

Highland Ballad

by Christopher Leadem, 1956–

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For Natasha

PART I

A Lingerin Flame.

1

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.

2

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."

3

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.

4

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.

5

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.

6

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.

7

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.

8

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⁽⁸⁻¹⁾ 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.

"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 Purceilles, 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.

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.

Horrified 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 needed her love and softening influence. And to one so young, knowing so little of men, it was easy to imagine that a sort of romantic friendship was also possible, had in fact already been established, and that all of this was understood between them.

Having been so long without the company of men, and in her life being close to only one—a man of exceptional virtue and character—she could not help but think the best of her new-found brother, and to believe, with her heart rather than her mind, that whatever injustices he may have committed, were over and in the past. Further, she reasoned, the world had need of such aggressive leaders: men who got things done.

She could not know that in following this naive and wishful train of thought she was making a classic mistake, indeed, the same mistake her mother had made before her. She was yielding to a woman's instinctive attraction and submission to raw strength, which clouds the conscience, and hampers honest judgment.

Michael had been strong and good; Stephen was merely strong. She was too young, and too needful, to see the difference.

So riding back with the setting sun, feeling fatigued but at the same time warm and secure in his presence, it did not seem out of place for her to rest her head on his shoulder and let her arms, which were wrapped about his waist for support, squeeze him affectionately. And if she felt inclined to add, "Thank you, Stephen, I feel wonderful," where was the harm?

And as they reached the steep and narrow final passage, his actions seemed to confirm all the noble, underlying qualities which she had begun to read into his character. Sensing that his horse was tired he dismounted, and taking hold of the bridle, led it the rest of the way on foot, displaying both a firm, sure tread, and surprising physical stamina. Of his virility, had she known the word, there could be no question.

When they reached the hut, the sky seemed to hover in a peaceful and many-hued twilight. Everything around them was hushed and still, with no light showing from within. Stephen reached up to help her dismount, and as her feet lightly touched ground, took her in his arms.

Her eyes looked up at him searchingly, his face so close to hers. Then he was kissing her, and before she could turn away she felt his right hand glide across her ribs.

She tried to pull away, but he only brought her body more firmly against his. And she felt a part of herself yield as they kissed again, her lips parting expectantly. Once more she felt the hand kneading toward her breast.

But as it touched, and she felt the growing insistence of his movements she came back to herself, and with a shock realized what she was doing, and with whom.

"No!" she gasped, trying to break free. Still he held her, but she persisted. "It's not right."

At last he released her. With this action he too seemed to remember himself, and to refrain, though his reasons were vastly different.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I'm afraid you quite carry me away." She gazed back at him, his features half hidden in the gloom, trying to understand the source and meaning of his words. It was impossible.

"Oh," she said in despair. "I didn't want it to end like this. Couldn't you just embrace me, as you would a friend, and say good-night?"

"As a friend?" So sharp and demanding was his voice, his whole bearing, that she found herself saying, quite against her will:

"Please, just give me a little more time. I'm not ready..."

And these words, like so many other innocent acts, seemed to achieve an end of their own, altogether separate from what she had intended. Stephen was strangely soothed, and gratified, as if hearing exactly what he wanted to. She felt, as much as saw him smile. He came to her, and embraced her gently.

"Oh, Mary," he whispered, as he kissed her cheek. "Thank you for this. Thank you for not giving in. I've been waiting all my life for a feeling, like this." And he kissed her again with heart-breaking softness.

Then he stepped away and swiftly mounted. "I'll be back three days hence. We will ride again, and make our love in the fields." And he rode off, leaving her bewildered and unable to reply.

And all at once the last light of day was gone. The breeze which had seemed so gentle, now fled before the cold and chilling airs of Night. She retreated into the woeful shelter of the hut, and lay down on the bed in confusion.

10

The prisoner had slept for nearly twenty hours, woken off and on by the cold as his fire grew dim. At such times he would rise only long enough to fuel it once more to a warm and yet (so far as this was possible) a slow burning blaze. He knew the white smoke of the driftwood would be difficult to see, dispersed as it was through the cracks high above, and carried away by the steady breeze from the sea. But still he took no chances, using only pieces that were cracked with age, retaining not the slightest trace of moisture. Then trying to forget his parched throat and empty stomach, he would lie yet again in the sand, sleep remaining the single greatest need.

But as night fell again on the interceding day—even as Mary watched the Englishman ride off—he woke for the last time, feeling troubled and restless. So dry had his throat become that each involuntary swallow brought with it a sharp and brittle pain. His mouth felt lined with parchment, and he was dizzy and weak from hunger. He knew that whatever the risks, he could no longer remain where he was, but must find food and drink. And this meant people, of whom life had made him so mistrustful.

His clothes were dry, nearly scorched. These he had stolen as he fled across the countryside with his companion, who along with himself had broken early from the rest. But the fit of them was bad, and their look on him plainly suspicious.

As he dressed, then climbed carefully up to the narrow opening, he felt a deep trepidation he could not suppress. Because somewhere inside him a voice had said, "Enough. Enough running and hiding and stealing. I must take myself openly to the first villager I see, and ask for help." And while this ran counter to all the hard lessons he had learned in the stockade—that a man must look out for himself, trusting and needing no one else—yet a line had been crossed inside him, from which there was no returning. He did not wish to die, but neither could he live as some hunted and detestable beast. He climbed down from the rock.

The twilit beach was empty and the waves had grown less. Here and again came the sound of gulls, along with the high screech of a sea-hawk somewhere above. He plodded on through the indifferent sand, toward the small fishing village some two miles distant.

Upon leaving the hiding place he had formed no clear plan, and in his bitterness told himself he did not want one. But as the cliffs that walked with him began to diminish and pull back from the shore, leaving the more level expanse and tiny harbor of the village, his mind of necessity began to work again, trying to think of anyone he might know there, who would have no love for the English, and be willing to take him in.

In the midst of his reveries he looked up to see an old man sitting on the porch of a low ancient cottage, separated from the rest of the village, holding aloof as it were on this, the nearer and less accessible side of the harbor. A steep stretch of sand led down from it to the very edge of the horseshoe bay, broken here and there by large projections of stone.

The old man looked back at him placidly, smoking a short pipe and humming quietly but distinctly to himself. The prisoner felt fear, and a deep hesitation, until almost in spite of himself he began to follow the rise and fall of the simple tune. Then with a rush of warmth and melancholy he recognized it: *The Walls of Inverness*. It was a song that had been sung at the camp fires of Highland soldiers for time out of mind. The old man was a veteran, in this blessed, unmistakable way telling him that he knew of his plight, and would help.

With relief but at the same time caution, the younger man approached the cottage, and mounted the steps to the weather-beaten porch. The two men regarded each other a moment in silence.

"You know, then?"

"Aye, lad," rejoined the fisherman in his clear baritone. "Three red-coated cavalry were here yesterday, searching about and makin' a fuss. Saw fit to post a threatening bill on the door of the church. *Escaped traitors (traitors, mind) from Edinburgh... believed headed... fifty pounds reward... death to anyone aiding or abetting*. The usual stuff."

"The villagers will be on the watch for me, then?"

"Nay, lad. That bill was torn down before their horses were out of sight. And you plainly don't know sea-folk if you have to ask." He took a puff on his pipe, and continued without haste.

"We live with death every day of our lives, and would not last one season if we grew afraid every time the word was spoken. That lady out there." He moved his arm to indicate the sea. "She gives and takes life as she pleases, with hardly a warning. God's mistress she is, with moods and temper to match. If we'll not bow to her, then what have we to fear from three young hoodlums, flashing their sabers as if to wake the dead?"

"Meaning no offense," said the other, "and I'm sure you're right. But aren't there some as might be tempted by the money? And might the English not have spies?"

"Perhaps," said the fisherman thoughtfully. "The arm of the Devil is long, and no denying. But you'll have naught to fear of that tonight. I live quite alone, as you see, and in the morning there'll be a fog to blot out the sun." He said this with confidence, as one who had seen it a thousand times before.

Then extinguishing his pipe against the wooden arm of the chair, he rose as if to go inside, with an open hand indicating the door. "Right now I imagine you're hungry, and might do with a mug of stout?"

"Yes. Thank you." No other words would form, as he felt his throat tighten with emotion.

They walked through the painted doorway, and into the shelter of stone.

In troubled dream Mary lay upon the bed, restlessly turning. Words and pictures of the day would appear to her, soft and lovely—riding through the magnificent countryside, feeling him close beside her—till with a start she felt again the claw-like hand upon her breast, and beheld the iron gaze which knew no entreaty. And shaking her head in torment, she would drive the images away.

After some time of this she half woke, though her eyes remained closed against the bitter truth of the waking world. She clutched the pillow to her like a lover, and in a moaning, despairing voice said his name.

"Oh, Michael. Where are you?"

Where are you? Where are you? The words resounded in her mind, growing fainter, spiralling through a dark tunnel which became a deep well, leading to the heart of the abyss. And like tiny pebbles they struck the water far below with the faintest echo of sound.

Something stirred, as if woken from a fearful and everlasting sleep.

She saw clearly, now level with her eyes, a dark and shallow pool among a copse of death-black trees, the whole of the scene shrouded by mist and lit by seeping moonlight. And in its midst, lying face downward with only his arched back protruding above the surface of those terrible waters, the figure of a Scottish soldier.

As if sensing her presence the figure lifted its head, bewildered, and stood up. A fearful, long-drawn wail split the night, whether from the spirit or from herself she could not have said, only that the face was that of her beloved, that he was in great pain, and had been struck blind. He turned wildly from side to side, trying to penetrate the blackness of his eyes. And the same words that she had sent to him now became his own, endlessly, hopelessly repeated.

"Where are you? Where are you? Where are you!"

She tried to answer but could not, as if between them they possessed but a single voice. And as he finally stopped thrashing, and she felt her tongue loosed, she became aware of the thing which had stilled him, so utterly that she knew he had lost all hope, confronted by the sinister, solitary figure which parted the mist and stood before him: her hated half-brother, who had stolen and crushed his heart.

All was deathly still as they faced one another in silence. Purceville drew a long pistol, and held it at arm's length. Michael was a statue, head down, hands at his sides in resignation. There was the crack of a shot, and again a frozen wail split the night, this time undeniably her own.

Mary sat bolt upright in the bed. She was trembling, and her inner garments clung to her in a cold sweat. Fully awake now, and with the sudden insight brought by waking, she knew beyond a shadow of doubt what she must do. Still fully clothed, she stepped down from the bed and lifted up the mattress.

The manuscript book was there, had been there all the while she slept. The feel of its widow-black cover was cold and forbidding, but there was no longer time for fear or hesitation. She lit a thick tallow candle, and moved with it to the hard, bare table and chair.

Her mother was still nowhere to be seen. She bolted the door from within, then opened the book before her.

11

The two men sat before the roaring fire, smoking contentedly. The prisoner put a hand to his stomach, feeling nourished and filled as he had not been for many months. The room was warm; he was safe for the night, at least. And yet something was troubling him. Nothing to do with the man, or the place. It did not even seem to concern himself. But in some remote corner of his mind there was disquiet, as if someone he cared about was in trouble or in danger. He took another deep puff on the pipe that had been given him, unable to work the thought through.

They had remained thus for some time when at last the old man spoke. From his patient movements and steady gaze throughout, and still more from his present silence, the younger man sensed a profound caution and wisdom. So now that he chose to speak, the prisoner deemed it best to leave his disquiet for a time, to listen or to speak as was asked of him, and to learn from the seasoned veteran what was needful.

"I don't ask you to tell me your name," he began. "In truth I'd rather not know it, since what I don't know I can't tell. But if there's some name you would be called, near enough the mark to feel it yours, but wide enough to leave safe your parentage, I'd be pleased to learn it."

The younger man smiled. "Call me Jamie."

"Well then, Jamie. For the sake of an old man's curiosity, if nothing else, won't you tell me something of yourself? The escape and such, and what your plans are now. Needless to say you'll sleep in a bed tonight, much better than that old crack in the northern cliffs."

"How did you know about that?" His mind raced; perhaps the hiding place was not as safe as he imagined. "Could you see the smoke, then? Do you think others saw it as well?"

"Nay, lad. Fear not. What smoke there was could hardly be seen: a wisp or two among the rocks, which I saw only when I brought my skiff close in."

"Then how?" asked the prisoner anxiously.

"T'was the sea hawk that gave you away. She's got a roost up near the top, and it seems you smoked her out proper. Wouldn't land all day, just kept circlin' about and looking down. If there's one thing a beast won't abide it's the smell of smoke.

Puts 'em in a God's fear, and no mistake."

"But how did you know about the hiding place? I thought that just myself and my childhood companions..."

"And of course you thought that I was never young. But truth to tell, I was. Lost the virgin there, I did, and haven't seen her since." He let out a grunt of laughter, and broke into a boyish grin. Then slowly returned to the matter at hand. "All in all, I doubt there's half a dozen as know of it, and none of them English. You're well enough there, and in the morning I'll see you safely back." He paused, relit his pipe. "But right now I'm in the mood for a story. A good one, mind. And I'm obliging you to tell it to me."

So the man called Jamie began his tale, relating at first only the barest facts of his capture and imprisonment, leading up to the mass escape as they were being transferred from one hell-hole to another.

But as the memories and emotions rose up in their fullness before him, he found that he could no more pass over them quickly than he could forget them.

The wounds were too deep, and too many, for that.

So gradually, without himself realizing the change, he spoke in greater length and detail of the trials and fears of that time, and of his desperate struggle not to be broken, or to lose sight of his dreams and yearnings, no matter how black his world became. Even his childhood, and his passionate love for the girl, found their rightful place in his tale, so much so that his throat often swelled or shut tight, and he was unable for a time to go on.

But go on he did, far into the night, while the old man here and there nodded his understanding, or gave a timely word of encouragement. Until it had all come out, and he slumped back in the chair, exhausted, his face wet with tears.

Then without further speech the old man rose. And taking down a candle from the mantle he showed him to the bedroom, where he gave him his own bed to sleep in. Then with the young man safely at rest, he returned to the fire to think through all that he had heard, and decide what he must do to help him.

Because this same weather-beaten mariner, who was never to be seen making dramatic gestures at the church, or heard to raise his voice in righteous patriotism at the tavern, who himself had so little in the world, was then and there willing to risk it all to restore a single life to fullness. Without being asked, or telling himself that he was good or kind to do so, he felt the simple, organic stirrings of compassion in his aged heart. And expecting no greater reward than the warmth of the feeling itself, he determined to do all he could to guide this lad back to safety and freedom.

Simply put, he had vision enough to see another human soul before him, and courage enough not to turn away. For such was the spirit of his kind.

12

She had found what she sought: a chant to raise the spirits of the dead. In terror at her own resolve, yet no more able to restrain herself than to stop her heart from beating, she put the book beneath her arm, wrapped a thick cloak about her, then lit and lifted the torch that she had found.

The night was still and cold as she stole from the hut, with traces of ghostly mist already forming in the hollows. The moon shone full and hard, dimming the surrounding stars with its halo of pale white.

She made for the Standing Stone, as dry as bone, where the power was strongest, older than the hills themselves. She felt that she moved not of her own accord, but as a puppet upon the strings of some higher (or lower) being. The reading of those dark, soul-splitting words had done its work on her. She moved as if entranced—eyes wide, mind dark and dulled. Only very deep, in the roots of her being, did the heart remain intact; and she realized that no matter how strange the vehicle, or how terrible the consequences, this was a thing which must be done. She must reach out to him with living hands, and in death or in life, calm the tortured spirit of her beloved.

The Standing Stone was just that, an uncarved granite tusk, thrusting up from a high shelf which overlooked the ravine. She approached it slowly, her senses returning. It did not need the reading of ancient lore to make her stand in awe of it, or believe in its dark powers. For this was a place known throughout the countryside, to be wondered at by day, religiously avoided by night. It was said that the ghosts of William Wallace and Mary Stuart could be summoned here by those possessed of the black arts, as well as murdered warriors and chieftains from the grim, violent times before memory.

She trembled at the sight of it, as everything beyond fell away, shrouded by mist and distance. It was as if she stood at the edge of the living world, opening upon the vague and endless sea of Death's Kingdom. Her one desire was to turn and flee, back to the world of daylight and living flesh. And yet she must not only force herself to look upon it, but pass beyond, and standing in its far shadow, to call upon the very darkness from which her spirit palled.

She stood motionless, her resolve wavering before the onslaught of doubts and questions. Was she doing the right thing? Might her actions not only do them both further injury? These thoughts interlaced with a raw, gut-level fear for her own safety.

Yet strong as these forebodings were, there lived inside her something stronger: the love of a single man. The thought of Michael alone and in pain, was more than she could bear. She took the final steps, and stood on the sloping ground just beyond... It.

The ravine opened before her, its steep sides leading down to the flatted heath below: a narrow vale of silvered grass, withered shrubs and speckled stone, here and there marked by solitary trees which rose up from the wreathing fog like pillars in a flood. The same fitful breeze which had carried it from the sea beyond, moved the vapory shroud across the scene in ghostly patterns: here and again clearing an open stage, only to wrap it once more in its cloak of white invisibility.

But this she took in with her eyes only. More acutely than any other sense, she felt the Stone behind her, a glowering menace, an evil force aware of her presence.

She steeled herself to turn and face it. Then braving its deepest shadows, she wedged the torch between it and a smaller stone, half crushed beneath.

And with this action, thrusting stubborn light into a place of darkness, she found the courage needed to perform the grim task ahead. Kneeling in the dank ground with her back against the Stone, she shook off the cold shudder that ran

through her at its touch, and opened the book before her, turning to the ribbon-marked page.

Holding his image ever before her, she began to read aloud the chant.

The words came haltingly at first, unwilling, then stronger, slowly taking hold of her until it seemed another, far older woman spoke through her: that she did not need her eyes to recall the words or sound their meaning. The voice rose and fell.

By the Standing Stone, as dry as bone
Through ancient tales to walk alone
By moonlight stark, to spirits dark
We call to You Their way be shown.

Back from the land, of withered hand
To islands where the living stand
With arms apart, and naked heart
This spell to Thee I do command.

Send spirit forth, by dark stream's course
If Hell itself should be the source
Let Cerberus' gate, not hold his fate
But shatter walls With killing force.

All this she read, and more besides, until her arms seemed to open of their own accord, in the final gesture of invocation. Then with the trembling emotions of a lifetime, she said his name...

Nothing happened.

A slight freshening of the breeze, nothing more. The spell had failed. All her mother's arts were but seeming and superstition. Michael remained on the other side of Death's iron door, unreachable. She fell forward onto the bitter earth, overcome by unquenchable despair...

She heard a sound.

Was it again the wind's mockery of bagpipes, the faintest strain playing upon her mind alone? She listened again. The sound grew stronger, undeniable, moving toward her from the west. Far away it seemed, from the depths of the ravine, which led after many miles to the sea. It played Scotland the Brave, a poignant sound in that dismal place, as she heard in its every note a proud defiance of death and darkness. She got to her feet, and moving to the very edge of the shelf, peered intently into the wavering vale below.

The sound continued to come on, nearer and nearer, then suddenly ceased, now surely no more than two hundred yards away. She strained her every sense for sight or sound of him, in vain. She began to despair once more, until it occurred to her that perhaps the torchlight held his troubled spirit at bay. Quickly she returned to the Stone, and forcing out the beacon, rolled its lighted knob against the hissing turf until it sputtered and went out. Then moving back to the ledge she rejoined her vigil, prepared to wait all night.

But she did not have to. Almost at once she perceived the figure of a man, moving slowly through the fog. It came on steadily, down the center of the vale.

Now hidden by the mist, now clearly outlined: a kilted Scottish soldier, pale and weary, wandering it seemed to her, without direction or hope. Her heart leapt inside her, reaching out to him with all that she was.

The curly head was raised at last, still vague with distance. The figure stopped, as if sensing some presence... then turned and looked up at her. A face once handsome and strong. His name was instantly upon her lips, as in fear and ecstasy she made to cry out to him.

Suddenly from behind her came a whoosh and swell of blazing light, and a harsh voice crying harsh words. She whirled to see her mother outlined in fire and

smoke against the blood-red backdrop of the Stone. Then pushing past her, the witch hurled a flaming brand into the abyss.

"In se nama Dagda!" she cried in anger. "Baek wealcan sawol, to Helan!" A great billowing fog engulfed the place where the figure had stood. And when it cleared again, he was gone.

Still her mother stood poised, waited expectantly, a blackened rib held in her uplifted hand.

But when the apparition did not reappear, slowly she lowered it... and the look of wild fear passed from her eyes. She trembled, and spat upon the ground. Then with a sharp look at the girl, she turned to extinguish the swift bonfire she had made.

Then without a word, she took the sobbing girl by the wrist and led her away. Utterly devastated, Mary did not resist.

Only when they were safely shut up inside the lair did the old woman give vent to her fear and vexation.

"By all the gods, girl... you shall do no such thing again! Did you want to lose your own soul as well?"

"I don't care!" cried her daughter sullenly. "I don't care."

And with the utterance of these words, rising as they did from her long suppressed darker nature, something precious and fine collapsed inside her: the will to live, and keep giving. She moved listlessly to sit before the fire, not for warmth, but only to turn her back on the endless pain and disillusion of this world.

All was lost, and darkness overwhelmed her.

13

The next morning she was just the same, sitting silently before the fire, with unseeing eyes gazing into it, thinking not of light but of darkness. Her mother, who had slept little and worried much, offered her tea and breakfast, which she refused. She asked her then to build up the fire, to which the girl consented, though not for any reason that her mother might have hoped. And this solitary action, which she repeated several times that day, was all the movement that the woman could rouse from her.

When evening came, she asked her daughter why she stared into the coals.

Mary answered simply, without emotion. "I am watching the fire die. Like a human life, no matter how many times it is built up, the end is always the same. And when the will to feed it is gone, there is death." With this she turned slowly towards her mother, adding with grim satisfaction. "Yes. At least there is Death."

Then she turned away again, the faint smile dissolving into the stone coldness of her face.

The witch spent the whole of that first day, and much of the second, reading through her books of lore, trying to find some spell or charm that would cure her daughter's malady. Because to her understanding, she had been touched by some

dark spirit of the Netherworld, or perhaps possessed in some measure by the Stone itself.

But what ailed the girl was not the work of witchcraft, and there was nothing in her mother's books or box of talismans that would move or affect her in the least.

What the old woman could not see, because it was too close to her own experience, was that Mary had given herself heart and soul to a man she could never have, the only man that she would ever love; and without him all life seemed but a mockery of hope. There was no longer any reason to live, nor did she wish to find one. And so she had resolved to die, death being the only comfort she could see on the black horizon of her ravaged world.

Her mother put her to bed on that second night, to which she consented only because it was less troublesome than to refuse. And whether she slept at all the woman could not have said, for in the morning she lay exactly as she had before, hands at her sides, staring blankly at some fixed point above her. Again she would not eat, and rising, drank a little water only because her throat felt dry and uncomfortable.

But as the third morning wore on, the young girl began to show signs of agitation, as if recalling some unpleasant fact that interfered with her sullen wish to die. All at once she stood up from the chair, pulling the hair at her temples and groaning angrily. The old woman, glad for any sign of life, stepped closer.

"What is it, Mary?"

"The fool! The fool!" she raged, pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

"Who?"

"Stephen Purceville! Today we are to, *Ride again, and make our love in the fields.* Oh, if he only knew how I detest him now!"

As if some horrid music box which played always the same restless dirge, the lid of it thus lifted, her mother's long obsession for vengeance once more began to work inside her. Even then.

"You must be careful, lass. If you tell him as much there could be trouble, and not the swift and easy death you seem to long for. If you truly wish to hurt him—"

Mary cut her short with a swift, knifing motion of her arm. Upon hearing these words an intolerable irritation had come over her at the stupidity of these sorry puppets: her mother, and the Purcevilles both young and old, playing out their little games of lust and hate, as if they mattered at all in the end. How could they fail to see that everything, everything ended in death and ruin? All their petty desires were less than meaningless; they were absurd.

But this was not what lay at the heart of her unease. For at the thought of her half-brother, and of the very real threat he posed, the will to survive had once more begun to assert itself inside her. She was afraid. And this simple, undeniable impulse—the desire to avoid pain and danger—tormented her now because it would not be suppressed. Death she did not fear. But thoughts of trying to fight off her brother's oblivious, self-satisfied advances, the possibility of rape or imprisonment if she refused him... These she could not face.

"I've got to get out of here!" she said suddenly, as if herself a puppet whose strings had been violently jerked. And rushing to the door before her mother could stop her, she broke from the hut and began running wildly down the path, her one

desire to reach its root and turn aside before Stephen Purceville could arrive there, trapping her in the narrow pass.

She did not know how narrowly she succeeded. For no sooner had she reached and taken the track west, climbing a shallow hill and then dropping again out of sight, than the expectant officer on his panting steed arrived at the meeting of ways, and began climbing steadily the final stretch to the hut, and the long-awaited rendezvous with his imagined lover.

14

The man called Jamie spent the night, and the two days following, at the cottage of the fisherman. This had in no way been planned. But he had woken trembling and feverish, and with a deep cough that would not be silenced. It was as if only now, when it had reached a safe haven, that his body could tell him of its many ills and deprivations.

The old man insisted that he remain in bed, at least until the high fever broke.

As to thoughts of his own safety, he had none; and with the heavy overcast and clinging fog he deemed it prudent, and a necessary risk, to keep him from the cold and damp of out-of-doors. The younger man at length agreed, not because it seemed wise, but because it was inevitable. He had no choice. Once so healthy and robust, he now felt a dull ache in the very marrow of his bones, and a chill that would not be abated. So he remained in bed, and with forced patience, passed the two hard days.

But on the succeeding morning—perhaps two hours before Mary fled in panic from the hut—he felt again the deep restlessness which had troubled him three days before. Something was wrong. Someone dear to him was in danger. He could not have said how he knew this; but know it he did, and resolved then and there to pay call upon those he loved. Though he was still far from well, and fully realized the risk, this instinctive sense would not be overruled. He now found it as impossible to remain in the cottage as it had previously been to leave.

He thanked the fisherman for all that he had done, and promised to send word to him, or come himself, as soon as he knew that all was well. And he promised to be careful. The veteran was concerned: his experience had taught him the inadvisability of haste. But seeing the intensity of the younger man's face he could only wish him well, and after he had gone, say a silent prayer for him in his own fashion.

The wheels of fate were turning. Events were in God's hands now.

* * * * *

Mary wandered aimlessly across the high plateau toward the sea, feeling lost and miserable. As she walked she watched the fog rise slowly and evaporate, along with all faith in herself. Vaguely she told herself that she would never again live with her mother in the dark, dismal hut, where everything was smoke and confusion. But even this seemed a wavering resolve. How could she promise herself anything, when she had been so weak...

A single tear broke from the stillness of her face, as she realized that in all the haste of her flight she had nonetheless seized the heavy cloak from its peg by the door, the same which she now wrapped about her. She cried because this instinctive action showed her, more even than the painful workings of her mind, that a part of her still wanted to live. As much as she had loved Michael, and loathed the thought of a world without him. . .still, she desired life. It was in that moment an unbearable anguish.

She heard hoofbeats approaching from the west. This did not at first seem to register, except perhaps for a dim realization that it could not be the man she feared, who would have to approach from the east—behind her.

The plateau had gradually sunk and narrowed, until now it was little more than a rough gully between the two rocky shoulders which pressed upon it. It occurred to her that the riders, still hidden by the rise and fall of the track ahead, would soon be upon her, and that there was nowhere to hide. But the same nightmare logic that says not to fear, it is only a dream, told her now that this could not be what in fact it was: a dangerous meeting in a place far from help. It all seemed so inevitable. And she was tired of fighting.

Two horsemen appeared on the track below her as she reached the crown of the rise, which occurred at the very point where the opposing walls were highest, rising in serrated levels to a height of sixty feet, several yards to either side of her.

The riders were dressed in red.

She looked quickly about her for a sheltering shadow or place to hide, as all the warnings that she had been raised on began to torment her. But the noon sun was hidden by a cloud, as if it had not the heart to watch: there were no shadows. And they had seen her.

The two men rode easily, lazily in their fine English saddles. Young cavalymen, they had been sent to investigate reports that one of the escaped prisoners believed to be in the area had been sighted.

But if their superiors placed a high importance on the capture of these elusive wretches, clearly they did not. For them it was a tedious duty; and without their captain to oversee them they were merely pretending to search, killing time and half looking for trouble. Like much of the English military of that time they were not volunteers, but had been pressed into service as an alternative to prison. They were neither dedicated nor high-minded, and had been assigned to this remote desert (as they thought of it) because they were fit for little else. In fact, they were hooligans, representing not the best of their country, but the worst. As for compassion, they had little enough for their own kind. For the kin of these stubborn Highland fools, they had none.

So when they saw the girl it was not a question of what they wanted from her, but only, would there be anyone to witness the act? Their eyes searched ahead and behind, to either side, then fixed resolutely on the girl.

Mary observed all of this, but stood rooted to the spot in fear and disbelief.

Surely they could not want her like this, pale and distraught. Surely they had some conscience. The two riders stopped just in front of her, addressing each other as if she did not exist.

"What d'ya think?" said the first in a heavy cockney. He was a smallish, heavy-set man with a nondescript face and yellow teeth. "Would be a fine catch, and no

mistake." His companion, a lean, dour-looking man with drooping red moustaches, did not at first reply, but only continued to stare at the object in question.

"I think," he said at length, dismounting. "That I want you to hold my horse."

The smaller man laughed harshly, and spurred his own steed forward to take hold of the reins.

"Just be sure ya save some for me," he said. "I don't fancy ridin' a dead horse."

The red-haired man began to advance, as Mary backed away in rising horror.

"Please," she said in a pathetic voice. "Don't do this." But her words had no effect. The man seized her by the arms, and after a moment's indecision, threw her to the ground.

And then he was upon her, tearing at the buttons of her dress, pressing her body hard against the stony track. Writhing in terror, Mary let out a piercing scream. The man lifted his hand to strike her. But the blow never fell.

A shadow flashed across her vision, as an indistinct shape flew down from the rocks above. There was the thud of impact, as the man on top of her was torn aside. Two men wrestled on the ground beside her. The one, in rough clothes that fit him badly, quickly gained the upper hand, pinning the other beneath him. He raised a long knife in his hand, and with a savage cry, drove the blade home.

But an instant later there came a shot from behind, and the prisoner fell forward across the man that he had stilled. The second cavalryman, still mounted, had drawn his pistol as soon as he regained his senses, and waited only for a clear shot at the Highlander.

In the confusion he had lost his grip on the other's horse, which bolted at the sound. And taking quick stock of the situation, the cavalryman seemed to feel much the same panic. For he too rode away, as if the Devil rode behind him. His hoofbeats died slowly in the distance.

Recovering somewhat from the shock, Mary rose and went to the crumpled form of her deliverer, to see if anything could be done. The ball had pierced his back, but perhaps...

Raising his upper body carefully, she drew him clear of the other. Then kneeling, she slowly laid him down, causing the fair, curly head to loll weakly into her lap. She let out a gasp as a familiar face looked up at her, and said her name with a smile.

"My Mary."

It was James Talbert, her cousin, and companion of her youth. And though he lay dying, there was yet a look of strained happiness on his worn, still boyish face.

"James!" she choked through her tears. "You should have just let them... Oh.

Don't die!"

"Hush, my girl. I don't mind." His words were quiet but distinct. "You don't know it---" His face clouded with pain, and for a time he was unable to speak.

"You've done me a kindness," he said finally. "You've given my death meaning."

With this he stiffened, and gave a convulsive shudder. She feared he was already gone; but after a pause the blue eyes opened again, and he spoke. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything," she wept. "Anything."

"Kiss me, Mary." Brushing the tear-stained hair from her face, she did as he asked.

"Thank you, love... You're so very sweet... Too bad you're in love with that other one, eh?" He tried to wink at her, but his face was suddenly changed, as crestfallen as the moment before it had been triumphant. His muscles convulsed from the pain of his mortal wound. "Kiss me, Mary. I'm gone to a better world."

Trembling, she bent once more to press her lips to his. And when she rose again, he was gone.

"No. Dear God, please! It should have been me," she sobbed. "It should have been me."

She rocked him slowly back and forth, for the second time in her young life crying the bitter tears of a loved one lost. A heavy silence reigned about her, and the birds in the heath would not sing.

15

So it was that Stephen Purceville found her. He had knocked twice on the door of the hut, with growing impatience until, receiving no answer to his summons, he kicked it in. There he had found her gone, the place empty but for a filthy hag who hid her face and said nothing.

Yet for all his indifference and haste, the momentary glimpse of her eyes had struck a chord of memory inside him, though he was far too angry to puzzle it out.

His woman (he thought of everything he desired as his) had betrayed him, gone off, when she knew that he wanted to see her.

Riding off in a storm of emotion, he came across Sergeant Billings as he rejoined the main track, who with a scared face spoke of ambush and treachery, and pointed back along the way he had come. Angered still further by the intrusion of duty (and reality) upon his romantic dreams, he forced out of the man what information he could, then bluntly ordered him to be silent, and follow.

So the two rode west together, and found her still in the same attitude, holding the body as she would a sick child. She did not at first seem to hear them approach, till with a vehemence which startled them both, the young Purceville screamed at her:

"What is the meaning of this!"

Mary turned, as if not understanding what was wanted of her. Her eyes focused on him with an effort, and she replied slowly, in a voice that seemed to come from far away: from the bottom of a well.

"Two men are dead, who perhaps desired life. And one who desired death still lives. What meaning would you have?"

The blankness of her face astonished him. For a brief instant he felt something akin to genuine horror. What could have happened to transform the lithe, innocent creature of so few days before? But the thought could not penetrate deeply, for now the smaller man had begun to speak.

"You see, Captain, it's just as I told you." He spoke rapidly, eyes wide and shifting with the obvious lie. "She 'ates us. Set a trap for us she did, acting all seductive like. Then her man jumps down from the rocks—"

"You shut your mouth!" cried Purceville bitterly. He had seen Mary's torn dress, and knew how much faith to place in the character of these men. "Get out of here," he said. "Back to the barracks. And God help you when I return."

The small man rode off in haste, but did not go where he was sent. As he struck the high road he turned to the south instead, and fled into obscurity.

The Englishman dismounted and came closer. His face was a study of inner conflict, as rage and compassion warred inside him. Mary had little doubt (nor was she wrong) which side would win.

"Why?" he asked flatly, stopping a few feet away. "Why didn't you wait for me? If you had... none of this would have happened."

The girl slowly lowered the body, then stood to face him. "In the name of God, Stephen, is there any part of you that isn't utterly cruel? Do you think I don't know that?" This was too much. Her patience expired, and she no longer cared for the consequences.

"Am I supposed to feel worse because I also hurt your feelings? Am I supposed to equate that with the death of two men, one of them my cousin? Damn you! If you possessed the least sensitivity you'd have known three days ago there could be nothing romantic between us. And today. If I had thought for one moment that you would listen to reason, and let me explain—"

"What would you explain!" he cried hotly. "That you have been sleeping with a traitor? That you prefer his filthy Scottish bed to mine? That you are a whore, like all the others? Well? Why don't you speak!"

"I am very sorry for you," she said at last. "You are blind, as no man I have ever known. You will never learn, and you will never change." And with that she turned her back on him.

For a single moment he stood transfixed, loving, and at the same time hating... *her*. She knew him as no one else, and had always spoken the truth. But the words she spoke now were not soothing, were not the gentle words of comfort he sought. Instead they burned, like salt on an open wound.

Pure, blind hatred rose up inside him, devouring all else. He seized her by the shoulders, and with the heat of the primal hunger, turned her towards him. If love would not be gratified, then he would at least have lust. For the second time that day, Mary looked into the unseeing eyes of rape. Terror was no longer possible. All she could feel was despair, and pity. This would be the final, unbearable shame for them both.

"Stephen, I beg you. In the name of what you once felt for me, and I for you.

Don't do this. Forgive my hard words. I do not hate you. But this... This can never be."

"Why not? Why can't it?" He pressed her hard against him. "You know you want me." His mouth engulfed hers, then moved greedily to the skin of her throat.

"Stephen, don't . It's not right!" She tried to pull away, but he held her fast. She felt his left hand drag her downward, as his right hand worked to free the remaining buttons.

"Stephen... no!" She was on the ground, and he had flung aside his coat, looming on one knee beside her. Then with a swift movement of both hands he tore open her slip, the widening V of her dress. Still further, till the treasures of her body lay exposed. His mouth was upon her breast, as his hand swept low to engulf her.

"Stephen! For God's sake... I'm your sister!"

He froze instantly, then lifted his head with a jerk. "You're lying."

"No," she said bitterly. "My mother is the widow MacCain. Your father raped her, then sent her away when he found she was with child. Your father... is my father, too." She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest. And the pain in her eyes was more than he could face. Because he knew that it was true.

Then for the first time he seemed to see the bodies, and to realize that they had once been men. And he saw her, his gentle sister, ravaged and distraught by the work of his own hands. He did not feel remorse, which was beyond him. But sorrow he could feel, and even, in that moment, a halting compassion.

"I'm sorry. Mary. I didn't know... There's really nothing more I can say." He rose, shifted uncomfortably, trying to reconcile himself to his actions. It was impossible.

"Is there anything I can do now," he said stiffly. "To make it better."

"No. Just go away."

He turned, and started to leave.

"Wait," she said, half against her will. She could not look at him. "Help me to bury him. Both of them."

He put on his jacket, pawed the ground with his boot. "...I'll need a shovel."

"Ride back to the hut. My mother will give you one." She finally looked up at him, and the tears would not stop. "Please leave now. I'm not that strong."

He remounted slowly, and with one last look at her, rode off. Mary was left to prepare her cousin's body, and to seeping thoughts of death and earth.

When Stephen returned, they buried James Talbert. And then the other, placing stones over the mounds to keep the wolves off. There were no other adornments to give them. And even as they worked, the clouds thickened and turned to rain, as if Nature wept, to see the unending tragedy of Man.

16

"May I take you back to the hut," Stephen said when they had laid the last stone. "I have much on my conscience already. I would see you safely home, at least." He could say no more, nor did she wish him to. They rode back in silence, and in silence they parted.

With silence, too, did she greet her mother, who asked no questions, but only welcomed her with a strange, apologetic smile. Hardly able to notice, let alone dissect the mysterious change in her, Mary shed her wet and tattered garments, then hung her cloak by the fire to dry. As she put on the nightgown the old woman provided she said blankly, and bitterly.

"James Talbert is dead. I must go and tell Anne this evening. Please don't wake me until then." She lay listlessly in the bed, and after a long, empty passage of time, fell asleep. She did not dream.

Her mother returned to her place by the fire, and sat down in a melancholy heap. She felt anxious and utterly lost, without place or purpose in the world.

For a change had in fact taken place in her, with or without her consent. In the troubled hours since her daughter's flight, it had become impossible to think of killing and tearing down. Too clearly did she see, and feel, and remember all the dark, destructive forces that pull the living back to earth, wholly without a woman's schemes. And she felt this to the core of her being, because she knew that she, too, would soon return to dust.

Because her body was at long last giving out. Beside the painful angina which had plagued her since the night of the Stone, she felt in these bitter, infinite hours a dizziness and blurring of vision which she knew to be the forerunner of stroke.

Her daughter had not yet realized her condition, and for this, at least, she was grateful. As her own life inexorably diminished, she found she thought less and less of herself—of the past—and more and more of her daughter's future. This was both painful and sad, because she saw the tragedy of her own life mingling, and becoming one, with Mary's. How similar. Her love for John MacCain—clean, strong, yet ended by untimely death. Then the desperate, animal attraction to a handsome, brutal man who had broken her heart, and crushed the last of her dreams. He was his father's son... Then the emptiness, and finally the horrid, burning hatred of all that still lived, loved, and desired happiness.

Her one hope now, strange as it might have seemed but a few days before, was that the girl might still be young enough to heal, and wise enough to seek that healing in the light of life, rather than the darkness of revenge, which had so fruitlessly swallowed the remnant of her years.

Mary woke to find a fresh dress and undergarments waiting at the foot of the bed. After she had dressed, her mother gave her tea and porridge, and to her surprise, did not try to dissuade her from the long journey to the faded cottage.

Both of them knew it to be a dreary, and possibly dangerous task. But both, for different reasons, also knew it to be essential. Wrapping the cloak about her Mary went to the door, determined not to look back. Still, something made her turn.

"I may not be coming back for a time," she said. "You understand that?"

"Yes," replied the old woman, in a voice wholly lacking its former strength. "Will you make me one promise before you go? Only make it, and I will rest easier."

"What is it?"

"Promise me... that you won't try to take your own life. That you will not let the bitterness fester inside you like an unclean wound, turning slowly to the poison of hate. Will you give me your word?"

Mary looked back at her, confused.

"You have nothing to fear, I'm sure. I should have thought my weak character well known to you by now, and to have removed any such concern. Twice I have set a hard resolve, and twice failed. I doubt if I should ever find the courage."

"Listen to me, Mary." Her mother spoke now so earnestly, and with a desperate entreaty so unlike her, that despite the numb lethargy into which her heart had sunk, Mary felt a qualm of fear on her behalf.

"It is not weakness," said the woman, "to desire life, and to respect it enough..."

Tears gathered in the pale, aged eyes that had lost their hard luster. "I fear I have done you a grievous ill. Forgive me!" And she hid her face, ashamed.

And for all the pain this woman had caused her, all the mother's love withheld for so many years, Mary found herself unable to return the injury, now that the chance had come. She went to the old woman slowly, took down the trembling hands, and kissed her on the forehead.

"You are what your life has made you. Of course I forgive you. And I'll make your promise, if you'll make me one in return." Her mother nodded helplessly.

"Will you promise to rest, and be gentle with yourself, until I can send a doctor back to check on you?"

..."Yes."

"All right, then. Let me help you to bed, then I'll build up the fire one last time."

Her mother was unable to reply. And having done what she said, Mary left her with those words.

Margaret MacCain died three hours later, as a black curtain descended slowly across the field of her vision. A single tear escaped her. She said a silent prayer for her daughter.

And then she, too, was gone.

Mary walked on through the bitter night, the faltering torch she held like a fretted candle in the depths of the dark. The rain had stopped, and the ground frozen solid. Each footstep clumped painfully against the hard, unyielding earth.

Her mind was so numbed with pain and loss that she found she could not even think. Time seemed to stop dead in its tracks just to mock her.

She continued.

Passing without fear the Standing Stone, she regarded it now in blank wonder, that she could ever have thought it more than a broken and projecting bone of the lifeless earth. It fell behind her plodding footsteps, an impotent slab of nothingness.

A wolf cried out in the distance, and she did not even care. Right foot, left foot, followed one another in mindless, meaningless rhythm. All was dead for her.

Nothing lived, nothing moved, nothing breathed. There was only this one last task to perform, and then oblivion.

At long, impossible length her weary footsteps took her along a familiar path, past a silent dell wreathed in scrub oak and maple. White crosses of stone shone dully in the moonlight, in a hollow she had once held sacred. A name was spoken in her mind, and in distant memory a hand caressed her face. She felt a moment of profound sadness, for a love that had died. But even that lost sorrow faded, till she knew that it was truly over.

Up the shallow hill to the cottage. She turned the knob of the thrice-familiar back door, and entered. Through the kitchen, into the passage to the main room, where a fire was burning brightly. Her aunt looked up as she entered, from the same armchair in which she had left her. A man stood beside her, with eyes so deep and piercing...

She collapsed to the floor. Michael James Scott lifted her in his trembling arms, and carried her to his mother's bed.

PART II

The Fortress.

17

Mary felt something cool being pressed against her forehead, and at the same time a warmth and lightness of being for which she could in no way account.

Remembering the vision she had seen of him—was it days, hours, moments before?—she opened her eyes slowly, afraid of waking from the blissful dream of his return, which could not possibly be real.

Yet the first thing she saw as they focused in the gentle candlelight, was the same beloved face, neither shrouded nor ghostly nor pale. It had aged, become more serious. But it was still of living flesh, still shared the same world as her own. He sat leaning across her on the bed, with softened, loving eyes taking in her every movement. His arms were spread to either side of her, within reach of her hands. And feeling again the swoon of emotion and disbelief, she caught at them quickly. Her fingers encircled his wrists, and he did not fade away.

Again he pressed the cloth lightly to her forehead. Then with a tenderness and swelling of the heart that erased in one moment the imprisoned hell of the past three years, he bent down and kissed her gently.

"Stay, Mary. It's your Michael, in the flesh, and he'll not leave you again." Her eyes closed hard, and the tears that flowed from them were an anguish and an ecstasy for which no words exist.

"Hold me," was all she could say. "Just hold me." He raised her up and crushed her to him, his face as wet as hers.

"Dear God, I love you." And again he kissed her, long and full. But then he drew back, and a dark shadow clouded his features, as if recalling some barrier which stood between them still.

"What is it?" she asked, terrified.

"Forgive me," he said. "I know you're glad to see me... and I have no right to ask." Their eyes met, and there was such astonished pain in her gaze... "Do you still love him?" he whispered.

"Do I still love who?"

"The Englishman."

"Michael! Whoever said that I did?"

"...but your letter, the day I left to join our troops. The one you put in my pack, explaining—"

"Michael, look at me." He did, as bewildered as she. "I have never loved anyone but you. I never could. And I wrote you no such letter, then or otherwise. The only

Englishman I know is my half-brother, and if in the whole of my lifetime I can learn not to hate him, I will deem it a blessing from Heaven."

He fell back further still, as if it was she who had returned from the dead. The question of who, then, had written the letter, hardly occurred to him. Only one thing mattered. Against all hope... she loved him too. A tortured groan escaped him, and his face so convulsed with emotion that he could only hide it in shame against the coverlet.

But slowly the paroxysm passed, and he felt loving fingers caressing his hair, and whispering words of comfort. "Michael," she said, as he drew himself up, exhausted. "It must have been my mother who gave you the letter, part of a long, bitter plot against Lord Purceville. She needed my help, and wanted you out of the way. Please forgive her. She harbored such hatred against him, that it made her blind to all else... But that is in the past." She tried to smile, as he nodded his understanding. "You know," she said. "I have a few questions for you, too."

He put a finger to her lips. "Soon, but not now. Let us have what remains of this night, at least, free from sorrow and danger. Let us have each other."

At that moment there came a light knocking at the door, and Anne Scott entered the room. Her face was so softened, and beaming with such reborn faith that Mary hardly recognized it. Her unbound hair formed a loop of pale gold upon the shoulder of the nightdress, and she looked years younger than either could remember seeing her.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, as if this were not her home, but theirs. "If my son will give a doting mother one last embrace, I will leave the two of you in peace. I fancy I'll sleep in Mary's room tonight, and give up my chambers to you."

"Truly, Anne? Would it be all right?"

"Listen to me, Mary. God married the two of you long ago. And in this moment I'm so happy, so grateful..." She faltered, and her eyes glistened. "My son is given back to me, whom I thought to be dead. Do you think I can't share him, this one night, with the woman he loves, and the girl I raised up from a child? Please, Michael, before I make a fool of myself. Kiss me, then send me off to bed."

He rose, but not more quickly than she. Mary embraced her first, like a schoolgirl, then stood aside as mother and son said their affectionate good-night.

"In the morning hard choices await us," said the woman, addressing them both.

"But for now, let us thank God. Let us thank Him." She was blinded by tears, and turned away. Michael watched her go, then closed the door softly behind her.

"In the morning I shall have to give her sad news," said the girl, remembering her purpose. "And perhaps it will grieve you as well."

"What is it, Mary?" And despite his own assurances, he felt that he must know.

"Tell me now, and let us have done with dark surprises..."

"Michael. Your friend and mine. James Talbert is dead."

He was silent for a time, then asked simply.

"How?"

"Two men attacked me on the road west of my mother's hut." She thought it best not to add that they were English. As it was he came forward and took her by the shoulders, with a look of sudden anger and concern.

"Attacked you? Are you all right? They didn't—" She shook her head quickly, emphatically.

"No. James saw to that. He killed the one... then was shot in the back by the other, who rode away." She looked at him imploringly. "I'm so terribly sorry. I feel as if it's my fault..." He held her close to him, and closed his eyes.

"No, my girl," he said at length. "It's not your fault, and no more than I expected.

I don't know if I can explain this to you. Here. Sit you down, and let me wrap the coverlet about me. I'm afraid I'm not quite well."

She did as he asked, and studied this new Michael as he spoke. He had changed both physically and spiritually, though there had always been another side of him, seeming at times so serious and worn that she could find no trace of the hardy, boisterous youth she had once known.

And even as he spoke of the hardship and sorrow of another, her woman's instinct read his own tale between the lines. And seeing his pain, she determined to learn fully of the scars and afflictions he bore, that she might nurse him again to health and ease of mind.

"James had a rough go of it in prison, as did we all. But for him the more so, because he could never master his pride and fierce temper. He didn't know when to back down, and just survive. Because of this he was often singled out for punishment, as an example to the rest. Punishment in that place... took various forms. But it always ended with the Cellar, a cold and solitary cell in the ancient dungeon that lay beneath our castle prison.

"For weeks on end... he was caged there without light or hope, like an animal.

Each return to the light of day saw him more ill, and more distracted. But it never once brought him closer to submission. Towards the end, his feverish mental state had become so acute that our captors thought of sending him to an asylum. This, until it was learned that he had contracted the shakes,⁽¹⁷⁻²⁾ which would sooner or later carry him off of their own accord.

"It is a wonder that he lived to see the escape, let alone survived our long flight across the countryside. What a bloody hell that was. Stealing food, horses when we could get them, riding or walking the endless miles by night, hiding out like thieves and murderers by day. All in the land of our birth, and the home that we had fought for. After what we had already been through, I don't know how he endured it. I, at least, had thoughts of you, though I had lost all hope of your love.

He had nothing but fever and chills, and a strength that grew less each day."

"My God. Michael. Did he know about the letter, the one you thought I wrote?"

"Yes, love. We'd been together through so much, and were now thrown into such a desperate pass... There could be no secrets between us. But he loved you, as cousin and friend, and never held it against you."

"Then he died thinking... that I was in love with those who did this to you. Oh, it is horrible."

"Easy, lass. His pain is over." Again they embraced, taking that last human comfort against young and tragic death. Then Michael began to pace again, both to warm himself, and to finish what he must say. For he, too, carried a burden of guilt and remorse.

"As I said, it is a wonder that he survived it. But some last obsession drove him: whether hope or madness, I could never say. He was determined to return to the home of his fathers, and perform some last act of heroism." He paused. "There is something else I haven't told you. Something very painful to me."

"What is it, Michael?"

He could not face her, as if she were some part of himself which he had shamed. And the look of self-reproach that she had long known in him, returned with a force she had not yet seen.

"It was a horror for me to watch his decline, his hopeless battle in the stockade.

Because we are so much alike, and because I felt... I often felt that he made my mistakes for me. That I learned, and survived, only because of him. Many is the time that my own temper was about to explode, to my injury, and possible undoing... But it was always James who struck the guard first, or raised his voice in anger at the outrage we all felt, but lacked the courage to act upon.

"It is a terrible thing to think that he died for that courage, and that because of my cowardice I live. Seeing the black end to which we must all come, still I shunned the fight. After the first year... I only turned the other cheek, again and again. I told myself that I had to survive, just keep trying and hoping. But survival becomes a poor excuse, when pride is lost.

"It will be many years," he concluded, "before I can look myself in the face when I think of James Talbert."

"Why?" she asked, in deepest earnest. "Because you desired life instead of death? Because you saw the futility of resistance, and chose not to follow him into the grave? For I tell you now, and from the bottom of my heart, that if you had not lived, and come back to me... my own sorry tale could not have gone much further.

"And what of your mother? Do you have any idea what her life has been like, without you? I will never understand. Why do men call it a virtue to die, to leave bereft the ones they love, and a weakness to return to them, and give meaning and substance to their lives?"

"Perhaps that is unfair," she continued. "I have seen in the years of your absence just how bitter, how unanswerable sorrow can be. And I know that nothing is ever that simple. I only want you to know that this pain, this scar, I understand as well as you. I have felt the same remorse, the same bludgeoning sense of guilt. Until tonight.

"Do you know what he said to me, as he lay dying in my arms? 'You have given my death meaning.' He performed that last act of heroism, Michael. He may have saved my life." Her voice faltered. "And if what you say is true, then he also helped deliver my love from the depths of the darkness. And to me, his name shall always be thrice blessed.

"Hold me, Michael, please. Don't ever let me go. Dear God!"

"My only love, I promise you that. With all my soul, I promise you that."

They put aside all further talk until the morning, and made their bed together for the first time. Michael was too ill, and she herself too weary, to make love. And without any words this was understood between them. They found joy and solace instead in the slow, gentle caress many lovers never feel, because they do not first feel love. Their passion would come when the skies above them were less dark, and when the fruit was ripe on the tree. Not before.

They slept far into the overcast morning. And when they rose a further bond had been established between them, that no earthly trial could ever put asunder.

He was a man, and she was his woman.

The Lord Henry Purceville, Governor of MacPherson Castle and the Northern Garrison, awoke in the worst possible humor. He had quarreled bitterly with his son the night before, after being informed that one of his cavalrymen had died in disgrace, and another deserted rank in consequence. His head throbbed from the excesses of food and drink that had become habitual with him; the whore that lay sleeping beside him (his mistress) stank of his own corruption; and the prisoners he had been charged to find, in the most demanding terms, still eluded him. In the chill of early morning, he felt every day of the fifty-three years he bore.

Of all these circumstances, the quarrel with his son troubled him most deeply.

It was not so much the fact of a dispute, all too common between them, as the disturbing revelation which had come from it.

Because no man, no matter how far he has strayed from the path of wisdom, wants to appear low and cowardly in the eyes of his son. And no man, retaining from childhood the slightest memory of loving female attention, can wantonly desecrate the altar of motherhood without a latent stab of conscience. Yet both these things had now risen up to haunt him, in the form of a daughter he had never seen.

If the bastard child had been a boy (as he had vaguely imagined, when he thought of it at all), the problem might have been more easily reconciled and acted upon, one way or the other. But a young woman, and still more, a young woman who had evidently sparked some feeling of affection in his son—the only person he cared for in the world—this was far more complicated.

Sending his mistress to the floor with a savage kick, he bellowed for his servants, ordered her dismissed, then sent for his son to learn the particulars of the MacCain girl. He was a man of action, and action would be taken.

One way or the other.

It was the widow Scott who woke them. A premonition of danger had come to her, and whether real or imagined, she would take no chances so long as her son remained a wanted man. She knocked on their door as the mantle clock struck eleven, and asked them to dress quickly and come out, that they might formulate precautions in the event that mounted soldiers, or other unwanted strangers appeared at the house.

When the two emerged and sat down to breakfast, and again as they moved to sit by the fire to hold counsel, the woman was struck by the seriousness of both faces. Caution and determination she expected from her son, who had spoken to her the day before of the hardships and dangers he had already faced, and must face again, until he won his way to true freedom.

But Mary seemed to understand as well as he the risks and perils of their position, and acted not at all the happy, naive bride-to-be. And now, as Michael built up the fire and drew the curtains tight, she found that the girl would not even look at her, would not return her questioning gaze.

"Mary? What is it, girl, what's wrong?" Michael, who now returned to stand before her, intervened.

"Mother," he said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder. "My fears for James Talbert have been realized. He died yesterday, defending those he loved. He has been given Christian burial, and as soon as may be, we will place a stone over the grave. I'm sorry."

The woman looked searchingly into his face, then lowered her head and wept silently. But when she raised it again, though her eyes still glistened, their look was firm and determined.

"I will notify my brother tonight. It will be hard for him, and for his wife, because he meant as much to them... Nay, do not try to comfort me. I am a proud Scottish woman, and not rendered helpless in my grief. The times are hard, and the living must look to their own devices.

"That is why we are here," she went on. "Painful as it may be, we must now turn our attention to our own precaution. We must be prepared for the worst. We must vow to protect your union to the last. And if it comes to it, you must be willing to sacrifice my safety for your own. Do not argue with me, Michael! I have had a full life, thank God, for all its latter hardship. I am determined that you shall have the same. The blood of Scott and Talbert, our family, must endure."

Having said this, she put one hand to the other, and slowly removed her wedding ring. She then placed it solemnly in her son's hand. No further explanation was needed.

"Thank you, Mother. It means a great deal to me."

Michael returned to stand by his betrothed, who looked up at him in awe and astonishment, feeling for the first time the full import of what was happening between them. They were to be man and wife, as surely, and unalterably, as he now stood before her.

"Give me your hand, Mary." She did. "With this ring, on the day of November 2, 1749, I pledge to you my life, in the eyes of God and man. Mary. Will you have me as your husband?"

She nodded fiercely, then all at once burst into tears.

"You remember then," he added gently, "that this is your seventeenth birthday as well? I have not forgotten. It is the date I set long ago, when you were but a child, to speak openly of my love for you. I tell you now, if you did not already know it, that you have been my beacon and guiding star, the hope which I held fast to my heart, when all others deserted me. I love you, Mary, with every drop of my mortal blood. I'll love you in this world, and if there is a God, then surely I will love you in the next."

He kissed her, long and full. Then began to pace, as if to master his own emotions.

"All right then," he said, moving still. "Our safety.

"The immediate danger—that of a sudden search—has already been addressed by my mother and myself. Our good steward, as the times grew dark, had the foresight to install a trap door with a small, stone-lined cellar beneath it. It has been checked, and with minor repairs, put in good working order. The cellar itself has been furnished with blankets, food and water. This occupied the better part of yesterday afternoon, the first of my return. I had determined to go in search of you

this morning, when fortunately for both of us (I am still far from well, and had risked the daylight once already), you came to me first.

"So far, until we've heard your story, I remain the principal danger to us all. If trouble does come, I can be hidden away in thirty seconds time. The door is here."

He rolled back the threadbare carpet. "And the latch, here." He bent down and lifted the square trap on its hinges. When he let it down again, except by close scrutiny the wooden floor seemed of a piece, the door itself invisible. He replaced the carpet and came towards her, seeming calmer.

"You see, my girl, Anne and I have already had a chance to talk. From what she told me of her meeting with young Purceville—and I expect that for my sake she did not tell all—I wonder if you are not in danger as well. We need to know fully who our enemies are, or are likely to be, and who can be trusted to come to our aid. I have one ally, a fisherman from the village of Kroe, and the beginnings of a plan, though it is still far from ripe. The first step, as it must always be, is survival. Can you tell us then, in as much detail as possible, what has happened in the time since you left the cottage?"

"Will you tell me one thing first?" she asked. "Forgive me, Michael, but after all I've been through, as you will soon hear... It would put my mind very much at rest, if you would tell me..." Her face betrayed a deep, lingering fear of the Night.

"Who, if not yourself, lies in the grave beneath your stone?"

"It is you who must forgive me. I should have told you sooner." He took her hand, and held it firmly. "It is no wraith who stands before you, and no one has raised me from the dead.

"I can't be certain, but I believe it to be a man of my regiment. He was about the same height and build as myself, with roughly similar features. Poor beggar. The only name I ever heard him called was Jack. He was one of the younger lads, and shivering so dreadfully on the morning of the Battle—from cold and fear alike—that I gave him my coat, his being tattered, and far too light to serve. It's hard to believe to look at me now, wrapped up as for a winter storm, and pacing like an animal just to warm myself. But I was never cold in those days, as you'll recall."

He gave a bitter laugh, then shook his head, as if to drive away the feeling.

"Looking back, I guess I was luckier than some. A ball grazed my head very early in the fighting, and I knew nothing more, until I found myself being dragged away by two English infantry... What is it, Mary? What have I said to upset you?"

"They dragged you to a grove of dark trees! You were dazed and pale, but still they pulled at you fiercely, as if to throw you to the ground and run you through."

"How on earth did you know that?"

"I saw it in my dream! I thought I was witnessing your death. Oh, Michael, I've been so afraid!" It was some time before he could calm her enough to give voice to his own bewilderment.

"It's all right, now. It's over. But the strange truth is..." He hesitated, not wanting to upset her further. "I thought it was the end for me as well, though they only took me to stand with the other prisoners. That day, and especially those first moments when I regained consciousness, have woven themselves in and out of my nightmares ever since. I don't understand. How could you have known?"

Surprisingly, it was the widow Scott who shed light on this first part of the mystery. "I've heard it said that twins, or merely siblings who have been close

since childhood, can be miles apart, after a separations of years, and suddenly know when the other is ill or in danger. The two of you, growing up as brother and sister, were every bit as close. And in some ways you shared a bond that was closer still, because you were in love.

"I once heard you, Mary, cry out `Wolf!' in your sleep, only to learn the next day that Michael had had a terrible dream, in which he was being torn apart by wolves. I thought it unnatural, and an ill omen, at the time. Now I do not. There is obviously a deep spiritual link between you, such as I felt at times with my own husband. It is not for us to question God's gifts," she concluded, "but only to use them as well and honestly as we can."

"That is why I came when I did," the man confirmed. "I knew that you were hurting and afraid. Somehow I knew."

"But the man in your grave," Mary persisted. "You gave another man your coat. . . I remember they would not let me see the body. But surely that was not enough, of itself, to mistake him for you."

"I'm afraid I must take the blame for that," said the woman sadly. "The body, when it was brought to me for identification, was so mangled by grapeshot... the face nothing but a bloody pulp... that I'm ashamed to say I lost my self-control."

Knowing that Michael's papers had been found on him, I went into such a swoon of grief... Our poor countrymen who brought him could only assume that he was, in fact, my son. The coffin was brought and sealed, and the next day we buried him, along with all my hopes.

"I was trying to protect you, Mary, and was far too devastated to think clearly, or to search for further proofs. His hair and features, what could still be seen of them, were enough to complete the illusion. I suppose that in after times some doubt of it crept back to me. But as the months turned into years, and brought no word, I despaired. The only defense I can make, is that the pain of not knowing was greater still... I could not ask myself, or those around me, to bear it any longer."

There was silence. And then, without prompting, the young woman knew that the time had come to tell her tale. The spirits of the Night, and the shadows of Fear, must not be allowed to dwell inside her, but must be held forth in the hard light of day. She was afraid, and many times in the telling felt the pain of it too great to bear. But as Michael had done in the hearing of a wise man of the sea, so Mary now poured out the cup of her grief, not asking for pity, or answers, but only speaking the words that would not lie still.

And when she had finished, Michael was there beside her, and her own flesh still lived. Her eyes, which had misted and looked into places dark and unfathomable, focused again on that which was real: stone, fire, and flesh. And in this return to daylight senses she no longer felt an all-conquering fear of the strange evens through which she had passed, but only a restless curiosity, and reborn questioning of the sinister forces which had then seemed so strong and undeniable.

"Can you tell me, Michael, what these things portend? Do you believe in the powers that my mother worshipped and feared?"

"No, love. I do not believe in that kind of magic, nor have I any use for miracles, outside the one great miracle of Life. Still less do I believe in demons and sorcery

now, for having heard your tale. It only shows me, more clearly than ever, the power of superstition to deceive. Would you like me to show you the key to the mystery, the weak link which shatters the entire chain of seeming?"

"Yes," she replied. "More than anything."

"The answer is simple," he said. "It is music: a magic that is real, disproving a magic that is not."

"I don't understand."

"Bagpipes, Mary. Bagpipes. Twice you heard them, and twice after saw the *spirits* which gave credence to all else, the foundation on which the whole illusion was built. Here is what must have happened.

"The first spirit I can answer for plainly, for it was myself. James and I had at last crossed the high road, and returned to land we could think of as our own. He had been given the pipes by a crippled soldier, one of our own, who took us in along the way. And now James would be silent no longer. He insisted that we return as proud veterans, and not skulking thieves. So as we parted ways at the last, and when he deemed me safely hidden by the rise that shields the cottage, he began to play, and marched off in defiant glory.

"Shortly afterward I found you in tears, lying across a grave that bore my name.

It broke my heart to leave you there, even with the spoken promise—you did not imagine it—that I would come back to you. But I was determined to bring no danger upon you, or upon this house, until the pursuit had cooled, and the chance of discovery grown less. Looking back, it was a cruel mistake. But I was obsessed. I was going to escape, and bring no danger upon you. I hope you can understand, and forgive me."

"Of course," said his mother, for both of them.

"Thank you," he said quietly. Mary nodded gently, and asked him to continue.

"All right... And yet again, by the Standing Stone, you heard bagpipes. Did they play Scotland the Brave?"

"Yes," she answered, understanding at last.

"It is the only song James knew, or ever wanted to learn. It was he you saw: pale with affliction, kilted as a sign of defiance, as he could not be by day. He must have been half dead by then...

"For he, too, was determined to bring no harm upon his family. Like myself he would not go to them, though he was too proud, and too far gone, to conceal himself as I did. I could not convince him to follow me to the hiding place, and I could not force him. I believe now that he must have spent those last nights in wandering and delirium, waiting for the chance to perform his final deed. But unstable as his mind had become, the heart beneath remained intact. And there were moments of perfect lucidity, as when he looked up from the ravine, and saw you.

"He fled from your mother not in fear, but to protect her, and yourself." He released a deep breath. "The Stone, and the words of the spell, were impotent but for the power you gave them. The mind creates worlds of its own, every bit as tangible, and every bit as dangerous, as the physical reality we all share. Give up your common sense, your right to question, and you become a helpless lamb among the wolves of this world."

"Yes," said Mary. "Now it all seems so clear. The trunk filled with charms, the talismans to drive away your spirit, the spell my mother believes she cast over Stephen Purceville: all but the fabric of illusion, given substance by the wholly independent actions of men. I, too, have no more need of such miracles."

"But," said Michael firmly. "Though the shadows of evil fade in the light of day, the evil itself does not. The Purceviles, both young and old, are still very much to be feared."

19

As if in answer to his words, the thunder of hoofbeats came suddenly to their ears, approaching unexpectedly (for the British fortress lay in the opposite direction) from the west. The widow Scott, who had felt the danger growing as the day wore on, was the first to react. She was up and out of her chair, and pulling back on the carpet before her son had a chance to stand clear.

"Michael, quickly!" And she forced her trembling hands to find the latch, and pull open the trap door.

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Michael moved toward the opening, then turned to say a last word to his betrothed. But by chance his eyes lighted on her portrait, and for the first time he saw the bullet-hole at her throat. In horror he thought of Stephen Purceville, and in a flash read between the lines of what the women had (and had not) told him.

And even as his mother tried to urge him down the steps, he reached out and took his lover by the wrist.

"Mary, too! Until we're sure!" She nodded gratefully, not wanting to be parted from him, and the two descended.

"Remember my words," the widow whispered through the crack, before sealing them in darkness. "You must be willing to sacrifice me. No arguments!"

She closed the trap and pulled the rug to, even as the snorting of hard-driven animals mingled with men's voices and the sounds of dismounting. Heavy boots rattled the front steps, followed by a thumping fist upon the door.

"Open," came a heavy voice. "In the name of the King, and on peril of your life. Open!"

Anne Scott looked quickly about her for any tell-tale signs of company. There were none, and gratefully she recalled the other precautions she had taken: both bedrooms had been straightened, the dishes cleaned and put away. But for Mary's cloak, which she could pass as her own, the two still wore all the clothing they had brought.

Mastering her fright as best she could, fiercely determined to protect her young, she went to the door... and opened it.

But for all her resolve, her eyes were unprepared for the spectacle which greeted them. The Lord Henry Purceville himself stood before her. And beyond his hulking form, she saw the bodies of two men slung across spare horses, one of which, dressed in ill-fitting clothes, pale and stained with earth... It was only by supreme

exertion that she kept herself from swooning. There were twenty riders at least, all tainted with the smell of smoke.

"Where is she?" bellowed Lord Purceville, pushing her aside with such force that she really did stagger. Then to her bewilderment his son, who had followed him in, caught her up, and in the moment it took to steady her, whispered in her ear:

"Tell him nothing. I'll do what I can to protect you." The older man whirled angrily.

"I tell you I want her. Ballard! Tear the place apart. Stubb! Take the rest of the men and search the surrounding countryside. Meet me back at the barracks with your report; and if you value your hide, don't come back empty!"

With this all but two of the men—the one called Ballard, and another he detained by seizing his collar and shoving him forward—rode off. These entered quickly, and began going through the rooms, opening drawers and overturning furniture.

Of the two only Ballard, a large, swarthy man whose hands and face were darkened with soot, seemed to enjoy the work. The other, a lad of sixteen or thereabouts, only followed with a scared look, doing what his Lieutenant commanded. As for Lord Purceville, he sat himself in the chair that Mary had occupied, and stared at the woman icily, beckoning (ordering) his son to sit across from him. The widow Scott could only look back at him in dismay, and try not to notice his thick black boots, resting at the very edge of the carpet.

He was heavier, and grayer than she remembered, those many long years ago.

But her first impression of him then—that of a bull about to charge—still held true. He was a big man, both taller and more thickly muscled than his son. Their faces were much alike, except that the father's was fuller: more rudely carved, more deeply lined, more savage.

But if harsh features were a mark of lesser intelligence, then the rule was broken here. His mind was more than a match for his son's, or even Mary's. The truly frightening thing about him, as she would soon learn, was that this glowering beast, this physical brute, was also sharper and shrewder than any man she had ever known. She could not feel brave in his presence, only vulnerable and afraid.

But as the two men returned from the loft, reporting, "No sign that anyone's been here but herself, though the upper room is undoubtedly a young lady's," she remembered the dangerous nearness of those she had sworn to protect, and the injuries they had already suffered at the hands of such men. Her pride returned, along with the instinctive cunning of a woman cornered.

"Of course," she said, feigning indignation against the search alone, and total ignorance of what they could want from her. "It is my niece's room, to return to if and when she chooses."

"And where is she now?" demanded the tyrant.

"She has gone to live with her mother, as I told your son not a fortnight since. I suggest you look for her there." It occurred to her only after she had said this that it might endanger her sister-in-law.

"It may please you to know," he said calmly, taking a sharpened letter-knife from his coat and twirling it carelessly between his fingers, "that we have already

been to see the widow MacCain. She, too, had the insolence to speak to me in such a manner. Would you like to know what we did to her? Tell her, Ballard."

"Burned her for a witch, we did—tied to a tree, right up on her own roof." The man smiled, as if he found this detail particularly satisfying. "My one regret, Lord, is that you hit her so hard in the questioning, she never regained her senses to enjoy it. One would have thought she was dead already."

"That will be all, Lieutenant. Take the bodies back to the Castle. But first, check the neighborhood. See if you can't flush out a kilt and jacket for our amorous red-haired friend, if you follow my meaning."

"I do at that, sir. And I don't suppose it would hurt to brand him for a prisoner as well?"

"Number 406. Good day, Ballard." The Lieutenant pushed the younger man forward, then followed him out, closing the door behind.

"As you see," continued Purceville, "I have ways of arranging circumstances to meet my own ends. And I have no qualms at all about eliminating women who oppose me. I can think of at least a dozen pretexts to end your life right now.

Would you like to hear them?"

"I have told you already," said the woman, vainly trying to suppress the image of her sister engulfed in flames. "I have told you that my niece is not here, that she left me a week ago. Your son himself can attest to that... I do not know where she is."

"That is the second time today you have referred me to my son. The truth is, dead woman, that I have no strong inclination to believe him. I don't know what it is about the MacCain girl that causes those around her to feel so protective—the illusion of innocence, no doubt—but it seems I must accept the fact. My own son has lied to me about the cousin' who saved her from assault, neglecting to mention that the man was also a Jacobite, and one of the fugitives we sought.

Fortunately, as you saw, I take nothing for granted. I found it out for myself, and now have the evidence I need to hang her, if I so desire."

"On what charge?"

"Harboring a fugitive!" he bellowed. "And conspiracy to murder soldiers of the crown! One of my men was killed in this alleged assault', and another has disappeared entirely. All serious crimes, punishable by death." He paused, letting this new threat sink in. "Now do you have anything to say to me, to save the girl's life, as well as your own?"

The widow glanced quickly at the son, wondering when, if not now, he intended to come to her aid. But he only turned away, and she surrendered all hope of it.

Looking back at the father, who had stopped twirling the knife, and only stared back at her with cold murder in his eyes, she could not help but feel that the end had truly come.

She had been prepared for the worst, and ready to sacrifice all. Because of this, and because of the skilled aggression of the Lord Purceville, everything she saw and heard only worked to confirm her darkest imaginings. Her heart went cold inside her as he rose to his feet, the knife clenched firmly in his hand. Her eyes misted and her limbs trembled; but she never once thought of betraying her son.

She hung her head and was silent, waiting for death.

She waited in vain.

Stephen Purcell did not intervene, among other considerations, because he knew that his father was bluffing. Even a Governor could not kill a woman without cause, and Stephen was astute enough to know it. The political winds, to which his father was not immune, were shifting. A move toward reconciliation had begun, and such acts of wanton violence, as well as the men who employed them, were rapidly losing favor in the eyes of the Court. Also, his father had made many enemies in his rise to power, men who would use such a thing against him, as they had tried to use the escaped prisoners. To burn a corpse as a scare tactic was one thing. To murder a woman in cold blood was quite another. Not that the younger man put it to himself in this way. He did not have to. He knew the realities, and he knew the man. His father was bluffing.

The woman was startled out of her black study by the last sound on earth she expected. Rather than the slow, sinister footsteps she had tried to anticipate, she was called back instead by the sound, infinitely more mocking than laughter, of strong male hands striking together. She looked up, and he was clapping!

"Madame," he said, "I salute you. You have withstood the first assault. I can afford to be magnanimous, for you will not survive the second." And again the face turned deadly serious, though the look of restless violence was gone. It was impossible to believe that it had been feigned. It had not. But neither had it brought the desired result; and he was wise enough, now, to adopt a different course.

For he had no doubt that the woman was hiding something. The hard edge of his foil remained, but the strokes became finer, more mincing.

"A lesson for you, Stephen. Most women, indeed, almost all, can either be bought, or threatened into giving up what is wanted. Why? Because they lack the simple courage—to face life in the first case, and death in the second. They use money, and men, as a shield against life; and nothing on this earth can induce them to face death, or even the thought of death.

"I have heard it said that if women ruled the world, there would be no war. That is true, but hardly a compliment. The reason there would be no war is that none of them would have the courage to fight it. At the first shot they would all throw down their arms and run away. Deceit, manipulation, love. These are the weapons they employ.

"But as witnessed here, there are a few scattered instances of honest character, of a woman standing up to death. But almost always it is done in the defense of her immediate family: her husband, her child. That is what puzzles me here.

Having threatened her own life unsuccessfully, I took the next step, as I taught you long ago: threaten the thing she is trying to protect, and mean it. But even this brought no result. Why? At such times one must draw back, look beneath the surface, examine motive .

"The implied motive here is to protect her niece alone, but I do not believe it. No woman is willing to die for the bastard child—oh yes, I know!—of her sister-in-law, and a man she both fears and detests. Perhaps she raised her from a child? Still not enough. We must look for some deeper relationship.

"Did you see, when she thought I meant to kill her, the way she hung her head, and reached down into some secret place she believes I cannot touch? Whose

image did she turn to in her moment of need? For I tell you, Stephen, she was prepared to die. And it wasn't for any half-breed girl."

He took a sheet of folded parchment from an inner pocket, and settling more deeply in the chair, smoothed it open against his thigh. "I have here a list, names and numbers. It was brought to me yesterday, along with more detailed information, concerning the prisoners still at large—thankfully, very few. I think you will find our information quite thorough and up to date. Now I know not only the men who hail from this country—and are therefore likely to return—but also the friends they kept in the stockade, and the smaller groups they split into after the escape.

"You heard me tell my Lieutenant to brand the number 406 on our dead comrade's body—though I warn you, I may still use it to incriminate your niece.

Why that particular number? I will tell you. It is the number of one of the men decidedly traced to this area: the companion, protector, and... could it be... the cousin of our heroic James Talbert? Are we coming nearer the mark, Mrs. Scott? You look quiet pale; would you like to sit down?"

"I will stand," she said desperately, trying to prepare herself against the coming blow. For now he had found the weak place in her armor, the secret refuge of her soul. One thought only kept hammering at her brain. Admit nothing. At all costs she must not let this shark catch scent of her son's blood.

And in fact the identity of the second prisoner was not known to him, though his insight and shrewd guesses had brought him dangerously close to the truth.

Beside the number 406, the reported friend and fellow fugitive of James Talbert, were written these words: No name given, possible memory loss from head wound, called by fellow prisoners *Jamie*. This was the small victory that Michael had won during the first brutal year of his captivity: he would not give up his true name. His identity, and therefore his life, remained hidden.

But through the uncanny memory for persons and places which every tyrant must possess, the Lord Purceville recalled a sturdy youth, several years older than his son, who had once accompanied the Scotts on a visit to Margaret MacCain, during the time of her employment at his estate—the fierce disdain he had shown as he stepped from the carriage, and spied its hated Master. Where was this fiery-eyed youth now, who must surely have been of fighting age and temperament at the time of the revolt? Had he been taken prisoner, and escaped along with James Talbert, or merely been killed in the war? In any event the mention of his name was bound to cause an emotional reaction in the mother, which might lead him in turn to the girl. Like a skilled fortune-teller he would draw her out, read the story in her face, and follow where it led. Between pauses:

"What was this prisoner's name, you ask? Why, his last name appears to be Scott. Could that be your son? Has he been here of late, to visit you? Is it he you are trying to protect? Is he in hiding along with Mary? Yes, of course. That's it.

They grew up together, did they not? Were they very close, your strong, golden-haired son and fair, emerald-eyed niece? They say that cousin is a dangerous relationship; surely there was an attraction. Could they have been more than friends... even, lovers?" At this Stephen's head jerked towards her, as if he had been scalded.

The woman could bear it no longer; she felt herself ready to explode. But just as fear and rage rose irrepressibly inside her, she instinctively channeled the outburst to lead him away from her son.

"Have you no shame, sir! My son is dead and buried these three years, as a short walk to the gravesite of our clan will plainly show. He was a brother and father both to my niece, and as fine a man as you could ask. You will not speak against his honor in my house! He was willing to die to stand up to the likes of you, and so am I. Kill me, if you have the courage. By God, I'll listen to no more of this!"

"Careful, Mrs. Scott. You say your son lies yonder in the grave, but that too could be a hoax. I have unearthed two bodies already. I will not hesitate—"

This was too much for her. For the first time in her life, hatred flared into animal violence.

"You will do no such thing! Check the funeral record at the vestry, then take yourself to the Devil!" Seizing her husband's stout walking stick from its place in the corner she flew at him, screaming. "You get out of my house! Get out, you Godless bastard!"

And though she was but a woman—though her blows were blocked and the stick taken from her—the suddenness of her fury served its purpose. The man believed her son was dead, and saw plainly there was nothing more to be got out of her.

Yet in his answering rage he might still have done her serious injury, if his son had not intervened. Henry Purcell pushed her back against the stone hearth wall, and cocked his great fist for a blow which might well have killed her. Stephen caught his father's arm and pulled him away from her, slowly but firmly.

"You don't want to do this," he said.

"No one speaks to me like that. I'll kill her!"

"And give Earl Arthur the weapon he needs to call an Inquest? Destroy yourself for a moment's passion?"

"She has defied me! I will have my daughter brought before me."

"Then leave her to me, if that is all you want. I know more of this family than you do. Promise me now, in front of her, give me your word, that you will do nothing to harm the girl, or put her on trial for conspiracy." His father only struggled more fiercely, outraged that anyone should force on him such a condition.

But he found himself breathing too hard: his chest ached, and the exertions of the day had begun to take their toll on him. He was tired. He felt old.

Still, had the request not come from his son, and had he not already been willing... With a last sweep of his arm he broke free, and relaxed his great limbs.

Then looked his son full in the face.

"I will do it for you, to show that I am not what you think. If you bring the girl to me, tonight, I will drop all charges. And I never meant to harm her..."

"You accused me of many things last night. You are very naive. Since your mother's death, it is true that I have not been kind. Kindness gains a man nothing, nor does the illusion of love, as you will find. Yes, I sent the MacCain woman away, as the scheming slut she was. But I have no intention of hanging my

own daughter. Perhaps you will not believe it, but as much as anything... I just want to see her." He threw up his hands in disgust. "I promise, damn you all!

Bring her to me, tonight, and the charges will be dropped."

Stephen stepped away, and to the center of the room, feeling awkward and stiff.

This was the closest thing to a confidence that his father had shown him in many years.

"Thank you, Father. That should be agreeable... You might as well start back. If I may speak to Mrs. Scott alone, I think I can convince her that it is the only way."

"See that you do!" he growled, turning on the woman once more. "If you can't, bring her instead. I'm not over-fond of hostages, but they usually bring the desired result. Good day, Mrs. Scott." Without further speech he filed past and out the door, remounted his fierce gray, and rode off.

Stephen was silent for several minutes, as if confused in his loyalties. Then turned again to face the woman. He spoke stiffly.

"Mrs. Scott. I must apologize to you for my conduct at our last meeting. You have no reason to believe it, I'm sure. But I am not the same man now, that I was. Your niece, my sister, has forced me to look at myself in a new light. I don't much like what I see. I make no excuses, except to say that I am my father's son, and was raised without... Nevermind. I am sorry, too, that you had to endure his wrath for so long. There was no other way. Had I spoken before I did, it would simply have made matters worse."

The woman could only stare at him in disbelief.

"And now all you ask," she replied, "in exchange for my own freedom, is that I turn an innocent young woman over to the man who burned her mother at the stake, and threatened to violate my son's grave. To say nothing of what you yourself have done. Why should my answer to you be any different than the one I made your father?"

His face flushed with anger, which he then suppressed. "First, because I am trying to protect her. And you, though you don't believe it. Second, because he didn't kill her mother, or even strike her, as he told his men. She was dead when we arrived... You don't believe me. Here. She left this note for Mary."

He handed her a single sheet, on which was written the woman's dying message to her daughter. The hand was weak and failing, but undoubtedly that of her sister. Anne Scott read it quickly, then looked searchingly into the young man's face.

"The third reason, and I do not say it as my father would... I know she's here, Mrs. Scott. The soiled cloak on the peg, is hers. She was wearing it yesterday when... When I found out what kind of man I had become. I can't forgive myself for that. I can only try to make amends, by seeing to it that she is never again brought to such a pass.

"But I'm afraid the first step toward that end, must be the visit to my father. You must believe me, he will do nothing to harm her, so long as I remain as her protector. He is angry now, and afraid that she may pose some new threat, when his skies are already darkened for a storm. But when he learns her true nature, as I have, he will realize his mistake. And if I have anything to say about it, he will make restitution as well, for the years he left her destitute.

"Mrs. Scott. I don't ask you to forgive the wrongs that were committed in the past, only that you trust me to know the realities of the present. If he is defied, my father will only become more ruthless. He will scour the countryside; he will never stop. You must let me take her to him. There is no other way."

The woman moved wearily to her chair, and sat down. Violence she had been prepared to withstand, and treachery. But a seemingly genuine offer of help, from the one man with any influence over their most deadly enemy... confused her utterly.

Where did her responsibility lie now? For though she tried to suppress it, another thought had occurred to her. If Lord Purceville dropped the charges against her niece, and sent to Edinburgh (or merely buried) the body of Mary's assailant as prisoner number 406, would that not end the search for her son, and make him, in time, a free man? Try as she might, she could not help but wonder at this chance, and weigh it against the possible danger to her niece.

"Will you do something for me?" she asked him. "Will you return to me in an hour's time? My niece, as you guessed, is close by. But I must have time to think, and speak to her at length, before I can come to any decision."

"You understand that I cannot go far? And that if either of you try to escape, I merely become an extension of my father—just as hard, just as ruthless."

"Yes," she replied. "I ask nothing more."

... "Where would you suggest I go?"

"Our ancestral gravesite lies in the wooded dell, a quarter of a mile from here, by the back path. There you may satisfy yourself that my son was in fact killed in the war. Nay, don't be angry. I saw the look that crossed your face when your father said those things about him. If you are to remain as Mary's protector... It's important to me that you know they were not true."

"All right. I will remain in the dell for thirty minutes, no more. Then I will ride in wide circles about the house, to insure that no attempt is made to escape. I must take her back, tonight. And the day is already growing long."

"Thank you," said the woman. "If you will truly act as the friend and benefactor of my niece... You will not only have my forgiveness, but my gratitude as well."

Stephen nodded with an unreadable expression, and left the house. As soon as his horse's hooves could no longer be heard, she went to the trap.

Despite all Michael's objections, when she learned the chance existed to free him from the pursuit and persecution of the English, Mary too insisted that it must be taken, the plan tried. And his mother told him plainly:

"You are unwell, and a wanted man. If nothing else, this buys you time to recover from the harrows of your affliction. You are the one among us most in danger, and most in need. We are going to do this for you; there is no time for pride and fear!"

He would never have consented, no matter how great the pressure, if he knew that Stephen Purceville himself had assaulted Mary, and that his father had violated the grave of James Talbert, to obtain for him this *chance*. But he did not know. And it soon became clear that the only way to stop the two from going—

Anne Scott accompanying her as a guardian—would be to try to restrain them physically, to the possible undoing of them all. For at irregular intervals they

heard the hoofbeats of Stephen's horse, now nearer, now farther away. And the hour was nearly expired.

As it was he was far from pacified, and had nearly to be forced down the steps as Purceville drew rein, and approached the door.

And when two more hours had passed, and he forced open the trap door beneath the added weight and resistance of the carpet... They were gone. The house was dark and empty. Purceville had ridden ahead to send a carriage back to meet them, as the two women he loved more than his own life, advanced slowly north along the road to MacPherson Castle.

20

When the carriage at last arrived for them, looming up out of the fog like a great floating skull, it was full Night, and the shadows had again grown long across the young girl's heart.

Walking beside her like a wraith in the gloom, explaining to her the *details* which she withheld from Michael, Anne Scott had seemed less and less a loving guardian, more and more the whispering narrator of the black comedy into which she had so suddenly returned, after a brief and unreal respite of light and hope.

But of all the things the woman said, only one would take solid hold in her mind, dimming and obscuring all others like the wreathing mists that had engulfed her fated cousin upon the margins of Death's Kingdom: Her mother, who in her short-lived happiness she had all but forgotten, had joined him there. She was dead.

Dead. Her mother, who had suffered so much, whom she had promised both in thought and word to restore, if not avenge... Gone forever. Small voices, peeping like crickets in the dark silent halls of Damnation, told her she had done everything she could, and must now surrender her to memory.

"Would have told Anne this evening... before she set out for the Talberts... from there to send a doctor." All useless now, swept away, as the Lord Purceville had swept away her mother's love, and then her life.

And now, just as surely, she herself was being drawn into the heart of that great spider's web, to be sucked dry and then discarded. She remembered her mother's words: the man you most want to love, but in the end must despise more than any. Her spirit palled as the door of the plush carriage, like the padded lid of a casket, sealed them in. Fear and cold and grief at last overcame her, as she sloughed in near unconsciousness against the known and unknown woman beside her.

But a moment before all was consumed in the black sleep of despair, a tiny figure stood at the heart of the abyss and whispered a single, heart-breaking word.

The figure was herself, and the word:

"Michael."

21

Mary woke to find herself in a strange bed, with monogrammed sheets and a broad, crimson canopy. She lay still and tried to realize all that had happened. It was impossible. Her recollections of the night before were so confused... and her present surroundings in such flat contradiction to the naked exposure she felt... that the aura of unreality remained.

She let out a bewildered breath, and pressing her fingers to her temples, tried to reshape in some logical pattern the events of her journey, and later installment in this room. Images came to her in sharp detail, but would not arrange themselves to any firm order or conclusion.

She saw again the pale interior of the carriage. Then through the window, the grim Castle looming upon the promontory: *above the mists, beneath the moon.*

She saw the drawbridge raised again behind them, and the spiked portcullis lowered in the arch beyond. And then the great, hulking form of a man, seated as if in Judgment upon a raised throne of oak at the head of a long reception hall, hung with bright banners and fading tapestry. She walked towards him, came closer, then stopped.

At this point, had she known it, she did in fact lose consciousness, collapsing to the apparent (and unexpected) distress of her father. He had been the first to come to her aid, and loudly summon a physician. Afterward she had been taken to the rooms she now shared with her aunt, who was stationed in the adjoining chamber.

A door opened in the wall to her right, calling her back to the present. The widow Scott entered quickly, seeming no more assured or at peace than herself.

With a troubled look she approached the bed, and took her niece by the hand.

"I fear we have made a serious mistake," she said.

The words were so obvious, and such a gross understatement of their position, that the one reaction the girl felt capable of was annoyance. The widow read this in her face, shook her head.

"That's not what I mean. Whether we did right or wrong in coming here, and whether it will help Michael—" She looked about her, as if fearing the very walls, then went on in a lowered voice.

"Whether or not we can do anything to call off the search... I have found a dangerous weakness in our story, and the one physical detail I overlooked. I cannot hope Lord Purceville did not notice." She lifted Mary's hand before her, and slowly she understood.

The *ring*.

Such a bitter irony: the very symbol of life and enduring love, of the common purpose that bound them together... might work to the undoing of them all.

For at that same moment the Lord Purceville sat alone in his study, pondering many things, not least among them that slender band of silver, set with a single diamond.

The contradiction to the facade of innocence which the widow had tried to plant in his mind was obvious. Why did the girl wear a wedding ring, while the woman did not? Who, and where, was the man who had given it to her? And what string

had Stephen pulled, perhaps inadvertently, to bring them here? For though in his hard way he loved his son, he was not blind to his shortcomings. It was unlikely that Stephen had, of his own devices, unearthed and exploited some weakness which he himself had missed.

But most puzzling of all was a question far more simple. Why, after facing death to protect her, had the woman suddenly put her niece, his daughter, into the palm of his hand?

Back in their chambers, the two women saw they had no choice but to see it through. To switch the ring back to the widow's hand might prove disastrous, while to change any element of their story (much of which was still unclear to Mary), would prove equally perilous.

It was decided that they should speak of the ring as an heirloom, which had been passed on to the sole inheritor of Scott blood and tradition. This might also lend credence to the guardian's fierce determination to protect her. And in this same hurried conference, Anne Scott went over again all that should, and should not be said at Mary's inevitable, and surely imminent meeting with her father.

Still, if she had been summoned to him in that moment, and had he not been distracted, he might easily have picked her story apart, and held them all at his questionable mercy.

But he was distracted, and distraught. A courier had arrived the night before, only hours ahead of his daughter's carriage, bearing news that he was loathe to hear. Earl Emerson Arthur, his sworn enemy of so many years, had been appointed Secretary of State for Scotland. And full of his new-found authority, the vindictive old man had decided to abandon his long siege—waiting for some damning evidence to arise against his rival—and decided to attack instead, on Purceville's own ground, while the tide of disfavor was still strong against him. A review was to be called, if not a formal Inquest, and evidence gathered to dismiss him. And while losing his seat as Governor was not a literal matter of life and death, to the aged and slowly despairing Lord Purceville, the two amounted to one and the same thing.

For no man is so strong that he can hold off forever the grim whisperings of age.

His power and station were all that remained to him, a last shield of illusion, which so narrowly blocked out the sureness and finality of Death. Without it, he would have to look its grim harvest square in the face. And for all his mockery and outward courage (unfeigned), this was something he was consummately unwilling to do.

Now he was cornered. And the cornered beast is most to be feared.

22

Several hours later a man-servant came to the women's quarters to announce: "The Lord Purceville," (his exact words), "requests a private interview with his daughter."

Whatever their desired affect, upon hearing these words something shook in Mary's heart, as she felt again the sudden pang of the orphan. Because she

realized in that moment that this simple phrase, *his daughter*, had never once been applied to her. For an instant the tears started in her eyes; and for all her fear of him, her one desire was to run and fall weeping in his arms.

But then she remembered all that her mother had told her. She remembered, too, the life of empty hatred to which he had driven her, at the cost of all that was gentle and giving inside her. And the way he had burned her very corpse.

The tears stopped. A look of such implacable will came into her eyes that the widow Scott, who had been plaiting her hair in preparation, took a step back in dismay. All the brooding anger that she had once seen in Stephen, the forerunner of violence, now showed itself in the girl, with a keener edge, and yet whiter fire.

"Mary, listen to me," she whispered closely. "You must not do or say anything to upset him. Our lives, all of them, are in his hands."

But her words were without effect. Mary stood like a fierce, enchanted statue, waiting only for the sculptor to finish, to come to life and fulfill its vengeful purpose. And when the last lock of hair was in place and bound she stalked silently from the room, following the startled servant.

After two long hallways she hardly noticed, she passed by several doors in a third, then was ushered in to the great man's den. Her eyes took in nothing but his seated form, which stamped itself forever in her mind as the living embodiment of evil, and sole object of revenge...

If Henry Purceville had harbored any notions of winning the girl over, or of displaying even the most distant paternal affection, he soon forgot them. Her iron gaze quickly despatched the small stirrings of tenderness (and guilt) which he had felt the night before.

But strange to say, the fearless disdain she showed him was not without reward. In truth it was the one emotion he still respected. It at once cut through his predisposition toward women as weak and spineless manipulators, and gave her a separate identity. She was his daughter, and she was not afraid.

There could be, for the moment, no thought of killing her.

"Well, girl," he said, settling back in his chair as the servant closed the polished doors behind them. "If you have hard words to say to me, say them."

"I hate you," she hissed.

"And why is that?" His face remained immobile, whatever the underlying emotions.

"You raped my mother."

"Yes, though she did not ask me to stop. And if I hadn't, you would not exist."

The thought staggered her, but she pressed on.

"You burned her body! You denied her Christian burial."

"Your mother was not a Christian. By the look of her hut, I'd say she fancied herself a Daughter of the Trees. Such as she are not buried, as you must know."

"If not for your countrymen, and their accursed King, my cousins..." She struggled. "They would not have been killed in the war."

"And if not for your countrymen, and their drunkard Prince, there would have been no war."

"No," he continued, raising his hand to stop her. "Don't tell me that you were oppressed, and had no choice but to rise in revolt. The strong have always dominated the weak: it is Nature's unchanging law. Had you been strong enough

to defeat us, you would have won your freedom, and left the women of England to mourn the dead."

Mary looked hard at him, disconcerted. She had been ready to pour out the crucible of her wrath upon him, and at the slightest mockery, to rush forward and scratch out his eyes. But he only remained before her, unmoved and unmovable, with no apparent effort refuting her every grievance. Worst of all, his words held the power of a twisted truth.

"You have an answer for everything. That doesn't make you right. In the eyes of God—"

"God ?" he sneered, as if the very thought were offensive. "You have reached young womanhood and still not seen through that, the cruelest and emptiest of farces? Look at me, girl."

She did, then wished she hadn't. Those cold and knowing eyes seemed to look straight through her. Hatred deserted her, leaving only fear. And in that moment she was sure it was not her father, but the Devil himself who stood before her. His wicked tongue was a foil far too clever for her innocence, and she knew it. She felt her innermost temples exposed, and had little doubt that he could ridicule and undo the most sacred feelings she possessed.

"Aren't you going to ask me why I I don't believe? Are you afraid? I am going to tell you; and if only once in your fairy-tale existence you listen to the voice of reason, then let it be now." He spoke evenly at first, but it was clear that she had stirred the cauldron of his emotions.

"I disbelieve for the simplest, and most undeniable reason of all. Experience .

For forty years I have taken what I wanted, disobeying each Commandment, each precept, a thousand times over. And not only do I go unpunished... but I have thriven, and raised myself to great power.

"I will tell you something I have never told anyone; you may take that any way you like. Listen! From earliest manhood I have fought against the principles, nay, the very heart of Christianity. In truth, a part of me longed for punishment and reversal: to be put in my place, as a sign there was some meaning, some Order in the world. But there is none, unless it be survival of the fittest. Hardly the kind of world that a God would make, unless his sole purpose was to punish its weak, pathetic creatures."

He paused, trying unsuccessfully to calm himself. "The only 'earth' that the meek shall inherit... are the indifferent shovelfuls the diggers throw back into their graves!

"What have you to say of that , little whore of my flesh? Answer me!"

She knew not where she found the words, nor the courage to speak them. She only knew that they were right.

"The final reckoning has not yet come," she said quietly. "Your imagined victory will slip through your fingers like sand."

He bolted from his chair and came at her, before either realized what had happened. Pinning her against the door, he mastered his wrath only long enough to cry out in a dreadful voice:

"Be gone! Out of my sight!"

Mary fled from the room in tears. He slammed the door after her, then struck it so violently that the oak shivered and his hand nearly broke. For she had committed the one act that no evil man can tolerate.

She had spoken the truth.

That evening Lieutenant Ballard appeared, to escort the ladies to, "More suitable quarters." He led them, along with two armed guards, to the high tower at the furthest extremity of the Castle.

After a long and torturous spiralling of stairs (for their escort would not let them rest), they came at last to the uppermost story. There Ballard took a long iron key, and forcing the eye of the lock, pulled back the thick wooden door, pierced by a single, barred window.

They were ushered in, and all doubt of their position left them. It was a prison cell. Piled hay on the floor comprised the beds, two water buckets, one filled, the other empty, their only toilet. Two woolen blankets had been rudely thrown down, as if their captors resented even this small show of humanity. But for these, and for the water, the place might have gone unchanged for a hundred years.

Ballard approached the girl, and took her roughly by the wrist. Too numb to react, she could only watch as he pulled the ring from her finger, and flung it out of the high, paneless window. No explanation was given for this action, or for the sudden change in their status. And when they tried to ask, the Lieutenant only smiled, and said in a harsh voice:

"Little Mary, Queen of Scots, locked in the Tower, waiting for death." And he let go a laugh, so void of compassion that it made the blood run cold. He strode back out onto the landing, then turned again to face them through the closing door.

"Master 'enry has a visitor, and needs no more trouble of you. If you want to live a little longer, do nothing to call attention to yourselves. Quiet as mice, my pretties, or bad men will be sent to keep an eye, and more 'an likely both hands, on you."

He pulled the door to, and left them in darkness.

23

That same evening, after observing the necessary formalities surrounding the arrival of Earl Arthur, Stephen at last broke away from the banquet and went in search of his sister. Whatever his father's feelings, he was both glad to have her under his roof, and firmly set in the belief that he was acting on her behalf. His motive for seeing her now (so he told himself) was a sense of responsibility for her comfort and well-being.

The affection which he felt for her at their first meeting had not changed, his thoughts continued, except that the lust had gone out of it. And in a sense, even this was a relief. His greatest need now was for friendship and a sense of family, both of which might only have been lost and obscured, had they become conventional lovers.

He had drunk more than his share of the wine served at dinner, seeming unconcerned by his father's tension, and the measured severity of Earl Arthur.

And now, as he walked the long corridors he fell to reminiscing, to gentle, water-color thoughts of their long ride together across the countryside. And he remembered their first kiss, so innocent, so full of feeling. To see her now, and to know that it was in his power to bring her back to pride and prosperity, aroused in him a feeling of warmth and tenderness which he had not experienced since childhood. To speak with her late into the night. To kiss and to touch, her... The door was ajar.

The room was empty. She was gone.

An old peasant woman was making up the bed. He wasted little time on her.

"Where is my sister?" he demanded.

Her eyes narrowed at this. But after a moment's pondering, she seemed to understand doubly. "Ah. She and her guardian have been moved to other quarters."

"What other quarters?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

"What do you know!" he cried angrily.

"Only it was the Lieutenant as took 'em, and that he was none too gentle." And she turned away, concealing her purpose, as ever.

Stephen stormed out of the room, blind with rage. Those who passed him in the hallway drew back as from a fire. Even those servants of long standing... none had seen him in a state like this.

He entered the banquet hall just as the Earl and his entourage were leaving.

The withered Arthur nodded stiffly in greeting, but Stephen never saw him. His eyes knew the presence of one man only, and that man stood at the head of an emptying table.

His father eyed him darkly as he approached, and with a stern gesture, ordered him to keep silent until they were alone. Then giving final instructions to his steward about the service and lodging of his guests, he turned and walked sharply to an auxiliary den, with his son a brooding tempest behind. No sooner had the doors closed behind them than the deluge broke. At first the father tried to weather his son's wrath, hoping that it would soon spend itself, like all his passions.

But Stephen was not merely upset. He was outraged. For perhaps the first time in his life, he knew the intoxicating power of righteous anger. His sister, whom he loved and had sworn to protect, had been locked away like the coarsest and commonest of criminals. And he knew Ballard well enough to imagine the state in which he must have left her, and what she must be feeling now. The thought of his thick, gnarled hands upon her, dragging her away, was the final straw.

"You bastard."

It has been truly said that a father shall be judged by his sons, and that if he is found wanting, they will be a bane and a curse until death. All the enmity and resentment he had ever felt toward this man, all the shortcomings of his own character, indeed, every injury he had ever suffered, he now held to be the fault of the fat, corrupted animal before him.

"You will set her free, now," he ejaculated. "Or so help me God, I will find her and do it myself!"

"Stephen..."

"You fear Earl Arthur? It is I you should fear. I know enough to have you transported, along with the lowest horse-thieves and highwaymen!"

"You had best calm yourself, Stephen," replied Lord Purceville coldly. "And if you know what is good for you—"

"Are you threatening me? Do you think I'm bluffing!" he cried, coming to within inches of his father's face. "I am going to the Tower, now. And if I am in any way resisted, I will go to Earl Arthur instead, and put an end to your sorry game."

"You will not—"

"Watch me!" And he turned on his heel, and made for the door.

Henry Purceville seized his son by the arm, and jerked him back into the center of the room. "Be still, I'm warning you! Don't make me lock you away as well."

With a scream of rage Stephen pushed him off, then flew at him, fists reeling. So great was his fury that he knocked the larger man down and, pinning him there, began to pummel him with half-blocked punches to the face.

Then he felt a sharp pain at the base of his skull, and falling forward, knew no more.

24

The first night that Michael spent alone was indescribable. To have held the treasure of his heart so near, after both had suffered so much, only to be forced to turn her over to the most feared and hated man of the district, and a name of ill repute since childhood... There was no reconciling himself to the facts.

That she was his daughter might afford her the narrowest margin of protection.

But who could say what an English Lord—his noble birth a sham, at that—might do when confronted by the threat of an illegitimate child?

And the son, Stephen Purceville. Both Mary and his mother had doctored their accounts of him, knowing Michael's fiery temper of old. But he was wise enough, with the passing years, to know when he was being shielded from the truth. The bullet-hole in the portrait spoke for itself, a constant reminder that the younger Purceville was a force, and a danger, unto himself. At best he was an emotional powder keg, prone to sudden threats (and possibly acts) of violence. At worst he was as cold and calculating as his father. The effectiveness of his methods could not be questioned. He had taken the two women he loved, without a fight, from under his very wing. What nest-thieving fox could claim as much?

Such was the image he began to form of his imagined nemesis.

The morning after was no less a torment. Because for all the unquenchable fear and concern he felt for them, Mary and his mother had been right about one thing: he was not well. Nothing short of bed-rest and shelter from the cold would begin to rid him of the debilitating fever, and the deep, constrictive cough that had settled in his chest.

But how could he remain calm, and rest, when those he loved remained in unspeakable danger? Several times he started for the door, only to be halted by the cruel realization that there was nothing he could do. Not only would the exposure to the elements do injury to himself, but his very presence, in any way

connected with them, would only increase their peril ten-fold. And the still deeper question, which lay at the back of all others, which haunted him and gave him no peace:

What could one frail, unarmed man do against the grim, unyielding walls of MacPherson Castle?

As evening began to deepen, and in the same hour that the cell door was being closed upon the women, his inner turmoil reached a fever pitch. Something had to be done! He paced back and forth, howling his rage at the walls.

And yet his mind knew, for all the throbbings of the heart, that he could not yield. He had learned the hard way, in the stockade, that there were times when self-denial and an iron discipline were the only way. And for all the pain it cost him, he knew that he must wrap himself warmly and try to sleep. In the morning there might be some meaningful action he could take. And there was nothing, save pneumonia, that he could accomplish how, alone and in the dead of night.

So he prepared to pass the dark hours as he had passed those previous.

Leaving the fire to burn itself out, he took the stones that had been heating before it, wrapped them in a sling, and carried them up the ladder-stair to Mary's bed, where he would sleep. In the loft he would at least have some warning in the event of a sudden search, as well as the advantage of height in a struggle. There was, perhaps, no reason for the English to return to the cottage...

Still, he could take nothing for granted. The evening fire was a necessary evil, now smoldering to ash. All else must be patience and concealment, until the morning light brought clearer counsel, or dealt him some new card unforeseen.

Until then, patience and hiding. Patience and hiding...

He fell asleep.

25

Clear your mind, begin again All that came before is gone; There is no truth,
there is no past The day is gone, the light is lost. The long fought hours slip away
To whited stones; The stones are ground to dust Dust blows in the wind, then the
song begins again.

The time has come the Judgment soon; Above the mists, beneath the Moon.

Youth to age, and back again And all resounds in death; Death to old and young
alike, And all for Heaven's Breath.

Such were the words that Mary heard, as she slipped into a dream. The voice seemed to come from the walls, and the walls from the stone heart of earth, the earth so old it had forgotten them. Too weary and wretched to fight, yet as she spiralled back and always down, the Voice became familiar, and edged all else in fear.

It was the voice of her mother, unburied and unwept.

The voice became a hovering form, which followed her as she walked. The ground beneath her feet grew hard: it was cold, and the winter wind touched her harshly. Till a great house appeared at the top of a hill, surrounded by well-ordered green.

She drew nearer its stone walls, passed through and into warmth and firelight.

But it was quickly Night, and in silent corners the shadows gathered thick to hold their counsel. A long corridor it was, and in the distance a candlelight appeared, drawing closer: a large, strong handsome man. He was her father, but she was not his daughter, only Woman already swayed by the strength of his gait, and the unswerving resolution of his hands.

He held a ring of keys, as Ballard had, and like him forced the lock. The doorway opened and a woman no longer young, but still fair and far from old, sat up in the ghostly bed and wrapped the coverlet about her. And the form of light and darkness was no longer behind her, because it was she, her mother in the bed.

The Lord Purceville took her hard by the wrists, and dared her to scream. But no such sound came, and it puzzled him. Something like love shone in the deep and pleading blue eyes. And pain and pain and pain, because she knew it all before. Yet again the tragedy must be played. And she could only watch, and feel her heart weeping blood as all life was drained by him, the widow-spider.

And then her mother was alone in an unknown room, familiar though she had never seen it, a chalice of poison in her hands. Her face was wet, for the innocent babe that lay wrapped upon the bed. But the anguish and despair were too great, and with trembling limbs she lifted the cup of sorrow to her lips.

Yet bitter was the taste, bitter even as the road which led her to it: the cup was still half full when the baby cried, and something shook in her heart. She uttered a scream, and Anne Scott burst into the room, followed by her brother.

And she did not die, but was taken away. And the child taken from her, forever.

The light went out in her soul, and the softness of her heart... her youth was gone.

And then she was old and dry, alone in a smoky hut, gnawing on the ends of schemes. Alone in ruin, alone with Death.

But somewhere a door was opened, and in walked the babe, grown to woman.

And though she tried not to love her it was in vain: her own Mary, conceived in broken love, the lost treasure of her heart. And she loved her, full love once more, though it was too late. A black curtain was lowered before her eyes, as blood and water flowed from the breast...

Then large, calloused hands almost Roman, came and took her from the lair, and tied her to a tree. And wood was brought and gathered round... till smoking tongues licked her feet, a beast unproud, devouring death as sure as life, and old and young alike.

Mary shuddered, and her eyes opened wide.

Her eyes were open. She was not sleeping, nor dreaming of a dream. And yet the presence remained. The widow Scott lay breathing evenly, somewhere in the gloom. But the presence remained.

Not a raging ghost, not the white-shrouded form of a woman, but an invisible essence, unimagined: the echo, the afterglow, the spirit of Margaret MacCain. It did not speak to her, but only watched, knowing her thoughts, in some way bound to earth until the drama was played out. Or the dream was gone.

Mary lay still, afraid but understanding. It was not a thing that needed to be taught; it simply was. And she knew it in the depths of her being. And the

darkness of Night was infinitely deeper than the darkness of the mind. Fear could not match the hard truth of it.

Thunder rolled beyond the walls in a glowering storm, as spiders crawled freely through the window.

26

Michael woke suddenly, to the sound of the front door being thrown open, and a low scuffling noise in the passage which he could not dissect. The door was closed again and voices were heard, along with the muffled curses of a man bound. And for all the fugitive plans he had tried to form, Michael knew his one defense now was utter silence.

"The old man's lost his mind," said the first voice, breathing hard but speaking in hushed tones. "How long's he think he can keep things dark, now it's come to this? We can't keep him stowed here like a barrel in the hold forever."

"And you're a damned fool, Stubb," came the second, harsh and uncowed. "All we've got to do is keep him out of sight till Arthur turns tail and runs. And he will, or I know naught. The old man can't be took on his own ground. And but for his majesty here, and them bitches in the Tower, there ain't none as lived long enough to speak against him. Master Henry does things proper, and no mistake."

"You may be right for now, Ballard, but how long do you think he can keep it up? He's squeezed blood from these stones long enough. There's Hell to pay, I'm sure of it."

"Tell it to the parson, Stubb, he'll put it in his Sunday speech."

"You don't understand."

"You're the one who don't understand. You think I'm married to the old man, but I ain't. If he comes out on top, I'll stand by him right enough. But if he don't, he'll learn that Toby Ballard is no man's slave. Me, I sticks with the meanest dog, and when he's killed I go my own way... Oh, his Lordship didn't like that. Here, loosen his gag. No one to hear him now but the walls."

"—kill you myself!" cried the bound man. "So help me, Ballard, you won't live to see the new year!"

"Ah, now, your majesty," said the other, unconcerned. "Maybe I will, and maybe I won't. For the time, though, I think you'd best concern yourself with yourself. It might trouble your father for a time if some accident were to befall you while in my care. But he'd get over it."

"You wouldn't dare."

There was a sinister pause, in which the only sound was that of a saber being drawn, metal against smooth metal. Then with an icy menace such as Michael had heard only once before, in the stockade, the man put it to his throat and said bluntly.

"Try me."

Again there was silence. The gag was refitted.

"He's all yours, Stubb. Don't leave him alone, even for a short time. I'll send someone to relieve you in a day or two." He turned again to face the young Captain.

"Good night, or should I say, good morrow, your majesty ." Ballard's heavy tread reached the door, opened, closed, and went beyond it, as he mounted and rode back to the Castle.

Michael tried to think what he must do. There were too many questions here for which he had no answer. Only one thing was clear to him: the man Stubb was the immediate danger.

There could be no thought of flight, in any case. A weapon, albeit a treacherous one, had been placed within his reach, in the form of Stephen Purceville. He must find a way to use it. With no clear plan, but not without hope, he determined to bide his time, and watch for some opportunity to ambush and subdue the guard.

He did not have to wait long. Apparently the officer had determined to have a look at all the rooms. For after first checking those on the main level, he was heard just below, as he put his boot to the first rung of the ladder-stair, and began to climb.

Startled into action Michael leapt from the bed, and when the man's face appeared above the level of the floor, kicked it squarely with the flat of his foot.

He had not envisioned the consequences. Perhaps in fear he had struck too hard; perhaps the man had thrown himself backward in sudden shock. Whatever the reason, his body was sent hurtling back and down, and crashed in a terrible angle against the joining of wall and floor below. The man was killed instantly, his neck broken.

Stepping back from the opening, Michael pulled on his boots with a trembling hand, trying to disbelieve what his eyes had just shown him. But when he climbed down to examine his foe, all uncertainty left him. No breath, no pulse. No life.

An anguish such as he had never known overcame him. By his own hand, a human life was ended.

With hot tears stinging him, he gently lifted the body and carried it to his mother's bed. His only thought, irrational as it may have been, was to lay the man more comfortably, and block from his mind the horrible contortion in which he had found him. This done, he staggered toward the cold hearth as if for shelter, arms crossed before him to block out the world.

But the world would not go away. Almost as soon as he entered the main room he heard a muffled gasp, and the scrape of a wooden chair being pushed back in alarm.

Michael lowered his arms in dismay, not remembering. He saw before him an English officer, bound tightly to a stiff upright chair, and gagged with a twisted length of black cloth. His senses told him he was looking at Stephen Purceville, but his mind was too dazed to take it in. In that moment he only knew that it was a man, like himself.

"I didn't mean to kill him," he choked. "I just wanted to knock him out, and take his weapon."

Having said this Michael steadied somewhat, and tried to force himself back to the present. With no clearer motive than to relieve the discomfort of the other—his enemy, he knew—he loosened and removed the gag.

Still Purceville could not gather himself to speak. All his life, he had been the one to hold another powerless before him. To be so bound, and at the mercy of an unknown Highlander—who by the look of him was not altogether rational—terrified him. But at last pride goaded him to words.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you going to do with me?" And with this, like the tolling of a bell, Michael saw the situation laid out clearly before him.

And into focus, doubly sharp, came the memories of a lifetime of injustice: The seizure of his father's home and property, the impoverished conditions to which he was unused, and the contaminated well that had taken his life. Then the War, the Battle, and the Stockade. And he remembered, too, that the English held prisoner his nearest and dearest, in some wretched place called the Tower, where they were no doubt abject and afraid.

And though he couldn't hate to violence any man, now that the soldier's fall had shown him the fragility of all human life... pride he could feel, and anger. Roughly opening his shirt, he pulled it down across his shoulder, then turned his back to show the numbers branded there.

"What does this tell you?" he demanded in turn.

"You were a prisoner," said Stephen. "I'm sorry. You're a free man, now... Look, you can't kill me. There's no reason—"

"What in Hell do you mean, free?"

The Englishman could not understand the vehemence with which the word was spoken. "All prisoners of war have been pardoned. The word arrived yesterday, with the new Secretary. You have only to turn yourself in, and renounce your former cause... Reconciliation."

"You're lying," said Michael desperately. "You're like your father... you're lying!"

"No. On my mother's grave, I swear it."

Then to his bewilderment, Stephen saw the man take his head in both hands, and fall to his knees with a tortured cry. At length the worn face looked up, and it was neither joy nor relief, but unutterable sorrow that was written there. Almost a whisper.

"Then why. Why, in God's name, were you so Hell-bound to capture us?"

Purceville hesitated, fearful of another outburst. But the answer was so obvious.

"A last minute power play. You know. Politics."

And indeed another outburst came. Trembling with rage Michael stormed to the lifeless hearth, and smashed his boot-heel against it.

"GOD DAMN YOU TO HELL!" he cried. "You, and this bloody world you've made for yourselves! My cousin is dead because of your politics. The man in the next room is dead, and I am a murderer... Aahh! Jesus!"

Stunned by the power of the man's emotions, and fearing for the consequences, Stephen all but begged.

"It was an accident. I'll testify on your behalf. Look, it's not the end—"

"No! Not for you and me. We're the lucky ones. We're left to go on fighting."

Michael brought his gaze back to earth, knowing his words would never reach the younger man. But still they must be spoken.

"Can't you see, Purceville? When men hold in their hands the fate of nations, there's no room for whim, or politics. Don't you see that every time your King rolls angrily in his bed, a thousand lives are swept away?"

"You! You took away our land, our dignity, and gave us nothing in return but the butt of your muskets. Do you wonder that it came to war? Then for years those of us with the courage to resist you were called *traitors*, and hunted down like dogs. Now you say we are prisoners of war, and all we have to do is walk away." He paused, overwhelmed by the thought.

"Can a man walk away from his past? Can the cold stones of the grave lose their shadow, and rotted flesh grow whole again to walk with the living? God damn you!

We stand atop a pile of bodies four miles deep, over which you would hold a pretty picnic. And ten times ten thousand left to grieve.

"Dear God, I cannot look at you, for the very sight is bile in my throat. When ignorance leads the blind, how black shall the blindness be?"

He walked out of the room, with all feeling gone from his soul.

27

The widow Scott opened her eyes in the chill hour of dawn. Indirect sunlight filtered through the high window, silhouetting the statted form of her niece, who stood in silence before it. At her side the girl held something metal that gleamed dully. Her eyes looked out unseeing.

"Mary? What's that in your hand?"

Slowly, as from a distance. "I've got to kill him."

Once more Anne Scott felt herself in the presence of a will, a force that was beyond swaying. But she knew that she too had a part in the unfolding drama, and she would not watch idly as her niece destroyed herself.

"Because of your mother? You think that you must follow her down the bitter road—"

"You speak of what you cannot imagine."

There was no answering obsession. The woman did not try. "How will you do it?" she asked simply.

"They did not think to search us." Mary held up the slender blade that the witch had sewn into a fold of her dress, then forgotten.

"Surely that, of itself, would not kill a man."

"Human excrement makes a very effective blood poison." All said evenly, without emotion or remorse, without living movement of any kind... "Mary. Your mother left something for you." At this she turned, like a sleepwalker disturbed by the calling of her true name. "Stephen brought me this note. Her dying words."

"A forgery," she stammered, "meant to dissuade me."

"No," said Anne Scott firmly. "After twenty-nine years, I ought to know my sister's hand."

"Don't come any closer." She raised the knife halfheartedly. "I don't want to see it." But Anne Scott continued forward, held out the folded sheet.

Mary's left hand could not stop the right. She took the page and held it open against the angled sill. She read.

A single tear escaped her, then another, till at last she dropped the blade and leaned heavily back against the stone. The tortured grip had managed but five words, the last broken and trailing, but undeniable.

Mary, I love you. Forgive

Anne Scott moved closer, and took the forlorn head to her shoulder. Mary did not resist. She only wept, unable for a time to speak.

"But, if I do not avenge her... then her story is truly ended. She lived, and died, for nothing. Oh, it is too terrible."

"No, Mary. Her life, and broken love, brought about your life, and a love that is real. You must never forget that." The widow paused, understanding at last.

"Listen to me, girl. You carry a part of her in yourself: in your flesh, and in your seed. The story never ends, it only changes characters. And those who have left something beautiful behind them, never die. They live on in the thoughts, the hearts, the very lives of those who loved them." And the woman found that she too was crying, the most profound tears of her life. For in this, most unlikely of moments, she had seen beyond the grave, and touched the face of God.

"When you bear a child of your own, you will understand just how very much that means. For now, my sad Mary, just cry. Cry, and love her."

"Oh, Anne, I'm so cold." And she began to shiver, her trembling flesh once more asserting its will to live. Anne Scott took their two blankets, joined them together, and sat with her closely huddled in the straw. Both wept, and held each other, knowing fully and without illusion, what it was to be a woman.

28

Life would not go away. There was no room for fatalism or self-pity, and he knew it. Nothing else mattered, nothing was real, until Mary and his mother were set free.

Michael put on his coat, and climbed down from the loft. Going to his mother's room, he unbuckled the fallen officer's sword, and put it about his own waist.

Then he took the man's pistol and slipped it under his belt.

Moving to the kitchen, he filled a dipper with water from the urn, and walked with it into the main room. By now the morning was full, and sunlight pushed against the heavy curtains. The two men saw each other clearly.

"I thought you might be wanting this," said the Highlander. Stephen Purceville eyed the dipper, then the man, suspiciously.

"I'm not going to poison you, Purceville." Stephen's eyes then shifted to the pistol. "I'm not going to shoot you, either. If you'll drink this, and promise not to try anything foolish, I'll untie you as well. We've got to come to an understanding."

"First tell me who you are," said the Englishman. "And what you're doing here."

"My name doesn't matter. All you need know is that I'm a friend to Mary, and the widow Scott. My one concern now is to get them out of your father's prison.

Here, drink." And again he held forward the dipper.

"Why is that so important to you?"

"Because I want you to know where your sustenance is coming from. And your freedom, if you'll help me."

"But why—"

"For the love of God, man, drink! I cannot untie you while I am holding this.

Time enough for talk while we dig the grave... For your comrade, Purceville. I don't intend to kill you. Just remember I've a gun and sword both, and know how to use them."

Reluctantly Stephen drank, then followed the Highlander's every move as he untied him.

But if he had harbored any thoughts of attacking him once he was freed, the painful stiffness of his limbs dispelled them. There was nothing for it now but to play along, and keep watching for a chance... But in spite of all he could not fully submerge a feeling of relief at being set free, and a raw animal gratitude as they moved to the kitchen, and he drank his fill of water from the urn.

With the pistol in his hand but not pointed, Michael led him next to the small, attached toolshed behind the cottage. Pointing inside it to a shovel, he instructed the Englishman to take it up, then walk ahead of him slowly to the gravesite of his clan.

"You're not going to bury him here?" said Stephen as they reached it.

"Yes, I am. He may have been an honorable man, and he may not. But he died among us, and among us he will lie."

"Us?"

"Master Purceville, you have a nasty habit of questioning the inevitable. We are in a place of burial, because a man is dead. I am a Scot with a pistol, and you are a Brit with a spade. There is the earth; now *dig*. I will ask the questions."

Muttering, but having no choice, Stephen did as he was told.

Michael leaned back wearily against a tree. And shaking off the melancholy of both the place and the task at hand, he forced his mind to think. He must unravel the mystery of the man before him.

So speaking with the half-truths and feigned ignorance which had become habitual with him among strangers, he began.

"The first question is simply put, and simply answered. I expect nothing less than the truth..." Nothing. "I have heard it said that Mary is your half-sister. Is that true?"

Bluntly. "Yes."

"You have been less than kind to her."

Stephen felt the color rising at the back of his neck. "I didn't know, until a few days ago."

"And how do you feel towards her now?"

"That's none of your affair!" he cried, whirling angrily. He would have advanced, but Michael straightened and pointed the gun squarely at his chest.

"That's enough. Save your anger for the digging." The other relented, but did not turn away.

"Very well," continued Michael. "I will assume from the heat of your answer that you care for her, and perhaps are not altogether happy that she has been locked away."

"Why in Hell do you think I'm here?" he snapped. "You bloody savages think you're the only ones to stand up for something? I stood up for Mary, and look what became of it." He threw down the shovel in disgust. "Do you think I'm glad at what's happened? I promised to protect her! My father will pay for what he's done to me."

Michael watched the younger man's face intently, searching for any sign of deceit. He found none.

It seemed almost too good to be true. Not only might this man's emotions be turned toward freeing the women... but by all appearances he was as shallow and guileless as his father was deep and cunning. But he knew better than to hope too much, or to show his true feelings, at all.

"Well. Leaving *bloody savages* aside for the moment, perhaps we are not as far apart as I feared." He lowered the weapon, leaned back against the tree. "Calm yourself, and perhaps we can talk as reasonable men."

"All right," he continued. "Here, then, is what I'm offering. Your freedom, in exchange for the safe deliverance of Mary and the widow Scott. In this you may serve me as ally, or hostage. The choice is yours."

"If you want them back," said Stephen, "then let me go now. Give me Stubb's horse, and a weapon to protect myself. All I have to do is reach Earl Arthur, and tell him my story. My father will lose all power over their fate, and a good many other things as well."

"You will forgive me," replied Michael, "if I am not as confident of English justice as you are. After they are rescued, you may do what you like to hurt your father. Not before."

Stephen looked hard at him, first in anger, then in disbelief.

"You're not serious. You can't expect to win them from the Tower by stealth? It's over two hundred feet high. Inside the castle are scores of armed soldiers, with a thousand more garrisoned less than two miles away. We don't even know which cell they're in, or if they're still together."

Michael grimaced, releasing a heavy breath. Though in his heart he knew the grim realities, to hear them spoken was still disquieting.

"I do not say it will be easy, or without danger. I only know that between you and I... we've got to find a way." He stiffened. "Look at me, Purceville, square in the eye. As you love your sister, and on your word as an Englishman, will you help me to free her? For I tell you, in the eyes of God we can do no less."

Stephen did not answer at first, but stood returning his captor's firm gaze. "Why do you ask me to swear as an Englishman? What makes you think any promise will bind me?"

"Because I know that's important to you. And because I believe that in spite of yourself, deep down, you are an honorable man." The other turned away. "Listen to me. Sooner or later you've got to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. There's no middle ground. And the line between them's got nothing to do with country, or birthright, but the way a man acts in the role, the place he's been given. I'm asking you now, not as a Highlander to a Red-coat, a commoner to nobility, or any other distinction you care to draw. I'm asking you as a man, to another man. Won't you help me, in what we both know is right?"

"You're very naive."

"No. God damn it, Purcell, listen! No man has greater reason to hate and mistrust than I have. You've taken everything: my youth, my health, my home, and now the only ones I love in all the world. But I refuse to hate you. I refuse to stoop so low, to believe in so little, to sell my honor and my hope for that bastard emotion. There is no greater defiance than that.

"Think! Have you never loved someone you should have hated? Or held on to something you were told you must surrender? We share the same needs, the worst of us, as we share the same flesh. Stephen. You and I, we've got to trust each other. We've got to get them out."

"While you hold the gun, and I dig the grave?"

"No." Michael opened his coat, and tucked the pistol once more beneath his belt.

"Come back to the house with me now—don't try anything foolish—and I'll find you something to eat. By rights I should dig this grave myself."

"And the horse?"

"I will use it to bear the body, and keep it close to me at all times. I said trust, Stephen, not stupidity. Trust isn't blind, any more than faith is, if it's real."

"Faith in what? In God? You're dreaming."

"Call it God, or Life, or anything else you like. I haven't given up on it. Because no matter how close I've come to it, Death has never had the final word. My flesh still lives, and therefore my hope. Maybe I am dreaming. But without dreams a man's got nothing, nothing at all."

Stephen looked down, undecided.

"So what's to keep me from walking out, except the threat of a shot in the back?"

"I won't shoot you. If you want to walk out into hostile country, a wanted man, that's up to you. But I wouldn't give a ha'penny for your life, if you run afoul of that man Ballard. At least you know, or you should, that I'm an honorable man."

"You speak of honor," said Stephen, "and trust. And yet you won't even tell me your name. Don't I deserve that much?"

"I will tell you that when we have set them free, along with anything else you like. I don't ask you to understand that, just accept it. Anonymity is my one defense. That's the way it is."

..."I need time to think," said Stephen finally.

"And you shall have it. After I finish here I've got a long ride ahead of me, to make preparations. You shall have most of the day. But whatever you decide, we must be gone from here tonight. If I know human nature, your Ballard won't send anyone to relieve his comrade, or come himself, till tomorrow at least. Be we can't take that chance."

"And what if he comes back today? You're not going to bind me, and leave me here without a weapon?"

"I'm not going to bind you at all. As for a weapon, you've got surprise. And you've got something far more lethal. The human mind, and will to survive, are not to be underestimated." He shaded his eyes and looked up, saw the sun already approaching the noon. "Enough of this. You've got to eat, and then think. I've got to work."

Without further speech, they set out for the cottage. But as Stephen passed the grave of Michael Scott, he could not help but wonder at the identity of his worn

but indomitable deliverer. And looking back to the place where Stubb would lie, who but a day before had walked and breathed, been proud, and stubborn, and afraid like himself, he felt a cold shudder run through him.

For he, too, had been given a taste of Death.

29

Michael rode in full daylight toward the sea. It was a little used road, linking the fishing village of Kroe to the uplands; and if what Purceville said was true, he was, for the moment, no longer a wanted man. But he had little choice in any case.

Riding against the sea-winds at night would be the death of him, and plans must be laid for the twilight after next.

Even so, he could not help feeling apprehensive as he slowed his horse to a canter, and turned down the single brick street of the town, overlooking the bay, then the sea beyond. As he passed through its center—small shops, a public house, plain, two story homes joined at the shoulder—he found himself looking down and straight ahead, subconsciously drawing his shoulders together as if to fade into every shadow, afraid of every eye. James Talbert's phrase, "skulking thieves," came back to him. At the same moment he passed a sturdy lad of fifteen or thereabouts, who looked up at him with a fearless eye, almost mocking.

And all at once his fugitive life became intolerable. For in the boy he had seen himself, half a lifetime before.

With sudden resolution he checked his horse, and sat up straight and proud in the saddle. Shading his eyes he looked out to the sea, and beyond. Somewhere, across the unfathomable waters, there had to be a better life: a new land, where he could start again.

He would never submit to Imperial rule; this he knew with absolute certainty.

And he would not live like this. What had begun in his mind as a means of short-term escape—fleeing the Castle by sea—now branched out into thoughts of a new home, a new world, where the skies were freer and a man could still dream.

He turned back again to the hills of his beloved Scotland, the land of his birth. A great sorrow filled him, and an ache that was almost physical gripped his chest, for a dream that had died, and a home that was lost.

But the past was gone, and there was no returning. He must look to the future.

He must live free or die.

The lad looked back at him, startled by the change. "Master," he said plainly.

"Who are you?" The Highlander breathed deep the sea air, then replied.

"I am Michael James Scott, a proud veteran of the war against tyranny, and a man who will hide no more." With that he gave rein to his fretting animal, and rode openly to the fisherman's cottage.

The old man had seen him coming, but remained smoking placidly as before.

There was much here that he did not understand, and he had many questions.

But he knew enough not to worry himself, or to act in haste. Life, in the form of young *Jamie*, was coming straight toward him, and would no doubt make itself clear.

Drawing up to the low stone shelter, Michael dismounted and tethered his horse, then strode quickly up the steps. The eyes of the two men met, and though everything had changed, nothing had changed between them. Michael was still in need, and the fisherman was still willing to help.

"Can we go inside and talk?" he said. The old man nodded.

Again they sat before the fire, grateful for its warmth, and for the strong walls around them. Michael had laid out the facts as he understood them, told his friend all that he knew. And now he waited on his judgment, seeking aid and counsel alike.

"Well," said the other, after mulling over all that he had heard. "I'd say it's more than clear we've got to get them out... and I'd have to say you're right, not trusting their fate to the English. There's good men among 'em, it's true. But when there's a struggle for power between adamant men, innocents are going to be hurt, and conscience swept aside.

"On one thing you can rest assured," he went on. "I'll be at the cove with a skiff, if and when you need me, with my boat anchored not far off. I'll move in at nightfall tomorrow, prepared to stay till dawn, then do the same the next night if need be. I know the place well enough, as I know most every coast from Skye to Inverness. It'll be a tricky sail coming out—with the wind against us. But I'll warrant the wind's been against us some years now, eh?"

"Thank you," said Michael. "It means a lot."

"Aye, but that's the easy part. First we've got to get them out." Again he puffed on his pipe thoughtfully.

"Well then. I've seen that tower from a distance, and know the castle by reputation alone. It was built centuries ago as a defense against the Vikings, and word has it it's never been taken. It was built to withstand far greater force than any you or I could hope to bring against it." The mariner paused, considering.

"Stealth, you say. And rope... Aye. A grappling hook might be the answer, if the window weren't as high as it's bound to be, and you had all night to make the throw. But I suspect you don't, and the weight of the attached line would make it all but impossible in any case."

"I'd thought of that," said Michael. "But I didn't know what else to try... Tell me the truth, John. Is it hopeless? I think another prison cell would be the death of me. But if there's no other way... I'll turn myself in along with Purceville, and try to reach the new Secretary—"

The fisherman shook his head. "No. Your kin have turned themselves in once already, and you see the result. And I did not say it was hopeless. You were on the right scent. You're just not the crafty old hound that I am." He gave the younger man a wink. "Where a rope won't go, perhaps a bit of string will, to lead the way."

Michael set his horse at an easy gallop, as the road leveled and he began the second, less arduous leg toward home. He felt heartened as his leg brushed against the saddlebag, and he thought of the bundles contained within. For the first time since the women had been taken from him, he felt a tentative hope.

There was a chance.

The last daylight faded behind him; but now the feared night wind was less, and only urged his mount to greater speed. After a time he looked up at the waning, but still formidable moon, wondering if its light would be a blessing or a

curse in the coming escape. For the hard clear skies of mid autumn had begun, with ten thousand stars looking down unobstructed. There seemed little likelihood of change by the following night. Perhaps the fog would be a factor, though the high promontory on which the Castle was set...

It was no use worrying, he told himself, with less conviction than he wished he felt. Again he fought off the familiar sense of dread which had never fully left him since the morning of the Battle, but only varied in theme and intensity. Familiar too was the dull, oppressive ache of his affliction. How much longer he could deceive his body with the promise of future rest, he did not know. He was worn, both physically and emotionally, to the last thread of resilience. And yet he could not rest. Still one more journey must be undertaken, before he slept that night.

Perhaps an hour later he came at last into sight of the lonely homestead. When he circled at a distance, to interpose the chimney between himself and the moon, a faint trail of smoke could be seen rising from it, and this encouraged him.

Someone remained within. Any trap set by the English, he felt sure, would be presaged by absolute silence and stillness. But this did not rule out the possibility of an ambush by Purceville, who had not yet made his intentions clear.

With this in mind, he dismounted several hundred yards from the house, and wrapping the horse's reins about the branch of a sheltering tree, advanced on foot.

Opening the back door soundlessly, he slipped inside with the pistol cocked and ready. Nothing. Heart pounding, he advanced slowly down the passage, toward the indirect glow of the hearth. He turned the corner...

Purceville sat motionless facing him, a drained goblet in his hand. He evinced no surprise. Apparently his senses were sharper than the Highlander guessed.

"I will do it," he said evenly. "On the condition that I am never again left weaponless in an indefensible corner."

Michael came closer, unbuckled the dead officer's sword. He handed it to Purceville in the English fashion, then straightened and looked him square in the eye.

"I ask for no greater promise," he said, "than that you do what you know is right. Now, if you will take it, here is my hand."

The Englishman took it in his own, with the same measured gaze that he had worn since the Highlander's return. There was no time to wonder at the thoughts that lay behind it.

"Come on," said Michael. "We've got a long ride ahead of us."

"Where are we going?"

"To find a more defensible corner."

30

The Lord Henry Purceville lay alone in the heavy framed bed, with sleep the distant memory of a child. And though he knew there were a thousand contingencies which he must anticipate, and prepare against, still a single question drove all others from his mind.

How had it come to this?

His own son, whose hatred now seemed assured, had turned against him, and had to be bound and dragged away like a criminal. His beautiful, melancholy daughter, who had dared to stand up to him, lay pale and shivering in the Tower at his own command. And he himself, once a proud and fearless soldier of the line, lying and hiding to protect his pitiful gains from a withered aristocrat whose skull he could so easily crush.

Feeling suffocated, frothing with rage at his helplessness, he threw aside the covers and rose to pace about the room as if a cage.

Because the question that truly galled him was not Why, but Why now? If such a reversal had come when he was younger, with his future still ahead of him, he might have seen some justice to it. He would have known there was a difference between good and evil, and all that this knowledge implied. He would have believed in something. He could not lie, and say the knowledge would have changed him much. But at least he would have known, as his daughter's plight had shown him, that real people were the victims of his blind aggression, people whose only crimes were not weakness and naiveté, but kindness and compassion.

But he had not know, or so he told himself. His life had run on, untaught and unobstructed, a raging beast crushing everything in its path. And now, just as surely, that killing momentum would hurl him from the brink of its dark height—down, down into the yawning abyss. Of what lay at the bottom, he dared not even think.

And not only was it too late for him, but for his victims as well. How many men had he killed in battle, or destroyed in the political arena, to attain what he had once called power? How many women had he sucked dry and then discarded? And for what? Only to learn when the damage was already done that the actions of men, for good or evil, made a difference. They mattered! The bile rose in his throat, nearly choking him. For now the mindless cruelty of life... was slowly turning back upon him. That same unyielding blade, the heartless razor that he had served and become, was proving to be double-edged.

But fear and a momentary helplessness were not to be confused with impotent despair. The Lord Purceville was far from defeated. He let the feelings run, because for the first time in many years he could not stop them, and he knew it was unwise to try. Time enough to master his emotions when the flood had died down.

For now he must know where personal weakness was likely to occur.

For as Anne Scott had already glimpsed, the truly frightening thing about this man, was that he defied all the self-destructive traits of the storybook villain. And though he had given himself over to evil, he was still capable of a kind of wisdom.

Though he lived on one side of the boundary, he never ceased learning from the other. He understood killing and healing alike.

Forcing all else from his mind, he looked back across the pages of his life, trying to find some common thread, some shred of lost meaning that would make him understand.

His childhood memories remained the most vivid of his life, and though long suppressed, it took little effort to bring them back in sharp detail. He shuddered as he sat again on the edge of the bed, anticipating the grim scenes which had hardened him and made him cold, but never lessened in their stark brutality.

He had grown, a wild weed, among the wharves of London. His mother was a sometime prostitute, his father a man he had never seen. The only thing she would ever say of him was that he had been a sailor, and had left her destitute when she was but a girl. He wanted to hate the man for it, but he knew his mother too well to trust her version of the past, or to feel much pity on her account. She fed him, sometimes, and gave him a corner of the floor in which to sleep. In return for this he was expected to steal, to warn her of the police, and to keep silent when she brought home from the public houses the dirty, hardened wretches who filled her cup and purse alike.

One evening she had returned with a particularly evil looking Portuguese, a cut-throat pirate by the look of him, living like others of his kind under the King's protection, so long as they terrorized Spanish treasure ships and not his own. The man's dark eyes through their narrow slits spoke of a malevolence that even his mother must have felt. But she said nothing, gave him the wine he demanded though he already stank of it, and led him up to her room, oblivious.

Through the poor ceiling he could hear the clothes tearing, the blows and sharp curses of the man. But these meant little to him. The rougher sort were like that, and if his mother minded, it never kept her from bringing the same lot back again.

So long as they paid in gold and silver, it was all the same to her.

But then he heard an unfamiliar sound, and it brought him up short. His mother had screamed in earnest. He could hear her pleading, while the man before her had become deathly silent.

Trembling with sudden fear and concern, he reached under the floor-boards to the place where he kept the stolen pistol. Then ran with it up the doubling stairway. Again the woman screamed, the sound cut short by a dull gasp of pain.

He lifted the latch and burst into the room... too late.

His mother lay bleeding on the bed, her eyes wide with uncomprehending horror. The long knife had started in her womb, and jerked upward with a vicious pull. The man, fully clothed, stood watching her die. He turned toward the frozen child, the bloodied knife poised, ready to strike again.

But the young man was not his mother. With the instinctive ferocity re-taught him by the streets and quays of London, he stiffened his arm and fired. The murderer fell at his feet. At the age of ten, he had killed his first man.

He did not wait for the Law to decide his fate: he had seen too much of its handiwork. And he had no intention of slowly starving like the other orphans of the gutter. Instead he crept down to the docks, and stowed away on the most imposing ship he could find, dreaming, in his way, of a life of adventure at sea.

And when the vessel was well out in the Channel, he left his hiding place and snuck into the captain's cabin, late at night as he paced the deck. Once inside he worked his fingers to the bone, scrubbing, polishing, and straightening the room.

The strategy worked. When the captain entered and saw what he was doing, he beat him half to death, then ordered him chained in the hold. But after three days he released him and set him to work, performing tasks of the lowliest kind, with no other pay than a meager share of salt pork and hard biscuit, and the constant threat of being thrown over the side.

But to a boy who had never known or expected kindness, it was enough. He never thought to complain or answer back, except to the cruder sailors, who

thought to use him as a girl. These soon learned that the knife he carried was no idle threat, and that the boy could not be cowed. They left him be.

Even the iron-willed captain had come to respect him. After a time he made him his cabin boy, going so far as to teach him the rudiments of sailing and navigation.

He never showed affection, most probably did not feel it. But he became nonetheless the closest thing to a father that he would ever know.

The vessel was a slave ship, and it gave him his first confirmation of life's inherent cruelty. For the strange dark men they transported were no less strong, subtle, or determined than themselves. And yet for no greater crime than being primitive, and unable to defend themselves against the weapons and treacheries of Europe, they were sold into a bondage from which there was no escape, ending only in death.

He never thought to question whether this was right or wrong. And if this captain and this ship did not carry their human cargo to the colonies, some other would have, and perhaps not as safely or as well. So at the beginning of each westward passage, he learned but a single word of the tribe's native tongue. And when he went down into the hold to bring them their gruel, when one of them would catch his eye and make pleading gestures, bewildered at his lot, he used it:

"Accept." There was no other way to survive.

And so for five years he had lived, making the long triangular passage: from London to the coast of Africa, carrying medicine and supplies, from Africa to America, with the slave labor which helped build it, then back again to England with raw materials, and the profits that came from being aggressive, and willing to do what was necessary. It was a lesson he never forgot: injustice there would always be, and a man must look to his own advancement.

But then Captain Horne had died, strangled to death by a slave's chain in a ship revolt. The huge, fierce black man had been oblivious to the thrusts of his own knife from behind, his one desire to kill the man in front of him before his own life was ended. This, too, was a lesson he would long remember. The captain had grown less severe with age, and had loosed his grip, just enough, for those he kept under his thumb to rise up and take his life. The moral? Victory must be consolidated by ruthless vigilance.

He had shed no tears when order was restored, and his Captain's body returned to the deep. He was simply gone, along with the life that he had come to know so well.

And though he might easily have found work on another ship, being then a strong and tireless lad of fifteen, he decided that the rise to power was too slow, and too limited at sea. Real opportunity, in his eyes, lay in the military and political arenas.

So when the ship returned to Plymouth, he joined the army as an infantryman, and later forged and sponsored his own commission as officer. At every step he gained the reputation of a fearless soldier, and of a fierce, unyielding leader of men. Such indomitable young lions were much needed in those days of expanding Empire, and could rise quickly to positions of prominence, especially along the frontiers.

Nor was he to rise in rank alone, but also in station. After a determined search, he at last found a noble family in ruin, ready to collapse. And through a

combination of bribes, extortion, and the threat of violence, he forced the aging and childless Lord to recognize him as his legitimate son, and rightful heir to his name and property alike. The old man died but a few months later, his spirit broken, his body racked by poison.

And so he found himself at twenty-nine, his implacable charge taking him to the heights of his profession, swift and sure as an arrow's flight. He had no illusions; he had no dreams; and he could not conceive of anything that would alter his life's course in the least. He believed he knew and understood all that the world held for a man, and did not hold. He knew what he wanted, and he was willing to pay the price.

Yet it was at the very heart of this emotional wasteland that the one kindness, the one exception of his life had somehow found him. He had just returned from southern Africa, where forces under his command had crushed a native uprising before it could gather impetus and support. In honor of this he had been decorated, and invited to a special reception held for him at the summer estates of the Earl of Sussex.

Arriving in little-used dress uniform, making no attempt to hide his disdain for this aristocratic gathering and all that it implied, he had seemed, as he often did in society, a poorly disguised wolf among dogs. His one desire was to make the acquaintance of those persons who could advance his career, ignore those who could not, and get out before his deep-seated hatred of the rich caused him to do or say something he would later regret.

But during the meal he found himself seated across from a beautiful and fragile young woman who for some reason looked down, blushing, each time his eyes fell upon her. There was something in her face... he had never been able to describe it... that made him curious about her. He felt drawn to her somehow. He did not know why, nor did he think to ask. Thinking and asking, outside the pale of his ambition, were a thing almost forgotten.

So when the company moved to the ballroom he stayed on, and after watching her for several minutes from a distance, approached her and asked her to dance.

She flushed more deeply than before, looked up at him with pleading eyes. She started to say yes, then fell into a swoon.

Oblivious to all else in the room, indeed, in all the world, he caught her up and carried her to the freer air of the balcony. Those who tried to follow were met with such a murderous glare...

Sitting beside her in the gentle moonlight, he had felt such concern. And when she came back to herself, when she opened her eyes and saw him she said simply, to his astonishment:

"You know that I love you."

Knowing nothing else he embraced her gently, with such a surge of tender emotion that for a time he did not know himself. The past fell away. The future as he had planned it turned cold and barren in his sight. Without so much as knowing her name, or even believing in the possibility, he knew that he had found the love of his life.

There were many obstacles, not the least of which was Earl Arthur himself, her uncle and guardian, who violently opposed their union. But the newly empowered

Lord Purceville was obsessed, and let nothing stand in his way, until they were man and wife.

He remembered their wedding night, Angelica beside him in the moonlit bed.

Her virgin's blood ran softly, like a benediction, as he wept the only real tears of his life. The world lay gentle and loving in his arms, knowing him as even he did not. He could see no end to their happiness...

The pain of it became too much to bear. He tried to force himself back to the present. But there remained one more memory, one more brutal image that would not lie still—a savagery that went beyond simple violence. For it was the cold, unfeeling hand of Death: death to the young, who so desired life.

The vaginal blood ran again, as if in mockery of their love. His second son, stillborn, lay beside her in the bed, as she clutched his hand in uncomprehending pain and fear. The physician bowed his head in resignation, and walked away.

No gentle and loving farewell was left to her, only life seeping out, and death creeping in. She knew that it was over, and in the final moments only begged him to go on, to love their living son, and try not to hate. But as she died his hope died with her. The one love, the one exception, had gone from his life.

And in time he grew harder and more ruthless than before, a meanness added to the fire of his charge, as innocence enraged him, and naivety invoked his wrath...

How could she be gone, the one he held so close? There was no justice... God? If such a being had stood before him in that moment, telling him the reason, he would have cursed him and tried to kill him.

The Lord Purceville found himself alone, on the bed that he had made, his eyes as dry as the desert of his life, the hateful emptiness of the present. It was pointless: to look for meaning in a world where none existed, to search for reason among the airless stones of a ruined temple. He had never known such bitterness.

There was nothing left. Nothing but to destroy his enemies, and live out his life in defiance, unvanquished and unawed. The soft light that had tried to suffuse his soul, was snuffed out like an insolent candle in ancient and unchangeable darkness.

He had made his choice. The night had wounded him, but not enough. He had chosen the sword long ago, and by the sword he would die. He cast aside worthless sentiment, and studied the end-game before him.

Because stone is hard—it does not change—and a stream will run to its conclusion.

31

Michael woke with a sense of foreboding that was almost physical. He often felt uneasy after too short a sleep, as if hearing the distant thunder of inevitable death. But this was more immediate, more intense.

The knowledge of what he must do that day had never left him, but had woven itself in and out of his dreams. It was not that.

Something was wrong. Where was Margaret MacCain, and why had she left the hut deserted? Looking across at Purceville's empty bed, he felt his throat tighten and his heart beat heavily. Pulling on his boots and long coat, he walked as calmly as he could to the door of the ancient dwelling, afraid what he might find on the other side. He opened it.

The horse was still there, grazing unconcerned in the place where he had left it.

So the Englishman had not deserted him. This, and his bent form not far off, calmed him. But not for long. First his eyes made out the shovel in his hands, then the newly dug grave at his feet. The red, clay-like soil piled around it called to mind images of an unhealing wound. What did it mean? His mind flashed back to their conversation the night before, as they reached the high narrow pass, and approached the witch's hut. It was not so much what Purceville had said that troubled him, but what he had not said...

"You'd best stay back and out of sight until I've spoken to her," had been his own words. "The widow MacCain has no love for the English, and your father..."

Well. Let's just say I may have spoken too soon, when I said that no one has greater reason to hate you." Nothing.

"I'm not even sure how she feels about me," he continued. "But when she learns that Mary is in trouble, and that we are trying to help her, I think she will see things as they are." Still no reply. "You don't seem overly concerned, Purceville.

She's a hard old woman, and as determined an enemy as you're ever likely to face.

I'm not one to fear her for a witch, but there are other weapons she might employ."

"She won't resist us," said the other strangely. "...she's not as hard as you think."

"What makes you so sure?"

Again no answer. He had been too weary to press the point; he only thought it curious. And when they reached the dark shelter and found the woman gone, the night's small rest assured, he had been far too relieved to wonder at it. For in the clinging darkness he had not seen the charred tree above, or the withered bones that shrank away from it.

Walking stiffly now in the early morning cold, he approached the Englishman.

Stephen heard him, but did not turn. One last ashen limb projected above the rising level of earth in the hole. He began to hurry himself to cover it, then stopped.

"Stephen? What are you doing?"

Purceville straightened. He said, without turning. "I am burying the mother of my sister, and the woman who cared for me as a child."

At that moment a flock of ravens spoke behind, an evil sound that seemed to mesh the rising web of horror about him. Turning toward the summons Michael saw the tree, as a gust of wind shook its blackened limbs in a dull rattle of death.

Then whirling back in shock, he saw the bones.

"What happened here?" he cried. "What have you bastards done! "

In a flash it came to him: the party of horsemen riding hard from the west, the soot-marks of their boots upon the threshold. Anger and hatred overwhelmed him,

as before he knew what had happened the pistol was in his hand, and pointed at the back of his enemy.

But then Stephen turned to face him, and he lowered it again. Because there were standing tears, and real shame in the Englishman's eyes.

"It's not what you think," he said weakly, head down. "What we did, was bad enough. But she was dead when we arrived." He put one sleeve to his eyes. "She left a note, which I gave to Mary, asking her to forgive... My father... burned her body as a warning, and to frighten his own men into action. I hate what we've become. I hate it."

..."I believe you," said Michael slowly. "And I'm sorry."

"Please don't say any more."

The Highlander started to walk away. "No, wait," said Stephen. "I want you... I want someone to hear this."

"I'm listening."

Purcellville shifted uncomfortably, resisting to the end. Then spoke what he truly felt: the only eulogy the woman would ever have.

"She was my governess, and treated me kindly. But I never told her... that I loved her, too." He started to lower his head in despair, then raised it again in sudden resolution. "We've got to get Mary out, and away from all of this. She deserves so much more, than this."

"We will, Stephen. Tonight." A pause. "Would you like me to help you?"

"No. It is my responsibility. Mine..." The realization stunned him. He fought back a sob. "Dear God, I am weary of graves."

"Then let us vow to do the work before us well," said Michael, "that there may be no more."

"You don't understand," said Stephen. "If we rescue my sister and her guardian, and you take them away from here, your fight is ended. But mine is just begun."

Michael wrestled with his own emotions, then came up and put a hand on the troubled man's shoulder.

"You've made a good beginning, my friend. You've looked the Devil in the eye."

Purcellville met his penetrating gaze, puzzled that these simple words should mean so much. And in that moment this stranger was so like Mary—the way he spoke, the way he knew him so well...

"Stephen. Every man chooses his own time to stop running. And it's only when you turn, that you find out what you have inside you. I cannot lie, and say it will be easy, or that you will triumph simply because your cause is just. The truth is that it's much harder to be a good man than a bad one, to do what's right, than to be selfish and afraid. I've fought the Devil, in my way, for thirty years, and come to no reward. On the contrary, my life has been a constant struggle.

"And tonight," he went on, "I face the battle of my life. Nothing else matters, in all the world. And so help me, Stephen, I'm terrified. I speak of faith, and yet I do not feel it. Getting Mary safely away is everything. Everything. If I fail, or injure her in the attempt, my own life is less than meaningless. My life must end..."

Then it was he who stiffened in defiance. "But God or no God, I will have her out. With all my soul I swear it. She will be freed."

Stephen studied him, both stirred and bewildered. "Who are you?"

Michael, too, hesitated at the truth. It could forge a bond between them, or destroy everything.

..."I am Michael Scott. Another man lies in my grave."

Stunned silence.

"Then it's true! You are in love with her."

"Yes, and I have been for most of my life. But it's not something sordid, Stephen, whatever you've been told, or your fears may imagine. I've watched her grow from a child. I've dried her fatherless tears. I've loved her in silence, as a brother and a friend. And never, until a few days ago, did I tell her all that was in my heart.

"She loves me too, Stephen. If ever two people were meant to be together, it is she and I... I have asked her to marry me, and she's consented."

Stephen walked away to control himself, as bitter jealousy burned through him.

The thought of her with anyone was more than he could bear. He whirled, his face flushed and distorted.

But anger was soon drowned in despair. Because the truth had finally come to him: he was in love with his sister, whom he could never have. He clenched his fists to his eyes as if to banish all sight, all memory. Then slowly he mastered himself, became perfectly still.

"Well," he said darkly. "There it is."

"What do you mean, Stephen?" The Englishman looked full into his face, then turned away.

"My trial. My test. In order to free the one person I truly love, I must lose her forever. To do what is right for others, I must do injury to myself. It is a bitter choice."

"Yes," said Michael. "But it is not the choice you think. What you do tonight, or do not do, will be for yourself, not for Mary or for me. Because if you don't help, and something happens to her, you will carry it for the rest of your life." He released a weary breath, and shook his head. "I cannot help you choose."

"No," said the other, looking down. "It seems I must help myself."

There was nothing more to say. Michael started back toward the hut, wondering if he hadn't made a terrible mistake—if he hadn't tried the character of this man too hard already. He slowed, stopped outright, then said without turning.

"I would like to have you with me, Stephen. You know the place, and the situation, far better than I. But if you feel you cannot... you are free to do as you like after I have gone, with no further obligation to me."

Purcell was silent. Michael first saw to the horse, thought for a moment to keep it with him at all times... No. If this man was going to risk life and limb to help them, he must be shown this much trust, at least. He reentered the hut, and began to work on the long length of rope he had brought with him from the cottage.

Purcell watched him go, then slowly refilled the hole that he had dug, thinking his own dark thoughts.

Earl Arthur stood in the cold cellar-chamber with a cloth held to his mouth, examining two corpses. While both were branded, and both wore native clothing, that was where the similarity ended.

The authenticity of number 383, James Talbert, could not be questioned. His curling, brown-blondish hair and classic Scot features, his square but emaciated form, all fit the known facts: the prisoner who would not be disciplined, who had escaped mentally ill, and on the verge of death. Even now he wore a look of defiance.

But the other, number 406, was all wrong. While no physical descriptions were listed on the tally sheet he held, this surely could not be a man who had fled across half the country, hunted and desperate, remaining with and protecting his doubly afflicted companion.

Beside the physical anomalies—the body before him was lean, but not from hunger, and bore no other signs of a destitute existence—he could find no indication in the pale, languid countenance of the necessary courage and character to survive such an ordeal. Indeed, it was difficult to imagine a face that exhibited less character, or spoke of a nature so obviously low and unseemly.

And what of the way he had been killed—by a single, clean blade-thrust to the heart? Why wouldn't mounted patrols simply shoot him, if it came to it, rather than dismount, and engage in hand-to-hand fighting? Such a confrontation, with such a result, seemed unlikely at best. And to think of it, why had Talbert been shot in the back? A dying man, and one of his fiery and unstable temperament, was not likely to turn and run from his final meeting with the hated English pursuers.

But the most damning evidence required no such speculation. As an underling reluctantly turned the red-haired man onto his stomach, the discrepancy was plain. The brand just below the left shoulder was not a scar, but an unhealed burn, perhaps not even inscribed while the man still lived.

Earl Arthur had the weapon he needed.

But there was more to come. Upon returning to his chambers to mull over the discovery, and think how to use it to greatest advantage, he had found an old woman still at work on the rooms. He started to leave for the solitude of an adjacent library, when she accosted him with her knowing voice.

"Begging your lordship's pardon," she said, eyeing him steadily. "If you will forgive me, speaking so bold, I have words about my master you may find worthy of your attention."

The Secretary did not think to remind her of her place, as he normally would have done. This was the very type of disclosure he had sought, and been unable to secure, from all the local persons his men had questioned. Fear seemed to padlock their jaws, and even the promise of reward (and protection from Lord Purceville's wrath) could not induce them to speak.

So seating himself graciously on one side of a small table, he bid her sit down on the other, and the interview began.

The woman spoke mysteriously of an illegitimate daughter and her guardian, locked away to keep them from telling what they knew, and of the sudden disappearance of Purceville's son when he learned of it, and sought out his father

in a rage. Arthur himself had witnessed their tense meeting in the banquet hall, and marked the subsequent absence of young Stephen, which had been explained to him in a most unusual and unsatisfactory manner.

Wasting no more time he thanked the servant, gave her a silver coin, then called for his orderly and dictated a strong letter, informing Parliament and the King of his intention to call an immediate Inquest. By this time it was late afternoon. The Earl's breathing was tight, as ever, and his heart beat hard and unevenly from the excitement.

But he was determined to act swiftly. After a quarter century, he finally had the means to slap down this crude upstart, who had seduced his niece away from him, and forced her into an unnatural marriage, ending in death.

From that time on they had been enemies. And he had sworn that if it took a lifetime, the rogue would be brought to term for his insolence. That Purceville had risen still further, despite his every intervention, had only fanned the embers of his jealous hatred, driving him on and on. Most galling (to a man who held as sacred trust his own noble birth) were the manipulations, never proved, which had led to his recognition as a Lord, descended from other Lords. Let others believe what they liked! This man was lower born than the commonest sailor, and one day he would hold forth his true nature for all to see.

And now, now that day had come! Throwing caution to the winds, he strode briskly down the long corridors, seeking a direct confrontation with his foe. At length he came upon him in his study, sitting unconcerned with a beautifully printed, leather-bound book in his hands: *The Gentleman's Creed*, by Sir William Blythe.

"Purceville," said the smaller man hotly. "I should like a word."

"Certainly, Earl," returned the other, with his hand indicating an adjacent armchair. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" His calm and courteous manner were infuriating. But seeing the book, Earl Arthur contained himself.

"I am here to inform you, Lord Purceville, of my decision to hold a formal Inquest into your conduct as Governor of this province. I have made this intention known to the King, and only await the arrival of his official observer to begin proceedings against you."

"Well," replied Purceville calmly. "You are within your rights as Secretary, I am sure. But might I inquire, as an innocent man, what it is I am being charged with?"

Arthur went on to tell him, with some heat, of the suspicious nature of the second corpse, of the bastard daughter imprisoned somewhere within the castle walls, and of the subsequent disappearance of his son, who could perhaps have explained both these things.

But not only was Purceville unruffled, when the girl was mentioned, it was all he could do to suppress a sinister smile.

"Yes," he said, when the other had finished. "I can see how these things might upset you. And to tell the truth, I am as anxious for the answers as you are. I

myself suspected mischief, when my men brought to me the alleged prisoner, number 406. I have since been conducting my own investigation into the matter.

"In fact, it was to this very end that I despatched my son—to the place where the capture is said to have occurred—to secure further details. I'm sorry I could

not have been more forthcoming with you on this. Perhaps you will understand if an old soldier, far from his native soil, feels a certain loyalty to the men who help him defend an often hostile frontier? I did not wish to hold one or more of them before you as criminal, until there was conclusive evidence against him."

He touched his fingertips lightly together, continued.

"As to the second charge—that of an illegitimate daughter—I must confess that I myself am bewildered. There is in fact a young woman here who claims that title—or rather, her guardian claims it for her. And though the evidence is quite clearly against them, still the woman persists. She has asked for a rather large sum as recompense, which I can only interpret as outright blackmail. But I assure you, they are not under lock and key. If it will ease your mind, I will take you to them after supper. In fact, I insist."

So convincing had the performance been, the casual air and supreme confidence, that Earl Arthur experienced a moment of doubt. What if Purceville had spoken the truth, and the charges against him proved groundless? But his stubborn anger rallied, and he remembered with whom he was dealing.

"Yes, we will pay a call on them, immediately—and I mean just that! —after the evening meal." Which was, of course, exactly what Purceville wanted.

The old man started to leave, then paused in the doorway. "And when shall I have the pleasure of speaking to your son?"

The master never batted an eye. "Will tomorrow noon be acceptable? That is when he is scheduled to return to me with his report." Arthur grunted, presumably in assent, and left the room.

The stage was set. Alone in her chambers, the old woman smiled.

33

As the shadows of afternoon grew long, deepening toward sunset, Michael began the final preparations. Trying to suppress his own anxiety, he saddled the horse slowly and with care. He stroked its flanks, checked its limbs and hooves, all the while speaking softly and steadily. For this animal must not only carry them a considerable distance, but be silent and disciplined when they arrived.

It was a good mount, he reassured himself, sturdy and well trained. Whatever its master's faults, he had clearly loved and cared for his horse.

With a sudden pang of sorrow and exhaustion, he remembered who that man had been, and to what end he had come. The unfairness of life, the endless cruelty...

No. He could not give in. Whatever happened this night, to himself and the ones he loved, rested squarely on his shoulders. He must act. He must find a way.

As he finished, and led the mare toward the hut, Stephen stepped out of it.

"You're coming?" Michael asked him, as calmly as he could.

"Nothing has changed," replied Purceville stiffly. "We've got to get her out. All else comes after."

"Good," said Michael thickly. "Good... Will you hold her while I fetch the rope?"

The other nodded.

Once inside, Michael slung the long, heavy coil across his neck and shoulder, then reemerged into the still, expectant air. The time had come.

He bowed his head in silence, but no words of prayer would come to him.

Instead he took a deep breath, and opened his eyes to the task that lay ahead. He nodded tersely to his companion. Then began to descend, with Stephen leading the animal behind.

Upon reaching the branching of ways, it was agreed that neither would ride until they came down from the rough mountain paths, onto smoother, more tractable ground. They walked, as distance and Night closed around them.

* * * * *

"What is it, Anne? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, Mary. A premonition... something." She stood up and shook herself against the cold, but the feeling remained.

At first she thought to keep it to herself, out of habit, and to protect the girl. But they had grown so close these long, empty days in the cell, with little to eat and only the shelter of each other's bodies to keep them from despair. All barriers had fallen away, leaving them what in fact they were: two frail and frightened human beings, surviving both physically and emotionally by sharing the same warmth, the same breath, the same meager sustenance. She could not hide anything from her now.

"I feel," she went on, "as if something terrible is going to happen."

"To Michael?" Both understood so many things without words.

"No, Mary, I don't think so. Perhaps to us... Someone is going to be murdered, and it will happen in this room."

* * * * *

The banquet hall was again nearly full, though the air was far from festive. Both camps seemed to realize that something major had occurred in the battle between their respective leaders, and to sense that something further would happen that night. Only Purceville himself, and the large, rough-looking officer to his right, appeared unconcerned.

The meal proceeded, largely in silence. Then, as the cloth was drawn, the Governor rose and began to propose a series of toasts.

There was nothing unusual in this. Rather, it seemed the act of a genial host, trying to smooth over the obvious tension of his guests.

"Gentlemen, I give you the health of the King.

"Gentlemen, to a strong and united Britain." And so forth.

But after these stock phrases, suitable for such an occasion, his words began to take on a more personal tone, which bordered at times on outright sarcasm.

During the first several toasts, Arthur had worn the air of a righteous man who would not be pacified. But as their nature and content became more inflammatory, and their number far exceeded decorum, he became first agitated, then flushed and quite angry. The latter speeches of Purceville ran something like this:

"Gentleman, to the health of vibrant leaders." To Arthur, an obvious slur against his age and recurring angina.

"Gentlemen, to the gallant soldiers who conquer and protect, so that others may live comfortably from their labors." The Secretary had never been more than a token officer, nor served in a single campaign.

"Gentlemen, to those with the strength and courage to make their own way in the world." And so on.

Finally the aged aristocrat stood defiantly, and raised his own cup high. "I see no gentleman before me," he retorted. "But I will answer his challenge." And he glared about the room. "To the truth about low-born men. And to those who will not leave their treachery in darkness, but hold it forth in the hard light of day."

The gathering, already hushed and apprehensive, now fell silent as a stone. For unlike his rival, Arthur had made no attempt to hide his animosity, or to engage in verbal cat-and-mouse.

But Purceville only smiled blithely. "Splendid!" he cried, as if the remark could not possibly have been directed at him. He drained his goblet with a flourish, then crashed it gaily back down onto the table. Anyone who did not know him well (and there were many present who did not), might have thought him too deep in his cups.

"Well, my friends," he said, a bit unsteadily. "It has been a lovely evening. But sadly, all things must come to an end..."

"For now there is work to be done. In the name of that same truth which the Earl so eloquently serves, he and I must be off on an errand of our own. We are going to interview a lady ." And he raised his eyebrows suggestively, the very portrait of a man who had lost all restraint. "Lieutenant Ballard will accompany me, as my faithful right hand in all things. But perhaps Earl Arthur would feel more secure with a somewhat larger retinue?" Again (to Arthur) the underlying insult, the slur against his courage and character.

"My orderly officer will be more than sufficient escort for me," returned the Secretary. "To record the events of our interview. For I am sure that I will have nothing to fear, once the truth is known."

"Bravo," said the larger man heartily. "Your strength and vitality are an inspiration to us all. Now gentlemen, if you will excuse us."

Purceville himself led the way, as the four-man procession filed out of the room, leaving behind the light and heat of the banquet hall. And on toward the back reaches of the Castle.

"I'm afraid it's rather a long way," he said, as they turned the first corner.

"Perhaps the Earl might care to take a short rest?"

"Your audience is gone, Purceville. This is between you and me. I may not be as young as you; but by God I'd walk to the ends of the earth tonight!"

"Of course." And after a time. "One last corridor."

When they reached the massive Tower door, Ballard drew out his ring of keys.

Inserting the largest, he turned it roughly in the lock, then pushed in on the heavy oak barrier with a groan of iron hinges. A dark opening awaited them.

The company stepped inside, and were enfolded in echoes. To their right, illumined by a single, recessed lamp, stood the beginnings of an ancient stairway, cold stone that spiralled out of sight. Ballard relocked the door behind them, then took up a torch, and lighted it at the lamp.

"Perhaps you should reconsider, Earl? I'm afraid the ladies in question reside on the uppermost story."

Arthur ground his teeth in impotent wrath. He had eaten and drunk obstinately at the meal, as if to prove himself. He had taken the bait, and dug the hook deep into his flesh. And though now a part of him smelled the trap, his pride would not let him back down. For the strong wine had gone to his head, and he believed himself more than he was.

"I shall go wherever you lead," he said hotly, unable to control himself. "To bury you, I would descend into Hell itself."

"Very well, Secretary. My second will lead the way with the torch. Watch your step, and be sure to tell us if you begin to flag along the way."

Ballard suppressed a grin of pleasure, and began to climb. The others followed.

The aristocrat's hard resolve could not last. Soon he moved as if in chains, every step a punishment. This man who had begun life so high, gliding easily and arrogantly down the gentle incline, now found himself struggling bitterly just to reach the level ground of final judgment.

Halfway up it was clear that he should go no further. His breath came in tight gasps, as almost unconsciously he clutched at the growing pain in his left arm and shoulder.

Becoming alarmed, his orderly called a halt, and approached his failing master.

"Your Lordship must rest," he whispered emphatically. But the others looked down in sneering silence. As soon as he regained his breath the old man pushed him off, and said harshly.

"We go on."

"But surely," said Purceville, in his best native tongue. "'Tis no trouble to stop."

"We *move!*" The procession continued, always upward.

Ten steps from the top, Arthur collapsed. Rushing toward him with a look of sudden concern, the Lord Purceville lifted his shriveled form, and carried it like an injured child up to the broad final landing.

"Oh, this is bad," he said, as he set him down and stooped to examine him. "I fear I've made a terrible mistake. Mister Cummings," (this was the orderly), "Run like the Devil! Fetch my personal physician. Tell him what has happened, and that I fear for the Secretary's heart. I'll do what I can to make him comfortable here: we dare not try to move him." The man turned pale with fright, then rushed headlong down the steps.

As soon as he was out of sight and hearing, Ballard set the torch in its iron mount, and allowed himself to smile in earnest.

"Got to hand it to you, Governor. That was a fine piece of work. He'll be nine parts down before he remembers he can't get out without my key. And he's half winded as it is."

"You must not take that for granted!" growled Purceville, himself not immune to the rigors of the climb. "Did you bring the flask as I told you?"

"Of course." And a look of reproach.

"Then give it to me. Now !"

Ballard glared at him, but the other was not even looking. He lifted the tin from his pocket, and placed it in Purceville's outstretched hand.

Burning with rage, Henry Purceville took the fine embroidered handkerchief from the breast pocket of the crumpled man. Then soaked it with water, and brought it slowly toward his face.

"What are you going to do?" ejaculated Arthur helplessly. But his voice had been reduced to a cracked whisper, and his imagined safety deserted him.

"This is for the soldiers, your *Highness*. And for me." And the son of a sailor stuffed the cloth full into his mouth. Then with one great hand holding the jaw shut, he pinched off the nose with the other, and stopped all flow of air.

The old man could not endure it long. Suffocating, struggling to breathe and break free, his heart gave one last, violent pump, then seized and ceased forever.

The life slowly left his body, and his eyes sank deeper in their sockets. Earl Emerson Arthur, was dead.

But a moment later a sound became audible below: the soft rasp of leather on stone. The orderly was returning.

Purceville reached hurriedly into the dead man's mouth and began to pull out the soiled cloth, but too late. The orderly turned the final arc, his head rising above the floor of the landing. . .and he saw. The scene before him, the events of the entire evening, required no further explanation.

"You—You've killed him!"

And though weary to his very bones, the man whirled and flew down the steps once more. For now his own life was in danger, and the fear of death worked like lightning on his limbs, still young enough to respond. It could not occur to him that he was still trapped inside the tower (as he had realized halfway down), or that all its doors remained locked to him. He only knew that these men would try to kill him, and that he still wanted to live.

"What are you waiting for?" bellowed Purceville at his Lieutenant. "Go after him!" But Ballard stood very still, his eyes narrowing.

"And what about them bitches?" he said, motioning with his head toward the door of Mary's cell, pierced by the barred window. "They heard the whole of it, too."

"Fool!" cried Purceville, with deliberate menace. "They'll not live out the night.

Now go! "

Ballard lowered his head, then walked sullenly past his two superiors: the one living, the other dead. He began to descend in pursuit, but his pace was far from running.

After a time he slowed to a walk... then finally stopped altogether. He knew the man could not escape him. The thick and impenetrable door sealed him in, and two of his own men guarded the long, unapproachable corridor. No outsider would hear his cries, or come to his aid.

But this was not what made him pause. Things were becoming too complicated, as the old man took more and more chances to protect himself. And what if he failed? Who had been his 'loyal right hand' these many years, doing the dirty work, and taking all the risks?

"Toby Ballard," he muttered. "That's who. And likely to have my neck stretched for the trouble." That very day he had killed a King's messenger—the man Arthur had despatched—for which he might well taste the gallows.

And there was yet one more bitter savor added to the stew: he had developed a weakness for the girl. What he felt for his 'little prisoner' could hardly be called

love, and he knew that in time she would have to be done away with. But to be killed by *him*, tonight, before his desire had been met and served... He sat down on a middle landing, neither high nor low, trying to work it all through in his mind.

For the Lord Purceville had misjudged him. What this man felt for him was not loyalty, but merely a primal respect for his strength, such as any pack animal might feel. And now that strength had begun to fail. Me, I sticks with the meanest dog, and when he's killed I go my own way . But who was the meanest dog now, and which side would prevail? Arthur was dead, but the power of the Crown...

These were the things he tried to weigh, knowing that very soon he must decide. And then he must act.

34

The two men lay peering over the edge of a low, crumbling wall, looking down a sharp slope at the garrison below. Row after row of long, low buildings met their eyes. Behind the barracks, to the watchers' left, were the stables for the horses; in front of them, the night watch stood talking or drinking coffee before a blazing fire.

Two sentinels paced back and forth between cornering guardhouses, with the pickets of the mounted patrols just beyond.

It was now full night. The rising moon was exactly halved, with long bars of smoky cloud passing at intervals across it. The resulting twilight was neither pale nor pitch, but a sporadic intermingling of both. Whether moonlight or deepest shadow fell across the creatures of earth, seemed entirely a matter of chance.

Neither help nor hindrance, Michael thought. But he expected no more.

Thus far their journey had gone without incident, though the real difficulty and danger lay ahead. Yet the largest part of what he fought in that moment was not fear, but a fatigue that bordered on despair. It was a sore trial to have ridden so far, and lived in darkness so long, only to arrive weary and unsure at the time of greatest need, when courage and decisive action were most critical.

As he looked down at the garrison, and on to the Castle in the distance, he felt again his own frailty and insignificance. Rustic proverbs about weakness overcoming strength, and water (in time) eroding the hardest stone, brought little comfort. For Mary and his mother were imprisoned by the hands of men. Proverbs and faith would not free them, only active human resistance. His heart beat heavily against the cold ground. He knew what he must do.

"How do we slip past them?" he asked Purceville.

It was a formidable question. For behind the stables the stone rose sheer, a bony ridge forming one margin of the high peninsula on which the Castle was set: a long and difficult climb at best, to an uncertain end. It also forced them to leave the horse behind, and to abandon all thoughts of mounted escape.

To the fore of the compound as well, there seemed little hope of stealth. The only road in passed directly in front of it, full in the glare of the watchfire. Beyond it, to the right, lay only a narrow stretch of rough greenbelt, then again the ground rose, rocky and untenable. Perhaps they might creep along in the far shadows, where

the uneven turf met stone. But one false step, one noisy balk on the part of the animal, already restive, and they were as good as caught.

Stephen stared directly at him. "We don't."

Michael felt his blood run cold. "Stephen! You're not thinking of betraying—"

"Of course not. If I wanted to turn you in, and try to reach Earl Arthur, I'd have only to raise my voice and we'd be surrounded at once. I will admit that I'd thought of it. But your way has certain... advantages."

In a brief moment of unobscured moonlight, Michael saw that the Englishman's face had resumed something of its domineering cruelty, and realized that the tables had been turned once more. But there was something else at work there as well, some deep inner conflict, not yet resolved. And he knew, for all the anger and fear that now welled up in him... He still needed this man's help. He forced his hand to loose its grip on the pistol, and his voice to remain calm.

"What is your plan?" he said, as evenly as he could.

"To walk right past them—myself on horseback, you tied to a length of rope behind. I'll say I've caught another prisoner, and am taking him to my father for interrogation."

Again Michael forced back his emotions. "And what if one of those men knows of the rift between you, or Ballard is there himself?"

"Those *men*," said Stephen with disdain, "are the King's soldiers. They know nothing of the inner machinations. The ones who do my father's dirty work—those either cruel enough to like it, or weak enough to be bullied into submission—are stationed with him in the Castle. And if Ballard should be there, I will have him arrested and put in chains. You forget that in the King's army I am still a Captain." Stephen paused. "And if you have a better plan, Highlander, I should very much like to hear it."

Again Michael felt the sense of helpless inevitability that had assailed him as the women were taken from him. He railed against it, cursed it, hated himself for beginning to yield. Fate's endless trap opened yet again before him... to what end?

But no matter how he searched and fought, he could see no other way. This time, at least, he would force one concession. He drew out the pistol, and rested its cold muzzle against the Englishman's chest.

"Purcell. Will you swear to me now, on your life, that no matter what happens to me, you will get Mary out and away from here? I mean just and only that. In the eyes of God, and on peril of your life, do you so swear?"

This time there was no hesitation. "That I do most solemnly swear."

"All right, then." Slowly he lowered the pistol, and handed it to Purcell. "Let's see if you've got any of your father's gift for deception." Their eyes met, though coldly, and both understood.

Together they crept back from the wall, then rose and moved to the deeper shadows of a weather-worn tree, where they had left the horse. Michael himself cut a length from the coiled rope, untied the knots he had put in it for Mary's rescue, and fastened one end to the saddle.

"All right," he said. "Bind my wrists, before I change my mind. And see that the knots are tight. If anyone examines them, I want it to look real."

Purcell did as he asked, exactly, then remounted. All done in silence, and without once looking into his face.

In silence also did he spur his mount, and lead the bound man, none too gently, down the hill and onto the road that had swallowed the women. And on to the garrison of men.

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The Lord Purceville leaned back heavily against the cold stone wall, eyes wide with a fear that was altogether new to him. His own breathing as they reached the upper stories had become tight and irregular; and now, though nearly twenty minutes had elapsed, his chest had still not relented its angry rebellion at such use.

For he was no longer young, and his body's weight had begun to overmatch the inherent strength of his limbs and heart. And this same heart, which had served him so long and so well as to be all but forgotten, now labored heavily to compensate. And while he was probably in no danger of a seizure, what he had seen in Arthur, and the long suppressed fear that his physical hardihood would one day desert him, combined to race dark imaginings through his mind.

And where the hell was Ballard? That they must kill the orderly was clear, but it must be done in such a way... Damn him! His sudden appearance had undone a scheme so perfect it would have solved everything. "Everything!"

But his wrath was wasted here, and he knew it. He let his great body slide down to the hard, unyielding floor. And for all the anguish it cost him, he knew he must remain there until the furor of his body had lessened, and his thoughts become more tenable. Then he would act with swift resolution. Or so he imagined.

For Ballard, in his ponderous and short-sighted way, had reached a very different conclusion. Though unable to weigh the full consequences of such a choice, he had decided that the days of his master's dominance were numbered, and that it was time to abandon him.

"I'm me own master now," he said aloud. "Now I decide who lives, and who don't."

So rising slowly, with plans of his own passing through him in the dark, he descended the remaining steps, and approached at last the final landing—the broad level space before the massive door.

He heard a sudden start in the gloom, and strained his eyes to see. The single lamp was now smoking so badly, and cast such a wavering glow... He saw the orderly, crouched like a frightened child at the foot of the impenetrable door. The Lieutenant took a breath, then chose his course.

"Peace, Master Cummings," he said to him. "I haven't come to kill you. Stand against the far wall if it will make your mind easier. I'm going to let you out."

"But you... you murdered him." Almost a sob.

"Not I, my friend. It was that bastard, Purceville, who done it before I could stop him. And that'll be an end to my faithful service, I promise you. After all these years' blind obedience, I see him now in his true colors. I tell you, I've had enough."

He came forward with the ring of keys in his hand, as the other moved distrustfully away. He inserted the iron shaft, turned it in the lock, and pulled open the door with a seditious crack like the unsealing of a coffin. Then stood away.

The orderly eyed the opening, torn between desire and fear. Then began to inch toward it with his back against the stone, arms spread plaintively behind him.

"Be cautioned," said Ballard as he drew closer. "You must walk past the guards at the end of the corridor as if nothing has happened, then lie low till I've had time to deal with the Master. His men are ruthless, and the Lord only knows what they'll do if they suspect..."

The young man looked back at him, confused, then suddenly burst through the opening and out into the corridor beyond.

Ballard sealed and locked the barrier once more. And thinking of the girl, so utterly helpless in the cold dark cell, he smiled.

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Perhaps a mile from the garrison, the bony ridge to the left of the road began to decline and pull back, leaving in its place a high, grassy plateau. This continued largely unbroken to the Castle, due north, ending to westward in a stark precipice that fell for a thousand feet into the churling seas below. At this same point the road began a long, slow loop to the right, at length bending back to meet the fortified drawbridge at the Castle's eastern gate.

Here Stephen turned off the weathered track, moving up into the lateral plain.

Michael plodded on behind him, still bound, his wrists raw and aching. So convincing had Purceville's performance been before the garrison—so rough and disdainful his treatment of the prisoner—that Michael himself was not certain how things now stood between them. But a short distance from the precipice the Englishman checked his horse and dismounted, approaching him.

"I underestimated you," said the Highlander. To this the other did not reply, but sternly set to work loosing the bonds.

"This much I did for you," said Stephen, as the last knot fell away. "What I do from here on is for myself, and for the girl."

"I ask no more." Nothing was said about the pistol, which the Englishman did not return. For Michael knew that the time for weapons and fighting was passed.

Now there was only the Tower, and the sea.

The two mounted, and rode the remaining distance carefully, the horse weary and unsure beneath them. And soon the hard dark walls of the fortress were sharply outlined against the tattered sky beyond.

Drawing closer still, Stephen guided the reluctant animal to the very edge of the cliffs upon their left. Far below the seas crashed sullenly against the unyielding stone, or hissed dark warnings upon the sands of a shallow inlet. Michael strained his eyes for any sign of the waiting skiff, but distance and darkness defied him.

And soon the great, cornering Tower frowned black and menacing before them.

They dismounted, feeling small, perhaps a hundred yards away, in the hollow beneath a wind-riven oak.

Together they advanced on foot, through the cold stubble-grass, until they were halted by the rounded bulge of the Tower itself. Immediately to the right of it a dry, deep-cloven moat had been cut into the stone foundation, encircling the Castle on its three exposed sides. The fourth, to westward, was protected by the fall of cliffs behind.

But the Tower itself needed no such fortification. Two hundred feet high, its thick and unscalable walls showed no opening for at least half that distance, and then only a staggered spiralling of high narrow windows for archers. The only other feature it showed beneath the crowning battlements, were the lizard- and gargoyle-headed drainspouts, which in centuries past had been used to pour boiling oil down upon the heads of would-be attackers, along with a volley of arrows and a shower of stones.

Craning his neck to look up at it, Michael saw neither light nor sentinel, either in the Tower itself, or upon the high, adjacent wall. For none were needed. Sheer physical impassability guarded this bulwark turned prison, where there could be no thought of rescue or escape. The Berserkers themselves had not been able to storm its fastness, and they were five centuries gone and forgotten.

Here at the last, Michael realized the full desperation of his scheme. It would take a near perfect throw to reach the upper windows with one of the projectiles in which he placed such hope. And as Stephen had said, they didn't even know which cell the women were in. He could not look at Purcell now, who surely must be sneering at his *faith* and naiveté.

So there it was. To have come so far, and overcome such obstacles, only to be defeated in the end by cold, indifferent stone. His whole soul longed to cry out her name in passionate summons. . .but he dared not. For though the walls were blind, surely there were ears within to hear his desperation, and descend upon them like angry birds of prey. Feeling utterly lost, he lifted the great coil from his shoulders, and let it fall in a useless heap to the ground. And hung his head, unable for a time to continue.

But when he raised it again, unvanquished, his eyes caught a gleam of something bright and solid in the grass, as for a moment the moon shone down clear and unobstructed. He moved closer, before the pale light could hide itself once more. Was it possible...

The ring! He lifted it gently, as if it were a thing of smoke which might dissolve upon his touch. But the slender band remained.

"What is it?" asked Stephen.

"A sign," replied the Highlander.

And with these words all the hope and urgency of his task returned to him. "It is my mother's... it is Mary's ring, cast down as a marker from one of the cells above." He turned again to face the Tower, careful to stand in the exact spot where he had found it. "The way the windows are staggered, it could only have come from the uppermost story. Would that make sense, based on your knowledge of the Tower?"

"Yes," said Stephen, understanding. "And it would suit my father's temperament as well. He'll have done everything possible to intimidate..."

But Michael was no longer listening. Instead he ran with sudden resolution, back to the startled horse, and removed the saddlebags. Returning again, but this time not so close, he tried to gauge the height and distance exactly, then poured out his bundles on the ground.

* * * * *

The two women sat huddled together in fear, at the farthest point from the wretched, inadequate door. For as Ballard suspected, they had heard every word of the murderous doings beyond it, including Lord Purceville's promise that they would not live out the night.

Of all the moments Mary had yet endured, this was undeniably the darkest. To hear one's death sentence pronounced is a trial few can face. To hear the words spoken by her own father, the man who had brought her into the world, who should have loved and cared for her above all others... was a horror so black it nearly clove her heart in two. She hunched together, pale and shivering with fright—unable to act, or even to think.

And yet it was only in that, most desperate of corners, that the true strength of her spirit revealed itself. Her slow-awakened courage, pushed to its final need, became galvanized at the last, not a momentary surge, to be swept away as soon as anger left her, but a permanent foundation, underlying all. The will to live, and to resist the evil that would snuff out that life, rose so strong in her that it was all she could do not to cry out in rage.

Clenching her jaws to keep the lower from trembling, she broke away from the helpless embrace and began to move across the floor on all fours, searching for the blade that she had earlier discarded.

With this, Anne Scott too seemed to gather herself, and perceiving her niece's intention, began to search for the knife as well. All done in the poor and inconstant light from without, and with the urgency that only threat of death can bring.

It was no easy task. For the uneven paving stones held many cracks, with scattered straw overlying all. But at last Mary's hand touched steel, and her fingers closed around it.

A moment later two sounds were heard, one almost in answer to the other. First came Ballard's heavy tread upon the threshold of the landing. Then somewhere in the distance, a startled horse gave voice to its weary confusion.

As if with one mind the women sought each other out. Then locking arms, they turned all senses outward, poised for instantaneous action. Together they heard the rough speech of the men outside the door, at the same time wondering with secret hope what rider had approached the outer walls, where none had come before.

"Where have you been?" growled Purceville angrily. "What did you do with him?"

"Mister Cummings met with an accident. He was in such haste to bring help to his dying master, that he missed his footing and fell headlong down the stairs.

Broke his neck. An ugly accident, but natural enough."

"Good," said Purceville more calmly. "Good work." But Ballard would have none of it.

"So the death of these two we can explain," he said flatly. "But how are you going to explain throttling them bitches?"

"I'm not, Lieutenant, and I suggest you watch your tongue." He paused, perceiving for the first time the danger of the man before him. Not even his son knew more... "We throw the bodies out the window, then have them collected by Simon's men and hurled into the sea. Arthur's escort will be too unnerved by his death to remember why he came here tonight, if they ever knew. Then tomorrow we put two other women in their place—my former mistress and her mother—who'll say only what we tell them to say. All done as neat as neat."

"Well it don't sound such a sure thing to me," rumbled Ballard, whose one thought amidst the closing web of treacheries was to have his way with the girl, possibly even steal her away.

"So who bloody asked you!" cried Purcell, drawing a great pistol from the inner lining of his coat. But the sudden outburst brought an answering pain from his chest, and he fell back against the wall for support. Yet he still had fire enough to point the weapon squarely at his subordinate, who had taken a menacing step towards him.

"I catch my breath... then we go in, and do it!" Ballard could only glare at him, his hopes for lust slipping away.

The two women, holding whispered counsel of their own, had begun to form plans for an ambush, when a second unexplained sound met their ears. Soft, but infinitely nearer it came: some round and yielding object had struck the floor gently, then bounded a short distance further with a rustle of hay.

Again Mary dropped down on all fours, groping, but this time toward a more definite source. Again her hand met something solid, which she could not at first identify. It seemed to be... a ball of twine, wrapped about some heavier object.

"Anne," she whispered anxiously, rejoining her companion. "It must have been cast through the window. What can it be?"

Holding it up in what poor light could be found, the older woman made out a tiny sheet of parchment wrapped beneath the first few strands, on which some kind of message had been scrawled. She hurriedly worked it out with her fingers, beginning to understand. Recognizing the word *rope*, as well as the hand which must have written it, she needed no further explanation.

"It is your way out," she replied firmly. "Yours. Remember that, both of you. And as you love me, do as I say. You must leave me behind." With that she moved swiftly to the window, and wrapping the end of the twine securely about her left hand, with her right cast the remaining bundle as hard and as far as she could.

Michael, still at his distance, unsure of success, did not see her. But Stephen could; and sensing the same urgency that had driven the Highlander to sudden action, he called to him in a harsh whisper.

"Michael!"

The slender cord had unraveled perhaps half the necessary length to reach the ground when, catching slightly, it pulled the remaining ball back against the Tower wall. But the force of impact loosed the snag, and the weight of the stone within carried it bouncing and unwinding to the turf below.

Michael, coming forward, still had not seen his mother. But he saw the shrunken ball of twine, reduced to almost nothing, and wasted not an instant.

Seizing the end of the rope, which lay but a short distance off, he tied the thinner cord firmly below the first of the spaced knots, then tugged gently in signal. Only then did he look up to see the female form leaning out, and with frozen breath, watched the life-line beginning to ascend.

Anne Scott held the tensing line away from the wall for as long as she could, till the growing weight of the rope forced her to bring it closer to her body, praying that the twine would not catch and tear against the stone. Mary stood guard behind her, the knife clenched, trying to understand what was happening. Anne Scott stepped back. The rope was in her hand.

"...I tell you I don't like it," snapped Ballard just beyond. "And what if I told you I hadn't got the key?"

"I'd blow your God damned head off."

Searching the floor, the widow found the iron hoop through which ancient shackles had once been passed. She put the end of the rope through and tied it fast, tested it with a severe pull, then guided Mary quickly to the window.

"Over the side with you, Mary," she whispered. "No time for fear. Michael is below with your brother. Yes! Give me the weapon... now up into the sill. That's it. Keep firm hold of the rope, and use the knots to guide you down. Climb swiftly but carefully, then be gone, both of you! I'll deal with this lot."

Hardly knowing what had happened, Mary found herself outside the window, clutching a dark rope with all the desperate strength of youth. She tried at first to gain some foothold, then in a moment of panic, to reach up and climb back into the sill. But the groping hand slid away, and the downward momentum twisted her body outward... She hung by one hand above the void, as a sudden wind ripped across her, and the surf beat hungrily against the rocks far below. Fear choked her nearly to paralysis. But there was something else, there on the solid ground. Two figures stood, one of them...

Twisting her body and using her legs for leverage, she turned again to face the stone, and with her right hand, once more took firm hold of the lifeline.

Not looking down, breath coming in gasps and limbs trembling, she began to descend, her feet wrapped tightly, tensely sliding from one catch-knot to the next.

When she dared to look again she was halfway down, and Michael was standing beneath her, arms wide as if to embrace the sky.

Anne Scott heard the key being turned in the lock. But for all her determination, the great hulking figure who threw open the door was too fast for her. As she moved swiftly toward him, the knife raised, her motion was checked by a savage blow that felled her at once, and left her all but senseless. The Lord Purceville, with the light behind him had seen her coming, and with his great fist crashed her to the floor.

Moving past her as his eyes strained to adjust to the gloom, he swept the cold shadows of the chamber like a ravening wolf that had lost sight of its prey. For a moment he despaired, as it became clear that the girl was gone.

But then he saw the rope, rising tautly from the floor and over the lip of the sill.

Himself not wasting an instant he ran to the window, shifted his bulk, leaned over and out of it. Seeing the girl still descending far below, he swept out his own knife and began cutting into the strands one by one.

Michael was too intent upon the progress of his nearing lover to take in the dark bulge that appeared at the window. Mary never thought to look up, but only continued to descend.

Perhaps twenty feet from the ground she suddenly felt the rope begin to give.

Releasing her hands once each, she instinctively pushed away from the wall—The last strands gave way as she fell back, stifling a scream.

Michael caught her, shielding her body with his own; but the force of impact sent them both to the ground. Together they rose, embracing and in tears... until slowly they perceived the danger that awaited them.

And it came not from above, where Lord Purceville knew that any shot was as likely to strike his son as the two lovers... but from directly behind them. More sinister than raw violence, because it came from an unguarded quarter, the dark spectre of betrayal rose before them.

Stephen Purceville stood with the pistol at arm's length, his eyes fastened with twisted vehemence upon the turning form of the Highlander, his passion all the greater for the torment of his soul.

"Stephen!" cried the girl in sudden terror. For in her mind's eye she recalled the dream: Michael standing blind and helpless, returned from the dark pool of Death, only to find its second emissary standing ruthless and final before him. As in the dream, the messenger of hate knew no entreaty. His eyes and voice were cold as steel.

"I vowed that I would help you win her freedom. That I have done. But I will not surrender her to *you*. The girl will come away with me, or be buried here beside you."

"No," said Michael flatly. "No."

"I'll kill you!" cried the betrayer. And the scarlet arm began to stiffen in the firing motion.

But at the very instant he would have shot, Mary stepped before her only love, willing to die to save him.

A moment later the Englishman was confronted by something more unnerving still. For it was not the love loyalty of another, but his own, unrealized devotion. A cry was heard from above: not a scream, for it contained rage as well as fear. Like a stone from a precipice it fell, and like a stone struck the earth beside him, changing to the horror of his eyes from a formless clot... into the writhing figure of a man. His father lay, broken and dying, on the ground.

And from the Tower above came another sound, as if in answer to his pain: a howl of laughter so complete, so devoid of all remorse... Ballard had come up behind his leaning master and, all other base pleasures denied him, with his own strong and gnarled hands, hurled the aging tyrant to his death.

Casting away the pistol as if itself the instrument of murder, Stephen fell to his knees before his father.

"What can I do!" he cried. And while the man's tortured movements grew less, the son knew in his heart that this was not the easing of pain, but the end of all struggle, brought by death.

The Lord Purceville had just strength enough to turn his head once, and view the flesh that would outlive his own. But that was all. The life flowed out... Angelica. I'm sorry .

Too late. He had tried to kill his own daughter. His eyes rolled back, and he was dead.

Stephen's head shot back in agony, as he released a sound more bestial than human. All was dead for him. He was alone.

But no tears would form, nor did he wish them to. The one emotion that still burned, and seemed capable of sustaining him, was revenge. He rushed blindly back and remounted the horse. And brandishing the sword, rode away toward the gate in a fury, as if the lovers did not exist.

Anne Scott remained prone on the floor, her mind dazed but her senses still aware. She had seen Lord Purceville go to the window, as she had watched his treacherous Lieutenant move behind him... and heard the long fall to ruin.

Now she lay very still, as the man remained with his back to her, perhaps in contemplation of what to do next. Moving one arm only, she again found the knife, which had not slipped far from her grasp. And she in turn felt a strong temptation to creep up behind him... But all around her was the taste of murder and death.

And for the love she still bore her children, she could not.

Then Ballard, for reasons known only to himself, turned away and walked past her, out of the cell, and locked the door behind him.

Mary was the first to regain her senses. For a warning bell had tolled somewhere within the Castle, and now an answering shot was heard from the garrison below.

"We've got to get out of here, Michael."

"But my mother..."

"Go!" came a woman's voice, descending from on high with the strength and finality of angels. The two looked up to see the widow's stern form pointing out and away, not in gesture, but command: they were to live, and go on giving.

Michael looked to the ground, to the wasted rope, then into the eyes of the young life entrusted to his care. And for all the pain it cost him, he was left no choice.

"I'll come back for you!" he cried. "I love you!"

And taking Mary by the hand, he led her to a crease in the cliffs, where a knife-slash path led to the sheltered cove far below. There, in that place removed, he could only hope that the fisherman was waiting with a boat.

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The long, snaking descent seemed to take forever, yet still no pursuit showed itself on the heights above. Perhaps the death of their leader had thrown the soldiers into confusion...

As they drew nearer the shallow inlet, Michael could see something dark against the encircling stretch of sand; but it gave him little hope. At first the shape of it was wrong. Then, as the distance grew less and his eyes began to assimilate detail, he saw that it was in fact a skiff, but swamped and overturned as from a wreck: the oars scattered, and no sign whatever of the pilot. Real despair gripped him, as he could only assume the worst—

A shot was fired from the heights above, and then another, as soldiers with torches and long muskets appeared suddenly upon the promontory. Shielding her body with his own, Michael guided his beloved through a last knifing trough, and out onto the rough outer sands of the cove. Together they huddled down in the shelter of a jutting stone, as he tried desperately to form some alternative plan.

But none was needed. From beneath the overturned skiff, now scarcely forty yards distant, a shadow emerged and stood hard against the shoreline.

"Michael!" cried a familiar voice, and the Highlander's heart leapt inside him.

Without answering, almost without breathing, he took the girl by the hand and ran with her that last naked distance toward the boat. The crack of muskets was again heard from the promontory, and the torches began to descend in a long, angling file. But it would have taken a perfect shot to hit them, even if they had been stationary.

And the three were anything but that. By the time the lovers reached him, the fisherman had righted the skiff and retrieved the oars. Then all together they set the prow to seaward, and half lifted, half lunged it down the wet sand incline, to where the ends of waves splashed around them.

"Into the boat with you lass," said the fisherman, as the waters surged stronger beneath it. "Kneel in the prow, and hold steady as you can." Then together the two men urged the craft forward, into depths that would sustain it. A short way further, and they clambered over the sides, taking up their rowing positions. Then lowering oars, they bent their backs in unison, and prepared to meet the oncoming waves.

The first nearly swamped them with a crash of angry foam. The second was little better. But each time, during the lull that followed they would steady the craft, and with determined oars drive the boat further, away from the writhing shores, and out into the calming vastness. Another wave, and then another... and they floated upon the bosom of the sea.

Several hundred yards offshore, and perhaps a mile further up the coast, they came upon the fisherman's boat, securely anchored. Pulling alongside it, the two men helped Mary up and over the side, the old man instructing her to go below and change out of her wet clothes, then heat some broth over the small, cast-iron stove.

"I'm afraid there's no such luxury for us," he said to Michael, as the two boarded and tied the skiff behind. "The nearest English-held port is some miles from here, and I'm not sure they'd try to come after us at sea. But we can't take that for granted; and in any case, we've got to be off before the fog gets too thick. I'll not have us tacking blind, this close to an uneven shoreline.

"There's a blanket forward," he continued, catching his breath. "That's where I'll need you to stand. Help me set the sails, then to your post, and keep your eyes wide open. Things might get a bit close. We'll have to find our way out by dead reckoning."

Even as he spoke, the trailing mists that had seemed so harmless began to thicken, and the wind to grow less. Soon the fog became a patching curtain, then finally, a dense cloud.

Kneeling at the fore of the vessel, shivering with cold, Michael strained all his senses for any sign of hidden rock looming up out of the grey, or sound of

crashing surf upon the shore. The cloud-wrack above had at last cleared away, but the unbridled moon only served to cast a ghostly aspect throughout the clinging shroud, so near, ever-present, and menacing.

He fully realized the danger. Even with all the mariner's skill, to sail in these waters half-blind... He looked back to see him standing by the wheel, with compass and lantern beside him, navigating by instinct and memory alone.

Framed by the mists, weathered but hale, he formed a classic portrait of savvy and determination. But was that enough? Only time, and agony, would tell.

At length Mary came back on deck with a lantern, bringing each of the men a steaming cup. Standing by her troubled companion, she offered to watch in his stead. But for all her courage she shook from the cold as badly as he, and her darkened eyes and sunken cheeks spoke plainly of the harrows of the cell.

"Thank you, my Mary," he said to her. "But I've got to fight this last battle myself. The best gift you can give me now is to know that you are safe and well. Go lay you down, wrap yourself warmly, and try to sleep. Go on with you now. John and I still have a bit of work ahead of us."

She wept to see him struggling so, unable even to keep his jaw from trembling as he spoke. But she saw that his mind was set, and that forces warred inside him with which she must not interfere. She kissed him gently, whispered, "I love you," and went below.

The hours seemed endless, the tension unbearable. A thousand times Michael thought he must crack—from the pressure, the cold, and the need to peer unerringly into the formless void. But he knew that he must stand his ground.

Then slowly, so slowly that at first he thought his eyes deceived him, the shroud began to thin, and a grey light to grow in what he knew must be the east. The fog began to patch, as the stubborn light grew stronger.

Then suddenly they broke into the open, and the red sun climbed once more above the rim of the world. He lowered his head in exhaustion, closing his eyes at the last.

And when he opened them again, there on his left hand he saw the ring, still clinging, forgotten, to the middle joint of his smallest finger.

A sob escaped him, undeniable. Because through all the numbing darkness, the anguish, futility and death, its single jewel shone hard and clear and perfect, untouched by the ravages of time, or the treacheries of men. The tears flowed freely, passionately, for he knew the Bastard had not beaten him.

His love survived.

Epilogue

Michael sat before a warm fire in the small island cottage, contemplating the ring about his finger. It had remained there since the night of the escape, and he had vowed not to take it off until his mother had been freed, and he gave it once more to his betrothed, this time in marriage.

Both he and the girl had fallen ill during the long sail to Rona, a lonely island of the Hebrides, and a place as far removed from English control as one was likely to

find in the whole of Britain. Their first days there, in the care of the fisherman's brother, had been spent bedridden, fighting fever and exhaustion alike. Mary, with her natural vigor and stubborn optimism, had been up and about some days now.

But Michael's hurts were deeper, of longer duration. Only now, after more than a fortnight, did he feel his body beginning to respond.

The fisherman had returned to the mainland after seeing them settled in, and had promised to do all he could to secure the widow's release, including hiring a solicitor, and filing for clemency under the new articles of Reconciliation. But he cautioned that patience and prudence were still needed: that they must lie low, and make no plans without him. In any event, he had said, he would return with news as soon as it was safely possible.

But each day that passed left Michael more in doubt. For what had become of the hornet's nest they left behind—Earl Arthur dead at Lord Purceville's hand, Purceville himself murdered by a subordinate, and Stephen half mad with rage—he could not imagine. Surely after a time a new Governor would be appointed, and some kind of stability return. But where that left his mother... It was beyond contemplation, almost beyond hope.

And this was what galled him. He had done all that a man could do, winning freedom for himself, and for the chosen of his heart. And yet he could not think of joining her life to his own, because the other half of his devotion remained imprisoned and destitute... for the crime of loving her children. Try as he might, he could not swallow this last bitterness, nor put it from his mind.

The cottage door opened suddenly and in burst the girl, breathless and in tears.

He tried to ask her what was wrong, as dark fears of pursuit and capture raced through him. But she shook her head emphatically, unable yet to speak.

"You must come with me," she finally managed. "Put on your coat; something wonderful has happened."

He did as she asked, wrapping himself warmly, then walked with her out into the bracing, December morning. And as he took those first steps along the path, it occurred to him that he had not seen the sun, nor felt the free wind across his face, for what seemed an eternity.

The brisk Fall air was invigorating, the long sweep of rocky hillside magnificent.

He thought he had never seen a sky so deep and blue. Real hope stirred in him, tormented him. He tried to stay the girl and make her speak. But she only clutched his hand more tightly, and urged him down the broadening track toward the sea.

Looking out across the blinding sparkle of blue-green waters, he saw a single sail approaching the tiny harbor. Shading his eyes he made out a smallish vessel, with a weathered pilot standing at the wheel. And beside him stood another, a woman... He fell to his knees, unable for a time to continue.

At length he rose, and walked with his beloved the remaining distance to the landing. There, drawing nearer, the fisherman met his gaze with a smile that seemed to melt away the years, and make them both children again. The older man threw the mooring line to his friend, who tied it to the dock with a trembling but joyous hand. Anne Scott stepped off the boat, and mother and son embraced.

* * * * *

Mr. and Mrs. Michael Scott stood aboard the deck of the merchant brig DAUNTLESS, watching with deep emotion the nearing coastline. It was now nearly June, and they had been at sea for two months. A single word resounded in both their hearts, as the burly captain approached them, and clapped his fellow Highlander on the back.

"America," he said to them, "and God bless her. America."

When he had gone, Michael put one arm about his young wife's shoulders, and drew her near. With the other hand he touched the growing swell of her womb, as if to caress the unborn life inside it. He looked at her with glowing eyes and said simply, truthfully.

"Now the work really begins."

For he knew that his mother had been right. The story never ends, it only changes characters. They stood at the end of one road, and the beginning of another, holding firmly to the roots of their past, sending hopeful and determined branches into the future.

Anne Scott remained in her native Highlands and eventually remarried, living with her husband in a modest home near the place of her birth, until her death in 1776. She was buried in the gravesite of her clan, and on her tombstone, these words:

Those who have left something beautiful behind them never die.

They live on in the hearts, the minds, the very souls of those who loved them.

And on her grave a single, glorious rose.

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(8-1) Typhus.

(17-2) Ague.