of guardians until Michael came of age. Now it was completely lost, their legacy ruined. Now she lived with her mother and aging aunt in the fading cottage that had once belonged to the chief steward, all that remained of the family property. It was neither beautiful nor poetic; but it was warm, and for the time at least, safe from the hungry eyes of soldiers. The dangers to a young girl in an occupied land need hardly be detailed.

And there were other dangers as well.

On this morning, as on many others, she walked slowly down the narrow, winding path to the gravesite of her clan. Bordered by scrub oak and maple, alone in its silent dell, it was a place removed from time, hallowed, and to her, sacred. For here, among the stones of four hundred years of Stuart knights, lay the body of her beloved, her soul. Her brother. Brushing back a long lock of raven hair, she stepped furtively towards the mound of earth that was like an iron door between them.

Michael James Scott
1719 --- 1746
He died a man's death,
fighting for his home.

The words on the small tombstone had always seemed to her a blasphemy, the hurried cutters finding it more important to speak of patriotism than to give the date of his birth. These trite, inadequate words were all that future generations would ever know of him. They could never see him as he had been in life---the shock of curling, golden hair, the fierce and penetrating sapphire eyes. He had been strong and stubborn like all his blood, but with a sudden tenderness that had long ago stolen her heart. Her friend, brother and father. And in the most secret depths of her heart, her lover as well.

One image of him remained indelibly carved in her memory.

He stood silhouetted against the open door of the shepherd's hut, in which they had taken shelter from a sudden, violent downpour. The play of lightnings beyond flashed his tall, muscular form into brilliant lines out of the grey. He stood defiant, legs spread, crying out to the storm that lashed him. Aye! It'll take more than that to kill a Scott!
And he had laughed his fearless laugh.

"Michael don't, I'm scared," she said aloud. And he closed and barred the door, and came to her with the gentle smile which he gave to her alone.....

She fell to her knees on the cold ground, unable to stop the flow of bitter and blessed memories. She wrapped the shawl tighter, remembering, feeling as deeply and surely as if it were not a thing of the past, but happening now, this moment:

He came to her, and put his cloak about her. Then feeling her shiver in his arms, changed his mind. "No. We'll have to get you out of your wet things. I'm an ugly brute, but you'll catch your death."

He built a warming blaze in the fireplace, then took the heavy woolen blanket from the bed and brought it to her. "Come on now. No time for being shy; I'll turn away." And he carefully tended the fire as she shed her dripping garments, and wrapped herself in the blanket.

Perhaps an hour later he lay sprawled on his back, stripped to the waist on the broad, solid bed. She stood watching him, his dried riding cloak about her. Her own clothes were nearly dry, and the rain was less; yet for reasons she did not understand, her one desire was

to remain with him there, as they were, forever. He stretched his arms behind him and let out a yawn, and looked at her with laughing, sleepy eyes.

"I'm all done in, my little Mary, riding and running about with you after the long day's work. Better let me have a bit of sleep, then we'll take ourselves home. Wake me in a bit, won't you?" And he rolled over on his side, leaving her flushed and agitated, not understanding the feelings that stirred inside her. The early night was hushed, her brother lay long and beautiful in the firelight, and she was thirteen years old.

After a short time that seemed like an eternity, during which she never once took her eyes from him, she heard the soft, steady breathing of his slumber. All her love and confused desire suddenly took hold of her. She loosed the cloak about her bare shoulders, and came closer. Quietly, timidly, her heart pounding, she lay down next to him, drawing the broad cloak about them both. She rested her face against his arm, while her hand mysteriously sought out the scraggly down of his chest. He stirred.

"What's all this?" he whispered dreamily. "You're not still afraid?"

"No," she nearly shouted. "It's not that at all." And then, as if afraid the moment was lost, she drew in her arms and snuggled closer to him still. "You're not shamed for me, are you, Michael? I've done nothing wrong."

"Ah, hush girl. You love your Michael and he loves you. Where's the sin?" And his strong arm enveloped her back, as he gently kissed her forehead.....

Oh, to feel his arms around her, his skin against hers! She sobbed aloud at the thought of it, and flung herself to the ground. How gladly she would have died, then as now, to be with him forever. But still her life went on, still the feelings and images would not stop:

They lay quiet for a time, her breasts touching his, their faces so close, breath intermingling. Then all at once, with a voice hardly her own, she said the words that had sealed her fate.

"Kiss me, Michael. If you don't kiss me I swear I'll die." And though she could not see them, she felt the laughter of his eyes. But he did as she asked, slowly bringing his lips to hers. They touched, ever so gently.

Then with a sudden passion which surprised them both, he gave a deep, despairing sigh and crushed her to him, his hungry mouth devouring hers. "My Mary," he said. "My beautiful Mary."

Then just as suddenly he broke away and stood up from the bed. He began to pace back and forth, cursing himself, so afraid he had in some way wounded her. She lay still, feeling the loss of his flesh like the loss of a limb. And two months later. . .he was no more.

She found herself hopelessly, hatefully back in the present. Alone. Convulsive sobs shook her as she lay across the mound of uncaring earth. Her tears wet the rough grass beneath her, flowing like blood

from a mortal wound. One word, one thought only existed in the whole of her being.

"Michael!"

A fresh burst of wind whistled through the heath and fretted the fallen leaves around her, carrying with it, or so it seemed, a faint strain of bagpipes. She turned her face to listen. Was it possible: that soul-stirring sound, so terrible in battle that the English had since outlawed it?

Was it there, or was she truly mad? She strained all her senses..... No. The sound was gone. She buried her face and wept once more, defeated.

Again a breeze stirred, this time more gentle, this time much nearer. She felt a large hand caress the crown of her head, and brush the side of her face as she turned again, bewildered. Half blind with tears she saw the wavering outline of a man, and heard a voice whisper,

"My Mary."

She knew no more.

Two

She was found there by her aunt, pale and shivering. And as consciousness and memory returned to her, a light of wild hope and fear widened the deep emerald of her eyes.

"Aunt Margaret, I saw him! He called me by name, I swear it!"

But whether because the wisdom of age had taught her the wishful fancies of the young, or for some other reason, the hale, grey-haired woman elucidated no surprise. She helped the frightened girl to her feet, and without a word, started her on the path to home.

But once Mary had gone the old woman turned, and made her way back to the grave. Reaching inside a goat-skin pouch that hung from her side she produced something cold and pale, and kneeling, laid it upon the heart of the mound. Then rose and looked about her with a narrowing eye. Claspng a withered hand about the amulet that hung from her neck she set off, leaving the bit of melancholy white behind.

A human finger.

The amulet about her neck was a raven's foot, clutching in frozen death a dark opal.

Many hours later the old woman had still not returned to the cottage. Mary sat with her elbows upon the sill of the loft window, the rage of thoughts and questions inside her gradually slowing to the one emotion possible in one who had seen and known such endless disappointment: disbelief.

But try as she might to resolve herself to it, to accept that it had not happened, still the phantom touch lingered inside her, denying all

peace. "My Mary." How differently the voice had said those words, than on the day of her brother's passion! And yet how similar, how full of the same love and care. And the only thought that would take solid hold in her mind was that the two feelings, gentle love and hard desire, were one in a man, inseparable, and that even as a child she had inspired both in him. My

Mary. Mine. She wanted to fall on her knees then and there, and pray to be taken to him, in death or in life. But the sound of her mother's voice stayed her, rising angrily from below.

"Mary! What are you about? Come down here at once."

Obediently, though without affection she submitted, descending the wooden ladder-stair from the loft that served as her bedroom. Her mother's face and whole bearing spoke of the cold composure, the loveless discipline which always followed such an outburst. It was an expression she had come to know all too well. Wherein lay the mystery of this woman? She did not know, only that there was no commiseration, no sense of shared loss between them, and that she was hardly what the younger woman imagined a mother should be.

But on this day there was especial agitation among her classic, though faded Scot features---round, sturdy face and steady, full blue eyes---and a greater visible effort to control herself. Of late this usually meant that she had quarreled with Margaret. And these arguments, Mary knew, somehow centered on herself.

"Where is she?" the mother burst all at once. Like Michael she often kept her deepest feelings under lock and key, revealing to the world only a lesser parody of herself. But now something had happened---

"Go and find her!" she cried, at long last giving in. "And if she has gone to that witch's hole of hers, then. . . tell her she may just as well stay there, and the Devil take her! I've had enough of it, do you hear? Let them burn her at the stake; I'll not have her bring shame upon this house. It's all the same to me!" And she ran to the armchair by the fireplace, hiding her face in her hands.

The daughter followed, more confused and forlorn than ever. She loved her aunt, though she also feared her, and could not understand the vindictive nature of the words spoken against her.

"Mother, what are you saying? What are you thinking of?"

The hands came down to reveal a tired, careworn face no longer able to think of pity. "So, you never knew she was a witch? How blind a woman can be, when she wants to. Why, you don't even know, still haven't guessed---" She faltered, then cried out. "Dear God, I cannot bear this cross any longer! You have taken my husband, my beloved son, and left me with his temptress." Then turning to Mary. "Go to her! Get out, I tell you! She will tell you everything, everything now. Make your home with her if you like. Leave me to my wretched memories." And physical sorrow bent her nearly double in the chair.

The girl took a step to console her, but the hateful, flashing eyes turned on her erased any such notion. She hesitated, then ran to the door in dismay, and out into the bracing, October wild. It seemed the last vestiges of solace and sanctuary were crumbling around her, leaving a world too terrible, too full of dark meaning to endure. She

ran.

But her steps were not blind. Instinctively she stayed on the western side of the rise, which hid her from sight of the road. And though she had rarely seen it, the back of her mind knew where her aunt's strange and secret abode lay: beyond the ravine, in land too wild and rocky to grow or graze.

It was growing dark when she finally reached the high pass in which it lay, and in place of the wind a cold stillness reigned. The rocky culvert did not benefit from the failing light. It was a harsh and cheerless place, all thorn and sloe, with here and there a gnarled, leafless tree.

The faraway cry of a wolf froze her to the marrow: she was alone, and could not find what she sought. Why had she come in such haste, without horse or cloak? Her body ached and the sense of youthful despair, never far from her, returned with the added force of cold, helpless exposure.

An owl swooped, and half fearfully she followed the line of its flight. As it rose again against the near horizon, she saw there at the meeting of stone and sky a trail of black smoke, barely distinguishable in the darkening gloom. She followed it downward. And there, half buried in the hard earth which bounded it on three sides, she saw her aunt's sometime residence, the 'witch's hole' as her mother had called it. And though she loved her aunt, and had nowhere else to go, she could not help feeling a moment of doubt.

A wedge of stone wall---one door, one window---was all the face it showed, the short chimney rising further to the sunken right. It was in fact a hole, dug and lined with stone perhaps a thousand years before by some wandering Pict, with a living roof of roots and turf. Her aunt had merely dug it out again and repaired the chimney. The window and door, framed in ready openings, were new, along with stout ceiling beams. Nothing more. It was a place that perhaps ten people knew of, and nine avoided.

She stood unresolved, chafing the arms of her dress, unable to keep warm. But at that moment a solitary figure came up the path towards her, and she recognized the shawl and bound hair of her aunt, stooped beneath a large bundle of sticks.

"Inside with you, lass," said the woman evenly, again not evincing the least surprise. "You'll catch your death."

"Let me help you with your load," the girl offered.

"I can quite carry my own burden, Mary. Just open the door for me; I'll walk through it." Mary did as she asked. They went inside.

The single room was dark and low-ceilinged, with no light but the hearth fire, which played strange shadows across the rough stones and wooden bracings. Herbs, tools and utensils, bizarre talismans hung from the walls. The floor was of solid earth. A wooden table and chair, two frameless beds, an ancient rocking chair---there were no other furnishings.

"Sit by the fire, child, and wrap a blanket around you. I'll have the tea....." But studying her face more closely, the old woman put a hand to her forehead, and could not entirely suppress a look of concern. "Into bed with you, Mary, you're burning with fever." And she quickly arranged warm coverings for the thin, down mattress, which lay on a jutting shelf of stone covered with straw, and threw more wood on the fire.

Soon the room was warm, and in its primitive way, quite comfortable. Mary lay in the bed, her shivering stopped, and the herb tea that her aunt had given her calming her nerves. But still there were the questions that would not rest.

"Aunt Margaret," she began pensively, eyes glittering. "You quarreled with mother, and now she can bear her cross no longer, and she says you must tell me everything." Though the sentence was hardly coherent, the old woman nodded her understanding. She came and sat on the bed, taking the young girl's hand in her own.

"I'll tell you this much now, and then you must sleep. There'll be worlds of time in the morning. Will you promise me you'll sleep, and trust

me till the sunrise?" The daughter nodded.

"She's not your mother, Mary. I am."
Three

That night, her subconscious stirred by fever, and by the maelstrom of unsettling events, Mary dreamed more deeply and vividly than she had since childhood. The fire burned brightly before her as the old woman, ever mindful, rocked slowly back and forth, beside her.

She stood atop a high hill, looking down into a broad expanse of green valley. To the left she heard the stirring sound of bagpipes, to the right, the ominous drums and steady tramp of the English. Two armies advanced upon each other, making for some indefinable object in the center of the field, which for some reason both sides wanted. To the left the plaid kilts and mixed uniforms of the Highlanders, to the right a rigid, regimented sea of Red. She watched them draw together with the uncomprehending horror that every woman feels for war, unmoved by words of glory and patriotism, understanding only that men, men dear to herself and others, are about to die.

It seemed that the Scots would reach the object first, being the swifter and on their own ground; but suddenly they stopped. At their head she saw two men on horseback: a rugged, wizened general, and a handsome young prince with long plumes in his hat, seated on a brilliant white charger. The general was arguing and gesticulating sharply that they must advance and attack. But the Prince, with an air of supreme confidence and divine understanding, only made a sign of the cross and remained where he was, content.

The British halted and formed ranks, expecting a charge. But not receiving it, and perceiving their opponent's hesitation, they quickly brought their artillery to the fore. Unlimbering the cannon, they loaded and took aim, and began to shower the unmoving Highlanders with grapeshot and thundering shells.

The young girl gasped in terror, and shouted for them to fight back, or run away. The general waved his arms more violently than before. But still the Prince gave no order, and only looked about him as if puzzled, unable to fathom what was happening to his men.

And at length the English charged, mowing down the decimated Scottish lines like so much rye after a hailstorm. While the Prince slipped away with his escort.

But all of this, gruesome and sinister as it was. . .this was not what froze her heart. In a smaller scene that somehow stood out sharp and clear, two red-coated foot soldiers were dragging by the arms a tall Scot with a bloodied shock of golden hair. He was dazed and plainly wounded, but still they pulled at him fiercely, as if to throw him to the ground and run him through. They carried him out of sight, into a copse of death-black trees.

"Michael!" she cried frantically, trying to follow. But her legs would not move, and she sank slowly into quicksand, her skirts billowing.....

Then the dream shifted and she was back at the grave, lying in the rough grass. Again she felt the gentle touch on her hair and startled cheek, again the reassuring voice:

"My Mary." And then. . .was it real or imagined? "I'll come back for you." From the bottom of a well. "I've come back for you." Farther, and fainter, then suddenly sharp and near. "My Mary. Mary....."

"Mary!"

"Mary, wake up. You've put yourself in a frenzy." And her guardian steadily, though not without emotion, replaced the thrown and disheveled blankets. "You've got to keep yourself---"

"I. . .I saw him again," she stammered. "He called to me. He said he'd come back for me." She tried to rise. "I've got to go to him, I've got to find him!"

"No."

For the first time her mother (the claim was true) spoke forbiddingly, taking her by the shoulders and forcing her back down. "He's dead and in the grave, and that's where he's going to stay. And unless you want to join him there---"

"But I do!" cried the girl. "I do. Why doesn't anyone understand?" And she turned away and fell to weeping. Her mother was silent.

Perhaps an hour later the girl was asleep again, or appeared to be. Troubled, her mother rose and went to an ancient chest that lay hidden beneath a musty stretch of carpet, in a niche carved out of the cold ground beneath. Kneeling over it, she unfastened the broad belt that secured the lid, which she lifted and leaned carefully back against the wall. Then with a quick glance at her daughter, she reached inside and lifted out from among its shadowy contents a withered branch of hemlock.

Moving to the fire, which glowed and hissed sullenly at her approach, she thrust its head into the flames, holding the root in a stubborn fist. Quietly and solemnly, she chanted some words in a language that her daughter could not understand, and at length the dead leaves and smoking stalk caught solid fire. Standing once more, she drew a slow circle with it in the center of the room, then went to the door. As soon as she opened it a cold wind pushed past and blew out the trembling torch, but this seemed no more than she expected.

Stepping outside and closing the door behind her, the witch took a few paces forward, turned again to face the hut. She waved the branch in strange patterns, moving from side to side and repeating the same chant, so that the smoke which still seethed from it drew wisping traces about the door, the window, the whole of the house. Then turned again, and cast it to the ground before her. She opened her eyes wide, oblivious to the stinging smoke, and whispered harshly.

"You leave us be!"

She went inside.
Four

As if a troubled thought that had slowly worked its way through her second sleep, with the first light of dawn Mary sat bolt upright in the bed, and said aloud.

"He's not my brother."

The old woman, who had apparently not slept at all, turned to her from her place by the fire, now lowered to glowering coals for cooking. She thought to reply harshly, then checked herself. Like a skilled surgeon or a patient general (or a bitter woman gnawed by hate), she knew that the matter of her daughter's lost love must be handled with extreme care.

"Not your brother. Your cousin."

"Then---" The realization scalded her. "We could have married! There was no sin, no shame in what I felt for him."

Again, though it ran counter to all her designs for the girl, the old woman knew this was not the time to speak against the hopeless romance that she still carried like a torch in the Night. And also (the darkness had not yet swallowed her completely), she felt that her daughter deserved this much.

"There was no sin. Naivety perhaps."

With this her daughter broke into wretched tears, and it was some time before the woman could calm her enough to speak. She moved to sit beside her on the bed; and so helpless and forlorn did Mary then appear, that for a moment her mother forgot all else and slowly brought to her breast the face that had suckled there so long ago.

"What is it child?" she said gently, stroking the soft hair that had once been her own. "What is it hurting you so?"

"All this time..... I thought it was because..... After he was killed,

I went to my confessor. I told him everything, and he said---

There was no need for her to finish. Too well did the other understand the vindictive nature of men.

"He said that Michael was taken because you had committed incest: that it was God's punishment for a grievous sin, and that it's your fault he died." The pitiful nod and freshened weeping told her she was right. "Nay, lass. It was not the hand of God that killed him, and many other good men besides. It is not the Creator who so brutalizes lives and emotions. It is men."

And with this all her maternal softness faded, as her eyes stared hard and dry into some galling distance of thought and memory. Her arms fell away from her daughter's shoulders, and she unconsciously ground her teeth.

Mary, who had seen none of this, raised her head and wiped the tears from her eyes, feeling something like a pang of conscience. "I'm sorry. . . Mother." She could not help blushing at the word. "I've been selfish, thinking only of my own sorrow. Won't you tell me something of yourself? It must have been hard for you, surely."

The woman's gaze returned.

"Ah, life is hard, girl. Someday I'll speak of the roads that brought me here, but not now." She rose as if to say no more, then turned to the girl, so young, with the only words of comfort she could find. But at that they were not gentle, were not the words of hope.

"You must learn from the trees, Mary. A lightning bolt, a cruel axe, cleaves a trunk nearly to the root, and the oak writhes in agony. But it does not die. It continues. And though the hard and knotted scars of healing are not pleasant to look upon, they are stronger, many times stronger, than the virgin wood. You must learn from the trees," she repeated. "It is among their boughs and earthward tracings that the true gods are found."

"You're not a Christian, then?" This simple non-belief seemed to her incomprehensible.

"Nay, Mary, I'm not. The gentle Jesus may comfort the meek, but he is of little use when it comes to vengeance." The woman stopped, knowing she had said more than she intended. But perhaps this much of the truth was for the best. She would have to know soon enough, anyway. "There are other powers, closer to hand, that give the strong a reason to go on living."

The younger woman studied her in silence, and all the awe and fear of her that she had felt since childhood returned. She remembered the chant, the flaming branch. And now the callous determination..... Toward what end? She recalled the words that had seemed so innocent the day before:

Just open the door for me; I'll walk through it.
But what door was she to open? What vengeance?

But first there was one more question, which rose in sudden fullness

before her.

"My God. Margaret. Who was my father?"

"The Lord Purceville, though it was not willingly I took him to my bed."

There was no need to say more. Her mother went back to the hearth, and after a cheerless meal, told her to remain in bed until the fever broke. Then went out on some errand of her own.

Five

Mary remained in the bed as she was told until, between her natural vigor and childlike curiosity, she began to feel better, and then, quite restless. Putting more wood on the fire and dressing warmly (she was not incautious), she began to look around her for something to do, or perhaps, something to read. It was impossible yet to think through all that had happened in just these twenty-four hours, or to know what she must do in answer. She felt like a shipwrecked swimmer, far from shore on a dark night: that the water around her was much too deep, that she must rest, and wait for some beacon to lead her again to solid ground.

But for all this, she could not help feeling drawn to the ancient chest from which her mother had taken the hemlock. She told herself to forget it, but could not.

That her mother practiced in the black arts was apparent; and a vague feeling that perhaps through witchcraft she might reach the troubled spirit of her beloved, drove her in the end to hard courage, overriding all other considerations.

She went to the window and peered out, then moved to the door. Stepping beyond it furtively, like a young rabbit outside the den, she looked about her. The sun hung motionless almost exactly at the noon, and the chill of night had passed. There was no sign of her mother, nor any other creature save a solitary hawk, which soared watchful high above.

She went inside again and rolled back the corner of the carpet, as in quick glances she had seen her mother do. The chest lay beneath. The thick belt was easily undone, and there was no other lock or latch. It occurred to her briefly that this was what the old woman wanted, and at the same time that she would be furious, and fly into a terrible rage. But this did not matter. Nothing mattered except that Michael had come to her, and touched her, and called out to her in living dream. She lifted the wide lid, and set it back against the wall.

Somewhere outside a raven spoke, and a sudden blast of wind shook the door. She started, and whirled about, but did not waver in her resolve.

Inside the trunk were many grim and grotesque articles which appalled her, and which she would not touch. But to the extreme left, pushed together with their bindings upward, were four large manuscript books, bound in leather. Her eyes, and seeking spirit, were drawn to these.

They were alike untitled and unadorned, yet to one she was

unmistakably drawn. Her hand moved toward it almost without conscious thought: the smallest, burnished black. It was thinner than the others as well. And so, growing wary of the witch's return, she lifted it quickly and moved to the bed. There she slid it beneath her mattress, then returned to the chest, which she closed and bound as before. She had only just rolled back the carpet when she heard, muffled but distinct, the cry of the hawk high above. And she knew, somehow she knew, that her mother was coming back up the path.

She undressed again quickly, down to the slip, and was careful to set the dress back on the chair as it had lain before. Climbing back into the bed she was acutely aware of two sensations: the lump at the small of her back made by the book, and the pounding of her heart.

The door-latch was lifted, the hinges creaked, and her mother stepped into the room. She looked exhausted and grim, and seemed to take no notice as her daughter sat up in the bed and addressed her.

"I'm feeling much better," she said, trying to sound bright and happy. She could not quite pull it off, but thankfully, the old woman's mind was elsewhere.

"It is done," she mumbled in reply, as much to herself as to the girl. Laying her things absently on the table, she pulled loose the comb which bound the iron-grey locks behind her head, and shook them free about her shoulders. At this simple act Mary drew a startled breath, and it was all she could do to suppress a gasp of fright. For here, truly, was the classic apparition of a witch: the ragged, wind-blown dress and shawl, the long, wild hair and intent, burning eyes. This, the woman noticed.

"Not much to look at, am I?" At first she glared as she said this, then turned away, remembering to whom she spoke. "There was a time, Mary, and perhaps not so long ago as you might imagine, when men said I was still quite fair. But time. . .and poison. . .have done their work." She grew silent, and bitter, once more. But something inside the girl urged her now to draw the woman out, not leave her alone in this darkness.

She got down from the bed and stepped timidly towards her. Placing one hand on her shoulder, with the other she lifted a stray lock of her mother's hair and tucked it gently behind her ear. The witch pulled forward and away, but Mary persisted. She came close again, and this time put her arms around her full, and kissed her lightly on the temple.

"Mother," she said, the word arresting the other's anger. "Won't you tell me how it was for you, all these years, and what you're feeling now?"

"What does it matter, girl? The wine is drawn and must be drunk." But ominous as these words sounded, her daughter brushed them aside. Because now, her eyes clouding with tears, she understood what was taking place in her own heart: an orphan's awkward and tremulous love for her true parent.

"But it does matter," she insisted, "to you. And to me."

Their eyes met. For a moment Mary thought the woman would weep, and

embrace her, and all would be well. But the aged eyes knew no more tears. She turned away.

"All right, Mary, I'll tell you, though I've little doubt you will stop me halfway. But just now I'm exhausted. If you really want to help me, put on the kettle for tea, and bring me a rye cake. The weather is turning," she went on, rubbing her arthritic shoulder. "We'll have no visitors tonight, at least. There'll be hours of time for talk."

"Promise me, then. Tonight you'll open your heart?" Her mother gave a queer sort of laugh.

"What little is left of it. Yes, yes, child, I promise. Now bring me the tea and give me a moment's peace." Mary did as she asked.

Six

That same afternoon a single rider approached the steward's cottage, in which now only Michael's mother remained. Hearing hoofbeats, she went quickly to the window and pulled back the heavy curtains. Though this woman had little left to lose, she was concerned almost in spite of herself for the safety of her niece. And in her darkened frame of mind, she could not help but fear the worst.

A British officer, seated on a majestic bay stallion, slowed his horse to a loose trot and drew rein just beyond the porch. This in itself did not seem such a threat. It could mean anything: some kind of summons, a requisition for cavalry horses and supplies (which they did not have), or simply a saddle-weary officer wanting a drink to soothe his parched throat.

But when she opened the door at his ringing, impatient knock, she took a step back in astonishment, and it was only with difficulty that she preserved a veneer of resignation and indifference.

She saw before her Mary's face. It was broader, and infinitely masculine---framed in strong and curling black hair, the green eyes fierce beneath scowling brows. But it was the same green, the hair the same shimmering black. Identical too was the fair, unmarked complexion, the smooth and finely chiseled nose and chin. Something in the shape was dissimilar, yet still.....

She could not at first read the riddle, until with an arrogance that could never have come from her niece, he threw back the door and advanced upon her, driving her back into the passage.

"So, my good widow Scott. You recognize the son of your esteemed overlord, and perhaps were expecting him as well?"

"No, truly sir. I don't know what you mean." It was not necessary to feign surprise. She could not imagine what the son of the Lord Purceville could want of her.

"I don't have time for games!" he shouted, pushing past her and searching the adjacent rooms before returning to stand before her. "And what of that hag sister of yours. . .and your daughter?" At these words he perceived genuine alarm in the face of the other.

And alarmed she truly was. For since the day of that terrible battle,

which had occurred but a few days' ride from the cottage, the two women had done everything possible to hide their adolescent charge, whose beauty and innocence made her a natural target for marauding troops.

"I have no daughter, sir, you are mistaken. No one lives here but myself and my aged sister-in-law. If you would be so kind---" The back of his hand crashed across her face, starting a trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth. He raised the hand again threateningly, then for some reason, smiled.

"You're not too old, you know. I might have a bit of sport on you myself." But remembering his purpose, he grew cold and severe again. "Pray do not think me an idiot. We too have spies, loyal folk among the hills. I spoke to one such gentleman scarcely an hour ago..... But that would be telling. You have a daughter, Mrs. Scott: Mary by name, a charming creature by all accounts. If you wish her to remain so, you had best tell me what I want to know."

"Please, sir, I beg you. Just tell me what it is you want. I'll give you anything I have, but please, spare the girl. She's a poor, helpless creature, alone but for the two of us. We've done nothing wrong, I swear it."

"Well," he replied more calmly. "At least you have a bit of sense."

But if she had meant to turn aside his interest in the girl by calling her helpless, and alone in the world, her understanding of men (at least that kind of man) had failed her badly. He began to pace eagerly, his hands behind his back, speaking with the aggressive assurance of one accustomed to having his own way. And for all her fear and agitation, she could not help but notice that he was also terribly handsome.

"This is what I want from you, for now. A small group of war prisoners (in truth it was closer to a hundred) have escaped from the hold at Edinburgh, the last, effectively speaking, of your would-be prince's Highland rabble. Our information is that they have since split up into smaller bands, each heading for their respective homeland. There, no doubt, they will attempt to stir sympathy for your deluded cause.

"Fools!" he continued, as if possessed of the truths of the Universe. "Scotland's day is done. Henceforth her destiny shall be irrevocably tied to that of England. We are trying to be magnanimous, and make reforms. But we will not tolerate, we will crush utterly, any attempt at further rebellion."

"Magnanimous?" she mocked, her pride returning. "Is that why you struck me? Is that why you threaten three lonely, bereft women, who have already lost to you all that they loved and held dear?"

"I did what I had to do!" he cried hotly. "And will do more besides, if you don't hold your tongue. These traitors will be found, and punished---drawn and quartered, or hanged from the nearest tree. And anyone who aids them, or does not send word of them to me at once, will receive much the same. Though in the case of three lonely, bereft women, the punishment might be slower, more amusing."

Again she was driven to fearful silence. She hoped that this would be the end of it, but apparently he had not yet received what he came for, a motive, perhaps, not entirely official.

"And now, good widow Scott, I would very much like you to tell me where I might catch a glimpse of your charming daughter. Oh, do stop the theatrics," he said irritably, as she clasped her hands to her bosom and made as if to fall on her knees before him. "If I wanted the services of a whore I have the whole countryside to choose from. It is just that your daughter. . . interests me. For unless I am much mistaken, I have seen her once before."

"I must beg you this last time," she pleaded. "Ask of me anything but this. Take me if you like, kill me if you must; but I cannot---" He had raised his pistol to arm's length as she spoke, and now fired it with a crack at a portrait of the child Mary that hung in the adjacent room. The ball found its mark at her throat, leaving a dark hole through the canvas of the shadow behind, and the frightened woman turned paler still. She tried to speak but he cut her short, his voice low and menacing.

"I swear to you, my Highland whore, you will tell me where she is to be found. Because if you don't, this very moment, I will find her myself, and with this same pistol put a hole in the real Mary Scott, and leave her to die in the dirt!"

"My sister has a second home," she stammered, hardly knowing how she found the words. "On Kilkenny ridge, beyond the ravine. A small path winds up to it from the Standing Stone, one branch left, then two to the right. We quarreled, and the girl has gone off to live with her. It is the whole truth, I swear it. God have mercy on us!"

"I believe you speak the truth at that," he said coolly. And reaching inside his unbuttoned officer's coat, he drew out a felt purse. Loosing the strand with his fingers, he reached inside and removed several gold coins, which he placed gently on a table beside her. "Thank you, Mrs. Scott. I will take that as permission to pay court upon your daughter. I fancy I may even marry her, if she is the girl I'm thinking of. Good day to you."

He stepped past her, out through the open door, and remounted his beautiful bay.
Seven

Towards evening the weather did in fact turn foul, with heavy clouds blowing in from the sea. Laden with rain, and stirred to inner violence by the turbulent upland airs, they discharged their burden with a vengeance among deep cracks of thunder. Bolts of white fire stabbed the earth as the deluge broke, turning good roads to bad, and bad to treacherous and impassible quagmire. So forbidding had the mountain paths become that even the young Lord Purceville, the most stubborn and heedless of men, was forced to turn back and seek shelter, postponing, for one day at least, his desired meeting

with young Mary Scott, of whom he had heard such glowing reports.

So deeply, in fact, had the old man's words affected him, that he fancied (though this was unlikely) he truly had seen her once before, gathering wildflowers on a green hillside in Spring. And whether of

human or otherworldly origins, the spell, to which he was particularly susceptible, had done its work on him.

He wanted her.

* * *

The man staggered wearily down the high embankment, until he came to the final, near-vertical stretch of cliff. The cold rain lashed him; the need to reach shelter and the warmth of a fire had become all consuming. He had not eaten, or slept, for days. But for all of this, and for the pride that had once been his, he knew that he must now be supremely cautious. One half-hearted grip on the dripping rock, one misplaced footing, would send him crashing to the ground below. And while at this height such a fall might not mean death, it surely would mean broken bones, which in his present plight, hunted and desperate, amounted to one and the same thing.

The stretch of sand was now only a few yards beneath him. The agitated sea roared and pounded just beyond. Weak and trembling, chilled to his very bones, the prisoner at last set foot on level ground. Struggling on in the wet, giving sand, he searched for the entrance of the walled-in hiding place. Even in daylight it would be difficult to find. In the murky dusk it was next to impossible. So far as he knew, no one but himself and his childhood companions had ever found it. Of these all but one had been killed in the war. And as for the girl..... He doubted that she would remember.

At last he found the slight ravine, which led back into the sea-cliffs. A short distance further was the place where the granite had split, and one huge shingle buckled and slid forward. Climbing the slanting crack it formed, he came to the narrow fissure, which in daylight appeared as little more than a deeper shadow among the darkened wedge of the seam. He twisted his shoulders, and crawled forward until he reached the ledge on the other side, within the enclosure. And though he stood hunched in a blackness complete as the hole of Hell, still his spirit rejoiced as if it had fought and clawed its way to Heaven.

He had beaten them. He was free.

With a surge of fierce courage such as he had not felt for many months, he leapt down blind, trusting that the place had remained as he remembered it. His feet landed easily in the soft, giving sand, as his body fell forward in a weary ecstasy of surrender. He embraced its sheltering softness like a lover, then found to his bewilderment that he was crying. This was something he had not done since childhood. He tried to check the tears but could not, as all the pain and fear of the last three years, and of that terrible day, poured out of him.

He thought of the girl and he knew, even then, that though danger still surrounded him, he must see her again as soon as it was safely possible. For he had held her image before him like an icon and a guiding light through the years of brutal captivity, placing his hope, and all his heart, in the belief that she remained, alive and free. That she did not love him in return, but loved another, did not seem to matter now. Nothing mattered except that he must see her, and speak to her, and tell her what she meant to him. Then he would be content, and gladly lay down his life.

With tears still wounding him, he searched the niche in the adjacent wall, until he found the tinderbox that he had left there. Against all odds its contents were intact. The rotting straw beneath it was dry, as was the piled driftwood he had gathered and stored so long ago. Clearing a level space in the sand, he built a waiting bed of straw and thin slivers, then struck flint to steel, shooting tiny sparks into the heart of it. Again and again, until with the aid of his living breath a single tongue appeared, and began to spread. Then with the knowledge acquired of a lifetime, he fed the fire slowly, nurtured it, until at last it grew and swelled into a living, warming blaze.

He hung his head and wept outright. The lingering flame of his life and his love still remained. He groaned, and in a torment of joy and suffering, said her name.

"Mary!"

He stripped off his soaking clothes and draped them across driftwood stands to dry. Lying naked now in the growing warmth of the chamber, he said a defiant prayer of thanks, and with her image before him still, drifted at last into sleep.

Eight

The rain beat against the single window; the door trembled beneath the force of the wind. But for the dry heat that emanated from the blazing hearth fire, Mary would have thought herself in a dank and dripping cave. The night aura of the place had returned as well, with strange shadows playing once more across everything she saw. Half fearfully now she asked her mother to keep her promise, and speak of the hard life which had led her to the present. She herself sat in the rocker, warmly wrapped and with the steaming kettle close at hand, while true to her nature, the old woman sat stiffly and without comforts in the plain unmoving wooden chair.

"All right, Mary, I'll tell you. And you've a bit of salt, no denying, to parry with an old she-wolf in the den. But if the words I speak begin to feel too harsh, like sack-cloth against your delicate skin, I'll understand if you stop me. It's hardly a tale for a lady."

"I won't stop you," said Mary stubbornly, beginning to see that every inch of this woman's bitter fortress would be yielded grudgingly, and that pain and courage were the only measure she respected. "You must tell me everything, from the beginning."

"That would take many days, child, and even then you would not know the half of it. I will tell you now only those events which concern yourself, along with such glimpses of my youth which you will understand, and are needful."

"I'm listening," said the girl.

"Very well." And the old woman began her tale.

"When I was scarcely older than you are now, and no less naive, I fell in love with a man twice my age. He was a fisherman, whose wife had died in giving birth to their only child, a strapping son, now five

years old.

"John was a lonely man, and beginning to feel the weight of his years. I was a lonely girl, and to his mind innocent, full with the first bloom of untainted womanhood. I was to be the empty page that he would write upon, the flowering stream beside which he would rebuild his life. He saw nothing but the good in me, and my one desire was to please him, and to give him all that he needed.

"But my parents, being blind with wealth and comfort, could not see him as I did, could never know the honest depth of his soul, or the gentle touch of his big, calloused hands as he held me. The need and loving warmth he showered over me quite stole my heart..... They saw only that such a match was beneath me, as the only daughter of a respected landowner, a man of solid means and family background.

"So we eloped, John and I, and were married in a chapel by the sea. When my father learned of it he was furious, and disowned me. It was the last time he ever spoke to me, as this will be the very last, I warn you, that I will ever say of him. Child-lusting bastard! Had me in his bed more than once, when we were alone and I could not escape him.

"Don't look so shocked. It is always within the most staid, aristocratic families that the heart is most deeply rotted. So don't feel yourself cheated, girl, that you never knew your father---the man you most want to love, but in the end must despise more than any.

"But never mind all that. It hardly matters. Good, decent John MacCain and I were married, and lived happily enough for two years. I still bear his name, though it is seldom remembered. But if there is one thing the cruel Christian God will not tolerate---he, too, is called the Father---it is those who find meaning and bounty without him. We had little enough in the world's eyes, and never more than we needed to live day by day. But what of that? We had each other, and the boy, who had come to think of me as his mother. We had the sun and the sea, and the land behind. Our Scotland.

"Then one day he took the boy and went out in his boat, as ever, to earn our daily bread. It was as fine an April morning as you could ask, and I saw them off under a gentle sky, with softly lapping waves to put a woman's heart at ease. It need hardly be said that the skies soon darkened, and a gale blew in like thunder---

"Nay, girl, back to your chair; I don't want pity. That was the way of it, and nothing to be said or done now.

"He did not return that night. And after three days' fruitless vigil, there was no use hoping further. A priest came to our small cottage, and said some words as empty as the promise of afterlife. My brother and I held candles in our hands, and I think he was truly shocked that I shed not a single tear. He could not know that my nights for many years had been filled with them, and that those last, worry-sick three had drained the well to its dregs, and beyond. That was the end of it. My first love was gone, leaving me a widow at nineteen, wholly without means.

"My brother did what he could for me, I'll give him that. And he would have played the father well enough for you, if the Fever* hadn't got

him first. They're not all bad; I do know it. But the good ones with hearts that feel, are forever and always at the mercy of them that don't---the aggressive lot who just take, and trample, without thinking.

*Typhus.

"But here, I'm ahead of myself, and you look near done-in. Into bed with you now, and enough of my sad stories."

"No!" said her daughter at once. "You promised. I want to hear it all!" Though she was in fact tired and morose, and beginning to feel again the ache of her affliction, Mary sensed that now or never would she learn the whole truth. She must show this woman that she too could be strong, and was not afraid of dark reality.

The widow MacCain looked hard at her, trying to gauge the depth, and source, of her daughter's desire to know. But at the same time she felt the slow stirrings of concerned motherhood, and at that not the detached, objective instincts of a guardian, the role she had been forced to assume, and grown accustomed to these many years. She turned away, and wrung her hands as if deep in thought.

"All right," she said at last. "But we must get you into bed in any case. I'll not have you seriously ill."

She rose, and took the tea-cup from Mary's hand. She turned down the covers for her, and saw her securely tucked in. Then to her dismay as she sat down on the bed beside her, felt such a surge of tenderness for this innocent extension of her own flesh, that it was only with difficulty she did not bend down and kiss her damp, flushed forehead.

"Go on," said Mary, who in her mother's eyes crossed that very hour from adolescence into womanhood. There was no denying the soul inside her.

"Are you very sure, lass? I do not say it in mockery, but truth be told it's not a tale to make the young heart glad. I'll understand if you've had enough."

"No, really, I'm all right now. Mother," and she took her hand. "I want to know."

The woman gave a sigh, and shook her head. She found herself cornered, and not by the hounds and hunters of treachery, but by honesty and simple love. There was only one way out: forward, through memories and emotions she had long banished. There was nothing else for it. She continued.

"My father grew old and finally died, with my mother not far behind. My brother became man of the house then, and one of the first things he did was to send for me, though it was not straight away that I went to him.

"I had been earning my modest keep as a teacher to the children of the fishing village, and living alone in the spare, two-room schoolhouse that they built for me. I'd had chance enough for suitors if I wanted them. But I did not, could not think to put myself through such pain

again. And though I loved them well enough for the simple, hard-working folk they were, but for my John I never met one as stirred the embers of any true romantic feeling. Of course the men of the distant gentry wanted no part of me, a dowerless widow who had shamed her family and married beneath her class. They were not all so heartless, and I kept a good deal to myself. But the truth remains that none ever cared enough to overcome the obstacles, and learn what lay hidden in my heart.

"So the years went by and I found myself at thirty. My mother had died, and my brother taken Anne for a wife, who had borne him a child. So at last I swallowed my pride, and thinking to be useful, went back to the big house that still haunted my dreams. Both Bryan and your aunt were kind enough in their awkward, Christian way, and did what they could to make me feel welcome and at home. But as Michael continued to grow---yes, child, who else would it be?---they naturally began to feel a tight bond of family that did not include me.....

"But here the way becomes less clear. It is never a single incident, nor even a closely knit series of events that makes us what we are, but a lifetime of broken promises and shattered dreams. They say that hope springs eternal, and I dare say that's true. More's the pity, since it must always end in disillusion, and finally, in dark and lonely death."

She felt her daughter's hand grasp her own, and saw that there were standing tears in her eyes. As if a veil had been drawn aside between them, she saw at last the terrible loss the girl had already suffered, and was suffering still, in the form of an impossible love for a man three years dead. Yes, thought the dark widow to herself, she deserves to know the truth.

"I began to feel the need for solitude, and a place to dwell on the long chains of thought that had taken root inside me. So I made this place my own, and spent long hours, whole days and nights here, learning. For I had been shown three books of Druid lore during the first year of my mourning, by an old Welsh woman who lived in the village, my only real companion. She taught me the ancient tongues, and asked me to copy them out in English, along with other tales and spells which she knew only in her mind, that they might not be lost at her death. Yes, Mary, she was a witch, though that name need not mean all that fear implies." She paused.

"A priest has a kind of power over men, because he appeals to the angelic, or 'right' side of the soul---all filled with yearning for the light, and the fear of God. The witch works through the left, no less powerful, because its roots lie in corrupted instinct: vanity, unclean desire, treachery and violence. And to the weak and abusive, men such as my father, it is only that much harder to deny. The daughters of Lug cast no darkness of their own, create no evil that does not already exist in a man, but only turn that inner blackness to his own undoing.

"Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord. These words are attributed to the great God of Christian and Jew alike. But what men cannot see, because their simplicity demands a single being to worship and fear, is that the One God is divided into many facets, wholly separate beings, with moods and purposes all their own. I have chosen the god Dagda, as He has chosen me. His passion is for retribution against the

violent---the axe-wielders and plunderers, the outwardly strong. It is He who spoke through the prophet long ago."

"Mother," said Mary. "Please don't be angry, but you're frightening me. You know I don't pass judgment, and that I'm trying to understand. . . and love you. But this isn't what I want, what I need to know."

With this the old woman, whose eyes had lost their focus and begun to stare off into space, came back to herself. "Aye, lass, I hear what it is you're telling me. I was only trying to give you a glimpse of that part of myself which cannot be shown in outward events. You'll be wanting to know about the circumstances of your birth..... About your father."

At this the cold eyes gleamed with unspeakable malice, and with a shiver of stark insight Mary discovered the source, the burning heart of her mother's hatred. It was as if all the bitter rage she felt for the world of men, every grudge, even blame for the war itself, had been focused upon this one man as the symbol, the living embodiment of evil, and sole object of revenge. And with a second shock, and full knowledge that had somehow eluded her, she realized that this him, this monster her mother wished to destroy, using her as a vehicle, was the first, the original Lord Purceville. Her father, who formed half her living flesh.

And as much as she knew him for the man he was, as much as she sympathized with her mother and abhorred his rape of her, yet again she felt that sudden and all-inclusive pang: the orphan, who after years in the lonely dark, discovers a natural parent, living still.

But now the old woman was speaking again, had in fact been speaking all the while these thoughts raced through her, no longer aware, it seemed, of any presence save her own, blindly reciting the words that had become to her a litany of hate.

".....was just an officer then, in command of the Northern Garrison. We were not yet in open rebellion, and after a fashion, were content to be subjects of the British crown. But we were never equals. The Purcevilles, outsiders that they were, still secured for themselves a beautiful estate, with a magnificent home and many servants. And one of them, by a strange twist of Fate, was I.

"Hard times and higher taxes were beginning to take their toll on Bryan, and I felt useless enough in his house. So I determined to seek employment, and a place of my own, wherever I might find them. For I had not yet learned that my place was here, and that the world of men held nothing for me. Stubbornly I hoped, and stubbornly I fell into the trap.

"As much as perhaps I should have known better, I solicited for, and was given the job of governess to young Stephen Purceville, aged then seven years. He was a hard and abrasive lad, his mother dead and gone years past. Yes, Mary, you begin to see how life repeats, and how I was laid bare for the final sting. I loved the boy, hard as it was sometimes. There was something in him, a brooding hunger of the eyes, which endeared him to me for all his excesses and bursts of temper. And if the truth be told, I saw the same hunger and restless need in the aggressive coldness, the outward ferocity of his father.

"Fool, fool, fool!" she cursed herself. "We women find a strong, demanding master, and we think that because of his strength there must be goodness and nobility within, that if nurtured..... But it does not exist. Takers and users, they plunder our hearts and our bodies, then throw us to the dogs."

"Then," asked Mary gently, trying hard not to upset her. "He didn't actually rape you?"

"Aye, rape he did, though not in the sense that fear casts the word---alone in some barren place, far from help. But I said it was not willingly I took him to my bed, and it's the god's truth. He would come to my room of an evening, and letting himself in---he held keys to every room in the house, and none were spared---he would.....

"This is a hard thing for me to tell you, girl. He forced himself on me, and at times I struggled, or even cried out, until a cuff or sharp threat silenced me. And yet, strange to say. . .after the incestuous horrors of my father's house, it was a kind of cleansing, purging pleasure to be so used, so long as I believed that somewhere, in the depths of his heart, he loved and cared for me.

"Dear God, how blind we can be! It was not love he felt, nor secret tenderness. It was not even clean desire, but the novelty of a woman my

age---thirty-three---who was still fair, and of violating by night the woman who coddled his son by day.

"But it was more than even that. In his meanness and baseness he knew, in some measure, what it was I felt for him, and it gave him a twisted satisfaction to be admired and cherished by a native lass, who meant to him less than nothing." Again she paused, as if herself overwhelmed by the memory.

"In time I became pregnant," she said, in a voice almost sad. "And all my confused, forlorn affection became the more profound. For he had stirred inside me what even John could not: a child of my own.

"So on the last night that he came to me, as we lay panting side by side---for I had not resisted him..... I looked over at him in the gentle candlelight, and with the trembling emotions of a lifetime, told him that I loved him, loved his son, and now would bear his child. To think that in that moment I half fancied he would take me in his arms, and ask me to marry him.

"He laughed at me! So utterly cold and cruel. Then as he came back to himself he seized me by the wrists, and swore that no child of his would be born to a scheming slut---his very words---the likes of me. And he beat me, as if trying to snuff out the lives of both of us. I honestly believe he would have done it, if fear of losing his position had not intervened.

"Then he dragged me by the hair, down the long hallway, and threw me out into the cold Winter night, with only the torn nightdress wrapped about my battered limbs. The last words he said as I ran from the house in tears, were that if anyone ever learned the child was his, he would kill us both. And he meant it."

Mary was crying now for both of them, feeling as if she, too, had been beaten and raped. "How could he?" was all she could manage.

"How?" asked the old woman, half mocking, half in earnest. "For a man like that it was as easy as breathing.

'The shark will strike

and the spider spin,

The mad dog kill, and kill again
Until he is killed in his turn.'

Remember that, Mary. It is the way of things."

"But why....." It seemed almost cruel to ask, but she had to. "Why the charade of my being Anne's child? Why couldn't you and I have had each other, at least?"

"Aye, that. Well." And for the first time that night, through all the gruesome details, the woman found herself at a loss, as if this alone still caused in her something akin to remorse. "At first it was the family honor. It was as easy to cloister the two of us, as one. And then.

"I tried to poison myself a short time after you were born, as only your life inside me had prevented my doing before. As much as I wanted to love and care for you, as the innocent babe you were.....

"It all became too much for me, Mary, and my brother's death was the final blow. I just wanted it to end. They say I went quite mad for a time, if endless loss, and a death-like sense of oppression be madness.

"The surviving family, the Talberts, then considered me an unfit guardian. And with the coming of dark times it was difficult to blame them, or disagree..... And so I gave you up---"

She had to stop, because the girl had risen beside her in the bed, and this time in deepest earnest, wrapped her arms about the withered neck, weeping as if there were nothing left in all the world. The old woman (old and haggard at fifty) felt a moment of weakness. She wanted to cry herself, to give, and receive comfort in return. But the tears would not come.

Then she remembered the man, and was silent.

And more than anything else Mary had heard or experienced that night, this simple non-action, and the three words the witch finally uttered. . . brought home to her the full brutality, and continuing tragedy of her mother's life.

"He will pay."

As the rain beat relentlessly, and the wind howled through the barren pass.

Nine

Stephen Purcell rose early the next morning. He had slept alone that night, something of a rarity, and woke feeling both cleansed and restless. Cleansed because, like all men who give and take love too freely, he knew in his heart how meaningless the endless procession of women had become. Restless because he fancied, and simultaneously feared it was not true, that he had at last found the woman who would make it all real, and still the inner turmoil which had haunted him time out of mind.

He got up and stretched his lean, hard-muscled frame, calling for his valet, who came at once and began helping him dress. This act was by now such a matter of ritual that it left his mind soft and dreamlike, free to think again of that mystical creature of beauty and innocence, so unlike the others, that he would woo, and take as his wife.

That he had done nothing to earn, and therefore to deserve such a blessing, that real love could not possibly find him until he stopped using and hurting all who came within his reach---these were thoughts which could never occur to him. Rather, it seemed unlikely that he would ever wake from the dream of dominance and superiority in which he had been raised. For he had been born into wealth, and taught (though not by his father, who in fact had taken little hand in his upbringing) that his noble birth entitled him to both material satisfaction, and the subservient respect of all around him. And because the world could not possibly live up to this contrived and irrational viewpoint, he was forever angry, feeling cheated, though by whom he could not say, of the peace and happiness that were rightfully his.

Sending the servant from him, he splashed cold water across his face and neck, brushed and pomaded his strong, raven locks, then set about to shaving with especial care. Toweling away the remaining lather he finished dressing, buckled on his sword and walked briskly down the corridor, roughly pushing aside the butler, who in the semi-darkness had failed to descry his young master's approaching form, and deferentially stand aside.

Entering at length the high, majestic dining room, he was oblivious to the opulent splendor all around him. His one thought, as he seated himself brusquely, was a mild gratitude that his father, whom he despised, had not yet risen. For in the aging baron he saw what he considered an unfair reflection of himself---what he was, and would become---and he judged most harshly in his father those shortcomings which he himself possessed.

But on a more human level, and in the open book to which all save murderers (and he was not yet that) are entitled, the 'brooding hunger of the eyes' which the old woman had described in him as a child, was in fact a true window into his innermost self---his deep-seated need for womanly care and affection. His only memories of his mother, who had died so young, were of an angelic being in a long white gown, who stood in the twilight doorway of his bedroom. . . then entered softly, and kissed and petted him good-night. And without realizing it, he longed with all his soul for that gentle, reassuring touch, so suddenly and irrevocably lost.

He remembered more distinctly his first governess, the widow MacCain, whose patient affection he had begun to return when his father, for reasons he would never make clear, had sent her away in disgrace. In

later life he had solved the bitter puzzle for himself, after his own fashion and understanding, and hated them both for it.

Back to the present, he set to his breakfast with a will. He ate not because he was hungry---genuine, limb-weakening hunger was something he had never known---but because he had a long ride ahead of him, and wished to retain a good measure of strength at the end of it, when he saw, and would meet.....

Her.

He abruptly pushed away his plate. And for perhaps the second time in his adult life (the first being the morning of the Battle, in which he had served as an adjutant) he felt a kind of fear and nervous awe of what lay ahead. Wiping his mouth mechanically, he threw aside the napkin, strode down the long hallway, and made his way out toward the stables, buttoning his crimson officer's coat against the early morning chill.

The great irony of his existence, and of his current fixation on a woman he had never met, was that the same restless hunger which drove him to her, and which was so transparent in his eyes, had acted as both a heart-throb and aphrodisiac on a score of beautiful women, English and Scottish alike, and he could have picked from their number anyone he wished. Servant girls, ladies, wives and mistresses of other men, all were quite helpless before his sharp and demanding emerald gaze, enhanced as it was by his high position and rakish good looks. At any moment there were always two or three jewel-like creatures who considered themselves deeply in love with him, and would gladly have forsaken all others to be his wife. But of these he wanted none. Beyond the plunder of their willing bodies (and this very willingness made him look upon them with contempt), he thought of them, and cared for them, not at all.

The groom, who had been warned of his master's mood and early approach, stood ready, holding the reins of the saddled stallion. Again the young man took no particular notice of his good fortune---that here was arguably the finest horse in the countryside, sleek and tireless, worth more in stud alone than many of the country folk could hope to earn in a lifetime. He knew only that it was his, and that this, at least, was as it should be. In a rare show of affection, he went so far as to pat its beautiful neck before mounting. But this did not keep him from upbraiding the groom for a loose strand on the saddle-blanket. And no sooner had he mounted the animal than it ceased to be for him a living creature, and became instead a vehicle, existing merely to carry him to a desired end. He rode off, leaving the groom to shake his head, and spit disparagingly in the dirt.

Such was the love he inspired in men.

Mary sat at the bare table, drinking tea and chewing a hard biscuit, while her mother peered narrowly out of the window. Both had been silent since waking---there seemed little left to say---but at last her mother broke the stillness.

"Mary. What will you do if Stephen Purceville comes to call on you today?" Mary knew better than to ask why he would. So far as her

mother was concerned, there was no such thing as coincidence. She thought for a moment, then replied honestly.

"I don't know. He is, after all, my brother."

"Half-brother," the old woman hissed. "And not the better half, remember that." The girl did not like, and could not understand, her mother's tone.

"Margaret," she said flatly. "If you did not want us to meet, you would not have arranged his coming here. You show me one path, then chastise me for taking it. At least tell me what it is you want, so I can make an intelligent choice."

"What I want," she repeated thoughtfully, as if regretting her earlier outburst. "For now all I want is that you should meet, and let nature take its course."

Again Mary felt hostility rising inside her. She wanted to love this woman, and help her if she could. But not as a puppet, and not in that way. "Nature's course! Are you suggesting that I---"

"Easy, lass. I'm suggesting no such thing." Her voice was cool and soothing. "Just get to know him. Do what you feel. Nay, child, that's not what I mean. I think you'll find he has a certain charm. You may even like him."

Mary rested her chin on her fists, and let out a deep breath, bewildered. Of all the strange fates and traps: to be given a set of natural parents after feeling she had none, only to find that one was detestable, and the other wanted him dead.

But the son, her half-brother. . . here was a mystery. What was his guilt, or innocence, and what would he feel towards her? Whereas Michael had known all along that she was not his sister, Stephen would have no notion that she was.

Of one thing only was she certain: she had had enough of violence and hatred. She decided she would judge this man by himself alone. And if he turned out to be a friend, so much the better. Whatever the case, she would not take part in any scheme to hurt him. And perhaps..... As if divining the thought, the old woman broke in upon her reverie.

"Just remember this. You must not tell him that he is your brother, and you must not use my name."

"But why?"

"Why? Because if his father learns of it he will kill us both."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe that."

"Believe it!" Again the harsh voice was edged in steel. "By the god, girl, haven't you been listening? Don't you know yet what kind of man he is?"

"But to kill two women without pretext? Even a Governor---"

"Oh, he would find a pretext. Harboring a fugitive, spying..... Witch

craft."

Mary was silent. And though she reproached herself for it, her one desire in that moment was to get as far away from the hate-filled old woman as possible. She longed to escape from the smouldering darkness of that place, to find some quiet hillside where she could think it all through, and decide what must be done. What must be done..... But at the same time she felt the need, far stronger than she cared to admit, for some strong and reassuring male presence.

At that moment she heard hoofbeats outside the door. Not waiting to ask, or consider whether it was right or wrong, she rose from her place and went to the door. The old woman did not try to stop her. She went outside.

Stephen Purcell stopped short in the saddle, and for the space of several seconds, did not move or breathe. Then with an effort to remain calm he dismounted, for that brief instant losing sight of her, and telling himself it had not happened.

But when he moved forward around the horse, holding tight the reins as if trying to keep a dream from fading, he felt again the strange and forbidding shock of her presence.

The girl was beautiful, yes, but it was far more than that. There was a depth to her, a genuine suffering..... But that was not the whole of it, either. What did it mean? What did it mean?

He could not know that part of what he was feeling was an instinctive sense of kin, the primal recognition of blood and family, a feeling which jarred against, and at the same time increased, his awed physical desire, for her.

And alongside this, no less tangible, was an almost spiritual softening, and unconditional love. . .yes, love, for the beautiful and innocent child before him. Everything about her, from the gentle eyes and supple figure, to the long and simple dress she wore, seemed to him more becoming and picturesque than anything he had ever seen. At the back of his mind flashed a vision: an angelic being all in white.....

For her own part, Mary also felt a shock. From the first glimpse there could be no doubt that he was in fact her brother. She knew this not by any cold comparison of features, but by the sudden love and pity that welled up in her own heart. Love because, whatever his faults and follies (these too she sensed), he was her brother, a fellow orphan and lonely, wayward soul. Her womanly instinct recognized this at once. Pity, because she saw in his eyes the rising of a passion that could never be fulfilled. He was in love with her. This she knew with equal certainty.

Still holding tightly to the reins, he came forward. Remembering his pretext for coming, he began to speak stiffly of escaped prisoners and official duties. She listened, hearing not so much the content of his words, as reading in his voice and manner the confirmation of what she had intuitively sensed. And she could not help but feel a certain thrill that this powerful, aggressive man should find himself groping for speech, shy and self-conscious before her.

And indeed, the young captain soon felt the emptiness of his words, which were like banners raised without wind to support them. He stopped, flushing with anger and embarrassment, and looked at her. As clearly as if she had spoken, her eyes said to him. "It doesn't matter. I know why you're here, and it's all right."

She stepped closer, and without fear or hesitation, began to stroke the white muzzle of the bay, which to his surprise, did not pull away.

"He's never let anyone do that," he said honestly. "A perfect stranger." He unconsciously stepped back, allowing her greater freedom. "Have you been around horses all your life?"

"When I was younger, before....." Her face flushed. "But that's not why. We understand each other."

"Before the war?"

"Yes," she said defensively. She could not understand his persistence, into a matter that was clearly painful to her.

"Do you hate us all, then?"

Her eyes flashed, then became quiet again. "No. I've seen too much of hate, and death. I lost..... I lost everything."

And suddenly it came to her. She was standing and talking with a man, her own flesh, who had been on the other side of the firing, and might well have given the order to kill---

Her face went pale as an intolerable pain rose in the hollow of her chest, and the full horror of war loomed before her. She stepped back, senses failing, and would have fallen if he had not rushed forward and caught her up.

Horried at his own actions, which could have caused in her such pain, he carried her back to a flat stone before the hut, which served as a bench. She sat woozily for a moment, not knowing where she was, until she became aware of his voice, and of his strong arm about her shoulders, supporting her.

"Mary, it's all right," he said. "Please, please forgive me. We won't speak of it again." And looking up at his troubled countenance, so full of concern and self-reproach, she could not help but forgive him.

He continued, hardly knowing what he said, trying to mend the breach that he had caused between them. "I, too, know what it is to lose: my mother, when I was very young." And in that moment it did not seem strange to him to speak of this, his greatest secret and vulnerability, which he hid so tenaciously from others.

"Stephen." She spoke plainly, though she was not sure herself what she felt, sitting there so close beside him. "You came in the hope of becoming in some way intimate with me. That has already happened; I ask you to think of me as your friend. And as a friend, I have something to ask of you."

"You know that I would do anything." And he colored to hear himself

speak.

"Thank you for saying that just now." She laid her hand lightly on his, feeling the shiver it caused in him. Half against her will she left it there, and felt his grateful fingers close around hers. "Would you take me riding today?" she asked. "Without expecting anything in return? More than anything right now I want to go somewhere wide open and free, where I can think, and feel alive. I need someone I can be alone, with. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

But even as he said this, he realized that in the confusion he had lost his grip on the stallion. With a catch at his throat he looked out, and saw that it had moved off, grazing now on a sparse patch of green perhaps forty yards away. As if sensing his eyes upon it, the horse looked back at them alertly.

"I've got to catch him!" said the man. And he leapt to his feet. But at his first running strides toward it, the beast raised its head and galloped easily out of his reach, a short distance further up the path. Again the young officer made as if to charge.

"Stephen, wait." Slowly she walked over to him, as to a child who had not understood his lessons.

"But I've got to---" She shook her head.

"No. What you've got to do is stop grabbing so hard at life, and learn to caress it---stop trying to make everything your slave. Haven't you ever just let life come to you?"

"But the horse---"

"Has probably not experienced a moment of true freedom since you've owned him."

"Mary." His face betrayed deep conflict, and she knew that she had been right, and struck upon the roots of his character. "That animal is worth a fortune," he continued desperately. "If he escapes, or is stolen....."

"He won't escape," she said firmly. "This pass leads nowhere: a dead-end of stone. But that's not what this is about. What you're showing me now is that you're afraid, terribly afraid to let go. You think that if you don't go out and take, by force if necessary, then life will give you nothing, nothing at all. That is a lie which is cruel to both yourself and others. And if you want anything to do with me it must stop, here and now."

"How do you know this?" he demanded. "You're only guessing." But he realized that by his very vehemence he was admitting the truth of what she said. Already she knew him. Somehow, she knew. He let out a breath, and said to her simply. "How would you retrieve my horse?"

"By giving him what he needs. By kindness rather than the noose. No," she insisted. "I am not speaking of ideals. I will do it, like this."

Without haste she returned to the door of the hut, and went inside.

Her mother sat staring blankly at the fire, though Mary had little doubt that she had moved there but recently, and had heard, if not seen, all that had taken place.

"Mother, may I take some apples?"

"They are in the basket, as you know for yourself."

"Thank you." There was no time to wonder what her mother was feeling, if anything. She

strode up and kissed her quickly, then took two of the apples and went outside.

There both man and beast looked back at her. With neither haste nor hesitation, she took a bite of the first apple, and, as if the man did not exist, walked directly toward the stallion. It craned its neck at this, and looked cautiously back at its master. But as he made no move, it turned its large, animal eyes back to the girl.

She did not hold the apple out enticingly, or make the cooing sounds of entreaty which she knew it would instinctively mistrust. She simply advanced, acting as if the reins did not exist, paused, came closer, then stopped carelessly perhaps ten feet away. She took another bite of the apple, then laughed as the creature snorted impatiently, and at last came up to her. She reached below its head with one hand, and fed it the apples with the other.

The reins were in her hand, and the animal ate greedily. Then all at once she burst into tears, and hid her face against its long and beautiful neck.

Together they rode across the wide and wild moors, past stark mountain ridges, and lochs many thousand feet deep. All beneath a warming sun and mild, caressing wind. They spoke quietly or not at all, taking in the broad magnificence around them, each thinking their own thoughts, alone, and yet in the deepest sense, together.

At least that is how the girl perceived their long ride through Nature. For her it was poetry and roses, a spiritual as well as physical reunion with the brother she had never known, and who so obviously

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