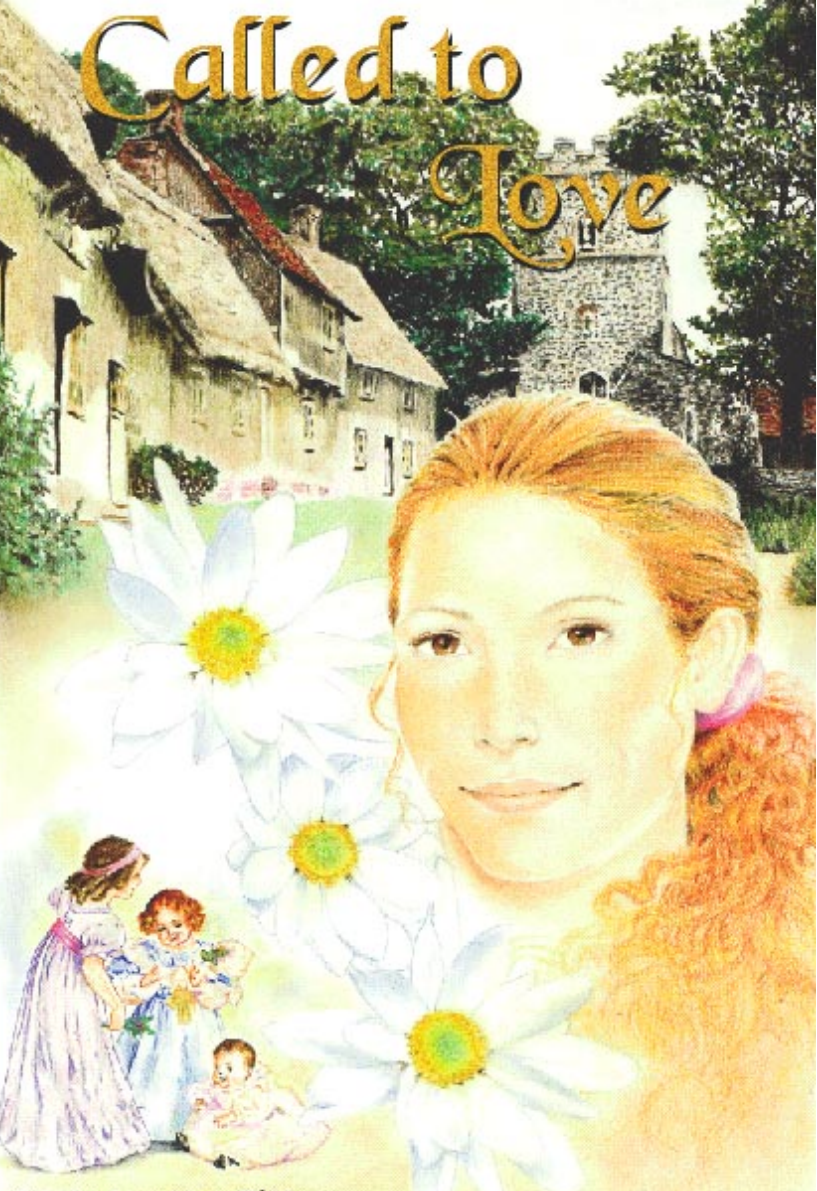


Called to Love

The book cover features a central illustration of a woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair, looking gently towards the viewer. She is surrounded by several large, white daisies with yellow centers. In the background, there is a picturesque village scene with traditional stone buildings and a church tower. The title 'Called to Love' is written in a golden, ornate font at the top left.

Called to Love AND OTHER STORIES

Includes the Titles:

**Kirsty's Glen • The Stranger from Beyond
The Life & Times of Mr. Stoneheart**

CONTENTS

CALLED TO LOVE	1
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>135</i>
KIRSTY'S GLEN	139
<i>The English Civil War & Scotland.....</i>	<i>188</i>
THE STRANGER FROM BEYOND	193
<i>Afterword by Jesus</i>	<i>236</i>
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MR. STONEHEART	239
GLOSSARY	265

Called to Love

As told by George Eliot

PREFACE

Many who began their lives with noble aspirations and lofty hopes have seen their dreams tumble all around them when they met some obstacle or crisis. Yet others, without aspiring to achieve the same noble goals of being of service to mankind, found opportunities right where many others had left them—at a crossroads with seeming defeat or impossibility. Common souls have been made uncommon through difficulty. These are those who, by accepting their suffering graciously, were gifted with a special ability to persevere, to reach out of the small confines of their world to touch a wounded body, to comfort a broken heart, to go where angels fear to tread, to forget their own sorrow that they might wipe a tear from another's eye, to love without limit.

Perhaps some of these souls never made a mark in history deep enough to be praised and exalted the world over, but their selflessness left an unforgettable impression upon the hearts of those in the small circle of people they reached. And who knows but that one day, when rewards are handed out in that City in the sky, the greatest rewards will not be given to the mighty, the powerful and the prestigious, but to the humble, the caring, those who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs, those who heeded the call to love. These are the heroes in God's great hall of fame. For the meek shall inherit the Earth.

May this brief glimpse into the life of a simple, yet brave and loving woman encourage you to reach out in love to all whom you can, for some day you will come to learn that we are all called to love.

Chapter 1

The afternoon sun shone high amid fluffy clouds, and its happy rays covered the wheat fields so that the meadows looked like a big, beautiful golden quilt. At the edge of the field was a gorgeous blue lake with gentle ripples that shimmered in the sun.

The men were out in the field, harvesting rich bushels of wheat and grains to store for the winter. The women worked tirelessly, making their homes sweet and heavenly dwellings, and filling the air with the appetizing smells of freshly baked bread and homemade stew.

As the afternoon rolled on, the last bit of sunlight shone in through the window of a small room at the corner of one farmhouse, and rested gently on the delicate face of a ten-year-old girl. Jeanette always loved this time of day. It seemed to warm her whole being and create a sense of newness and enthusiasm for life, simple as it was for a crippled ten year old. Her thick bundle of reddish hair, tied up in a worn pink ribbon, blended delightfully with the sunshine that filled her room.

“Thank You, sweet Lord, for such beauty and glory,” she whispered, gazing intently out the window into the colorful sky. “And thank You for my family,” she continued as she wiggled in her bed, unruffling the blanket that covered her frail legs and letting the sun’s rays fall gently on them.

Her mind drifted, and the years rolled back to the days when she used to run, leap and skip in the fields with her friends and her older brothers and sister. A smile spread across her face and filled her dreamy brown eyes with delight, as she remembered the freedom and joy she felt when the wind brushed against her cheek, or sent her skirt

flying into the air as she ran and played. Those days seemed so perfect, so heavenly, almost like a dream.

Life had not been easy for Jeanette since the carriage accident that left her crippled nearly four years earlier. Somehow, though, the tragedy had produced a sweetness and gentleness of spirit in the child. Jeanette wiped away a tear that sneaked silently out of the corner of her eye and rolled down her dimpled cheek. Sad as she felt when returning to reality, Jeanette loved to think on those good old days, playing in the fields. Somehow those reflections gave release to her spirit, which was bursting with life and youthful ambition.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Her father had come to take his youngest child down to dinner, a time very much anticipated by the spirited youngster who spent most of the day in her tiny room. Father carried her ever so carefully down the old and creaky steps of their humble farmhouse, until they came to the homey yet simple dining room where the family had gathered around the table.

After being greeted with smiles from each of her four brothers and her sister, Claire, she cheerfully exclaimed, "Oh, Mother! Thank you for laying such a bountiful feast before us!"

"And thank you, angel, for gracing us with your presence!" responded her mother.

Such sweet exchanges were not uncommon in their family. Though they were not afforded many of the luxuries and comforts of life, the one treasure that they were not lacking was an abundance of love and care for one another.

After dinner, mother sat at the piano, and soon their voices filled the house, sounding a tune of gratitude and hope that gave strength to their tired bodies, and courage to bravely carry whatever

burdens had been or were yet to be placed upon their shoulders.

After a pleasurable evening together, everyone retired for a well-deserved rest. But Jeanette stirred restlessly in her bed, happy, at least, for some action as she viewed a distant thunderstorm through her window. She enjoyed the evidence of her Watcher's great power and majesty as He "rumbled through the sky"—a child's interpretation of the loud thunderclaps that disrupted the otherwise peaceful night.

Every rainstorm sent Jeanette's imagination to a world beyond; she pictured her dear Lord—her Watcher, as she called Him—watching over the villages and towns, caring for the little ones as they slept. The sound of thunder was the resonant pounding of hooves as His heavenly horses galloped through the night sky. The lightning was the torch that led Him through all the dark villages, straight to the cots and cradles where His "earthly angels" slept. She wiggled with excitement at the thought of Him coming to watch over her, all snug and warm in her little cot. It seemed she could feel Him gently stroke her hair in the soft moonlight.

Her gratefulness burst out in the form of a prayer: "Thank You, my dear Watcher, for caring for me! Even though I may not have legs strong enough to carry me swiftly everywhere I would like to go, thank You for using Your magical legs to come to me. Thank You for watching over me, keeping me company, speaking with me, and playing with me. Keep me this night as I sleep. May Your angels be 'round my bed, and may they watch over my entire family. Amen."

Jeanette could see the flashes of lightning and hear the thunderclaps draw nearer. She was thrilled to watch the majestic and powerful display in the

sky, and to feel the sense of security that enfolded her heart like a set of strong fatherly arms, when she knew her great Watcher was near. As she tossed and turned in her cot, her thoughts wandered to those dreamy days of dancing and playing, and then back to the excitement of her Watcher coming to pay His rainstorm visits—tending to the welfare of the little ones all over the world as they slept.

She smiled as she felt a beam of light warm her face. *Could it be morning already?* she thought to herself. *My, how the night passes ever so quickly.* But after opening her eyes only to find the night and stars as she had seen them just moments before, she blinked to see if she was dreaming or not.

Then she saw it again.—A light was travelling towards her room, growing larger as it neared her window.

“He’s come! He’s come!” she said in an excited whisper as she lifted her head and propped herself up on her elbows. “My Watcher has come to tend to me!” Jeanette wiggled, exhilarated at the thought. She wished so much that she could jump out of her bed to bid her family come and see such a wondrous sight, but she knew her legs could carry her only in that world of dreams she visited each night.

Closer and closer the light drew to her bed, enveloping her in warmth and love such as she’d never known. She closed her eyes contentedly, and opened her arms wide to embrace the light. In an instant, she found herself embracing her Watcher, her Father, Friend and Savior. Astounded at first that her daydreams were materializing, she put her hands on either side of His face and stroked His cheeks, bathing her heart in the love that emanated from His kind eyes. Her surprise turning to elation, she threw her arms around Him and squeezed Him as tightly as her little self could.

“Thank You, thank You, thank You!” was all that her lips could utter.

“It was your faith that brought Me here,” said the deep, but gentle and reassuring voice.

The hours passed like moments as she told Him of her happiest moments, shared her loftiest aspirations, her memories and dreams of when she could run and play, her love for Him, and a hopeful curiosity at what could possibly await her in the months and years ahead. He in turn held her tiny hand, stroked her rosy cheeks, told her stories of the world beyond the stars, and of how her simple life was to blossom in days to come. She beamed as she listened to His soft, love-filled voice.

After what seemed like only a few moments of happiness she’d never known could exist, she snuggled up to Him and rested her head on His broad shoulders. She drifted into peaceful slumber, a smile still lingering on her delicate face, for she had partaken of Kingdom Come.

The Watcher looked down on her tenderly, nodding His head with fatherly pride, reminiscing on one of His days on Earth when He told His disciples, “Suffer the little children to come unto Me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Chapter 2

The next days and weeks passed quickly for Jeanette. Frail as she was, she couldn't do much, but her cheerfulness brought joy to her loved ones as they labored. She kept the special night when her Watcher came to her, close to her heart—a secret between her and her Best Friend.

While she seemed to grow weaker by the day, by contrast her spirit and faith seemed to grow all the stronger. She trusted that one day her life would blossom like He said it would.—But how? When? She knew not. Hers was only to trust and have patience, no matter how long the days and nights, the months and years. As courageous as her spirit was, the little strength that her tiny frame possessed only seemed to decrease as time pressed steadily onward. Illness took hold, and some mornings Jeanette awoke to see her family all kneeling beside her bed, praying that God would increase her strength and set her on the road to recovery.

The autumn passed swiftly, bringing the family to the threshold of winter. It was their earnest prayer that she would regain her strength in time for Christmas, a time they all—especially Jeanette—cherished most of any time of the year. All sorrow, longing, and dissatisfaction were transformed into incessant praise to their Maker the whole Christmas through. How different it would be without their angel! They prayed and prayed, pleading for her healing.

One morning Mother came to look on her angel's pale face, to meditate and commune with her Savior upon her knees. Father crept quietly in behind her, laying a comforting hand on Mother's shoulder, and joined her in silent prayer.

Meanwhile, Jeanette's happy self was in another world. She was thinking again of those days when she used to run and skip in the fields, the days when she was well enough to visit the other families in the village, play with the other children, bring flowers to the sick or the mourning, and share gladness to everyone she met with the blithe and cheery spirit she had been blessed with. It was all so different now.

Many a time, Jeanette's mind couldn't help but wander back a few years and relive those happy moments; but this time, as she pictured those wonderful days, she became that lively, healthy, dancing child again. Everything was the same as it had been back then: the neighbors' houses, the dusty roads she had skipped down, and the flowers she had picked to give to some lonely soul. She was there again!

Her awe was disrupted by a peal of laughter from behind her. She turned to see her friends from the village playing in the street. They ran to her, hugging and enjoying each other's company once more. She could hardly believe it! The past few days had almost been like a constant dream, and now she could scarcely differentiate between her dreams and memories, and reality.—Had her Watcher brought her dreams to life? She looked around again. A soft heavenly glow seemed to rest upon everything she saw. She quickly turned to her friends once more, but they were still; those same happy expressions were on their faces, only motionless as a painting. Her curiosity and wonder seemed to grow with each heartbeat. She heard singing in the distance, soft and gentle voices, yet rich and full like a choir.

"What are they saying?" she wondered aloud, and strained to make out the words.

Carry on, sweet child. Carry on. Soon the night will end and then will come the dawn. Yet a rosebud, growing still, you will soon blossom to perform God's will. Carry on, sweet child. Carry on.

The voices faded into the distance, and the scene that surrounded her began to spin. She instinctively closed her eyes. The chorus still ringing in her ears was now interrupted by soft voices that spoke in an urgent tone.

"Look, look! She's stirring. Quickly, get her something to drink."

She opened her eyes, and upon seeing the two faces of those she loved most on this Earth, Jeanette smiled with the same sweetness that was always hers. Her spirit still very much alive, she tried to collect herself and muster up enough strength to tell them of her wonderful experience, but they quieted her.

"Hush, angel, you must speak to us later. Rest now, that God may bring you back to full health."

A feeble attempt at a smile swept across Jeanette's face as she fell back into peaceful sleep.



Christmas was just around the corner and Jeanette was feeling stronger and stronger. Every day she pondered the words of that heavenly chorus, which she could still hear clear as ever, *Carry on, sweet child, carry on. Soon the night will end and then will come the dawn. Yet a rosebud, growing still, you will soon blossom to perform God's will. Carry on, sweet child. Carry on.*

"Yet a rosebud ... you will soon blossom to perform God's will," she repeated aloud and propped herself up, resting on her elbows.

"What would a little crippled one like me be able to do to perform God's will?" she mused. "Oh well, how shall I know?" She clenched her fist resolutely

in her own childish way and determined, "Well, come what may, God help me to carry on."

What she did know was that her Watcher had orchestrated everything, and she trusted Him with all her heart. Once again her pensiveness was disrupted by some commotion in the house. A little girl, not more than five years old, had been found at the edge of the field in the cold and snow. She had wandered to their home, lost it seemed, and fainted from the cold and exhaustion. They rushed her into the spare room, wrapped her in warm blankets and when she was settled in a sound sleep, everyone took to the kitchen for a cup of tea and some discussion.

Where could she have come from? was the big question on everyone's minds. Happenings like this were unheard of in such a quiet, rural area as theirs.

"Did she say her name?" one of the boys asked.

"I asked her," said Father, "but I could only hear what sounded like 'Ana,' and the rest was too faint for me to understand."

All sorts of speculations went flying, ranging from the amusing to the hideous. But Mother wisely ended the conversation by saying, "Let us remember the words of the Master, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' We'll care for her as best we can and then try to locate her family on the morrow."



The night passed by quickly, and everyone awoke to a shout by Jeanette's oldest brother Fredrick, "She's gone!"

In no time the family was spread throughout the house and across the fields, in a desperate attempt to find the child that had so mysteriously come across their path.

Jeanette folded her hands in earnest prayer for the lost little one. As she opened her eyes for a moment to peer out the window by her bed, she saw a large husky figure in the distance, carrying their mysterious visitor and disappearing into the forest just beyond their farm.

"I see her! I see her!" shouted Jeanette. After describing what she saw to her family, her father wrung his hands in despair, realizing that it was too late to go after them. Everyone knelt for a moment of prayer for the little one's safe-keeping.

As Mother led the prayer, they heard a loud knock on the door. Father gently unlocked the bolts and the door swung wide open. Two heavy men accompanied a smaller, distinguished-looking, elderly gentleman with striking blue eyes.

"May we come in?" asked the distinguished man in a gruff voice.

Not knowing what else to do, Father replied, "Why, yes," and ushered them in.

The elderly man took Father aside and said in a quiet, yet firm tone, "I am not at liberty to explain why, but you and your family must take care that you never again speak of the little child who was in your home for the night!"

Father opened his mouth as if to explain, but no words could come out. He was awestruck, confused and mystified at it all, and his face showed it. Father looked deep into the man's eyes, which seemed to hint of a greater mystery than their little family was ready to be a part of.

The elderly man, who never gave his name, pulled out a small satchel from within his coat and whispered, "Silence in return for this." And suddenly as they had come, the three mysterious visitors departed.

Father opened the purse and he and Mother

looked at each other in wide-eyed surprise! Gold! Enough to keep a farmer and his family for years to come!

“What could be so precious and so worthy a cause to spend this much in order to ensure that no secret comes out of our mysterious finding of yestermorn?” Father queried.

“Oh God, help that little child to be all right. Help no harm to befall her! Keep her under the shadow of Thy wings,” Mother cried.

What an awesome turn of events for such a quiet, humble family! Father and Mother decided it was best to keep this part of the mysterious three men’s visit—the gold, that is—a secret from the children for now.

Finishing the conversation, Father turned to walk up the stairs when a man in a black coat standing outside one of the living room windows caught his eye. Father stopped to look, and the man, upon being discovered, quickly ran off.

Still looking out the window, Father turned to Mother, “I know not what the future holds, nor what great mystery has come upon us and blanketed our home and simple life with anxiety so suddenly, but I caution you to take great care that none of the children leave the property alone for the time being. They must also never speak of this little girl, just as the man warned. This matter is well beyond our knowledge and ability to help, yet perhaps there was some reason God led her across our path. I feel that we should seek His divine wisdom as to what we might do, all the while entrusting the child to God’s care and wisdom.”

Mother agreed, and added, “Yet we must not instill any fear into our children’s young hearts. We must speak faith, for our Heavenly Father doeth all things well.”

“You’re right, Mother. You’re very right,” said Father, as the two of them walked arm in arm to tell the children.

Up in Jeanette’s room, where the others had by now gathered, Father and Mother disclosed the events of the morning to the children.

“What do you think they’re doing with her?” One of the boys piped up.

“It’s awfully strange if you ask me, all the things that have so suddenly happened upon us,” said another.

“Let’s just hope that she’s not in any trouble,” said Jeanette’s sister.

“Alright, alright children. Now is a time when we must speak faith. Not only that, but we must pray. For there is nothing that lies outside the power of prayer except that which lies outside God’s will, and I know that it is not God’s will that one of His little ones should perish. He promised.”

In spite of the gold, that night Father wrote a letter to their magistrate, outlining the strange events that had befallen them that morn, and requesting that some inquiry be made. They did not dare to try and investigate the matter any further themselves, nor did they tell their children about the letter. But by some strange twist of fate, unbeknownst to Father or Mother, the letter never reached its destination. Yet all that while, the family upheld the dear girl in their prayers.

It took some time before the family got over the initial surprise of the events that brought such excitement to their quiet home. But the children were obedient, and not a word was spoken about the little girl who had mysteriously come and gone. Nor did they speculate anymore. Their life returned to normal, and as the years passed, it all seemed more and more like a strange dream, almost as if it had never happened.

Chapter 3

In the years that followed, Jeanette's four older brothers and sister married and left the farm to establish their own homes and lives. But they visited often, bringing added "bundles of joy,"—their children—with them, to the delight of a set of proud grandparents and "Aunt Jeanette." Jeanette, as she grew older, had learned to walk short distances with the use of a rudimentary pair of crutches, though not without great difficulty. Each step was laborious and slow.

Father and Mother advanced in years, and Father, now taken ill, soon drew close to the threshold of the life to come. Mother cared tenderly for him, and Jeanette spent many days at his side, cheering him, praying for him, and comforting him. After many years, she had finally told him about the memorable visit her loving Watcher made to her bedside when she was just a young girl, which brought tears to her dear father's eyes.

He whispered, "God must love you dearly, my child.... He must love you very dearly." He stroked her red hair, and smiled with fatherly pride at his beautiful, now teenage daughter. Those that knew her in her childhood would recognize her in an instant, even if they had not seen her for many a year. She still had those same innocent, sparkling brown eyes and a gentle face framed by a rich bundle of red wavy hair inherited from her mother, and she still wore it gathered at the back with a ribbon.

"He has made you weak so that His strength, His love, can come through. What a privilege, darling! What an honor!" Father continued.

Mother gazed lovingly on the two of them from the door, and a tear gently rolled down her cheek.

She knew Father didn't have much time left. His life had been full and rich with God's blessings, and she knew he was soon to enter into the joy of the Lord.



Early one morning, Mother awoke to hear Father mumbling softly.

"I don't think it will be much longer, my love," he whispered. "My strength is nigh gone, and I have prayed for the Master to be with you and our beautiful daughter, as He has promised." Mother, feeling that the time was at hand, kissed him and then ran and helped Jeanette to the room.

They each sat on either side of him, holding his hands and ready to bid farewell.

"Mother, I thank thee for thy tender love and graces; for being a pillar of faith and strength to me..." A sob shook the old saint's body "...for being there when I needed you."

She wished she could speak, but no words came out, only tears sparkling with love.

Finally she managed to whisper, "I thank you, my love, for a lifetime of love and unshakable faith in our Master."

Father gently squeezed her hand in gratitude, then turned to Jeanette.

"My little Jeanette, do not cry. I am going ahead of you, into our Savior's presence, which He has privileged you to experience a touch of even while on this Earth. My heart and my prayers will always be with you and Mother. God knows they will. Stay true to your calling. Forget it not. No matter what this calling brings your way, stay true. Stay true...." Father's voice trailed off, and with a smile of gracious surrender, he passed from the arms of his loved ones into the arms of his Savior.

Mother and Jeanette held each other a long

while. They knew they had been blessed to have such a saintly man to love and be loved by.



Several days after Father's passing, Jeanette asked Mother, "What do you think God would have us do now? Without Father to care for, it will be awfully quiet here. The brothers and Claire have now all got lives of their own, and..."

Mother's eyes lit up.

"What is it, Mother?"

"Father and I never told you children, so as not to worry you, but do you remember those three men who visited our house that one morning when the little girl disappeared?"

"I do. But that seems so many, many years ago. I hardly remember if it happened."

"It did. I have the proof." Mother beamed. "The men requested silence in return for this." She showed Jeanette the bag of gold.

"Father wrote our magistrate about the events of that strange morn, but aside from that, there was nothing we could do, ignorant and secluded as we are here on this farm. So we prayed for God's will and His protection upon the little girl who He allowed to come to our doorstep. Then we decided to keep this until such a time as He would show us what to do with it."

"So what are we to do with this?"

"I've had a secret aspiration for a long time, Jeanette, but I had to wait until the time was right, until your father needed me no longer. I know there are many in the village who are poor, sick, and uneducated, and whom we could help in many ways. We have no need for this farm now, just you and I. We could move to the village and live off of this gold for many years, and spend our time helping those in need."

“Splendid, Mother! But will we have the strength to do all this, you and I? You are not in your prime anymore, and I cannot walk!—Even with the help of crutches my strength will hardly permit me to move about on my own for more than a few brief moments.”

“I do not know how long my strength will last, but I know that we must give to others. We must share what we have been given. Perhaps this is God’s plan.” Then she hesitated for a moment as if someone was speaking to her, “Nay, I am *sure* that it is God’s plan.”

So the two women spent the rest of Mother’s years helping those in need. They sold the farm, and moved to the village, as they had purposed. There, they did what they were able to help whom they could. From comforting and tending to the sick, to helping deliver babies, caring for orphans and teaching children of poor peasants, Jeanette and Mother gave of all that they had, both in strength and in love. Then the time came, and Mother also went on to receive her reward, and to rest in the arms of Jesus, and her husband who had gone on before her.



After Mother passed away, Jeanette came to a time of decision in her life. She was frail, weak, and in need of much physical assistance, but she knew there was still much to do in the village. There was no end of requests for help from every part of the little town—babies being born, infirm to be cared for, orphans to be sheltered and taught, and much more. Her prayer was that if it was God’s will for her to continue on in her ministry, that He would send a special person to help her.

Jeanette and her mother had become much loved by the villagers, and with Mother’s passing,

Jeanette received ample comfort and assistance. She knew that from now on, although crippled and weak, she could not simply keep to herself and live a simple life; she knew that she had been called by God to love and minister to others. Though incapable of doing much physically, even needing help herself, she had learned that the greatest need of many hearts was love, comfort, understanding and faith, and this she could give. The prayer of her heart became that she would find someone who she could work together with, to continue the mission she and Mother had begun.



In honor of her mother, and in gratitude to Jeanette, some of the villagers took her out for the day to see the old farm where she had spent much of her life. She was brought back to the room of her childhood, where she spent several hours alone, reflecting on her life and all that she had experienced: the visit from her Watcher—as she called Him when she was young; the vivid dream of how her life was to blossom in years to come; the little girl who happened upon their farm that curious winter and the three strange visitors who followed; then the move to the village and all that she and Mother had done there.

“What an odd life I’ve led,” she said aloud.

“What a beautiful life you’ve led,” said a voice behind her.

She turned her head and saw a young man standing at the door.

“May I come in?” he asked politely.

“Of course. Who are you?”

“My name is Francis. You and your mother helped my father once when he was very ill. He spoke of you often, saying that you were like two angels in a world of darkness, or so it seemed at the time—so

much poverty, sickness, death and ensuing sorrow.”

Jeanette lowered her eyes, slightly abashed at such frank appreciation.

“I can only thank God that we were of some usefulness. It brings me much joy to know that we have brought a little bit of happiness to others.”

“And so it must,” Francis replied.

“What brings you here?” Jeanette asked.

“Well, since my father passed away, I wanted to come and find you, and also thank you for him. He would have loved to see you again himself, but I believe he must be smiling down from the Heavenlies to see that I have made the journey to thank you in his stead. I heard that you had come here, and thought it an opportune time to make your acquaintance. My mother and I are both grateful for what you’ve done for us, and how you’ve likewise helped so many others. Now that your mother has passed away, God rest her soul, we wanted to offer our assistance, if we may, to help you continue on with the work that you and your mother began. Mamma is quite old herself, but would be happy to cook and keep house, and offer her motherly advice and assistance when needed, while I can help you to go about the village.”

Jeanette was happily surprised. Never had it crossed her mind that the answer to her prayer would come in this package, but she was all the more grateful. Francis was a ruddy sort of youth, tall, with soft green eyes that matched his dusty blond hair so nicely. He had a challenging twinkle in his eye, yet his composure betokened a soft and gentle, albeit self-assured character. Jeanette knew she could easily come to love this fellow with such a strange mixture of qualities.

“You must be a Godsend. I have been praying for help, you know.”

“Then I must have heard from God this once,” Francis replied, with a charming smile.

They both laughed in wonder at the amazing manner in which God works. Jeanette was happy to have some youthful company, and Francis was equally delighted to be accepted by this delightful, determined girl.

Upon returning to her village, Jeanette decided to join Francis and his mother who lived in a nearby village, and there continue the ministry she had started with her mother. She bade farewell to the villagefolk whom she had come to know and love, and promised to keep them ever in her prayers. The villagers in turn expressed their gratitude for all she and her blessed mother had done for them, and shared Jeanette’s joy in finding a team with whom she could work. Francis helped to move Jeanette and her few belongings to his mother’s cottage in a nearby village. From there, and together, they plunged into the ministry of loving and caring for the needy souls God brought across their path. Francis and Jeanette worked well together, as well as greatly enjoyed each other’s company, and Jeanette took great delight in the increased youthfulness and energetic joy that Francis brought to their tasks.

Chapter 4

Less than two years had gone by when other interesting events began to unfold, taking Jeanette around a new turn in the path of God's plan for her.

Mamma had just finished preparing dinner. It had been a long day for Francis, delivering supplies to homes on the outskirts of the village, and he and Jeanette were taking a moment to relax in their simple living room when there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," Francis called as he went to open the door.

"It's probably someone in need of..."

"It certainly is someone in need," said the man as Francis opened the door. "Is this the home of the little lady Jeanette?"

"Yes. It is."

"May I see her? I have been sent by the Lord Samuel, a close relative and counselor to His Majesty, the king."

"Please, please come in," said Francis, surprised to be entertaining an emissary from such a distinguished person.

The richly dressed man entered their humble home, and as Francis closed the door behind the man, he noticed his fine carriage and men waiting outside. He quickly followed the visitor, who had already begun making his way towards their livingroom, and once there, offered him a seat. The man graciously accepted, and sat down opposite Jeanette.

"Please forgive me for intruding," he promptly began. "Do allow me to get directly to the matter, however. Lord Samuel's wife is very sick, near unto death, we believe."

“How would such an event involve us?” Francis interrupted.

The man barely acknowledged the interruption, and continued speaking to Jeanette. “Well, His Majesty, the king, has heard many pleasant things about your kindness and your ministry in these villages. He spoke to Lord Samuel about you, my lady, and Lord Samuel has asked if the lady Jeanette would kindly consider coming to his home to serve the Lady Julinne in her last days with us. We don’t know for how long it would be, but Lord Samuel and the king were concerned that she receive the best of care...”

“From me? I’m just a farmer’s daughter!—And crippled at that!” exclaimed Jeanette.

“Yes, but to be frank, Jeanette, Lady Julinne is in need of someone with a heart of understanding and compassion, which God knows you have. You will have maidservants at your bidding, to be your hands and feet, and do the things you cannot do; but the lady would be ultimately in your care. If you are pleased to accept this invitation, Miss, we stand ready to take you even tonight. Lord Samuel and their majesties will be so grateful...”

His words trailed off into the background while Jeanette struggled within herself. The villagers, her work here—it meant so much to her. Then she looked at Francis, and quickly down at the floor in the hopes that their eyes wouldn’t meet. Francis had become such a good friend and companion, and the two of them worked so well together, so much so that they had come to feel like neither of them could do without the other.

Besides, there was in those days such a great chasm, it seemed, between the lords and the commoners. Jeanette was confused. *Is it not my life’s calling and duty to help those in true, dire need, such*

as the poor in this village? Surely my Lord would not choose to send me to give to those who could hardly be considered in want? Yet she heard the still small voice of her Watcher speaking softly to her heart, reminding her that though the homes and bodies of the rich may not seem to be in grave want, their hearts and their souls were.

She lifted her eyes and they met those of Francis. For a moment their gaze locked, as if they were peering into the inner chambers of each other’s hearts, seeking assurance of their agreement.

Francis broke the silence: “Go, Jeanette. God has planned it this way. I shall continue the work here, and in God’s time, I will see you again.” His voice was reassuring and full of faith.

The messenger looked all the while on, solemnly waiting for her agreement. “Perhaps I could return tomorrow, if you need more time,” he suggested.

“No, that is fine. I have decided to accept, and I shall be ready presently.”

“Wonderful! Then let us be off.”

After Jeanette packed some belongings, and the men helped her into the carriage, she remembered the angelic tune that she had reviewed so many times when she was a little child: *Carry on, sweet child, carry on. Soon the night will end and then will come the dawn. Yet a rosebud, growing still, you will soon blossom to perform God’s will. Carry on, sweet child. Carry on.*

She took heart that God was there as always, leading and guiding her into another page, another chapter in the book of her life.

“Drive on!” came the orders, and soon they were on their swift way to Lord Samuel’s castle many miles to the west. Jeanette had never traveled even a fraction of such a distance, and it seemed to her to be a world away.

They traveled rapidly through untold towns and villages, and then into the lush countryside, the soft moonlight guiding them all the way. Finally, as the sun began to rise, they arrived at the home of Lord Samuel, which was really more of a palace than a castle. Jeanette was escorted immediately to Lady Julinne's chambers.

"The young lady has arrived, my lord," announced one of Lady Julinne's chambermaids.

"Show her in," replied Lord Samuel, and within a few minutes Jeanette was carried in. There, in one of the most luxurious bedchambers Jeanette had ever imagined, much less set eyes upon, lay a frail, sickly woman. Fine linens, carpets, plush cushions and drapes were the trappings of this fine room. This was surely not Jeanette's element. She had grown up a farmer's crippled daughter, and was content to serve those of her kind. Now she found herself in the service of the wealthy and powerful.

"I am sure that You truly do have a plan, oh Lord, though I can scarcely imagine what it might be," she whispered beneath her breath, as she was carried forward to where the lady lay.

Lord Samuel took Jeanette's hand and kissed it softly, thanking her profusely for coming. Lady Julinne lay still and silent, gasping every now and then as if a word was trying to escape her lips. Her gentle expression thanked the young girl for her kindness in leaving a well-loved work and ministry, to come and tend to a dying lady. Stripped of her beauty and glory, the lady now saw herself as a simple, plain woman whose riches and fineries had done nothing to ease the pain which seemed to permeate her entire being.

Lord Samuel dismissed himself, followed shortly by the servants and chambermaids, and Jeanette was

left alone, with a maid in attendance, to care for and cheer the lady with her youthful company.



The days passed slowly, with Jeanette spending most of her time in Lady Julinne's lovely room. During the times that Lady Julinne was conscious, she was very happy to have Jeanette by her side. Jeanette's sweet smile and manner never failed to cheer her ailing heart, and even bring a measure of a smile to her otherwise listless face. As the days wore on, however, Julinne seemed to be slipping more and more into her unconscious states, and awakening less often.

One day as Jeanette looked in silent awe at her surroundings, and then over to the lady as she slept, she thought to herself, *Surely she must have known a very great loss; her sickness seems to not only be of the body, but her spirit is broken. Every one of her beautiful features looks as if it is in pain, but it is her heart that ails her most. Oh, that there were a way to reach into her heart, some way to heal her spirit so that her health could be restored! Even when she sleeps she looks as though she is deeply troubled, struggling to decide whether each next breath should be her last, or whether to live on—though in pain—for the sake of her beloved Samuel.*

In the weeks that Jeanette had now been at Lord Samuel's castle, the chambermaids and once even the Lord Samuel himself had shown her portraits of Lady Julinne in her younger years. A happy, bright-spirited, lovely lady she was! But how different she seemed now—so lost, so heartbroken. It was as if her body was left with but a wisp of a spirit that slipped in and out of this world.

She took a closer look at the lady. Her lips were whispering a word Jeanette could not understand.

"May I help you, Lady Julinne?" Jeanette whispered.

"Anabelle ... Anabelle," the lady whispered again and then turned her head and fell back into a deep sleep.

Anabelle? Jeanette had never heard anyone in Lord Samuel's castle being called by that name! She pulled the cord that rang the servants' bell.

Maureen, the chambermaid, rushed in.

"Yes, my lady?"

"Who is Anabelle? The Lady Julinne is calling for Anabelle!"

Maureen's countenance fell and her large brown eyes turned to the window.

"I must ask his lordship to come," Maureen replied without turning her eyes from the window, making Jeanette all the more anxious.

Maureen hurried off and several minutes later, in walked Lord Samuel, his head and shoulders held high, his eyes both sad and yet sparkling with a sober sort of tranquility. He was a kind-hearted man, having gone through many sorrows and becoming the better for them.

He sat down near Jeanette, in a fatherly manner took her hand in his, and cast his eyes upward as if he was seeing the events as he told them.

"There was once a little girl, born an only child to a lord and lady in their later years of life. A darling soul Anabelle was! She brought nothing but sheer joy and pride to her parents.

"One fateful day, she slipped from under their watchful eye, and disappeared. What a sorrowful supper it was, that first night when our little daughter's place at the royal table was empty. To eat in silence, glancing every now and then at the empty chair that once seated our little princess was almost more than we could bear. Every minute for

many a month, we hoped she would be found, and that we would once again see her burst through the door; but no, soon enough we realized it would not be so. It seemed like we had been rudely awakened from a most wonderful dream, and were sorely lacking courage to face the days ahead.

"Search parties were dispatched day after day to find Anabelle. My, how they searched! But the little princess was ne'er to be found. And Lady Julinne has never been herself since then. It was as if the light in her life was put out from that day forward. That was over ten years ago. Now we are growing all the farther along in years, and we have no child to whom we can bequeath our riches, nor can we hope to bear one.

"My beloved wife's spirit has now well nigh given up, and the angels may soon kiss out the candle of her life so that her crushed heart might be soothed and restored by the Father Who knoweth all things. Day and night I wish so much to make her better, to bring back her will to live. If only I knew how.

"I know the sorrow; I too have been pained these many years. But Julinne has let her sorrow enchain her heart, and keep it from knowing the freedom of God's unending mercy and comfort. I fear she will not recover unless she is able to hold her only daughter once again in her embrace, and her will may not survive long enough to see that day, if Providence would deem us worthy to grant it. My heart tells me that Anabelle is still out there somewhere, still alive, and that she will return one day; but perhaps that is only a lonely father's wishful thinking."

Lord Samuel looked up, and wiped a tear from Jeanette's eye. Jeanette smiled compassionately. Now she had a greater understanding of the lady, and felt she could better care for and comfort her spirit as well as her body.

"You must have faith," Jeanette encouraged him. "You must have faith, for where there is life, there is hope."

Lord Samuel smiled. "Thank you, darling child. Thank you," he said as he turned to leave the lady in Jeanette's care and return to his duties.

At that moment, Jeanette's eyes lighted on a small painting in a far corner of the room that she hadn't noticed before. It was a portrait of a middle-aged man with deep, fiery blue eyes, and a face full of intrigue.

"My lord?" Jeanette called out after him, surprised at her own boldness.

"Yes, child?"

"Please pardon me, but who is that man in the painting?"

Taking a closer look, Samuel said, "Ah, that is my younger brother. Not much younger, barely three years. He lives in an estate rather far from here, with his family. We haven't met or spoken for some time ... some misunderstandings, family difficulties. I don't understand entirely why he estranged himself, or how he became so embittered, but ... Ah, why should I be speaking of this? It is the past. He is a fairly wealthy man and from what I hear, does very well for himself."

Jeanette felt an odd tug on her heart as she looked at the picture of the steely-eyed man, though she did not know what to attribute this feeling to. But somewhere in the outskirts of her subconscious, she knew that there was something about this man that she must discover, before it was too late.

"I must be going now, dear child. But do not fear. If you need me, ask one of the chambermaids to fetch me."

"Thank you for your kindness, my lord," she called after him as he turned to leave. *What an*

unusually kind man ... for a lord, that is, she thought to herself.

Then she looked once more at the portrait. Her casually curious glance toward it would quickly transform, almost involuntarily, into a locked gaze, accompanied by an eerie feeling. Without much else to do, she found herself repeatedly studying the painting and the mystery that filled every wrinkle and feature of this man's face. She was unaware that some curious events were taking place at this very moment in a castle far across the country.

Chapter 5

A beautiful 16-year old girl stood at the window of her richly decorated room, looking into the rose garden below. It was the most cheerful spot of the entire castle that had been her home for many years now. She often stood at this window, reliving glimpses of another life she thought she remembered living as a very young girl before coming to Gregor's household, who had lovingly taken her in after something dreadful had happened to her parents, or so she was told. No details were ever disclosed to her, though curiosity drove her to ask about her true parents, and what had happened to them, not too infrequently. The odd thing—and it became more so as she grew older—was that no one around seemed to know anything of the first few years of her life, and her true parents. All she had were faint memories of playing on the beautiful lawns of a great palace, many horses, and kind people, though she could not remember their faces, hard as she tried. One thing she knew for certain—she had been very happy then. Her mind far away, she was scarcely aware that one of the servant ladies had been knocking on her door for quite some time now.

In a last attempt to get the young lady's attention, the servant pounded on the door and shouted, "Jayne!"

Snapping back to reality, she sighed and went to the door, assuming the dignity and mannerisms that she knew pleased this dreadful household. Though she was treated well, there was a strange dreariness that permeated the entire castle. The long dark halls were rarely filled with sounds of laughter and jubilation, and life seemed a dull routine for all who lived there.

Opening the door, Jayne smiled and said, "Yes. Please do forgive me. I was dozing off."

"Never mind, never mind," chattered the servant lady as she made her way in to clean the room, obviously pleased that the girl was in good spirits.

Jayne was quite a different picture from Jeanette—almost a perfect candidate for a princess, if looks could make a girl one. She was the rather dainty type, with long golden hair, soft curls sprinkled here and there, big blue eyes, and—contradicting her gentle looks entirely—a very daring, brave, yet highly practical and fun-loving character.

As she stood by, watching the maid go about her business, she thought about her lord—and father of sorts, whom she affectionately called Uncle Gregor—and what a hated man he had become. She didn't hate him, though. To the contrary, she pitied him. As the years rolled by—almost twelve now, since she had been taken into this household—he seemed increasingly sorrowful. It was as if a heavy burden had been permanently placed upon him, and in a sense, it was true. His life was not one which could make a person proud to review at their deathbed. But these things were far removed from Jayne's perception. She had only overheard the servants gossip of what a hated man he had grown to be. He rarely brought this side of his personality home, however. To Jayne he was a mysterious old man who hardly ever spoke, yet whom she appreciated for his kindness in having taken her in—as she was told, and respected for his position.

Meditating on these things, she realized something that intrigued her momentarily: She hadn't seen her Uncle Gregor for an unusually long time. Perhaps he was off on business, or perhaps...

Just then she heard someone whispering in the library just next to her room. She crept slowly,

casually, out of her door and down the hall to the library door, straining to hear who was there. It was Lady Eleanor and a doctor.

"How much longer do you think he has, Doctor?"

"With good rest and no strain or stress, well, still not long, I'm afraid. There isn't much we can do. His condition is very poor. I'm sorry, my lady."

The woman turned to the window. "His life was not as he wanted it to be as a young man," she whispered, staring out into the meadows beyond their large estate.

"Pardon me, my lady?" The doctor looked up, wondering if he really had heard right. Gregor was a wealthy man, and seemed to have made a good life for himself, though the doctor knew little about his crafty side.

"Oh, nothing, Doctor." She calmly turned around and walked the doctor out of the library and down the stairs to the door of the mansion, her heart and countenance heavy.

Gregor's wife was a stately lady. She had somewhat of a kind nature, though not kind enough to object to Gregor's sinister deeds, which had pervaded every chapter of his life. Indeed, the kidnapping of Anabelle, his elder brother's daughter, and therefore heir to the family fortune before himself, was the capital crime. It weighed heavily on her heart, though she had unsuccessfully tried to harden herself and ignore the gnawing feeling on her conscience.

Once the doctor had departed, Eleanor sank down onto a couch by the door, her face in her hands. How could she ever repair all the ill that Gregor's uncaring, greedy heart had wrought over the many years, she wondered.

Jayne, or Belle, as her true parents had once affectionately called her, looked on from the top of

the stairs, taking in all that was happening, her mind awlirl. *So that is what has happened to Gregor! He must be ill—but where could he be, and why have we not been told?* She thought to herself.



Staring up at a portrait of Gregor and herself, Eleanor remembered Gregor as he was when she met him—a youthful, optimistic, ambitious man! Never did she dream what a tyrant he would turn into. She knew that deep inside, his heart was sorrowful and he regretted the impulsive greedy deeds he'd machinated and performed.

But Gregor was a proud man. Too proud for his own good! She knew his heart would never recover if he faced all he'd done and acknowledge such deeds for what they were: wrongs. The deceitfulness of riches and greed had engulfed him and turned him into just what he'd passionately declared as a young man that he would never become. He had become disillusioned with himself, she knew. But she loved him too much, she thought, to make him face the truth.

Drawn away from her thoughts, she caught a glimpse of Belle's figure at the top of the stairs.

"Who stands there?" Eleanor called out, attempting to regain her composure after being caught unawares in such a state of deep thought.

"It's me, Jayne, Lady Eleanor," Belle replied.

Jayne, Eleanor repeated in her mind. *What a cheerful little girl she was.. She did her best to bring happiness to each of the servants and household from the day she arrived. But now, how she has grown! The life we imposed upon her must have stripped her of her childish innocence much too fast. What heartache her parents must have experienced.*

It was too much for Eleanor to cope with. She knew the kidnapping was indeed a great wrong, but she

had stood by just the same and watched it all happen, her silent protest turning to indifference.

Eleanor looked up to where Belle had been standing moments earlier. Seeing no one there, and looking around to see if anyone else might be in sight, Eleanor walked down a long corridor that Belle had never seen the end of. It was a wing of the castle forbidden entry by anyone save Gregor, Eleanor, and a few trusted servants. Curious, Belle quietly followed Eleanor from afar. There were many libraries and unused rooms on either side of the corridor, rooms that Belle had never seen. The inquisitive and daring soul that Belle was, she had attempted entry to this wing before on a few occasions, only to be caught, reprimanded and sent to her room each time. But this might be her chance! Fortune seemed to be on her side. Then again, dull as her life normally was, she was happy for any chance at a little adventure and excitement, even if she did get caught once more. Distracted by these thoughts, Belle just barely managed to softly step aside into one room, whose door was conveniently open, when Eleanor turned around to assure herself that no one was following her. By now curiosity had Belle firmly in its grip, and she was determined to see what mystery she was about to stumble upon.

Lastly, she came upon a long, dark flight of stairs, heading upward, with some sort of landing in the middle before the last few steps. On the side of the landing stood a large statue of a lion that Belle took note of—she would need some place to hide herself, should Eleanor turn around again, which did not seem too unlikely to the nervous Belle. At the top of the stairs was a door, which Eleanor entered and left open. Once Belle heard the opening of yet another door, she decided to take her chances and creep up after Eleanor.

Peeking through the first door, her eyes led her through another door several feet away. It had been left wide open. Belle's eyes widened.

There in a bare room with many windows was Gregor, lying on a luxurious bed, propped up by many pillows. His face was a ghostly white. He was obviously very ill. Belle could still hear that gruff voice of his, faint as it was by now.

"Does anyone know I'm here?" he asked.

"No one except the doctor and Serah."

"What did the doctor say?"

"You'll be fine with a lot of rest and nourishment," Eleanor said haltingly. It was obvious she was trying to hold back the lump that was rising in her throat and the accompanying tears.

Gregor grabbed her arm. "Don't lie to me, Eleanor! My body tells me the truth even if you refuse to acknowledge it. I'm dying and you will not even admit it?"

"I hope and pray..."

"What do you think I've been doing all this time, no strength to do anything besides lie here and think—about the past, about the future, exploring the darkest recesses of my mind and my life? I deserve no mercy. There is no cure for my ill health or my ill heart. This is my due." He gasped for air before continuing. "You must tell the household of my incurable illness at eventide. It should not be hid from them any longer, since I have so little time left. Besides, it may come as good news to them." His voice sounded hard and bitter.

By now Eleanor was weeping uncontrollably.

"Must you resign yourself to—to the doctor's prediction?" She sobbed.

"I will die soon; that is not the argument. What it is that I can do before I die is my only question.

How is our young girl, Jayne?" he continued, his voice taking on a more relaxed tone.

"She is well."

"And after all this time, she still knows nothing of her parents?"

"Not a word has been told her."

"...And now I am on death's doorstep. What can be done about her now?" He mused.

"Do not speak that way—you are only sick now, your will can keep you alive."

"My wife, I am dying! Do not ignore the fact!"

"I do not ignore the fact that you will die eventually, as will all of us, but you needn't die now!"

Ignoring her, Gregor continued. "Only a few know the truth about Jayne ... I have stolen my brother's heir, yet now that I am dying, I will still never inherit any of the wealth and power that I craved—that which led me to steal his only daughter, Annabelle. But what's done is done. Yet I have lived each day since that moment fearing what might happen should my brother solve the mystery of her disappearance."

There were a few moments of silence as Gregor pondered his words. Belle started backwards, and almost lost her footing at the top of the stairs. Was this the secret to her true identity?

Gregor mused, "How strangely life repays us for our deeds."

Eleanor was silent.

"We shall speak of this later. I must think. I need time to think," Gregor concluded.

Gregor closed his eyes and Eleanor got up to leave. Belle, though completely awestruck by all that she had heard, managed to scramble behind that enormous lion statue before Eleanor appeared at the top of the stairs. Belle held her breath, while beads of perspiration made their way across her

frightened, nervous being. Getting caught earlier would have been a bit of adventure, but now she had gone too far and clearly discovered too much, and it would be trouble. Belle closed her eyes and kept as still as possible while Eleanor passed by, but she needn't have worried. Eleanor's eyes were too dim with tears and her mind too far off to notice anything unusual.



Throwing herself on her bed, Belle was filled with uncertainty. *What is going to happen to me? Should I try to escape? Or will I be held captive here forever, as they have kept me captive from myself until now? No, there must come an end to all this someday. But I cannot live here another day, knowing my true identity. I must make good my escape, and speedily. Perhaps this is the time, with Uncle Gregor being so sick.*

She shook her head in despondency. She realized that it was not love that had brought her to this household, but jealousy. How she longed to be loved once more! She always loved the warm feeling that she had whenever she recalled her memories, distant and fleeting as they were, of her happier childhood. Now that she knew who she would be looking for, she treasured the memory even more, and longed to find a way to reach them. Though she could not describe the mixture of emotions that threatened to overwhelm her, still, somehow she felt at peace. She knew God had taken care of her all these years, and that she was still in His hands now.



Gregor likewise lay pensive upon his bed. Weak as his body was, he could not stop his mind from replaying the past quarter century of his life, and he was terrorized by the selfish and greedy deeds that never until now had weighed so heavily on his heart.

“Stop! Stop, I say!” he would tell himself emphatically, trying to block the heavy burden of his conscience, which was becoming more than he could bear.

There was no way to repair much of the damage he had caused. Even that which he could change, he could only repair marginally. No great deed or apology could ever wipe away years of pain he now, in these moments when his own life seemed as fleeting as it truly was, saw he had caused people; the poor he had turned away; the clumsy servants he had sent out with no job prospect, no home, no family; the harsh, cruel way he had treated his household; the pain he had caused others to ease his own hurt.

The death of his father had transformed him from a youthful, spirited fellow into a miser, old before his time, at the very best. He recounted how people affectionately nicknamed him “Charming” when he was a young man. Little children used to gather round him as he told hunting stories, and as he played with them in the fields. He was going to be loved by all forever, he thought.

But now, as he looked back on his life, he saw only ugliness in the latter years. Hate had eaten away at him; bitterness had choked his happiness and that of many others.

He remembered the day when his father died and the lion's share of his great wealth and riches were given to his older brother. Samuel was but three years older, but older he was, and as was the rule of the time, he inherited the larger portion of wealth, and held the power, while Gregor was left to find his own way in life. That day Gregor's life had changed completely. Bitterness drove all the youthfulness and enthusiasm out of his being. His only hope was that when his brother passed on,

Gregor could claim the riches and power, since Samuel and Julinne had been married for many years, but remained childless.

But the day they rejoiced at the birth of the little Lady Anabelle, Gregor's last selfish hope was shattered. It was as if he had shut himself into a darkened room, and the last flickering candle had just been snuffed out. Sorrow soon turned to hatred. And so it happened that when Belle was four years old, she went for a walk in the forest from which she never returned, having been taken by Gregor's trusted men.

Now that Gregor was old and sick, and knew his life may be drawing to a close, his heart ached for the sorrow and anguish he had caused his brother and most of all, Julinne. They, in their ignorance, had continued to treat Gregor with the utmost kindness and respect. Why he shunned them was forever puzzling to Samuel and his wife. Samuel knew that Gregor had resented his richer inheritance, but had no idea how strong the weeds of greed and envy had grown, nor what deeds they had perpetrated. Gregor feared what would happen if the truth was ever disclosed.

"Enough of this! Stop it, man!" he berated himself again. The verse his mother used to always quote him when he was a young boy, "That which you sow, you shall also reap," echoed in his mind.

Finally coming to grips with his own losses—loss of dignity, loss of spirit, loss of pride in his empty triumphs, and the soon-to-come loss of his own life—he resolved to return Belle to her rightful parents. He heard that the Lady Julinne was ill, and hoped that his only joy and relief would be in seeing her recover upon Belle's return. Humiliating and painful as he knew it would be, he decided that as many wrongs as could be made right *must* be

made right. That evening he would inform Eleanor that she must reveal Belle's true identity to the household the following morning and announce that preparations would be made for her to be returned to her rightful parents.



After recovering from her shock, Anabelle reviewed every entrance and exit of the property that she knew so well, trying to imagine the best route for her escape. She had gone on long walks to every edge and corner of her uncle's lands surrounding the castle, though she had not been permitted to enter the nearby towns. Her sense of direction was keen, and she readily absorbed the stories that she was told by Gregor's house servants. They took a pride in telling of secret roads and passageways, which Belle loved to hear—and was now thankful to have been informed of. She knew this information would greatly help her in her attempt at flight.

That evening was a quiet one. The news of Gregor's condition was too disturbing to allow for conversation about anything worth conversing about. Lady Eleanor couldn't help but act exactly how she was feeling, despite feeble attempts to the contrary. A sad and somber air seemed to have spread to every part of the house. There was no corner of the property, be it garden or room, that could offer Belle escape from the gloominess that filled the air. This gave good reason for Belle's anxious countenance, which she found it difficult to hide, preoccupied as she was with the truths she had stumbled upon earlier that afternoon.

Even the cook, of all people, seems so down! thought Belle. *He's usually a cheerful, happy man. Nothing ever moves him. Though I presume in his position it would most likely be deemed the appropriate*

thing to partake of the gloominess. Even I cannot bring myself to feel the slightest bit of joy over Lord Gregor's condition. He is a sorry sight, and I wish there were some way to deliver him from this pitiful state. But perhaps it is better for him to die, that his spirit may come to know some relief when he passes on. Oh God, I do pray it will be soon.

Belle had inherited her father's calm optimism and compassionate spirit. Never could she feel embittered towards another human soul. She seemed to understand that each person has known some pain, no matter how deeply hidden from view.

As everyone retired for the night, a tingle went through Belle's body. This was the night! She felt secure that she could make her escape, everyone being so preoccupied with Gregor's condition and his care.

As soon as the house was settled, Belle went to the porch for some quiet and fresh air, as was her usual custom. There was no reason to suspect that Belle would attempt to make flight, and so without much difficulty she crept away in the quiet of the night, hoping to make good progress before dawn.

That same night Gregor told Eleanor all the thoughts that he had struggled with that day, and the decision he had made. Totally taken aback, Eleanor thought him merely mad from the pain, and assured him he would feel better if he relaxed and thought joyful thoughts rather than remorseful ones.

Mustering up all the strength he could, Gregor responded by taking hold of Eleanor's arm as she stood by his bed. With a firm grip, he shook her arm and said, "Eleanor, I must let this little one return—I must!" He loosened his grasp and shook

his head as if on the threshold of another world, "I have caused too much pain already, much too much pain...."

Eleanor had not heard him speak that way for years. She responded by stroking his arm and then quietly returning to her bed. Eleanor couldn't help but feel confused and frightened at this sudden change in her husband, but she knew he was doing the right thing. She determined to help him in any way she could.

Chapter 6

As the first bit of sunlight shone through her shutters, Lady Eleanor awoke. Seeing her husband lying peacefully upon his bed, and remembering the last words on his lips the night before, she arose and hurried to arrange Belle's return.

Simple as it was to travel to his brother Lord Samuel's castle, though by no means near, this particular journey would be no small affair. It was a reversal of all the plans and goals their lives had been centered around these many years. Eleanor could hardly believe she was following Gregor's orders so implicitly, but not being one to protest, she told the household of Jayne's true identity, and the plan to return her. She then asked one of the servants to bring word for Anabelle to meet her in the library. The rest of the servants were then dismissed. A maid obediently went to send for Anabelle and the rest went about their duties after the announcement was over, confused as they were about this strange turn of events.

Eleanor was frightened and excited at the thought of Anabelle's response. How would a little woman like Belle react?

Tension rose when she heard a knock at the library door. Rehearsing her lines and her presentation to Belle, she was completely unprepared to hear the words that the maid uttered.

"Lady Eleanor! Jayne is gone!"

Eleanor shook the frightened and nervous maid, "What do you mean she's gone?"

Serah, the maid, was too frightened to answer. Eleanor pushed her to the side and hurried to Belle's bedroom. Serah had lived at Gregor's castle for many years, and experienced many things, but this was beyond reality as she knew it. An old spinster, with

one grown son, these events shook her like nothing had before, and stretched even her highly active imagination to its limits.

Curiosity led her to follow her mistress into Belle's room. The mistress looked into the wardrobes and all around, in every corner of the room, searching for some clue or lead as to Belle's plans. Gregor would be crushed to hear of Belle's disappearance, but if they could find her in time, Eleanor wouldn't need to see her husband suffer so, she thought to herself.

Eleanor was completely unaware that Gregor had already overheard the news. He was overtaken with both grief and determination to find her or confess all to Lord Samuel before the last thread of his spirit passed on to his reward, whatever that would be.

Serah sighed. Imagining that the girl, who was now a young woman, had most likely overheard the news, and was now making her own way to Lord Samuel's castle, was a most frightening thought to her. *Belle doesn't know the way! She'll probably try to escape through the forest, where she could easily get completely lost, and even perish before she has reached the edge of the village!* Collecting herself, and offering her help to the mistress, who refused it, she went about the house as she always did, all the while thinking of what she could possibly do to help Anabelle.



Entering the bedroom where Gregor had lain peacefully resting only minutes before, Eleanor gasped. Gregor's bed was empty! Eleanor leaned wearily against the door and felt as if her world was crumbling under her. She jumped when she felt someone try to open the door. The servants never entered the room without knocking, and

Serah, her maid, had already been to the room earlier. Turning around slowly to see who was at the door she was astonished!

"Gregor! Why are you all dressed? Have you gone mad? The doctor says you have not much time to live! What burst of insanity has..."

"Hush, my lady. I am going on a crusade," Gregor answered calmly, though obviously in much pain.

"A crusade? You surely have gone mad. Let me call the servants," Eleanor said as she turned to the door.

Continuing to ready himself, Gregor said, "I am going on a crusade against evil. I go to right the greatest wrong I have ever performed."

Then, looking down in shame he uttered the most sorrowful words Eleanor had heard from his lips, "Nay, I go to right only part of the greatest wrong I have ever performed. The rest cannot be undone, I'm afraid."

"But Jayne is gone. Stay, please stay. We can send the guards to search for her."

"This task, no one else can do for me, my love." His piercing eyes looked into hers, assuring her that embarking on this last mission was the only way he could pass on in peace.

With a soft kiss of her hand, such as he'd not given her in years, he was off with a small group of his guards.



The air in Lord Samuel's palace was heavy. Lady Julinne had slept for days, and it seemed she could not be awakened. Lord Samuel stood faithfully by her bedside, along with Jeanette, each taking a turn in guarding this beautiful lady's soul. Many hours they had both knelt in prayer, especially Lord Samuel, beseeching God to revive her spirit. But

she had not so much as stirred, and though Samuel tried to stay hopeful, Jeanette knew things looked grim for his already very broken heart.

He was a man acquainted with many sorrows, and she prayed that he would make it through this one also. In her prayers for the Lady Julinne, Jeanette interceded also for Lord Samuel and did and said all that she could to comfort him. She also prayed, in the face of seeming impossibility, that Anabelle would return, for she knew that God's eye was upon all the sparrows, and He would surely know where their precious child was. He could return her in His time.

In those many lonely nights, Samuel had never left his beloved lady's bedside. He hoped and prayed that she would awake, yet victory was not in sight. Jeanette spoke words of love, and read passages of Scripture to impart hope to the lady's soul, in an effort to revive her spirit and her will.

Lord Samuel had business to attend to this day, yet his dear love still had not woken from her very deep slumber. Hesitant as he was to leave the lady in such a state, he entrusted her to Jeanette's loving hands, for Jeanette had love in everything she did and said. *She breathes love*, he told himself many times, *and no harm could come to one who is in the hands of a soul who loves.*

With a heavy heart, he went off in his carriage, calling, "Until the even!"

As he rode away from his home, he was scarcely aware that Gregor was riding towards it. Both men, travelling in opposite directions, were of heavy hearts as they sat alone in their carriages. Each was sorrowful for a different reason: one for remorse and one for the impending loss of yet another loved one.



In the late afternoon, while looking out the window beside the lady's bed, Jeanette saw a carriage ride into the castle compound. A short, elderly man stepped out and began to falteringly walk up the long avenue to the castle. Samuel had told her of all events that could be expected to take place, and this was not one of them. She continued watching out the window to see what this determined but frail-looking man would do.

As he neared the great entrance to Lord Samuel's castle, the man fainted on the path.

Jeanette watched as the man's carriage driver hurried up to help him. She quickly reached for her bell cord and pulled it several times.

In answer to the bell, Maureen came hurrying into the room. "Yes, my lady Jeanette?"

Jeanette cringed. "You needn't call me 'lady,' but there is a man who has fainted at the gate. Please, we must tend to him and bring him into one of the visitors' bedrooms, so that he may rest and we can find out from whence he came."

Maureen hesitated, but upon seeing the compassionate look in Jeanette's eyes, she hurried down to where the butler and some servants were already gathered around the old man. After giving them instructions, she hurried back to Jeanette.

"Jeanette, it's Lord Gregor! He hasn't come to the castle for years." Maureen's big brown eyes widened and she fidgeted nervously. "He's a frightening man, Jeanette, so hard and cold. I wonder what brought him this far, and I can't think it would be anything good."

Jeanette smiled understandingly at Maureen; she herself did not like to think of people in such a fashion, at least not until she was able to meet them for herself.



After several hours, Jeanette was informed that Lord Gregor had regained consciousness. She asked one of the servants to take her down to the room where Lord Gregor had been laid, while Maureen watched over the Lady Julinne.

The room was dimly lit and the old man lay on the bed, his weary eyes pensive and obviously troubled.

As the servant carried Jeanette nearer to Gregor, Jeanette felt shaken. Looking into his deep, steely blue eyes, she recognized the man whose portrait had given her such frightening sensations, though he now obviously had many more troublesome years behind him! This was the estranged brother who Lord Samuel spoke of. Instantly, an odd premonition began to form in her mind. *I wonder if he was somehow involved with Anabelle's disappearance!* But before the idea could establish itself in her mind, Lord Samuel, who had returned earlier than expected from his business, now quietly entered the room, and his presence interrupted her thoughts.

Lord Gregor trembled with emotion and fear. He was entering the very throes of his mission, and he would carry through with it bravely, he told himself.

Lying helplessly weak upon the bed, Gregor feebly reached out his hands to his brother, Lord Samuel, who took them tenderly in both of his.

"What brings you here, my brother?" Lord Samuel gently inquired.

With great difficulty, and many tears, Gregor told of how he had come to confess a great wrong, and to do all within his power and ability to right it.

Silence and shock overcame Lord Samuel, though tenderness and sorrow filled his eyes, as Gregor told the story of how long ago bitterness had

choked the good things out of his life, and was the very root of all the troubles he had caused himself, his family, and yet others. He told, with the greatest shame, how bitterness had led him to take the heiress to Samuel's wealth, and then told of how she had fled from his castle that selfsame day.

Gregor watched his brother's countenance carefully, for his fear was great, though not greater than his repentance and remorse. Lord Samuel wept and kissed Gregor's hands, much to Gregor's surprise.

"We have both suffered much, you and I. But we are still brothers!" Lord Samuel said, as he buried his face in Gregor's hands and wept.

Lord Samuel then preempted Gregor's question of how to find Belle, by assuring him, "My brother, rest. I will send someone to fetch your wife. We will search for Belle also. God has had her in His hands all this while, and He will return her in His time. I know this of a surety."

Chapter 7

Anabelle had walked long. She would not chance resting too close to the castle that had been her prison all these years. Unaware of the great changes that had taken place, she had no intention of being nearby when Lord Gregor would learn of her escape. If he had kidnapped her once, there was no telling what he might do to her now. But it had been many hours since she had taken flight yesternight. When it was almost the dawn of the next day, she entered a small village which was totally unfamiliar to her. She had only known of castles and palaces, and her eyes had never lit upon small, poor houses as those inhabited by the common people of her land.

Walking through the streets, looking for some place to rest her weary head, she spotted a small cottage just beyond what looked like a deserted market place. She trudged on until she neared the little cottage, but eventually her legs gave way, exhausted as she was, and she fainted a few steps away from the cottage she had marked as her destination.



Francis had just woken up and was going about his morning chores. He had been faithfully continuing in the ministry that Jeanette and her mother had established by way of helping the poor and needy. Lonely as life was with her away, he often thought of Jeanette and wondered when she would return. In her absence, he discovered that he loved her more than he had perhaps realized when they were together. But he dared not think of her too often, for how he could not stand the cloud of loneliness and seeming isolation that overcame him when such sentiments overshadowed his otherwise cheery spirit.

Peering out of the window, as was his usual habit each morning—he knew not why—he blinked a couple of times. It looked like a person, perhaps a young woman, had fainted on the path to their little cottage.

Not being one to take a second thought before helping a soul in need, Francis quickly dressed and went out to see if he could be of assistance. He picked the girl up, carried her into the little cottage, and laid her in Jeanette's room. She looked like she had come a long way, and Francis was curious as to what brought her to this part of the country. But those questions would of course have to wait until she awoke.

Just then he heard the young girl stirring. Before he could even turn around, she called out in an assertive manner, "Good morning, sir. I must thank you for your kindness in fetching me from the road. I was truly exhausted. Forgive me."

Rather surprised at her unpretentious nature, Francis mumbled, "My pleasure. ... I mean, you're very welcome."

At that, the girl gave a gentle smile and rolled over and fell back into an exhausted sleep.

Francis busied himself in the kitchen, fixing something to eat, while he waited for the young girl to wake. *It's an interesting thing to have a young woman around again*, Francis thought to himself. *I'd almost forgotten just how pleasant it is. Man surely is not meant to live alone*, he chuckled.

Francis had scarcely finished chuckling to himself when a tug at his arm caught him totally unawares. He spun around, only to find her little self now seated on a stool behind him, giggling at his jumpiness.

"I'm sorry, what I am about to tell you is of a serious nature," she started, once she'd recovered

from her giggling.

"Francis," he finished the sentence for her.

"Thank you, Francis," she answered. "My name is Anabelle. You may think I am ill or insane when you hear this, but in short, I am the long-lost daughter of Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne."

Francis' eyes widened, just as Belle imagined they would.

"And you suppose I should believe that?" Francis responded, looking over her soiled and ragged appearance.

Ignoring his challenge, Belle looked straight into his eyes, "I need your help, Francis."

"Of course ... Anabelle?"

"You can just call me 'Belle'."

As briefly as she could, Belle told Francis the story of how she had come to discover her true identity, which had been hidden from her these many years, and her purpose in fleeing her uncle's castle. Francis listened in wide-eyed astonishment, wondering how much he should believe, or what were simply the delirious ravings of a misfortunate lass. However, something told him that she was sincere. Perhaps it was her voice, or perhaps the keen and alert glimmer in her eye. In either case, he felt it his duty to help her in whatever way he could. As soon as she had finished her tale, he formulated their plan.



Jeanette sat patiently by the Lady Julinne's bedside, just as she had done every day over the months she had been at the castle, reading scripture, singing, telling stories, praying for the lady. Disheartened, and perhaps even frustrated that the lady had still shown no signs of recovery, Jeanette lay her head on the lady's bed.

"My dear, dear Lady Julinne, many days and nights I have sat here beside you, supporting you,

praying that God would grant your recovery." A tear rolled down Jeanette's cheek. "There has been no sign of answer still, yet through these many hours beside you, I have grown to love you well. I know your heart aches, but if you would only give God a chance to comfort you and love you, I think it would bring back the life that you have missed so much."

Jeanette buried her face in the quilt. She thought she felt the Lady Julinne stir, but, *No, the lady must be standing very close to the vestibule of Heaven right now*, she told herself.

"I love thee as well, Jeanette," a soft voice broke the silence.

The whole world seemed to become still in that instant. *Lady Julinne?*

Jeanette slowly turned her head and for the first time her eyes met a radiant smile from Lady Julinne. Slightly abashed for having been so frank in front of the lady, Jeanette lowered her eyes, but Julinne's hand gently lifted the girl's chin.

"Let me look once more into your eyes, my child. Many nights I have heard your voice beside me—a soft, love-filled one, never ceasing to pray, to love, to reach out to me. Let me now look upon your face so that I may not only hear the love that comes through you, but see it as well."

With the little bit of strength she had, the lady squeezed Jeanette's hand and said, "You have become like my daughter, the precious one I have missed for so long. You are a special child indeed."

Jeanette's heart was flooded with joy. Those many days and nights she had spent weeping for the lady's soul, doing her best to love without seeing it returned, had not been in vain. *If my heart rejoices at this, how much more would my lord's heart be glad!* she thought to herself.

Just then, the doors swung wide open and there stood the Lord Samuel, looking longingly at the lady, just as he always did when coming to pay his evening visits. He had not yet noticed.

"My love?" Julinne managed a faint whisper.

Puzzled, he slowly walked forward, and upon seeing his dear wife awake and smiling, he rushed and knelt by her bedside, unable to contain the joy that was rushing within him.

"Yes, yes, it is I!" He assured her, kissing her hand.

It was a moment beyond words, the happiest either of them had known in a long time. After a few moments of bliss and exchanging assurances of love one with another, Lord Samuel told Julinne that his brother, Gregor, had come that afternoon.

Just then there came a knock at the door. Samuel went to open it and encountered one of the servants, who whispered to him that Lord Gregor had passed away. Lord Samuel's heart sank, but he quickly thanked and dismissed the servant, and turned back to Lady Julinne and Jeanette, trying to hide the heaviness he felt.

Kneeling beside Julinne once more, he answered the puzzled looks on their faces, announcing, "It's my brother. He has left us."

"I know, my love," responded Julinne. "He came to my bedside whilst I was still asleep. He said he could not stay long, but that he had come to speak with me. I, of course, was surprised to see him, but even more surprised at what he said. He spoke of Belle, and how it was he who had taken her many years before, and he spoke of the grief he now felt for the sorrow he had caused so many—even those closest to him. I could not believe that he had done such a thing, but he urged me that it was even so, and he pleaded for forgiveness. He said,

“My lady, I have caused much suffering, much pain. I wish I could undo the many years of sorrow I have brought to the lives of many, and most of all to yours. I sought to secure the power and wealth of my brother for myself, but my greed took away the very life with which I expected to enjoy it. I wish that all those harmful words and deeds could be erased. Please tell those you meet to show all the love and kindness that they can, for we pass through this world but once and we must give what we can before it is too late.

“One last word, my lady. Let God’s great comfort and strength heal whatever hurts I in my selfishness and jealousy have caused. Receive His love and comfort, free and full, and give life another chance. Give love another chance. It waits with open arms, ready to embrace you if you will only take one step forward to receive it.”

Julinne stopped for a moment and looked upward, her eyes sparkling.

“Oh, Samuel, he looked so happy! Though broken with the full realization of all he had done, he looked as one who had accepted the mercy and atonement of God, and was now going on to a new life—a life that would know no sorrow. It was when I assured him of my forgiveness that my spirit came back to me again. It was he who urged me to return to you, to life...” Then looking into Jeanette’s eyes, the lady said with deepest gratitude, “and to you, dear child—you and your special love.” She hesitated for a moment, and then turned to Lord Samuel, a tear rolling down her cheek. “How ashamed I am for having left you alone, my lord, to indulge in my own sorrows.”

Samuel kissed her, “How happy I am to have you once more with me in body and spirit, my love.”

Jeanette smiled and squeezed the lady’s hand gently and affectionately, and the three of them

looked upward in silent prayer and thankfulness for God’s ever-abundant mercy.



Lord Samuel’s castle still being a great distance from their village, Francis and Belle borrowed two horses to make good time before nightfall. They set off that same morning towards Lord Samuel’s castle. Unaware of all that had taken place that day, they were trying to make good time in the hopes of getting as far away from Lord Gregor’s reach as they could, and as quickly as they could.

They stopped for the night in a small village, and the next morning continued their journey rapidly through the towns and cities en route to Lord Samuel’s castle. It was early noon when they both stopped for a rest, and to buy some foodstuffs at the local grocery in a town along the way. They then headed off to the edge of town, finding a secluded area atop a small hill beside the main town road, where they sat down to partake of a quick lunch. As they rested beneath the shade that the sparse trees afforded them, Francis caught a glimpse of a little old lady peering searchingly around on the road that led beside this wooded area, but he took little notice and assumed she would be off in another direction shortly. Surprised he was when he saw her small form moving up the hill, directly towards where they were sitting. He tugged at Belle’s sleeve.

“Do you know this lady, Belle?”

Belle strained to look at the well-covered little old lady, who was still a good distance away, but coming determinedly towards them. Suddenly, taken aback, she squealed.

“It’s Serah, Lady Eleanor’s personal servant!”

They stood up, preparing to run, fearing that Gregor’s guards would come following close behind

her. But Serah called out to them, “Anabelle, Anabelle! Please stop, I’ve come to help you.”

The name startled Belle almost more than Serah’s unkempt composure. Although she now knew that she indeed was called “Anabelle”, and not “Jayne”, as she had been called from the time she set foot in Gregor’s household, Belle was nonetheless surprised and confused, wondering if it could be a ploy, or an attempt to lure her back.

The two quickly mounted their horses, as Francis looked anxiously around to see if they were being approached from any other directions. But there was no sign of any others. Relaxing somewhat, they allowed the old lady to approach them.

“Anabelle,” Serah began, as she breathlessly reached the two youngsters, “so much has happened since you left those two nights ago. The whole household is in an uproar”

“I can imagine so, Serah.”

“No, you don’t understand. Something has come over Lord Gregor, and the morning you left Lady Eleanor announced your true identity, and that Lord Gregor had purposed to return you to your parents! When we found that you had gone, Gregor despaired, and immediately departed for your father’s castle. All of the servants were sent out to try and find you. I suspected you may have headed to the village, and when I got there, I found out that you had indeed been there, but that you had left with a young man. I suspected you might be heading this way, so I took a carriage, and traveled all night, and with Godspeed arrived here before you did—most certainly a miracle. And just a few moments ago, when the grocer informed me, as I had this morning requested of him, that an unknown young man and woman had stopped in his shop for supplies, I hoped and prayed that it

would be you, and that I would find you—and I have! Thank God you rested, giving this little old lady time to catch up to you!” Serah said excitedly, hugging Belle.

“This young man, Serah, has agreed to help me all the way to Lord Samuel’s castle,” Belle explained.

“Oh, I knew that God would care for you. How could I worry so? Praise be to God!” Serah replied enthusiastically.

“Well, then,” Francis interrupted, “since it appears that all is now well, let us make haste and be off. It is yet a good many hours’ ride to Lord Samuel’s castle. God willing, we can be there shortly after dark. Serah, you can ride with me.”

Chapter 8

Rejoicing over the wonder of Lady Julinne's recovery yesternight, Lord Samuel sat beside her all that day and evening, talking and enjoying her company once more. She had once again, almost magically, become that beautiful, blithe and spirited lady he had married many years ago. Having Belle there was the one thing that would make it all complete, they both thought to themselves.

Jeanette had been taken to one of the guest rooms in the castle for some time of rest. She had faithfully stayed by the lady's side these many months and both Samuel and Julinne were deeply touched and delighted with her dedication. They planned to reward her and perhaps invite her to remain as a part of their household.

Jeanette invited some of the chambermaids to her room for tea, rejoicing in all that had happened, and wanting to share her joy with the others. The chambermaids were so busy enjoying this special time when life had returned to the palace once more, that they hardly noticed the three persons riding towards the castle, approaching the side entrance almost directly below Jeanette's window.

Gingerly, Belle knocked on the door. After telling the guard that the long-lost Anabelle had finally returned, she was met with the very expression she had anticipated. Stunned and overwhelmed with joy, not to mention proud to be the one to herald these great tidings, the guard ushered her up to her mother's chamber and let her enter without prior announcement. Francis and Serah waited outside the door as Belle ran into her father's arms and held her mother's hand.

The three wept for joy, not knowing how else to express their thankfulness and gratitude to God for bringing them all back together.

Belle told her father how Francis and Serah had helped her, and he duly thanked them both, and let them retire for the evening. The journey was not over for Francis, who immediately set out to inquire of the whereabouts of his dear friend who had come to mean so much more to him in the months she had been gone.

Francis thought to continue on in the spirit of surprise that seemed to have filled the day, by startling his unsuspecting little Jeanette.

Peering into the half open door, he was delighted to see the attractive red-haired beauty he had missed so greatly peeling with laughter along with the other ladies around her. He hardly wanted to disrupt, but not being able to constrain himself, he pushed the door wide open and walked over to Jeanette, whose face was just as stunned as he had imagined it would be.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, delighted, but curious.

He put his finger over her lips,

"Explanation later, first things first," Francis said as he lifted her chin and kissed her softly.

Jeanette blushed, while the maids all cheered and looked knowingly at each other. They had heard a few stories from Jeanette about this kind young fellow and they thought it best to creep out of the room and leave the two alone together.

"How has all the work in the village been, Francis?" Jeanette asked.

"Very well cared for," answered Francis, in mock conceit.

"Aha, has it missed me?"

"Some. Have you missed *me*?" asked Francis, half in jest, yet all too curious to know if she still thought

of him as fondly as he used to think she did.

"Some," Jeanette answered casually, with a coy smile, knowing him too well to be deceived by his jest.

They both laughed, as did the maids outside the door. They were excited for their dear little friend and yet hoped that things weren't too serious between the couple, for they had all come to love Jeanette dearly, and wanted so much for her to stay.

But after a few days Jeanette found herself bidding farewell to Lord Samuel, Lady Julinne and the household whom she had come to love and consider as her very own family. She loved them dearly and would have happily spent a lifetime there, but now with Lady Julinne well, she knew it was time to return to her people. Word had often come to her while she was yet at the castle of many souls and bodies that were broken and in need. Misfortunes had happened on unsuspecting families, sickness had struck on elderly or the very young, leaving a trail of homes or hearts that needed her, and she was eager to do what she could to help.

Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne pled for her to stay and be a part of their household, for never had they found a soul as priceless as Jeanette's. But Jeanette felt that her mission here was accomplished. No, she would return to the poor and downtrodden, where she felt she could live her life to the full.

During the long ride home in a carriage provided by Lord Samuel, the faces of the many that Jeanette had helped in her young years flashed through her mind's eye—the babies, the children, the elderly, the sick, and the brokenhearted. Yes, it took spirit to give to people who had nothing to give in return, but she fully believed that if even once in your life you give life and joy to someone,

it's worth it all. Though it may have seemed to some that there was not much a crippled woman like Jeanette could do alone, yet with the help of those she was close to, they ministered not only to the physically needy, but more importantly, brought comfort and hope where there was grief and sorrow. What fulfillment it brought Jeanette to do what she could do to bring a smile to the many saddened souls that came across her path each day.

Francis and Jeanette planned to steal quietly into their humble home for a bit of peace and rest and time together before embarking once again upon their tasks. But as is so often the case when one attempts discretion, someone recognized them, and before long it seemed like the entire village came to the cottage to greet her and wish her well, and tell her how much they had missed her.

Francis, having just recovered his priceless treasure, and yielding to his protective instincts, wanted to guard her from all the commotion and let her rest awhile. But the giving soul that she was, Jeanette pled with him, "Please Francis, I have so many blessings that I could not even begin to count them all, for I would not know where to start. Let these people, these dear souls that God has entrusted into our care, feel His love through us. He can give me the strength."

Jeanette was busy chattering and laughing together with her dear friends, the townsfolk, when a maid burst in through the door of the cottage.

"Dear Jeanette!" she cried out. She looked exhausted as if she had run a long way. "My lady and her little one are deathly sick. Please, I pray you, come and comfort them. They have just returned from a long journey across the seas and are gravely ill. I am sore distressed, for it has been days since they have awakened enough to eat or

drink. I hear that you are the angel of this village and I know not who else to ask. Would you kindly consider?"

So began Francis and Jeanette's next mission of healing, comforting and restoring. The sickness was the beginning of an epidemic that swept theirs and the surrounding villages. Jeanette wrote Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne, requesting supplies, which they happily agreed to give, eager to be of service to the little angel.

Jeanette was not always well during the next three years, and at times sickness threatened her fearfully, but God was faithful and each time she fell ill, almost immediately her strength would return, sometimes in double measure, it seemed.

Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne were concerned, however. She had been like an angel to them and they wanted so much to care for her as best they could. One day, as Jeanette was resting and recovering from her latest bout of affliction, a messenger came from the Lord Samuel's castle, bearing a letter:

To our dearest Jeanette,

It is our earnest hope and prayer that this letter reaches you safely and finds you in the best of health and strength despite what we know is a very taxing and sacrificing duty that you have dedicated your life to.

How we both consider you like our very own daughter, and wish that we could be by your side. But duty calls us as well. We ask that you would kindly consider coming to work at our castle now that the illness that swept the villages is coming to an end. You could continue your great work and ministry to the poor from here.

You have done so much for us; we could never repay you. This invitation is but a small token of our deep gratitude.

*With deepest admiration,
Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne*

Jeanette closed her eyes and leaned her shoulder on Francis, who sat on the bed beside her. How she loved them dearly and would have loved to live at the castle with them and be considered one of their family! Perhaps with them close by she would be in an even greater position to help the poor by supplying their material needs—something she could not always do when she was among them as one of them. But no, the more she pondered their offer, the more she was sure: Her life was to love and she could not love as well, she felt, if she did not live amongst those she was called to love.

“Francis, have you any idea how difficult this is for me? I do not pretend to boast of any great strength. I truly wish that I could live out my days in such a beautiful home, my every need and want supplied. But I fear that is not my purpose. I think that my palace is one in Heaven and that my purpose is to stay true to my calling until such a time as God grants me leave, bound for my heavenly home.”

Francis argued with her that this could be a Godsend and answer to the prayers of the poor. “Oh, I am torn in some ways. It could be a great benefit for my work, but then again, I would not know the plight of the destitute as I do now. I would not be able to comfort as I can, as we can, now. I would be answering the prayers of their lips, but not the one in their hearts. Oh, they pray for wealth, for finer houses, for finer things, but in their hearts they

pray for love—love that knows no age or creed, class or condition.” A tear rolled down her cheek. “I should stay here.”

“Do you love the lord and lady?”

“Oh, of course! How can one pray and live for another without becoming a part of them? I shouldn’t like to think that my refusal of such a kind and benevolent offer would render them any pain. I do hope they’ll understand. But these people here need someone, and for now, until God chooses another, we must give all that we have to them. We must always be here for them.”

“Jeanette, I never wanted to say this, for I feared you would find me pretentious; but I think it wonderful that God has granted me this chance to labor together with such a saint as yourself.”

“Oh hush, Francis! It’s nothing of me! ‘Tis what God has asked, and what I must do. He has made it so that I can be free from all obligations—no abundant wealth to bind me within its desirous grip; no great earthly beauty (that, Francis could hardly resist questioning) to preoccupy me with self to the neglect of others; no family to shelter me, albeit with the best of intentions, from the realities that so many must face alone. This life, this place, is my duty, my calling. I belong here.”

And so Jeanette began to write:

*My dearest Lord Samuel and Lady Julinne,
How pleasantly surprised and delighted was I to receive your kind letter—the kindest I ever received, so full of love and tenderness. How wonderful it feels to be so loved! How I thank God each moment that I think of you, for bringing me into your beautiful lives and for making me a part of all the wonderful things that He saw fit to bring about.*

Chapter 9

I pray that I have been able to partake of the courageous, yet gentle, spirits that are so evident in both your lives. I can never thank you enough for the privilege of being a part of your household, and even being considered one of your family.

In all honesty, there is not a place in the world that I would choose before yours. Yet I feel a commitment, an obligation or mission, you might say, to the people here and to any that come my way. It is with a somewhat heavy heart that I decline your offer—heavy because I love you dearly, and feel very much like a daughter to you. Yet my heart is with the people that I have been called to love, and try as I might, I fear I can do no other than to stay with them as long as my heart tells me to.

*Yours lovingly,
Jeanette*

Before long, as if troubles and illnesses did not provide enough tragedy for the people of their land, Jeanette and her countrymen found themselves at war. Tens of thousands of men, old and young, bade their loved ones farewell and headed off to the battlefields with heavy hearts and uncertain futures.

Among the young men who were called to combat for their country was young Francis. How Jeanette's heart ached when he departed! Such special friends and family they had been to one another all this time. Now, with Francis' mother fading in strength each day, and with no one to lean on except her beloved Watcher, Jeanette resolved to give her life all the more to helping and caring for those who had also given a loved one to the cause of the nation.

Week after week Jeanette made inquiries as to how many had been injured or killed, and if her beloved Francis was among the ever-growing number of casualties, but little news reached their village. Without a friend and helper—though she needn't have feared for her own care, nor for assistance in her labors, as there wasn't a soul around who wouldn't help her in whatever she asked or needed—Jeanette oft felt very alone. She longed for someone to share her joys and pains with once more.

"Dear Lord," she prayed one even, "I plead with You to make my calling and election sure once more. I thought that I had chosen the right path and that my duty was a sure one. But now, I often find myself unsure, wondering, and yes, sometimes questioning. If You are with me, it makes all the difference in the world. Assure me once more, I pray."

Her teary eyes looked downward, yet her heart was lifted, for she knew that never does one ask the Heavenly Father for help without Him answering in His perfect way and time. Her soul assured and her heart at rest, she bravely resolved to carry on the sometimes-wearisome task that had grown to be so much a part of her.

Jeanette did not have to wait long for the answer to her prayer. For even as she uttered those words, a messenger from the battlefield rode swiftly towards her village, whose words would spur her very heart onto the next challenge of her life. After many days, exhausted and wearied from the long ride and harsh conditions, the messenger arrived.

“Jeanette! Jeanette!” Matthew, a little boy from the village, who always announced the coming of messengers to Jeanette, burst through her door. “Another messenger has come! I’ve brought my uncle and he’ll take you to see him!”

By the time Jeanette, Matthew, and his uncle Edward made their way to the very primitive hospital (it could hardly be called such) where the ill and wearied messenger lay, the letters and messages had already been passed out. The three of them began making their way to the man’s bed where he was surrounded by some of his family.

A crotchety lady stopped them. “Aye, what are you people doing? Relatives, are you? If you aren’t, you best be on your way for this man is very ill, he is.”

“This young lady’s man is on the battlefield and she’d like to be knowing if there’s any word of him. She hasn’t heard from him in months now.”

“Yeah, we’ve heard it all here, we have. Oh, all right, go on then, make yourselves happy. Find out about the young miss’ man.” She replied with a scowl.

Edward helped Jeanette forward and set her down at the foot of the messenger’s bed, to the astonishment of the relatives and onlookers.

“Who are you, pretty miss?” The messenger managed to whisper and crack a feeble smile—the compassionate kind that showed he had been through a fair bit of suffering.

“I just came to inquire about a young man, Francis. Is there any word from him?”

“I’ve passed out all the mail I got, an’ I don’t recall anything from a man named Francis,” He said somewhat sorrowfully, disheartened that he was not able to bring glad tidings to her hopeful soul. Jeanette lowered her eyes in a feeble attempt to hide her disappointment, when ...

“Wait! You wouldn’t be ‘Jeanette’ by any chance, would you?”

Jeanette’s eyes brightened, as if to say “Yes, is there anything after all?”

The young man continued, “I knew a man named Francis. A kind and caring man was he. I only met him shortly before he was moved to another frontier. But while I knew him he told me that he wished a little lady by the name of Jeanette could be there to help. He said you were crippled, though I remember I had a hard time imagining it from all the wonderful things he said about you! He said that while you didn’t have a lot of knowledge of medicinal matters, that you had some, but mostly that you had a heart of gold that could be helping to mend some very sad and broken hearts up there. He was sure you could learn the medicinal stuff in no time, but that your cheery spirit would do these sad men, all broken in spirit and many in body too, an awful lot of good.”

Jeanette’s brown eyes sparkled with tears, happy ones, for though she knew not whether

Francis was still alive, this beautiful appreciation was treasured.



The young man's words echoed in Jeanette's ears day after day. Could she really be of help? Was this her Watcher's next plan for her? *It would be a big step for anyone, no less for a disabled person*, she thought. But then again, where would the beauty be in a life with no crosses, no challenges, and no risks to provide contrast to its joys and pleasures?

One day while Mary, one of the townspeople, was visiting her, they began to talk about the war. Mary had the stature and heart of a perfect mother, which she was to not only her own pretty brood but to any other soul who she found in need of that special maternal touch. Mary had been helping care for Francis' mother, who had shortly before passed to the world beyond, and she would still often visit Jeanette. Together they would make packages of food and flowers—kindly, loving things that, though they weren't worth very much, could lift a soul who was surrounded daily with the hard conditions of war. Many there were who never faced a day knowing whether they or some dear loved one would come through alive and whole.

"Oh, Jeanette, a horrid thing war is," Mary said, straight out of the blue, though it was apparent she had been thinking about it for some time. "For people simple as us village folk, it's impossible to understand why anyone would want to put so many lives at stake for wealth or a bit of land, if you know what I mean."

"I know, Mary. Just think, if all the world were village folk, what a better world it would be."

"Bless your heart, dear. I think that's just about the kindest..."

"No, truly! The poor in wealth are rich in heart and spirit. They must work to care for others, to care for those they love. All their giving comes from their hearts. But if you have enough wealth to worry about whether you have as much land as your neighbor, or whether you have enough riches to last you three lifetimes instead of only two, rather than thinking about how you can put your efforts toward caring for others' lives and hearts, then you have too much wealth, I would say. Why is it that the ones who have less really have more to give?"

"Because they're giving from their heart, child," Mary said as she reached over and stroked Jeanette's cheek from across the table. "What comes from the heart is the most precious gift of all, no matter how little it may seem."

After a few moments Jeanette mustered up the courage to speak to Mary of her thoughts and intentions. "I've been thinking, Mary. What would you say if I told you that perhaps I was meant to go to the battlefield for a time, to give what little I can to help those who have close to nothing?"

There was a long silence, as Jeanette expected, before the wise old matron answered her. "Child, you must do what your heart tells you to do. Don't let anyone try to protect you or shield you too much. I won't lie to you and tell you it won't be hard out there. Goodness, strong grown men are dying every day on the battlefield! But follow your heart. Sometimes your heart has reasons that logic just can't understand, you know. I'll be praying for you, darling."

Mary walked over and stood behind Jeanette, her arms around her, tears rolling down her cheeks as she whispered, "God knows I—we all, really—think of you as a daughter. We wouldn't want to let you go for the world, but there are others who need you

and we know you well enough to know that your heart is never happiest unless it's giving the very most it can to those who need it most. And, who knows but God, perhaps you'll meet Francis and be able to aid him in his great need!" Mary added with a chuckle.

Jeanette laughed through her tears, "Why Mary! You think of everything. You really do! I do believe though, that I am meant to go."

"Then go, my child. We will all be with you in spirit. Your work here is done for the time being, and you need to go on. Know that wherever you are, you will always have work—for you have been called to love, and love's work is never done, is it, my angel?"

"Thank you, Mary." Jeanette said as she lifted her arm to wipe away a tear.

"Well then, we'd best be getting to work to help you prepare. You'll have to get government permission to go, and I'll warn you that won't be easy. The best of people won't want you to go, out of desire to protect you, and the worst ... well, you know how difficult they can be sometimes. You must find someone to go with, for as much as I admire your fortitude and courage, I must remind you that..."

"Yes, I know. It's just not possible for me to do anything alone. I know, Mary. I'll find someone."

"And the Lord will be with you, Jeanette. That I know of a surety."

Chapter 10

Mary was right; it was difficult to get the necessary permission. The king and queen's newly appointed counselor was an old friend of Gregor's. Many similarities could be seen in their characters – that is, before Gregor's transformation in his final hours. Sir Robert had always been a grievous sort of man, as long as anyone had known him. One would not be far from the truth if they thought that he had never smiled before in his life, for he found very little reason to be amused or cheered. How or why he had come to be counselor the people were not sure, but many rued the decision nonetheless.

Permission to proceed to the battlefield had to come through Sir Robert, and therein lay Jeanette's obstacle. Robert would shudder when the palace would at times begin to ring with animated talk and laughter about Jeanette. Jeanette had never been to the palace, but as anyone knows, there is in each human soul a great tendency to relay—usually with utmost faithfulness and detail—unusual or remarkable tales. Robert despised Jeanette, and the more he heard of her great kindness and gentleness, service and sacrifice, the more he disliked her. He seemed to have an ever-increasing appetite for recognition and power, often to the hurt of others, and especially to the detriment of those who, intentionally or unintentionally, drew people's attention and affection away from him.

Dreary people of Robert's kind have no desire to help a cheerful person, able to make themselves loved and respected by all, even if their lot is obviously much worse than his own. So upon receiving Jeanette's kind request that he grant her permission to visit the soldiers in the battle fray, he was gleeful. This was his chance to deny her

some form of happiness, he thought. He responded that she was far too frail and it would be a dangerous environment for a young woman as she.

But Jeanette was not easily dissuaded. Time and again she wrote Sir Robert, pleading her case and stating her deep desire to be of assistance to those who were giving their lives for her country. And time and again she was refused.

With each cold refusal came an increasing, almost burning, desire within Jeanette to go to the fields of battle. *Until this fearsome, miserly man aids and supports my going to help the poor men of war, I will not give in!* she thought to herself.

Upon receiving yet another letter of refusal from Sir Robert, Jeanette determined that she would appeal to the king and queen. She had never met them in person, but she knew that they had heard of her. In good faith, she wrote and pled with them:

My Majesties,

I do pray for you each day, that our Heavenly Father will anoint you in your pressing matters of state. I know the crown is heavy, but I trust that God, Who doeth all things well, will continue to bless your path as He has mine.

I believe He has called me to help those who have, in such a selfless manner, given themselves bravely in battling for our kingdom against those who would invade and oppress us. God has given me a desire to be of assistance in any way I can, and therefore there is one thing I would ask of you:

To grant me permission to visit the soldiers at a fortress near the front for however long it is necessary. I have written, requesting permission before, but I have been refused. I

understand the concern for my welfare, but many have already given their lives, and I would be more than glad to give mine in the service which God will help me render to bring His hope and cheer to the hearts of these broken men. I think it would be selfish not to. I pray that God will also provide someone for me to travel and work with.

If your majesties would be kind enough to grant me and my traveling companion permission to proceed with my venture, I would be ever so grateful.

Jeanette



The king was busy discussing a matter of the kingdom with Sir Robert, when a messenger came to the door. Bowing low before the king, the courier handed him Jeanette's letter. The king thanked him, and upon opening it, a big smile spread across his face.

"What is it, my lord?" Sir Robert inquired, curious as to what could bring such fond thoughts to His Majesty's mind.

"It's a letter from Jeanette! Ah, it's been many years since I have heard of this young girl. Many, many years. I remember she was of wonderful assistance to Lord Samuel when his wife was ill, deathly ill." The king's voice trailed off as he began to read her letter.

Upon the mention of her name, Sir Robert scowled. *I thought my troubles with her were over after these many letters of requests. Surely this could not be yet another ...*

"Bless the child's heart, she wants to be of service to her fellow countrymen. I find that very honorable. We'll have to discuss this, though."

Honorable! I find it very bothersome. Sir Robert mused within himself. He was confident he could crush the idea with his good reasoning.

“So, my good counselor. What say you of this request?”

Putting on his most pretentious look of concern and kindheartedness, Sir Robert began, “Well, your majesty, I think that it is a very noble desire....”

“Good! So do I. So do I! Then it is finished. We shall let her go.” Then, looking out a nearby window, the king spoke softly, almost as if he was thinking aloud, “What a blessed heart that child has! Such love and kindness permeates her very being, I have heard.”

More concerned than ever to not let this one pass, Sir Robert interrupted, “I think that though it is a noble request indeed, thought should be taken to her welfare. She is a cripple....”

“Yes, that much I remember hearing. She may be crippled, but she has done much more for her fellow man than many people who can walk, I would say. Would you not?”

Hardly able to contain his fury, Sir Robert said firmly, “It’s in the best of interests for her, I would think, that her request be denied.”

“Sir Robert,” the king reasoned, “how can we do such a thing to someone with such pure intentions? Besides, I believe that God can and will keep her. We are not sending her to the battlefield, remember. We are sending her to a fortress, which, though danger be plentiful and circumstances less than delightful, is scarcely the battlefield. I would be going there myself, except for my age which is indeed a great hindrance to my youthful spirit.”

Feeling quite disturbed by this turn of events, things having not gone as planned, Sir Robert determined to try to stop Jeanette or else make

things difficult for her at every turn. A rather huffy man was he in general, but his demeanor was noticeably more sullen the rest of the day.



Jeanette, Mary and Edward (young Matthew’s uncle, who sometimes accompanied the women on their errands of mercy) had just returned from visiting a family on the outer edges of the village. The mother was due to deliver any day, so they had gone to prepare for the delivery, give prayer and support to the family, and keep the home going for the day, while the mother brought forth her new baby. It’s hard to think what a crippled woman would do to keep a home going, but Jeanette so loved to care for little ones, and, leaning on her crutches, would manage to get around enough to do what was necessary. She fascinated them with her stories and books, and had no problem keeping them busy and teaching them a thing or two. The husky woman that Mary was, she not only delivered the babe, but she cooked, cleaned and, along with Edward, took care of the farm for the day to give the father reprieve and time with the mother and the newborn.

Jeanette was in high spirits upon returning, and Mary and Edward took her straight to her little home where they laughed and chattered and recounted the events of the day.

“Well, I’d say that was a handsome day!” Edward exclaimed.

“I should like to think so. What about you, Jeanette?” said Mary.

“I agree. And I would think that the most handsome thing that could happen to me now would be...”

“Francis returning!” Edward and Mary both piped up with a hearty chuckle.

“Oh, of course!” Jeanette laughed, slightly embarrassed. “But what I meant to say was that their majesties would grant me permission to go to help the men in battle.”

“Our prayer is that your prayer will be answered, child. Remember, the Lord has His times and seasons. And it is time and season for me to be returning to my family before they wonder what has become of me!” Edward said as he walked to the door.

“Goodbye, ladies!” he called out.

“Thank you, Edward, for accompanying us!” Jeanette waved.

Edward left and started on his way home, or so they thought, when suddenly they heard footsteps running toward the cottage, and heard his voice calling “Jeanette! Jeanette!” as he rushed in with a letter in his hands.

“Good Lord! Jeanette, there’s a letter for you from Their Majesties. I met a man on horseback riding towards your cottage. He asked if I knew where the cottage of Jeanette was, and I offered to take it for you. Surprisingly, he agreed. Here, open it.”

The two of them looked on with excitement as Jeanette broke the seal and opened the letter.

Jeanette,

Your God is with you and your request has been granted by His Majesty, King Fredrick. You may go to the fortress of your choice to do as you have stated. We know your efforts will be greatly appreciated by all. His Majesty’s blessing and prayers are with you in this endeavour.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs

“Oh! I’m so happy!” Jeanette exclaimed as she hugged Mary and Edward, who were both looking on with a mixture of happiness and anxiety. They loved to see her so happy and full of joy, yet they were also concerned, as anyone would be in their position, for her welfare.

“But who will go with you, Jeanette?” Mary piped up.

“Oh! I’d almost forgotten about that in my happiness to finally receive this long-awaited answer to my request. But I’m sure I can find someone.”

“Will I do?” A voice called from the door.

“Anabelle!” Jeanette shrieked with excitement. “Don’t jest with me. Of course you could not come. But my, is it wonderful to see you!”

“I do not jest, Jeanette. I pled with my father and mother to let me go. I cannot stay behind castle walls the whole of my life. If I am to be heir to their lands and wealth one day, I should want to know just how the common people fare and how they live their lives.”

“You are an angel, Belle!”

“No, Jeanette. *You* are the angel. I’m the privileged one who was rescued by your sweet family. If it were not for your kindly father taking me in from the cold that day long, long ago, God only knows what would have become of me. I remembered the brief time I spent in your home, though I did not know how or why I ended up there. I found out not too long ago that I had run away from Gregor and his men soon after they had taken me, whilst they were travelling from my parents’ castle to his. A precocious child I must have been!

“Well, they caught up with me finally, and you know the story. The night I spent in your lovely home was something I never forgot, these many

years. I wanted to be kind as you all were. I'm sorry for all the chatter, but I am so excited, you know, and so happy to be of use to someone who has been of so much help to me and my family!"

"Oh, Belle, how delighted I am that we shall be partners for a time, though I know you will have to return one day."

"If I could help it, I would stay here with you forever!"

"Well! I suppose we should be making our travel arrangements and finding supplies and all that is needed."

"That, my dear, is all taken care of!" Belle said with a mock air of efficiency. Jeanette was soon to find out how nicely Belle's practical sense balanced her own inspirational self.

"We're off!" Jeanette laughed excitedly. "This is no picnic we're about to enter, I know, but I so rejoice for I have tried time and again to make this very thing a reality, and it is now coming to pass!"

"That it is, that it is." Edward and Mary said, looking at each other contentedly. They were indeed proud of the two brave girls and wished and prayed for the very best. They were also happy as ever to see Jeanette's eyes sparkle so at a fresh challenge.

"Why look, Mary and Edward! The rain has stopped and there's a ray of sun coming right through the window over there! There must be a beautiful rainbow painted in the sky as well! Would you mind helping me over to the window, Edward?"

"Of course, child." Edward helped her over to the window. It was a pretty, picturesque sight, and none of them could remember when Jeanette looked more beautiful. The sun reflected off her

reddish curls, temporarily turning them gold, and her face shone like that of a little child who has climbed her first ladder and seen the world from a different view.

Chapter 11

The journey to the chosen fortress, Bulwick, was long and arduous. There were many stops and it took over a week before the girls, accompanied by Will, a servant of Lord Samuel's household, reached their destination. The weather was poor and it seemed that not much was going in their favor, but they pressed on. Autumn was coming to an end and soon winter would be upon them, and no one would want to be caught traveling in such a terrible winter.

They finally made their way to Northfield. As they entered a little village just outside of Northfield, which was to be the last stop before reaching their destination, they peered out of the carriage windows. Everything looked so desolate and deserted. The people milling around were few, and sorely lacked in spirit. One could almost say it looked like a ghost town.

"Everything looks so grim, The people here appear so miserable, don't you think?" Belle said, returning her attention to Jeanette, who was sitting next to her.

"So true. What a shocking taste of reality it is to come here—reality as it is for these people, I mean. It's like entering another world — a gray, ghastly kind of world. The gloom and death that lie just beyond seem to have enshrouded the entire village."

"If they have not even partaken firsthand of the effects of war, but are only a few ripples away, imagine how in need the men at the fortress are."

"Yes, I can only imagine."

They both peered out of the window once again and saw an elderly lady walking opposite the carriage, on the other side of the small dusty road they were also travelling on. She looked at them

with cynical eyes, and when her eyes met theirs she called out skeptically, "Rich angels of mercy are you, to come and bestow your graces upon us lowly folk? We don't need your money or your social kindness; we need somebody who understands, who knows the pain. Eh? Do you understand what this old woman's trying to tell you?"

She rushed up to the carriage, which was moving slowly through these dreary streets, and continued calling out to the two girls: "We've seen the likes of you before. Don't you be ignoring me! It isn't pretty to be here standing and watching as the rich bend low to help the poor. The rich should be stopping the wars, they should. After all, they're the ones who make them!"

With that some people tried to take her away, but a feisty one she was, continuing to call out as people tried to hurry her away.

"The poor lady!" Belle whispered.

"Belle, let's ask them to stop the carriage. I want to talk to her."

The carriage stopped, Anabelle stepped down and then Will, who was to be Jeanette's legs, as it were, jumped down from the front of carriage, where he had been sitting, and carried Jeanette out.

The lady stopped, stunned, as she watched Will help Jeanette out of the carriage. In all the commotion, the lady had tripped and someone was holding her in his arms on the side of the road. As the girls approached the old woman, she turned her face away.

When Jeanette reached out to her, she showed a face full of sorrow, eyes brimming with tears and spoke, "I'm sorry, both of you! Rich lasses you look like, but a heart you must have or you wouldn't be leaving your blessed comfort to come out here." She especially eyed Jeanette, seeing she was crippled.

"Don't be sorry," Jeanette replied, taking the woman's hand gently. "It's all too understandable, all that you said just a moment ago. We aren't what you think, though. We're just two young girls, I from a simple life and small village just like you. We only want to help. That's all. We don't have much; but whatever it is you need, we'll try our best to help."

The woman started to sob as she told her story, "I was only a little girl when war broke out in my country. My parents, important people back home, were taken away and I was brought here with my brother and sister and put in a home with other children like us. Rich people from the village nearby would come to pay social visits and bring their children who would mock us orphans and steal what little we had. Then they came to take my brother and sister away. The rich boasted of their charity towards us and would sometimes lay big feasts at the home we stayed at, though I could hardly call it a home! But as soon as those who were performing their charitable deeds would leave, our keepers would take back the feast, the clothing, all that had been given us. They would yell and scream at us, telling us we were the scum of the world. I was six years old when I was taken, and I lived in that hole for thirteen years.

"When I finally left that awful place and came to this village, a young man visited our village, a kind and caring man. I was just a maidservant, caring for people's children, doing the washing, but he cared to talk with me. He visited often and I grew to love him. He told me that he would come and marry me, and I was happy for the first time in my life!

"But he never came back. One day a carriage came up to the house where I lived, and a wealthy looking man and woman came out, shouting and screaming at me: 'Scum of the earth! You were

meant to serve, nothing more,' and then continued, 'Don't try to marry our son, you don't deserve the likes of him!' Then I realized these were my dear man's parents. I never knew he was of the wealthy breed—he was so kind and gentle. They left me, devastated, and went off to secure their son's life as they would have it.

"From that day on, I was more sure than ever that I wanted nothing to do with any of them rich who'd be coming just to blow their own trumps, like the Bible says, and who don't care anything about the poor. So when I saw the two of you, I couldn't help myself. The hatred..." the lady wept.

There was silence for a few moments that seemed like hours. For Belle and Jeanette, coming from two very separate worlds themselves, this was only the beginning of their firsthand encounters with the pain and hardship that had befallen so many of their countrymen in this war-torn region.

"We have nothing much to give, dear friend." Jeanette told the woman. "But we will always remember you, and pray for you and those who have suffered so bravely as you have. I wish I could promise that we could change everything for the better, but I'm afraid we are only two..."

"Oh, promise me you will try?" The old lady whispered, a tiny ray of hope in her eyes. "If not for me, for others like me, for we have no voice, and," regaining her composure, she chuckled, "I'm much too old now to try."

Jeanette and Belle looked at each other and then back at the lady who was now smiling softly. "Yes, we promise to do our very best."

"Thank you, my girls. Thank you. God knows you are angels of mercy, be you wealthy or not. I mightn't have much longer on this Earth, thank God, but so

long as I do, my prayers are with you." With that, the lady closed her eyes peacefully.

"Someone get a doctor, quickly!" Belle called out.

Someone came running with a man who said he was a doctor. He knelt down beside the lady and examined her.

"She isn't gone, is she?" Jeanette asked.

"No, the exhaustion and tension have left her worn body—and spirit too, perhaps—quite weak, but she'll be doing better with a little rest. Now, don't you worry. Be on with your journey and we'll care for her."

"Do you know her name?"

"Rebecca. It's Rebecca, my angel." The lady opened her eyes and whispered, and gave a feeble smile before she lay back to rest. "Bless you, children."

They both kissed her hand and went back to the carriage to continue on with their journey.



That night was a long one for the two girls. It dawned on them more clearly than ever that life seemed to have dealt some harsh blows to some and not all had taken it graciously. The ones who did take things well seemed to be the better for their hardships. As for the others, well, some would say that it was as if the flame of their spirit had been snuffed out before it was time.

They were now on the very last leg of their journey, and it could be said that though they were half as blithe as they were at first start, they had come to have a greater and deeper understanding of those around them. Thus they were more prepared to be of assistance to the desperately needy and dying men they had come to care for.

When they arrived at the fortress (which was really a large old and rundown manor house

dedicated to housing the soldiers coming in from the battlefield), a large group of the newly-wounded had just been brought from the battlefield after several days of travel. The picture was heart-wrenching. Men, young and old, lay dying or at the very least in severe pain, either on the floor, on haystacks, or on beaten-up furniture. Their surroundings were filthy and the rooms were very dimly lit.

The few soldiers and nurses who were on duty sat around trying to enjoy themselves in the few minutes they had when they weren't attending to a new wagonload of wounded men or hauling off corpses for burial. Their coarse laughter and hardened spirits hurt Jeanette and Belle. The two were new on the scene, to be sure, but there couldn't be a reason to let these men pass away without some honor, some recognition and appreciation for their bravery.

"Aaaarggghh!" A shout from another long corridor startled Jeanette and Belle. The men stopped laughing and a few rushed to see what was happening. A young man, severely wounded, had been lying on some old furniture that had given way. The fall was almost more than his body could bear.

Will took Jeanette and Belle to where the poor man lay. He was a young man, obviously once good-looking and perhaps good-natured and kind, though all this was hard to tell in his condition. After he had been re-situated and given a place to lie—nothing more than a blanket atop a haystack, the men left. Jeanette, Belle and Will looked sadly at the young man, agonizing in pain. His wounds were like nothing they'd seen before, and they scarcely knew what to do. In fact, nothing that day was like anything they'd seen before. There was so much

that needed and ought to be done in this dreadful dwelling, but where to start, they didn't know.

Belle, the organizational talent that she was, suggested, "Perhaps you and Will could stay with this young man and help to clean his wounds and tend to him, Jeanette. Just your presence will probably serve to comfort his soul, and prevent him from being alone with such pain. I'll try to find out who manages this place, and arrange with them what can be done insofar as beginning to clean, or tend to others."

"All right. But Belle, do take care that the men and nurses who have been here for so long don't feel threatened by our presence. Help them understand that we are only trying to help, and that we've come to work with them."

Belle smiled at Jeanette's concern. "Of course, Jeanette."

Will kicked a pile of hay against a wall next to the young man as a place to seat Jeanette. "These walls are awfully grimy," he said as he sat her down. "You'll be all right, won't you? I'm afraid this whole place is more dingy than anything I've seen in my life!"

"That it is," Jeanette responded, and then thought to herself, *If only the king knew. If only the king knew.* She hoped that action could be taken toward improvement, by them finding a way to tell Lord Samuel of the conditions they found here. If they could get news to Lord Samuel, he could get it to the king for them (for they two were friends from youth, and still close confidantes now in their later years). — Little did she know that it would be much more difficult than she imagined to get help for these men. She would soon find out what it was, or rather, *whom* it was that stood between her cause and those with the power to make a difference.

Jeanette knew what it was like to sit beside a dying person day after day, hoping, praying for their recovery. But she never felt as moved as she did sitting beside this young man. Every time she looked at his worn, beaten, and wounded body and face, the tears would flow. She had given, yes, she thought oft, but her own loving was almost put to shame when she would survey the rooms, the corridors, the corners and crannies, all filled with men who—some willingly and some unwillingly—gave themselves, body and spirit, to the cause they were fighting for, futile as it may have seemed.

She would hum or sing as loudly and long as she could, trying to give cheer to those in earshot and trying to keep her own spirits high. It was nigh impossible in those conditions at first, but she knew that if she could only impart spirit and love to them, it could do wonders for them even physically. Sometimes she'd whisper into the ear of the young man beside her, reading him scripture or just talking to him.

"Will you tell me your name, brave fellow?" She'd ask him often. He hardly responded, though sometimes he'd stir and she hoped that he had heard her. "I suppose one day you will. We're praying that one day you will."

Jeanette stayed most days, and even some nights, on this haystack beside the young man's side—the man whose name she had not yet come to know, but whose soul she had come to love, among many others like him, for his bravery and courage. He stayed in the long corridor, what the caretakers there dubbed the "Great Hall," though it hardly resembled anything great. It was the most central location and roomed the most soldiers. Jeanette preferred to be in the hustle

and bustle of things, not off in a room far away from all that went on day after day in this wretched place.

One day while Belle and Will were tending other wounded soldiers not far from the Great Hall, they heard Jeanette call out, "Belle! Will! Come if you can!" They ran over to see what had happened. The young man beside her was fitfully stirring, trying to toss from side to side but without much success. He had been feverish for many days now and was trying to say something, but Jeanette couldn't understand him.

Will and Belle came running to his side. "What is it?" they both said in unison.

"He won't stay still and I'm afraid he's going to hurt himself. Feel him! His temperature rises and then falls so quickly. I'm not sure if perhaps he's slipping away. He's also trying to say something, I think." She looked down at him, his lips moving and sometimes successfully making a sound.

Will and Belle moved closer to his face.

"Help me. Help me. ... H-h-help me," He kept repeating over and over.

"We are! We're right here!" Jeanette responded enthusiastically, happy to be able to understand him finally. There was more, though, and they strained to hear it,

"The horses..." he moaned as he tossed his head from side to side a few times, "...the horses and fire. So many dead. So many, many." Tears streamed down the cheeks, flowing into the bandages on his face and neck.

Jeanette stroked his hair and gently squeezed his hand. "It's going to be all right, my friend. It's going to be all right." She whispered and hesitated a moment before the tears started streaming down her cheeks too, "Heaven is waiting for those who

fell, my friend. And we'll do our best to bring you who live back to health in good time."

As suddenly as it started, the young man stopped shivering, groaning and tossing. He looked peaceful as could be, so peaceful, in fact, that the three became worried.

It was Will who broke the silence. "Why should we be sad? The happy thought could be that he's flying towards the angels, though we'd miss him no doubt. Perhaps he'll come back to help the other..."

The girls were silent and Will thought he'd better join in. He stroked Jeanette's back comfortingly.

Then came a moment of suspense as the young man slowly and deliberately looked up at Belle, then turned to Will, then Jeanette, all of them straining to comprehend whatever he was to say or do next.

A smile broke out on his face and he said, "It's Mark. My name is Mark." Then he sank into a deep sleep.

Will's face broke out into a big smile, and the girls almost laughed through their tears. They were so happy that he'd heard them all along. He was just the first of many to respond to their thoughtful and loving treatment and personal concern.

They came to know him well in the coming months as he recovered, and nicknamed him their "first patient"—though it could hardly be called a hospital of any sort. There were many "patients" to follow, and Mark's cheery spirits and amazing recovery did wonders for them all. They found out that he had a wife and a young child whom he had never seen, and they were eager to put them in contact with each other.

After several months, Belle joyously showed Jeanette the long-awaited reply to his letters to his family:

My dearest Mark,

What a joy it is to my heart to know that you live! Our little one is looking forward to seeing you as well! There aren't enough words to tell you how deeply concerned I was for your welfare, hoping, dreaming, and then just praying, that you would return to us one day whole. To know that my hopes, dreams and prayers of seeing you again, healthy and whole, are all coming to pass at once, is more than I could have ever asked for. God has been so gracious to me. There are so many things to speak of—all that has happened over the last few years—and so much love to give you that I can hardly wait for your complete recovery and return home to our arms.

*Forever,
Dorothea*

"Forever, my love!" Mark exclaimed in a pretend toast. "To happiness, to love, to God and to you wonderful angels!" The three of them cheered and hugged. The girls looked almost as thrilled as if they had found long-lost loves as well. Admittedly, there is scarcely a greater joy than seeing such happiness bestowed on one you love. It's almost like possessing it oneself.

The months flew by, until at last Mark seemed well enough to return to his home. (Mostly for want of better supplies and medical facilities, recovery from the wounds of war was not a speedy process in those days.)

Mark visited all the halls and rooms, anywhere the wounded soldiers lay, encouraging them to keep their will so that soon they too could return home to their loved ones and begin a new life. He couldn't

leave without enjoying a pretend toast, as was his custom, to “a new life, happiness, God, ‘our angels’ (referring to the three) and of course, his first love—the dear wife who awaited him!”

“And a new love—your little boy!” Someone called out.

Mark cheered again and waved, “Keep your will, everyone!” Then he turned to Jeanette and Belle, chuckling, “Keep your Will too! You need him! Ha, ha!”

So ends the recovery of just one of the many lives that were touched at Bulwick. It had become a much brighter and happier place over the past year. How could it not? Where love, faith and hope abound, great things can always happen.

Chapter 12

Precious times they were at the old fortress, with nary a lonely moment. There was always plenty of action, needs great and small, and as circumstances improved, the situation became cheerier and brighter. Happy thoughts and laughter came pouring from every room and corridor it seemed. Jeanette was lonely sometimes, though. It had been over two years since the war had started and she had said goodbye to Francis, and she couldn’t help but wonder what had become of him, though she tried to think of and hope for the best. She had tried to find news of him from those who passed through Bulwick, but no one seemed to know of him. She knew that having to be apart from him, unsure of his safety, and having no knowledge of his whereabouts had helped her understand those all around her who had lost or left their loved ones behind. They could truly identify with her, for many were also in similar physical conditions, handi-capped from the war. To them she was an angel in disguise, giving in her own want.

One morning Belle came into Jeanette’s room. “Are you all right, Jeanette? You’ve slept several hours past the regular time! That is of course all right with us.—You deserve it totally. We were just a little concerned, that’s all.”

Jeanette stretched her arms, yawned and then smiled as she looked up at the ceiling. “I was having a dream about Francis.” The faraway look lingered till it seemed she noticed it herself and then started chuckling. “Oh, silly me! I haven’t been able to stop thinking about him the past few days.”

Belle went over to Jeanette’s bed and helped prop her up higher on the pillows. “Oh, I’m so sorry! I wish we could hear something, some word of how...”

"No, no." Jeanette interrupted, and yawned once more. "I'm sure he's all right. In my dream we were in this building, sort of like a meeting hall or something. There were many people there: educated people, doctors, lawyers, and the like. I'm not sure exactly what we were doing, but then somewhere in the dream he was there and I was so happy to know he was well. Must be all my thinking these past few days, for I rarely have such dreams, you know."

"I know. Neither do I."

"Except for once, many years ago ... Well, it wasn't a dream, really. I think it really happened. Did I ever tell you about that?"

"I'm not sure."

"If I had told you, you would have remembered, for this was not the type of thing one experiences every day, you know."

"Tell me, and then we'll get you up for the day. If you're feeling well, that is."

"Well, I was ten years old, I think. It was in that corner room of the farm where I spent my days and nights. I used to tell myself that whenever there was a storm it was God's angels riding heavenly horses that made the thunder, and the torches they carried made the lightning. There was a storm that night..." and Jeanette went on to tell Belle of her Watcher's visit.

"Jeanette, that's so beautiful! Why didn't you ever tell me that before?"

"Perhaps I'm too shy. I've only told my parents and they've since passed away. I just thought that it would be best if I kept it to myself."

"You should tell the soldiers here. It would be so special to them, I'm sure."

"Oh no! I couldn't."

"But you should," Belle encouraged her.

"Perhaps. Perhaps one day. I shall see."

Eventually Jeanette succumbed to Belle's persistence, and one can only imagine the hope and peace that filled those broken spirits to realize how Heaven loves each human soul in such a personal way. But that was later. Now the two sat there silently on the bed, neither knowing what to say, when a knock on the door ended the awkward silence.

"It's Will. May I enter?"

"Yes!"

"You both missed all the commotion!"

The girls' eyes widened, "What commotion?" They asked in unison.

"A messenger, from Sir Robert. From the sounds of it they may be cutting the supplies for the fortresses."

"Even this one? But we don't even have enough supplies as it is!" Jeanette cried.

"Sir Robert isn't one to be considerate of one location above another. He would never know anyway, for he'd never spend a moment of his life in one of these places unless the king demanded it of him. Nor would he ever take anyone's word for the condition or the need, so there's not much hope really," Will said sadly.

"Not much hope?! Will, we must do something. This cannot happen. We're barely managing at the moment."

"Let's wait and see, Jeanette. Perhaps it's only a minimal cut."

"Minimal is much too much. There can't be any cuts! If anything, we should be getting *more* supplies, *more* donations from the rich. These men are dying or at best severely hurt! We've got to fight for them. If we don't, who will?" Jeanette pleaded.

"She's right, Will," Belle agreed. Sir Robert is probably working towards something larger or worse,

and this is his first step. If we can stop him, we'll be able to at least hold off any other difficulties that he might try to cause."

"What? You think he means something by this, Belle?" Will asked.

"Of course! Sir Robert was a good friend of Gregor, so I know him. He is not a hasty man. He deliberates, and weighs every move. Like Jeanette says, we'll have to fight against it. There's no reason in the world that could be good enough to take from the needy."

"May I see the letter?"

"Of course, Jeanette."

"Oh look!" She read key portions aloud, "'A meeting is being convened to discuss the budgets, but for the time being ... until these things are confirmed ...'" The meaning of this dawning upon her, Jeanette exclaimed, "This is only temporary, but it could be made permanent by the people who attend this meeting. We've got to get to this meeting, Belle. We have to find out where it is and somehow try to get in and speak for these men."

"All right! But how?"

"Belle, do you think we could write your father to ask the king to allow us to attend?"

"Ohhh, I don't know," Belle hesitated. "But I suppose it's our only chance, at least for now."



"Charlotte, will you take the tea away and ask Sir Robert in? Thank you."

Moments later, Sir Robert walked in. "You asked to see me, my lord."

"Yes. You requested that a meeting be held about the budgets."

"Ah yes!" Sir Robert interrupted. "I, er, I mean, we, the council, shall discuss these matters with the appropriate ministers, doctors, and the like.

This war is costing us heavily, and there are things that must be done, regardless of the effects on the proletariat, you know."

"Regardless of the effects...?" The king raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"By effects, I mean their reaction, my lord. The people are often rather lacking in understanding of such matters and what they don't understand, they often oppose. But discussing these things with the parties involved could give better support to the more sensitive issues. We must be sure to lower our expenditures before we find the treasury empty."

"You are right in that, Sir Robert. But take care not to lower or take from the necessary budgets to those in sore need. We mustn't strip our people bare for the sake of garnering a few riches here and there. We must think about their needs. How I despise war! It seems to me that some only see it as a game played with wooden soldiers and horses, that can be nailed back together if broken. Why must some people risk others' lives for their own gain?"

"I know not, my lord."

"Neither do I, Robert." The king patted Sir Robert's shoulder and walked him to the door. "Neither do I."

Just as Robert was about to leave, the king called him back. "One last thing, Robert. You will show me the list of attendees to this council meeting, will you not? I would be very interested in seeing who is invited."



"Jeanette? Are you almost ready?" Belle knocked on the door of Jeanette's room. "Do you need any help?"

"Oh yes, I'm almost ready, if you wouldn't mind doing my bed for me. Will usually does it, but he's

busy and I wouldn't want to leave this room in such a state."

"Of course."

"Jeanette, are you nervous? I mean, we haven't heard a thing from the palace or my father about whether our request has been granted. There is still nothing in the post this morning, no word from the palace. I guess they must be very occupied with matters concerning the war. So we'll just have to go to the meeting uninvited. I've never done anything like this in my whole life."

"And you think I have?" Jeanette laughed. "I just think it's important that we do what we can to stand up for these poor souls who don't have anyone else to speak for them. They surely can't do it themselves, and so I feel it's the least we can do."

"Jeanette, the thought that I know one day I'll have to leave you is a sad one for me. Being here I've felt so free, so useful; it's been wonderful. It's as if I've been a bird in a cage all my life, and now I'm learning to fly!"

After a few moments of silence, Belle said (as if she had been wondering about this for some time and only just got the courage to ask), "Jeanette, I don't mean to be rude, but do you ever wonder where Francis is and that maybe..."

Jeanette stopped a moment while she was brushing her hair, "...that maybe one day he'll come in as one of the wounded, or...?"

Belle nodded.

"Yes, I do."

"Every day?"

"No, I'm far too busy for that. Besides, we've been here a long time now. When we first arrived I used to think of it each day, but after awhile, I learned to trust that I'd see him in God's time."

"You are an angel! I doubt I'd think the same."

"Oh, you would, Belle. There isn't any use always thinking of yourself when there are so many around you who are suffering."

"I know what you mean."

"Time just goes by slower, and the days seem longer. But every once in awhile, I really wonder. No messages, nothing except for that one man's word."

"Which man?"

"You know, the soldier, the messenger who I told you about before. And I didn't even know his name!"

"Are the ladies ready?" Will called from the hallway.

"Yes! We are!"

"Good, good. Ladies, ladies, they always take so long!" Will said jokingly.

"In a lifelong attempt to be beautiful for the men!" Jeanette retorted.

"My, my! Nettie, must you always get the last word in?" Will chuckled, then sighed and shook his head.

Once they were in the carriage, they took one last look out the window at a few heads and hands popping out and waving at them. "We wish you luck! Godspeed!"

Jeanette, Belle and Will waved back.

"A cheery lot they are!" Will said, and the girls agreed.

Chapter 13

The journey back to the capital was not something any of them looked forward to much. They all remembered the long trip they took to arrive at the fortress in the first place. Belle, who had returned to her parents' castle for two brief visits during the war, had gotten to know the road quite well by this time. When they passed through the village where Rebecca, the elderly lady who had mocked them at first, lived, they inquired about her. They heard that she was bedridden, and seemed to be standing on the doorstep of Heaven. But even so, her spirit had seemed to grow younger and stronger as her body grew older and weaker.

"Rebecca?" The three inquired at the humble cottage door where they were told she lived. Not hearing any reply, they decided to enter the house quietly and see if she was all right. Their curious eyes darted around as they tried to see where she might be, though admittedly, there wasn't much choice in a two-room cottage.

"My, my, my!" Rebecca said in a loud whisper, for she could hardly speak above that. She rose up in her bed, and leaned forward, straining to see if it was indeed who she thought. "Yes! My eyes have told me the truth today. It's you same three lovely people!"

They entered the room where she was lying peacefully, propped up on several pillows.

"You stay here by yourself?" Belle asked.

"Oh no, a darling girl from the village stays with me. She slipped out for a few moments just before you came. You see, many folks say I'm on the doorstep of Heaven—bless the thought. I do hear and see things sometimes, beautiful things. I wasn't sure if I was seeing angels from beyond, or if you

were truly there. Then I saw my little angel of mercy being carried in, and I knew. Bless you people! I can't imagine you came all this way only to see me?"

Jeanette smiled and started to answer, "We are on our way to a meeting, but we had to stop and see you."

"Oh dearie, let the kind mister here set you down on my bed. It'll be more comfortable."

"Thank you, Rebecca."

"Oh!" Rebecca replied as she smiled and threw her hand daintily to the side, "It's really the most that a sick old lady can do!"

"You are in such lively spirits, Rebecca!" Jeanette exclaimed. "If one couldn't see us, they would probably imagine we were the elderly and you were the youth!"

"Ha, ha. If they couldn't see—or hear, dear, perhaps! It's you angels that did this to me. Especially the little angel here," she pointed to Jeanette.

"I was so nasty to the both of you, and then when you came to speak to me—which is something, I'll have you know, none of the rich breed ever did to anyone speaking out against them—and I saw that one of you was crippled, I was so ashamed. I had been wasting my sad life feeling pity for myself; and not only pity, but also hatred for others, and I suppose for God too. Then I saw that there was a poor little angel here who I came to find out had grown up the daughter of a poor farmer, and hardly knew the meaning of being able to dance and play as a girl. Then I thought to myself, 'My, my, Becky. You are in a sorry state and you should spend the rest of your days cheering instead of waiting to be cheered.' It took me awhile to get over the terrible feeling that I'd been wasting my years, and sometimes I still do feel

quite badly about it, but I much prefer enjoying the last of my days here before knocking on the door of Heaven. They do say I'm at the doorstep you know," she smiled as she again repeated what was obviously a very dear thought to her.

"I often have wondered about the young man I once knew and loved, and what has become of him. Life really is a mixture of many different threads, all making one big tapestry, and I often wonder where his thread led after it crossed mine and whether he is still alive. I loved Carl very much. If you ever find the opportunity—you know how they do sometimes arise just at unexpectedly delightful moments—would you find out for me what has become of him? Carl Tendell was his name. Even if you never make it back to tell me, just knowing that someone who knows me like you do could know how he fares would be wonderful."

"Of course we'll do that, Rebecca." Belle smiled and Jeanette squeezed Rebecca's hand.

"You are a delightful bunch, you are! Off with you now! I'm sure there is a whole world awaiting you, so you'd best be on your merry way!" Rebecca smiled and waved as they arose to leave. They all knew it would most probably be the last time they saw each other, but the beautiful transformation of Rebecca's soul was something that none would forget till the last of their days.

"Life is really a mixture of different threads, isn't it?" Jeanette said to Belle when they had returned to the carriage.

"Why, I never thought of it quite like that, but I believe the dear lady is right!"



The royal building where the meeting was to be held was bustling with activity as the three walked in. Having such a variety of individuals from the

upper echelon of society congregate under one roof produced an intensity of atmosphere that could be felt as soon as one walked in the door and down the corridor leading up to the central hall. Heroes to their cause, Jeanette, Belle and Will felt like tiny fish in an ocean of sharks and whales. Their silent awe was disrupted by someone asking them what business they had there. They had not been formally invited.

Will mumbled some reason for their presence, which the inquirer accepted, surprisingly enough, as he continued on his way.

Spirits high, though a touch nervous, the three agreed that Will would stay with Jeanette while Belle went to find a way to enter the meeting.

Shortly after Belle left, a horse and carriage arrived and a young man rushed out with a sealed message from the king. He entered the building, glanced around, and when his eyes fell upon Will and Jeanette he hurried over to them.

"Pardon me, but I was instructed by the Minister of Affairs to give this message to the little lady Jeanette Fredrickson and company. Might that be you?"

Jeanette nodded and Will stood up respectfully.

"Many apologies for the tardiness of this message," the young man said as he handed the sealed message to Will. "I pray it was not a moment too late."

"I share your prayers, good fellow!" Will replied in a friendly manner, not having the slightest clue what the message could be.

"Let's see what's inside here, Nettie," Will said as he smiled in amusement to Jeanette.

Jeanette leaned over his shoulder and then shook Will with excitement, "Don't you see what this is?"

Will shrugged and replied nonchalantly, "I'm reading it, Jeanette."

But Jeanette, in her curiosity, had already begun to read the message herself, to see if it was what her hopes presaged. And her feeling was right.

Just that moment Belle sauntered over, threw her hands up in frustration and said, "I just don't see how we can do it. These people aren't exactly the friendly, helpful type."

"Belle!" Jeanette motioned for her to look at the message. "This just came from the palace!"

Belle looked over and read aloud the message,

Lady Belle and the little lady Jeanette,

His Highness the king has formally granted you permission to attend the upcoming finance meeting, being persuaded that the causes for which you expressed such sincere concern will be duly represented by your presence there. This letter bears many prayers and the king's good wishes.

The Minister of Affairs

"There, see!" Jeanette proudly announced. "We have our invitation! Let us enter at once!"

The three made their way to the room where the meeting was to commence. As they entered, there was much discussion going on within different groups of people scattered around.

Belle found a set of seats that were not occupied and Will brought Jeanette over to them. They had just finished seating themselves when Sir Robert walked in. The commotion died down quickly, and it seemed the meeting was about to begin. Sir Robert scanned his audience, perhaps to make sure that all who attended were those whom he wanted

to attend, for he was not one to take kindly to surprises. However, there was one in store for him today which uncovered itself when he glanced over to a corner and saw Belle, Jeanette and Will seated there. His disturbance at their presence could be noted by no one, save Belle and Jeanette. The others were far too busy chattering quietly amongst themselves, reviewing their speeches and arguments.

“Shall we commence?” Sir Robert said, once he had recovered from his initial disappointment.

The meeting carried on as any other similar meeting, except when it came to the topic of care for the soldiers. As expected, Sir Robert moved towards the position of cutting their costs. There was a low whispering in the audience for the most part, and some less determined individuals looked around for direction, and a cause they could stand with. Though it was apparent that no one favored Sir Robert’s plan, most people would rather look the other way than become entangled with his questionable politics, or risk becoming the object of his wrath.

Finally a voice called out. It was Jeanette.

“Sir, if I may, I would have to disagree with your proposal.”

The ministers in attendance were stunned as they turned around to see this little woman call out, not even rising to speak as everyone else had thus far done. More surprised were they at her determination, for she didn’t flinch, or look nervous or uneasy in the least.

“Pardon me, young miss?” Sir Robert said, in an attempt to humor her.

But Jeanette knew he had heard her, and carried on.

“It cannot be right to take away from the needy in this way. These poor men are dying, or at the

very best, are badly wounded. They have nothing. They have willingly given of their own lives to defend our country, protect our people and our wealth, and have sacrificed more than many of us ever will: their jobs, their loved ones and families, their comforts, their health, their strength, and some even their lives. They have already given as much as anyone can give. Will we take the very bare necessities from them as well?”

Hushed voices and sounds of surprise filled the room as Jeanette sat there looking straight at Sir Robert’s shifty eyes.

How dare she question my authority and wisdom! I hate and despise her very being with all that there is within me. I shall have to bring down her fantastical ideas of what life is all about. All this charity has gone too far and I must stop it at once. I will not be humiliated by this outburst of seeming morality! He stormed within himself.

Putting on a wonderful display of sympathetic understanding, he proceeded to “explain” his reasoning to the “ignorant youngster,” as he addressed the council once more.

“I see that our dear friend does not fully understand the state of our nation. But never mind, we shall dedicate a few moments to enlightening the youngster,” Sir Robert said in a disgustingly patronizing manner. She looked straight at Sir Robert as he reviewed his case and explained his position once again.

“So, in light of all these facts, I don’t see any other course of action. Do you?” he asked, though it sounded more like a taunt.

Jeanette glanced around the room. She felt slightly embarrassed at being the youngest, and in many ways most disabled, not only physically, but even in her background and knowledge of such

matters. But her mind flashed upon the faces of those many hundreds of soldiers, nay, perhaps thousands, who had passed through their much-loved fortress—faces of souls in torment, broken-hearted young men, many of whom had given their lives before they even truly understood the meaning of what they were doing. She could sit quietly no longer. Sir Robert had given her no choice but to speak her mind and to let all the passion and love she had for those poor young men spill out over those present.

She fidgeted a little and glanced around the room before she began, "I'm afraid it was I who had not made myself clear at the start, Sir Robert. Perhaps I should explain once again..."

"I think you have made yourself quite clear already, miss," he retorted.

The hushed voices began talking amongst themselves once again, and a few people—daring ones, no doubt—called out, "Let the little lady speak!" They had seen enough boredom in meetings such as this one to last them several lifetimes, and they were somewhat enchanted by the spark and zeal that Jeanette exhibited, and interested to see how this little confrontation would play itself out.

Then, from the very back of the room, another voice called out. Like Jeanette, he did not rise, but his voice rang out, loud and clear. "Yes, Sir Robert," he started, with authority in his voice, "you must let the little one speak. Many of us here know what this little one has given, and it puts us to shame. We who have the most power have done the very least for our people. In my youth I once had an opportunity to give all that I had—not only riches, but also love—yet I cowered when met with opposition. I beg of you, let us have another chance

at love and kindness towards those who already consider themselves far beneath us."

"You are deviating from the subject, sir." Sir Robert snapped.

The man was none the slower to respond, "I believe, sir, that the real matter here is not purely a financial one, but one of principle."

There was silence, followed shortly by a soft murmur among the people.

Then, for his closing sentence, the man called out again, "Sir Robert, let the little one speak!"

Shaken, Sir Robert reluctantly agreed. "Very well then. Make it brief."

Jeanette continued. "I have lived for the past two years with the very men whom your decision here will affect. I thought I had seen enough suffering and poverty, being the crippled daughter of a poor farmer. But when I went to Bulwick Fortress, sorrow took on a new meaning for me. There I saw twisted bodies, broken hearts and spirits, men—some not even men, but merely boys—who had given of their poverty to guard the wealth and lands of the rich. I have seen their suffering, have heard their heart-rending tales day after day. Some find happy endings, being re-united with their loved ones, or being restored to health and set free to in some way build a new life for themselves. Yet I have seen others die, having given their lives in service and sincere dedication to the only cause they had ever known in their short span of life on this Earth. I cannot stand idly by when decisions such as these are being pondered, and not do something about it."

She looked around and then raised her voice so that none might miss a word, "These, ladies and gentlemen, are our true heroes. Many died in obscurity for what love would consider an unworthy

cause—killing lives for livestock—and they sacrificed what poverty they had to save the wealth and freedom of the rich. Yet we sit here discussing how we can take away what little those who remain, have! Ministers and members of the council, you have studied many years and acquired much knowledge for your respective professions. I am but a crippled young woman, who grew up learning naught but what fulfillment and reward can be gained by seeing and appreciating the simple things in life. Things that are really the most important to us, things that I wish for the poor men back at what I now call my home, to have: love, laughter, someone to think of them and their welfare, someone to care.

“I’m afraid I have no credentials, no pompous titles or degrees to back up all that I have just said. I have no profession that is of great importance to the state. My profession, which I hope to continue for as many years as I may live, shall be to love—as best as I can, as much as I can. That is all I can give from the frail frame I possess. But you, you have the power to change things. You can sway events to see that those who are in most dire straits, who have a most desperate need yet who have no voice, are given the simple, yet priceless gift of love—a gift that can only be bestowed on one human being by another. I beg of you to consider these men, not as numbers and figures, but as hearts and lives, as if they were your own sons and brothers.”

Silence filled the great hall, and even Sir Robert found himself speechless. He was enraged, but could not find any plausible argument to counter Jeanette’s presentation. The cuts were canceled.

Once the meeting was over, Belle and Will went off to find something for the three of them to eat.

Jeanette sat quietly, pondering all that had happened. Tears would fill her eyes from time to time when she thought of how much this victory would mean for the boys she’d spent her last few years with. “Dear God, You have been most wonderful to me,” she sobbed quietly, not wanting to attract any attention at all after the meeting. People were still milling around, chattering as they left, but most of them pondered silently what had transpired during this meeting—for it was more than any other ordinary meeting. It had sounded as a call to arms, a stern reminder that life was more than the pursuit of one’s personal comfort and prestige.

Sitting as quietly as she was, Jeanette did attract the attention of some, and as she lowered her head to hide her tear-stained face, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Looking to the side, still not raising her head, she followed the form upward till her eyes met those of a long-lost familiar face.

“Francis!” She burst out, forgetting that her eyes were still spilling over the last of her tears.

He smiled gently and wiped the tears away.

“You did well, my little Jeanette. Wonderfully!” He said as he knelt down and put her face to his chest, stroking her hair and spilling a few of his own tears. There were no words for a moment such as this, a moment they had both awaited for years. Jeanette had entrusted her dearest earthly love into the hands of God, all but giving up hope of ever seeing him again. Yet now, here he stood before her. She counted it but another sign of God’s marvelous love and bountiful blessings upon her, and indeed it was a long-awaited reward for her faith and trust, and her acceptance of God’s will, whatever that would be.

After a few moments of blissful silence, Francis stood up and motioned for another person to come

closer. It took a few moments before Jeanette recognized her familiar face, but no sooner did she open her mouth to call out the name when Belle ran forward to greet her old-time friend, Serah, the maid from Gregor's castle.

"Serah! I always wondered what had become of you!"

"No worrying was necessary, dear child. After Gregor passed on, there was no need for my continued service at his castle. Lady Eleanor kindly dismissed me and I volunteered to help care for the wounded in another part of the country. How blessed we could have been if we had worked together! But I suppose that might have been too bold a dream to hope for," Serah said with a chuckle.

"But what are you doing here?"

"Dear, dear Belle, always full of questions. I came to accompany one of the directors from where I have been serving, as his assistant. And now here we are all together, a blessed thing indeed!"

Everyone turned to Francis, eager to know what curious events brought him there.

"Several months into the war, I was severely wounded. I wasn't a pretty sight, nor was I even sure that I would even survive the ordeal. So, my dear Jeanette, I preferred to wait until I was whole again before sending word to you, rather than have you know what a state I was in," he said with an affectionate stroke of her cheek. "The road to recovery was longer than I expected, and it was only a short while ago that I was whole enough to make the journey back to our home. Upon arriving, the villagers kindly told me that you had gone to Bulwick temporarily to help care for the wounded soldiers. I made the long journey to the fortress, and only arrived three days ago, just after you had left. The staff told me that I could wait there till you returned, but if I

hurried, I might be able to find you here. Driven by a longing to see my sweet Jeanette sooner than later, I straightway turned around and rode without stopping, till I made it here. I told the guards outside the door that I was the family of the little lady Jeanette, but they told me I would have to wait until you came out. When people began to leave, I managed to sneak in—and there saw you.

"How can you be so calm? This is such a blissful moment!" Belle teased.

"Indeed it is. Only, my heart made its first leap for joy when I heard your voice from outside the hall, Jeanette. As I heard those beautiful words you spoke, I pictured you, young and pretty as ever. I couldn't wait to see your beautiful face and embrace you. You did wonderfully!—Our Lord used you wonderfully!"

Francis hesitated for a moment, as if to say something more, but instead, setting aside his usual modesty, he bent down, lifted Jeanette up into his arms, and kissed her passionately.

Jeanette smiled, blushed and cried all at once. What a victorious day it had been in every way! But the last triumph of the day was yet to come.

As they turned to leave, Francis felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see an elderly man, bent and holding on to his cane, but with a shining face and youthful spirit that would almost make one think he were walking straight and tall.

"Where is the little one whose voice I heard?" the man inquired.

Belle looked over at Jeanette.

"Ahhh, your heart is indeed as lovely as your face, my dear."

Jeanette blushed, as she gave a curious look as to who this man was. He answered her questions not too slowly.

"I have been living for the day that I might speak out on behalf of those whom you have given your lives for—not just men wounded in the battle fray, but men, women and children, to whom poverty is as familiar as wealth is to those of us. As I said, I had a chance once to not only help them, but to speak out for them. Only I was too cowardly a young man to trudge on in the path I had once been so sure was for me. My cowardice was a source of great distress for some time. Yet having grown older, and more comfortable, it was easy to succumb to the comforts of one's own life, and turn a blind eye to the hardships and deprivations of others. I want to thank you for opening my eyes once again to the plight of those around us, less fortunate than ourselves."

No one was quite sure what to say.

"Thank you, dear young ones, for putting your reputation aside that you might help those who have no reputation. You know, our Savior had no reputation either, and I am sure He is looking down upon you now from the heavenlies with such fatherly pride." The man chuckled and looked slightly awkward for a moment, till Jeanette asked

"What is your name, kind sir?"

"Lord Tendell." Then he hesitated for a moment. "Carl Tendell. Why don't you just call me 'Carl'. The 'Lord' sounds rather stuffy and pompous, don't you think? I used to be so proud to be called that, but now, well, a title isn't everything, you know."

The three who had met Rebecca looked at each other with awe and surprise. The old man looked at them with interest.

"Did you ever know a lady by the name of Rebecca?" inquired Belle.

For a moment, the man's eyes seemed to fill with sorrow, as if he was reliving some distant

and painful memory. "Why yes, yes I did—many, many years ago. But how could you possibly have known?"

"We..." Belle hesitated, wondering if this man could truly be the same one that Rebecca had spoken of. "We have met her, and she asked us to see, if we might, how you fared, and said that she would be happy if we were able to find you, even if we could not bring word to her."

"You ... you met her? And she spoke of me? But ... Where is she? How is she?"

They all couldn't get out the words fast enough to assure him, "She's fine, and a wonderful lady!"

The old man sat himself down beside them and begged them to tell him anything they could about her. The two girls told the story of their first meeting, each taking a turn and filling in where the other had forgotten. The old man smiled at the happy ending.

"So the bravest woman I ever knew is still alive." He mused. "I shall have to try to see her. It may be the last thing I do, but I shall have to do it. Do you think she would be happy to see me? Or would it be too difficult for her?" Carl asked.

Belle, Will and Jeanette looked at each other, and then back at Carl. "She would be happy."

"That settles it! I'm going to go and see her. Thank you, my children. Thank you!"

The company stepped outside the building, each as happy as they could be for all that had transpired that day. It was raining and seemed rather dreary to most others around, but for them there was a special sort of sunshine, an inner glow such as none of them had basked in for quite some time.

They stopped at one of Serah's friends' houses for some tea after trudging through the stormy and wet town, and there discussed their plans.

“So, what will we be doing after this?” Serah asked with a little knowing wink at Francis. “Will we all be returning to where we came from, or do any of you have other plans in mind? My destination is rather far from here, and my director has arranged for us to return on the morrow. Before then I should like to know where my beloved friends will be heading.”

There was silence for a few minutes. Pensive looks were on each of their faces. Then Will broke the silence.

“I think that now with Francis’ re-appearance, Jeanette won’t have as great need of assistance such as I have been honored to give her these past two years,” He said in his casual, friendly way. “I will, of course, be needing to return to the service of Lord Samuel, though I will always be with you in heart and spirit; the last two years have been a happy chapter in my life.”

Then everyone turned to Belle. “I think that I should like to stay with Jeanette. I do believe my days are somewhat numbered in that my beloved parents are well along in age and I may be called back at any time to learn more about the affairs for which they are responsible,” Belle responded with a sigh. “I so like this happy profession of loving, as Jeanette called it this afternoon. But each of us are called to a certain path and in time I shall have to continue along mine—alone.”

“We shall always be with you in spirit and in prayer, Belle.” Jeanette said as she reached over and affectionately squeezed her dear friend’s hand.

“I’ve gained invaluable experience from working with you all—experience which I hope will help me in years to come,” Belle said without looking up.

“Come, come now, child. You speak as if you would be needing to leave us all tomorrow,” Serah said soothingly.

“It feels as though I may be needing to do just that, Serah. But my prayer is that I can stay with you all for as long as God wills it.” Then recovering from her nostalgia, she chirped, “Let’s celebrate together! Such a happy day it has been for all of us!”

Soon after that, each returned to that which God had called them to for the duration of the war. Carl Tendell and Rebecca had a delightful reunion and he spent the rest of his days alongside Rebecca, till she was called to her heavenly home, where he followed her shortly. There they were called to enjoy a new life together in the land where there are no poor and no rich, but where there is plenty for all—plenty of love and all that is good, and not a spot of anything to the contrary.

Chapter 14

Francis, Jeanette and Belle continued working together at Bulwick Fortress for another year, at the close of which Belle returned to her parents' castle. Her mother was dying and her father lay very ill, and both of them passed on a short while after Belle's return. Then little Belle became Lady Belle, and was married not too long after to a fine young man of her parents' choice. The war ended just a few months later, yet Jeanette and Francis stayed on at the fort for several more months, until all the men at the fortress had recovered and were able to return safely home.

About a year after Belle's marriage, she and her husband, Lord Anthony, had a beautiful daughter, who they named in honor of Jeanette. Along with her obligations to the state, Belle did her best to participate in activities that would help and encourage the poor, and so she was much loved by the commoners and tenants who lived on her lands. She met with her friends and former co-workers not infrequently, and they were as close in spirit as they ever were in flesh.

Francis and Jeanette's work at the fortress over, they returned to the village of the birth of their ministry, or "profession" as they now liked to call it. All their friends were there to greet them after these many years, including dear Mary, who had taken such splendid care of Jeanette after Francis had first gone off to war. Jeanette and Francis joyfully shared the news of their engagement, and told of the miracles God had done to bring them together again.

Soon the day of the wedding had arrived. Mary had helped Jeanette into her wedding garments, and delightfully exclaimed, "My, my! You are looking lovely, dear young girl."

"Not so young anymore, Mary!" Then she turned to Mary and lowered her voice, "Just a bit short of thirty!"

"It's as if you stepped into our lives and hearts yesterday, yet at the same time you seem to have always been there. Anyway," Mary continued, "you look as if you had just turned twenty. I think all the love you have inside keeps you young."

"How kind of you, Mary," Jeanette said as she hugged Mary.

"You'll make the loveliest bride I've ever seen!" commented Edward as he entered the door of her quaint little room.

"Only I'll not be able to be walked down the aisle!" Jeanette joked.

"Which is why I shall carry you down the aisle, dear girl—with your father right beside me in spirit. He and your mother are right here on this glorious day, I am sure of that."

"We'd best be off now! The carriage is waiting outside, I can see," Mary said as she strutted around the cottage, tidying things up as best she could, just like a mother would.

"Carriage?" Jeanette asked.

"Why yes, dear girl. They didn't tell you? Lady Belle arranged for someone to bring this decorated carriage so that you could have a comfortable ride to the village church. She said she'd love to come and will if she can, but that her little daughter had been sick and she wasn't sure if she could make it or not."

"Why Belle, she always thinks of everything, the practical soul she is!" No one spoke of Belle quite in that manner except for Jeanette. They had shared a good deal of their youth, and though one was the lady and the other the subject, deep down inside they knew that they were both ladies in their

own right. Belle often called Jeanette the Lady of the Villages. She was right.



"You may now kiss the bride." No sooner had the words left the kind minister's lips when Jeanette found herself enveloped in Francis' strong embrace, and the kiss was just as special and enchanting as if it had been their first.

The two turned to face the cheers, clapping and excited laughter that had broken out at the onset of their romantic embrace. Roses were tossed into the air, ribbons and flowers seemed to be flying everywhere. In between the pastel rose petals that were descending softly on and all around her, Jeanette saw Belle's pretty figure in the back of the church, dressed simply and almost unrecognizably so as not to draw attention away from her lovely friend. They exchanged smiles, wishing each other the very best.

After the ceremony had come to a close and everyone was milling about, enjoying the food and festivities, Belle came to Francis and Jeanette.

"Why Belle, it's been so long! I'm so glad that you could come. I heard that your daughter was sick."

"So she was, but she's better now. Her maids do take care of her, but I felt it best to stay nearby until she was better for certain."

"A mother's heart you have now, in addition to all your other qualities," Francis complimented Belle.

"Why thank you, Francis. And now, let me share a secret with the both of you."

The two of them strained to hear Belle's forthcoming secret.

"I'm going to be a mother of two shortly!"

"Wonderful!" They both chorused.

"It isn't acceptable for these things to be announced until they have well nigh happened, but

the two of you have been such special friends for so many years, and I hoped it would perhaps kindle a desire in you, dear Jeanette, to join me in motherhood some day soon if God wills it.”

“Oh, but I don’t know how I could, being that I...”

“Hush, my dear friend. No more of your worries about seeming disabilities hindering you. I know better than that after all those years spent right next to my determined friend. You can do anything if God wills it.”

And so God did will it. Jeanette and Francis had one child to their name—a delightful daughter.

Though our brief story ends here, these eventful years that have been covered were not the end of the lives and loves of the happy subjects of our story. Francis and Jeanette did their best to love and give until the close of their years. Anabelle did well in all that she had been left by her parents and uncle, and in turn left a legacy of kindness and benevolence that was carried on by her eldest daughter. Will and Serah were, each in their own way, a ray of sunlight to the darkened spirits around them, until the close of their days. Not long after the war ended, the king relieved Sir Robert of his position as counselor due to their great differences of opinion. Being the wealthy man that he was, he spent the rest of his days minding his fiefs, and it was said that he grew considerably kinder in the later years of his life.

In the days when sorrow and suffering were more common than laughter and jubilation, these few souls shed light and love as best they could. They merely opened the window to let the light flood into a sad and darkened room, and all those that came in contact with their happy rays followed suit. They in turn opened other windows and made the world a more beautiful place for the people around them.

Though perhaps they would not go down in history as exceptional heroes and heroines, to later become the subject of poetry, song or sculpture, they were heroes to those they served. They were angels of the poor, saviors to those who knew not enough hope to even dream of a better life, yet found it through the life and love of a simple farm girl and her companions. A life need not be great to be beautiful; it need only be full of love.



About the Author:

Eliot, George (1819-1880): pseudonym of Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans, an English Victorian novelist whose books, with their profound feeling and accurate portrayals of simple lives, give her a place in the first rank of 19th-century English writers. Her works include *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861).

Kirsty's Glen

KIRSTY'S GLEN

This story is set in Scotland at the time of the First English Civil War¹. Oliver Cromwell and King Charles I of England led the opposing sides. In Scotland there were mixed reactions from a land and people torn with religious and political strife, clan warfare and feudal rivalries. The issues in the war were drawn not only along political lines, but also along religious ones, with different sides using the power of the church to further their own political ends. In Scotland, the majority adhered to the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, known as “the Kirk,” and disliked the idea of Charles putting Anglican Bishops over them. Several of the Scottish earls had made a covenant vowing to protect their freedom to worship God in their own manner, and this was signed by most of the nobility.

It was through this “National Covenant” that some men of power first came onto the scene. One was Lord Archibald Campbell, earl of Argyll, a powerful man deeply involved in politics, who along with the clergy, signed the covenant, pledging to defend Scottish Presbyterianism against Charles’ attempts to impose Anglican worship on their country. This covenant gave greater power to the Kirk and to men like Argyll, and was disliked by many. It was seen as a threat to those who espoused other beliefs. Another earl, Lord James Graham of Montrose, led the resistance, aligning himself with the king of England, and soon the country found itself torn by war.



As the sun was going down beyond the distant purple heather*, the cool winds blew through Kirsty’s

¹See page 188, *The English Civil War and Scotland*

long tresses', as she sat dreaming about all that would be happening tomorrow. Her elder sister, Isabel, was to be married to Roddy Cameron, a fair young man who lived at the far side of the glen' that spread below her. It would be a grand affair, and relatives from near and far would be coming.

Kirsty's glen rested in the beautiful hills of northern Scotland, where her family worked on the clan farmland. It was a beautiful piece of land they worked, and their clan chieftain, Laird Donald MacDonald of Glengarry was a kind man. Kirsty's father, Calum, was a hard-working farmer, rough in his outward ways, yet he had a soft heart, especially for Kirsty and his other beloved children. He would often take them out into the hills and show them the beauties of creation. Calum had a deep faith in God, though he was not a "religious" man. He was neither stern nor legalistic, but he always took time to give God the honor and love he believed was due Him.

As she sat there on the hillside, Kirsty could see her father and two brothers in the distance, returning from their long day's work in the fields. They would be hungry now and her mother would be looking for her to help get supper on the table. Kirsty jumped up and dashed down the side of the hill, skipping over the patches of thistles that were growing wild among the heather-covered hills. She would be back, she thought, in plenty of time to assist her mother. Her sister, Isabel, was over at her cousin Catriona's, getting fitted with a beautiful new dress specially made for tomorrow's wedding. As she neared the cottage, she could smell the peat' burning in the oven and knew her mother was baking up some special treats for the marriage celebration. It would be a glorious affair, and even the chieftain himself promised he would do his best to be in attendance!

"Hello, James!" she called out as she neared the house. James, the chieftain's elder son, was just coming out of the humble cottage. Turning to face her, his bright red hair glistened in the sunlight, and he gave her a smile.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Kirsty! My, how you have changed!" he said, remembering that the last time that he saw her she had been covered in mud, with her hair in tangles, after having fallen in a bog while playing with her younger brother! Now, two years later, there she stood, a young lassie', with beautiful raven black hair and sparkling blue eyes. She was quite a different picture now, outfitted in a lovely dress, and her face flushed from running down the hill. "You have become a beautiful lass, you have. My, your father must be proud of you!" She was relieved that her cheeks were already pink, so James never noticed the blush his comment, and his admiring look, had put on her face.

"Well, James," she answered, "it took long enough for you to come visiting, I suppose the next time we'll be seeing you will be at another wedding!"

Her mother came out from the kitchen just in time to hear this and interjected: "Kirsty, hush! You shouldn't be speaking to your laird like that! He came all the way here to let us know that his good father has provided a special treat for the wedding tomorrow, and he has brought us some fresh salmon from his stream for our guests."

Kirsty thanked him and with a quick glance back at him, went into the kitchen to get busy with the dinner preparation.

James was pensive' on his way home. He kept seeing Kirsty's beautiful flushed face in his mind. James was now 18 years old, and heir to his father's land. He would be the next chieftain, and thereby become one of the greatest land-owners around, the

MacDonalds being one of the great clans of this Highland region.

Kirsty must be about 16 years old by now, he thought, and she seemed quite different from the mischievous little girl who had played tricks on him the last time he had visited this part of his highland glen. She had truly blossomed into a fine young lass. *Well*, he thought to himself, *this wedding celebration is looking better all the time!* It was quite dark by now, and James, who knew the lay of the land well, quickened his horse's pace as he wanted to be back at his father's castle in time to welcome some guests who were due tonight.



Back on the farm, Calum had arrived with Robert, Kirsty's older brother, and Ewen, her young brother. Kirsty's mother had prepared a plentiful supper and Kirsty was just finishing laying it all out. There was fresh trout and potatoes, oatcakes with butter, potato scones^{*} and creamy groudie^{*}, along with hot milk and rhubarb pie. Father said grace, thanking the good Lord for His bounteous supply.

Ewen was full of stories about his day's adventures, as this was the first time he'd gone up to the mountain pastures with his father. Usually he stayed back helping mother and Kirsty with the daily chores as well as doing his studies. Father and Robert usually took care of the running of the farm, herding the sheep and working the farmland along with a few gillies^{*}, Robbie, Murdoch and David. It was hard work and sometimes they would come home almost falling into bed, but Father was always grateful to the Lord for His supply and blessings.

"Aye," said Father, "Ewen was a great help today. We got more done than we normally could hae managed. I thank the good Lord for giving me such

a wonderful family." And, looking to his wife, "Allison, you have brought up a fine young lad^{*} here. He will be a big blessing to us! Well now," he said, "let's hae some time at the Lord's feet the night^{*} before we sleep. Robert, get me the Bible doon frae the shelf!" Robert reached up and brought down an old Bible and handed it to Father, who started to leaf through the well-worn pages. Picking a Psalm, he started to read as they all drew close and listened carefully.

After this quiet time of vespers was finished, all gave a hand to clean up quickly. Robert, Ewen and Kirsty then went off to bed, while Father and Mother stayed up talking. *What a lovely day it has been*, Kirsty thought. Mother had been so preoccupied with preparations for the marriage, that she had forgotten about Kirsty, and so she had been free to spend most of the day off in the hills after her daily chores were finished. How she loved to watch the sun sparkling on the daisies and the dandelions, and the winds ruffling the purple heather like waves on the sea ...

Kirsty had seen the sea once, while she was young, when they visited some distant relatives on the Isle of Skye¹. They spent two months away from the mainland, and the beautiful sight and sound of the waves washing up on the shore remained forever etched in her mind, and she still fondly remembered the beauty of the sea, and the majesty that spoke so clearly of the power and might of her beloved Savior. Yet all had not been peace and beauty. They had been troublesome times, as Scotland prepared for an invasion of England, and men everywhere were being sought and questioned as to their loyalties. Mother greatly worried and

¹ **Isle of Skye**: the largest of a group of islands called the Inner Hebrides, off the western coast of mainland Scotland

fretted for Father's safety. Father thought it safer to leave the glen for awhile, until the winds of war had blown over. Thankfully, it was not long before things calmed down, and they were able to return to their beloved Highland glen.

Although things were relatively peaceful again now, it was a time of great uncertainty in the land. The country was rife with division and trouble, torn with political and religious fighting. Greedy men of power were bringing the land to ruin. But up here in the Highlands they had for the most part been left alone and uninvolved from the trouble, which fell mainly in the Lowlands and in England. Still, no one knew what the future held, yet as her father would always say: "We know Who holds the future, and as long as we have trust and faith in Him, He will direct and guide us and keep us safe!"

Father had been through troubled times before, and his faith burned the more brightly for it. He was never heard to speak other than positively, and he always encouraged and uplifted all around him—a rare trait, but one that gave him a good name among all around, so that they looked to him for help and guidance when times were troubled. He was no preacher, but knew the Bible better than many a scholar.

When Calum was young, a learned preacher stayed with his family for several years. He had been hiding up in the Highlands from religious persecution, and would work with them in the fields by day, and in the evenings teach them from the Good Book. Calum had, in turn, instilled this love for God's Word in his family. They would start every day with prayer and reading of the Word, and end it with the same. When out working or traveling, Father would use almost anything that happened or that they would see as a lesson about God's creation, or His love and His provision.

Calum was never one to get involved in doctrines nor theology, simply believing Christ loved and died for all, regardless of their belief. The Lord had given Kirsty's father a special gift of such faith that he had on various times prayed for people and the Lord had healed them. As there was no minister in these hills except the occasional passing one, people looked to Calum as a spiritual leader.

Many thoughts flew through Kirsty's head as she lay in bed that night. She, like James, was thinking about the last time they had seen each other. She had been out in the fields years ago with Ewen and had fallen in a bog while trying to catch him, and was quite a sight when James happened upon them! She remembered her embarrassment and how silly she had felt, and today once more she had felt her face sting with bashfulness as he looked at her. He had changed so much now, and become quite a handsome lad, tall and wiry, with that flaming stock of hair. He was looking every bit the chieftain he would become. Coming back to reality, she realized he was not for her likes, being a laird and all. *Aye, it's dreaming I am*, she thought.

Suddenly the clomp of horses' hooves startled her! The banging on the door! *What a commotion, and how unusual for this time of night! What on earth could it be?!* Slipping out of bed, she peered through the small window and saw her father hastening out with someone and fetching his horse from the byre*. He then rode off into the distance. Kirsty was left with a multitude of questions racing through her mind, and it took quite some time to drift off back to sleep.

Shortly after, Kirsty again woke with a start. She looked out the attic window again, and saw her father and Lachlan, their neighbor, carrying someone into the old byre. He was dressed in

clothes such as she had never seen before. This was obviously no Highlander. *Who could it be?* She longed to rush down to Father and find out all she could, but, knowing her father, she thought it best to wait.



When James returned from the glen, he opened the great door and entered the main hall of the castle, and his home. The laird, his father, was standing there with his three younger brothers, Dougal, Kenneth and Sandy, as well as his cousin Andrew and two strangers he'd never seen. All were in deep conversation and turned at his entry.

"Well, if it isn't James! Is all well with Calum?"

"Aye, it seems so," James replied.

After the others had left, Laird Donald called James to his side. "It seems I will not be able to go to the marriage tomorrow, James, as I've been called to go to Inverness¹ to an urgent meeting. Dougal, Kenneth and Andrew will come with me, but I'll leave Sandy in your care, along with whatever other business you'll need to attend to around here. I ken' it's a big responsibility. I'll be gone about two weeks, and I'll use the time to get some other needed business done as well. Och', it's bad timing with all that's happening. Your mother will also be going to the Isles, as her mother is doing poorly and needs her, and your sister Iona will go with her. So you and Sandy will be alone, except for the servants and gillies."

This was a lot at once for James—being left to care for the lands, run the great house, attend a wedding, as well as mind Sandy! He laughed as he thought how this part could prove the hardest of all, Sandy being keenly prone to getting into trouble.

His father looked serious for a moment and said quietly: "It seems I'm summoned to Inverness as there are rumors of trouble brewing, and there are some decisions to be made. I'm glad Morag and Iona will be visiting Anne in the Isles, as that will take a load off my mind. You are a bright lad, James, and I know I can trust you to the running of this land. Pray God it will be a quick trip."

Putting down his quaich', he continued: "We have a long journey ahead of us, so we must make haste. We'll be off within the hour. James, can you organize the horses and provisions while we all get ready? And may the good Lord keep and protect us!"



Kirsty slept fitfully until the crow of the cock reminded her it was time to rise. She heard mother bustling about downstairs and the smell of scones baking told her breakfast would be ready soon. Quickly she dressed and hurried down to help set the table, as she heard Robert trying to rouse Ewen, exhausted after his first day of "real man's work." Once downstairs, she noticed Father was still not there. She looked out the window toward the byre a couple of times as she passed back and forth with the plates and mugs. It was all so unusual. She felt like bursting out with questions to her mother, but bit her tongue, knowing that if there was anything they needed to know, they would be told about it.

Just as Robert and Ewen came down the steps, father came in the front door and sat down. He was looking very tired, with a reflective gleam in his eyes.

Mother gave a few looks to Calum, but not a word passed between them. Father reached over and pulled out his Bible, read a chapter for devotions over the table, and Robert said grace. Father then explained the plans of the day: Ewen would go with

¹ **Inverness:** central city of Northern Scotland, and administrative seat of the Highland regions

him to ready the kirk for the wedding, whilst Robert took the horse to bring a note to the chieftain. It was important and needed haste.

Then to everyone's surprise, he added that no one was to go near the old byre for the time being. Robert and Ewen looked at Father, then Mother, and then to Kirsty to see if any would expound on it. *Whatever could be the reason?!* They wondered. It was unlike Father not to give an explanation, and Kirsty was bursting with curiosity.

It was a beautiful morning as Robert bade Father leave and rode out to see the chieftain. After breakfast, Father and Ewen went off to visit sister Isabel and cousin Catriona, to see if all was well, before heading off to the kirk. Kirsty was redding up¹ after breakfast and Mother had disappeared to the old byre with a covered tray! This was getting more and more mysterious. Mother returned and started on the last of the sewing before the wedding. It would be another three hours before they would start over to her cousin's. After she had finished her chores, Kirsty slipped out the door and sat behind the house, looking over the braes² and occasionally glancing at the old byre.

Finally, her urge to find out what was going on took over and she sneaked around the back of the byre, to where there was a hole she and Ewen often used when they played hide and seek. She was very nervous, knowing she was disobeying her father, but the pull of this mystery was strong! Quietly she sneaked behind the old tree trunk that lay in front of a hole in the side of the byre. It was a tight squeeze, and once inside, it took a little time for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, but soon she could make out her surroundings. She moved quietly to where the old stalls were and peered through a gap in the planks. Ah, there he was, the

stranger! He was sleeping and his face was turned towards her. He was handsome-looking, she thought, and probably in his thirties. There was a scar on his uncovered arm that told Kirsty he was probably used to fighting, as it was not a scar that would have come from working the lands. His clothes were torn and soiled, but made of fine linen with lace and bright, red colors.

She had heard of the Royalists who fought on the side of Charles I, and now there was much conflict in the Lowlands between Charles' supporters and the Covenanters¹. Was this man one of the Royalists? Why was he here?

She knew her father well enough to realize that if someone—regardless of who they were—was in need, he would not flinch at being the one to lend a hand. He had often quoted to her the story of the Good Samaritan as a sample of how Jesus wants His followers to be. Some of Calum's previous deeds had caused no end of gossip. To some, he was an example of a good Christian; to others—those more religious and strict—he consorted with unbelievers or heretics. Kirsty's father always reminded her of Jesus and His example, and how He kept company with the drunks and dregs of life. None was turned away from Him, not even the Roman soldier who came to seek his servant's healing. Who was he to do other than his Lord? God was the Judge and not man. He would try to look on the heart, as God did, and past all the prejudices of man.



Meanwhile, at the MacDonald castle, streaks of morning sunlight slowly filtered through the

¹ **Covenanters:** 17th-century Scottish Presbyterians who were devoted to maintaining Presbyterianism as the sole religion of Scotland. During the First Civil War (1642-46) they fought with the Parliamentarians against the Royalists. See also page 188.

shutters, filling the room as James MacDonald lay there watching the glistening dust flowing back and forth into the light. He then turned his thoughts to the day ahead. Now his father was gone and he was the acting laird. He prayed there and then that God would give him the wisdom to perform his job well, and be all that a chieftain should be to his people.

Well, he thought, the gillies will be able to care for the land, and the loyal servants will care for the day-to-day running of the old castle. John Stewart would be able to tend to Sandy's care and schooling, and with the assistance and support of his father's faithful household, James would be left with the freedom to oversee all, and make any needed decisions that might come up. Today he would go to the wedding of Calum's elder daughter in his father's stead. It would be an excellent opportunity to get better acquainted with the other clan septs', all of whom would be in attendance at the wedding.

His thoughts once again returned to Kirsty, Calum's younger daughter. She had turned into quite a bonny lass and he was looking forward to seeing her again. Just then, a knock brought him back from his thoughts. Malcolm, the family's trusted servant ever since James was a baby, entered the room.

"Good morning to you, Master James. It'll be a busy day afore' you, so you'd do well to get a good breakfast under yer sporan'. I'll take care of the horse and food and you can prepare yourself and freshen up. I'll go call Sandy and we'll dine in the hall."

"Thanks, Malcolm, could you be sure to call John Stewart also, as I need a wee' word with him over breakfast."

Trusting that all would go well enough on the home front, James planned to set off to the kirk by

way of the lochs', as he'd heard of some cairds' being around that area. He wanted to see for himself what sort of people they were, as they had a name for stealing and robbing.



Back at Calum's byre, the doors opened suddenly, flooding the byre with light. Kirsty dove into a nearby pile of hay. It was Mother, Lachlan (the neighbor who'd helped carry the stranger in the byre) and Neil Cameron (the father of Roddy, Isabel's fiancé).

"I gave him some breakfast," she heard her mother saying, "and cleaned him up a little."

Bending over, Lachlan peered at him. "Aye, a good job you did, Allison!" He turned to Neil. "Well, we need to hae a wee word with him. So Allison, you can be off to finish yer work, and we'll see to the gentleman." Lachlan gently roused the stranger. Looking up and squinting his eyes against the light, he smiled weakly, and offered thanks to them.

"Och, nothing at all! Calum would have none of that. It's our duty as good Christians!"

"That may be so, but there are some who would say otherwise."

Opening a bag, Neil pulled out a plaid' and pair of trews' for the stranger.

"These'll make you blend in better while you're recovering. We'll need another name for you, though," he smiled.

The stranger answered, "Donald is a good Highland name, don't you think?"

"Aye, then Donald it'll be!" replied Neil. "We'll let them know you came from the Lowlands—Glasgow maybe—and that you're on your way North, but that an accident befell you." The stranger looked intently at Neil and gave a word of thanks, then the two farmers turned and left.

Donald started to change into his new clothes and discard the old ones. Then, turning, he walked right toward where Kirsty lay, bending down in the stall directly opposite her to pick up his saddlebag, which Kirsty, in all her excitement, had failed to notice as sitting so closely to the planks through which she had been spying. She froze, and a feeling of guilt gripped her for having gone against her father's wishes. Kirsty was normally a very obedient girl, for she both loved and greatly respected her father and his word. She prayed for God to forgive her this once, and promised she'd never disobey like this again.

Donald paused while reaching down, and Kirsty was sure he was looking directly at her, though she had no way of knowing for sure. Just then the door opened and her mother entered the byre again.

"Well, look at you. You're up and about and ready for some good hot soup, I can see." Now that his "past" was settled, she invited him to come into the house, and Kirsty sighed with relief as they left. She quickly made her way out the back hole and back up the brae where she sat down to compose herself.



James mounted his horse and set out toward the loch. The day was looking bright and sunny, a change from the usual overcast or rainy days of late. It was a braw^{*} day for a ride and James was reaching the top of the hill, turning to the loch, when Robert came riding towards him. James halted his horse and waited till he approached.

"Well, Robert, it's nice to see you! Where are you headed?"

"I was on my way to the castle. I have an urgent message for the chieftain from my father." Robert pulled the scroll from beneath his plaid.

"My father has left the bhurg^{*}," James answered, "and will not return for a while. If it is truly urgent, you can give it to me."

Robert dutifully handed him the scroll, and watched as James opened and read it over.

What is that look on his face? Robert wondered. Worried? Thoughtful? After a few moments, James asked Robert if he was going straight back, or if he would like to accompany him to the loch.

"Och, I'd love to!" said Robert. He hadn't been to the loch in a long time and was happy for the chance to talk with James.

Meanwhile, Laird MacDonald and his company were approaching Inverness. The company had grown considerably, as other chiefs and lairds of Highland clans had met up with them along the way, having been summoned to the same meeting. Their group now numbered fifty, and they were quite an impressive sight as they entered Inverness in their bright tartans^{*} and feathered caps, bristling with dirks^{*}, claymores^{*} and broadswords. People moved aside and stared in wonder at these Highland "catarans,"^{**} as they were known to the city folk.

Laird MacDonald prayed a quick word to the Lord for James: "Give him guidance and help him in all that he has to do." Looking to his other sons, he smiled: "Well, it looks like it's going to be an interesting meeting. The Earl of Seaforth is here and the old Laird Gordon himself!"



James and Robert were enjoying their trip and getting to know each other. They were quite different, to be sure—James the heir of a laird and Robert a farmer's son, but they had similar interests, such as hunting and fishing, and were soon engaged in lively conversation. They rounded the bend and soon reached the hill overlooking the

loch. James spotted a tuft of smoke spiraling upwards, and the two young men made their way round the back of the wood lining the loch. There they dismounted and left their horses behind to approach the cairds' encampment on foot.

They could hear the sound of laughter and talking, the clatter of cooking and children playing, as they came to a small clearing where there were about 30 men, women and children gathered around eating. They were a rough-looking bunch, dirty and ragged, but something inside told James they were not dangerous. He looked on them as Jesus would, as lost and needy people. Stepping out from the trees, he called: "Hello there! I be James MacDonald, laird of the lands you are camped on. May I speak with you?"

There was silence for a few moments as the stunned cairds turned and saw James standing nearby. Robert then came out from the trees behind James, and the tinkers started to look fleyed'. Some fingered their long dirks, looking to see if others were about to come swarming out of the trees. Then an older-looking man stood up and motioned them to come forward.

Carefully the two approached, looking around them at the faces of this group of ragged gangrels'. Seeing some fresh trout hanging over the fire, James smiled and said: "I see you had a good catch today; this always was a great fishing point." The tinkers still seemed very unsure of what to expect, and kept looking to the wooded area around them as if suspecting that a mob of gillies would come storming down on them any moment. James moved closer to the old man, who seemed to be their spokesman or leader.

"I heard you were camped here," James said, "so we thought to come by and visit you, and let you

know you're welcome to stay for awhile and rest. Take what you need from the land for your families, as we have plenty. But we'll have no trouble here. We're peaceful God-fearing people. We'll no' turn away the needy, so take your fill and rest. Now that we're clear on that, maybe you could introduce yourself? " A look of surprise and relief spread over the cairds' faces, and it was easily seen they were not used to being treated in a respectful manner.

"I'm William Ferguson, and these are my kinsmen," the old man answered. Some women came and offered their visitors some local browst' and fresh trout.

"We were living down in Strathclyde¹ where we had settled for some years now. Then when the Covenant was signed, our troubles began. Some of the clergies and elders stirred up the people against us, calling us heretics and devils. We were chased out of the village, our properties burned, and we became vagabonds, harried' from town to town. We have heard that some have gone as far as to kill people who do not worship as they, so we are planning to flee to the Islands where there is more freedom, at least so we heard." William paused for a moment. "We thank you for your kindness. You are the first true Christians we've met in a long time. It restores our faith to know that such people still exist in our country."

"Well," James replied, "you'll have no trouble here in these parts. If any come to you, tell them Laird James MacDonald gave you permission to stay and use the land. You keep your side of the bargain and you'll find that you'll have a peaceful stay. Jesus said that whatever we do unto one of the least of our brethren, we do unto Him."

¹ **Strathclyde:** region in western Scotland, of which Glasgow is the administrative center

"I wish all Christians in this land were as you, Sir Laird!" answered William. "May His blessing be on you. If you have need of our help in any way, please let us know."

Shaking hands, the two turned to return to their horses, when James stopped for a moment and turned back to William: "If anyone harries you, or you see anything that looks like trouble, send one of your men to my place. It's down to the left of the fork a few miles back that way!"

William agreed readily and then they parted.



Kirsty entered the kitchen with some strawberries she had just picked from behind the house, and saw Donald sitting with her mother at the table, eating some of her soup and scones.

Mother looked up: "Kirsty, let me introduce you. This is Donald, a distant relation of your father, just up from Glasgow. He's on his way to visit in the Isles, but had an accident on the way and will stay with us until he is well enough to continue his journey."

She glanced at Donald, and a little twinkle came to his eyes, as he stood up and smiled at Kirsty, "Well, Calum never told me he had such a bonny daughter. You'll make some young callant' a good wife."

Mother rose and excused herself. "You look after our guest, Kirsty, as I've work still to do. I have to finish some sewing for the wedding this afternoon."

"Please sit for awhile," said Donald. She sat quietly, wondering if she should bombard him now with the questions that were filling her mind, or wait.

He leaned toward her and whispered: "Do you usually hide among the haystacks in the byre? Or only when visitors come?"

She blushed and stuttered, "What do you mean?" "I'm sure ye ken, but dinna' worry, your secret is safe with me."

A look of relief spread across her face: "You're no angry at me?"

"Ha! I was young myself, once!" he said.

Recovering her plucky spirit, Kirsty asked him what he was really doing here.

Donald was silent for a moment, then, looking at her solemnly, said, "Since I'm keeping your secret, I'll trust you to keep mine as well. I was brought up the fifth son of a wealthy Lowland laird. My father was a very religious man who brought us up the same way. When I turned 18, I felt I needed to leave home and try my own wings, and I left for Sweden where I enlisted as a soldier. Over the years I traveled to many countries—Holland, Germany, Spain—hiring out my sword to whoever would pay. It's hard to kill and yet believe in the teaching of the Holy Book. War is a terrible thing, and I've seen Christian kill Christian, all in the name of peace and God! It's been hard to reconcile these sights with what I was taught from the Good Book.

"After many years of travelling and fighting I was feeling more and more confused and in need of a rest, a time to think, and so I came home. After being here for a few weeks, I soon found out that all was not the same, the land being in turmoil over this Covenant. It seemed a good thing in a way—freedom to worship as one believed. Even Montrose, a Godly man whom my father respected, signed it. My father decided against it, though, and as it came to pass, Argyll and the politicians got more involved.

"A new Covenant and Solemn League was made which gave power to the Kirk alone and took away the freedom of others. Montrose refused to sign this time, as my father did once more. This time, the

clerics⁴⁵ stirred up the people and my father's house was attacked. He and my brothers were slain. I was wounded badly and left for dead, but an old friend took me into hiding and helped me recover.

"When I was a little better, I made my way South to join up with the king's troops, accompanied by nine others, but we were intercepted by a cleric, commanding some Covenanter soldiers. I was able to escape mid-battle, along with two others, although my companions were wounded. Then I heard rumors of an army of Royalist Scots being formed under Montrose in the North, so came this way.

"While passing through Strathclyde, I was attacked again by the same cleric and again suffered wounds. He is a devil of a man, this cleric, and hunts me with a vengeance. This time I escaped only by a miracle of God. As he and his men pursued me, I was thrown from my horse as I turned a bend, and fell down a gully. The soldiers followed my horse into the woods and once they were well passed, I continued making my way on foot.

"I collapsed from exhaustion, and must have lain unconscious and with fever for all of a day or two when Lachlan found me in the hills nearby. He was kind enough to take the risk of bringing me back to his own home, and he straightway called your father, who brought me here to recuperate.

"Your father and Lachlan were like angels of mercy to me," he said. "They put faith in my heart in these troubled times. God has not forsaken this land, for people like your family are living His Word and His love. There are many these days misusing His Word for their own selfish ends. But people like you shine bright and show true Christianity, unlike these false prophets of hate, these hirelings who spread the sword and fire and scatter the sheep. It is difficult to know sometimes who is right, as there

is both good and bad on all sides. Aye, one thing I learned is that war is hell. It leaves you feeling soiled in body and spirit, until it seems difficult to believe in anything."

The door opened and in strode Father. "Well, ma' bonny lass, ye have found our guest, I see! And you, Donald, you look well. Lachlan told me you seemed to be on the mend, but I didn't think you were so well on the way to recovery."

Sitting down at the table, Calum looked at his daughter. "Isabel will be at the old kirk by mid-afternoon. There is a preacher from Stornoway, Lewis, by the name of Ian MacLeod, an' he will do the wedding. So all is going well. Murdoch will bring them over to the kirk. Ewen stayed at the kirk with John to help get it ready. Kirsty, if you could go help Mother now, I need a wee word with Donald here."

Kirsty excused herself and went to help Mother. Calum turned back to Donald: "Well, my friend, it seems Kenneth Graham, while returning from Glasgow on some business, encountered a party of Covenanter soldiers about six hours away heading this direction. They may turn off East at the Old Cross, but there is just as much reason to believe they may be on their way here. There seems to be a cleric with them, a serious-looking man clad in black."

Donald was quiet for awhile, then spoke softly: "Calum, you have been a true friend to me, you and Lachlan and all your families; I don't want to repay your kindness with trouble. I'll head out to the hills. I can still outdistance them, and spare you any trouble."

"Whisht," said Calum, "you'll do no such thing. You're still in no shape to travel. You'll stay on with us. We'll leave it to the Lord. He can take care of whatever unfolds."

"Dear Lord," Calum prayed, "You ken the situation fine and we all feel You spared this man for Your glory. So you take care of him now and let no harm come of this. Give me wisdom, Lord, to know what to do and what to say; and most of all, bless us with Your protection. Keep us safe in the hollow of Your hand."

"You're a true man of God, Calum, a man of faith," Donald spoke after the man had finished praying. "I believe the Lord will honor your prayer. "

"Well," said Calum, "I must away to the kirk. You come with Kirsty and mother in the wagon and bring the rest of the food and supplies. I'll meet you before you reach the old tree near the bend to the kirk. We'll take it one step at a time."



Meanwhile, James and Robert were making their own way to the kirk. "It may no be any of my business," Robert suddenly blurted out, "but the note I gave you from my father—it's not bad news, is it? You looked a bit worried when you read it."

"No," replied James, "I hope not, anyway. It looks like your father has taken in someone who may be the cause of some trouble. The Covenanters are looking for him. That's why I asked the tinkers to be on the lookout for any signs of trouble! Your father is a good man, but there are those who would judge his actions differently, and could call him a traitor or heretic. I pray by the Good Lord's grace nothing will come of it. Let's be getting on to the wedding and cheerier things!"

The old kirk was fair bustling with people. It was two years since the last wedding there and it was thronged with perhaps 200 guests gathered around. The pipers were playing and the young girls dancing. The bairns' were playing and the women were putting out all the food for the feast after the

wedding. Soon the Reverend MacLeod arrived with Murdoch and the MacLeods, and Roddy Cameron's family arrived shortly thereafter. They and all the others who were just arriving brought in meat, trout, chicken, pies, jams, pickles and scones, and soon the servants from the laird's house arrived with the salmon.

"Och aye, it's going to be a fine party, this!" said the Reverend, as he eyed all that was being brought in. Auld Willie arrived with his fiddle and started to tune it up, while Angus and Jimmy were playing away on the pipes.

Just then James MacDonald and Robert topped the bray and watched all the scurrying back and forth. They had a good view of the whole area. They saw Calum, Allison, Kirsty and someone else coming down to the glen. "Looks like your father's visitor has come," said James. "Let's get down there and make him welcome."

"Aye, it seems all is ready to start now. I see Isabel coming down the glen there, along with Catriona and her family," pointing along the worn path to the kirk. "And Roddy and his family have arrived already."



Just about two hours' journey away, the Reverend Stewart Campbell and Lieutenant Kenneth Robertson stopped at the Old Cross along with 30 Covenanter soldiers.

"Well," Kenneth spoke, "should we head off to the East coast or continue towards the glen up North?"

"North! He's not the type to go to the East coast. He'll look for help in the Highlands. We'll trap him up in the hills, mark you me!" the Reverend Campbell coldly replied.

The column of troops continued on up the road toward the glen and down to the clachan' and the

kirk. Kenneth readjusted his jerkin', lifted himself in his stirrups and looked to his troops. "Well, men make sure your pistols are primed' and your swords are ready. These Highlanders can be a rough bunch if they get to fighting. So let's go!"



After a simple but deeply touching marriage ceremony, the big wooden doors of the kirk opened, and Roddy and Isabel emerged to the hoots and cheers of all. The Reverend MacLeod followed behind, along with Calum and Neil Cameron. The pipes were skirling' and the festivities broke out. Everyone was enjoying the great occasion. The meal was laid out in a buffet, and everyone was heartily helping themselves to the many delicacies set before them. Music filled the air, and dancing broke out, the young lassies and laddies making the most of it all. Calum, Neil and James were exchanging old tales of Wallace and Bruce¹ when suddenly Lachlan came galloping into the throng, looking disheveled and breathless.

"What's the matter, Lachlan?" asked James, leaping to his feet.

"Covenanter troops!" he exclaimed. "Just round the bend, not a quarter hour behind me!"

Calum rushed to find Donald. "Go into the kirk," he said, "and in the vestry, you'll find an old bookcase. If you push, it will move to one side, and behind it you'll find a painted mural of the Nativity. If you push on this, it will open to a small cupboard with a low trap door that leads to a small hidden chamber. You'll be safe there. Hurry now! Murdoch, you go and close everything behind him! Lachlan, go call Reverend MacLeod!"

James was glad that Calum was around, and was quick to take charge, since he felt rather helpless himself at such a time.

"Do you think everything will be alright?" James asked anxiously.

"Aye, no bother!" Calum reassured him. "It's the best time for it to happen. But we'd better ask the good Lord for His help also." He led the group in a prayer, and explained as briefly as possible the situation with Donald, and the urgent need for no one to speak of his having been in these parts. The loyal clan that they were, he knew that no one would breathe a word. They finished just as the soldiers came in sight 'round the bend. The pipes had already begun playing again and the partying continued as if there had been no interruption. *What will this encounter bring to our glen?* James wondered as he watched the approaching horsemen.

The soldiers now approached the kirk and soon the music stopped. Everyone watched as the party drew up in front of Calum, James, Neil and Reverend MacLeod. The Reverend whispered to Calum: "That's the Reverend Stewart Campbell. I know him from attending the General Assembly. He's a hard man. You'll find no mercy in him. He's like the scribes that killed our Lord. The young officer is Kenneth Robertson. I knew his father in Lewis many years ago. He left to the mainland to work in St. Andrews. I'd heard he was in the army now. Let's pray he is like his father and no like the Reverend Campbell!"

Kenneth eyed the large crowds of people a little nervously. "Who's in charge here?" he asked, looking to the Reverend MacLeod.

"I am!" James boldly answered, stepping out from among the crowd. "I'm James MacDonald, son of Donald MacDonald, chief of the clans of Glengarry.

¹ **Wallace and Bruce:** Scottish heroes, William Wallace (1272?-1305) and Robert Bruce (1274-1329)

We are presently celebrating the wedding of one of our clansmen."

Then, turning to the Reverend MacLeod, he introduced him: "This is the Reverend Ian MacLeod from Stornoway, Lewis. And what may be the purpose for your visit here?"

Kenneth looked surprised and said: "I'm sorry, Reverend, that I didn't recognize you. I was a young lad when we left Lewis, but my father often speaks of you." Turning back to James, the lieutenant said, "I'm sorry to disturb your celebration, but we're hunting down a renegade, a malignant and heretic, who was seen heading this way. We tracked him to the Old Cross but lost his trail there. Have any of you seen any strangers 'round here?"

"Well we have had a lot of coming and going, with the wedding and all, but no strangers have been here that we know of." Then as an afterthought, realizing they may know of the cairds also and become suspicious if he did not mention them, James added, "There is a family of tinkers, though, camped by the loch."

At this the sinister Reverend Campbell looked at him and with piercing gaze slowly asked, "Do you plan to send away these tinkers?"

"No," replied James. "I see no need."

"Well!" answered the Reverend Campbell, "I'd be careful about entertaining these tinkers, as their kind are little more than randy' skellum', heretics and renegades. Where are they from? Why are they here? Do they stand for the Covenant?"

"They are good and honest people, and bring no harm, I am sure. They are visiting for a short while, and I have seen no sign of heretics or such among them!"

"Well, thank you for your help," interjected Kenneth. "Would it be permissible for my troops

to rest and have some food and water before we move on?"

"Aye," said James, looking to Calum, who then signaled to Lachlan and some others to get the troops the requested items. The Reverend Campbell looked over at the kirk and motioned to Kenneth. After whispering to him, Campbell asked the Reverend MacLeod if he could go rest in the kirk for a few moments.

"Of course," replied MacLeod, and escorted him in.

Reverend Campbell asked the way to the vestry and was shown into a small but well-furnished room. He looked around and his eyes caught the bookcase, as he was a well-read man. He was soon browsing through the books. MacLeod went to fetch him some food, and soon returned with some pie and milk.

MacLeod motioned to some books, "These are very rare."

"I noticed that," Campbell replied. "I didn't expect to see such in this place. You surprise me." Then, changing the subject, he said coldly, "I didn't see you at the Assembly last month."

"I couldn't get away."

"*Couldn't?* The Assembly is your most important duty, my brother. You spend too much time with these Highland catarans. You ought to be more diligent to the teachings and rules of the Kirk!"

He paused a moment and continued. "You keep bad company, Ian. You need to watch you don't fall in with these malignants."

Suddenly the sound of a loud CRASH filled the room. "What was that?" asked Campbell, turning to the bookcase where it appeared to have come from.



Donald had followed Calum's instructions and soon found himself in a small room with a table, chair, bed and a bookshelf. There was a jug of wine

and a bowl of nuts on the table, and a little lamp which he lit before closing the trap door. *Hmm! Quite an interesting place*, he thought, as he looked through some books. His heard voices in the vestry and as he moved in that direction to try and make out who they were, he tripped over a corner of a rug, and knocked over the chair with a loud crash!

"Jesus," he prayed, "please do something, no just for me, but for these kind people who have risked all to help me."



Outside the kirk, Kirsty and Ewen had seen the Reverend Campbell go into the kirk, and her curiosity was getting the better of her. *I'm sure Donald went in there. I ken what, I'll go look in the window at the back of the vestry and see what be happening in there.*

"Ewen, come give me a hand!" she called. Ewen, happy for some entertainment, was glad to oblige and together they pushed some old barrels round to the back of the kirk and placed them on top of each other. Then Ewen helped Kirsty to climb on top and she tried to peer in the window which overlooked the study room near the bookcase. She couldn't quite make out what she was seeing, so she stood up on her tiptoes and could then see the Reverend Campbell standing there with a book in hand. Seconds later, the loud crash startled her and she lost her balance, tumbling down, the barrels crashing on top of her, and knocking her unconscious.

Reverend Campbell closed his book, and shifted his gaze back to the bookcase from which he had taken it. Just as he was looking around, Catriona ran in calling to the Reverend MacLeod. "Come! Quick! There has been an accident outside!" The Reverend Campbell joined MacLeod as they stepped outside and went 'round the back to where Kirsty

lay unconscious and Ewen sat a little dazed.

"Here is your mysterious crash, Stuart!" said Ian, pointing to the window overlooking the vestry. "Bairns! They were perched on the barrels and they collapsed. Let's get her inside!" Murdoch and Ian carried her in, and Campbell and Catriona followed.

Just then the Lieutenant Robertson came and called the Reverend Campbell, informing him that the men were ready now to start off again.

"I'll be but a moment," said Campbell, turning to collect his things from the vestry. The Reverend MacLeod led his colleague to the door and watched as they departed down the glen.

"I pray that's the last we see of them," he said to James.

"Aye, and I pray they cause no trouble for the cairds, for they seem to be heading to the loch!"

"Aye, that's true," said Calum who had just joined them. "He's a merciless man, that cleric. I wouldn't call him a man o' God, but more a minister of Satan!"



Donald had been shaken by his fall. He expected the soldiers to break in at any moment and take him. As he got back on his feet, he saw a book lying open on the floor in front of him. Picking it up, he read:

Tho I pass through gruesome cleugh, fin I ken he is near, his muckle crook will mee defen, sae I hae nocht to fear. Ilk comfort whilk a sheep could need, his thoughtful care provides, the wolves an dogs may prowll about, in safty me He hides.¹

As he closed the book, a great peace filled his soul. He felt a strange warmth within, such as he never felt before. *Thank You, Lord, for giving me Your peace, Your words of comfort, Your strength.* His faith

⁶ a local quotation from the 23rd Psalm: "Yea, though I pass through the valley of the shadow of death..."

was tested again as he heard noises and saw the trap door start to open. As he looked up expectantly, the light filled the room and he was ever so relieved to make out the faces of Calum, James and the Reverend Ian MacLeod peering down at him.

"Are you all right, man?" they asked.

"I am that."

"The Lord helped you out there, Donald," said Calum, "with a little help from Kirsty!" he added, as he told Donald what had happened.

"How is she?" asked Donald.

"Och, she is fine, just a wee bit stunned from it all. She's gone off to rest with Catriona and Ewen. Now let's get you out of here. I'm sure you wouldn't mind a wee dram."

"For sure, Calum, for sure. I wouldn't say no to that!"



"Soldiers coming! Covenanters!" went a cry through the tinkers' camp. William quickly gathered all together, as Norrie came running into the camp.

Gasping for breath, he related his tale: "I was trapping some rabbits when I spotted them. They are coming round the far side of the loch. They are two dozen at least, armed every one, and they'll come behind through the woods."

"Och, it looks like trouble," said Malcolm, "it seems they be coming the back way in order to surprise us."

"Break the camp, William, and let's flee to the hills. We have time to get away yet," Angus advised.

William was quiet for a moment. "No, we'll wait on this. We will stay," he said. "We're legal here, with permission from the laird. If we flee they'll hunt us down anyhow, so stay we will."

"There is a cleric with them, a thin-looking man, bent and black like a crow. I don't like the look of him," added Norrie.

"Then we'll need the help of the Lord, won't we? Let's pray. Malcolm, go get the women and children together and give them some warning. Angus, get the camp ready. Dougal, get some stew cooking. Davie, you go find a good spot in the hills over there and stay and keep watch. If any trouble starts down here, run and call the laird. You do remember where he lives?"

"Aye, I'll do that, William."



Kenneth halted the troops at the top of the ridge. "Well, you see that thin column of smoke coming out of the wood," he said, pointing down, "that's the camp. There will be a clearing in the wood to the left there."

The Reverend Campbell nodded as he squinted his eyes. "Do we go on foot or horse?" he asked.

"On horse. We're no sneaking around, Reverend. The laird said they were honest people, so we'll treat them as such."

"I've never known an honest caird," said Campbell, his voice filled with hate. "If I had my way, we'd rid the land of such skellum. They're thieves and heretics and we should root them out and destroy them as the Lord commanded Joshua."

"Perhaps you're right," said Kenneth, surprised at the harsh tone of Campbell's voice, "but remember that our mission is simply to find our man, and that's what we'll do."

"Aye, you're right, of course," the Reverend answered. "But mark my words, this land would be better off if we rooted these gangrels out like weeds."

Kenneth led the column of men down the hill and into the clearing. The tinkers huddled together

as the stream of troops entered their camp. William came out to meet them, his long claymore slung over his shoulder.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, looking at Lieutenant Kenneth.

Kenneth looked around at the scene of ragged children running around, women worn with hard work, young men with eyes full of independence, resistance and pride. Some of them fingered their dirks uneasily as they warily eyed the well-armed soldiers. Then Kenneth looked at William. He was old, rough-looking, with a weather-beaten face, but strong, determined eyes.

"We're looking for a renegade whom we tracked this way. We lost his trail at the Old Cross. Have you seen anyone around?"

"No one has come this way," William truthfully stated, "except for the good laird. You're welcome to search, though," he added.

Kenneth motioned to some troops who quickly slid from their horses and searched the camp.

"Nothing here," one replied gruffly as they returned. Another adjusted his bandelier and spat on the ground as he eyed the tinkers with disgust.

Kenneth looked to the Reverend, who was looking with disdain at the tinkers. Then looking over to William, the lieutenant said roughly: "Well, as good Christians, you know your duty then. If you see anyone, we'll expect you to report it! We'll camp near the Old Cross for the next two or three days." Kenneth could sense that the Reverend did not trust them nor believe they would help in any way, nor did he agree with Kenneth's treatment of these tinkers. To his statement Kenneth added a reminder that helping a renegade was treason, punishable by death.

Soon they were all heading back 'round the loch,

and toward the Cross where they would camp for the night.



About two miles down the road, the Reverend asked Kenneth leave to separate from the company and spend a couple of days in prayer at the kirk. Kenneth was surprised at this request but agreed, offering him a couple of armed men for escort.

"No," he answered. "It's just down the road a couple of miles, so there will be no need. I'll meet you in a day or two by the Cross."

Kenneth reluctantly agreed, and they parted ways.

Soon after, the Reverend turned the bend and smiled to himself. "Aye, these catarans think they fooled us, do they? I know that there was more to that instance in the kirk than just those children making a racket. I saw a good spot in the rocks when we came by before. I'll show these Highlanders that I'm no man to take lightly!" He turned off the road and tied his horse in a secluded spot, off the road in a small wooded area, and then headed farther up the hill on foot, climbing the steep rock face. Campbell had been brought up in the mountains and though he didn't look it, he was very fit and soon had climbed up and found a perch in the rocks overlooking the road from the kirk.

Calum, Murdoch and Donald were coming round the bend on their way home, and Robert followed alongside on his horse. Calum's wife, Allison, together with Catriona, Lachlan and Ewen had gone before them, and Kirsty was riding a couple of miles behind, together with James on his horse. From his high perch, Campbell spotted the company coming. As he strained his eyes, he recognized Calum and his family and neighbors. But who was the other man sitting on the wagon with them?

As they passed his look-out point, he gleefully exclaimed to himself, "Aha! Got you, my little friend! You thought you could outsmart me! But I've got you now. By morning I'll have Kenneth and his troops dragging you back to Glasgow in chains!"

As they turned the bend heading to Calum's shieling, Campbell started to climb down from his perch, when he lost his footing on some loose rocks and tumbled down the rocky slope through thistles and over sharp jagged rocks, landing at the bottom in the bracken. He lay there unconscious and covered in blood, half of him in a ditch at the bottom of the precipice.

Quarter of an hour later, Kirsty and James passed by the same spot, deep in conversation. Kirsty was happy for the time to get to know James better.

"Kirsty, that time I saw you covered with mud from the bog, I think I fell in love with you already. But when I saw you yesterday, breathless from running down the hill, your face flushed and hair blowing in the wind, I said to myself, *There is a real woman, one with fire and spirit!*"

Kirsty blushed. "Shh, away with you." Then, as she caught his eye, she added, "I can't believe you're saying this, James. You know I'm not a one for the likes of you."

"Quiet!" James exclaimed, as a rustling in the trees startled him. He slid off the horse, and carefully moved forward into the bushes. "Kirsty, come, look!"

Standing tied to a tree a short distance into the bush was a horse, with the obvious saddle markings of the Covenanter troops.

"Someone is around here. We need to be careful," James said, his eyes scanning the area as he moved slowly along. Then they spotted the Reverend lying

in the ditch at the bottom of the hill. "He must have been spying! Look up there!" he said, pointing to the overhanging rock high above. "He must have seen Donald and the others. What should we do?"

Kirsty looked at the Reverend, lying there covered in blood, cuts, scratches, bruises, and his clothes torn by thorns and thistles. He looked a terrible sight. "If he lives, we're all dead," said James. "They'll hang us as traitors."

Should we just leave him? No one would find him and he would most likely die without attention, Kirsty mused. But she quickly shunned these thoughts, as all that her father had taught her came to mind.

"We have to help him, James," she said. "We have to do what we can. 'Love your enemies, do good to those that persecute you,' were our Savior's words. We'll have to trust God, James. Go! Ride to Father, quick. He'll know what to do."

James mounted his horse and headed down after Calum, while Kirsty moved closer to Reverend Campbell. He was quite a wretched sight, and she tried to pull out the prickles and clean his cuts as best she could. No longer did she see him only as her enemy, but rather as a soul in need of her attention and care. *Lord, help me. Make me Your hand, Your loving mercy to this poor man. If You forgave the soldier who crucified You, who are we to do less?*

Soon Calum had arrived with Donald and James.

"He's in a bad state, Father," Kirsty said. "He's unconscious, and I think he has some broken bones."

Calum glanced at him. "Well, we'll take him back to the shieling. Donald and James, come help me lift Campbell into the wagon."

Donald walked beside the cleric's horse, looking at this man who had been hunting him. This cleric was responsible for the death of many, including his

family. Yet, for all his own pain and suffering, Donald could feel no hate. Now, as he looked on him, he had no feeling of revenge—only pity and compassion.

“My, how I’ve changed,” Donald said to Calum. “I’d never have thought I’d lift a finger to help this man! A week ago, I’d have slain him! You and your family, and the way you truly live the Words of Jesus as men ought — all this has changed me life.”

“The Lord works in our lives, Donald, to help us learn about love and mercy. He wants us to be as He was while here on Earth, to forgive as He did. Love begets love; hate breeds hate.”

“Aye, I remember the story now of the Good Samaritan, and how Jesus showed us our commission,” answered Donald.

“That’s what a real Christian is, Donald, an example of Jesus’ Love.”

“Aye, and the story you put me in remembrance of, how Jesus healed the ear of the soldier who came to arrest him,” said Donald. “I’ve learned so much these few days with you all. Truly, the Lord’s ways are not as ours.”

“Do you remember how Paul persecuted all the Christians,” Calum went on, “until Jesus changed his life? He was deluded, as is this man now. But even Reverend Campbell can come to truly know Jesus and receive His mercy. Pray for him, Donald, that Jesus can reach down to his soul and change him.” He paused a moment and went on, “The Lord wants all to come to Him, and His forgiveness is all-encompassing.”

Robert came round the hill, riding quickly toward his father. “All is ready. The attic room is being made ready for him, and Lachlan has gone to call Reverend MacLeod.”

“Thank you, son. His life is in God’s hands now!” James, somewhat worried about what turn this

situation might take, and feeling responsible to his people, yet hesitant about how to handle this situation, looked to Calum, waiting for some words of Godly counsel.

“I wonder where the lieutenant’s troops are, and what they are planning to do next. Lord knows, they could have been plotting together with Campbell to launch some raid on our lands or homes. James, I would advise that you take some of your most loyal men and find out where the Covenantor soldiers are, and see if you can ascertain what their plans might be. We can be none too cautious in dealing with the likes of these. Aye, and most of all, we will need to claim God’s hand of protection on us all now.”



That night, as the full moon brightened the lea and the winds were swirling over the bracken, Kirsty sat by her window watching the golden wheat rolling like waves in the winds. It was such a beautiful night, and the serene landscape again reminded her of the time she spent near the sea. In spite of the tenseness of their situation and the potential danger the family had found themselves in, Kirsty felt peaceful and at rest, trusting that the God Who made such beauty and splendor in the world all around them would surely be able to care for and protect His children whom He loved.

Meanwhile downstairs, Donald, James, Calum and the Reverend MacLeod were gathered round the table.

“Well, James,” said Ian MacLeod, “it looks like he’ll be alright. His cuts and bones should mend fine. But it’s his head I’m no sure about. He’s taken quite a blow. Something could have been damaged inside, an’ I’m no doctor. I ken his fever has come down a lot now, though, and Kirsty has been taking good care of him.”

"I've done a bit of scouting, together with Robert and a few of my men," James spoke up, and it appears that the Covenanter soldiers are camped at the Old Cross. I left Robert and two men to stay and keep an eye on them for now. From what we could tell, all thirty of the troop, as well as the lieutenant, are camped there, and they didn't seem in any way alarmed, or aware of what has become of the Reverend, so he must have been alone in whatever he was doing."

"Then perhaps we ought to just wait and hope that they'll move on in a day or two," Calum suggested. "We've no idea what sort of plans were discussed between the Reverend and the lieutenant, and it may well be that they've parted ways for good, and that young Kenneth Robertson will be moving his men on soon enough."

James rose up. "Calum, you ken I may be young in years, but I am the acting laird while my father is gone. I can summon a force of fifty men by within the night, and we could be ready to fight if need be."

"I don't feel right about that," said Calum. "We don't want no blood shed!"

"I ken you have noble intentions, my good man, but I'll no let you nor your family be put in danger. As I am the laird, I have my responsibility."

"Wait, the both of you," said Donald. "I think we can reach an acceptable compromise here. Calum, let the laird gather his men. We may not need to fight, but we may in the end save much bloodshed if we can at least show them we are prepared to defend ourselves. I know you put your trust in God, and I am learning to do so as well; but there is a time to use the sword, and the Good Book says that 'a strong man, armed, keepeth his goods in peace.' James is the laird, and protecting the village and glen is his responsibility."

Calum assented. "All right, I agree. You go ahead, young James. But if it comes to a confrontation, then God help us all. When there is war, there is never a winner. We may defeat this little troop, but soon enough, more will come, and if we want to live in peace we'll end up having to either flee to the Isles or join Montrose."

"Now, what of the women?" asked MacLeod.

"Aye, I was thinking they ought to all go to Catriona's for now, and Ewen also. They'll be safer there, as the lieutenant's men would head here first, methinks," said Calum.

Kirsty, who had come down the stairs in the middle of the conversation, and silently listened, suddenly piped up. "I'll no be leaving, if you'll allow, Father!" she said with determination. "Please, I'd rather not go. I've no desire to leave here, but my heart tells me to stay with you. Someone needs to tend to Campbell, and I feel that should be me. Mother can go with Ewen, but let me stay."

As Father nodded his consent, Donald said, "You're a right feisty lass, Kirsty! You have the Highland heart all right!"

"I think that if the troops come, they will no harm the lass," said the Reverend.

"I'll go and gather me men then," James affirmed, "and send word to Robert to continue to watch from the Eagle's Rock by the Old Cross, and let us know immediately if there is any sign of trouble."



Unbeknownst to the clan, the lieutenant, concerned for the Reverend Campbell's safety, had sent a man to follow him secretly, and to watch for his wellbeing. Following from a good distance, he had come upon the scene of Calum, Donald and James lifting the Reverend on to their wagon and

carrying him back to the farm. The soldier returned to Lieutenant Robertson immediately, reporting that the catarans had captured, and possibly killed, the Reverend.

Shortly after James had left, Robert noticed movement in the camp of the Covenanters. Something was happening, and they moved stealthily closer to find out what was afoot. They saw the soldiers scrambling out of their tents where they had settled for the night, and arrived just in time to hear the lieutenant addressing his men:

"It seems that the Highlanders in the glen have attacked our companion, the good Reverend. I was at first determined to leave these hill folk in peace, trusting that they meant no harm, but it seems that my trust has been betrayed. I do not know if they have sheltered the heretic, but my spy saw a man that he does not recall seeing earlier at the wedding today. I see now they are capable of such treason. I do not wish to do this, but it seems we will have to confront these Highlanders, and do so quickly, before they can gather together a greater number than we are and seek to resist us. We must attack at dawn. If we would give them even a day to gather their clansmen, we could well have a force of two or three hundred men against us, who would surely do away with us.

"Let me make it clear that there is to be no killing of women nor children. We will proceed first to the house of Calum MacDonald where the Reverend has been taken. We will try to peacefully demand that he release the Reverend and the heretic to us, but if he refuses, then be prepared to fight."



Kirsty went back upstairs to the attic room and took a seat near the window. She continued to watch over the Reverend, waiting for any signs of

consciousness. She wistfully turned and looked out the window at the glistening moon, thinking of how things had changed so quickly, when she heard him stirring.

"Reverend Campbell, can you hear me?" she asked.

His eyes flickered, looking at her face, her loose hairs shining in the moonlight, ringing her countenance with a halo of light. A little dazed and befuddled, he whispered, "Are you an angel?"

"No! I'm Kirsty, Calum MacDonald's daughter."

Slowly he recalled the day's events. "Ah, yes, I remember ... you helped the renegade, you..." He paused, looked at her intently and went on. "I fell, didn't I? Why did you help me? You could have left me there to die. No one would have known."

"I would have known," she argued, "and so would the good Lord."

He grimaced a bit, feeling the pain from his wounds. "Yes, my little lass, you are an angel. I once was as kind-hearted as you, a long time ago in my youth. Now look what has become of me," he continued. "You bring me to shame, lass."



Robert and his companion rushed off toward the laird's castle to break the news that the lieutenant and his men were on the march, proceeding towards Calum's farm at the edge of the glen. Thankfully, James had already been able to gather thirty-five men from the village.

Young Laird James went and stood before the fearsome-looking troop of Highlanders, clad only in kilts, but armed with claymores and with strong valor and a desire to defend their families and lands.

"We had not intended to fight, but rather hoped that we would be left in peace. But now we are indeed threatened by these Covenanters, and I see

no other choice but for us to fight, that we may continue to at least live, if not in peace, than by our determination to survive. Nevertheless, I will still attempt dialogue with the lieutenant, and we will fight only if all else fails.”

He then gave the order for the men to move forward. They knew that Lieutenant Robertson's men would head toward Calum's house first, so they took a path over the hills that they knew would get them there well before the soldiers had arrived. Robert continued on lookout duty, while the Highlanders positioned themselves for battle.

Just as light was beginning to sweep across the sky, they could see the troops coming over the hill, shrouded in the morning mist. Lieutenant Robertson, taken aback at encountering a wall of armed men before them, quickly called his men to halt.

“This is not going as planned. I did not expect to have to engage in battle against these Highlanders. Let me try to speak to them first, and see if there is any reason in them. Perhaps this can be settled without us killing each other off, and the Reverend likely being killed in the process. I will go forward. You, Denny, ride by my side.”

As James saw the lieutenant riding forward, his men standing back in formation, he rode out to meet him mid-field between the two small armies.

“This is not as you think, good lieutenant...” James began.

“Not as I think? Do I think it right that my companion, the Reverend Campbell, has been attacked, and is being held in the house of Calum, which you and your men are now so ably poised to defend? Not as I think, although one of my men saw him being carried in, wounded or dead I know not? Why the preparation for battle, if the men of this clan have not committed an act of treason, for

which you ought to be punished? And what of the heretic? The same man who witnessed Campbell's capture testifies to having seen the rogue enter this very same house.”

“It is true that we stand ready to defend ourselves and our families from harm, for we got word of your troops coming to attack; but we have done no wrong, and seek to do no harm. We found the Reverend injured beside the road that leads from the kirk, and he is now in an attic room in this very house, being tended to by the farmer's young daughter.”

“And do you expect me to believe your tall tales, young sir?” shouted Kenneth. “And even if what you say of the Reverend is true, you cannot deny that you have committed treason in concealing the infidel!”

Calum, Donald and Ian knelt in prayer in the shieling, desperately beseeching God for deliverance. Donald realized that his time had probably come, and he would be captured one way or another. These people had been so kind to him, even risking their very lives to save his, and now they might all suffer for their Christian acts.

I will go out and give myself up to the lieutenant, he thought. Perhaps then he will leave these simple Highlanders be, and many lives will be spared. He moved forward to walk towards the door, and just then Kirsty came down the stairs.

“Father! Donald! Come quickly! The Reverend has awakened. He wants to talk to you, Donald.”

Soon Calum, Donald and Ian were in the room, all shocked at how different the Reverend looked. His face no longer showed the hard, cold, and stern gaze they knew, but now his hazy eyes were glowing with warmth.

“As I have lain here, wounded and nigh death, I saw our Lord. He appeared to me, and stood there, just as you are here now. He looked at me, saying

'Stuart, Stuart, where have you been? I've been waiting these many years for you to come to Me.' Then I saw a vision of Him, bloody, lying down on His cross, a soldier hammering nails into His hands. I was filled with horror as I suddenly saw that the soldier was me! The Savior looked into my eyes and said, 'Why do you persecute Me?' Then He was gone.

"Over the years, though I once had a sincere love for Christ, I changed greatly. In these many years since, it has not been the love of Christ constraining me, but rather hate and intolerance. I can't undo the past, but I can help to change the future. I am a man who has tasted the bitter fruits of his own hands," Campbell said. "I've been wrong."

Looking to Donald, he said, "Can you forgive one who has caused you much pain and trouble?"

"Aye," said Donald. "I can, for like you, I have been learning what Jesus wants of us—love, forgiveness, mercy. We may have chosen different paths, but we are both reaching the same destination, that of learning what it really means to be a Christian."

All were awed at the deep change in the Reverend, yet the urgency of the situation at hand pressed upon them. Considering the dire circumstances they all found themselves in, Donald pleaded with the Reverend.

"We are on the brink of battle, and though I am willing to go and give myself up, so that these peaceful folk might be spared, there may be another way out of this. Do you think the lieutenant would let me remain free at a word from you? And would he likewise pull back his troops at your command?"

"Aye, that he would," replied Campbell. "Your capture was my mission, and he was but to assist me. He knows that my word is the last."

At this point Calum left the house, and James

and Kenneth paused in their discourse as they watched him ride through the troops standing guard before his house. He approached Kenneth.

"Lieutenant, come, I pray you, into my house, and see that the Reverend is alive, that he has been well cared-for, and that he has somewhat to say unto thee."

Kenneth looked at Calum, then at James, then back at Calum. He hesitated for a moment, then turned to his men and shouted, "Hold your positions, men!" Accompanied by Denny, he followed Calum to the house, where they dismounted, and were led up the stairs to the little attic room where the Reverend lay. Seeing that the Reverend had indeed been well taken care of, he was taken aback for a moment. Then he turned to the young laird.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you, sir," Kenneth said to James. "What would you have us to do now, Reverend?"

"Robertson, you know that I came here to find a malignant scoundrel and heretic, but I have found out that I have been pursuing the wrong man. The people here are men of God, good Christians, kind-hearted people who treat each human soul with love and care, as God would. The mission is over, Lieutenant. You may pull back your men, and return to Edinburg. I'll stay here until I'm well enough, that is, if your hospitality would permit?" he turned to Calum.

"Aye, there is always a place in my house and in my family for anyone in need," Calum assured him.

Lieutenant Robertson bowed deferentially, and took his leave. James went out to his men with the good news that all had been settled peacefully, and a great shout of rejoicing and praise to God was heard across the hills.



James offered the tinker William and his kinsmen a place of work in the Isles with some relatives of his who had need of good, honest workers. As for Donald, his cousin, who held a commission in the King of France's Scottish guard, upon hearing of his troubles, offered him a position in France. Donald, whose real name, Kirsty learned, was Thomas, felt this would be best for him to accept, as there would likely only be more trouble for him if he remained in Scotland. Soon he caught a ship to France to start his new life, having learned much, and most of all having found a closer walk with his Savior.



A few weeks later, Kirsty was sitting on top of Ben Moor, James MacDonald sitting beside her.

"Kirsty, at long last I heard from my father last night. He will be back in two days."

"You must be happy. That will take a big load from off your shoulders, James."

"Aye, it will that, Kirsty. But I must say, that though the days after the wedding were difficult and trying ones, I am grateful for all that has happened. Grateful to God for how He has worked. I've learned very much, and best of all, I've gotten to know you. It's hard to believe that you are the same Kirsty I first saw running down the brae just a short few weeks ago."

"Indeed much has happened in just a little time. I would dare to say we all have grown a lot over these days."

"Kirsty, I was wanting to ask you if it would be fine to see more of you? You know I love you, and once my father comes back ... well, I would be bold enough to ask him if we could be engaged.— That is, if you agree..."

"But James, you are a chieftain. I am only the

daughter of a common farmer. We could never..."

"No, you are more than that, Kirsty. You are the daughter of a king."

"A king? What do you mean?"

James looked into her eyes. "You are a true daughter of the King of kings, and I am only a laird of earthly lands. The question is not whether you are worthy of me, but rather, am I worthy of you? I want to have you by my side always, Kirsty."

James gently pulled her close and kissed her. She put her arms round her Highland laird and gazed into his eyes. "Aye, James, I do believe that the future will bring us much happiness." She pulled him closer, and returned his kiss with another.

Down in the glen, Calum looked up and made out the figures of Kirsty and James. "Well, I never would have thought..." he exclaimed. A smile crossed his face as he thought on the good fortune of the happy pair and said, "It looks like we may no have to wait so long for the next wedding in the glen!"



The English Civil War and Scotland

17th-century Scotland was devoted to maintaining Presbyterianism as its sole religion. In 1638, when King Charles I of England was trying to impose England's reformed Anglican practices on Scotland, the "National Covenant" was drafted and signed by many prominent Scottish churchmen. The "Covenanters," those who had signed the covenant, vowed to protect the Church of Scotland from any who would seek to change their established tradition of worship. Soon an army of defense had been raised.

King Charles wished to meet this act of rebellion with force, and force required money from Parliament, which was hastily convened. The king faced problems in Parliament, however, as they were at the same time angered because of the king's reforms to the Church of England. So the king dismissed the "Short Parliament" after only a month, scraped some money together, and placed his troops under the command of his able and ruthless deputy, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford. But English troops fighting for pay proved no match for Scottish troops fighting for religion, and in 1640 the Scots invaded England. Parliament was once again convened, an act which soon led to England's "First Civil War." Already at odds with the king, the English and Scottish parliaments signed the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643. Scotland would fight on the side of the Parliamentarians (those loyal to both Parliaments), and against the Royalists (those loyal to King Charles). By 1647 King Charles had surrendered.

Having won the war, the English Parliament sought to disband the English army, and use the Scottish forces to protect themselves. Cromwell,

an outspoken member of Parliament, was distrustful of the Scots, and threw in his lot with the army, though he insisted that the authority of Parliament was to be maintained. During the ensuing confusion that followed, Charles escaped, but ended up in Scotland under the watchful eye of Parliamentarian loyalists.

Alarmed by the growing strength of the English "Independents" under Cromwell, the Scottish Covenanters made a secret treaty with Charles against them. In return for aid in regaining his throne, Charles consented to abolish the Anglican episcopacy. In the ensuing conflict between the Covenanters and the Independents, however, Cromwell conquered Scotland, and Charles was executed on charges of high treason.

When, after Cromwell's death, Charles II came to the throne in 1660, the Anglican episcopacy was reestablished, and enforced throughout the realm. Throughout his reign, and that of his Catholic brother James II, the Covenanters were cruelly persecuted. After the Glorious Revolution (1688) deposed James II, Presbyterianism was once again restored as the state religion of Scotland.

(Compiled from Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia, and Encyclopedia Britannica)

The **Stranger from
Beyond**

THE STRANGER FROM BEYOND

It was a beautiful spring morning in a distant and faraway land, and the golden sun shone softly on the silvan hillsides. The warm breeze carried the scent of the flowers and fresh grass, and the promise of balmy summer days to come.

A teenage girl could be seen making her way across the fields, carrying a wicker basket on her left arm. She strolled along, stopping to gather buttercups, daisies, dandelions and crocuses while enjoying the fresh air and a chance to be alone with nature. Her name was May. She was as lovely as the spring morning on which she was born, with eyes as blue as a clear lake, and soft golden tresses that fell about her shoulders. She had just turned eighteen and still maintained the freshness of childhood, yet a certain depth and wisdom could be seen in her sparkling blue eyes.

May's father was a farmer, a widower named Jacob, who had struggled to keep his farm alive and take care of his precious daughter. The tragedies and tribulations they had faced together had given her a maturity beyond her tender years. Jacob had once been a well-off landowner, but much of their land had been cruelly and craftily confiscated by a selfish and power-hungry lord named Sargon. Sargon was a vassal lord over the surrounding countryside, and he kept a tight and oppressive grip over the land and its people with the help of his devoted guards and henchmen.

May had gone that radiant spring morning to collect wild flowers with which to decorate their humble cottage, which stood between the forest and the fields that her father laboriously tilled. She skipped gaily up to a fence and prepared to climb over. She balanced her basket of wild flowers

precariouly on top of the one of the fenceposts and boldly swung one leg up on top of the fence. As she pulled herself over, the basket of flowers toppled off the fence, and with an exclamation of impatience, May climbed back over and down. She was surprised to hear a deep voice behind her, saying, "Here, let me help you."

Somewhat taken aback at this intrusion on her spring morning reverie, May turned to see a handsome young man dismounting from a large white stallion. He was dressed in simple traveler's clothes and his brown curly hair fell down around his shoulders. For an instant May's clear blue eyes met his warm brown ones. Abashed, she coyly turned away and began straightening her dress, somewhat ruffled by her climb. Gently the stranger bent down to return her scattered flowers to the wicker basket.

"Thank you very kindly, sir," said May.

"It is my pleasure," the stranger replied.

"You are not from these parts, are you?" May inquired.

The stranger smiled. "No, my home is in a distant part of the country, beyond the ranges of the blue mountains yonder." May turned and gazed searchingly at the distant mountain ranges. She had always wondered what lay beyond there, but never dreamed that she would converse with someone from so far beyond.

"Oh," she replied, "I would love to have you tell me about..." May stopped in mid sentence, realizing that she was being uncommonly forward in her first conversation with this total stranger.

He chuckled, but seemed to understand. "Of course, I would love to," he said, as he handed her back the basket of wild flowers.

"I must be going," May blurted out, her cheeks

turning a little red. "My father will be waiting and I have chores to do. Goodbye!"

"Then perhaps we can talk some other time." With a benign smile, the stranger mounted his steed and turned towards the road which ran alongside the fields to continue his journey. As she reached the little crest on the hill just before the cottage, May turned to look once more at the mysterious stranger. *Who could he be? Why is he here?*

That afternoon, May needed to go into the village to buy provisions. Their little cottage was about two miles out of the village, but the long brisk walk in the spring sunshine was never a bore. She enjoyed the scent of the fresh grass on the side of the road, the sound of the thrush and the robin singing in the forest and the green rolling hills which led up to the hazy blue mountain ranges in the distance.

On this particular afternoon, however, she noticed a dark blot on the otherwise serene landscape. Coming down the road from the opposite direction was one of Lord Sargon's armed men, riding a dark horse and wearing an ugly gray suit of armor which looked particularly repulsive to May. She slowed her gait, looking for some possible diversion from the road, to avoid any confrontation with such undesirable company.

To her right a little path led off the road up to a small well where women from the surrounding farms came to draw water. An elderly woman was coming towards the well from the other side. Her back was bent low as if the burdens of a troublesome life weighed heavily on her worn shoulders. She was carrying a bucket with which she obviously intended to draw water out of the well.

May walked up to her and cheerily asked, "May I help you, please?" Before the old woman could answer, there was a shout from behind them.

Sargon's soldier was now spurring his horse up towards the well. May shuddered slightly.

"You can't draw water out of that well," he shouted officiously. "By the degree of the great Lord Sargon, none shall draw water out of any well without his express permission." May's trepidation turned to anger as she looked at the old woman and saw her lip begin to tremble.

"But sir," the old woman pleaded, "I have nowhere else to draw water! Wherewith shall I find drink? Somewhat to quench the thirst of my grandchildren?"

"Orders are orders!" said the soldier, imperiously dismounting from his horse. He swung the horse's reins around a wooden pole and proceeded haughtily towards the well, as if to enforce his authority.

"How can you be so selfish!" May exclaimed! "It won't hurt Sargon if this poor old woman takes just one bucket of water." May knew that to challenge one of Sargon's henchmen could have serious consequences, but the injustice of the situation was too much for her to stand by and say nothing about.

"Orders are orders!" said the soldier pompously. "This is Lord Sargon's well and none shall drink of it without his permission." With that he drew himself a bucket of water, drank greedily of it and disdainfully tossed the bucket back into the well. Suddenly, there was the clatter of hooves and a loud neigh behind them. All three turned to see the stranger May had met that morning gallop up the little path towards the well. Without hesitation he drew a sword, sliced through the reins of the soldier's gray mare and slapped it heartily on the rump, sending the animal cantering off down the path and out on to the road.

With an angry grimace, Sargon's soldier pulled his own sword, but the stranger nimbly dismounted

and with a few deft strokes knocked the soldier's sword out of his hand, pushed him to the ground, and pointed his own sword at the man's throat. "Mercy, mercy," whimpered the soldier, his pomposity dissolved in an instant.

The stranger turned to the old woman and looked at her with benevolent eyes. "Draw your water, old woman, as much as you like."

May was impressed with such a deft display of swordsmanship from one whose manner had seemed so gentle. She helped the old woman draw a full bucket of water and, carrying it, walked with her towards her little cottage. Sargon's soldier was still on the ground whimpering, "Mercy, sir, mercy!"

May turned to the stranger, "Thank you sir! Thank you so much!" Grateful tears glistened in the old woman's eyes; words seemed beyond her.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye May caught sight of three dark figures on horses coming down the road. "Beware! They are Sargon's soldiers!" she shouted to the stranger.

He looked as if not particularly perturbed and said, "Well, it seems I must be going." He mounted his horse, as Sargon's soldier regained his imperious stance and began shouting, "Rogue! Scoundrel! Blackguard!" while running wildly down towards the road. He shouted to the approaching soldiers, "Chase him! He is a scoundrel!" but the stranger was already out of sight and their pursuit was futile.

May took refuge in the old woman's cottage for a short while lest the soldiers harass them further. Sargon's soldier, however, enraged by the loss of his horse and the humiliation of being outwitted by this clever stranger, seemed to have totally forgotten about the old woman and turned to walk back into the village on foot.

Cautiously, May stepped out of the cottage and continued her journey to the market. *Who is this handsome stranger?* she wondered. How brave he was! How noble! How strong and yet how gentle, simple and unassuming. Within May's heart, a new hope was born—a hope that freedom could once again come to their oppressed and exploited lives.



Almost a week had passed since May's first encounter with the stranger. Although the excitement of it all had faded somewhat in the routine of daily chores and helping her aging father with the farm work, May still flushed with pleasure, albeit somewhat uncomfortably, whenever she thought of him. She began to hold imaginary conversations with him in her mind, asking him about the country which he came from, longing to know the secret of his nobility and confidence.

One day, after a few hours in the village market selling some of the farm produce, May wended her way through the streets of the village on her way home. Passing the house of Thomas the Blacksmith, she heard the sound of sobbing. Being acquainted with Thomas, she thought it would not be too bold to knock and inquire if she could be of assistance. As she was walking up to the door, it swung open and out walked Thomas, carrying his five year old daughter, her arms draped around her father's neck, and her face terribly pale. His wife Alice stood in the doorway behind them, her weeping face buried in her hands.

"Thomas, what is it?"

"My little Milly is very sick. I have tried to call the physicians, but Sargon has given orders for all the physicians to treat only him, his forces, and their families. I am desperate to find anyone that can help poor Milly. She has been sick with a fever

for four days and I fear that there is not much life left in her."

"Oh, I wish there was something I could do!" cried May. *Oh, if only the stranger were here. I'm sure he would know what to do,* May thought.

Just then, May caught sight of a white stallion coming down the street towards her, the stranger mounted on his back.

"May!" he called "How do you do? I followed you from the market, as I wanted to talk with you."

"I was just thinking of you, sir," stammered May, still not having the courage to ask his name.

"My name," he said, "is Jasper."

"Jasper," repeated May softly, "How did you know my name?"

"It seems everyone at the market knows you quite well." replied Jasper. May flushed a little in excitement at the thought that Jasper was interested in her, but she was quickly brought back to the reality of Thomas and Alice and their daughter's plight.

"I am so glad you are here. This is Thomas the Blacksmith and his daughter Milly. She is very very sick and there are no physicians around to help her. Is there anything you can do?"

Jasper dismounted and walked over to the young child, obviously concerned.

"How long has this child been sick?" he asked.

"Four days." stammered Thomas, his usually gruff voice shaking with emotion, as he struggled to hold back his tears.

Jasper walked over to his horse and took a canteen of water out of his saddlebag. He poured a little water onto a cloth and gently sponged the young child's burning forehead and cheek. Thomas, May, and the stranger walked back into the house, the stranger carrying a bundle which he had taken

from his saddlebag. Out of it he pulled some small jars full of spices and herbs. He mixed some of these in a cup of water and helped the sickly young girl to drink it.

"Let her rest awhile, and she'll be feeling better soon," He assured Thomas and Alice.

After lying still a little while, Milly's eyes fluttered and looked into the stranger's kind face, as he smiled down in tender concern. She looked over to her father and said, "Father, I'm hungry."

Anxiously Thomas put his hand on her forehead.

"The fever!" he exclaimed, "It's gone! Thank you!"

"Give her something to eat," said Jasper.

Somewhat in awe, May stammered, "That was wonderful! How did you do that?" Jasper smiled humbly, and May again wondered at his kindness and his amazing abilities.



"Come, may I have the pleasure of escorting you home?" Jasper asked May after they had stepped out of the house.

"Why, of course!"

Jasper led his horse and together they walked out of the village and along the paved road which led to May's cottage. As they walked, May began to ask some of the questions that she had rehearsed in her mind, and Jasper started to tell her more about himself, about his father's estate far beyond the blue mountains, about his travels to many different lands, about his concern for the poor and their plight. May told him of the arduous struggles of the people in the village under the cruelty of their despotic leader, and of the misery which he had inflicted on the villagers and farmers round about. Jasper listened sympathetically, and though he appeared to be a complete stranger to these parts, May felt as if he truly understood her heartaches and worries.

As they neared the cottage, she hesitated. "Jasper, I ... would love to invite you into our house, as you must be tired from your journey and needing refreshment, but I am afraid that my poor father may not understand. You see, I am all that he has, and he is terribly afraid of anyone taking me away from him."

"I understand," said Jasper, "but I do hope we can meet again."

"I am sure we can find a way," May smiled quietly.

"My window is that one over there underneath the birch tree." She blurted out on a sudden impulse.

"I see," said Jasper with a contented smile.

May, a little flustered, rushed into the house and up to her room. Had she been too bold again? Would he think her wanton or overly forward?

"I wonder if he likes me?" she wondered aloud, as a smile played across her face.



Jacob came in from the field as May was preparing supper. After dining they sat by a raging log fire, May knitting a scarf and her father reading one of his old books by candlelight. As was his custom, at about 9 o'clock Jacob kissed his daughter good night and went to bed.

May lingered a little longer in front of the fire reviewing the events of the day, and as the last embers stirred cozily in the fireplace, she finally went off to her bedroom. She lay in bed, but could not sleep. The moon shone full that night, so she opened the curtains and gazed out into the surrounding countryside, bathed in a beautiful silver glow.

How romantic, she thought. Oh, how I wish that Jasper could be here with me. Her mind raced with

thoughts of what she would say, what they would do. Finally, she returned to her bed and began to drift off to sleep. But all of a sudden she was startled by the sound of tapping on the casement of the window. She immediately sat upright, half scared, but half anticipating who it might be. *Could it be?*

A shadowy form could be seen in the moonlight outside. She gasped, "Jasper...?"

"May," he whispered, "May, I had to come. I have been thinking about you so much."

"Oh Jasper," she said. "I am so glad you came. I was wishing that you would."

"May," said Jasper, "how would you like to come with me for an evening ride?"

Impulsively she clambered out of the window in her bare feet. Jasper looked at her with a mixture of amusement and approval, noticing how the moonlight shone through her thin, silken night dress, revealing the youthful feminine form beneath.

"I think you may have to wear something warmer than that, or you will catch your death of cold." With a little giggle at her own impetuosity, May climbed back into the room, quickly put on a dress and some shoes, and once again climbed out the window.

Quickly the two figures moved across the field to where Jasper's horse was tied. He lifted May up onto the horse and then climbed up in front of her, and for the first time she slipped her arms around his strong masculine chest. He was so warm, so comforting. They took off at a canter across the fields, which were bathed in the mystical silver glow from above.

Jasper turned his horse into the forest, and they alighted in a moonlit glade. After lifting May down from the horse, instead of letting her go, Jasper

continued to hold her tenderly. May looked up at him, her curved lips waiting in expectation, and she was not disappointed. There, they kissed for the first time. Passionately, yet tenderly, they held and kissed one another, gazing long into each other's eyes.

After a little while, Jasper said with gentle concern, "I had better take you home, otherwise you won't have any strength for your chores tomorrow." May reluctantly assented, although she would have willingly remained in this forest glade with her newfound love until the dawn broke.

After the ride back through the forest and across the fields to the cottage, and one last, long, lingering embrace, the two lovers parted.

"Jasper, come again soon."

"I will."

Brimming over with happiness, May climbed back through her window, tucked herself into bed and fell into blissful sleep.



Jasper was true to his word, and throughout the days of blossoming spring and ripening summer the two lovers met often. Sometimes he would come in the cool of the evening, and they would gallop across the fields to their secret forest glade. Sometimes they would set off across the green hills in the early morning, find a secluded spot by some laughing brook, where they would spend many pleasant hours together. Jasper also continued his exploits of helping the common folk, and his reputation quickly spread throughout the countryside. Most welcomed him gratefully, though some were suspicious, not knowing where he had come from, or what he was doing in their town.

One day as May entered the village on her way to the market, she noticed that the streets were

unusually busy. As she neared the center of town, she saw a large throng of people gathered around a podium that had been erected in the main village square. Curious to see what would happen, May lingered in the square. Within minutes a loud fanfare announced the approaching of some dignitaries and onto the podium strode Sargon himself, flanked by members of his personal guard.

He was a tall commanding figure with jet black hair and a thin, elegantly manicured mustache. He wore a black velvet cape over his shoulders and his countenance was grim as a herald ascended the platform in front of him and read from a scroll:

"Hear ye, hear ye. Your great lord and ruler in his benevolence has condescended to come and speak with you in person today. Be attentive to his words. Long live Sargon, Lord of Sargonia."

Sargon stepped forward, and a hush fell across the crowd.

"People of Sargonia," he began, "thank you for coming out to show your loyalty on this auspicious day. I am deeply gratified by your show of support."

A sarcastic smile played around the corners of his mouth. "It is because of your loyalty that our lands continue to prosper." Then his countenance hardened. "Nevertheless, it has come to my attention that there is treason within our land. Certain foreign elements are entering in, trying to upset our peaceful lives. Some of you may have come to know such a traitor. It has been brought to my attention that a certain vagabond rogue who calls himself "Jasper" has infiltrated these parts, and is seeking to overthrow our established order."

May let out a little gasp and then quickly looked around to see if anyone had noticed her reaction.

"This vagabond scum purports to be a champion of the underdogs, but his true motive is to subvert

justice. I hereby warn you that anyone seen consorting with him shall be thrown into prison for treason, and anyone who knows of his whereabouts and does not reveal it to the authorities will also be found guilty of treason."

Sargon's voice rose to an angry shout, "And we will eradicate these treasonable activities!" His soldiers with one accord stood up and cried, "Long live Sargon, Lord Supreme of Sargonia." As the crowd echoed the shout, May quickly slipped away into the back streets of the village. She needed to sit down and compose herself.

She came upon Thomas the Blacksmith's house and knocked on the door. Thomas opened it and May sullenly entered and sat down.

"My dear May, what is distressing you, my girl?" May wondered whether or not she should expose her true feelings to Thomas, but out of anyone in the village, she felt pretty sure that he was one person she could trust.

"It's Sargon," she began.

"Hush, hush dear," said Thomas. "Speak softly now. There are many in our town only too eager to keep the peace with this powerful man, and they would not hesitate to report anything they hear to stay in his good graces, if he has any."

May continued in a whisper, "He said these terrible things about Jasper—that he is a rebel and a rogue and that anyone caught consorting with him will be punished and thrown into prison." May burst into tears.

Thomas reassuringly touched her shoulder, "There, there dear, now don't you worry about it. There are many of us that know very well that Jasper is a good, kind man, and we have witnessed his love for the people. Don't be afraid, my dear; good will triumph in the end."

"But what are we to do?" said May.

"Well," said Mr. Thomas, "those of us who know the truth will just have to be strong, careful and care for one another. We must be careful that we do not become the traps Sargon will use to catch him."

May was gratified that at least she had one friend who understood Jasper, although she was fairly sure that Thomas had no idea of the intimate relationship that they shared.

Having composed herself sufficiently, May set out for home. Skirting the main square of the city, she walked down back streets, hoping to avoid further confrontation with Sargon's men. Suddenly a voice called out to her from one of the houses, "Oh, it's little Miss May." It was Mrs. Thornwhistle, the local busybody.

"Now, little Miss May, I believe I have seen you with that rascal Jasper. We all know what a rogue he is now, don't we? What were you doing consorting with him?"

Hot tears ran down May's flushed cheeks as she replied, "You don't understand! He is a good man who loves people and cares for them."

"Well, look at this," said Ms. Thornwhistle to the other ladies who suddenly stepped out of the doorway behind her. "She's a rambunctious little missy, isn't she, Betty?" she called out to her neighbor. "Look what we have here, a little hussy* who has been consorting with the rogue Jasper, says he is a good man and he loves the people. And how much did he love *you*, little Miss May?" A cackle of laughter echoed out from the neighbors' houses.

From across the street another voice called out, "Shame on you! You are a disgrace to our streets, you and that vagabond Jasper!"

Anger welled up in May's breast. "I don't care

what any of you say! I know he is a good man," she said, then ran out of the village towards her father's cottage.

A confusion of thoughts cascaded through poor May's mind as she made her way along the familiar country road. No one had ever spoken to her like that before. She had always been considered a kind and good girl, and suddenly she was being called a hussy and consort of a rebel rogue.

How can they say those things about Jasper? They don't understand him. It had been more than a week since they had last met. Jasper had told her that he needed to depart on some undisclosed errand, and that he would return soon. Oh, how she longed to be once again by his side, to hold him in her arms.

As she entered her cottage, she turned and cast an anxious glance to the western sky where dark clouds were looming on the horizon. Flashes of lightning played across the sky and the smell of imminent rain was in the air. *A big storm is coming; He will never come on a night like this.*

Soon rain was pouring down around the tiny cottage. May and her father huddled close to the fire and when it was time, went to their respective rooms. Outside, the thunder rumbled and the lightning flashed.

During a respite in the storm, May thought she heard a tap on the window. *It could not be.* ... but then again she heard the familiar tap. Gleefully she jumped out of bed and ran to the window, and there he was.

"Jasper, thank you for coming, even on such a night."

"I had to come," He smiled. "Quickly, put on your overcoat. There is a break in the rain and I know a place where we can go."

May threw on her coat, slipped through the window, and they made their way to where Jasper's horse was tied. The air was crisp and moist. Lightning still danced on the horizon, but it seemed that for now the worst of the storm had passed.

This time Jasper went a different direction. "I will take you somewhere you have never been before," he said. Soon he turned off the road and on into a beautiful garden. Behind it stood a small summer house.

"Come," he said. As they entered the house, Jasper produced a lantern, and lit it, filling the room with a cozy glow, and casting their shadows on the walls that surrounded them. It was quiet and dry here, although they could still hear the pitter patter of droplets falling from the trees outside.

Jasper looked into May's eyes, with an unusual sense of gravity. "I had to come and see you tonight, it's very important," he said.

"What is it?" asked May anxiously.

"You know the terrible things that they have been saying about me."

"Oh yes," replied May. "It's awful. And today in the village, those terrible old women were mocking and taunting me." May burst into tears as Jasper comfortingly put his arm around her.

"Don't worry my dear," he said, "I know you love me and you know I love you and that is all that really matters."

May rested her tear stained cheek on his broad shoulder.

Gently he caressed her hair. Jasper continued. "I want you to know that whatever happens, I will love you and care for you and..." he paused, "May, I have something that I want to ask you."

Gallantly he knelt down before her, took her hand, and looked up into her shining eyes. "May, I

want to ask you if you will be my bride."

May let out a little gasp of adoration as she clasped his hand and said with impassioned fervency, "Oh my dear Jasper, yes! Oh, Jasper, I will! I want to be yours forever."

Jasper paused, then he continued in a more solemn tone of voice. "As you are well aware, my dear, our present circumstances make it difficult for us to be united at this time."

May ruefully nodded her head in agreement.

"But I want to let you know that my promise to you is that one day I will return, and take you away to a life more wonderful than you could ever imagine. Do you believe me?"

"Oh yes, Jasper, I believe you," May answered. "Even if it takes a long, long time, I will wait!"

"Even though we can't be together right now," Jasper continued, "you are mine in spirit from this point on and forever."

"Oh yes," said May, "and you are mine, and we are one—forever!"

"I love you, my sweetheart!" he said, and the two lovers embraced long and ardently, both secure in their love for each other, and longing for the day when they could finally be united.

As they left the summer house and walked through the suddenly moonlit and magically peaceful garden, May felt a new sense of the depth of their love for one another.—No longer was there just the budding thrill of romance, but a promise of love that could endure the storms and tempests of trouble-filled days.



Several days later May made her customary trip into the village, for shopping at the market. It was now autumn and the leaves on the trees were all shades of red and yellow. A cold wind was blowing

down from the mountains and May wrapped her shawl around her tightly as she walked.

Suddenly she heard the clatter of hooves behind her and a shout, "That's her! That's the one!" She turned and to her horror saw three of Sargon's soldiers bearing down upon her. Quickly two of the soldiers dismounted and grabbed her by the arms. The third, who remained on his horse, was a superior officer and he questioned her in a rough tone of voice, "Are you May, daughter of Jacob the farmer?"

"Yes."

"It has been reported that you have been seen with the rebel Jasper. Is this true?"

What could May do? She couldn't deny the man that she loved, for whom she was willing to give up anything to become his wife.

"Yes, it is true!" she said defiantly.

"Do you realize, then, that you could be charged with treason? But tell us where he can be found, and no harm will come to you."

"But I can't tell you, since I don't know," May truthfully replied.

"You mean to say that in all this time you've been seeing him, you do not know where he can be found? Liar! Take her away! We will question her later."

One of the two soldiers grabbed May's arm roughly and started marching her towards the village square where the court house and prison was situated.

"We will soon see how determined she is to hold her tongue," one of the soldiers sneered.

As they arrived at the main square, May again heard the sound of galloping horse hooves. She turned around and, to her bewilderment, saw Jasper riding into the square on his white stallion.

"Jasper!" she exclaimed under her breath.

"There he is!" one of them soldiers cried. Jasper calmly dismounted and walked towards them. The

soldiers seemed transfixed, as if they didn't know what to do.

"Am I the one you are looking for?" he asked.

"Yes!" the captain of the guards stammered.

"Then let her go!" he commanded.

"Jasper, no!" May cried.

With a look of infinite tenderness, Jasper spoke two words that would echo in May's heart for many long, lonely months, "Trust me!"

"Seize him!" the captain cried. Jasper submitted willingly.

"Go, May! Take my horse!" he shouted to her.

Without hesitating, May ran and jumped on Jasper's white stallion. She turned back and their eyes met in one last longing look.

"Go!" Jasper mouthed the words, "Run while you still can!"

May, her heart crying inside of her, galloped out of the town square, out of the village and towards her cottage. As her father was out in the fields, she was alone in the cottage. She quickly gathered up a few provisions and rode deep into the forest. There was an abandoned woodcutter's cottage hidden far within, which she used to frequent as a child. It would be a safe place of refuge for now.

She entered the cottage and collapsed in a flood of tears. How could this have happened? How could Jasper have let himself be taken so easily? Had she become the trap that had caught her beloved?! How mean and selfish it was of her! She wished that she would have gone with him to prison, even to death. For what seemed like hours she wept in bitter anguish and self-recrimination, until Jasper's gentle words stole into her heart. "Trust me!" he had said.

Her thoughts now turned to how noble and gallant her bridegroom-to-be was. Still, thoughts of despair

continued to invade her heart. Perhaps he would be imprisoned for a long time, perhaps he would even be ... she tried not to even think about the terrible fate that could befall her beloved. Over and over again she repeated, "Jasper, I love you! I wish only that you may know that I will always love you and that my heart is with you."

Three days later, May cautiously ventured out of the forest and returned to her cottage. She found her father sitting by the fireplace, staring sadly at the floor. As she entered he looked up with a mixture of relief and surprise. "Oh, my May, where have you been?" He went to the window and nervously looked outside. "Soldiers were here yesterday," he said, "looking for you. They said you have been consorting with this Jasper fellow. He is imprisoned now. I was glad for your sake that you were not here, and that they had obviously not found you yet. So I knew you were safe, wherever you were. Tell me, May, what is going on? Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

May sat down and relayed to her father the events of the last few months. She expected an angry reaction, but to her surprise he was gentle and understanding.

With a deep sigh he said, "Aye, my sweet May, I can't help thinking that he is a good man. Anyone that would stand up to old Sargon and all of his chicanery* must have something good within him. But my dear, you must return to your hiding place quickly, for it is no longer safe for you here."

Gratified by her father's sympathy with her plight, May hastily returned to her forest hideaway, where she again bode out the night.

Upon awaking the next morning, May became possessed by a burning desire to try to contact Jasper. She knew the danger of attempting such a

thing, but was overwhelmed by her feeling of concern, and could no longer restrain herself. Mounting Jasper's steed she headed out of the forest towards the village.

In a thicket close to the edge of the village, she tied the horse to a tree. Pulling her shawl over her head and a scarf across her face, hoping that she wouldn't be noticed, she proceeded cautiously through the back streets toward the prison, though she had no plan. Perhaps she could find someone friendly who would be able to take some provisions and a message to the prison? As she walked down a narrow lane, coming closer to the city's square, she heard a commotion, and paused at the entrance of the lane to try to ascertain what was happening.

She recognized Sargon's voice, "Escape! What do you mean, escape?! He was supposed to be taken to my castle in Sargonville today! How could he escape?"

May cautiously looked out around the corner of a building from the lane where she was hiding. She could see the chief jailer, a huge man over six and a half feet tall, trembling on his knees before an enraged Sargon.

"Bu- bu- but sir, it's not my fault, honestly. We kept watch over him day and night! We have no idea how he could have escaped."

Sargon ordered his soldiers, "Take this man and throw him into the dungeon! Then take a hundred men and search every inch of the countryside. I have hunted this scoundrel too long to let him get away from me now!"

Angrily Sargon climbed into his waiting chariot, which charged off down the main street towards his palace.

Flames of hope leapt high within May's heart. Quickly she hurried back through the streets and out of the town to the thicket where the horse was tied.

When she entered the thicket, a low whistle caught her attention from a nearby clump of bushes.

"Jasper?" she questioned in a low but hopeful voice.

"May!" came the response. After a quick glance around, May made her way into the thicket. There sat Jasper dressed in prisoner's clothes, and May let out a gasp when she saw that on his head and hands and feet were painful looking lacerations from the torture which he had suffered at the hands of the prison guards.

"Oh Jasper!" cried May, throwing her arms around him.

"Don't worry, my dear," said Jasper, "I am free now."

"Sweetheart, you suffered all of this for me. But why?"

"I couldn't bear to see them take you away, and I feared for your life," said Jasper.

"My love," said May, "you must flee, for the soldiers are searching for you. I have brought you fresh clothes, and here are some provisions you can use for your journey."

He quickly donned the clothes while May untied his stallion.

"Here," she said, handing him the horse's reins and a bag of food.

Jasper placed the provisions in the saddlebag, and then looked at May again. She was surprised to see his eyes wet with tears.

"What is it?" She asked.

"Oh May," Jasper replied, "you have made me so very, very happy, and I shall miss you so. But I have no other choice. I must leave, and go far away, until Sargon's wrath has all but forgotten me. But I shall return with the spring."

May looked down, trying to be brave, and struggling to hold back her own tears.

"May," Jasper said gravely, "times will become even more difficult for you and your village. Sargon is more power-hungry than ever, and his son, Tisbah, who he wants to set up as his first officer, is even more ruthless. But hold on, my dear, for these things will change. You may not understand everything now, but you must hold on. No matter what happens, please remember that it will all work together for good. You must trust me."

"Of course!" May answered falteringly. "I do trust you. Oh Jasper, I will miss you so!"

"I love you!" said Jasper, and gave her a tender kiss. "Farewell, my love, and never forget my promise."

For a brief instant the two lovers clasped each other, knowing that they didn't have much time for such a luxury.

"Remember, I will be back with the spring." With that, Jasper mounted his steed, spurred it out onto the road and galloped off, swift as the wind, towards the blue mountains.



Jasper's prediction proved correct, and difficult times came. Throughout the long winter, deep snow covered all the crops, and to make matters worse, Sargon took control of what food supplies there were for himself, his relatives, and his loyal minions. Many in the village were close to starvation, although a few brave folks had stored food in defiance of Sargon's orders and were able to distribute it clandestinely to those in need.

May moved back to her father's cottage, but rarely did she venture into the village. Whenever she did, the gossipy women looked at her narrowly, and some even spat on the ground when they saw her coming. In spite of this, May continued in Jasper's footsteps, helping those in trouble, sometimes by

taking a loaf of bread to a house where she knew the children were hungry, or visiting and cheering up the sick. Jasper had risked his life to help and comfort the villagers, and his love had inspired May to carry on and continue to love and care for others. She was despised by many in the village, but she also won the hearts of many who in turn helped protect her from those who hated or feared Jasper and sought to do her harm. She knew that ministering to and serving others was what Jasper would have wanted her to do.

Jasper's promise to return with the spring still repeated in her mind, and she began to secretly whisper it in the ears of those who she knew were not loyal to Sargon. More and more, the words, "He will return with the spring" were whispered throughout the village, bringing comfort to many aching hearts.

Towards the end of winter Sargon erected a large statue of his son, giving him the title of "Prince Tisbah the Mighty," and demanded that the people of the village come and pay homage to the statue once a week, by giving a portion of what they had worked to gain, whether it be food or other goods. Tisbah was a capricious, willful and spoiled young man who connived at every opportunity to take advantage of the citizens of the town. Together with his father he conspired to exercise even tighter control over every establishment and business in the town. It seemed that those loyal to Sargon were becoming more and more tied to him, while those who could see past his deceitful promises and realized that he had only made their lives worse, hoped for better times and were becoming increasingly fervent in their wishes.

It was in late February, when there were still patches of snow on the ground and a few struggling blue bells trying to force their way out through the

frozen earth, that May noticed a man in a dark cape walking along the road outside her house. He was accompanied by a younger female, also cloaked.

"Father," asked May, "do you know who that man is?"

"Oh," said Jacob, "that is old Davy, the watchmaker, a bit of an eccentric fellow, but harmless enough I suppose, though some say that he is an infiltrator, like your Jasper. It's unusual to see him in these parts, as he lives far away, in the hills behind the forest. He's been around for as long as I can remember, yet I've only met him briefly a few times."

May's curiosity was sparked as soon as she heard mention of Jasper's name. "And who is that with him?" she asked.

"Well," said Jacob, "that is probably his wife, Mary." The two appeared to be taking an afternoon constitutional, and a short while after passing by the cottage, May saw them returning. She determined that she would like to meet them, and perhaps even get some of her questions answered. She ran out of the cottage and up to the gate.

"Hello!" she said cheerily. "Are you Davy the watchmaker?"

"Yes, I am," he replied with a kindly smile. He had a long gray beard, warm sparkling blue eyes and shoulder length gray hair. His companion, Mary, was a petite, pretty brunette.

"I have never seen a watch before. Do you have one I may see?" May asked curiously.

"Of course!" said Davy, and out of his pocket he pulled a large ornate gold watch.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" May exclaimed with pleasure. "What does it do?"

"Well, it tells people what time of day or night it is."

"What a wonderful idea!" cried May, amazed at this innovation.

"Well, it's my job to tell people the time, and I reckon that time is almost up for old Sargon!" he said with a wink and a smile. May's heart leaped. He indeed seemed to be of a kindred spirit.

"Would you like to come in for some tea?" she finally offered.

"Why of course," replied Davy, "and by the way, dear, you can keep the watch. It's our gift to you!"

"Oh, thank you!" cried May.

They soon became fast friends. Old Davy fascinated May with the many stories that he told. Over the months that followed Davy and Mary often visited May and Jacob, and May derived much joy and inspiration from their company.

There had been times during the long cold winter when she had missed her dear Jasper so greatly that it was hard to carry on, and sometimes she even began to question whether he would indeed return. However, she managed to banish such thoughts by clinging to the words that he had spoken, "Just trust me. I will return with the spring."

Eventually May felt comfortable enough with Davy and Mary that she was able to confide her deepest thoughts to them.

Old Davy smiled and nodded, "Aye, and what a beautiful bride you will be." Old Davy's warm faith and reassurance encouraged May to keep on with her works of love and her words of hope and encouragement to those who were suffering, even though difficult and dangerous.

One day while Davy and Mary were visiting, May noticed that Davy seemed more serious than usual. Preempting her question, he said "The time has come for me to go on a journey, from which I will not return for a long time."

"Oh.... " May started, already feeling an ache in her heart. "How I will miss your encouragement and counsel. Must you really go?"

"Yes, I am more needed in another place, but before I go, we have a present for you. Mary?" Mary took a golden key from her purse and handed it to May.

"How beautiful! Thank you so much! But what is it for?"

"This key," said Davy, "possesses certain mystical qualities. If you clasp it very tightly and block out all your other thoughts, you will be able to hear the voice of your lover, even at a great distance."

"You mean, I can hear Jasper's voice?" queried May, wishing it were so, though it seemed hard to believe.

"All I can say is try it and see," said Davy with a wink. "Well, I must be going now. I've lots to prepare. Don't worry, my dear, we will meet again!" And with those words Davy and Mary took their leave.

May felt a tinge of sadness as she watched them disappear down the road. She knew she would miss her dear friend, but soon her curiosity about her new gift overcame her and she longed to try it out. She was a little skeptical as to how it could work, as she had never heard of such a thing before. Nevertheless, she hurried to her bedroom, closed the door, and sat on her bed, clasping the key to her bosom. At first she thought it was just her imagination, but she began to hear his beloved voice in her heart, "Trust me, my love. ... I will come in the spring."

"Jasper!" she whispered, excitedly, "it is you!"

As the days went by and the situation worsened, it seemed that the voice of her lover sounded more and more clearly in her heart. Everywhere she went, she carried her golden key, and it became her most prized possession.

The oppression in Sargonia grew increasingly intense. Tisbah commanded that no one could buy and sell except those who loyally paid homage to his statue. Many suffered because they refused to succumb to such tyranny, but somehow many survived. As the days wore on, the snow melted and the lilacs, bluebells and daffodils began to spring forth on the green hillsides, as if in defiance of the wicked regime.

May began to turn her eyes more anxiously than ever to the distant blue mountains, looking for some sign of Jasper's return. Although his comforting voice whispered in her heart, she felt an intense longing just to see his face and to be held in his arms once more. This desire seemed to dwarf everything else in her life. Even the privations, as difficult as they were, seemed nothing in comparison to the burning and passionate desire that she had to be reunited with her lover.



One afternoon as May stood gazing at the hazy blue mountains, she was startled by the sound of horse hooves on the road outside the cottage. She turned to see five gray clad figures riding dark horses turning on to the path that led up to the cottage.

"Sargon's soldiers!" she gasped. May knew there was nowhere to run, so stood defiantly awaiting their approach.

"There she is!" said one of them, "That is the one!"

"You!" said the superior officer, "go and call your father."

"Father!" May called through the front window of the cottage, "We have guests!"

Jacob emerged from the house. His jaw dropped when he saw the five fully armed soldiers and May confronting them.

"It has been brought to our attention" snarled the superior officer, "that both of you have neglected your loyal duty to our great leader, Sargon the Great, and his successor-elect, Tisbah the Mighty. According to the laws of our land, you should be thrown into prison. However, in his great benevolence and mercy, Tisbah the Mighty has decided not to be overly strict in enforcing his own worship, and in his magnanimity he has decided to give you until tomorrow to repent of your treason.

"You must be seen bowing down before the image of Tisbah the Mighty by tomorrow. If not, your cottage and your farm will be possessed by the state and you will be brought to trial on charges of treason."

May's heart sank to have gone through all she had, and then be faced with such a decision. The memory crossed her mind of the courage and conviction that Jasper had shown in the face of his adversaries and the sacrifice he had made, even risking his own life, for her. How could she do any less to show her loyalty to him?

She spoke out boldly, "You can tell your Tisbah that he is wasting his time. I will never bow down to his image."

Through clenched teeth the officer grinned menacingly. "Do not speak too hastily, little one. We will see if you change your mind about that by tomorrow!" Without another word he turned sharply and led the other soldiers at a gallop back into the village.

May turned and saw her father standing silently with lines of worry spread over his face.

"Oh, Father," she said, "what are we to do? It's easy enough for me to stand up for what I believe in, for I feel I have nothing to lose. But you stand to lose everything that you have worked for your whole life!"

Jacob opened his arms and May fell into his embrace. "Aye, my girl," said Jacob, "I would rather lose everything I own than lose my dignity and your respect."

The next hours seemed to be the longest of May's life as she moved around the cottage doing her chores and preparing her father's dinner. Throughout the evening she was hit with a sinking feeling of hopelessness and helplessness, but when she would clasp her golden key, Jasper's words seemed to reverberate in her mind and heart. "Just trust me. I will come." His words seemed like a single golden thread that was keeping her suspended above a pit of despair. She knew she could not let go. Then for moments she would be hopeful, almost rejoicing, until despair would come over her again like a wave. To fight it, she would sing with all of her heart. *At least I should try to cheer up Father*, she thought.

Jacob sat glumly, barely able to speak or eat. Her chores completed, May went to bed where she tossed and turned fitfully for hours before drifting into a restless sleep. Suddenly May was awakened by bright lights shining through her window and the sound of horses and voices in front of the cottage.

Quickly she fumbled with the watch that Davy the watchmaker had given her.... It was midnight. For a moment fear gripped her. Could this be Sargon's soldiers coming to take her and her father away? Was this the end? She slipped her dress on and ran to the window.

Her mouth dropped open with awe and amazement at the glorious sight which presented itself. Twenty knights riding white chargers stood in a semi-circle. In the midst of them was none other than her beloved Jasper! Only this time he was not dressed in simple traveler's garb as always

before, but splendidly arrayed as a magnificent knight.

His silver armor glinted in the light of the flaming torches which were held up by the knights all around him. His face was radiant and he dismounted and walked toward May's window, his bearing emanating an indescribable power and majesty.

At first May could barely believe that it was indeed her beloved, but it was unmistakably he! She flung open the window and as their gaze met, she could only mouth the name that to her had become the most precious word she knew.

Pausing before her window, he said, "Come to me, my love!" Almost in an ecstatic trance, May climbed out the window into his arms.

"My love," said Jasper, "I have come as I have promised. A long journey awaits us, we must depart at once."

Out on the road she now noticed that a beautiful carriage was pulling up, led by four white stallions. May was overwhelmed! She had never dreamed that the man who had come to her in such simplicity, could command such finery.

"Before we depart, one question, my love."

Jasper smiled, already discerning May's request. "Your father? He will be traveling with us too, in that other carriage you see just a bit further past the cottage." Jasper mounted his steed and with a commanding gesture to his knights the company set forth into the night. May knew that she was forever out of the clutches of the evil Sargon.

The carriage sped through the night towards the mysterious blue mountains, dimly visible in the moonlight. Jasper rode beside the carriage at first, but once the company was well out of range of Sargon's soldiers he passed the care of his stallion to one of his coachmen and entered the carriage, where he

and May embraced and kissed for the first time in many months.

The two lovers spent the rest of their journey telling of all that had transpired since they last saw each other, looking deep into one another's eyes in the rapture of requited love.

By and by the road began to turn up into the mountains and the air became purer and fresher. Above the mountains May could see the pale light of dawn beginning to ascend into the sky. The morning star hung like a resplendent pearl against a velvet backdrop.

As they came over the crest of the hill, May was breathless at the splendor that greeted her. The most magnificent castle she had ever seen rose out of the valley into which they now descended. It seemed to be built out of the purest white marble. Four magnificent turrets towered high above the surrounding countryside.

The carriage and its knightly escorts swept down the valley towards the castle, and as they approached the lowered drawbridge, a loud fanfare of trumpets greeted them. Nobles stepped forward as the carriage drew to a halt.

"Greetings Your Majesty!" they chorused as Jasper descended from the carriage.

"Your Majesty?" queried May, still in awe at all that was happening.

Jasper gallantly held out his hand, "Come, my love."

May stepped almost hesitantly out of the carriage into an exquisite marble courtyard. There were dozens of smartly attired courtiers attending Jasper's arrival. One of them, a slightly plump elderly man, smiled benignly and bowed.

"Greetings," he said to May. "Your Grace must be very tired after the long journey."

"Y ... yes," stammered May, overwhelmed, as no one had ever called her by such a title before.

Jasper smiled. "Tired she is indeed and she shall sleep. Kindly show Miss May to her chambers," he instructed two of the courtiers. Two other servants then arrived, to attend to May's father and lead him to his quarters.

"My love," Jasper whispered tenderly to May, "I will come to you."

Two of the courtiers stepped forward and led May through a large wooden door. They climbed a flight of stairs, coming to a wide balcony overlooking the courtyard.

One of the courtiers opened two beautiful engraved doors, "Your chambers, your Grace," he said, and respectfully stood aside. It seemed to May the most beautifully decorated room she had ever seen. A bowl of delicious-looking fruits was provided for her refreshment, and a large ornamental bed surrounded by a filmy curtain was prepared for her.

A gentle voice spoke to her from behind, "Welcome, your Grace. I am your lady in waiting. Is there anything I can bring you?"

Once again overwhelmed, May stuttered, "Why, this is all so much more than I could ever expect."

"Your Grace must be tired," said the lady kindly. "I hope you have a good rest."

Her head swimming with the amazing events of the night, May climbed into bed. She must have slept for hours, for when she awoke it was high noon. She sat up in bed and looked around her, dazzled by the beauty of the chamber. Everything was of the highest quality workmanship—an elegantly carved sofa with velvet pillows, ornate woodwork, delightful paintings on the walls, and a large window with white lacy curtains. A delicious meal was spread out on the table.

May walked to the window and gazed, entranced, at the idyllic countryside, the emerald-green rolling hills, sheep grazing calmly in the pasture beside a babbling stream, all framed by the turquoise mountains over which they had traveled.

"Such perfection, such beauty!" May whispered to herself, "And yet I am so unworthy!"

Then there was a knock on the door.

"Enter!" cried May. The door opened and there stood Jasper. "Oh Jasper," May cried, "what a marvelous surprise that all of this was awaiting me! You did not tell me that you were a prince and your home a beautiful palace!"

She ran to his arms and he held her tightly. "Ah, my love, I could not let you fully know of all the glory that would be yours if you consented to be my bride. Now I know that you love me for myself and not for my riches or my possessions. Because you love me and because you have been loyal to me, all that you see is yours."

Grateful tears welled up in May's eyes. Memories flooded back to her of the scorn she had received at the hands of the village people, of the privations and sufferings she had encountered because of her love and loyalty for Jasper, of the sacrifice she had expended in following his loving example, of the loneliness and longing that she felt in her heart as she waited for his return. It had been worth it all!

Jasper, seeming to read her mind, said, "Now, my love, all that you have suffered for me is rewarded with everlasting joy."

May looked down at Jasper's hands which were holding hers, and saw they were still scarred. "And you have suffered so much for me," she said with her voice breaking.

"I did this that I might have you for mine, and win your love forever," he softly answered. "Now

come, my love, let us sup together. Tonight shall be the royal wedding presided over by my parents, King Godfrey and Queen Isabella. Ladies in waiting will soon come to help you prepare. This is going to be the most wonderful night of my life."

"Of mine too," said May.

She was right. The evening was more spectacular and magnificent than anything she could have possibly imagined in her wildest fantasies. A banquet was prepared and a full orchestra played heavenly music. The most awe-inspiring moment of all for May was when she was brought into the throne room for her first audience with the great king and queen, escorted by Jasper. She entered timidly into the great hall of the castle, dressed in a ravishing bridal gown while Jasper wore his finest princely attire, with a golden crown upon his head.

May was dimly aware of the hundreds of knights, lords and ladies on either side of the marble aisle which led to two magnificent thrones. But her gaze was fixed on two majestic figures seated upon the thrones. May saw such love emanating from the king's benign countenance. All those in the hall rose, and Jasper and May stood before the throne.

The king smiled, "You are indeed beautiful, my child," he said. "Thank you for making our son so happy."

The queen spoke, "We have long awaited this day, my dear, and I am so very glad that you are to become a part of our family."

May's father, Jacob, stood to the left of the queen's throne, smiling and nodding in approval. Then May caught sight of a familiar figure standing with the courtiers beside the king's throne. It was none other than Davy, the watchmaker-spy, but dressed so splendidly that May could barely recognize him.

He was obviously more than just a spy, and definitely more than a watchmaker.

As the entire court looked on, Jasper and May exchanged their vows. When they finished, a choir broke into triumphant song. May's eyes streamed with tears as she thought upon Jasper's great love in exalting her from a mere farmer's daughter to a princess in his mighty kingdom.

After the wedding, May and Jasper partook of the splendid banquet that was prepared. There was all manner of festivities and rejoicing.

After enjoying the music and dancing for a time, Jasper whispered in May's ear, "Now come with me." He led her out of the main hall onto a beautiful marble terrace that overlooked a forest of pine trees on the hillside behind the palace. The moonlight shone enchantingly upon the pines.

As the music from the orchestra wafted out, Jasper and May danced together on the terrace, enraptured in one another's embrace. From the terrace, another door led into Prince Jasper and Princess May's bridal chamber, where the two newlyweds spent their first night together in the ecstasy of consummated love. The next morning they departed for Jasper's retreat in the mountains, where they enjoyed a blissful honeymoon.



The day after their return, Jasper came to May and said, "My dear, we must attend a very important meeting with their Majesties the King and Queen." May was a little nervous, as she had never before been summoned to such an important official gathering.

The king began by welcoming all his lords, ladies, knights and nobles to the meeting.

"My beloved Queen Isabella, Prince Jasper, Princess May, Lord Davy, Lady Mary and all my

beloved knights and nobles, it has long been my fervent desire to reclaim a portion of the kingdom which has been usurped from me by the wicked Sargon. As you know, he exercises tyranny on the poor village and the surrounding countryside.

"In counsel with my good lords and ladies, we feel that the time is now right for the liberation and reclamation of my kingdom."

"You mean that Sargonia actually belongs to your father?" May queried.

"Yes!" Jasper explained to her quietly, "Many many years ago My father gave the region to Sargon, who called it Sargonia. He was to be subject to my father's rule, and to pay tribute. But instead, he sought to rule Sargonia as his own kingdom, and refused to acknowledge the greater power and kingdom of my father. There were those who saw through Sargon's perfidy, and there were those who cared little who ruled over them, as long as they could get on with their lives. My father, willing to let them have their own way, decided it would be wiser to wait until the people of the region themselves became convinced of Sargon's malicious intentions, and would be ready to renounce Sargon and restore the lands of Sargonia to their rightful king and sovereign lord."

The king continued, "My own son, Prince Jasper, has successfully scouted out the land, and because of the good works of his faithful bride, Princess May, he is now well known to many of the inhabitants of the region." At this point, a round of applause echoed around the room.

May blushed a little, as she spoke hesitantly, "With your permission, your Majesty, the noble endeavors of Prince Jasper himself are the reason that many of the inhabitants of Sargonia now hold his name in high esteem."

"Ah, yes, but my good Lord Davy also informs me," replied the king jovially, "that my dear daughter-in-law served to be a most inspiring example of the love and concern which Prince Jasper held for his people, even in the face of great opposition and calumny*, and thus is worthy of great honor in my kingdom."

All the nobles concurred, nodding their heads and looking at May with warm approval.

"Thus," the king continued, "it is our decree that the force to liberate Sargonia depart immediately, and that Prince Jasper lead this invasion. Are all in agreement?"

Immediately the room broke forth into a loud shout of, "Long live His Majesty the King! May he reign victorious for ever and ever!"

May tugged on Prince Jasper's sleeve. "And may I accompany His Highness?" she asked with a smile.

With a twinkle in his eye he answered, "My dear wife, I would not attempt such an undertaking without you by my side."

The king's council having come to an end, preparations immediately began for the invasion.

By nightfall a mighty army of knights and warriors dressed in shining white armor, mounted on magnificent stallions, were assembled in front of the castle. Princess May rode beside Prince Jasper, Lord Davy and Lady Mary riding alongside.

"Lords and ladies, knights and warriors," Jasper called out. "My father once again shows his infinite wisdom in the timing of this invasion. The wicked Sargon is now at his weakest point. His attempts to exalt his son, Tisbah, as the ruler of his kingdom have been futile. Although many of the citizens have been deceived by Sargon's guarantees of future greatness and prosperity, yet many are angered by his tyranny, disillusioned by his government and

ready to embrace the kingdom of my father.

"Storms and plagues have beset Sargon's kingdom, so we expect any resistance to be minimal. Remember that his only power is in his threats, for there is no real loyalty amongst his soldiers. They do not love him, but only fear him. Although they may put on a brave front as we approach, I guarantee they will prove no match for our superior forces. We will travel at night and attack at dawn.

"Be brave, my soldiers, and fight for the honor of His Majesty the King and Her Majesty the Queen and for the liberty of the poor citizens of the oppressed regions!"

A great cheer rang out from the ranks, "Long live the true and rightful king! May his righteous reign endure forever!"

Raising his sword high, Prince Jasper turned and led the troops into the gathering dusk.

As May watched the first golden rays of the sun light up the morning sky above Sargonia, a feeling of excitement and ecstatic anticipation filled her heart. She thought of the poor people of the town who had suffered for so long and of the wonderful emancipation* that was about to be theirs.

Well before dawn, Prince Jasper's army was poised for the attack. Now as golden light filled the sky, the fearsome array of valiant knights dressed in shining silver armor drew into tight ranks on the hillside overlooking the village.

Sargon's watchmen sounded the alarm as they caught sight of the gleaming rows of spears and swords with the morning sun ascending in the sky behind them. Hearing the alarm, Lord Sargon ran to the window of his castle, and was seized with dread. This was the terrible moment that he had feared for so long.

Tisbah ran to his side at the window, "We cannot let this happen!" he growled through clenched teeth. "All we have worked so hard for will be destroyed. I will lead the troops myself."

With a gesture of his head, Sargon gave his consent, although he knew in his heart that his wicked kingdom faced its doom. Hastily Sargon's forces arrayed themselves outside the perimeter of the village.

Prince Tisbah spurred his black stallion to the front of the troops, "The impostor will be no match for us!" he snarled.

Prince Jasper called to his troops, "Charge!" As they thundered down the incline, the black array of Sargon's forces seemed to melt before them. Princess May, along with Lady Mary, watched from the ridge, thrilled at seeing their mighty army going forth to conquer. Within minutes Sargon and Tisbah's troops fled in disarray. The shields of Prince Jasper's army were impenetrable, and the archers' arrows bounced harmlessly off of them. Their swords flashed in the early morning sun with invincible accuracy.

The residents of the village, awakened by the sudden attack, saw the silver-clad knights sweeping into the town from every direction. Many of them recognized their liberators, and tried to determine the true identity of their leader. "It's Jasper, the kind stranger! Look at him now, dressed as a prince and leading a mighty army!" they cried joyously.

Within an hour Sargonia had fallen into the hands of its true and rightful lords. Sargon and Tisbah were taken and bound with chains and their bruised and bedraggled soldiers were captured and brought into the main square of the town. The citizens of the town lined the streets with tears of

joy and songs of gladness, welcoming the conquering army, and those who had complied with Sargon's reign hid their faces in shame.

As May rode at the head of the victory procession through the streets alongside Prince Jasper, she caught sight of Mrs. Thornwhistle and her contemptuous neighbors, huddled together in front of her house. Their mouths dropped in shock as they saw May in her queenly attire with a diamond-studded tiara upon her head. She graced them with a smile as they stood speechless, lowering their eyes in shame.

Victorious Prince Jasper halted his stallion in the main square of the village, where Sargon and Tisbah were chained in ignominy to a stake in the ground. Jasper removed his helmet and fixed his unswerving gaze upon them.

"Now you will know," he said to them calmly, "what it is like to suffer in prison as you have caused so many to suffer. Men, take them away and throw them in the deepest dungeon." Without further ado, strong soldiers seized the two deposed despots and escorted them unceremoniously to the dungeon.

Prince Jasper turned to address the waiting crowds. "This day be it known that liberty has come to you! My father, King Godfrey, and I have heard the cries of your oppression and have come to set you free. Use your freedom to build, to plant, to grow and to learn to love one another. My father has appointed my beautiful wife and I, together with Lord Davy and Lady Mary, as your new rulers, and we will reign and judge with equity and love for all!"

As the crowds cheered wildly, Jasper smiled radiantly, and his eyes scanned the crowds, seeming to look into every face. The morning sun tinged his brown hair with gold and his eyes emanated warmth and compassion.

May watched him in adoration until finally those same tender, laughing, loving eyes that had first met hers on that spring day long ago, once again locked into her gaze. May's heart swelled with admiration and love.—He was her hero!



Afterword, by Jesus:

“I have inspired this story as an allegory or parable of My relationship with you, My beautiful, young bride. I have given it as an illustration of how simple, sweet, magical and mystical our love is; of what a wonder it is that I, the King of all kings, would find the love of My life in you: simple, weak human beings who have nothing to give in return—nothing but your love, which I value above all things.”

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MR. STONEHEART

- A Twentieth-Century Allegory -

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MR. STONEHEART

Mr. Stoneheart lived in a glass house.

Paradoxical*, isn't it? Ask me why, and I'll probably say, "Why not?" But frankly, ask anyone, and they'd tell you that that's just how it was. More precisely:

Alexander Stoneheart lived in a glass house.

And a glass house it was, for besides the small hillock* that it stood upon, and a token presence of a trace of wood, there was glass everywhere—glass on the left and glass on the right, glass on top and glass on the sides, glass on the inside and glass on the outside, glass on the doors and glass on the windows, glass on the cupboards and glass in the cupboards, glass upon glass and glass within glass—glass everywhere. And every kind of glass: stained, paned, plain, colored, tinted, ground, mirrored, fiber, inlaid, framed, sculpted, and occasionally—broken. No, you didn't quite see through the glass *darkly*. Although of course, that *could* have happened if you were using the side entrance with the dark blue stained glass door from the garden side—or if perhaps the curtains were partly drawn behind the front door when you tried to look in and found another eye on the other side.

Anyway, even if you did see darkly, it was very short-lived, because soon the door would open and you *would* be *face to face*. When Gottim the butler opened the front glass door and met you with a glassy stare that seemed to look right through you, you were ushered further into that world of glassy obsession—your understanding of it as foggy as ground glass.

Inside, you were soon faced with an identity crisis, since your many facets stared at you from

glass mirrors that were mounted all over the walls. For the first five minutes or so, you busied yourself with trying to find a facial expression that from all angles could pass as halfway acceptable—all the while wondering how come you didn't have a single decent one in your repertoire after all this time—before finally quitting. Looking up, you could profess to being able to almost look into your companion's mind, since you could look down on a very clear view of his head in the mirror above you. If perchance he was a victim of hair-loss, so much the better view. Then there were mirrored tiles all over the floor¹, so you sort of walked upon yourself as you made your way across the room—an undertaking few people managed without wincing.

To this day, despite much deliberation, (and believe you me, there have been no mean' number of nights spent on this), no one really knows the exact moment when Mr. Stoneheart became obsessed with glass in this manner. Neither is the reason known as to why he put up all those mirrors inside his house. Maybe he was a narcissist' and liked to look at himself a lot, and that too from all different angles and perspectives. And so it was that, at any given time, there were eight to ten Alexander Stonehearts in the room.

Mr. Stoneheart seemed to feel quite at home with this many-facetedness. Perhaps it even gave him a sense of omnipresence, although it appears that

after a while, he no longer knew which of them was his real self anymore.

Again, a strange thing. Despite all the glass that he surrounded himself with and his incessant obsession with it, you couldn't see through Mr. Stoneheart. Neither could you tell which face of his he was turning toward you.

I suppose you could say that Alexander Stoneheart didn't have too many friends. I guess none of us in his place would have fared too well either in that respect, considering how far into the rat-race he was¹. But then, he wasn't all that different from the rest of the people who occupied that piece of earth called Shamelin City².

In this city, life took on a very strange mutation: It became tunnel-like. In general, it basically consisted of gravitating towards a single goal, namely, material abundance, using whatever means or methods one could to advance. Human life and conditions, other than one's own, took on an order of least importance. Everyone followed the same pattern—well, at least they tried.

The more successful, self-made ones amongst the lot, like Alexander Stoneheart, also managed over a period of time to excel in vain outward pretenses, aggrandized trivia and restructuring of the truth, and quite often measured each other by their degree of expertise in these fields and the

¹ Gossip has it that, for this reason, subsequent to their first visit, women always seemed to display a preference for trousers. Gossip did not seem to know, however, whether Mr. Stoneheart had mirrored the floor with this purpose in mind, but rather decided to give him the benefit of the doubt in this respect. At least that was the more common belief, held by rather largehearted people who preferred to lend themselves to a more charitable view.

¹ There was really no problem with rats in the city, unlike its near-namesake that is the source of the famous legend. The term "rat-race" was coined, for some reason, for the frenzy of human activity which was conducted here all year round, and with such amazing alacrity'. But it had nothing to do with rats.

² Most newcomers ask me whether Shamelin is to be pronounced as rhyming with Hamelin, or as "SHAME-lin." I usually direct them to the former, although I also like the alternative pronunciation.

extent to which they were able to authenticate this sham¹. The less fortunate members of this city were poor and were looked down upon. As far as Mr. Stoneheart and his likes were concerned, such people just “took up space.”

No, Mr. Stoneheart was not married. Well, let’s put it this way: not anymore. He had been once upon a time, however, his wife decided that this aforementioned and ever-intensifying pursuit of his own self was plain vanity, and since her patience was only ten years long, she left him in the eleventh—with sadness on her face—a year ago now—an event to which Mr. Stoneheart had little reaction other than to walk her to the front door.

You see, after years of practice, he had managed to steel himself to those emotional outbursts that were the domain of weaker mortals. Yet sometimes, he did miss her all the same, although he wouldn’t admit that even to himself. Now, alone in his glass house, Alexander seemed to have a bit more time to reflect. And he probably would have spent some time doing just that, except.... Well, *except for the knocking*.

More about that later. Today was a new day, Sunday, and you see, like all his other Sundays, Mr. Stoneheart liked his Sundays served to him rosy from the sun. He would stay late in bed, and stir sugar generously into his liturgical* morning tea (courtesy of Gottim), spread the newspaper all over, and take his time beginning the day before he finally got up and looked out of his crystal ball².

¹ Mr. Stoneheart’s glass xanadu’, incidentally, was a monument to this quest.

² Correction: his glass house. Sorry, couldn’t resist that. But if it in any way could have resembled a crystal ball, he would have probably been the only one to have looked out of one rather than into it. Still, it would be a folly to believe that he was endowed with any special soothsaying abilities because of it—not more than the local weatherman at any rate. Anyhow, read on.

Then after half an hour or so, he would go for a leisurely stroll in the garden.

However, this Sunday was different, because the day was cloudy. Because Gottim was on leave, and there was no cup of tea. Because, for one reason or another, the maid didn’t come that morning, and because his newspapers hadn’t arrived. Because he hadn’t slept much that night, nor could he sleep much in the morning. *Because of the knocking*.

Funny sound that was—kind of strange, like somebody was knocking. He did go downstairs to check a couple of times, but there was no one there. Was someone playing a prank? Maybe. But the guard posted outside the main gate hadn’t heard anything, or so he’d said. *He’s probably been sleeping on the job, useless fellow*.

A shiver went up Mr. Stoneheart’s spine. Was the house ... *haunted?*

Nah! Mr. Stoneheart brushed aside the thought in a hurry. *How could it be?* He had been the only one living there since it was built, along with his wife, Emily, for a while. He had built the house himself! Maybe he was just hearing things. It had seemed so close. It could very well have been his throbbing headache.

A cup of tea would have been good. Too bad about Gottim—that this day, of all days, he wasn’t there; but, well, he’d just have to make himself some tea—something he hadn’t done since he had met Emily.

He went downstairs to the kitchen. He saw the paper outside the front door, which the guard had diligently placed in order for the rest of the process to take place. Most activities at the glass house were carried out with an unnerving efficiency that might give an efficiency expert an inferiority complex, and were thoroughly conducted in a highly meticulous manner.

The morning newspaper, for example, was transported to Mr. Stoneheart's bedroom via a short relay system. It was dropped off by the newsboy (who himself first got it from the newspaper office) into the tray provided for it in the guardhouse connected to the main gate, from where the guard took it and put by the front door. From there the maid took it to the kitchen and left it there where it stayed until the precise time that Gottim finished his early morning chores and came in to make Mr. Stoneheart's morning tea. After Gottim made his trademark tea¹, he would take the tea and the newspaper on a tray to Mr. Stoneheart's room—just as he would be getting up. He accomplished this feat daily with clockwork precision.

Ah, well, each day besides today, that is. Mr. Stoneheart slowly made his way to the library. The all-pervasive glass was most certainly there as well. Glass cupboards lined the walls with all kinds of books on every subject imaginable. He always went there whenever he wanted to reflect, and that wasn't too often. But this was the only room in the entire house which did not have mirrors overhead. Perhaps Mr. Stoneheart didn't quite cherish the possibility of someone else looking into his mind and reading his thoughts.

He sipped his tea as he sat on his large, comfortable, customary couch in the library, and was soon immersed in the newspaper. Same old stuff. Wars. Famines. Disasters. Diseases. People dying, no matter what the cause, but dying nonetheless. People getting laid off. Violence—in all its shades and forms. It was as if they were living

in the six o'clock news. You could ask the homeless folks, the ones who lived on the sidewalk. They had the bad news for breakfast. They slept with it on the pavement and in their little makeshift hutments*. It haunted them in their dreams, turning them into nightmares. It was their playmate as they grew up. It seemed to have been their teacher and their school. They watched it grow. It was in the air around them. They breathed it; it choked them. It stalked the streets everyday, with every vehicle that passed by. It tempted them. It terrorized them. It victimized them. It *killed* them. Old people; young people; boys; girls; mothers; fathers; children. All the while struggling to survive.

Mr. Stoneheart and his kind simply passed them by. They didn't really like to see those sights on their route too much, for this would force them to hear the voice of conscience. *That* was something they had long locked away in the far reaches of their mind's attic, from where it let out a stifled cry once in a while—which was really more of a whimper.

There was an old folks' home that was on Mr. Stoneheart's way to work, but he didn't like old people, so he used to step on the gas a little harder at that point.

A long time ago, as a child, he used to visit his old grandfather in the country. Mr. Stoneheart's grandfather had been poor. Mr. Stoneheart's father had also been poor, but he passed away when Alex was in his teens. It was this Mr. Stoneheart who had worked hard and brought affluence to the Stoneheart name. It took years of working for himself, and finally he became a self-made man. He had made himself—for himself.

In his childhood, on his visits to the country he used to share the same bedroom with his poor grandfather who serenaded him nightly with his

¹ The toast would also be ready by then; the sprinklers on the lawn would have shut themselves off, the living room would have been dusted and cleaned by the maid, and so on—pure efficiency, you know.

nasal orchestrations, though without any uncaring motives on his part. However, this habit in turn only served to make little Alex increasingly irritable, and slowly, as he grew up, although his grandfather showed him a great deal of love and tried to take very good care of him whenever he visited, he began detesting his visits there. Now his grandfather had died a few years ago, and it was considered a real shame that Alex was too busy to come to the funeral, being that there was a board meeting to attend, and a social ladder to climb.

Mr. Stoneheart put down the paper. He looked at himself in the mirror—any mirror. His forty-eight years had etched their mark on his aquiline face and done the job just as well as at sixty-five. Somehow, time seemed to have eluded his grasp and pushed him along faster than everyone else. His hair had thinned out, but was still slightly long at the back; however, the lack of hair on his head was well compensated for by a well-nourished goatee which had flourished upon his chin for the past five years. His shoulders were bowed with all the burdens that he had carried over the years, past and present.

He stood up—all six feet of him—and went closer to the mirror. His blue eyes were bloodshot. He had barely managed two hours of sleep. And even then he'd kept dreaming of ... what? It was like a video tape in his head playing reruns of the past. *Oh, never mind. It's too late anyway. She'll never come back. There will probably never be another chance. Why couldn't she understand? It was to be all for posterity, for tomorrow. Besides, it was for others to see. The problem with Emily was that she didn't really care about what others thought. She always just did what she thought or knew to be right; that's why she left. She thought it was the right thing to do. What did she*

know? She was young—only thirty-five. But maybe ... perhaps if ...

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a noise. It seemed to come from the front door. *It sounded like ...*

Run, Mr. Stoneheart, run! Out the front door!

He ran all the way from the library, nearly tripping on the way, as his foot got caught in his dressing gown. But he was going to catch the miscreant this time. He reached the front door almost out of breath, and flung it open. There was a storm brewing outside and a gust of wind almost pushed him back inside.

No one stood there but the guard, who stood there a moment, startled by his master's haste. Then he requested permission to go home for lunch.

Mr. Stoneheart looked at him in disbelief, then looked away. *False alarm.* Then he looked at the guard again. *What? Is it that late? Must he leave?* He almost wished the guard could stay, then at least he would have had some company. Now he was going to be all alone. All alone with his thoughts and his memories—and whatever else it was that haunted him.

"You may go," he said quietly.

The guard excused himself and left. Mr. Stoneheart turned and made his way back to take up his train of thought where he had left it. He suddenly heard deep-throated thunder rattle some of the windows upstairs. "Sounds like a downpour coming in," he muttered to himself.

Walking in to the library, his eyes suddenly fell on an old leather volume in one corner of the leftmost glass cupboard. He stopped, then slowly made his way to it. It had been a long time since he had opened that book. He leafed through the pages slowly, through the pictures of him when he

had first started his business, pictures of other significant events in his life, until he came to what he was looking for: the *first* picture he had ever taken with Emily. He looked at it and a smile teased the corners of his mouth. She had such a gentle face, and such beautiful eyes. Her smile had very nearly made a poet out of him in those days.

Yes, *those* were good days! He could still remember the first time he had met her: it was in a cafeteria. She was with her friend, sitting at the table. It was there that the tapestries of their lives began to intertwine to form a single pattern. That's when he walked in and, distracted by her lovely face, promptly proceeded to trip over a bag which was jutting out slightly into the aisle, and then gloriously plunged headlong into a portion of chocolate mousse at the next table.

Although it is debatable as to whether his face actually benefited in any way from this experience, there is unanimous agreement in all circles that it helped his personal life a great deal. From then on, chocolate mousse was to always hold reminiscences, and Mr. Stoneheart often told himself that if he were ever to write his memoirs, he would dedicate at least a good portion to this tasty substance.

Emily quickly jumped to his aid, picked him up, and using her own handkerchief, cleaned up the mess from his face. This quickly became a precursor to the general pattern that emerged thence, and in the married life that was soon to follow. In like manner, it was noted that Emily Stoneheart always picked her husband up and cleaned up his mess. Whenever that happened. And he certainly thought at that time that she was made of gold. Well—*her heart* at any rate. She did love him quite a lot, you know.

But things had changed. Times had changed. He had changed. After all, now *he* was turning things into gold much more. Oh, and sometimes ... glass. And that was good, wasn't it? Of course, you always have to pay a price for everything. Oh sure, he had gotten *harder*. No!—Wrong choice of words. *Tougher*. Yes, that was it. He had gotten tougher. But wasn't that how he needed to be?

His train of thought was suddenly derailed. There was the sound again—that familiar sound. The sound of *knocking*.

Run, Mr. Stoneheart! Run!

He ran again as fast as he could towards the front door. One Mr. Stoneheart; two Mr. Stonehearts; three, four, five Mr. Stonehearts. He reached the door and flung it open. There was no one there. He slammed the door shut. The sound continued.

He ran upstairs. Six Mr. Stonehearts; seven, eight, nine Mr. Stonehearts. But there was no one else there.

Run, Mr. Stoneheart! Run!

He ran back downstairs to the library, then back out into the small hallway, past the guest bedroom and into the kitchen, back out into the living room, and then—totally out of breath—into the dining room. *All empty*. He looked outside the window. *Maybe there was someone outside*. But how could it be? It sounded so close! As if it were *following* him around! And suddenly, ... *it stopped*.

Outside, the wind seemed to have lost its senses. Like a spoiled brat who wanted to get his way, it wailed; it moaned; it sang in key and out of key and then groaned miserably. It rushed frantically here and there like a madman and gathered up everything it could—dead leaves, strewn papers, dust, grains of sand, pieces of straw or dried grass and all kinds of discards and other

things that no one had much use for. Tossing them together in one heap, it hurled them all angrily at the glass house and at the city, as if in an indictment against them. Then, mustering up all its strength, it blew harder still, and beat against the glass house ferociously.

The wind then ran down the little hill, clear out of breath, until it finally managed to gather its wits about itself somewhere in the city below. That made way for the clouds, which cried huge drops of rain. The lightning and thunder too protested more than their share—until they all went to get a refill. Then there was an unearthly hush, and everything went dead quiet. Everything stood as if frozen in time—silent, transfixed, as if in awe. Everything except for the ticking of time itself.

Mr. Stoneheart's gaze was fixed outside, but it was set in a frozen stare. He didn't seem to be looking at anything. He felt tired. His heart seemed to be pounding out countless echoes of the knocking. Perspiration beaded on his forehead and chased each other down to his chin in a panicky stream. It was cold sweat. He didn't like it. He was used to being in control, but suddenly, now he wasn't. He felt cold. Not surprising considering the time of the year, early November. But surprising considering he was in a centrally heated house.

He tip-toed upstairs to get a jacket, all the while listening for any signs of the knocking to resume. He felt scared. He didn't understand what was going on. His rational mind was at a loss to explain the course of events. For some reason, something told him he needed to get dressed. He didn't know why, but the compulsion was strong. It must have been *some* compulsion that made him do that; that was unusual, since he hardly ever went anywhere on Sunday unless he went out of town. But today, it

seemed that some unseen force was shaping his destiny, and so he obeyed. On his way down ...

There it is again, Mr. Stoneheart! Can you hear it? Run, run!

He ran downstairs, almost falling down the steps, and headed straight towards the front door. He was going to go out! For some reason, he hadn't seemed to have heard it when he had stepped outside earlier. And besides, he was all of a sudden feeling rather claustrophobic in his glass house.

He reached the front door and ran out. All over again: one, two, three, four Mr. Stonehearts; five, six, seven. The only difference was that this time he would leave the others behind.

If only the guard had been there. But maybe it was just as well that he wasn't, since Mr. Stoneheart would have looked foolish and crazy, and indeed he wondered if he was. The guard had certainly looked at him strangely enough when he had run downstairs earlier that morning.

The garden was strewn with dead leaves that had been blown off the trees by the raging wind. There were broken branches. The creepers that had been climbing up the side walls had been thrown down as well, to complete the picture. He went over to his rose bushes. He loved the roses and usually had a lot of them, but now most of them had broken off in the storm, and so had some of the branches. What was left were mainly the thorns. Despite this, the branches and buds that remained seemed happy. Maybe they realized that the storms they faced only made them stronger and their flowers brighter.

He walked around, trying to catch his breath and recall what was happening. He didn't understand it at all. His heart was racing; his gaze would not focus; his mind was dazed; his thoughts were in free fall. He looked beyond the gate down below. There was a

thick fog coming in from the east. Coupled with the smoke and pollution from the city below, it would make for a formidable smog. He looked towards the west and it looked as though the wind and the clouds had returned, armed to the teeth with a lot more ammunition this time. It was coming in for another blow, probably a longer one, and the flashes of lightning announced just that.

He looked at his watch. His hand was shaking uncontrollably. In fact, his whole body was. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. No, he wasn't going back inside the house. *No. Not after all that.* He would, instead, go down into the town, and find somewhere he could sit and think things out clearly. True, he normally avoided going there any more than he had to, but he had no choice. The guard wasn't back yet, and there was no telling how much longer he might be away.

Mr. Stoneheart closed the gate behind himself, and began walking downhill. This was unusual in itself, because Alexander Stoneheart always drove out of his crystal palace. That way he could pass the 'unpleasantness' that he encountered along the way to work rather quickly. But today he didn't do so—perhaps by compulsion, or perhaps since the keys were in the house, and he preferred to stay out. He didn't go in for an umbrella either, since that thought didn't occur to him, and since even if it would have, he would have probably declined to return to the house for it.

At the bottom of the hill, he turned around to look up momentarily from where he had come. Lightning flashed over the glass house, exposing all that was inside to anyone that might have been looking.

He took the curve that led towards town. The traffic was intense; people were trying to get back

from wherever they had gone. The smog had come over the city like a thick blanket that seemed to choke out everything else. From above, the clouds pressed on it hard and squeezed it almost down to the ground. Higher still, the sun struggled to pierce through, but it seemed there was too much in between. The few pedestrians looked as if they were trying to put some extra spring into their walk that could carry them a little faster. The shops had few customers. The owners wore a bored expression that seemed to have solidified on their faces and they appeared to have been sitting there forever.

Alexander walked till he came to the old folks' home. He slowed his pace. Today he wasn't in a hurry and he didn't have the gas pedal to step on, and for some strange reason, he didn't think of wishing he had it, either. He looked across the street. There was an old man trying to cross over and get inside before the downpour, but he seemed to be having difficulty. The traffic was too heavy and too fast for him. Besides, he had a stick that he leaned hard on. His back was bowed and his walk was labored, each step requiring a noticeable effort on his part. Each time he took a step forward, he then stepped back, obviously thinking he wouldn't be fast enough to make it to the other side. Quite a few of the drivers in their vehicles probably saw his plight, but as was the general practice, they did nothing about it.

Mr. Stoneheart looked at the old man. Suddenly a thought pushed him across the road: *Everyone gets old. I am getting old.... What if...?* His steps across the road became more resolute. As he reached the other side, he grabbed the old man's hand firmly and, slowing down the traffic with a wave of his hand, helped him cross over to the other side.

The old man looked deep into his eyes with a misty look, his mouth curled up into a wrinkled old smile and he squeezed his hand till the knuckles of his own hand went white from the effort. He mumbled in a wheezy voice something that sounded like "Thank you, son." He coughed a couple of times, and then slowly made his way into the old folks' home with a labored shuffle. Alexander Stoneheart stood there watching, his eyes following the old man, and his mind still dazed and trying to catch up with what he had just done. His heart was aglow with a peace and joy that he hadn't experienced in a long time. No, not since his distant childhood.

He continued walking further into town, albeit now with a hitherto unknown spring in his walk and his shoulders straight. He was on the main avenue that was lined with shops all along on its left side when he felt the first few drops. It looked like the clouds had finally won the battle over the smog and dispersed it with a light drizzle which slowly increased in momentum and got heavier. The rain was cold.

Mr. Stoneheart looked around and he saw people running for shelter. He saw a young boy running into a building. He saw folks huddled together by the bus stop. They were not waiting for a bus. They needed shelter. He saw a young mother clutch her baby to her breast, and, holding her little daughter by the hand, run under an awning. They looked poor. He looked at the direction from which they were coming, and he saw an old, faded and dirty blanket spread out on the sidewalk with a few old belongings that resembled clothes but looked more like rags.

He moved towards them for a closer look. He looked at their clothes. The mother wore old clothes that looked like castoffs. The little baby was covered

with an old sheet that seemed to have seen better times under a more affluent owner, and underneath that was perhaps the mere semblance of some sort of dress. The little girl also wore what might have been a lovely dress once upon a time, but now it was dirty and ragged and she appeared to have long outgrown it. But she wore the most beautiful smile he had ever seen and she now turned and flashed it at him, which suddenly made him feel so poor.

Her mother, upon seeing the exchange, suddenly pulled her towards herself, afraid. Mr. Stoneheart smiled at her benignly. He had never seen these people up close before. He had never stopped to look at them before. These were the people that "took up space." But actually, they had no place to go. They were rejects—an embarrassment to the society in Shamelin. They exposed its hypocrisy and selfishness by their mere existence. They were a testimony against it, showing that it had failed, and miserably at that; therefore it tried to pretend that they did not exist. It tried to pass them by. It neglected them. It oppressed them. It stole from them by denying their rights.

The rain slowed down, as though the clouds were trying to get their breath back. The wind whistled down the street and raced ahead of the traffic, daring it to try and catch up. The mother hugged her baby tighter, and along with her daughter, began moving away. As the little girl looked back at Mr. Stoneheart one last time, out of a sudden impulse, he reached into his pocket and rushing forward, pressed a few notes of currency into her hand. The mother turned to look at him, with a similar misty-eyed look like the old man had given him—a similar grateful smile, a soft word of thanks.

The mother and her little ones walked away, leaving Mr. Stoneheart with a resurgence of the

same feeling that he had felt after he had helped the old man. *This practice is addictive*, he thought. *How come I have never done this before?*

He walked away from there. As he walked, he saw a strange phenomenon about half a kilometer further ahead. It was in the big field that ran parallel to the road. There were clouds all around and it was a gloomy day, but there was a small spot in the big field where there was sunshine coming down. The stream of sunlight covered an area that had the radius of barely a few feet, and it looked like a giant spotlight had been turned on in the heavens and a drama was about to unfold. He stood there for a minute, fascinated, then started walking resolutely in that direction. He needed to get in that light. He had never realized how dark the city was, but now he could see the stark contrast.

He had barely gone about hundred and fifty meters or so when the rain came back with a vengeance this time, as if determined to cleanse the city of its filth and wash away all the hated things within: the vice, avarice*, selfishness, callousness, envy, and hard-heartedness.

The rain fell down hard, in large drops. Somehow the clouds never seemed to run out of rain. People everywhere ran for cover. Mr. Stoneheart ran too. He quickly ducked into the passageway of a building. There were a few other people standing there before he got there, and they all turned to look at him as he joined them. There was a young man among them who looked at him longer than everyone. Mr. Stoneheart managed an embarrassed smile. The young man was dressed simply, but neatly. He must have been about twenty-three. He had searching brown eyes that seemed to hold gentleness and softness within. The young man said "I have something

for you," and reached into the leather bag that was slung over his shoulder.

It was a piece of paper. Mr. Stoneheart looked at him once more. The young man smiled at him, then rushed out from the building to the next, and the next, as he made his way on through the rain. Mr. Stoneheart watched him disappear in the distance as he turned a bend.

Mr. Stoneheart looked down at the paper. It had something printed on it. He looked closer. It talked about love. *Love?* It was a gospel tract. Suddenly, like a flash of lightning, some words jumped out of the page at him. It was a quote from the Bible:

"I stand at the door (of your heart) and knock; if any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him."

The knocking! He had forgotten all about it; he'd been so busy with his new-found joys. But here it was! *The knocking!* This was it! This was the answer! No wonder it had seemed so close! But why had he been so afraid? Because he didn't know what it was; he feared the unknown. He feared what he had no control over. And, perhaps, he had also been afraid to face the facts. Now he knew that though he thought it a fearful thing at first, it was in fact a friendly knock from One who wanted to fill his dull and sterile life with happiness and joy; yet before he could partake of this rebirth, he had to be awakened to the reality that there was something more to life than his possessions and wealth—something beyond the walls of his glass house, in fact beyond the boundaries of his physical senses. All of a sudden, he felt so relieved, like a burden had lifted off him. And yet he was restless.

He turned to look once more at the sunlit spot on the other side of the road. He felt that he was meant to be part of the drama and only one thought

occupied his mind. *I need to get in that light! I need to get in the sunshine!*

He started running as fast as he could. He ran through the rain, through the puddles that had formed on the sidewalk, through the street. He was dripping wet, his clothes clinging to his skin. He ran past the shop where he had bought the pair of shoes he was running with. Past the showroom where he had bought his car. Past the coffee shop. Past the group of young folks who were chatting in the coffee shop discussing trivial topics. Past scores of eyes that saw him and myriads that didn't. Past the eyes of people who knew him and the eyes of people who didn't. Past more of those poor homeless people, through their living room, thrusting the last bit of money he had left in his pocket into the hand of a little street urchin who smiled at him gratefully as he sped past.

Past the flower shop where long ago he used to buy flowers for Emily. Past the bookshop where he hadn't been since he didn't remember when. Past the big supermarket where Gottim did the shopping for the glass house. Past all the fancy stores where they sold you all those things you didn't really need, and where the poorer people could only afford to stand outside and watch. Dodging feet, faces, things, poles, pillars, more people, and then dodging all of them again.

Past the first crossing and to the second where he needed to cross to get to the field. Over the curb. Past the traffic policeman who whistled at him to slow down. Past the cars that barely managed to stop in time as he ran across their path. Past the bus whose brakes protested loud enough to nearly turn him deaf. Over the fenders of the last row of cars which waited at the traffic light. On to the sidewalk at the other side and across it to the fence

around the field that formed its boundary, and over it in one leap. People stared, but he couldn't care less. Through the slushy puddles that splattered mud all over his shoes and trousers. Through the wet grass that did more of the same. Falling, tripping, slipping, scraping, bruising. Running desperately.

Finally, he was in the light, and the spotlight was on him. He sank to his knees in the mud, his face turned upward, as if drinking in the sunshine. The dust floated effortlessly within the rays of light and shimmered like little diamonds. He had come into the light from the darkness. He was soaking wet, but he didn't care. Tears streamed down his face and they merged with the raindrops that patted his face gently on their way down. His hair shed the wetness from heaven, and something seemed to melt within his breast and soften his soul. Now his heart was open and the light streamed in, illuminating every fiber of his being, within and without.

And then, faces flashed before his eyes: his grandfather, his father, Emily. The people he knew from work. The people he didn't know. The people he had never met. And finally, an endless sea—a mass of faceless people from Shamelin City—victims trapped within their surroundings, like they were waiting for the Pied Piper to take them away to his mountain. There were the people in the old folks' home who had relatives who had forgotten them, the boys in the orphanage on the other side of town, the patients in the hospitals that were so overcrowded, the people who lived on the street and had nowhere else to go.

He had been so wrong, about so many things. But he knew things would be different from then on: *he* would be different from then on. The city would be different. *He* would help make it so. Others

would help, too. The people would change. Life would change. He would go to Emily and ask her forgiveness, and he believed she would come back to him. There would be happiness in men's hearts and laughter upon their faces. Everyone would have a place to live. Everyone would have someone who cared about them. The burdens, though perhaps they would not be completely eradicated, would be lighter, for there would be more shoulders to bear the load. There would be hope; a reason for living. The darkness would be driven out. There would be *light*.

Yes, things would be different. And from that day on, they were. Because he was in the sunshine. And ... the sunshine was now in him.



GLOSSARY

abash: to make ashamed or uneasy
afore: Scottish for "before"
alacrity: cheerful willingness; eagerness; speed or quickness
aquiline: of, relating to, or having the characteristics of an eagle, usually denoting a curved nose, hooked like an eagle's beak
assent: to agree
avarice: immoderate desire for wealth; greed
bairns: children
bandelier: belt of bullets
benign: of a kind and gentle disposition; showing gentleness and mildness
bhurg: a town or borough in Scotland
blackguard: a thoroughly unprincipled person
blithe: lighthearted; jolly
bracken: fern
braes: hillside or slope
braw: nice, good
browst: ale
byre: barn
caird: a tinker, or wandering mender of metal household utensils
callant: a lad, youth, stripling
calumny: the utterance of maliciously false statements; slander
capricious: subject to whim; impulsive and unpredictable
cataran: raider
chicanery: deception by trickery
clachan: village
clan: a group of families like a tribe, with a common ancestor
clandestinely: secretly
claymore: double-edged sword
cleric: a member of the clergy people ordained for religious service
connive: to scheme; plot
constitutional: a walk taken regularly for one's health
coy: affectedly and usually flirtatiously shy or modest
despot: a person who wields power oppressively; a tyrant
dinna: don't
dirk: dagger about 12" long
dram: small glass of whisky
emancipate: to free from bondage, oppression, or restraint; liberate
fleyed: frightened

gangrel: a vagabond, a drifter
gillies: persons who work on the land as servants, usually from the same clan, but of a lower class, from an old Scottish Gaelic word for "boy"
glen: secluded valley
groudie: type of white cottage cheese
harried: to disturb, attack, or harass
heather: low-growing shrub with evergreen leaves and pinkish-purple flowers
hillock: a small hill
hussy: a vulgar, immoral woman
hutment: an encampment of huts
ignominy: great personal dishonor or humiliation
impetuous: characterized by sudden and forceful energy or emotion; impulsive and passionate
indict: to accuse of wrongdoing
jerkin: jacket
ken: know
kirk: church
lad: boy or young man
lassie or lass: young girl
lea: a meadow
liturgy: ritual
loch: lake
ma: my
magnanimous: noble in mind and heart; generous in forgiving
mean: low in value or amount; paltry
miscreant: an evildoer; a villain
narcissism: excessive love or admiration of oneself; conceit
no: Scottish for "not"
och!: Scottish for "oh!"
paradox: a seemingly contradictory statement that may nonetheless be true
peat: partially decayed vegetable matter, found in damp regions, used in place of coal
pensive: deeply, often wistfully or dreamily thoughtful
plaid: distinctly patterned shawl
presage: a feeling or an intuition of what is going to occur; a presentiment
prime: prepare for firing
privations: the lack of basic comforts or necessities

proletariat: the working class
quach: a two-handed drinking cup
randy: ill-mannered
redding up: tidying up or clearing an area
requite: to return, or make repayment for
scone: flat round cake or biscuit
self-recrimination: to blame one's self
sept: a division of a clan
shieling: shepherd's hut
silvan: wooded, marked with trees or forest
skellum: rogues, scoundrels
skirling: wailing
sporr: a leather or fur pouch worn at the front of the kilt in traditional Highland dress
tartan: colored cloth in patterns
the night: Scottish for "tonight"
tress: A long lock or ringlet of hair
trews: trousers
wanton: immoral; indecent
wee: small, little
xanadu: a beautiful place