

Standing there in the drafty air of the old barn which was to be his schoolroom, with the faint but lingering smells of dung, of limewash and straw, John was struck by the unfamiliarity of this new life he was about to enter. He was amazed too by those he had discovered therein, the ill-favoured servant woman and the two small peasant children. He could hardly forget the woman's appearance, for in truth her face was a shock to look upon, a scarlet-coloured, pitted crust of skin which spread from her eye to the jawbone on one side, with one eye which rolled of its own accord, unfocused. The children were clearly at ease with her, however, for the three leaned together, their heads almost touching over the bible. When he first spoke, they started with looks of shock and surprise as though he were some kind of spectre.

'I'm glad that you're so taken with reading, if I'm to be your schoolmaster,' he said, hoping for some kind of verbal response.

The little boy leapt up from the bench and scuttled away behind the high schoolmaster's desk which stood at the end of the room. The girl rose too, spying over to where the boy had fled but returning her wide-eyed stare to John. Her face was pale and thin, her faded garments of hoddens grey hanging loosely upon a skinny body.

'Good day, sir, good day to you, sir,' stuttered the woman, bobbing several awkward curtsies. 'We was just –, leastways the children was reading the bible, 'I ain't–.'

'So, I can see. And I believe that we've met before,' he said, hoping to calm the anxiety that his arrival had caused.

'Yes sir,' said the woman, pulling her cap down on her head and raising one hand to half cover her livid mark. 'And Emma and me is eternally grateful to you for saving us from the mob, thanking you, sir. Only Em ain't here any more,' she continued, her disfigured face flushing a deeper red. 'She went back to London. She didn't care for – erm– It's only me now.'

'I was pleased to be able to assist you,' said John, struck with curiosity about how a servant from England could have found herself first in Edinburgh and now in this place.

'May I ask how you come to be here? Do you live in the village?'

'Yes, sir, I works for Mistress Paterson,' she said in an accent strange to his ear and which flowed from her in a nervous stream of chatter. 'Master Paterson is in town, but the Missus, I mean Mistress Paterson lives here on account of her health. I been cleaning here,

getting the place ready, for the Reverend wanted it done, getting the place ready for the master, for you, for when you...'

'You have done well,' he said looking round, wondering about the nature of this Mistress Paterson's interest in the school.

The large room, high ceilinged with sound wooden rafters had walls newly whitewashed, a clean beaten mud floor and a wide fireplace at one end. A shelf in the corner held a tight row of bibles and prayer books. The furniture consisted of two rows formed of benches with long wooden planks to serve as desks for the children, as well as the master's tall one, from the side of which the small face of the hiding boy could just be seen protruding.

'I was told that it was no more than a shed fit for cows,' said John with genuine appreciation, trying not to look at the child for fear he should retreat again. 'But you've transformed it into a real schoolhouse it seems.'

The woman said nothing but stared at him again. He wondered whether she found his manner forbidding, though he had not intended to alarm her or the children.

'And are you to be two of my pupils?' he said looking at the girl who stepped forward and with a curtsy spoke up, 'Yes sir, I'm Mary Jamieson and I want to learn to read.'

'That's very good, Mary,' he said, admiring her earnest expression, 'but what about your brother? I think my sudden arrival may have frightened him.'

'Oh no sir, he's aye one for running awa', said the girl. 'Here, Willie, come here and see the Maister.'

But the child's face disappeared again behind the desk and John watched as the woman crept quietly towards it, bent down and whispered. 'Come out, me dearie.' Then she reached out her hand and John saw the boy's small one take it and allow himself to be pulled into view. Mary took his other hand the two led him to where John was standing by the bench.

'Sir, this is Willie but he cannae talk. He understands right well though.'

'Good day to you, Willie,' said John, meeting the child's pale blue eyes which stared at him without a blink.

'He wouldna be able to say the words of the holy book, but my mother...'

'Yes, Mary?' said John, hoping to coax more from her.

'My mother wants him to come to the school.'

'But of course he should.'

At those words, the small boy grabbed the bible from the bench and bolted off out of the schoolhouse as if pursued by a pack of hunting dogs.

‘Willie, come you back here!’ squealed Mary making to go after him, but turning back. ‘Sir, I’ll bring it back, I promise. Dinnae beat him, please.’

‘Don’t fret, Mary,’ John said, finding the theft more amusing than criminal and concerned to see the child’s fear of punishment. ‘Let’s simply say that your brother has already started his studies. Where do you live? I’ll call on your mother and father and tell them about the school.’

Mary pointed to the north and told him where their cottage lay. Then without another word, her face broke into a smile and she dashed out of the door after her brother.

‘I wonder if all my pupils will be so keen to take up their books,’ he said turning to the woman with a smile. ‘Forgive me, I do not know your name.’

‘I’m Susan, sir,’ said the servant woman with another curtsy.

‘And my name is John Wyllie,’ he said. ‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance again, under happier circumstances, I think, than the last.’

‘Yes, sir,’ she said, ‘thanking you sir.’

This time John was glad to see that her face puckered into something like a smile, but her hand worked nervously at the edge of her apron, rumpling and smoothing the cloth with her fingers.

‘Pardon me, sir. Would you like to see your chamber, sir?’ she said.

She showed him to a small room which adjoined the schoolroom, monkish in its plainness but clean, scoured no doubt by this worthy woman. There was a narrow bed against the wall, a rough cloth rug, a wooden chair and a table with a basin and jug. A tiny window gave the only light. He placed his bag in the room and enquired after the Reverend Wallace. The woman pointed the way from the doorway of the schoolhouse and he took his leave of her, thinking that though her face was marked, it did not signify that her soul was more tainted than one of more favourable appearance. And whatever the state of her soul, he pondered, it was purer without a doubt than his own.

A short while later, he knocked on the door of the manse, a substantial, two-storey house with a stone tiled roof. John was surprised when the Reverend Wallace himself, white-haired and frail, his back humped with age, opened the door to him.

‘Master Wyllie, is it? I am fair delighted to see you. Come away in,’ he smiled. ‘You’ll forgive me, for I’ve no one with me today. The wee lassie, my maid-of-all-work is not well, poor wee soul, so I sent her to bed. But not to worry. Come in with you now.’

He ushered John into the hallway and fumbled to close the latch. ‘And you’ve come to us early, eager to start your duties, no doubt. We did not expect you for another week.’

‘Aye, I am pleased to be here at your service,’ John replied with a sincerity which was not feigned.

The old man shuffled ahead of John along a narrow passage and showed him into the parlour. It was dark and plainly furnished, with two ageing, red plush-covered chairs on either side of the fire which burned vigorously, lending a warm glow to the room.

‘Will you have a wee dram, just to keep out the cold?’ enquired the Reverend Wallace with a twinkling eye. ‘I hear you’re a considerable scholar.’

John refused his offer of a drink, asking instead for water while denying the description of his academic prowess.

‘Here, take a seat by the fire,’ said the Reverend Wallace, sinking down into one of the chairs with a sigh. ‘Well, Master Wyllie, I hope you’ll not weary out here in the country, away from the city and the university, with your intellectual debates and all that kind of thing.’

John remembered with momentary pain the consequences of his last ‘debate’ in Cleriheugh’s tavern. ‘No, this chance has fallen well for me. I welcome it, sir,’ he said.

‘You’ll find no scholars I fear amongst these wee peasants,’ continued the old minister, smiling.

‘But I have met two already,’ replied John, ‘and they seemed well disposed towards scholarship.’

‘Aye, aye, the two wee Jamiesons, remarkable bairns in their way,’ he said, nodding as if at a private recollection. ‘This school has been long anticipated by the Kirk, and the people of the parish. It’s been my greatest wish to see a place for the bairns to learn. And thank the Lord, I’ll see my wishes come to fruition before I die, thanks to you.’

‘I’ll do everything in my power not to disappoint you,’ said John.

‘Good, good. You’ll be under my charge, you understand, as you’re not a minister of the Kirk. I’ll not interfere with your work with your pupils, unless it’s necessary. You’re young to be a schoolmaster and these simple cottars are not accustomed to the notion of learning, you know. You may find them in need of much guidance.’

‘I’m happy and grateful to accept your advice, for I know I’m ignorant of how best to instruct and guide young minds.’

The Reverend Wallace chuckled, downed his draught and pulled himself to his feet to help himself to another, emptying the last drop from the decanter with a quivering hand.

‘Aye, you’ve to stand no nonsense, you understand, and no indiscipline. You’d be advised to fell the biggest one of the class in front of the others, to show them the stamp of your authority.’

John nodded, uncertain about whether he had detected irony in the old minister’s tone.

‘We’ve some gentry around here too. Did you see the castle? That’s the seat of Sir James Foulis, he that’s known as Lord Reidford, the great lawyer. If you’re fortunate, you may receive an invitation to the great house, as they sometimes extend their bounty to us humble folk,’ he laughed.

‘I met a woman servant at the schoolhouse. Who is her mistress?’ John asked.

‘Ah that poor creature is Mistress Paterson’s woman. Mistress Paterson’s a bountiful lady indeed, though she’s an Englishwoman, the wife of the famous Master William Paterson, not long come from London,’ continued the Reverend Wallace, his tongue loosened by the liquor. ‘He’s involved in this venture, you know, the Company of Scotland. Quite an enterprising man, so they say. And his lady, it seems, has come to the country on account of her health. She’d no liking for the Edinburgh air. ‘Twas Master and Mistress Paterson who made a generous donation to the school too, aye, very generous. And by the way, I was to tell you that we’re to be invited to dine with Mistress Paterson, as soon as you are settled in. I confess I’m curious to hear something of her husband’s grand schemes.’

‘I’m most grateful for this generosity and your kind welcome, Reverend Wallace,’ said John, feeling already at ease in the company of this benevolent old stranger whose body bore witness to the decay of age, though his mind had the vigour of youth.

This introduction to his new life, more warm and open than John could have hoped for, did something to distract his mind. But in the evening, alone in his small room, he could do nothing to stem the flow of his miserable thoughts of Thomas Aikenhead who he knew, had mounted the scaffold that day. John’s empty stomach, for he had hardly eaten all day, ached like the gnawing of the guilt which he knew would never leave him. Nor would the painful longing, the hope he once foolishly harboured of loving Isobel. John fell to his knees by his bed and prayed for the salvation of the souls of Thomas and of Isobel. Though he knew he could make no bargain with God, he offered himself, his life, as a penance, if only He would hear.

## Chapter 11

February 1697

Susan still couldn't truly believe it, this life she now led, so far from London, its soot and smoke, its noise and its bustle of folk. She dwelt in this country place, in a village of stone houses, cottars' shacks and barns with open land and woods all around, with a bitter cold wind from the east most days, doing toil enough for six servants not one. Yet she had never before known such happiness, even during those precious times with her little Alfred. She saw her lovely schoolmaster, John Wyllie, most days and he spoke to her kindly and it thrilled her. It set her heart racing to see his face, so perfect, so comely though often sad, and to hear his voice. And then there were the children, her two little darlings, Mary and Willie Jamieson.

Perhaps there was a kind God after all who had sent his angel, John Wyllie, to be near her, on account of her being such a wicked sinner, for not believing in the Almighty and his only begotten son Jesus Christ. She paused in her sweeping of the ash from the grate in her mistress's house, sat back upon her heels and pondered happily for a moment on this possibility. Perhaps she should pray to God after all, to thank him for all his precious gifts to her. But what if he was tricking her again, waiting till she felt herself blessed before he snatched it all away from her, cruel and wicked? Oh God, dear Almighty One, forgive me such evil thoughts, but you did it before, she whispered, bowing her head where she sat, seeing the cloud of ash drift down from her shovel.

She shook her head and smiled at her foolishness, sweeping vigorously with her brush at the fallen ash. Let God himself come with his great sword in his chariot and strike her dead today, she wouldn't care. She'd tasted such bliss as few could hope for on this earth. Best of all was conjuring it into her mind again and again, like tasting one drop of honey, then another more sweet and delicious each time. No one could take away these memories, whatever else should befall her.

Only two weeks ago it was, when the children had surprised her at her work. Old Reverend Wallace and her mistress had set her on to clean the big stone storehouse and make it fit to be a school. A pretty mucky job it was too. The last creatures in the place were cows and, by the looks of things, spiders and rats. She was brushing the worst of the loose mortar, dust and cobwebs from the ceiling and walls in the small back room which was to be the

schoolmaster's chamber, when she heard a noise, like the creak of the outside door opening and then whispering voices.

Her first thought was intruders or thieves bent on mischief so she wielded her besom like a cudgel, ready for defence or attack. But then, stepping into the doorway of the chamber, she'd seen them, standing in the middle of the schoolroom floor, two little urchins with woollen shawls tied around their bodies, their legs skinny like sticks. The girl might have been around eleven or twelve years of age and the boy some years younger, though it was hard to tell, he being such a shrimp of a thing. They stared back at her, their eyes like saucers.

Susan yanked her cap down to cover her face, though she knew it was too late. They'd seen her mark and would most probably shriek and scarper off, like most other children. But the girl only made a start, then stood her ground, her peaky face all serious and solemn. Her little brother, for such Susan thought him to be, bold as brass, pointed his bony little finger at her, gazing with his blue eyes unblinking. Susan watched as he stepped slowly towards her. He wore a woollen bonnet on a head of fair curls. Susan's heart pounded for she longed to reach to him, scoop him into her arms and hold him as she had once held her own child. She relaxed her grip on the besom.

'Ello me dearie,' she said, 'I know I've a mug on me what would turn the milk sour. What's your name, me little love?'

The little lad said nothing, a strange whining noise coming out of him, and he pointed again at her face. Probably doesn't understand me, little lamb, Susan thought. Wouldn't be the first time. She stooped down towards him and still he whined, like a little whelp. Blow me down, he wants to see my mark she thought and she leaned closer. Next, his small hand was on her cheek, stroking the red ridges of it gently up and down. Susan felt the skin tingle at his touch and saw him smiling as his fingers dabbled over the crust of her face. Behind him stood his sister, who had crept nearer too.

'I'm Mary Jamieson and this here's my wee brother Willie,' she said.

Bemused and delighted, Susan straightened up, seeing that the boy's eyes were still upon her. 'Well, I'm Susan and I works for the lady what lives in the house down by the mill. I'm mighty pleased to meet you both.'

The next day Susan longed to go back to the schoolhouse again and was overjoyed to receive the Missus's command as she sat at breakfast in the parlour. She had not told the Missus about the children, for her mind could not wholly believe it. What if the little creatures she'd met were mischievous fairies or phantoms and not children at all? But what a

numbskull notion, she thought a moment later, they were flesh and blood, living and breathing. She was no madwoman, for all that was ugly and wrong about her; truly that child had touched her face.

‘The Reverend Wallace has asked if you can finish today in the schoolhouse, Susan. The new schoolmaster is to arrive this week, so everything must be in place,’ said the Missus.

‘Yes, Missus,’ said Susan, ‘I’ll get it all done and dusted today, no trouble.’

‘Very good, Susan,’ said the Missus, staring out of the window, all wistful. Perhaps she was ailing again. She always said she was of a delicate constitution, though in her figure she looked stout and hearty enough. But her face was flushed and she gasped and struggled for breath, sometimes coming over all faint and needing her smelling salts to revive her. The pity of it was that moving out of the city had not brought her much ease. She was forever complaining of this malady or that and had Susan running all over for stuff to make infusions, vapours and lozenges.

‘Is you quite well, Missus?’ asked Susan.

‘Yes, Susan. I’m quite as well as can be expected. To be truthful, I’m anxious about the plans my husband is making and all his talk of going overseas.’

Susan had overheard and only half understood such talk in their house in London. Some of the servants had spoken about Master Paterson’s plans to make a fortune trading with foreign places like China and India across the oceans. Susan had no idea what an ocean would be like, nor indeed what the notion of overseas meant at all, though she had seen many a ship on the River Thames.

‘I can only hope,’ said Mistress Paterson quietly, ‘that nothing will come of it. You can go now, Susan.’

It was so icy cold in the schoolroom, that it made Susan’s teeth chatter. For a moment, in this silent place, she wished Em were with her. She was a good worker Em, in spite of her moaning and complaining, and the nearest Susan had to a friend. Susan hoped that she’d made it back safe and sound to London. Em had fixed up to meet a man one evening who’d promised her a ride on his cart out of the city to the border land. She said she’d die rather than go to the country with the Missus and she’d made Susan swear not to say a word till the next day, when she’d be well on her way back to England. True, Susan found it hard work on her own, but in a secret way she was glad not to have to share this with Em, to have her eyes ogling John Wyllie too. This was all hers, so she set about brushing the dirt from the fireplace and was soon warmed by her exertions.

About an hour later, Susan paused in her toil and surveyed the schoolhouse, pleased with her efforts when she considered its filthy state at the start. Some cobwebs still hung on the rafters and the small window in the master's chamber was caked with dirt, but now it mostly looked respectable and neat, a goodly place for little children to learn their letters.

Then she heard the outside door creak open and knew that they were here.

'Good mornin' to you, children,' she said. Mary smiled at her shyly as they entered, though Willie came running straight to her, looking ready to jump into her arms. He grunted and smiled and Susan's heart leapt with pity, for the child had no power of speech. She bent down to him again and he gently stroked her mark.

'Susan,' said Mary, her face all excited. 'Do ye ken when the master's coming?'

Susan doubted that the poor little mites would be allowed into the place at all. In London it was only the rich that went to school. There was precious little in the way of riches in Colinton. Most of the folks she'd seen looked as thin and worn out as their clothes and the children not much better than beggars.

'And what will you give me if I tells you?' teased Susan. Mary's face fell.

'I hav'nae got anything tae give.'

'Don't worry none, me darlin', said Susan sorry for her jesting. 'I got something for you.'

She went to her bundle in the corner and took up a cloth-wrapped piece of cake that she had been given by the cook. 'Look 'ere,' she said, 'It's a nice bit of seed cake what was left over.' Susan broke it in two and handed half each to the children.

'Cake?' said Mary with a puzzled frown, 'for us?'

'Well who do you think it's for, the Man in the Moon?' said Susan.

Starving dogs couldn't have eaten it quicker. Willie stuffed the last bit in his mouth and grinned at Susan, pointing again at her mark, so she waved him to come to her for another touch. Her insides fluttered at the delicate whisk of the child's hand.

'God bless you and thank you, Susan,' said Mary serious, like she was saying a prayer.

'And God bless you too,' said Susan, feeling a flush rise to her face, 'but look 'ere, I've work to be done, so you best be off,' though in her heart she longed for them to stay.

'Can we no stay and help you?' said Mary. 'Willie can sit here and watch. I can wipe the bench seats. I can sweep out the fireplace. I can stack up the wood.'

Susan looked doubtfully at her, wondering what the Reverend Wallace would say if he knew the children were here at all. ‘Well, I suppose,’ she murmured, ‘but you’ve not got to get into no mischief, do you ’ear?’

‘We willnae,’ said Mary, though as soon as she’d uttered the words, Willie ran straight to the shelf full of bibles and took one in his hands.

‘Willie,’ shrieked Susan at him, ‘Don’t touch nothing, you mischievous monkey!’

Then the bold little lad only took off like a rabbit out of the door before either Mary or Susan could lay a hand on him.

‘Oh Gawd,’ said Susan, ‘Mary, go after him. Gawd knows what they’ll do to me if something goes missing or gets broke.’ Mary, eyes full of alarm, bolted out after her brother.

Susan hurried to the door and looked out, hearing Mary calling Willie’s name. The little scamp was half way down the lane, still holding the book, but Mary was gaining on him and soon caught hold of his arm. That’s it, give him a smack, but not too hard, thought Susan watching, but instead Mary squatted down beside him, speaking something into his ear. Then a moment later they were heading back towards the schoolhouse holding hands, with Willie still clutching the book to his chest for dear life.

‘Well, I never,’ said Susan, mighty relieved to have them back inside. ‘Sit down there, Willie and don’t move or I’ll tan your hide.’

‘Dinnae worry, Susan,’ said Mary with that serious look in her eye again. ‘We’re going to read the book.’

Susan put her hands on her hips in amazement. ‘You’re not tellin’ me you two young ’uns can read?’

Mary said nothing but sat Willie down on the bench, taking the book on to her lap and squeezing close beside him. He might be a queer little soul, thought Susan but he was sharp and quick in his understanding. They were surely never going to read, Susan thought, bending over them as Mary opened the bible.

That day Susan thought she might die with the surprise and delight of what happened next. It thrilled her even now when she recalled him appearing just like that, without her seeing, like magic, like the Angel Gabriel himself.

As she stood there in her mistress’s parlour, the ash drifting gently from the pan, she saw him again in her mind’s eye and she prayed. Yes, she’d pray to God now. Thank you God, Almighty God in Heaven for bringing John Wyllie here. No man before had ever looked at her and spoken to her as a human creature and not as a dog or a mad lunatic from Bedlam or a freak in a circus. Thank you God, she prayed again, for sending him here to

look upon her with kindness, an ugly, deformed scullion, lower than the lowest person in the world.

‘Susan, Susan,’ came her mistress’s voice. It burst through her daydream. Susan sighed and put down the brush and pan and hurried to the kitchen.

The Missus was standing by the table with the cook, a widow woman from the village. The woman’s arms were folded and she wore the frowning look of someone who’s just been put upon.

‘I have two guests for supper tonight, Susan,’ said Mistress Paterson. ‘I need you to serve at table, as Eliza is sick and I’ve sent her home.’

‘Me, Missus?’ said Susan alarmed.

‘Yes, of course, Susan. I have nobody else, now Emma has gone,’ said her Mistress, dabbing her cheeks with her handkerchief.

‘But, Missus, I ain’t, I mean, I don’t like strangers to see –,’ said Susan, filled with terror. She wasn’t fit to be seen at table. She looked at the cook, hoping that she’d come up with a better suggestion. But the woman only shrugged her shoulders.

‘Come Susan,’ the Missus said crossly, ‘I don’t have much choice in such a small household. We’re not in London now. You’ll have to do as you’re bid.’

‘But me face. It’ll put folks off their supper,’ said Susan, desperate now. Didn’t the Missus know well enough that she was only good for shifting coals and scrubbing floors, not dainty stuff like serving at table?

‘Just pull your cap down a little, for goodness sake,’ said the Missus all impatient, ‘and besides you know these two gentlemen who are coming tonight. They have seen you before and will not be shocked.’

‘Gentlemen?’ said Susan horrified.

‘I have only invited the Reverend Wallace and the new young schoolmaster, Master Wyllie.’

A flush of heat rushed through Susan’s body. John Wyllie would be taking supper here and she would serve him.

‘Cook will tell you what to do. We’ll hear no more about it,’ said the Missus and Susan was glad to oblige, for now her head buzzed with joy.

She worked without cease all day, making up the fires, beating carpets, polishing tables and chairs and all the silverware in the dining parlour. The Missus came in and said that enough was enough but Susan was driven like a mad thing for it to be perfect, for him. The brass and silver buffed up pretty brilliant but then Susan thought with dismay about her

own appearance. She ran up to her room in the attic for a clean pinny and a better cap for her head. She washed her face and tidied her hair. She even took a quick peek at herself in the looking glass from a distance, but only a glimpse for fear she should lose her courage.

Too soon she heard the Missus's timepiece striking six and a knock at the door. Rushing into the hall, she opened the door and let in the Reverend Wallace with his white hair and watery blue eyes followed by John Wyllie.

'Good evening Susan,' he said, handing her his hat and cloak. He smiled at her and she peeped back at him, curtsying and mumbling good evening like a simpleton, almost forgetting to take the old Reverend's cloak. She carried the garments to the cupboard while the Missus took the gentlemen into the dining parlour. Susan held John Wyllie's cloak in her arms for a moment, bringing it close to her face, hugging it to her, smelling it. A crash came from the kitchen, shaking her back into action. She ran down the stairs for her orders from Cook who stood with her ladle hovering over a steaming pot on the fire.

'Come away with ye, woman,' she said. 'What kept ye? Take up this broth to them now.'

Susan carried the soup tureen like she held the crown jewels and made it up to the dining parlour safely, sliding alongside the table without notice. To her relief, no one looked up at her.

The Reverend Wallace was addressing the Missus as Susan placed the tureen on the table and moved round, setting a plate in front of each of them.

'I would greatly like to hear of your husband's plans for a trading route to China,' he was saying. 'You have heard of the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies, I assume, Master Wyllie?'

'A little,' he replied. 'I have read a pamphlet about it. It seems a worthy venture, though I'm afraid that I cannot confess to being at all knowledgeable about business and commerce.'

Then the Missus started on about how Master Paterson knew of a place like paradise on earth away over the ocean. Susan had heard snippets of such talk on this subject before and it all seemed no more than a fairytale, far too good to be true.

'William travelled widely before I knew him, you know,' said the Missus. 'All over the world, but mostly in the Caribbean, I believe. He has met many famous adventurers and explorers who told of this land of Darien, between the two great oceans. It's a rich and wondrous place, ripe for settlement, a haven for trading across the Pacific Ocean by a much shorter route, or so I'm told. The Company are much taken by his ideas and his plans.'

‘If the place is so wondrous, I am curious as to why others, the Spanish, the French or even the English have not taken it over,’ said the Reverend quietly. ‘Have those nations not a great interest already in trading in the east?’

‘Oh, I don’t know anything about that,’ she said, ‘but I can show you the writings of Master Lionel Wafer. He writes such magical descriptions of the place. After supper, I would be happy for you to see his account.’

‘Indeed Mistress, I would find it of great interest,’ said the Reverend, ‘though I wonder if enough is known of this land and what people live in it already.’

The Missus made no reply for she was looking at Susan with a frown. Susan had been lurking at the side table, gazing unnoticed at John Wyllie. Now at this signal from the Missus, she had to quit the room, going back to the kitchen again to the noise of Cook’s banging of dishes.

‘Stop your dithering, woman, will ye. Help me with these.’

Susan didn’t mind Cook’s scolding for she would have to go back to the dining parlour as there were more dishes of food to be taken, as well as clearing away. She would see him again and again that evening.

‘And ye can tak’ them this jug o’ wine,’ grumbled Cook, ‘right now.’

Susan was reaching for the handle of the door of the dining parlour when she heard the Missus mention her own name, so she pulled back and paused outside.

‘I have only my woman Susan with me here,’ the Missus was saying, ‘She came with us from London. Emma, my other girl, took herself off during our preparations to come to Colinton, the foolish hussy. She just ran away. Back to London, I presume. Can you believe it? So Susan’s my only servant now, though we have the Widow Semple as Cook and little Eliza Black helps out from time to time. Yes, Susan’s a poor, simple orphaned creature, cursed as you see in her appearance, but faithful and very hard-working, strong as any man too. She can do the work of ten, by anyone’s reckoning. But I suppose I’d best keep her away from the schoolhouse once the children are there, lest any take fright.’

‘I think not,’ Susan heard John Wyllie say as she flattened her ear against the door to savour the sound of his voice. ‘I came upon her with two children, Mary and Willie Jamieson, in the schoolhouse when I first arrived. They seemed well at ease with each other, so I think there is little need to fear. It strikes me that children do not see the world as we do. They look with innocent eyes and do not judge.’

Oh God, why did you make him say such things, thought Susan, for it'll only make me love him the more? How can I bear it, to love him more? She gulped, pressed the handle of the door and entered.

'Well,' said the Reverend Wallace, 'that's a revolutionary view, Master Wyllie. I wonder which heretical works you have been reading.'

Susan saw that John Wyllie had coloured up in his face and seemed put out by what the Reverend said, though she could see that the old gentleman was smiling, not threatening or scolding.

'No, I merely jest, man. Don't be alarmed,' said the Reverend.

Susan gathered the soup plates and the tureen and was gone from the room in a moment.

When she came back with the dishes of meat, John Wyllie was talking again. 'The boy, Willie Jamieson, is he well known to you?' he asked the Reverend.

'Aye, his father Alexander is a good, hard working man and does his best for his family. But he's a poor cottar and it's a struggle for them, as it is for most. Times are bad at the moment, with the harvest failing again and the price of meal. As for the lad Willie, he's a strange little creature to be sure and seems not to be of this world. Even as a babe, when I baptised him, I saw he was not right, for he could not abide to be held in arms, not even those of his own mother. The ignorant say he is bewitched, of course, for he grunts like a brute and will not be tamed except by his sister. God knows what will become of the child.'

'Thank you, Susan, you may go,' said the Missus and gave her another look, so she had to be gone. But Susan, fascinated by the talk, crouched down outside the door and listened greedily for a few moments more.

'The matter of payment for the schooling, I believe may be an obstacle for some, such as the Jamiesons,' said John Wyllie.

'Oh dear,' replied her mistress, 'we can't have that. I should be most happy to pay for those children, if necessary.'

'Mistress Paterson,' said the Reverend, 'You are too generous. The elders have decided that the Kirk will pay for the poorest children.'

'That is excellent news,' said John Wyllie. 'I look forward to a full schoolhouse on Monday.'

'Aye,' said the Reverend Wallace. 'It will be a happy day.'

Back down in the kitchen some time later, Susan heard Mistress Paterson and her guests take themselves off into the parlour. That was the end of it. She might not see him

again that night. Then, as she and Cook were washing the dishes, there was a ring on the bell from the parlour.

‘Better get yersel’ up there,’ said Cook, plunging her arms into the bowl. Susan wiped her hands on her apron, pulled her cap down over her cheek, ran back upstairs, knocked on the parlour door and entered. The Missus and Reverend Wallace were sitting next to the fire, while John Wyllie stood by a bookshelf near the window examining a volume.

‘Susan,’ said the Missus, ‘will you go to my writing desk upstairs and bring down a roll of papers which are lying on the top. Master Wyllie has need of some for the schoolhouse.’

Susan went straight away and found the paper, tied up with a ribbon and returned only a few minutes later.

‘Thank you, Susan. Please put it there on the table,’ said the Missus. ‘And could you put another log on the fire.’

The Missus then cast her eye at John Wyllie who still stood with a small, red covered book in his hand. ‘It’s beautiful work, isn’t it Master Wyllie? I can see you’re looking at the binding,’ she said.

‘Aye, it’s very fine,’ he replied, his voice almost too quiet to hear.

‘My husband had several books bound for me in Edinburgh recently, for I’m a great lover of reading and have quite a collection as you can see,’ continued the Missus. ‘Now let me recall the craftsman’s name. Fletcher, that’s it, of Candlemaker’s Row.’

‘Fletcher? The bookbinder?’ said the Reverend Wallace, scratching his head. ‘Now that’s a name I’ve heard tell of not long since. Aye, I have it. Was not that same Fletcher, the guardian of that unfortunate young man Aikenhead, he that was hanged last month?’

John Wyllie replaced the book on the shelf with a jerk of his arm. He turned to the Missus, his face chalk white, like he’d just seen a ghost drift in through the window.

‘Forgive me Mistress Paterson, Reverend Wallace, I must leave you,’ he said.

‘Master Wyllie, really, so soon?’ said the Missus, her face all puckered and surprised.

The Reverend Wallace’s brows furrowed too. ‘Pardon me, Master Wyllie, for mentioning the distressing case, for wasn’t he known to you, that poor young man?’

‘Aye,’ said John, clearing his throat, ‘Aye, he was.’

The evening was over. Susan felt the air in the room fill with the distress that flowed from John Wyllie. As she handed him his hat and cloak at the door, he was silent and only nodded to her as she let him out. She watched his dark figure disappear into the night. If

only she could take his troubles upon her own shoulders, bear the burden of whatever horrible misery had struck him so sudden and weighed so heavy upon him.

## Chapter 12

February 1697

The anticipation of his first day as a schoolmaster was sufficient to absorb John's thoughts, distracting them from the guilt-ridden anguish which still dogged him in Colinton. The sky was hung with grey cloud and some spits of sleety rain had started to streak the sky as he stood on the roadway outside the schoolhouse door, awaiting the arrival of his pupils. Soon he saw several small figures trotting down towards him. The two at the vanguard he soon recognized as Mary and Willie Jamieson, Willie by his jerky, erratic progress along the track. A gaggle of boys approached from the opposite direction and soon John found himself seeing in through the doorway a succession of children, one or two better-dressed offspring of yeomen, others in the ragged clothing of poverty. There were above fifteen children, ages spanning about six to twelve years and he felt a mixture of pleasure and fear at the prospects for the day to come.

The final furnishings and equipment had arrived at the schoolhouse by cart only a few days before and so at last all was ready. The room itself was plain but not unwelcoming, with its white-washed walls and a good fire stoked up in the corner, the neat split logs stacked high at the hearthside by Susan. Two lamps glowed on the master's desk which stood at the front, tall like a lectern. By this desk was an easel on which was balanced a blackboard. Wooden shelves behind the master's desk housed the collection of bibles and prayer books and a large hour glass. The beaten earth floor, though pitted by the hooves of beasts from its former use, was swept clean, almost to a shine. John had seen Susan toiling and scouring with her besom until she was satisfied with the effects of her labour. There were two rows of benches, each with a long narrow table in front for writing and reading. The children filed in, silent and watchful as if entering a holy place.

'Good day to you all,' said John stepping to the front and issuing his first instructions. 'Take a place on the benches, the youngest at the front, if you please.'

He saw Mary Jamieson hesitating, being one of the oldest of his pupils, she also having in her charge, Willie, who was now whimpering and writhing in her grasp.

'Mary, take Willie to sit by you in the second row,' said John and was glad to see the worried frown drop from her face as she pulled Willie into a place on the bench seat and sat close beside him.

With all these expectant faces before him, John felt surprisingly awed, though it was clear to him that the children felt likewise, at least in these first moments in their novel surroundings. He was pleased too when the Reverend Wallace arrived quietly while he was leading the children in the 'Lord's Prayer', their heads bowed and their mouths obediently intoning the words.

'Well, good morning to you all, children,' said the old minister, proceeding slowly with the aid of a walking stick to the front of the class. He nodded with approval and scanned the faces before him. 'This is a great moment for us all, the first day of your school. And here is Master Wyllie. He will teach you many precious things, worth more than any gold in the world. He will teach you to read and to write and to think. Whoever you are, you will not be in ignorance of the word of God, but will read his words with your very own eyes. Your parents will be proud of you and I will hope to hear only good reports of you all. Master Wyllie will come to me weekly to tell me of your endeavours and your achievements.'

While all sat silent at the words of the minister, except Willie Jamieson whose low growling was just audible, the eyes of some of the littlest ones roved around the schoolhouse in wonder. As soon as the Reverend Wallace had left, John asked the children to recite their Christian names which he wrote swiftly on the blackboard. The children watched enthralled as he spelled out the letters of their names. Only Mary Jamieson and a tall, strong-looking, fidgety boy named James Vernon knew any letters at all and they spelled out and repeated each child's name on the board again, to the delight of their classmates.

John determined then to get them writing. He charged Mary with the duty of handing out slates and slate pencils to every child and soon each head was bent, small hands bunched in attempts to copy the letters of their names on the slates in front of them. John noticed quickly that some were labouring to accomplish any recognizable form of a letter and he moved round among the children, leaning over and guiding the hands of the smallest. Some chatter broke out and John looked round to see James Vernon cuffing one of the small boys on the head.

John, shocked, moved quickly and caught James by the arm, bringing him to the front of the class.

'James Vernon,' he said, 'you must learn to behave in school. We have no hitting in here. Here we are civilised.' The boy hung his head with a truculent scowl.

'Stand there James, until such time as you are ready to start your writing,' he said. He remembered the Reverend Wallace's advice and recognised his own naïve optimism in

imagining that he could command the unwavering attention of this group of unschooled peasant children.

But to his surprise, the children fell silent and turned their eyes again to their effortful work. John moved along the back row to the older children and watched Mary's attempts. He saw her hand tremble and knew that his scrutiny might be causing her agitation. She looked up at him, with tears in her eyes.

'I cannae do it, sir,' she said.

'Have patience, Mary. Your efforts will bear fruit, believe me.'

Then he glanced at Willie, head bent, nose nearly touching the slate, his hand moving busily across it. John took a step nearer, hardly believing what he saw, dense, neat lines of even handwriting covering the whole surface. John gestured to Mary to look at her brother's slate. Suddenly Willie looked up at them and grunted out loud.

'Wheesht, Willie,' Mary whispered at him. 'Dinnae make a noise.'

Some of the children turned round and giggled.

'Maister, he cannae speak,' said Robert Bailie, a freckle-faced boy. 'He's glaikit. He's touched in the heid.'

Some of the children laughed again.

'He's bewitched,' whispered a girl close to Mary.

John ignored the comments, his attention fixed on Willie's slate. 'Willie, this is beautiful work. May I show the others?'

Willie made no response save an unreadable stare with his blue eyes and so John took the risk. He took up Willie's slate and moved to the front of the class.

'Look here, everyone,' he said and Willie leapt out of his seat. Mary tried to catch hold of him, but he was too quick and swerved out of her reach. John held his breath for a moment wondering what the strange child would do next. But, having escaped his sister's grasp, he came quietly and stood beside John as the children all stared in wonder at Willie's slate.

'Look what Willie has done,' John said to them. 'This is the best writing I've ever seen. What do you think of this, Robert?' as if to remind the boy of his judgment of Willie.

'Now everyone, keep trying and see if you can make your writing like Willie's.'

Willie reached for his slate and John went to wipe it clean for him, but the child opened his mouth as though in preparation for a scream. Mary had by now left her place and stood hovering anxiously beside her brother, her hand raised ready to restrain him if necessary. John marvelled at the motherly care of this girl who was no more than a child

herself. Then inspiration struck, as he remembered that he had some Mistress Paterson's paper and ink. John went to his desk and drew out a rough sheet of paper, a quill and inkpot and guided Willie and Mary back to their places.

'Now, Mary,' he said, 'will you watch over your brother with this pen and ink.' He slotted the inkhorn into a hole on the top of the desk, smoothed the paper flat in front of Willie and taking out the ink stopper, dipped in the end of the quill. Then, leaning over Willie's shoulder, he wrote across the top "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want", then handed the quill to the boy. Willie took it and stared at it for a few moments, holding it above the paper, watching as a dark bead of ink dangled from the end. John stood ready to retrieve the pen from him at the failure of his experiment. There was no need however, for Willie had lowered the pen to the paper and had started to write, very slowly at first and then more speedily till he had written the line of the psalm twice over.

John was too startled to speak for some moments, but then he turned to Mary.

'Mary, did you know of Willie's gift?' he asked.

'Aye sir, for I came upon him making his letters in the dirt with a stick. He was taking them from the holy book that he stole frae the schoolhouse that time.'

'This is truly remarkable, Mary. Your parents must know of it.'

For the rest of the morning, all the children, as though taking Willie as their model, patiently toiled at shaping their letters, until all had achieved at least the inscription of their own names. In the afternoon, John rehearsed the children in reciting the catechism.

'What is the chief end of man?'

'A man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever,' the small voices chanted obediently and monotonously. John felt a heaviness descend upon them. Two of the smallest children had fallen asleep with their heads on the desk.

He recalled some of the tedium of his own schooldays and wondered how he might awaken the children's minds, not wishing to conclude the day with dull devotions. Then the memory struck him of the thrill of his secret reading of a book of tales of ancient times, borrowed from a fellow pupil and read at night by the light of a stolen candle, to avoid his father's disapprobation.

'You have worked very well today,' John suddenly announced. 'I am very pleased with your efforts every one of you. Now we can finish with a very famous story of times long past. Has anyone heard tell of the Wooden Horse of Troy?'

He was gratified to see that the children sat transfixed, as he told the tale. Even the sleepers had awakened. The afternoon light was fading as John drew the day's episode to a

close. ‘and so the next morning, as the sun rose over the plain outside the great city of Troy, the Trojans looked out and saw before them a huge horse, a great towering statue fashioned of wood.’

‘But sir, you cannae stop there!’ said Mary, suddenly jumping up from her seat, her eyes bright with indignation.

‘Mary,’ said John, ‘you must learn patience. It is a long story and there is too much to tell in one day.’

Within these first few weeks, John was very much surprised and pleased at the progress and application of his pupils. Though he marvelled at the inexplicable talent of Willie Jamieson, who was now copying whole pages from the Scriptures, he was gratified with the efforts of all the children, even the least able and inclined. His lack of experience had occasioned some minor mishaps and challenges to his authority, but he knew that his class were now keen at the best of times and biddable the rest. Mary Jamieson was a quick-minded, intelligent girl, a model pupil hungry for learning, James Vernon an unlikely and sometimes churlish scholar, but both showed particular ability and were reading and writing with some fluency already, after only this brief period of tuition.

He had no model for teaching beyond his own experience as a pupil at the grammar school and, remembering this with not a little fear and dread, he had determined to avoid the excesses of some of his own masters. He discovered early on that he was incapable of administering physical chastisement upon his charges, though he knew that discipline was of great importance in managing a class and harnessing the children’s energies. John’s one endeavour to control the rebellious James Vernon by force had failed and he swore on that day that instilling obedience in his pupils would never be dependent on violence or fear.

James had repeatedly disobeyed John’s instructions to strive for a neater hand, preferring instead to distract others around him. He was a quick and able pupil when inclined to work but would not hold his mind to the more laborious exercises such as copying. Warnings and threats of a beating were made, though his own unease was clearly greater than any sign of fear in James Vernon. However, he knew that the children sensed the challenge and that he must confront it.

‘James,’ he said feeling his temper roused, as the boy sat stabbing with his slate pencil upon the bench instead of copying the lines of scripture. ‘Come here. I have warned you against such behaviour. You choose to ignore my warnings and must take the consequences.’

He looked in the drawer of his desk and took out the black leather belt. It had lurked there since the first day, like a coiled snake and he had hoped never to have to employ it. He

ordered James Vernon to come to the front of the class. The boy eyed John insolently, as he put out his hand on the command to do so. The class watched in silence as John raised the strap and brought it down upon the hand with a force which caused a sharp smack against the flesh. He saw the boy wince with pain. But the effects on himself were altogether more alarming. He was aware of a trembling and of a feverish, sickly sensation passing through him, so powerful that he felt himself in danger of collapse. He saw himself then as this boy, stung with pain, beaten by a strong and powerful hand relentlessly forcing submission. The vision of his father came to him and he felt again the sting of the cane on his own back and legs, the humiliation of his own tears. He recoiled from the thought and the act at that moment. The strap fell to the floor. James Vernon was holding his hurt hand in the other and looked up at John with surprise.

‘James Vernon, you must go outside in the yard for the rest of your punishment,’ John said, hearing his voice quivering in spite of his efforts to control it. ‘Stand outside until the end of the lesson. I will speak to you later about what you must do to mend your ways.’

James stood for a few moments before slouching out of the door and closing it behind him. John, stung with disappointment and failure, thought it unlikely that he would ever see the boy in his schoolroom again. Now he had to take back what little control of his class he was able to salvage, hoping that his pupils were not so acute in their vision as to know the extent of his discomfiture and embarrassment. But he had one great ally, in the form of Virgil’s ‘Aeneid’ and quickly took up a vigorous account of the adventures of Aeneas’s escape from Troy.

John was pleased to note that the children were soon silently rapt. His confidence restored, he indulged himself in re-creating the drama of the story. But more remarkable than this was his sight of the schoolroom door opening a crack, unnoticed by the children. James Vernon was crouched low behind the door, his face just visible in the gap, listening too with the attention of one transported as a witness to the burning streets of the ancient city. After that John knew what sanctions to take for unwanted behaviour.

He was surprised and gratified too to find that Susan would on occasions creep in at the back of the schoolroom, and sit on the floor at story time in the afternoon. She was drawn to the school, it seemed, by her love for the children and they treated her almost as one of them, just as John had hoped with no sign of distaste or fear at her marked and disfigured face. Each day brought him more surprises and then finally, a revelation he would never forget.

Willie Jamieson had been scratching away contentedly with quill and ink, during the latest episode of the story, the arrival of Aeneas in Carthage, when John noticed Mary staring at her brother's paper. John hoped that the child had not filled that sheet already as the paper was nearly exhausted and he was unsure how he would find the resources to replenish his supply and keep the boy occupied.

'What is it Mary?' said John breaking off. All heads were turned to look. 'Has Willie finished his writing already?'

'No, sir,' she cried, her voice alive with excitement. 'It's no writing Willie has done. Sir, come and see!'