

Chapter 7 – November 1696

‘Isobel!’ It was her mother’s voice calling from upstairs. Though the hour was early and the morning dark, Isobel was already at her bench in the workshop, as she had an important piece under way which she hoped to complete that day.

‘Aye mother, what’s amiss?’

Her mother stood at the door of the workshop. ‘There’s no sign of Thomas this morning. You have not heard him go out early?’

‘No mother,’ replied Isobel. ‘Did he not come back last night? Mayhap he has stayed at the house of one of his friends.’

‘It’s not like Thomas to be intemperate,’ said Jean Fletcher, ‘or to stay out all night.’

Isobel felt a shiver of guilt to know and keep hidden from her mother Thomas’s great liking for the tavern. But in truth he had never stayed from home for the whole night before.

David Fletcher appeared behind Jean in the doorway. ‘Morning to you, lassie,’ he called to Isobel. Then he drew his wife to him in an embrace. ‘Don’t fret after Thomas. He’s a grown man and well used to the streets.’

‘I cannot help myself, David. There’s something not right.’

‘He’ll be back soon no doubt, perhaps a little the worse for the drink. He’s a steady lad for all his loud opinions,’ he said, picking up his apron and gathering the materials he needed for his first task of the day, a bag of flour and a bowl to mix paste. ‘He’ll be here by and by.’

In spite of her father’s unworried tone, Isobel sensed that his real mood was more anxious than he would admit, as she twice saw him pause in his work and stare towards the door at the sound of passers by on the street outside. Then he rose from his bench and rummaged on a shelf, knocking over several pots of ink with a clatter. Isobel flinched at the sudden noise and her hand jerked, causing her knife blade to slip.

‘Father, can you not be at peace? You’ve made me ruin this board.’ He said nothing and she felt guilt at her pettish tone. They worked on in silence with unspoken fears loading the air with unease. The tension was ruptured by a loud rap at the door and the sound of men’s voices. David Fletcher dropped the wooden spatula from his hand with a clunk on to the bench and went to the door. Two men, dressed in the grey coats of the town guard stood there.

‘Is this the lodging of Thomas Aikenhead?’ said the taller of the two men, lean and thin-faced with close-set eyes.

‘Aye, it is,’ said Isobel’s father. Her mind ran with awful possibilities. Thomas was dead, attacked in the street by ruffians or the roving vagabonds who roamed the city at night on the lookout for those out late with coins in their pockets or saleable clothes on their backs. Dear God, she prayed in her head, let him not be hurt. But the manner of this man was not that of one charged with breaking news of a tragedy of this nature.

‘I must tell ye that Thomas Aikenhead is arrested and it now in the Tolbooth.’

‘Arrested?’ said her father, in a voice strangely subdued. ‘How can he be arrested?’

Isobel ran to her father’s side at the doorway. ‘On what charge is he taken?’ she asked, though the men’s faces were grim and closed to her.

‘‘Tis for blasphemy against the holy word of God,’ replied the first man, after a pause.

‘But where? How did this come about?’ she said, wanting to strike the man’s blank face in her anguish to know.

‘For God’s sake, tell us,’ said David Fletcher. ‘Did you take him?’

The lean-faced man spoke up. ‘We do as we’re bid, to bring the message tae ye, that’s all. But some say he’s for hanging.’

‘But can we go to him?’ cried Isobel.

‘Aye,’ said the lean-faced man. ‘Best pray for him an’ all.’

A short time later, Jean Fletcher hurriedly bundled some bread and cheese, a bottle of ale and a clean shirt inside a plaid, in her haste knocking over and breaking an earthenware pot which caused her to weep.

‘My dear wife,’ said David Fletcher, taking her gently by the arm, ‘calm yourself.’ His voice was steadier now. ‘Have no fear. The foolish lad has provoked some argument in the tavern. He’s rash and outspoken, it’s true. He may suffer sackclothing for it, if his words were too wild for the pious around him.’

‘Aye, perhaps it will teach him to better guard his tongue,’ said Jean Fletcher wiping her eyes and trying to smile at her husband.

‘Come lassie,’ said David Fletcher to Isobel as she wrapped her plaid about her head. With a deep breath and an inward prayer for courage, Isobel took her mother’s arm and they departed together.

They hurried up West Bow, down the Lawnmarket to the prison in the Tolbooth where Thomas was held. Isobel was full of dread at the thought of entering such a place, but more of the consequences of Thomas’s crime. At the top of a narrow stair, at the side of the high stone building, they were greeted by a grinning turnkey who unlocked the door with a

grind of the key in its socket and led them through a low, stinking passageway in near darkness. Another gaoler unlocked the next iron gate and they stepped through to a further narrow corridor leading to a number of cells, where the shadowy figures of men could just be discerned.

The cell reeked of human excrement and sick, worse by far than the foulest of alleyways and middens in the town. The odour seemed thickened here by the unmoving grey air of the place. By the dim light of a lantern which hung on a chain on the wall outside the cell, they saw Thomas sitting in the corner, his clothes dishevelled, the fatigue of a night in this dismal place drawn on his face. Two others occupied the space, one lying motionless with his face to the wall and the other, an old man, with an oily, grizzled, beard looked up at them for a moment from where he sat, before bowing his head again without a word. The gaoler jangled his keys and grunted to them to enter before retreating back down the passageway where they heard the clank of his key once again. Thomas rose quickly when he saw them and Jean embraced him, weeping.

‘Thomas, my lad, what’s this? What have you done?’ said David Fletcher. ‘Is it truly a charge of blasphemy?’

Thomas released himself from Jean’s grasp and reached out his hand to Isobel with an attempt at a smile of welcome.

‘I’m fool, a perfect fool,’ he said, his voice heavy with gloom, ‘to imagine that we could debate freely in this town. I am indicted on the order of the Lord Advocate and the Lords of the Privy Council for blasphemy. But this blasphemy, as they call it, arises from my reading and study of the works of certain philosophers and deists. We debate these doctrines for the exercise of our minds and for amusement. After all, are we not charged with searching for the truth wherever it may be found, in the minds of men holy and unholy?’

‘But did you really take the name of the Lord in vain, Thomas?’ said Isobel’s mother.

‘I suppose there are some who would have it so. It was tavern talk, foolish jesting in the main. But it seems I’m to be condemned for it,’ said Thomas bowing his head.

Isobel had never seen him reduced like this before, as though the life and the energy had been sapped from him. It frightened her, but perhaps his crushed spirit would aid him now. ‘Thomas, if you repent, sincerely and humbly, surely all will be well,’ she said.

‘Oh Iz,’ he said, ‘I have need of humility, it’s true. In my arrogance I took delight in offending others. I freely admit it and for that I heartily repent.’

He paused and sighed then looked at them with a little of his usual vigour returned. ‘But, though I’m to blame for my own folly, I abhor the act of my sometime friend Mungo

Craig, for it is he who is the chief maker of these accusations against me. He has some of my writings as well. It seems he has passed them into the hands of those who would do me ill.'

'Thomas, to set down such thoughts in pen and ink,' said David Fletcher, 'could you not see the danger in it? How did the man come by them?'

'I do not know,' said Thomas.

At the mention of Mungo Craig, Isobel felt a wave of guilt threaten to overwhelm her. She had thought him a sly and fawning creature the day she had spurned his advances. But surely his spite and desire for revenge could not have led to this? Yet he had warned her, that day in the workshop. She had supposed that his threat was merely a petty ploy to punish her with fear, for her rejection of him. She had intended to tell Thomas, to warn him against further acquaintance with the man, but each day when she thought of it, Thomas was already gone from home. She could have prevented Thomas's humiliation or worse at the hands of this Mungo Craig. Though she was strong in her resolve not to weep, she knew that her face betrayed her anguish.

'Iz, don't be so gloomy on my behalf,' said Thomas, taking her hand again with some tenderness. 'If you fear for me, then my cause will seem hopeless. I'll plead my case, make petitions to the Privy Council, for it need not come to court, I think. I will make my penance publicly and with humility, for indeed I'm not innocent and deserve to be punished.'

'But, Thomas, there's talk of the most terrible of penalties and the Lord Advocate has the power to carry it through. Promise me that you'll guard your reckless tongue.' Isobel squeezed his hand and tried to smile.

'Aye, lad,' said David Fletcher 'for we live in a land where speaking aloud even doubts and troubled thoughts can cost a man his freedom. I know of a lawyer, Master Graham Cunningham, for I have done much work for him. I will seek his counsel. Have courage, Thomas. We will have you out of here.'

'I thank you with all my heart, David. Can you forgive me, all of you, for this disgrace? Can you forgive me for the trouble I've brought upon you?'

Jean Fletcher gave him the cloth-wrapped parcel of food they had brought and Isobel drew out of her bundle a bible and a small prayer book and handed them to Thomas.

'Aye sister, these are fitting for a penitent,' he said, kissing her on the cheek. The Fletchers took their leave with smiles and embraces. Their brave faces disappeared, however, once outside on the High Street again. A broadsheet vendor, his arms full of a bundle of papers barked out a garbled message, incomprehensible to them in their raw-nerved state. The man thrust his wares towards them.

‘Get ye gone, man, with your rubbish,’ said David Fletcher, waving the man away, with an angry gesture. But Isobel thought she had heard him cry something about Thomas and the charges of blasphemy. She hung back for a moment until her parents had started up the road, exchanged a coin for one of the papers, hastily screwing the broadsheet into her pocket for later perusal.

Catching up with her mother, Isobel heard her gasp for breath as she tried to suppress her sobs. Her parents walked, heads bent and eyes cast down on the street. David Fletcher reached to put his hand on his wife’s shoulder, but with a jerk she repulsed him.

‘David, you should have guided him. The foolish lad was bent on mischief. Why did not you not harness his words? You and your own loose heretic talk. You are to blame. He should not have gone to the college to have his mind turned.....’

‘Mother,’ said Isobel, stepping up to her and taking her arm, seeing the hurt on her father’s face, ‘there was no harnessing Thomas’s mind. It’s his nature to question and doubt, to argue and debate. Would you have us gagged and stifled in our own home? You’d have others control our thoughts and minds?’

‘Oh Isobel, not you too, lassie,’ wept Jean Fletcher.

‘Mother, I don’t say Thomas was right to speak as he did, though it’s for God to judge him, not men.’

‘Aye,’ said her father bitterly, ‘but that will never be till the Kirk looses its hold and its meddling ways. Thomas should have known this. He should have known to abide by the rules of the Kirk, for what else can be done in this country?’

‘David, no more,’ said Jean Fletcher, ‘not here.’

‘Mother, we must take heart,’ said Isobel, determined not to give way to despair. ‘Thomas is young and of good character, without a blemish to his name. He is serious and scholarly. The judges will see this.’

‘Oh God, make us not lose him,’ whispered Jean Fletcher and embraced Isobel.

‘Don’t think it, I pray you,’ said Isobel failing in her efforts to control her own tears. They stood for a moment, locked together and Isobel felt the shaking of her mother’s body subside. Isobel released her and taking her father’s arm she drew her parents to her. They walked together in silence back to their house.

Alone in her room, later that night, exhausted and with a throbbing head, Isobel retrieved the broadsheet she had secreted in her pocket. She unfolded the paper and scanned the text, trembling as she read.

Master Thomas Aikenhead is indicted and accused at the instance of Sir James Stewart, Lord Advocate and the order of the Lords of His Majesty's Privy Council of the most heinous crime of blasphemy. On the evidence of several witnesses and a deposition by Master Mungo Craig he must answer the accusation that he did scoff at and ridicule the Holy Scriptures and railed against the being of God and the Blessed Trinity. This crime is contrary to the Act of the King's Parliament 1695 and he will stand trial for his life. Those citizens who stand witness and accuse him are listed herewith.

Isobel's eyes travelled down the list, Patrick Middletoyne, Alasdair Farquahar, James McNeill. Several others were cited too, but at the foot of the list, the last of all, was the name of John Wyllie.

John found himself running, as though a mad horseman came at his heels, gaining on him, intent on trampling him as he fled. There was no pursuer; his father had gone from home early that morning. But his mind was so raw with anxiety at the prospect of a meeting with Isobel, that his desperation created visions and fancies not susceptible to reason. Only the sight of the solid stone walls of the city ahead helped his mind adjust to his purpose.

Isobel would think he had lied when he said he did not know Thomas. The thought drove him almost distracted. That she might think he had deceived her was torture to him. What could he say to her, knowing that Thomas, her adopted brother, was a self-declared atheist and blasphemer deserving of punishment? But the thought of the penalty, the talk of execution, horrified John. Passing through Bristo Port, he tried to calm himself, by plunging his hand into the icy water of a drinking trough and splashing his face to cool the heat of his anguish.

He prayed he would find her alone, though if it came to it, he would face her father and mother too. He would tell them of the sincerity of his sorrow, his regret that Thomas was incarcerated, but he could not condone the crime. He reached the end of Candlemaker's Row, where shopkeepers were opening up, with a banging of shutters and the splash of slops into the running channel of the sloping street. David Fletcher's shop sign was visible from where he stood and within a few moments John was knocking lightly on the door, as though to weaken the shock to Isobel of his arrival. He placed his fingers on the handle. Only this door separated him from her.

She was alone, standing by her bench in the workshop, and looked up as he entered, alerted by his knocking. Her face was pale, her eyes darker than the soft grey he remembered and he thought he saw her lip quiver.

'Isobel,' he said his heart pounding as he stood near the doorway, not daring to come closer to her, 'will you permit me to speak with you? I must talk to you.'

She stared silently at him, her eyes brimming with accusation and hurt.

'Isobel,' he said, hearing the unsteadiness of his voice, 'I did not know, not till too late, that Thomas Aikenhead is the one that you call brother. It shocks me deeply to know of his crime.'

Isobel's face, which he fancied had softened slightly with the first words he uttered, was suddenly a mask, white with fury.

‘How dare you come here like this, you who are named as one of his accusers.’

Her words tore at him like a knife in his flesh. She plucked a paper from the bench and moved with a few swift steps to stand facing him. It was the same broadsheet which his father had presented to him only a few days before. She held it before him at arm’s length and he saw that tears now ran down her cheeks.

‘You denounced him, along with others of your merciless band. His only crime is the foolhardiness of not guarding his tongue.’ Her voice was strained, breaking with anger through her tears.

‘Isobel,’ he said. ‘Please believe me. It was not as you think. He committed a serious crime against God’s law and the laws of the Kirk. He took the Lord’s name in vain. Worse than that, he denied the truth of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Whether spoken in jest or with serious intent, it is a truly heinous crime.’

‘You think so?’ she cried, her tears coming freely. ‘A crime? And did this crime hurt anyone? Is anyone killed? Is anyone harmed by his words?’

‘He denied the existence of the Holy Trinity, Isobel,’ John replied, inwardly pleading for her to relent. Why could she not see the reason and truth of it?

‘And does this make God tremble, do you think, the voice of one young man?’

‘Isobel, please, take care what you say. You will damn your own soul! I beg you.’ John felt despair claw at him. She was slipping away, his power to persuade futile against the force of her anger.

‘Thomas knows he spoke foolishly and repents with all his heart and mind,’ she continued, trembling. ‘The God I know is forgiving and will hear his prayers. He must.’

‘But he has violated the laws of God. You cannot deny it,’ pursued John, praying hopelessly that somehow the strength of his own faith might transmit itself to her. ‘I tried to prevent him from uttering such corruptions in public, in the tavern. You must believe me. Let us pray together for his soul, at least. Please, Isobel, for Thomas’s soul and for yours, which I cherish more than my own.’

There was no holding back now. He could only plead with the strength of the feeling which threatened to overpower him.

‘Isobel, for the love I bear you, please—I love you. I cannot see you mire yourself in sin.’

John stepped towards her, wishing above all else that he could hold her, persuade her, once she was in his arms, but to his horror she recoiled from him, pointing to the door.

‘Get out! I will not pray with you. You ally yourself with cruel and unjust laws, calling them God’s, when they are only the work of vicious men. Those men that say they are His ministers do evil and in God’s name. Is that not more wicked than anything Thomas has done? God alone will judge him for his crime, if it be one. I have felt the love and forgiveness of God in my heart many times. Have not you, or is your heart so filled up with misery and spite? I would rather be with Thomas, rotting in prison with the knowledge of a loving God, than with you and your kind who make God into a vengeful, murderous tyrant. Leave me! Get out! Report what you like of my words. Condemn me to the world as you did Thomas. Shout it loudly abroad if it will feed your soul’s need for godly revenge against heretics, though I am none. But never, never come near me again.’

Now he was lost in every way, in his path to righteousness, in his foolish hope of finding happiness with Isobel. She was lost to him and to God. Taking refuge in the gloom of an alley, away from the street, he wept for her, cursed himself for thinking himself capable of pleading his case, of persuading her of the seriousness of Thomas’s crime. But though Thomas was a blasphemer, he should not die for it. It was barbarous. Why had he not told her this? Why had he not told her that he loathed what the Kirk and the law proposed? He did not know how his name had come to be on that paper as a witness. Why had he not stated this too?

To escape these thoughts he ran from the alley but they beat in his head as he went. Was she the corrupting woman, the fiendish creature his father had described? Was she sent to tempt him from righteousness? It made him sick to think it. Isobel could not be the wicked harlot of his father’s demented accusations. She was the lovely woman that his heart ached for. She was true to her feelings, loyal to her brother, believed in his repentance for his offence. She had declared that she loved God and John believed her absolutely. But now it was too late; he had lost her for ever.

He stopped again, leaning against a gatepost, his chest heaving with the pain of his breath. He bowed his head, but he could no more seek comfort in prayer than fly to the moon. If loving Isobel led the way to his destruction, then he would take that path willingly to the end, would break from the holy, cold, miserable righteousness to which he had been shackled all of his life. What good to strive any more?

His nerves were too battered to go home and he headed instead for the most vile alleyways of the Cowgate, the haunt of thieves, whores and vagabonds. At the opening of one of the closes stood a lone woman. Her head was bare, save for a bunch of grubby lace

loosely pinned to her wild hair. She wore a dirty plaid which half concealed a red gown of some satin stuff. She caught his eye as he was passing and in a few rapid steps she was soon beside him, so near that he smelt an acrid odour of musty cloth and sweat.

‘Come wi me, ma darlin’,’ she said. Her tangled hair framed a dirty face and he saw the white shape of her leg beneath the skirt of her gown. ‘What’s a braw lad like you doin’ here? Come here to my bosom to take your comfort and more besides,’ she said and pulled him closer to her.

He let her lead him down into the darkness of the passageway. He had no will of his own, only a desire to go where chance would take him, without engaging his mind, exhausted as it was with guilt and pain. He was aware of the sharp stink in the alleyway and of other shadowy figures moving in and out of the black holes of doorways in the tall buildings which loomed above his head on either side of the narrow passageway.

‘Let’s see the colour o’ yer money,’ she said, holding out her hand. He fumbled in the pocket of his coat and drew out a silver coin which she grabbed like a hungry bird and stuffed into her bodice. She rubbed against him rousing his desire, so he lifted her skirts and tore at his breeches. It was over quickly in an agony of relief and misery. The woman disappeared instantly into the darkness of the close, leaving him alone in the dank stench of the place. There were no human sounds for a moment, only the ghostly flapping of garments slung across the alley high above, swaying like the dead on the gallows. Then he became aware of the distant rumble of voices and laughter from a tavern close by.

He made his way back down the close to the source of the noise and entered by a low doorway into a basement room with above a dozen men at a long table in the centre. Two looked up at him briefly but with little interest. He bought a bottle of aqua vitae from the landlord, retreating with it to the darkest corner of the place, where only one other customer sat, a soldier in a grimy uniform, leaning his head against the wall, eyes closed, mouth open and snoring.

As soon as John sat down and took his first mouthful from the bottle, the soldier’s eyes snapped open.

‘Can you spare a wee drap?’ said a man. ‘For an auld soldier of King William’s army?’

‘Aye, take some, by all means,’ John said, hoping he would not be joined by any more thirsty comrades.

‘Thank ye kindly, sir,’ he said pouring the liquor into his empty cup. ‘I hae fallen on bad times, ye understand. Whit can I dae, now the wars are all o’er? Where can I gang?’

There's word of a great adventure at the other side o' the world. There's land for the takin' to anyone willing tae work. Do you happen to ken anything on it?'

John had heard tell of the scheme of the Company of Scotland to set up a colony to trade with the Indies, but had little enough knowledge or inclination to engage with the man on the subject. Instead he mumbled an apology for his ignorance and swallowed the rest of the contents of the bottle himself, feeling the nausea rise in his throat with every gulp.

'Steady, young maister,' said the soldier, 'Ye drink like the De'il himself.'

He did not know how he came to be lying in Grey Friars churchyard that night. He supposed he must have walked there from the tavern. He was lucky not to have frozen to death, for the night was frosty and he awoke in his shirt sleeves, there being no sign of his coat, nor indeed his money. The night sky was black but stars ranged over it, dotting its expanse. He tried to rise to his feet, but his limbs were so stiff with cold that he lay paralysed for some moments, realising that he had little feeling in his legs and arms. Close to him was the odour of vomit and his skull was splitting with pain. It was the pain which saved him that night. But for that he might have lain there in a stupour thinking of Isobel and drifting towards death.

At last he struggled to stand up, wondering whether his legs would support his body but found that they moved mechanically along the gritted pathway through the graveyard on to the cobbles of the street. Then he was lurching down the slope to the gateway at Bristo Port and towards the deep darkness beyond. The pounding of his head admitted no thoughts as he staggered on, tripping and falling more than once in potholes in the roadway until he came at last to the black shapes of trees which stood close to the manse. He reached the yard just as the dawn was lightening the sky and squeezed through the scullery window which he had done once as a child. Creeping to his chamber, he fell on the bed, shivering in a cold sweat.

Here he lay tense and wakeful, trying to blot out the memory of the horrible sequence of events. He was alive, when he deserved instead to have perished in the dark churchyard, in the filth of his sin and misery, a fornicator and a drunkard. But he had been spared to endure his life, until such time as God chose to snuff it out. A sinner cannot choose his death any more than a godly man and so he must live. He would salvage the husk of himself and take action. And he knew what that action must be, an immediate escape from his father.

A little later, he heard the stable door opening and the sound of the horse's hooves in the yard. Then came the voices of Old Bessie and his father, a cough and the jingle of harness. When he knew it was safe to rise, he crept out to the yard, his head still pulsing

painfully and nausea churning in his gut. He stumbled to the pump and bent his head under it, sluicing the freezing water, which shocked like the strike of an icy sword on his neck. Old Bessie found him there and shook her head.

‘Maister John, look at the pitiful state o ye. What’s afoot?’

He looked up at her and tried to give her smile of reassurance through his dripping hair.

‘Oh Maister, it’s no like you to tak’ tae the drink.’ Her voice bore no shred of blame and was heavy with sympathy. ‘Come away in tae the kitchen. I’ll gie ye something’ll fix ye.’

He followed her in and sat down heavily at the table, watching as she threw some dried herbs into a pot on the fire. While the steam rose, Old Bessie shuffled up to him, pulling from her apron pocket a letter.

‘A man frae Colinton brought this for ye,’ she said, handing him the paper.

‘My thanks to you, Bessie,’ he said, breaking the seal immediately. The letter was from the Reverend Wallace on behalf of the Kirk Session of the Parish of Colinton, offering him the post of schoolmaster, to start in a week’s time. It was the only reply he had received from all his applications and petitions to other parishes and individuals, but it was all that he needed.

‘This brings good news, Bessie,’ he said, taking up the cup of steaming liquid which she had placed before him. ‘I have the chance of employment.’ He felt the concoction soothe his throat as he drank and ease his stomach a little. ‘May I trouble you for a clean shirt?’

‘It’s nae trouble, Maister John,’ said the old woman shuffling into the hallway towards the linen press.

He returned to his chamber and straightway sat down at the table and took up paper and ink. First he wrote his letter of acceptance of the post to the Reverend Wallace in Colinton but then he started on the more vital petition to the Privy Council. He spent some hours weighing his words with care, composing an argument for clemency in Thomas’s case. Even those who abhorred Thomas Aikenhead’s blasphemy must speak up for compassion and forgiveness in the face of a murderous law. Taking both letters to the inn in the village, he found a messenger who was pleased with the commission and the coins John offered. Now all that remained was to take his leave of his father. He packed his few possessions into a small bundle, some books including Isobel’s volume of verse, some clean linen and a few

other garments, though he now had to make do with a threadbare coat, his best one most likely being hawked somewhere in the city by the thief for a tidy sum.

At the usual hour of his father's return, he took himself to the parlour and sat down with a book of devotions by some pious churchman or other. He must present the right front to his father; his leaving must seem like an act of contrition, a commitment to doing God's work. John rehearsed the words, considering carefully how to lend the correct air of serious commitment to his request. He prayed that these strategies would secure his release for ever from his father's power. Strangely, he managed to assume a calm exterior, part of his mind filled with a cold resolve, while in his heart the corrosion of his loss and despair still burned. No matter, his resolute half was to be put to the test and there was not long to wait. As the Reverend Wyllie entered the parlour, John rose to his feet and addressed him before that glowering presence could shake his will and courage.

'Sir, I wish to tell you of a proposal and a request to you, for which I humbly seek your approval.'

His father looked at him suspiciously, his eyes narrowing but he gestured to John to continue.

'I wish to beg your permission to take up a post as a schoolmaster, sir.'

'Yes,' said his father with no reaction in tone of voice or expression. There was a pause.

'I think myself too full of sin and imperfection to proceed to further studies in divinity,' he continued, inwardly surprised at his measured tone. 'It is my hope that the discipline of teaching in a parish school will allow me to do God's work in a manner which is acceptable to you.'

Still his father said nothing, but John knew that it was safe to continue. Any anger, distaste or disapproval would have burst upon him by now had his father been sufficiently aroused.

'I seek to instil in children devotion in their quest for salvation, through the study of the Scriptures. I believe that I have the will to undertake this holy work, in spite of my imperfections. I will, of course, with all my power, labour to correct my faults and seek the forgiveness of God.'

'Hmm,' said his father which John recognised as the most explicit manifestation of approval of which he was capable, but his mouth tightened.

'And where, I seek to know, will you find such a position?'

‘I have received a reply to an application, an offer to take up a post,’ John said, realising that this information was most likely to rouse his father’s ire with the knowledge of his underhand investigations, particularly in the neighbouring parish, but he forged ahead. ‘As you know, the parish of Colinton has lately made provision for a new school to be established. The Kirk Session has been seeking to appoint a master, as the Reverend Wallace, the minister is not in good health and cannot take on the duties himself.’

‘That man,’ said his father abruptly, ‘I cannot approve of him, a latitudinarian, lax and liberal in his ways.’

John felt his heart pound and his hope begin to shrink, but to his surprise the deep cleft of his father’s frown seemed to relax a little and he paused, appearing to have come to a decision.

‘Well, the man’s influence will wane with his life, for he is not long for this world. If they have need of a schoolmaster, it may as well be you. You lack the strength of piety, but I believe you have been led by true teaching and instruction on the path of righteousness.’

‘Sir,’ John replied, ‘I feel privileged to have known the power of your guidance.’ The words nearly choked him but his father seemed to sense no insincerity.

‘Aye,’ his father nodded, staring hard at him. ‘Your stand against the blasphemer Aikenhead proves that your faith is intact.’

John bowed his head, sickened but relieved at his father’s acquiescence. However, in this last act of submission to his father, he was forced to request some money to tide him over until such time as he would receive payment from his employ.

‘When do you intend to depart?’ the Reverend Wyllie enquired.

‘I thought I might make my way there tomorrow,’ John replied, ‘if you have no objection.’

‘It is my hope that you will do God’s work, righteously and unswervingly,’ said his father by way of response.

‘I will strive to do so with all my strength,’ said John, wondering if his father would at last give him even a begrudging blessing, but there was to be none. The minister gave no sign nor expressed a whisper of loss or regret at their parting, neither that evening nor the next morning. Thus, John was able to walk free from this house. Cold and dreary as his childhood had been, it had been the only home he had known. Now he was to be truly alone. Old Bessie shed a few tears as he bid her goodbye in the yard and she gave him a cloth bundle with some bannocks, cheese and ale for the journey. John took her rough hand in his and thanked her for her years of work on his behalf. She broke into sobs for a moment,

muttering under her breath, 'Aye, always a good laddie, a braw laddie.' He turned away from her and proceeded up the track, never looking back.

After a walk of around two hours, the cold air and the exertion lending a small spark of hope to his step, John entered the parish of Colinton, marked by the broad dyke separating the outfield from the cultivated rigs of the cottars. The cart track widened to a more substantial thoroughfare and a farm cart, pulled by two oxen led by a labouring man, lumbered in front of him. Soon some small cottages came into view and high up on a slight promontory above the village stood the tall stone walls of a castle, three storeys high. The track descended to a river, which he knew was the Water of Leith where he caught a glimpse through the trees of a stone mill, the still waters of the pond behind and the rushing weir to the side. The track by the mill led into what looked like a pleasant tree-lined dell.

The roadway dipped again to a ford then sloped up to where, a hundred paces beyond, stood the parish church, an ancient stone building with a square tower. There was a house nearby which John took to be the manse. Further ahead was a sizeable stone barn with a thatched roof next to the roadway. From the distance he saw two small figures of children entering it by the door at the end. This was perhaps the schoolhouse, as the Reverend Wallace's letter had indicated that it was a converted farm building standing not far from the church. He decided to go there first as there was, he supposed, some instruction in progress. He proceeded to the building and entered by the door through which he had seen the children disappear.

His entry to the large whitewashed schoolroom was unnoticed by the two peasant children, a boy of around seven and a girl some years older, who sat close together on one of the wooden benches. They were absorbed in their scrutiny of a book which the girl held on her knee, turning the pages with reverent care. A third person, a woman in the dress of a servant or labourer stood just behind them.

'Look, Willie,' the girl was saying to the small boy, 'this is the word of God. These are the holy Scriptures. I can read some o' the letters. See, here that says the letter "G" and I'm going to learn to read it all one day.'

There was something in the seriousness of the child's expression that touched John profoundly so that he could not resist the urge to speak to them.

'I'm very pleased to hear it,' he said, causing the three to look up at him with astonished faces.

John too was struck with surprise, for in a quick moment's glance at the face of the servant woman, he knew that they had met before.

The air in the cell was sour as putrid curds and the smell of mould. When Isobel and her parents entered, Thomas rose from the stool in the corner and placing the bible he had been reading upon it, came to them.

‘Dearest Iz, David and Jean, it lifts my spirits to see you here,’ he said, reaching out his hands to Isobel.

His sunken eyes and sickly pallor made Isobel gasp, but she kissed his cheek which was damp and cold. Isobel’s mother embraced him next.

‘Here’s a clean shirt for your back, my lad,’ she said, in a scarcely audible voice.

‘Thank you. How I wish that godliness could so readily be put on as a clean linen,’ he said with a glimmer of his old wit.

David Fletcher said nothing but drew Thomas to him in a tight embrace.

Isobel unable to bear the palpable misery in the air spoke up, as neither of her parents seemed capable. ‘Thomas, God has not forsaken you, though you spoke against His son Jesus Christ. He will forgive, if you are truly repentant.’

‘Aye,’ he said sadly, ‘and we are all in His hands and subject to His grace. But the Lord Advocate is unmoved. The case weighs heavy against me. They have hounded me with their interrogations and I have heard the evidence against me. There is the deposition by Mungo Craig, the statements of many witnesses and my writings too. There is little to be done for I am guilty of a sin and a crime, condemned by both the Kirk and the King’s Law.’

‘But Thomas, many have spoken for you too, I know it,’ said Isobel, horrified to witness his despair. This was her clever, gifted brother with all vigour and hope sucked from him.

‘Aye, Lord Anstruther and Lord Fountainhall, two great lawyers have visited me here and heard my pleas and my repentance. They even supported my petition to the Privy Council. But it is over. I cannot deny what I said, and it seems that there are doubts in the minds of the powerful that I am truly repentant. There are those too who would make an example of me. Some of those who were named as witnesses, Patrick Middletoyne, Allen Ferguson and John Wyllie have themselves written their pleas to the Lord Advocate for clemency. I thank them with all my heart for speaking out, for they risk the cry of heresy too. Only the word of the Kirk could sway Sir James Stewart now and that will never be.’

Isobel tried to betray no outward sign of her surprise at hearing John Wyllie's name and felt a wave of gladness pass through her, to know that he had spoken for Thomas.

David Fletcher broke his silence at last. 'It is your first and only offence, my lad. Though the assize and the Lord Advocate find you guilty, the sentence—'

Isobel knew that her father dared not pronounce what they all feared.

'David, the trial seeks only to find full proof, not to argue the case, for it is already decided,' said Thomas. 'This I must bear, the loss of all hope in this world. I can only do now the one thing left to me, and that is to die well and more wisely than I have lived.'

Jean Fletcher sobbed quietly and clung to Thomas's arm.

'Come, pray with me,' he said. 'This is all that remains to do.'

The next day, Isobel and her mother were shrouded with their plaids, faces hidden as they walked arm in arm beside David Fletcher. They joined others filing into the High Court by a small door in a close at the side of the building. A stern-faced man, a clerk or official peered at them closely as they passed.

'Go up yonder, but stay silent there during the proceedings,' he said indicating a narrow staircase which led to a small gallery above the great hall where the trial was in session. Isobel and her parents climbed the stairs and joined others already crowded into the space: some of their neighbours, Malcolm Souter the haberdasher, and a few of David Fletcher's brethren from the guild, as well as a number of strangers, come to relish no doubt the sight of a heretic brought to justice. Isobel looked down on the dark wood-panelled hall, a high carved oak desk, a floor of grey marble and heavy beams looming from the ceiling. Below sat a dozen men in wigs and black robes. There was a low murmur of voices from the hall and then suddenly, silence.

A black-gowned figure in a long grey wig appeared behind the high desk and another cloaked man placed a thick bundle of papers in front of him. Thomas stood on a platform, penned in by a rail opposite the Lord Advocate, Sir James Stewart.

The Lord Advocate looked up from the papers, his face a scowl of displeasure and his voice heavy.

'You know, Thomas Aikenhead, of the evidence against you, which supports in full the indictment of your vicious blasphemy. Here in His Majesty's court, the assize has returned its verdict on the charge of railing against and cursing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and impugning and denying the truth of the holy Scriptures, the quarrelling and arguing against the being of God and against his providence in making and governing the

world. This assize finds you guilty of this blasphemy. For this you will be punished by death and the confiscation of your moveables, to be an example and terror for others who might commit the like crime.’

Isobel saw Thomas bow his head and felt her mother fall in a faint against her.

One week later, Isobel and her parents, cloaked again in their plaids, slipped into the throng that had gathered at Gallow Lee, a bleak open plain outside the city walls. The gibbet was mounted on a wooden platform and around it stalls selling foodstuffs and ale were ranged. Smells of baked pies and salty whelks blew on the wind towards them, along with another scent, mingled with the hum of human noise: the odour of anticipation. Her stomach sickened with these smells and at the sight of the eager faces of those who relished the prospect of the entertainment to follow. Isobel prayed that they could avoid the staring eyes of those who might seek them out in the crowd. She had already endured the scorn of some women the day before in the market, now that the sentence was passed and all knew of it. One had clawed at her and cursed her as a heretic, one who had harboured a blasphemer. Her nerves were so fragile that she knew her courage would break if abuse were added to the horror of what she must witness.

For a time, there seemed no further sign of the event to come and Isobel, her mind in turmoil, conjured a foolish fancy that there was going to be a reprieve. A messenger was surely just now riding to the Tolbooth to halt Thomas’s departure to the gallows. Could she hear the clatter of a horse’s hooves? She turned and looked back the way they had come. Was that a rider who pushed through the crowd? But then came the sound of a drum beat and another, then another, distant then moving closer, growing louder as it pounded along the track from the town by Netherbow Port. Moments later, shouts erupted at the sight of a clutch of muskets spiking the air, a band of the militia marching.

‘Blasphemer!’ screeched a voice. One howl was joined by others. ‘To the De’il wi’ ye! Burn in Hell fire!’ The calls drew the tight squad of soldiers into an opening in the crowd which then closed around it.

Through the pressed bodies and the moving wall of the soldiers, Isobel glimpsed Thomas at the centre, his face white as bleached linen, one hand clutching a bible. She clung to her father’s arm, pressing her face to his chest, wishing her eyes put out or that she might be struck blind so she could not look upon this.

But she made herself look up, watch, as Thomas was led up on to the platform and positioned on the ladder. A streak of black stuff, filth from the road flew at him, hurled by

someone close by her and splattered on the edge of the scaffold. Glancing to her right she saw the man, scooping up another handful of stony muck, his face lit with the excitement of hate. Thomas stood calmly while the hangman pulled away the shirt from around his neck and Isobel felt the bile rise in her throat. Though thin and sickly from his months in the cell, Thomas's face was composed, his fair hair grown long, curling about his shoulders. The rope was looped about his neck. Two black cloaked ministers mounted the scaffold behind him and Thomas cleared his throat to speak.

‘Though I am charged with blasphemy, I sought only the truth. It is a principle innate and natural to every man to have an insatiable inclination to truth and my desire to follow reason has cost me my life. I beg the Lord our God to forgive those who have spoken against me, my friend Mungo Craig and others too, in spite of my confession and my true penitence. In my heart I forgive them too as a true believer and Christian. And now, O Lord, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, into thy hands I commend my spirit.’

A moment of silence and stillness followed. Isobel held herself rigid, clutching her father's plaid at his chest, feeling his leg shaking violently against her as he stood. There was a shared intake of breath as the hangman pulled the ladder away, the rope tightened and Thomas's body jerked once and then drooped.

‘The De'il tak his own! God's curse be upon him!’ shouted a lone voice, joined by more growls from the crowd, while a tightness gripped Isobel's throat, like a murderer's hands almost stopping her breath. She shut her eyes fast, hearing her mother's sobs. She tried to pray, her fingers and hands clenched in front of her face. But she had no prayer to offer up, now that she had seen his body sway at the end of the rope and heard the baying of the crowd.

Someone grasped her arm. She started with the shock of it, but saw that it was her father, pulling her near to him, his face grey-pale, red-eyed, his mouth a line of misery.

‘Come, lassie.’ His voice was a dry croak and she saw that with his other arm, he held her mother whose body seemed limp and without life. ‘Come, let us be gone from this place.’

Isobel and her father had almost to carry her mother back up to the city from the place where Thomas's body now hung. Once or twice they paused so that her mother could recover her strength sufficiently to continue. They exchanged no words. Isobel walked in a state of numbness, her mouth and her mind paralysed. Just outside the city walls they stopped and Isobel heard her father sigh as he looked up at the thick grey stone of the fortifications.

‘I wonder can I live in this place any more,’ he said quietly, ‘in a country where a man can be killed by laws which seek to govern a man’s thoughts. To take a life and deny the right to repentance. Is this the teaching of Christ?’

‘David please, no more,’ said Jean Fletcher, clutching his arm. ‘Don’t put us in more danger, please.’

‘Aye, my dear, pardon me. We have no freedom to speak, for the agents of this Kirk may be upon us. It seeks to bind our thoughts as a master does his mule.’ Isobel’s mother wept quietly as he spoke. ‘But Jean, do not fret. I’ll say no more, but never will I set foot in a kirk again.’

On their return home, her father went straight to the workshop. Isobel and her mother tried to settle to their sewing. The thread in Isobel’s hand snapped; the linen, creased as her tense fingers puckered it. She wanted to tear it, rip it and hear the coarse cloth scream because she could not. Finally she set it aside and rose, moving over to the mullioned window, hearing her mother’s quiet sobbing in the corner. Would her mother never cease her weeping? No weeping would ease the pain. She could run to the house of the Lord Advocate and stick him through the throat like a swine? Then she could die on the gallows then like Thomas, though she could never face it as bravely as he. She looked down into the darkening street below, where some passers by moved along. Perhaps she would see Thomas coming along the street below, coming home for his supper. Perhaps it had not happened at all. Someone from the tenement across the way threw out their slops which streaked out like a serpent’s tail, to splash on to the cobbles a moment later and send a rat scurrying along the gutter. She heard the calling and shouting of people some distance away. All over the town, others were going about their own business of living.

‘Mother, I must go down to the workshop. I must work.’

‘Aye lassie, if you must. But tell your father he should not work too late tonight. He must take something to sup.’

In the workshop her father was bending over the bench, measuring out a piece of vellum and he raised his head when Isobel came in. She reached out to him and touched his arm. He paused in his work and clutched her hand for a brief moment.

‘Father, though we are in grief we must find hope somewhere. Things must surely change. People will make the laws change. There were many important men who spoke for Thomas. There were many who shared our thoughts and feelings and who abhorred this terrible punishment.’

He did not reply nor look at her. Then Isobel remembered the book she had been working on and how she had meant to show it to him. She found it now, on the shelf where she had left it, half finished, the threads of the stitching still uncut.

‘Look, father,’ Isobel said, placing the volume in front of him on the bench and opening it at the title page.

‘“A letter concerning Toleration” by John Locke,’ she read aloud. ‘I believe that the writer states that religious belief is a matter of private conscience, and no public authority has the right to interfere in how it is exercised. Listen to this,’ and she turned the pages to find the place where she had been reading as she had worked on the book. ‘“I esteem Toleration to be the chief characteristical Mark of the True Church”’.

The tight lines of strain on David Fletcher’s face loosened a little and he put his arm around Isobel’s shoulders.

‘You are a comfort to me, lassie. If only you and your like can multiply these thoughts and beliefs, perhaps change will come after all.’

The moment of silence after he had spoken was punctured by a shout from outside on the street. Then more voices were added in a rowdy cacophony. Isobel’s father clutched her in his embrace and they stood listening, without a word to each other. Then came the sound of running feet, of what seemed to be a crowd shouting coming closer, fists battering the door then the splintering of wood as an axe cut through and it was torn from its hinges. The axe-wielding man, mad-eyed, stamped on the fallen door as a flood of others crashed into the shop.

The workshop was suddenly crammed with bodies, flailing arms, sticks and even swords which swiped and crashed, splitting the presses, scattering glue pots, slashing at shelves which collapsed spilling their contents on to the floor beneath trampling feet.

‘Burn the filth!’ screamed one of the attackers and for a moment Isobel had a horrible vision of flames in the workshop consuming them all. She felt her father’s arms around her, felt him pushing her towards the inner door and a chance of escape upstairs. She could not go. She could not leave him and resisted, though the sight of the wreckers made her heart pound with terror.

‘Speak filth against God Almighty, would you?’ yelled a red-eyed man, rushing at them, spit flying from his lips, ready to strike at her father with a stick. Isobel felt the muscles in her father’s arm tighten and found her voice at last, screaming at the man’s hideous face, feeling the scream tear her throat. If she could only leap on him, scratch at his

eyes. The attacker did not land his blow on David Fletcher, turning and flailing instead at the contents of one of the shelves.

‘And this is God’s work that you do?’ cried David Fletcher, his voice a grim shout.

‘Aye, we do!’ called the axeman, who had just reduced one of the benches to splinters. He swung his weapon again and sunk it deep into the second one. ‘Heretics, this is the fate ‘o ye all!’ Then he charged towards them, shouldering his weapon.

David Fletcher broke free from Isobel’s grasp and pushing her behind him, lunged for the axe, catching it in his grasp but not with enough force to prevent its edge from gouging the flesh of his other arm. Isobel saw the blood spill on the floor and her father stagger and crumple against the back wall.

‘Cowards! We are no heretics,’ screamed Isobel as she ran to her father, barging with all the force of her body against the man, careless of the axe which flew in an arc above her head.

The axeman wheeled away from them and joined the others who were now intent on throwing piles of papers and books through the fractured door on to the street. A moment later, Isobel smelled the burning and saw the yellow brightness of flames. Then there were other shouts and the sound of a musket explosion.

‘The town guard!’ someone shouted and the frantic movement of bodies inside the workshop subsided. ‘Let’s awa’!’

Two to the men heaved Isobel’s bench over with a crash and then charged out on to the street, followed by the others.

Isobel crouched by her father, gripping his wound in both hands, watching the blood seeping through her fingers. Her father was silent, half-conscious, his face ashy white. Still the blood flowed out of him. Somehow she must stop it and she tore at her apron with one hand, wrapping it quickly round his arm, hearing the cracking of the flames outside and the retreating shouts of the wreckers. A moment later, two of the town guard men stepped into the shattered remnants of their workshop and stared silently at them.

It was Malcolm Souter, their good neighbour, who kept a haberdashery shop at the end of the row, who had called the town guard to stop the mob. It was he who had doused the bonfire of more than half of their books and materials in the street outside and had also enlisted his servant to secure the shop front with patches of timber nailed over the ravaged shutters. He stood the next day with Isobel and her parents in the shell of the workshop.

With the smell of charred wood and paper in her nostrils, Isobel swept the remaining splinters and shards from the floor. It was thick in gloom, save for the few chinks of light through the gaps in the boards and the small candle flames within. How could they work with so little light, thought Isobel in a daze. Would she and her father ever work here again? She was glad that the murk hid her face from her parents and Master Souter.

‘Dear, oh dear,’ said the haberdasher, dabbing at his brow with a handkerchief. ‘This is a terrible business. And I fear there’ll be worse to come. The Privy Council has ordered that all books atheistical and inflammatory are to be seized from booksellers and others. The Kirk Session officers have already raided Master Collins’ shop and taken some of Carlyle’s, God rest his soul, though it lies empty with no one to defend it.’

‘In God’s name what can we do, Master Souter?’ said Isobel.

‘Tis no matter what we do,’ her father said, from the corner where he sat on a stool, holding his bandaged arm. ‘We have little enough left to be taken.’

‘Come, Master Fletcher,’ said Malcolm Souter, approaching the bookbinder and resting his hand upon his shoulder, ‘you’ll rise up from this again, with your strength and your reputation.’

Then he drew nearer to Isobel, as though wishing to confide his advice only to her, in the light of her father’s depression. ‘It would be wise,’ he whispered, ‘to rid yourself of any other dangerous or inflammatory works. Make sure you have nothing which could incriminate you. Mistress Isobel, I grieve with you for poor Thomas, with all my heart.’

‘Thank you for your kindness,’ said Isobel, ‘I know that he counted you among his good friends, Master Souter.’

The shopkeeper coloured slightly, straightened his wig and smoothed his coat before taking his leave of them, promising to return the next day.

‘God has been merciful for sending us a good friend such as he. We might have all met our deaths at the hands of the mob,’ said Jean Fletcher, taking her husband’s hand in hers. ‘Does it pain you, David?’

‘No, wife. It pains me far less than knowing that I can no longer endure to live in this place,’ he said.

‘What do you mean, David?’ said Jean, her voice a dry whisper.

‘You’d have us stay in this country? We are ruined by the hatred of others. It seems that they are not content to wield laws to cut down those that offend. They would choke men’s minds through fear. I cannot live with this, nor would I have you endure it.’

‘David, no more, please,’ said Jean, clinging to him.

‘I’ll say no more, wife,’ he replied bitterly, ‘though they have cut off the life of a beloved and blameless young man. I’ll say no more.’

That evening, Isobel went down to the workshop again, to search for anything salvageable and in the hope of relieving her mind with some activity. On the only shelf left untouched by the marauders, lay some small octavo leaves, pages which had recently been brought in by a lady for binding. She carried this over to the part of the bench which was still intact and lit another candle.

She read the title page ‘*Poèmes par Louise Labé*’. Isobel’s fingers turned the leaves slowly and scanned the words of the first poem.

*Tant que mes yeux pourront larmes épandres
A l’heur passé avec toi regretter.....*

She would never now be able to read such works. In spite of her efforts to control the wandering of her mind, she remembered the last time she had heard French spoken, when John Wyllie had read her some verses. She hated him all the more because she had loved him, yet there had been so much pain in his eyes when she had commanded him never to see her again. He was a treacherous, unbending puritan, though she had seen how he was close to tears when he had pleaded with her. He had confessed his love for her and she knew without doubt the strength and sincerity of his feelings. And she knew that he, like others, had pleaded for Thomas’s life.

Swallowing hard and trying to focus her mind on the cream-coloured leaves of the volume which she held, to assess the thickness of thread she would need to stitch it, her fingers strayed to the next page. In a neat lady’s hand, someone, the owner she assumed, had translated this verse.

*While these eyes can pour out fountains of my tears
Mourning our shared peace, gone now, long gone,
While my slow sobs and sighs can still bemoan
This loss....*

Isobel could read no more. The words of the text blurred, swam and dissolved before her eyes.