

It was vicious cold, the wind, the way it tugged their cloaks like a raving beggar on a winter's night. Susan and Em and the others up top were near frozen. And what with the road so rough and the coach shaking them up till their teeth rattled, Susan was glad to see the city at last. But Gawd what a sight it was. She lifted her veil just enough to peer out over the plain. Beyond a jagged mountain on their right was a huge rocky hill with a castle stuck up high at one end. A black cluster of tall buildings stretched down a slope, hemmed in by dark grey walls all around.

Susan was wedged between Em and a stinking peddlerman who had boarded the coach at Berwick. They swayed and jolted together with the movements of the rocking vehicle. She was almost used to it now. Twelve whole days it had been after all.

'I'm chilled to the bleedin' bone,' said Em, digging her hand into Susan's side to seek out more warmth between her arm and her body. 'Ain't we never goin' to be there?'

'Yes, we're near now. Look over there, Em. It's Edingborough town. Just think, we'll be walkin' on solid ground soon,' said Susan.

'Thank the Lord,' replied Em. 'Is it always as cold as this?'

'Cold?' said the peddler. 'Call this cold, do ye? This is nothin'.'

Not much later they were rattling through a gateway in the city wall, into a tunnel of a street of smoke-black buildings on either side. They were mostly of grey stone, though some were of timber in between, but all were stacked up storeys high. Huddled together along the side of the street were little shacks and stalls trading wares. The Cowgate somebody called it and it stank worse than all the rotten meat in a market on a hot summer's day.

Mucky devils they were that lived here too, by the looks of things. Susan spied a woman hurling brown water, with a shriek, from a high window above the street. Get it smack on the head, anyone that didn't jump out of the way in time. The horses strained up the hill to the inn and at last the coach wheeled round through an archway into the yard. An ostler shouted to two boys who ran to the horses and grabbed their halters. Someone threw down a great heavy box from aloft with a thwack on to the ground. There were all sorts of folks standing by in the yard, mostly servants and pot boys looking glum, awaiting the arrival of the coach. The doors flew open and the whole thing rocked like boat in the Thames as the folks climbed out.

The peddler clanked his sack of wares, trying to lift it, near tipping it off on someone's head below.

‘Ere,’ said Susan, seeing him struggle, ‘Let me hand it down to yer.’

The man looked at her, startled, but clambered down and waited as Susan heaved the lumpen heavy bundle with ease into his arms below.

‘Aye, Missus. That’s a braw arm ye have on ye there. You should be in the circus. Thank ye kindly.’

Susan nodded, taking his comment as a compliment for he’d not seen her face. Then she caught sight of a familiar figure among all the strangers, Gilbert, the master’s man, leaning on a post by the inn door. He had his usual long face on him, miserable as sin, but it was good to see him. He’d come ahead with the Master and Mistress two weeks before, while Susan, Em and some other servants had stayed behind to clear up the London house. Gilbert saw them and waved, coming over to the side of the coach while they clambered down from the top. ‘Come on, Em. Gimme yer bundle,’ said Susan.

‘What a muck ‘ole ‘ave we come to?’ said Em in a loud voice as she stepped on the cobbled inn yard, pulling straight the skirt of her gown. Two men in the yard wearing bonnets and plaids gave her an evil look.

‘Hush up,’ said Gilbert to Em, taking her bundle. ‘There’s some folks don’t like us English much. So keep yer trap shut if you’ve any sense. How’re you gels then?’

‘Mighty pleased to be here, Gilbert,’ said Susan.

‘Speak for yourself,’ Em said.

‘Come on, let’s be off,’ said Gilbert.

Susan pulled her straw hat low on her brow and straightened her veil, blooming irksome thing, to make sure it was well in place. She was among strangers and foreigners so she’d best be on her guard. At least the daylight was nearly gone and it was gloomy enough for the Devil himself to go by without notice.

She hoisted both bundles over her shoulder, grabbed Em’s arm and followed Gilbert’s lead out of the inn yard into a street milling with folk. What a trial it was to keep their feet out of the lumps of filth and stinking puddles and at the same time look up at the grand high buildings and churches, just like those in London. Even the sedan chair carriers skidded and slid on the muck, weaving through the throng of horses and walkers, in danger of tipping out the gentlefolk on their arses if they weren’t careful. On each side of this main thoroughfare were narrow alleyways and passages leading off, sloping down steep between the stacked-up houses packed together on both sides. The street continued up the hill till at last Gilbert steered them towards a grand looking mansion of several storeys and Susan marvelled to see its chimney stacks reaching almost to the sky.

At the side of the stone mansion, they took a steep flight of steps down to a basement door which Gilbert rapped upon, then opened. Inside, it was all clean and neat, a good big kitchen with the cook standing there, Mistress McSniff or some such name which Susan didn't catch. The long deal table was scrubbed spotless. Pans, knives, ladles and spoons hung up all tidy in rows on the wall. Even Em took heed of it, for the sour look dropped off her face for a moment. Seemed like these Scotch folk were more fussy about their kitchens than their streets.

The cook's beady black eyes peered hard at Susan and Em. 'Jessie,' she called through another doorway and a tiny scullery maid of no more than eight years old appeared. 'Tak these lassies up tae the room.'

Up four flights of stairs, they followed the girl to an attic room with one little window up high. Susan dumped their bundles on the floor and stood on tiptoe, glimpsing a panorama as vast and wide as the window was narrow.

'Ere, Em, look at this,' she said. 'It's hills and mountains in the distance and look at the river. Don't it shine? Not 'arf bad, don't you think?'

'Don't want to look out on no wild mountains,' said Em, falling limp on the bed like a dead fowl for plucking. 'I want to go home, Sue. First chance I get, I'm goin' home to London, I tell yer. Don't know what the Master was a-thinkin' of bringin' us all here to this 'orrible land.'

'Well, he's a Scotchman hissself, ain't he? It's natural,' said Susan. 'Come on, Em, don't go on so. Buck up. At least you kept your place and your wages and the Missus is as good as the likes of us'll ever get.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Em.

'I think we're goin' to be very 'appy,' said Susan, for what choice had they but to make the best of it? 'Come on, Em. Let's get ourselves sorted and go downstairs. I'm starvin' 'ungry.'

Susan had clean forgotten the little scullery maid, still standing there in the room, when she pulled off her hat and veil and threw them on the bed. 'D'you think we could 'ave something to sup, me dearie?' she said all bright and friendly, turning to the girl who took one look at Susan's face and fled.

Only a little while later, the beady-eyed cook herself appeared at their door, with a tray of victuals and ale. 'Best tak' yer supper up here the night,' she said, squinting at Susan's mark. Susan tried to smile back at her and sighed.

'I was born like it,' she said simply. 'It ain't catching.'

The next morning, they went to see the Missus in a dark parlour on a lower floor. She greeted Susan and Em more like long-lost friends of her bosom, not servants.

‘It is so good to see you both here. It will make it seem more like home,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it cold, though and such a long way away? But let’s not think about that. How was your journey?’

‘Mustn’t grumble, Missus,’ said Susan seeing Em’s black look.

Mistress Paterson sighed, lowering herself down into a chair near the fire. ‘I found it dreadful, so exhausting, and then to have to come here.’ The Missus’s usually ruddy complexion was paler, Susan thought, though in her body she looked hearty enough. She’d taken to her bed at first when Master Paterson had told her they were removing themselves to Scotland, for she had no mind for it and went all peevish on him for a while, saying it would be the death of her.

‘And the air,’ she continued. ‘It’s not healthy, you know. I’ve been ailing since we’ve been here. I simply can’t stay in this terrible filthy town. London has dirty alleys and gutters to be sure, but this is beyond my endurance.’

‘Is we goin’ to be off somewhere else then?’ asked Susan, hesitating.

Em’s eyes lit up in a flash. ‘Back to London?’ she said.

‘No, Emma. Don’t be foolish,’ said the Missus all scornful, ‘We’re here now and we’re bound to stay. But William has found me a much better place to reside, a cottage in a country village, outside the city, a place called Colinton,’ replied Mistress Paterson. ‘I’ll be better there, away from all the dirt and stench. But don’t concern yourself with that for the moment. We’ll have to stay in town for a week or so anyway.’

Susan saw Em squirming, all ready to burst out again. ‘Missus,’ she said, ‘I ain’t –’

‘Yes, Missus, that’ll be nice, won’t it Em?’ said Susan quickly, pinching her arm, wishing she’d stop harking on about London with her every breath. ‘Now Missus what do you want us to do?’

‘Well, you can go to Mistress McNiff for I think she needs help this morning. We’re very short-handed in the house. It’s not what I’m used to at all. There’s only Gilbert, the cook and a little scullery maid.’

Susan and Em returned to the kitchen and another encounter with the cook.

‘Will youse two tak yersels to the merkit,’ said Mistress McNiff, speaking to Em, though Susan caught the stolen glances in her direction. ‘Ye’d best gang thegither.’

‘What’s she on about?’ said Em to Susan.

‘Eh?’ said Susan struggling to interpret the message.

‘The gither, the both o’ youse, tae the merkit,’ she said as though they were slow in their wits, her eyes lingering on Susan’s face.

‘I’ll ‘ave you know, Missus,’ spoke up Em, perky all of a sudden, ‘we’re London gels. We been goin’ to markets since we was knee high. We ain’t got no fear of goin’ out among the crowds, even amongst Scotch folk.’

Susan poked Em’s arm to stop her making little pebble eyes think even iller of them. ‘What she means, Missus,’ said Susan, ‘is just that we may be English but we ain’t stupid.’

‘Aye,’ said the cook nodding, ‘But just mind how ye go. Tak the first street to the right, then go left at the kirk. Here tak a basket and put on these plaids.’

Perhaps the woman had a kindly streak after all, Susan thought as she accepted the warm woollen shawl like most people, men and women, seemed to wear in the streets. She placed it over her head, pulling her cap down and adjusting her veil again to cover her mark.

‘‘Ere, don’t we look just like a couple o’ Scotchwomen?’ said Susan, as they climbed the stairs to the street.

Em, wrinkled her nose, grabbed Susan’s arm and they set off. They turned into a busy street packed with stalls selling all manner of goods: clothes, tools, pegs and baskets, pots, pans and ribbons. But it was meat they were commanded to buy so they went further down the street to the Fleshmarket. It had a whiff of home about it, Susan thought for a moment, the slaughterhouses and butchers round Smithfield. But the shouts of the vendors rang out strange and clanging to her ears.

Susan spied the stall with pigs’ heads and went straight for it, but a man barged into her as he passed and she lost her grip on the edge of her plaid for a moment. It’d be safer to let Em buy the meat, she thought, pushing her forward to speak to the butcher, while she hung back holding the basket.

‘You’re no from these pairts,’ said the man, waving his knife in the air, after hearing Em’s request.

Em only sniffed in response and Susan felt the need to give some account of themselves. ‘We’ve just come from London town, in England,’ she said.

‘Oh aye?’ said he, ‘I wouldnae spread that too loud abroad, if I were you. There’s folks here that wad cut yer throat if they knew you were English.’

‘My lord,’ whispered Em to Susan, ‘that’s a bit rich, that is, seeing as how we never even asked to come here in the first place.’

‘Well, you’re no alone, for there’s a fair few of your countrymen in Edinburgh these days,’ the butcher continued. ‘But I dinnae mind where ye come frae, as long as you buy the flesh from my stall. It’s my hope that your mistress likes her meat. Mayhap I’ll see you again,’ he said, winking at Em which made her cheeks go pink.

‘Seemed a nice enough fella,’ said Susan, as they made their way back to the main street.

‘For a Scotchman, I s’pose,’ said Em. ‘But they ain’t to be trusted to my way of thinkin’.’

Susan had no time to reply for there was some kind of commotion going on down the street, judging by the hollering that had broken out of a sudden. At about fifty paces from where they stood, close to a huge stone church with a tall tower, she saw a wooden platform with a small crowd of people standing close by, shouting and jeering at something happening upon it.

‘Look Sue, down there. What’s goin’ on?’ said Em.

‘Don’t know, but it ain’t nothing to do with us,’ she replied.

‘Perhaps it’s a hanging. Come on, let’s go and have a peek.’ The chance of a bit of entertainment seemed to have made Em more cheery.

‘There ain’t no gallows, thank the Lord,’ said Susan with a shudder. ‘I can’t abide it, to see poor wretches chokin’ at the end of a rope.’

‘It’s just the stocks. Come on, Sue.’

‘No, Em. I don’t want to see nobody suffering, no matter what they done. I ain’t goin’. Come back.’

It was no good; there was no stopping her. Susan stood, rooted to the roadway, watching Em moving towards the crowd round the platform, but then she was mindful of the advice of the cook. They’d best stay together the two of them, amongst all these strange folk. So, she gripped the plaid round her head and followed Em to the edge of the gathering.

There on the platform was a skinny little woman, being unlocked from the stocks. A man was holding her up by one of her red, stringy wrists. She was dressed in a shift of sackcloth and her face was covered with dirt, her hair shorn off close to her head, her scalp all scabbed with blood. The constable, or whatever he was, hoisted her out and shoved her down off the platform on to the ground, close to where Em and Susan now stood. On hitting the ground, her legs gave way under her and she collapsed in the dirt, moaning.

Some in the crowd were edging towards her, the poor creature, shouting God knows what at her. Susan couldn’t make out the words but she knew the meaning of their growls

and shrieks, like a pack of dogs cornering a rabbit near dead with fright. The woman lifted her bloodied head and reached out a hand towards Susan and Em.

‘There’s nae mercy for a hoor!’ cried a woman in the crowd.

‘Em, look at her,’ said Susan, her gut wrenching at the pitiful sight. ‘There ain’t scarcely a breath in her body, poor soul,’ and before she knew it, she had stepped forward and was bending down by the woman’s side.

‘Oi, Sue, what you doin’?’ hissed Em. ‘Leave ‘er, Sue. She ain’t nothing to us.’

‘Ain’t you got no feelings, Em? Poor gel, needs a drop to drink,’ Susan said, looking round for a pump or a trough, but all she could see was the circle of people around her, closing in and a boy lifting his hand and taking aim.

A slick of mud flew at Em and hit her smack in the belly and she squealed. Then a stone glanced off the ground close to where Susan was crouching. She heard Em calling at her to come away, but the miserable little wretch was still whimpering beside her. Her heart thumped as she smelt danger like smoke in the air.

Susan went to stand up but caught the end of her plaid with the heel of her boot. The cloth was tugged from her head, her cap pulled askew and the veil lifted from her face. Blooming Hell fire, her veil. Too late, they’d seen it. She fumbled to cover herself again, but it was no good. A small ragged girl beside her was pointing and screaming like a piglet facing the knife. Her eyes were huge with horror in her pinched white face.

‘’Tis the mark of the De’il,’ shouted a man, his hand outstretched towards her face as others started gathering closer.

‘Look it’s a witch come to claim her own,’ yelled someone else. Susan saw the closed circle around her.

‘Gawd save us,’ yelled Em, her voice quivering. ‘We ain’t witches, nor nothing like that.’

Susan looked round, quickly reckoning up the number of people, too many to take on herself.

‘We ain’t witches, I tell yer,’ squealed Em again, ‘We just come from London.’

This roused up the crowd fiercer than ever, muck flying at the three of them now from all sides. The little woman was howling and clinging to Susan’s skirts while Em sobbed, holding up her arms to fend off the filth. Then along with the hail of dirt and stones a man came plunging, straight at Susan and with arm outstretched, tore the cap from her head, tossing it into the air with a hoot of glee.

‘See, see the face o’ her! She’s the De’il’s dam,’ he shouted.

Susan's anger burst; the blackguard, the stinking bastard. Fear and shame gave power to her fist as she swung at him. It was a good one, a sound smack in the jaw and the villain fell back into the crowd. Her knuckles throbbed and her heart pounded in the strange silent moment that followed. Something else was happening, for the folk had all stopped their yelling and pelting. Someone was pushing through, parting the crowd and calling out for this to stop. It was a young man, in a black coat, like a man of the church or a lawyer. His face was stern, dark-eyed but handsome. He stepped forward and came to stand close to Susan, turning to stare back at the gathering before him.

'Get back, everyone,' he commanded, though he didn't holler or shout. 'Put an end to this disgrace. Go about your business. These women have done no wrong.'

Susan couldn't believe it, for no one uttered a word, only a few of them threw sly looks at each other. Then another piece of filth flew through the air, striking the young man on the side of his face. He made no move, just fixed his eyes on the villain, a filthy ragamuffin who shrank back in the crowd like he knew what a coward he was. Then with one hand, the young man reached for his pocket, drew out a handkerchief and wiped the dirt from his face. It was just him, this young gentleman come out of nowhere, against all of them. Susan tightened her fists again ready, while Em gaped like a fish at the stranger. He spoke again, with the same voice, firm but with a softness to it.

'How can you abuse these women? They are strangers to this town and yet they offer succour to one of our own. You punish for an act of kindness. Do you remember nothing of the teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ? Do you not remember the Good Samaritan? Shame on you all.'

Answer that you bastards, thought Susan, but none of them did. She felt a thrill in her belly. The young man paused and his eyes travelled over the faces in the crowd again and then to the skinny sinner woman who was grovelling at his feet. 'This woman too has endured her punishment. It is over. Go about your business with the love and forgiveness of Christ in your hearts.'

Susan felt her heart beat calmer now and watched as one last man in the crowd with a handful of dirt lowered his arm and dropped the muck back on to the ground. Some of the folks were muttering, but the young man didn't move and still fixed them with his gaze as they started to take themselves off. No one was going to defy him now, this young vicar or whoever he was. In a moment the crowd had almost gone.

Susan saw him properly now and surely she'd never set eyes on so comely a man, least of all a holy one like him. He was maybe only twenty years or so, with dark eyes so

solemn but with no hardness about them. His hair beneath his hat hung thick and black, his features were pleasing, with skin so smooth that she could do nothing but gawp at him like a dumb ox. Then he looked directly at her and at her mark, but his eyes didn't flicker, nor did his mouth curl in disgust.

‘Good women, you have been badly treated by my countrymen,’ he said. ‘Please forgive their actions and accept my apology on their behalf.’

Next he stooped down and quick as a wink, picked up first Susan's cap, her veil and then her plaid from the ground and handed them to her. For a moment Susan was struck dumb and stupid. Then somehow she managed to say, ‘Thank you kindly, sir,’ while Em, still wide-eyed, curtsied to him.

He nodded at them and was gone up the street in a minute.

‘Well, I never did,’ said Susan. ‘What sort of a place is this, full of savages one minute and an angel like that the next? Imagine that, Em,’ she continued in a daze, ‘a gentlemen helping us ladies in distress.’

Em's face broke into a smile too and Susan felt relief spread over her in a warm wave. Then she pulled on her cap, tucked in her veil and wrapped the plaid shawl over her head. The skinny woman still sat on the ground and Susan hauled her up, feeling hardly more weight about her than a dead cat. Without a look or a word to them, she shambled off up the street and down an alleyway out of sight. None of their attackers remained nearby, only one pretty-faced young woman, a passer by, who lingered a moment longer before turning from them and walking away down the main street.

Susan and Em made their way back up the street in the direction of the house, not saying a word to each other. As she went, Susan's eyes roved through the crowds for a sight of the young man. But he was gone. For the rest of the day, there was no other thought in Susan's head than of that gallant young man, their rescuer. He had looked her in the face and seen her mark. He had spoken to her with respect, just like she was an ordinary woman.

Isobel pulled at the sleeve of her gown, wishing that it were not so creased or that she had just a small piece of lace to embellish the dull cloth. She peeped again at the looking glass, guilty at the vanity of this second glance and wondering whether her mother would think her immodest to reveal so much of her hair. She jumped at the sound of the knock on the door and knew that it must be John Wyllie and that her mother would be there to admit him. How she would have loved to run to the door to greet him, to see him standing there, to have a moment alone with him. From her chamber, she heard her mother's voice.

‘Good day, Master Wyllie. Will you step inside.’

She heard him return the greeting and in her excitement nearly forgot to pick up the French grammar. Now clutching it to her, she ran along the passage and entered the parlour. She knew that she blushed when he looked at her. She felt the heat rise to her cheeks and saw his eyes brighten. How could she speak to him calmly, as at their first meetings, now that she had seen another side to him, that very morning, now that she could hardly control the quickening of her heart in his presence?

‘Good day, Master Wyllie,’ she said with a curtsy, pleased with her self-mastery.

‘Mistress Fletcher,’ replied John with a bow, adding shyly, ‘or should I say, Mademoiselle Fletcher, il me fait grand plaisir de vous revoir.’

‘Well, my lass,’ said Jean Fletcher with a broad smile, ‘it seems your lesson has already begun.’

Isobel watched her mother withdraw to the kitchen, though she left the door ajar and there was a vigorous rattle of coals in the grate.

‘Please take a seat, John,’ said Isobel, indicating two chairs by the fire. ‘Perhaps next time I may say that in French.’

She saw his dark eyes brighten again and smile flicker on his lips.

‘It will not be long,’ he said, ‘for I see you’ve been studying already.’ He nodded to indicate the book that she clutched to her breast.

‘But I’ve learned only a few words and phrases,’ she said.

‘Come, let me test your knowledge a little,’ he said quietly as they took their seats, he leaning forward, his eyes fixed on her.

She handed him the small book and his finger brushed against her hand. She heard her mother clattering dishes in the kitchen.

John cleared his throat and sitting back, opened the book and read each word or phrase in English, to which she was glad she could reply in the French. Sometimes, he pronounced the word again, encouraging her to repeat it.

‘Very good,’ he said, ‘You are an able student, Isobel.’

‘Have you taught many others?’ she asked.

‘Oh, not many,’ he said, blushing slightly, ‘in fact none at all. But I am well pleased with this first endeavour.’ They laughed together, in a moment of such shivering delight that Isobel would gladly have thrown herself into his arms.

She would dearly have liked to tell him that she had witnessed the extraordinary scene on the High Street that morning. She longed to praise his courage and kindness in a situation where most others would have turned away. To think she had judged him weak because of his overbearing father made her ashamed. But she had no wish to embarrass him with the revelation that she had spied unseen upon his actions. Instead, she rose and took up a small volume, a cloth bound book which she had just completed in the workshop.

‘I have an interesting thing here, in the French language, but I think it is very strange. The author is Chrétien de Troyes. Have you heard of him?’

‘I have heard the name, but do not know his work,’ said John taking the small book from her. She watched his fine features as he turned the pages, his eyes scanning the text.

‘Yes, it is an old work,’ he said, ‘a verse from an earlier time.’

‘Please read it to me, if you will,’ she said.

‘If I *can*,’ he said with a smile. ‘I will do my best.’

She watched his mouth forming the exotic sounds. How she wished she could capture those sounds, capture his breath by placing her lips upon his. A prickling of shame at these thoughts brought another blush to her cheeks, but he was intent on the reading for the moment, his eyes trained on the text. Then he paused and looked up at her.

‘Tell me the story of what you have read, John,’ she said.

She saw his colour rise. ‘It tells of two people, Erec and Enide, of their love for one another, their hardships, their—’

‘Will you take a cup of ale, Master Wyllie?’ came her mother’s voice and a moment later she stood in the door.

‘Thank you kindly Mistress,’ John replied looking up at Isobel’s mother.

Isobel felt a snatch of annoyance at this interruption. Then, however, she was privately pleased that her mother too approved of John, no doubt struck by his modest manners and comely looks. Her mother withdrew to the kitchen again.

‘John, this book cover is sadly worn,’ said Isobel, picking up the French grammar from the small table beside them again and examining its frayed edges.

‘Aye, it has been much used and abused,’ he laughed.

‘I would happily repair it for you. I could replace the binding, if you would permit me—’

He leaned closer and took her hand, his eyes searching her face.

‘Isobel, when can we meet again?’

‘Soon John, I hope very soon,’ she said, returning the gentle pressure of his hand on hers, as she heard her mother’s step approaching.

Though the light grew dim in the workshop, Isobel continued at her bench to complete a gold-tooled psalter for a young lady’s wedding gift. It had to be finished before the end of the week, so she would need another hour at least and then if she were not too weary, she might start on John’s grammar book. She ignited two more tallow candles which she placed on either side of her. This craft was the most loved and absorbing force in her life and had been for as long as she could remember. Her mother had frowned upon it and upbraided her father for letting such a small girl pick up and use the tools of his trade.

But how Isobel had loved it from the first: the smooth feel of the parchment, the flat roughness of the leaves of paper, the coloured cloths, the smell of the cured skins and leathers, the stiff white threads. Even the glues, pastes and paints in small pots, though foul in their stink, when dried gave off none and did their magic work in the making of a book. She loved to watch her own hands as they stitched the folds of the new leaves of a book and to hear her father’s correctings, his tutting and then at last his praise. He had taught her well from her childhood and she was an able and willing apprentice, so soon they were sharing the labours together and she was blind tooling and working with gilt with the skill of a journeyman.

That evening as she enjoyed the skilful working of her hands, she felt another source of delight, which made her want to sing and exult in her state of being and thank God heartily for it too. Was John Wyllie a man she might truly love? Indeed did she love him already? She paused and breathed deeply, knowing the answer, before adding another delicate frond of gold leaf to the psalter. She jumped at the sudden rattling at the outside door of the workshop, then the door was flung open.

‘Good evening, Iz,’ said Thomas, bursting in along with the gust of cold air and tearing off his bonnet. ‘Still at work?’

‘Aye, Thomas, I am,’ she said with a quick smile and a glance before turning again to her fragile operation. She was pleased at his presence but concerned that he might distract her with his ebullience and she might make a false mark.

He noticed her concentration and stepped back, taking off his cloak and throwing it on a chair nearby. Then he picked up another volume which lay close beside her on the bench.

‘Thomas, mind your fingers don’t soil that, for it’s a work of great importance for Sir Malcolm Pirrie’s library.

‘Have no fear, Iz,’ said Thomas quietly, ‘I’ll take care.’

He fell silent as he examined it, a small volume she had finished the day before, in dark calf skin, blind tooled with twining tree branches of her own fashioning.

‘Isobel, this is beautiful work indeed,’ said Thomas, catching her eye as she looked up at him, the last tiny piece of gold safely nestling in position. She placed her hands on her back and stretched from her bent position. ‘Is this really by your own hand?’ Thomas continued.

‘Why do you ask, you impudent wretch?’ said Isobel in mock anger, rising from her stool and smiling at him. ‘You know it’s mine. Do you doubt me capable of such work?’

‘No, Iz,’ he said, looking at her with no glimmer of irony or his usual gentle mockery of her. ‘Forgive my moment of disbelief.’ He stood looking at her, still holding the volume in his hand. ‘I find you as gifted as you are beautiful. Am I not most fortunate to have you as my sister?’

He came close to her and reached for her hand, squeezing it and saying quietly, as if to himself, ‘That I should not see such riches under this roof.’

Isobel felt herself colour, for this was Thomas in a different mood.

‘I think you’ve taken a drop too much this evening, Thomas,’ she laughed, plucking her hand from his and, snatching up a small horsehair brush from the bench, she swept it over his cheek and nose.

‘You wicked wench,’ he chuckled, dodging away from her waving hand and laughing. But she was flattered at the same time to receive his praise, for this was Thomas, her clever but mischievous adopted brother whom she loved dearly.

Orphaned at the age of ten, the son of a surgeon-apothecary and Helen Ramsay, Isobel’s mother’s young cousin, Thomas Aikenhead had been taken in by her parents, there being no other blood kin to offer him a home. David and Jean Fletcher had welcomed him with open hearts, feeling themselves blessed by this addition to their family, three other boy

infants having lived no more than a few months each. Isobel, their robust daughter was a child of just eight years when Thomas came to them.

At first he was quiet and sad, forlorn at the loss of his parents so suddenly taken together of fever. He went to school each day, as his father had left him a small sum to pay for his education. At night he would retire to the corner of the parlour and read. Soon, however, David Fletcher's busy bookbinding workshop and the treasures of printed material therein excited Thomas's interest, that and the eager, earnest companionship of his new little sister Isobel. He seemed to enjoy their times together, indulging her love of card games and stories of any sort which he would read to her.

'Thomas, what will you be when you're grown?' she had asked him once when he was around twelve years of age.

'I think I've a mind to be a physician,' he said, pausing as he dealt a hand of cards. She loved it when he shared his thoughts with her, as though she were a real companion and not just a weak-minded child.

'But would you not wish to be a Minister of the Kirk, as you're so clever and learned in your studies?'

'No, indeed, what a thought. I'd rather be boiled alive than spend my life chanting mumbo-jumbo and driving everyone mad with boredom.'

'Thomas, how can you say such things? Don't you fear God?'

'Aye, I do I suppose,' he replied, 'but I've no wish to be one of His ministers. Just think, why has He the need of ministers at all, if He's omnipotent?'

Isobel could say nothing, for her sense told her to fear something in Thomas's wayward talk.

She loved him for the kind brother he had become. Lively and quick-witted and a ready scholar, he had followed his dead father's wish and matriculated at the University at seventeen. The Fletchers were proud of their adopted son who pursued his studies with ardour, being gone from the house early in the morning and returning late on occasions, after several hours in the tavern with his companions. Sometimes he was fired up on his return with the legacy of their debating. He said they probed subjects both philosophical and metaphysical and Isobel became aware of a certain recklessness in his manner and his opinions. He spent a good deal of his time in the furious composition of essays and pamphlets expounding his theories and beliefs. He had to curb his desire to discuss such matters in the company of Isobel's mother, although sometimes it was more than he could do to restrain himself.

‘Poor Mistress Johnson,’ said Jean Fletcher one day, as they sat down at table together at midday. ‘She is doomed by the sins of that wicked husband of hers, for that’s surely how she came by her affliction.’

‘What nonsense,’ said Thomas, ‘Mistress Johnson is sick of an ague of the body. Is the woman not virtuous in her own right? Why should God punish her? Life is driven only by the ups and downs of fortune, not by God’s idle whims.’

‘Thomas, don’t speak such heresies at this table,’ said Jean Fletcher, pausing with her ladle in the air. ‘We live by the grace of God. He only knows what will befall us.’

‘Aye, so we’re told by the wise ministers of the Kirk, full many a day,’ said Thomas, mocking.

‘The Scriptures tell us so,’ said Jean Fletcher, a note of outrage straining in her throat.

‘Thomas, would you not tax Jean in the midst of her serving, or we’ll never eat,’ said David Fletcher laughing. ‘I’ve a deal of work to be done this afternoon.’

‘Husband, counsel him, will you not,’ said Isobel’s mother, her voice rising. ‘I’ll have no godless talk in this house.’

‘Forgive me, Mother,’ said Thomas contrite, though he glanced at Isobel with a wink, while her mother splashed broth into the bowls.

‘And you’ve not to lead the lassie astray with your wicked ideas, Thomas.’

‘Jean, Jean,’ said David Fletcher, ‘be still. The lad speaks in jest. And surely in our house, at our own table we are free to think and talk as we please, even though out of doors we must take heed not to be heard.’

Isobel tried to share her father’s view, but there was the fate of the sinful or even the unwary to fear. The sight of the stocks, which daily imprisoned new sinners, guilty of stealing or lying or wicked thoughts, or those sack-clothed and shamed for misdemeanours, publicly displayed in their humiliation by the Tolbooth. Filth-spattered beggars and even more respectable folk she had seen shackled there. She feared for Thomas’s loose and carefree words and was glad when he was safe indoors of an evening as he was now.

‘You’re drunk, Thomas,’ she said again as they stood together in the workshop that night.

‘No Iz. The ale makes me see life more clearly. We had all manner of talk tonight, even talk of pretty lassies, like you. There are some of my acquaintance who admire you greatly, you know. They have seen you about your errands on the High Street. But what’s this I hear of a certain minister’s son who is more than a little taken by you?’

Isobel blushed deeply and Thomas laughed.

‘Beware, Iz of these holy men. They’re never happier than when they’re punishing others, or even themselves for some trifle or other, miserable creatures that think all happiness a sin. Some are so severe in their holiness they would chill your very blood. Beware, beware of this John Wyllie,’ he laughed.

‘Thomas,’ said Isobel, finding herself unusually irked by his talk. ‘You are unjust. You have not met him. He is not —’

‘Ah ha!’ said Thomas, ‘I see it’s serious indeed. But in truth Iz, I think you’d best beware of all men whether they’re dour preachers, buffoons or charlatans. Take one of our party tonight, Mungo Craig, for instance. He craves an introduction to you, though I confess I’m not sure of the fellow, changeable as the wind, a shifting rascal I think, though he’s a genial enough companion in the tavern.’

‘Come Thomas, enough,’ said Isobel, snuffing out one of the candles and picking up the other. ‘I’ll get you some supper.’

‘What a fortunate man he’ll be, the one who wins you, Iz,’ Thomas said, encircling her with one arm and retrieving his cloak with the other, as they left the workshop.

Isobel thought no more of Thomas’s teasing until that same Mungo Craig presented himself the next week at the workshop and asked David Fletcher’s permission to speak to her. She disliked his looks and manners from the start and refused his offer to take a walk with him, on the pretext of not being able to leave her work. She was glad also of her father’s presence in the workshop at the far bench.

There was something of the fox about Mungo Craig, his features pointed and his eyes aslant and far apart on his narrow head, giving him the appearance of one who could look in opposite directions at the same time. He bowed to her obsequiously and taking off his hat revealed a curled wig which Isobel thought extravagant for one who was supposed to be a student of divinity. She had to admit to some surprise that Thomas could have entertained such a man and hoped that he would find no further cause to visit.

‘Mistress Fletcher, it is a pleasure to meet you,’ said Mungo Craig, in an undertone no doubt adopted to ensure a measure of confidentiality in the company of her father. He seemed incapable of straightening up, maintaining a curve in his back in the belief perhaps that it marked his attentiveness to her. ‘If you would have the leisure to walk out some time?’ he questioned.

‘Master Craig,’ she replied, with an effort to convey at least some show of civility, ‘I’m much occupied at the moment.’

‘Of course, of course,’ he said, bowing again, ‘but another day, perhaps, when you find yourself a little freer perhaps?’

‘Not for the foreseeable time,’ said Isobel too curtly, she knew.

‘I see,’ he said, with a flicker of his slanted eyes. ‘Then I’ll take up no more of your day.’ But instead of taking his leave, he crept closer to Isobel, breathing above her shoulder where she sat and whispered in her ear. ‘I have some counsel for you, Mistress. Mind you well that brother of yours, Aikenhead, if that’s what he is in truth, for he sails close to the wind. You’d best tell him to heed his tongue for it may land him in trouble.’

He turned quickly from her, replaced his hat and moved his sinuous body towards the doorway, slipping out through the small gap he had created. The door shut with a crash.

Her father looked up at her from his. ‘There’s one heart you’ve broken already, lassie. You were a mite uncivil to the poor man,’ he said.

‘But father, I’ve no liking for him, even though he would claim to be a friend to Thomas. Did you not see him as he fawned and cringed in his courtesies? Would you have me encourage a man like that? And did you not hear what he said of Thomas?’

‘I heard little of what he said,’ replied her father. ‘But you’ll not be easy beguiled, nor easy to please, I think. Just have some pity for the hearts of those who dote on you, lassie.’ And he bent again to his work with no further talk.

Isobel was piqued and surprised at her father’s disapproval of her conduct and wondered at his notion that she should bestow her affections on any who sought them. Perhaps his remarks were made more to protect John, whom Isobel knew her father regarded highly. But there could be no thought in her head ever of wounding John. How could her father think it?

Still, the unsettling words of Mungo Craig stayed with her well into the night. As she lay in bed, she thought again of his narrow lips as they whispered the warning, ‘Mind you well that brother of yours...’

The bell of the Tron Kirk struck five. A snell east wind buffeted the High Street, whirling over the cobbles and dispersing the stink from the gutters. John was not glad to be out, but his errand was urgent, as he was keen to acquire the book, a rare translation of a work by Phocylides which he needed for his studies. It was Mungo Craig who had informed him that one Patrick Middletoyne possessed a copy of this rare volume. Mungo, with unusual insistence, had suggested that they should seek him out in Cleriheugh's Tavern that evening. So John agreed to go with him, not wholly reluctantly, as his recent encounters with the Fletchers had revealed to him the possible pleasures of social talk. Cleriheugh's Tavern was much frequented by students, though he had never been over its threshold. It lay within a cobbled square of tall tenement houses, blackened with soot in the day and gloomily dark at night, though the ground floor of the tavern glowed with light from within.

John followed Mungo Craig as he lifted the latch of the door to reveal a low roofed, yellow-walled tunnel full of smoke. This long room extended to the back of the building with a number of smaller chambers adjoining. A fire flickered in the grate near the entrance while groups of men sat mostly engaged in conversation, occasionally punctuated with loud laughs. It appeared that some of the customers were lawyers or clerks, by the look of their black coats and periwigs, and then as he peered through the gloom, over on one side John recognised a group of his fellow students from College.

'Salvete, iuvenes,' cried Mungo in their direction, but all members of the group were listening with some attention to a fair-haired young man with a keen, intelligent face and a self-assured manner who was addressing them in strident and eager tones.

'The Bible?' he was exclaiming, his eyes bright and bold, 'that list of fanciful nonsense, mere ridiculous myth.'

'But, Thomas,' one of the party interrupted. 'The Scriptures have all the weight of history behind them. They are the testimony of learned men.'

'I'm amazed,' said the young man, with a sardonic smile, 'that the world has so long been deluded by this rhapsody of feigned and ill-invented nonsense. Take the miracles of Jesus, for instance. Cheap tricks, magic no doubt, to hoodwink the likes of us and those foolish, witless fishermen who kept him company.'

Someone snorted and the young man laughed out loud. John was shocked to his soul to hear these outrageous slanders, mouthed in so braggart and offensive a manner.

‘Well, Master Aikenhead,’ burst in Mungo Craig, approaching the table where the party was assembled, ‘you outdo yourself tonight. The Scriptures are the word of God. In doubting their truth, you surely must doubt God Himself?’

‘No indeed. That’s not my meaning at all,’ said the young man. ‘I doubt the myths which are sold to us as God’s truths. These scriptures are merely works of colourful imagination. Man’s imagination, played upon by cunning politicians or magicians can lead to belief in almost anything,’ continued this outrageous blasphemer.

John felt his heart pound with the shock of what he was hearing. Why did no one speak out? How could they listen with no challenge to this blasphemy? He could not hold his tongue.

‘Sir, your words are an offence to any right thinking man, an insult to the true religion and the word of God,’ he said, stepping forward.

‘Well said, sir,’ came a voice from a nearby group of soberly dressed older men with the look of scholars or lawyers about them. This interjection was supported by murmurs of assent from others in the company. John was glad for this affirmation in an unfamiliar place where he now knew that all eyes were upon him. He had been alarmed, however, to hear his own voice ring out in a hectoring tone, too much like that of his father.

‘Sir, I don’t think I know you, though I feel I should,’ said the young man, looking up, rising from his seat. ‘Thomas Aikenhead,’ he announced and offered his hand.

‘And you proudly state your name to the world, you impudent young fool,’ exclaimed the speaker from the next table who had supported John’s protest. ‘I would fain keep that secret, if I were you sir,’ he added, rising from his seat and making his way to the door, along with several of his companions.

‘Master Aikenhead,’ said John, feeling his courage rise on the wave of approval from the majority in the house, ‘I cannot shake the hand of a man who openly blasphemes and takes the name of the Lord in vain.’

‘See here, Aikenhead,’ remarked Mungo Craig, rubbing his hands with some excitement it seemed. ‘This gentleman will not stand so readily for your atheistical outrages.’

‘Master Craig,’ replied Aikenhead, with a look of surprise and annoyance, ‘you yourself have engaged with many of these arguments yourself, have you not? Dabbling in Descartes, Hobbes and the infamous Archibald Pitcairne himself, I hear. I seem to recall you propounding the beliefs of a Socinian, only the other day.’

Others at the table chorused their agreement in response to this as Mungo Craig waved his hand to dismiss the accusation. So here was more proof, if any were needed, of

the hypocrisy of Mungo Craig, thought John. The man was clearly quite happy to mouth the views of heretics and atheists whilst proclaiming himself a devout aspiring minister of the Kirk.

‘Oh come now, man,’ said Aikenhead to John again. ‘We are seekers after truth. Perhaps this is even Master Mungo Craig’s intent.’

‘I’ll not be drawn into your heresies, Aikenhead,’ said Mungo Craig with another dismissive wave of the hand.

Thomas Aikenhead simply smiled and turned again to John. ‘I wish only to provoke discussion, to goad these unthinking fellows into an enquiry, through reason to veracity. Come, join us please. You’re a man of the College, and I think I recognise you now.’

‘John Wyllie,’ he announced to the assembled company, still refusing to shake Aikenhead’s hand, ‘and it is Patrick Middletoyne that I seek.’

‘Sir, you are heartily welcome and I am gratified to meet you at last,’ replied Thomas Aikenhead, seeming unoffended by John’s manner towards him, ‘and may I present you to the company.’

John had no time in which to ponder the significance of Thomas Aikenhead’s remark before he was introduced to Patrick Middletoyne, a skinny, ascetic young man, with a pile of books at his side, who reached to shake John’s hand and provided him straight away with the promised volume. Allen Ferguson, Mungo Craig’s cousin was one of the party too and raised his cup to John in a friendly drunken gesture of welcome. Aikenhead and the others tried to ply John with drink, but he was steadfast against it.

‘Cold water does not make for a warm heart,’ said Aikenhead jovially, ‘especially on a night like this. Oh, to be in the place that famous fabler Ezra calls Hell to warm myself.’ His fellows laughed loudly at this comment.

John, suffering acute discomfort in this company and their outrageous talk, sought an early opportunity to excuse himself. Soon, however, the conversation moved to other topics of a less provocative nature. One of the party, a medical man started on an account of the latest cures for fever and agues. Thomas Aikenhead listened with great attentiveness, offering wise and astute remarks, which belied John’s earlier impression of the young man as a foolish provocateur intent on shocking through his profanity. Another of the group was in drink, John could see, his fresh red face dotted with perspiration. He was extolling the beautiful virtues of various young women he had had the fortune to encounter recently.

‘I have seen the rarest creature, this very day,’ he slurred. ‘Alighting from a carriage in the Canongate. You should see her, gentlemen, Mistress Henrietta Murray. Such beauty!’

Some of the others laughed loudly. ‘Were you not enamoured of a different lassie last week?’ said someone.

‘But, Thomas,’ said Patrick Middletoyne, ‘I’m serious when I say that your sister, or she that you call your sister, is the most beautiful girl in this city by far.’

‘Oh, Isobel, why yes, she is of course,’ said Thomas Aikenhead smiling, but with no touch of the licentiousness of the previous remarks. ‘Though she is not my real sister, she has been better than any sister to me. I was orphaned at a young age. There are no kinder people in the world than David and Jean Fletcher and no lovelier woman than their daughter Isobel.’

The shock of this revelation struck John like a blow to the head. His mind struggled for a moment to make sense of the facts. This then was Isobel’s Thomas, he of whom she had spoken. How could it be that the Fletcher family could harbour a renegade such as Thomas Aikenhead, an ungodly young man or perhaps simply one of outrageous foolishness? Worse still, he had been brought up in their house. He hoped in his heart that Thomas Aikenhead’s mischievous and wicked slanders did not reflect a truly depraved and sinful disposition.

At the mention of Isobel’s name, John noted also a change in the behaviour of Mungo Craig, who quaffed his drink and said suddenly with a note of disgust,

‘I think your Mistress Isobel Fletcher holds a mighty proud opinion of herself, to be sure, and she only a person of lowly station, a mere craftswoman. Nor is she a beauty to my eyes.’

Thomas Aikenhead frowned. ‘I wonder, Master Craig, if you speak from the hurt of Mistress Fletcher’s indifference to your charms,’ he said almost under his breath.

Craig leapt to his feet. ‘I dislike your loose tongue, Aikenhead,’ he spluttered, his eyes narrowing to a venomous stare. ‘You must watch it more closely, else it be plucked from your mouth! I take my leave of you, gentlemen. Good night,’ and with that he was gone.

‘I fear his attentions to my sister were not much appreciated by her,’ said Thomas quietly and the others exchanged some laughter at Mungo’s expense, which John could not help inwardly sharing. But it made him uneasy to hear gossip of Isobel and he was stabbed with the jealous knowledge of how much admiration she provoked in others.

Some time later, John rose to take his leave, a little unwillingly, he found, for he longed to hear more of Isobel and found himself not altogether displeased by the lively rumbustiousness of the company, in spite of the earlier tensions. Thomas Aikenhead and Patrick Middletoyne too made ready to depart.

‘We must leave you, gentlemen,’ Thomas announced and the three made their way out. Near the door, Thomas took John’s arm and spoke to him with surprising friendliness and familiarity.

‘May we meet again, Master Wyllie? I think you are acquainted with my sister, for she has spoken of you. I know that I have offended you tonight, for which I humbly beg your pardon. But my talk comes from the struggles and vexations I have with understanding matters of faith and truth. I have been reading many interesting, nay dangerous works, which have further stirred my thoughts and doubts. I would welcome a chance to discuss with you the refutation of some of these views, you who are not so tainted with their influence.’

John found himself taken aback by this approach, unable to answer immediately, thinking only of how his father would prefer him to consort with Satan himself than with the likes of Thomas Aikenhead. Yet, there was something courageous and incisive about this young man, which exposed the barrenness of his own unquestioning beliefs. Though he was familiar with some of the atheistical writings mentioned during the talk of the evening, the confines of his father’s views and, he suspected, his own intellectual cowardice did not allow him to stray from orthodoxy. Doubts and worries he certainly had, and deep misgivings about the conduct of the church in its rigid regulation and punishment of human frailty, but to question the existence of the Divine and the Holy Trinity was unthinkable to him.

‘Master Aikenhead, I would welcome the opportunity of more converse,’ he found himself saying, as they left the warmth of the tavern. They stepped out into the windblown street where the darkness of night had already descended. John pulled his cloak around him against the cold, not relishing the miles of his journey home.

Suddenly the light of a lantern flashed towards them and there was a sound of heavy boots upon the cobbled square. A group of dark cloaked men was approaching and John thought he saw the glint of metal, swords or daggers as they drew nearer and revealed themselves to be a band of fusiliers.

‘Is there one Thomas Aikenhead in this company?’ called one of them.

‘Aye,’ said Thomas, stepping forward, ‘and who is it that seeks me?’

There was no reply but in a sudden advance, two of the men charged at Thomas and grabbed him roughly by the arms. He struggled for a moment but desisted when he saw that he was overpowered.

‘What’s this?’ John said, once he had rallied his thoughts enough to speak.

‘Thomas Aikenhead,’ said one of the militiamen, an officer who followed behind those who now held Thomas fast. He removed a rolled up paper from his jerkin and read

from it. ‘Thomas Aikenhead, on the orders of the Lord Advocate, you are hereby arrested for your vicious slanders and blasphemies against the Lord God Almighty and the Holy Trinity. You have broken the holy laws of the Kirk and of the land and must take the consequences.’

‘Why, man, this is nonsense,’ said Thomas with a note of outrage. ‘From whence comes this charge? Who has laid this upon me?’

‘I know nothing of that,’ said the officer. ‘You must go along with us to the Tolbooth. Come quietly, or we shall make sure you do.’

Patrick Middletoyne took a few steps back and withdrew into the shadows away from the light of the lantern.

‘What’s to be done?’ John said in an urgent whisper to Middletoyne.

‘Go home,’ he replied stepping back out of the lantern glow. ‘There is nothing we can do. He should have had a wiser and a more guarded tongue. We must look to ourselves, for we were of his company. For God’s sake get you gone.’

John knew that he should have run straightway to David Fletcher’s house. He should have roused them all with the news of Thomas’s arrest. He should have offered succour and support to them and to Isobel. But instead, he shrank away in the dark, stumbling his way home over the dark miles and creeping into his chamber unnoticed, tortured by the thought of Isobel and her parents and their trials yet to come.

All night long his mind churned with indecision, battled with warring thoughts. Should he go to Isobel and her parents and commiserate with them, knowing the nature of the seriousness of Thomas’s crime? Thomas would surely be sackclothed or imprisoned for his outrageous statements and the offences he had committed. John’s other fear was of his father’s discovery of his continued connection with the Fletchers, though he hoped daily for the chance to break free from the minister’s bullying hold on him. He had already written to a number of parish ministers and even the Headmaster of his old grammar school enquiring about employment. Though he was firm in his resolve to stand up to his father’s spite and fury, he could not possibly plead that Thomas was innocent of this impiety. God’s laws must be obeyed and the Kirk was clear on punishment for blasphemous and heretical acts and declamations.

He woke the next day still feeling the weight of misery upon him and yearned to see Isobel. Their next meeting was arranged for the day after next. He wished beyond anything to speak to her, now, immediately, to gain her reassurance that she was not an adherent of the atheistic views expressed by her adopted brother. He was impelled also to know more of Thomas and to understand the development of his apostasy. There was his other fear, that

Isobel too spurned the teachings of the Kirk and the holy Scriptures. But how he longed to see her face, to speak but a few words to her. Then he thought how little was their chance of renewing the pleasures of their earlier meetings, now that this terrible thing had come to pass.

His depression stayed with him all day and he hid in his chamber. He pleaded illness when Bessie tapped on the door, telling him that he should be in town and at the University. He would have taken any pains to avoid an exchange with his father in this state, but that evening John heard the voice summoning to him to the parlour and he knew that he had no choice but to attend. Now that he felt the hope of Isobel slipping from him, he was conscious also of a weakening of his resolve, a return of his pathetic state of submission. He fell on his knees and prayed for strength, but was struck by the profanity of his plea to God, for the power to defy his father. 'Honour thy father and thy mother' rang in his head like a terrible taunt. He could hear Bessie clattering dishes in the kitchen but his father's unusual desire to converse was clearly driven by something which would not wait till the appointed hour for supper.

John entered the parlour to find his father in his chair by the fire, holding a printed paper in his fist.

'Come, sir,' he said sternly, 'Come here and answer this charge. This paper was brought to me by one of the elders newly returned from the town. It has your name upon it.'

'I know of no paper, sir,' said John truthfully.

'Be silent! You know, no doubt of the crime of blasphemy,' he said. 'And you know that the Act of Parliament of 1661 states clearly that any person not being distracted in his wits who should rail upon or curse or deny God will be sentenced to death?'

John felt the bile rise to his throat.

'And I believe you know that a student of the University is presently under arrest on such a charge,' he continued. 'You know this blasphemer Aikenhead? Look here upon this paper.'

The Reverend Wyllie thrust the broadsheet at John who with fearful eagerness scanned its contents. It stated that Thomas Aikenhead was to be tried for his life for blasphemy. The Lord Advocate had ordered this arrest acting on information given by several witnesses, but primarily on the strength of a deposition by one Mungo Craig. Sickened, John looked at the foot of the bill and discovered, as his father had stated, his own name at the end of a list of ten others.

'Well?' demanded the Reverend Wyllie impatiently. 'Do you know this blasphemer?'

‘Aye sir,’ John admitted thinking how little point there would be in dissembling. ‘I have met him but once. We are not well acquainted.’

‘I am gratified to hear it,’ said his father, ‘for he will hang for his crime, as is fitting.’

‘But, sir,’ John attempted to say, only to be hushed by his father’s unblinking stare.

‘I hope that you have been following my instruction to avoid the wild words of these atheists, those who have inflamed the mind of this young devil. I mean the heretic ramblings of Descartes and Hobbes.’

As his father ranted, John’s thoughts turned to the dissembling Mungo Craig. His fellow student must surely have prepared his deposition well in advance of the meeting in the tavern that night. Craig had arranged for John’s presence there, knowing that he would likely prove a vocal and public critic of Thomas’s views. Mungo Craig had staged a public display well suited to his purposes. Piqued by his rejection by Isobel and ridiculed by his fellows for it, he had sought and found a terrible revenge.

Only half listening to his father’s railing, John made his dishonest denial of knowledge of heretical works. He did not have the courage or strength to meet his father’s outrage by a truthful admission, having some knowledge of those and other works which were held in the College library but the Kirk would have burned. He wondered at his father’s reaction, if he had even a hint of John’s most recent reading habits, the poetry he had devoured since Isobel had lent him her volume of verse.

‘There is a wicked spate of atheistical thought abounding, impiety and profanity in this land,’ continued his father, ‘and we true godly men must stand against it. The Lord Advocate himself will lead us in this fight. I rejoice to see that your name is among those witnesses to denounce the blasphemer.’

As he spoke those last words, there was a twitch of his lip which John took to signify a hint of gratification and even pride at this act of righteousness. This was the only time in his life that John could ever remember having received his father’s approbation. But all he felt was desolation and disgust that such a thing should provoke his father’s approval.

‘There are those who will plead in his defence,’ continued his father, ‘but he must hang as an example. I hope you will take note of this, in your moments of weakness.’

The Reverend Wyllie paused at last. Taking a deep breath and holding fast to the little courage he could muster, John spoke up.

‘Thomas Aikenhead is guilty of blaspheming unwisely and causing offence, but I do not think that these foolish statements truly represent his beliefs. I think he is a serious

scholar engaged in exploring his doubts. He should be punished, of course for his blasphemy, but to take his life.....’

A moment later, John was reeling from the blow to the head with which his father had felled him, his defence of Thomas left unfinished.

‘Doubts? There are no doubts in the minds of the godly! I will not have such filth spoken in this house. Go against the laws of God and you will be struck down. There is no room, no excuse for errors of judgement. Everywhere I look,’ and here his voice rose to a note of near hysteria, ‘there is laxity of morals and standards and wicked appeals to reason. And even now, this creeps in through the mouths of some of the ministry. Do not talk to me of excuses.’

John raised himself to his feet, his cheek smarting in pain and shame at his feeble response to this bullying. But at the same time he still felt this curious new grain of determination to follow through his earlier resolve to escape. He knew he could not match his father in physical power and he saw now that such an escape could be achieved only through guile and dissembling.

‘And there is one minister, whom I had the misfortune to meet in the parish of Colinton, a man who shamelessly spouts liberal nonsense’ his father continued. ‘He, this man who calls himself a minister of the Kirk, this Wallace, would set up a school in the parish. I dread to think of his influence on the minds of the young and ignorant.’

John quaked inwardly to hear this name as one of those to whom he had applied for employment. Remembering his earlier resolve, however and preparing himself for another blow, he steeled himself to respond. ‘But wasn’t this minister duly elected, just as you were?’

His father spluttered with fury at the remark. ‘Do not presume to jest with me,’ he cried and John saw his fist poised, but instead his voice rose to a shout. ‘We will root out these evil profanities and cleave to the straight path given in the holy Scriptures for the godly commonwealth. Even as we speak there is a search in the streets of Edinburgh to confiscate all atheistical, erroneous, profane and vicious literature from all booksellers and those who associate with them.’

He picked up the broadsheet again and waved it in the air in front of John’s face.

‘I see that this blasphemer lives in the household of Fletcher the bookbinder. I knew that the man was a likely heretic. Well, he had best pack up his business forthwith. He’ll be chased from the town for his association with the vile criminal. Who knows but he learned his wickedness at the hearth of this same Fletcher.’

John felt a sickness rise in his stomach and a desperate urgency to escape from his father's presence, but the Reverend Wyllie gave no sign of drawing to a close. In fact he seemed aroused to a frenzy of excitement when he started on the denunciation of Isobel.

'That Jezebel, his daughter, openly flaunting herself, unaccompanied, with no sense of modesty. No better than a harlot!'

He came close to John, the spittle gathering at the edge of his mouth, his eyes rolling in his incantation of the well-remembered lines, ' "And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication." Revelation Chapter 17, Chapter 4.'

'Please, sir,' said John, his resistance crushed, his remaining desire only to retreat before the onslaught. 'I am not well. I must retire.'

The Reverend Wyllie looked at John in disgust for a moment and then waved him away.

'As you wish. You may go without supper. It may purge your body and your mind, to go without sustenance for a while. On your knees pray that you may be saved from sin, but first take an oath on the holy book,' his father said in a low voice, rising from his place. He took the heavy volume from its shelf and laid it on the table in front of John.

'Father, I must be excused,' said John weakly, his mind a torrent of imaginings, of visions of what might come to pass, Thomas in chains and Isobel....'

'No, you will not be excused,' roared the Reverend Wyllie. 'You must obey the Lord's command. You must protect your soul from further pollution by heretics. Swear, swear now as God is your witness that you will never again go near the house of these Fletchers.'