

The Turn of the Tide

A novel of Scotland

by

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Part One

April - May 1586

In all of Ayrshire there was no feudal hatred so long and so engrained
as that between the rival Lords of Eglintoun and Glencairn.

From A History of Ayrshire.

April 1586.

Chapter 1.

The dying sun held no heat and little colour, nevertheless it dazzled both mare and rider as they crested the rise.

“Easy, lass, easy.” Munro slid his hand from the reins to gentle Sweet Briar, his palm, as he stroked her neck, dragging against the salt sweat. Stifling his disquiet, he pressed again with his heels and, his thoughts focused on the task ahead, allowed the mare to pull away, trusting her instinct to carry them safe over the uneven ground. They flowed swift and smooth across the grassy, pock-marked hillside, flushing a scattering of partridge as they went. Had anyone watched their passing, they would have found it hard to distinguish where man finished and mare began, for both were dun coloured - from the top of Munro’s soft bonnet, devoid of decoration, to the mare’s fetlocks - the only flashes of contrast the dark hooves and the pale oblong of Munro’s face in the fading light.

Another mile, another crest, and Langshaw’s towers ahead of them, drowsing, half in, half out of the shadows. The mare faltered again, her ears flattening.

“Come on lass,” Munro’s hand strayed to the letter tucked into his jerkin, “I haven’t a choice, and the sooner it’s done the sooner food and rest for us both.” He leaned forward to flick at her ear and she snorted back at him, accepting his pressing.

As they came through the arched gateway, a stable lad tumbled from the hayloft, his legs spindle-thin.

Munro slipped from the saddle. “I’ll not be long. Walk her, and find a blanket and some hay, but no oats mind.”

The lad took the reins without enthusiasm or any mark of respect and Munro felt a flash of irritation. He flicked a glance at his clothes, then back to the lad. “It

isn't always politic to draw attention." He thought it an unmanly thing to take much stock of looks and so, despite his wife's best efforts, wore his clothing almost to extinction: his leather jerkin polished to a shine around the buttons and his boots heavily scarred along their length. He injected an extra edge of impatience into his voice, "Look sharp. We have travelled a distance and have a way to go yet, and I don't wish for her to be chilled nor to stiffen." Behind him the sun slid below the west tower, the last rays, fractured by the battlements, casting a gap-toothed grimace on the cobbles. Munro shivered, turned towards the tower entrance, and pausing at the top of the wooden steps, caught the smell of baking bread, which settled on his stomach like an ache.

As he entered the solar Lady Margaret Langshaw rose from her seat by the inglenook, one cheek flushed, the draught from the door rippling the tapestry on the wall behind her. She came towards him: a figure come to life. He bent over her hand, her skin, buttermilk-white, unblemished, drifting with the scent of almonds as they touched.

"A request, Lady - from Glencairn."

"My husband is from home. Can this wait?"

Munro proffered the letter. "It's for you. Glencairn expects a reply tonight."

Frowning, she slid her forefinger under the wax seal, her grip on the parchment tightening as she read. She pressed one hand against the bulge of her stomach. "To betray a guest...a kinsman...and to such an end...Glencairn presumes much."

Slate eyes met blue. Munro made his voice flat. "The Montgomeries are kin in marriage only. You are a Cunninghame."

She bent to pick up the small shift, fallen to the floor as she rose to greet him, her fingers teasing at the edge of the unfinished smocking. "And for that I must risk

my peace and that of my children?”

He dragged his eyes away, focused on the fire flaring in the hearth, on the basket of split logs calloused with moss, stifled the unbidden thought - her bairn is likely ages with my own. Blocking the anguish in her voice and hating his own tone, he said, “We are none of us at peace. Our cousin Waterstone’s lady lies cold in bed at night and his bairns they say still cry out in their sleep.”

“And am I to bring trouble to my lord too?”

“No trouble. Glencairn asks a signal only - the real work is elsewhere.”

“And if it goes awry? The sound of the rout will rebound to my door.”

“Am I to take your refusal to Glencairn?”

She spoke so soft that he had to bend his head to hear her. “I am a Cunninghame, God help me.” A hesitation... “I expect the Montgomeries tomorrow, some ten or twelve only. Braidstane is bid meet Eglintoun to sup here, and make for court thereafter. You may tell Glencairn to look to the battlement, on the west side. And they arrive as arranged, there will be a white napkin hanging.” She was looking past him to the square of window framing the darkening sky. “Beyond that I cannot do more.”

He bowed over her hand. “Glencairn is grateful, lady.”

She dismissed him with the smallest of nods. “Good-day Munro.”

He bowed again and escaped, clattering down the stair. Outside, glad of the sting of the air on his face, he wheeled through the gateway, closing his ears to the sound of children’s laughter floating over the barmkin wall.

* * *

William Cunninghame, Master of Glencairn, turned from the gable window, his dark eyes sparking. He made no offer of his hand to Munro, nor any concession to

ordinary courtesy, his voice echoing under the high-raftered ceiling of Kilmaur's long hall.

“What kept you? The job is done?”

There was only one suitable answer. “She will provide the signal.”

“As she should. And willingly I hope.”

Silence.

“She can be trusted?”

“Oh yes...” Munro thought of the look with which Lady Margaret had dismissed him. “Your father is a dangerous man to cross. She understands that.”

“As do we all.” William's laugh was a bark, rolling over the clusters of men grouped in each deep window reveal, muting their conversations as if he swallowed them whole. Munro inclined his head to each group in turn. They numbered about thirty and all were known to him, albeit slightly, for all hailed from North Ayrshire or thereabouts and all shared allegiance to the Earl of Glencairn and the Cunninghame name. What they did not all share - clear, even from his cursory glance - was an equal inclination to answer this summons. Prominent among them was Clonbeith, noted both for intemperance and, more importantly for the current purpose, his skill with a hackbut. And with him, Robertland, another close kinsman, who no doubt thought to make capital from the venture. In contrast, Glencairn's brother, John, stared at the Cunninghame arms carved into the lintel above the hearth and shifted his weight back and forward from one foot to the other, as if he suffered from a stone in his boot.

Munro studied the floor. - Dear God... There is not a house within twenty miles that will not feel the weight of what we do.

“You took your time.” The Earl of Glencairn filled the doorway. “I had not thought to have to wait supper beyond our normal hour.”

“His horse...” William, with a sideways glance at Munro, lied fluently, “...a lameness delayed his return, but the news is good.”

Glencairn shot another look, a little warmer this time, at Munro, who forced himself to smile in return. Glencairn was, like his son, tall, but without William’s languid manner, though both took great stock of their dress. He wore the latest cartwheel ruff over burgundy trunk hose and a cream, brocaded doublet, lined with the same blood red. Stationing himself at the head of the table, he grasped the horn of the Cunninghame unicorn which crowned the back of the heavy chair, the gold ring on his forefinger catching the light.

Munro met his gaze. “The Montgomeries are expected at Langshaw tomorrow. Eglintoun and Braidstane both.”

“And Lady Margaret? She will do her duty?”

“She hangs a white table napkin from the battlement. It will be easy seen.”

“And numbers?”

“A small company only, some ten or twelve men.” The candle in front of Munro flared and he looked down, lest in the momentary brightness any trace of reluctance showed on his face. Clearly not fast enough.

William, picking his nail with a cheese-knife, glanced at Munro. “Have you not the stomach for this fight? I hadn’t placed you for a coward.”

A muscle twitched at the side of Munro’s eye. “I too know my duty.”

“See that you do.” Glencairn sat down, William on one side, Clonbeith and Robertland on the other. They attacked the supper with relish, as if the gathering was no more than a social occasion; their conversation spiced with the latest gossip: The rumour of the return of the pestilence to Perth; how the young minister Andrew Melville, with a taste for presbyterianism, was well set in St Andrews as a thorn in the

flesh to Bishop Adamson; the plummeting value of the pound Scots against the English currency. Munro settled near the foot of the table, toying with a cutlet, and noted that John Cunninghame, folded into a space halfway down the long bench, shredded his slab of beef as if he prepared it for a granddame with no teeth.

Clonbeith helped himself to a handful of pickled chestnuts. “This talk of a school at Stewarton. Word is the minister at Ayr subscribes to the notion that everybody should have their letters - lads and lassies both.”

“I have no problem with education for those who can make good use of it.” William looked around, as if daring challenge. “We have a minister in every parish and I daresay derive some benefit...” he acknowledged the ripple of laughter, “...but to educate folk beyond their station, that I can’t see the sense of. There may be reason in a bonnet laird with a grounding in French, if only to avoid being cheated when he buys his wine, but if we can all spout Cicero, who will clear the middens? Tell me that.”

“When you spout Cicero,” slivers of chestnut sprayed from Clonbeith’s mouth, “I’ll clear your midden myself.”

A louder burst of laughter, reaching the length of the table, so that William flushed, half-rose, his right fist clenched.

Glencairn was on his feet, thrusting back his chair, grasping William’s arm. “Save your spleen for the Montgomeries. We ride at dawn. I wish no thick heads riding with me.”

There was a hasty scraping back of benches as most of those present followed Glencairn and William from the hall. Munro slumped back onto the form, knowledge of the proposed ambush a band tightening around his chest. He reached for the ale - thick head or not, it is as well to dull tomorrow’s business.

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He was up and rousing himself under the pump in the corner of the yard while the sky was still black, the only sign of approaching dawn a grey edge to the heavy clouds that bunched overhead. He had a good head for ale, but had taken more than enough, even for him. It had been gone two in the morning, before he had finally drunk himself to a stupor, though no one would have guessed at it as he joined Glencairn. His boots were laced up to his knees, his doublet tightly buttoned against the rain moving in a sweep across the valley. William was already mounted, his black velvet doublet slashed with silver, a peacock feather in his hat, indicating that he had made no concession to the job in hand. Glencairn too was dressed with care, but the others were, like Munro, soberly attired and could have passed for gentlemen of any ilk.

“Easy to see who does the work,” Munro said in an undertone to John Cunninghame, who circled on the cobbles beside him.

The clatter of hooves covered John’s reply. “Have a care you don’t share your thoughts too widely. There are those who would gladly take the favour that your displacement might provide.”

Munro changed tack. “What do we wait for? Are we not all here?”

“That we are, but Lady Glencairn is bid bring the younger children to give us farewell.”

“So...Glencairn’s not as confident as he seems...” Munro broke off as the family appeared at the main door.

Glencairn didn’t dismount, only leaned down, to rest his hand on the youngest child’s head. Shy of her father, she pulled back and buried her face in her mother’s skirts.

“It isn’t the child’s blame.” Lady Glencairn spoke quietly. “She scarce knows her father...”

“See to it that you teach her then, madam.” Glencairn's voice was also quiet, but far from gentle.

She inclined her head and stepped back as he turned his horse, spurring it towards the gateway. Munro thought of his own farewell: of Kate, white-faced and taut, the twins round-eyed, uncertain. Of his forced cheerfulness. “This call - it may not signify. I could be gone a day or two only.” Of his equal failure to draw a satisfactory response.

Once through the gateway, they rode in a pack, tight at the front, straggling at the rear, according to the quality of the horse, or, more like, the fitness of the rider. Munro sat easily, his grip light, and moved forward without effort until he rode again at John’s side, but made no attempt at conversation, unable to think on anything other than the present affair. They had climbed beyond the cleared ground where cattle grazed, last season’s bracken crackling under-hoof: autumn-gold shot through with curled fronds of fresh green.

William paused on the brow of the hill, turned. “More eager now, Munro? Last evening I thought you less than comfortable with your duties.” His horse pranced backwards, nudging Munro’s, as if to emphasize the thinly veiled threat. “Do you wish it, we could relieve you of your place.”

Munro bent his head, re-gathered the reins and gave himself time to frame a reply. “I have no such wish. I thought only of the King. The talk is...”

William scowled. “Ah, James.” There was a contemptuous twist to his voice. “And we are to pass on our obligations while others hold to theirs? We have lost much to the Montgomeries, and do well to remember it. This call to court - it is an

opportunity to strike at their heart, that we cannot pass.”

“Revenge may not be so sweet and the King gets wind of it.”

“Who’s to tell?”

Munro stroked his thumb along the edge of the reins but refrained from answer, as William talked on.

“Annock is a goodly choice. We should have no trouble in accomplishing our present end.”

“And the timing is right.”

“You think it isn’t?” William glared at the rider who dunted him from the rear.

Munro hesitated. “At this pace I fear we make Annock too soon. With the need to keep the horses quiet, it may be that we should walk a distance.”

With a tightening of his face William slewed sideways, skirting round the riders in front of him until he reached Glencairn. Munro saw the heads bend together. Saw the sharp glance cast backwards towards him.

John Cunninghame’s voice at his shoulder. “Careful laddie. It is a thin line you tread. William may not be eager to face a musket, but he fancies himself with a rapier and is aye keen to show his prowess, though not in a game such as this.”

Munro turned. “I know, but there are times when he makes me fair sick with his dress and his airs. No doubt when it comes to the bit he will find a wee jobbie for himself that hasn’t danger in it.”

He saw the slight settlement of John’s shoulders. “For all that you arrived a mite late last night, you have a handle on the way we are to play it. Glencairn and William make straight for court and hope by that to keep the Cunninghame name clear.” There was scepticism in his voice, “We are charged with making as neat a job as we can, then those who are bid, to join them at Stirling, looking as clean as if they came

straight from home.”

“Neat is it?” Munro clenched the reins, so that Sweet Briar startled. “One hundred and thirty years of tit for tat and none the winner isn’t what I would judge ‘neat’. And for what? The bailiership? Precedence? Eleventh or twelfth earl? Does any of it signify?”

John waved Munro’s voice down, glanced about, kept his own voice low. “Glencairn doesn’t see the office of King’s Bailie of Cunninghame as a small matter. Nor did our father or grandfather before him. And in truth, to give the charge of the bailiewick over to a Montgomerie hardly seems a master stroke, for all that they were close cousins, indeed the kinship likely increased the affront...But you have the right of it - death breeds death - look in any direction you please and there is a ruin to testify that we are all the losers. It would be a fine thing if it was only the English we had to fear and not the sow who roots in our own byre.” His voice dropped further. “If I had a choice I would rather be anywhere but here, but we are bid and we have come and may pray we succeed. Else...”

Ahead of them, Glencairn had stopped. Below, the ground fell away sharply, the valley spread out like a plaid. The slopes swathed in the brown of last year’s heather were streaked with grey cuts where water ran in thin rivulets down the steep hillsides. In the valley bottom there was evidence of strip farming: turned earth for the growing of hay marching side by side with grazing land. A river snaked through the strips, the banking sharp.

He gestured downwards raising his voice to combat the wind. “We make good time and need not haste. Nevertheless, follow me close, till we make safe ground. If the Montgomeries see us now, then we must link like the best of friends, and our opportunity is lost.” He turned his horse, heading for the cover of the woods. Beyond

them, in the far distance, the topmost turrets of Langshaw reared. A rider broke from the trees as they approached and galloped towards them, slithering to a halt.

“Well?” Glencairn was abrupt.

“A clear signal. The Montgomeries are there. I didn’t have to go close.”

“You took your time then.” Glencairn was turning his horse as he spoke, wasting no effort on thanks.

They cut diagonally across the hillside towards another clump of woodland, and once among the trees spread out, each choosing their own route, but always keeping others in sight. It was a difficult ride: the horses easily spooked, the riders, although most would not have admitted it, also wary. Each time a woodpigeon was raised or a squirrel disturbed in the undergrowth, all looked about, seeing in the shadows the possibility of danger. It was a relief when they emerged at last through the treeline and saw above and beyond them the heather-covered hillside. Glencairn broke into a trot, leading the fan of riders towards the higher ground.

Without warning the rain came, heavy and straight, visibility reduced to almost nothing. The horses, wary of the soft ground, became nervous and difficult to handle and of necessity all slowed. As they crossed the skyline towards the hill that overlooked Annock, Munro steadied Sweet Briar, disappointment rising that there was little fear of being sighted.

Glencairn's plan was clear: to come up below the ford taking advantage of the natural cover the lie of the land provided. It would likely be a miserable wait. As the rain slid down his neck and trickled inside his jerkin, Munro felt for his gun and bag - hopefully drier than his clothes. Another thought, necessarily stifled - or perhaps better the pan or match be damp and the plan foiled without loss of face for anyone. He urged Sweet Briar onwards, the slick on her coat seeping through his hose where

his knees gripped. As if they crossed an invisible line, the rain stopped. Munro stood in his stirrups and looked back to where rain still fell, merging the valley into the sky, and off to the right a second edge, where the landscape returned, blurred and sodden. Silhouetted against it, another group of riders, moving, slowly it seemed, along the ridge.

The Montgomeries would come this way then. - Dear God, this is a price to pay for old ties.

In front of him, Glencairn had halted, motioning the riders to come up close. He swung his horse to face them, William also. Their twin expressions were evidence, if any was needed, that each was eager for this prey, yet each determined that hands other than their own be soiled. As the last straggler brought his horse to a halt, Glencairn raised a hand. In the silence, broken only by the soft snorting of horses, he said,

“Do you wait here for Eglintoun and his men, and when you are done, make for home. But separate quickly, that you do not draw undue attention.” He turned towards John Cunninghame. “A small company only is bid to court. You brother, and you...” his eyes swept the riders and fixed on Munro, “...you, Munro, make for Stirling. We will put it about that we look for you by nightfall.” He jerked his horse round. “See to it that we do not hear of today’s business from any other source.”

Munro urged Sweet Briar towards the ground that dipped steeply away from the ford. - No doubting the wisdom of Glencairn making an early appearance at court, but as for William, his was the cowardly choice.

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Glencairn and William were no more than an hour away when the first of the Montgomeries appeared on the brow of the hill. From his vantage point Munro

watched their coming, focusing fiercely on the horses, on the shrinking distance between them, his gun cocked and resting on his knee. He wasn't one to spend much time thinking on God, but as he waited, timing the moment, the thought came to him - if God is watching, I trust He sees the principals in this.

Behind Munro the rest of the Cunninghames slipped into position at his signal. His first shot took the leading rider in the belly. He saw him falling, blood spouting through the splayed fingers etched into his side. A second rider urged his horse forward, but before he could reach the water's edge, Clonbeith took him from the left, shooting him in the head at close range. The third rider turned his horse and drew his sword, shouting to the others to pull back. He was rushed by three Cunninghames at once; who carved him up as he toppled, blinded from the rush of blood in his eyes, spearing his own foot as he fell.

A lad, knocked sideways by the force of the shot that took him in the shoulder, was screaming as he was hauled from the saddle. Munro heard the sharp snap of his wrist as he landed, saw him kick upwards, the man who had pulled him from his horse doubling away, clutching his groin. The lad, his face drained of colour, was dragging himself onto his knees, his left hand dangling, a jagged edge of bone protruding like a dagger point from his cuff. Munro, his gun re-primed, took aim, but before he could fire Clonbeith plunged into the water, blocking Munro's line of sight, and smashed the pommel of his sword into the lad's face, stamping on his damaged wrist. Another scream: high-pitched and animal, as the lad made one last effort to twist away, Clonbeith's sword-slash taking him on his left side, ripping him open from armpit to thigh.

Out of the corner of his eye Munro saw the last of the Montgomeries, still mounted, turn, his sword raised. Munro swung and fired in one motion, but the shot,

higher than intended, took the man in the mouth. The impact tipped him from the saddle, his jaw exploding in a mess of cartilage and bone. He fell backwards onto a jumble of rocks and was scrabbling up again on one leg when from behind a second and third shot pitched him face first into the peat-muddied waters that swirled upwards to greet him.

Munro lowered his gun.

Clonbeith came up beside him, his voice betraying no distaste for the job just done.

“Do you remain and finish the business. The rest will ride on.” He paused and with barely concealed reluctance added, “And take my horse. You have further to go. He’s fresher and will ensure that you make good time to Stirling.”

And so it was left to Munro and to John Cunninghame to pick their way among the scattered bodies, searching for any life. There was a sour taste in Munro’s mouth as he splashed through the water and reached down to turn over the first body - Eglintoun the Montgomerie earl - to judge by the device stamped on his doublet buttons. He sprawled, one foot still trailing from the stirrup, the horse moving restlessly, trampling the sodden ground. Releasing the foot, Munro led the horse to solid ground. Braidstane, likewise identified by the initials woven into his saddlecloth, was trapped, his leg caught between two rocks as he swung slowly in the current, which sucked at him, but failed to carry him away. The youth that Munro should have dispatched cleanly had not Clonbeith intervened, lay, his sightless eyes open, one hand tangled in the mess of entrails that spewed from his side. Munro wheeled around, emptying his stomach onto the fast flowing stream.

They worked quickly, stripping the bodies of anything that could identify them, the horses likewise, before slapping each one firmly on the rump and watching as they

galloped away. The job done, it were as well that neither the victims nor those responsible would be easily identified. Fine chance that any part of the day's work would remain a secret for long: about as likely as snow falling in midsummer, but it was lack of ready proof that Glencairn sought.

As he followed John, already urging his horse up the slope towards the higher ground, Munro welcomed the return of the rain, thought of his wife - Pray God Kate doesn't hear anything of my part in this.

Pausing at the top of the rise, John echoed his feeling, "We may be thankful. A downpour will destroy all trace."

Even dry it would have been a silent journey, for neither had a heart for conversation. John gave his horse no guidance and Munro, noting the uncharacteristic carelessness, understood that he too was less than comfortable with what had been done. A few miles past Annock, the weather, though not their spirits, cleared, and they quickened their pace; so that it was still light as they entered Stirling and presented themselves at Glencairn's lodgings. Thanks were not forthcoming.

The earl looked up as they entered, but did not trouble to rise, "I trust you can wait. Dinner will be a little delayed. I had not thought to see you quite so soon." It was a question of sorts.

Munro sensed John searching for appropriate words. "It was a speedy journey, and nothing to hinder us. We came through heavy rain, but left it behind shortly past Annock, though there it seemed as if on for the day."

"Well, well. I have a room prepared." Glencairn turned to Munro. "You I trust will find lodgings nearby, but do not lag for we have a guest or two contracted to join us for dinner."

Munro acknowledged the dismissal and with it Glencairn's adroitness, not only in placing himself in Stirling timeously, but also in ensuring that they had independent witnesses to prove it.

Chapter 2.

Word came to Braidstane.

Grizel Montgomerie was in the solar, the castle accounts spread on the table before her. She had taken the ordering of the estate upon herself some three months since, when, following on her mother's sudden death, her father had shrunk in on himself, seeming unable to face even the most mundane of tasks. At first a duty, it had become an interest and a pleasure. Her absent brothers she knew had thought it but a temporary ploy, that would serve to distract her somewhat from her own troubles.

And with little time to grieve, she had indeed found the memory of her husband fading, so that the brief, if happy, interlude at Annan had become like a mist, that lay on her when she awoke, but evaporated so soon as the day was properly begun, her first, sharp grief of widowhood replaced by an understanding that fulfilment could come in more than one guise. Though debts remained aplenty, a situation difficult to remedy without ready cash, she took satisfaction in the knowledge that, college education or not, she had as fine a head for figures and as good a manner with the tenants as any man. Her father restored, she had been guiltily pleased when he was summoned to accompany the Earl of Eglintoun to court, leaving her once again in charge.

She rubbed at the ink-stained indent on her index finger as she rose to greet the messenger who appeared in the doorway, blocking out the light. Since her mother's death the lad had shuttled backwards and forwards between Ardrossan, the Eglintoun stronghold, and Braidstane, his increasing awkwardness keeping pace with his height. The corners of Grizel's mouth began to lift - he grows like a nettle; then froze, as she took in the hair hanging in damp shanks over his collar, the doublet and hose heavily

splattered with mud.

“Mistress Montgomerie.” He held his hat in his hands, twisted like rope. “I’m sent from Ardrossan...”

She felt a tightness grip her chest.

He tried again, raising his head and fixing his gaze somewhere above and beyond her left ear. “Your father and my lord and those who attended on them...”

She grasped the edge of the table to counteract the weakness in her legs.

“...Are murdered. Ambushed at Annock. We wouldn’t have known of it save that the king...”

She forced herself to look at him. “All of them?”

He was able only to nod, his mouth half-open as if he gagged on his tongue.

Subsiding onto the settle by the fire she gestured to the opposite chair, all thought of normal hospitality forgotten. “How?”

He stared into the flames, spoke low. “We know little, mistress, save that they left Langshaw, and expected to make Stirling for supper. The king they say, wasn’t best pleased when he found Eglintoun hadn’t come as he was bid and remarked on it with some sharpness. But it wasn’t till yesterday, when the messenger came from court seeking a reason for Eglintoun’s tardiness and demanding his immediate attendance, that we knew of anything amiss. My lady sent to Langshaw and others of us to follow the route...” He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple moving in his throat. “The horse was near home when we spied her...” he swallowed again. “It was my father’s - safe and steady - so that we knew...”

Grizel focused on the scars in the leather of his boots, their age and comfort apparent in the way they moulded to the shape of his feet, the heel worn down at one side. Water had run off and lay in a puddle around his feet, steaming gently with the

heat from the fire. The mud was beginning to dry on his hose, and she watched without her usual irritation as he picked at the drying flakes, his nails chipped and filled with grime. She looked up again, and, as if there had not been a long pause, asked,

“You found them?”

“When we came to the hill above Annock...” He balled his hand into a fist, the knuckles white, his words coming in spurts and strings, as if through a mincer. “...The bodies were jumbled...some face down in the stream...others half-in, half-out of the water...There was a lad...his side open to the sky...”

Grizel held her hands tight in her lap. “Were they...” she thought of wolves, “...ravaged?”

He shook his head.

“They were all there?”

“Aye.”

Grizel in her turn stared into the fire, seeing, in the dancing flames, the Montgomeries as they had gathered in the barmkin: her father newly upright on his horse, the youngest lad who betrayed his excitement at his first foray to court by circling impatiently as he waited for the others to mount. It was a moment before she realised that he was speaking again.

“The bodies...” he was biting at his lip, “...they are to be dressed, and sent by cart...” A deep breath, “...And those of the horses that are found...”

Grizel felt a surge of anger. “Horses?” She forced herself to breathe more slowly, to think of this lad, riding hard to bring the news, all the while battling griefs of his own and rising, placed a hand on his shoulder. “Come, Ishbel will show you to a chamber.”

He looked down, as if seeing his clothes for the first time: the mud-streaked hose, the jerkin heavy with rain. Gesturing awkwardly at his legs, said, “I have nothing... I didn’t think...”

It was what he did not say that Grizel understood: that he had been dispatched, in haste and without preparation, to distance him from the sight of the bodies face down in the stream-bed. To bar him from that other journey, no doubt already underway: the rhythm of hoofbeats hammering across the moors: crops to be torched, doors to be splintered to kindling, steel to be drawn without mercy. A vision that fleetingly found an answering leap in her, the accompanying shame of it sharp. Vengeance, she thought, isn’t God’s. Not here. Not now.

* * *

Morning dragged in with a wind that rattled the casements and chased smoke down the chimney, funnelling it out into the solar. Grizel’s response: to pile up the fire so that it blazed constantly, keeping the smoke at bay; trying and failing to ward off the images that had invaded her dreams and now crowded her waking mind also. All night she had been a child again: bug-eyed, huddled between her brothers on the turret stair, her knees pulled up to her chin, her nightgown tucked under her feet against the rising chill; listening outside the door of the hall to the tales of other butcherings. Boyds against Stewarts; Maxwells against Johnstones; Kennedys, who, failing another family to fight, savaged amongst themselves.

Her brothers had delighted in the telling and had honoured each fresh atrocity by playing out old Montgomerie wounds: legends from their grandfather’s time, but well remembered and oft rehearsed for all that. They brandished their wooden swords, hacking and slashing at each other with whoops and cries as they circled the stump of the old castle on the hill behind Braidstane. Her part: the lady to be rescued, her bonds

loosed just in time to save her from the flames, smoke from the makeshift fire of twigs curling around the barrel she perched on. Or the one surviving child hidden among the gorse, emerging to their calls, hair tangled, arms scratched. Or, least comfortable of all, the grieving widow who swooned at the news of her family all gone and required to be revived by a liberal dousing with bog water. For Grizel the child, the stories had been a delicious shiver that rickled the length of her spine.

Grizel the adult had shivered in a very different way when, periodically, news of that sort came, and each time had thanked God that their own family enmities seemed, if not dead, at least to slumber. This new awakening so brutal, so unexpected, so impossible to thole. And yet... staring into the flames, her eyes rubbed red, the tears, which had eluded her on the previous evening washing her cheeks raw, she thought perhaps she should have expected some ill thing to follow hard on her mother's death, her own widowhood: for troubles aye came in threes. And by what right should my family be immune from the sickness that has plagued Scotland for more generations than anyone would care to remember, and our own county no healthier than the rest? She stamped on a shower of sparks that arced onto the floor from an exploding log. And thought of Hugh. Eldest he might be and with a temper to match his hair, but pray God she could convince him to halt the madness.

She didn't know how, or in what fashion, to communicate their father's murder to her brothers and in the end sent word to George in London, as the nearest, charging him with the task of informing the others. Then there was nothing to do but wait, first for the bodies, then for her brothers, her father's funeral delayed till their return. For the rest, they buried them together: a single stone to tell the horror.

Chapter 3.

Munro was in an alehouse half way up Stirling's High Street, rehearsing his frustration at the enforced stay at court to a pair of lurchers sprawling by the turf fire. Their coats were dull and matted, their eyes oozing, though whether from the smoke or infection it was impossible to tell. One scratched sporadically at a bald patch behind his ear, likely the result of a tick. The Cunninghames had been five days at court, and had, as far as Munro could gauge, accomplished little, barring Glencairn's small satisfaction as James cried Eglintoun for his tardiness, a satisfaction quickly dissipated as news of the murder came from Ardrossan, forcing him to busy himself professing outrage at the deaths.

Munro was not drunk, nor even nearly so, but boredom and forced inactivity weighed heavy on him and drove him to a moment of carelessness. He shook his head at the dogs. "...Who believes him?"

One, the younger by a good margin, thumped his tale in response.

"You're right." Munro glanced round. - Dangerous talk. Fortunate that all attention was focused on a dwarf of a man with wild hair that sprouted in random tufts of brown and white, who was perched on a table-top near to the door, gabbling. Interested in anything that might relieve the tedium, Munro swung on his stool, prepared to be amused; but catching the name 'Montgomerie', buried his head again in his tankard, an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He forced himself to call for another drink and downed it as if he had the whole day to waste, watching and listening to the man's tale with every appearance of appreciation. The kernel of it, that someone had been careless and word was everywhere about that blame for the Montgomerie murders lay at Glencairn's door.

Afterwards, he headed straight for the Cunninghame lodgings. And found John.

“Where’s Glencairn? Have you heard the news?”

John was matter of fact. “Gone to James to make claim that some far-out connection has over-reached themselves.”

“I know now how Peter must have felt at the High Priest’s fire. It was all I could do not to react when I heard the clack. I was waiting for the challenge: ‘Aren’t you with the Cunninghames?’” Then, as John’s words penetrated, “How far out?”

“Far enough to pass you by.” John injected a note of reassurance into his voice. “Besides, you were here with us. We may both have reason to be grateful for the care that was taken to ensure our timely arrival was noted.”

“I was thinking of asking leave to go home.”

“I wouldn’t advise it.” John poked his toe at the fire that sputtered in the hearth. “If, that is, you want to reach it in one piece. Worse news will come and when it does, I for one will be glad to linger. There is nowhere safer than close to the King.”

He was right. By the end of the fortnight, word of other atrocities came almost by the hour, until the number of Cunninghames, fallen or fled, surpassed that of Montgomeries killed at the ford. Munro, directed by Glencairn, dipped in and out of the alehouses and taverns that clustered below the castle precincts, reporting daily the grim tally. Few of those gathered at Kilmaurs before the ambush had escaped.

He brought word of Robertland, one of Glencairn’s closest kin. “He is put to the horn.”

Glencairn, staring out the window onto the cobbles below, spoke without turning. “That I knew.”

“And has gone to Denmark.”

“A chill choice.”

William, lolling on a bench, looked up, swung his legs to the floor, headed for

the ale. “France is gey crowded with Scottish exiles the now. No doubt he thinks to find a better billet.”

Shame stabbed Munro. “It is said that many, having the misfortune to carry the Cunninghame name are, though innocent, likewise forced to flee their homes.”

William raised his tankard. “You are fortunate then, on two counts. You aren’t at home, and your name isn’t Cunninghame.”

John saw Munro out.

At the top of the steps they halted. “When will it end?”

“Soon, I hope...The worst is likely over.” John spoke with apparent confidence, but Munro, reading his eyes, knew it to be a lie.

And so it proved.

The fate of Clonbeith was whispered everywhere, and received variously in shock or horror or gleeful malice. Munro refused the offered dinner and stayed with the Cunninghames long enough only to convey the message, revulsion clear in every syllable, his preface stark. “I think it probably correct in essentials, if not in each particular, though it may have gained something in the telling. Credited with leading the massacre...”

At his side, John shifted.

“...Eglintoun’s brother and others with him carried the pursuit to Hamilton. A little money spent, they found Clonbeith out in a chimney...” Munro swallowed, continued, “...Pollock, he that is son-in-law to Langshaw, hauled him down and, it is said, hacked him to pieces on the spot.”

William took a seat at the table, lifted a knife and began to carve a side of ham. “A clever, if bloody way to distance himself from the Montgomerie murders.”

As if to himself Munro said, “I have Clonbeith’s horse.”

“That I imagine,” said Glencairn, “is the least of his troubles.”

John, his glance flicking towards his brother turned Munro away from the table.

“If you cannot eat, at least have a drink before you go.”

The last rumour Munro brought to them was of Lady Margaret Langshaw.

“Gone to Ireland it seems, and not expected to return. I think now that we are all accounted for. Perhaps we can go home.”

Glencairn nodded. “Can’t say I’m sorry. A respite from James will be welcome. You talked of your brother. Send him to Kilmaurs: we will make a position for him there.”

It was at once a recognition of obligation and a dismissal. In the narrow wynd that dropped towards the lower town, Munro stumbled over a pile of rubbish lying in the drain, scattering chicken bones across the cobbles. Half-decomposed cabbage leaves and assorted peelings stuck to his boot and he carried the sour whiff to his lodging, like a guilt impossible to quell.

* * *

He returned home, wearied and with a conscience and stomach alike uneasy; even the sight of the sheep pens prepared for lambing and the fresh thatch on the stable roof failing to raise his spirits. To be met with stony silence and a chill in the atmosphere, indicating that a whisper of some sort had beaten him. The presence of the twins clamouring for attention protected him from immediate censure, but alone in their chamber Kate rounded on him.

“A day or two only? It may not signify?”

He reached out, but she twisted away as if his touch would soil her.

“The Cunninghames have lost much.” It was an unconscious echo of William.

“The half of Ayrshire has lost much, and over many years.” She sucked in air,

as if to fan a flame. "Indeed all of Scotland is salted with old rivalries that erupt, in season and out of it, like boils, which, doctored or not, leave scars aplenty to mar the landscape. Must we have part in it?" She took a handful of twigs from the basket by the hearth, snapped them into kindling. "It is a dirty business, and no-one the winner, save perhaps the coffin-makers and clothiers who aye make good money of men's folly. Cunninghame or Montgomerie, it makes no odds...Dear God to think more of obligation than our children."

He wanted to protest that it had been their children he thought of, and her...and her...for to refuse Glencairn... but risked only, "I did but as I was bid; as I was bound to do."

"No-one is bound - save by the laws of God." Turning her back, she unpinned her hair, snuffed the candle, spoke into the darkness. "There is always a choice. If this is yours, do not look to me to share it."

He lay, the centre of the bed a chasm beyond which Kate stretched, rigid, unwelcoming. - Small consolation that women did not fully understand such matters; that it was not so easy to slough off inherited ties; that there were unpalatable duties in this life. And, sleep eluding him, he found it impossible to banish entirely the sight of the bodies at the ford. Clearest in his mind the mutilated youth close to Braidstane. Though likely younger than his own brother, Archie, the build and colouring was sufficiently similar to provide a constant reminder of what had been done in the name of loyalty. He thought on Glencairn's pledge; decided to let Archie go. For didn't the lad itch to get to court and had plagued long since for permission to take himself to Kilmaurs?

Perhaps Braidstane had been equally pressed.

* * *

He rode to town to call on his mother, leaving his horse in the care of an ostler and picking his way through the clutter of buildings that jostled the Mercat Cross. He had never understood her need, following the death of his father, to replace the fresher air and relative quiet of Broomelaw with the bustle of a townhouse, but so she had chosen, and there she had stayed. He presented her with a piece of Flemish lace. "It is quite the fashion and I thought to bring a little of court home to you."

Mary fingered the lace.

He noted her stillness - she also has heard something. I might have saved the effort, and my silver.

After a moment, she looked up. "There is something I thought to say to you."

A knot tightened in the pit of his stomach - what was done was done and it did no good whatever to waste time in regrets.

"Glencairn's retinue is growing?"

He was unsure of where she was headed. "There are always those who seek to rise."

She held his gaze, her pupils dark and distended, the irises reduced to a blue smudge around the edge. "There is talk...though I haven't heard it direct..."

Waiting, Munro thought - she plays me like a fisherman, letting out and reeling in, reducing my resistance little by little, before she comes to the landing.

"A rumour only..." she continued, "...but likely enough; of Archie, and a girl, and perhaps a wedding. I had thought you wouldn't welcome the drain on your purse." She bit her lip, as if she spoke reluctantly and he was filled with a grudging admiration. "If Glencairn seeks other followers...you might look to your brother, else he will be always hanging on your cloak-tail."

Relieved that her thoughts had not been running on his own activities and glad

that he could claim prior thought on the matter he said, “Already done. Glencairn has promised him a place. Indeed, Archie agitates to go and I would have sent him already, were it not for the lambing.”

“You’ve managed without him before and can again.” She smiled and touched the lace on her lap. “This is a fine piece, and well made, I am grateful for it.”

Understanding that her gratitude extended beyond the lace he escaped before she could question him further.

* * *

With a welcome spell of fine weather carpeting the woods in aconites: a splash of yellow that should’ve cheered anyone, Munro sought to smother the memory of the massacre. And without his brother’s face constantly before him might have succeeded, but for Kate. He caught the shadow of it in her eyes each time she looked at him, her instinctive recoil from even accidental touch stretching the distance between them. What speech was necessary: for the running of the household, the sake of the children, was edged with ice. The easy camaraderie that had been the touchstone of their marriage and that he had not thought to truly value until it seemed lost, become a silence beyond bearing. And the likelihood that it wouldn’t be the end of the matter, at home or abroad, lay in the back of his mind, like an awkwardly placed slub in the weave of a bedsheet: impossible to ignore however you turned.