

3. HALLOWEEN

Wi rowan tree weel fenced about
We're safe frae ilkie evil
For weel I ken thon wid his pouer
Tae scare awa the Deevil

Minnie wis dowpit doon cross-leggit at her faither's feet, howkin the intimmers ooto her Halloween neep wi a soup speen an gaitherin the scrapit dauds o veggie inno an auld tin pot. There wis naethin byordnar in this, in ilkie ferm aroon the pairish cottar an ferm bairns wad be daein the same. Hoosaeiver, the auld tin pot wis placed abeen an ootspreid newspaper because Minnie an the neep war ben in the gweed room, far her faither wis readin the faimly bible afore he rigged fur a meetin o the kirk session. Sally Bruce, her mither, wis throwe in the kitchie, ironin Steenhillock's best sark. Oot in the stable, Jock Dow the grieve wis groomin the horse in the stable, makkin ready tae harness it teetle the gig fur the hurl doon the roch road tae Steenhillock kirk manse. The tea dishes war steepin in the sink, stukken wi birssled stovies, an Meg Ramsay wis new back frae the byre far she'd bin helpin the cattleman feenish aff the milkin.

Minnie's adored her Da. Her faither wis a heich, trim chiel wi a brow broon mower like the Kaiser's, an a fob watch glentin at his westcoat pooch. He cairriet his 52 years unca weel, clean livin an godly, fell godly. He wis twinin ane o Minnie's lang black curls roon the fingers o his left haun, an turnin the pages o the Haly Buik wi the tither. The lamps war lichtit, a saft, gutterin lowe, an the fire wis dauncin blythely in the hearth. The braiss tings an poker stood in the coal skuttle, alive wi shaddas an firelicht. As Minnie eidently howked at her neep, her faither read aloud frae the Auld Testament. He wis readin aloud frae Genesis twintyeacht, the story o Jacob's laidder:

An he dreamed an saw a laidder set upon the eirde, an the tap o it reached tae Heiven, an saw the Angels o God gyaun up an doon on it. An luik ye, the Lord stood abeen it an said, 'I am the Lord God o Abraham, thy Faither an the God o Isaac. I shall gie ye the lan ye lie on tae yersel an yer bairns efter ye. An yer heirs shall be like the eirde's stoor, ye shall spreid afar tae aa the airts, an in ye an yer heirs shall aa the faimlies o eirde be blessed. An luik up, I am wi ye an will keep ye in the place ye gyang....fur I willna leave ye.'

Minnie pit the speen doon on the rug an restit her haun a meenit, fur it wis hard wirk howkin oot a Halloween neep.
'Wis the Divil an Angel tee, da?' she speired.

'Foo are ye faan frae Heiven, o Lucifer, son o the mornin. Isiah, verse 14, chapter 12,' her faither made repon. 'Ay Minnie, he wis, bit he thocht himsel greater nur God an the Lord cast him doon tae Hell.'

'Doon the laiddier,da?' speired the wee quine, fair teen wi the thocht o the ghaistly laiddier raxxin frae Heiven tae the grun.

'Wheesht Minnie,' her faither telt her, nae unkindly. 'Yer brither's tryin tae feenish his lessons.'

His fingers, that hid been twinin the lassie's bonnie curls, noo fell tae strakin her heid like she wis a wee kittlin. She wis a pettit craitur, he cudna hide that he favoured her far abeen her brither Matty. Bit Matty wis the son o the hoose, the heir tae Steenhillock an aathing in it, steen an lime ay gaed tae the loon, auld Scots law, naitural law, an Minnie's claikin tongue hid tae be stilled tae let the loon get on wi his hamewirk.

Matty wis a dour loon, a scholar, nae as bonnie as Minnie, nae as clivver as Minnie, bit nae feel fur aa that. Eenoo he wis dowpit doon on a steel at a sma aik table ower bi the windae, English, Latin an Science jotters lay at his neive. Whiles he hatit his sister, fur their Da made nae attempt tae hide the fact he likit her better than ony livin body aboot the place, better even than Matty's mither, Sally. Throwe the windae at his elbuck, he could see the stibble park far she'd liftit the clyack sheaf, raxxin teem an bare in the meenlicht ootbye, ower tae the whinny braes o the Hill o Leddrach. Yestreen, his faither hid spent the foreneen up thon knowe sheetin fite hares, an Meg Ramsay hid the guttin, skinnin an stewin o them fur the evenin meal. Matty, fas neb wis niver ooto a buik, lost nae time in tellin Minnie as she suppit her platie o hair stew that warlocks could takk the form o a hare an that even noo they aa micht be eatin ane. Matty hid said thon kennin fu weel that his sister hid a vivid imagination an like as no the thocht o eatin a warlock wid pit her aff her sleep. Sure eneuch she'd hardly sleepit a wink fur thinkin on warlocks an hares, even tho her faither hid raged Matty an telt him tae haud his wheesht, an speired if that wis aa the siller he gaed tae Strathboigie Coillage wis gweed fur, learnin auld wives tales tae fleg wee quines.

The Hill o Leddrach wis weirin a reid croon, a sma reid spirkin toorie far Northies' bairns an puckles o the nearhaun cottar halfpins hid lichtit a Halloween bleeze:

Bonfire bonfire burn aa
Keep the fairy fowk awa

Minnie kent that fires wad be lichtit in puckles o parks roon Leddrach, ay, an Dunracht tee, bit nae tae keep awa fairies, naethin sae nochtie as fairies, na, tae keep awa the Auld Laird o Leddrach, the Warlock Laird beeriet in Steenhillock kirkyaird at the verra back yett o the Reverend John Geddes himsel. She wis itchin tae speir at her faither aboot the warlock, bit kent fine he didna haud wi superstitious styte an anely tholed the howkin o the neep an the dookin fur aipples tae come, because aa bairns howkit their neeps an fleggit ane anither wi tales aboot ghaists an bogles, an he widna takk awa her hermless pleisurs, tho he didna approve o them.

They sat quate fur the neist hauf oor, faither, son an dother, as derkness deepened its grip ower the lan. The anely soun wis the wee sooch frae the Bible as Matthew Bruce turned ower its gowd-edged pages, the scrat o Matty's pen as he screived his Latin grammar, an the rasp o the speen as it turned ower the yalla dauds o scrapit neep. The lowe spirkit an crackit up the lum, an the clock on the mantlepice gaed clunkety clunk till it stuck the quarter oor an a wee bit tune sang oot frae its clockwark throat. Matty's tyke, Benjy, wis sprauchled afore the fire, raxxin his paws, his wyme stappit wi parridge, his een steekit, breathin broken an whizzly as anely a dreamin dug can, his touzly coat taiglit wi dubs, wee tossils o glaur hingin frae the hinneryen o't. Benjy, tae, wis anely tholed in the gweed room bi Matthew Bruce because Minnie likit him there. Fin Minnie wis some itherwye, Benjy wis keepit ootbye, or ben in the kitchie.

Matty wid hae tae brush him afore he beddit, bit nae afore he'd steppit ower tae the byre tae luik ower the kye that pit siller in the bank an breid on the table. It wisna Latin grammar nur algebraic equations that did thon, na faith ye, an Matthew Bruce niver let his loon forget it. Matty wadna gyang on tae takk a degree like the lave o his fiers, nae siller in that, his road lay in the plyter o the parks ootbye, an if it wis coorse tae open the door o learnin tae his young son an syne shut it again, Matthew Bruce wid hae disagreed. Fermin wis bred inno him. The Bruces war Steenhillock as much as the Hill o Leddrach an the Troot Wallie, as much as the smaaest birk in the neuk o Kilrogie wids. Learnin, tho, wis fit set the fermer apairt frae his cottars, fur a smatterin o learnin meant that the loon could haud his ane wi doctors, lawyers an the like, speecially wi a weel-stockit byre o beasts an parks fu o aits an barley tae add tae their wealth.

At hauf by sax, Minnie's mither cam in wi her da's sark, tae say that Jock hid harnessed Tibby tae the gig an wis wytin wi the rynes ootbye in the coort. Minnie didna bide lang efter her faither left. The neep wis

feenished. She sterted tae play wi Benjy, Matty's dug, puin his fuskers till he gurred.

'Leave him,' her brither warned.

'Winna', cam her answer.

'Leave him Minnie, or ye'll wish ye did.'

'Winna'.

Bit fin Matty lowered his broos an pit doon his buik, Minnie kent she'd gaen ower far, liftit the neep an ran ben tae the safety o the kitchie. Meg Ramsay an her mither Sally hid a tin basin wytin reamin wi watter, fur the quinie tae dook fur aipples blinfauld. Efter the dookin wis daen, Minnie's lang ringlets war weet as cat's sookins plaistered roon her broo. She tirmed her claes an pit on her flannel goon. She sattled inno the horsecheer bi the kitchie fire wi her clootie dally, Betsy, an sterted tae prig wi Meg Ramsay an her mither fur Halloween stories.

'I dinna ken ony Leddrach stories' her mither telt her. 'Haud yer hauns oot an haud this hank o worsit till I wyve the oo inno a baa. The anely queer kinna stories I iver heard war aboot the Wee Fowk that flittit frae Migvree tae Leddrach, some like masel fin I merriet yer faither. Anely they didna wint tae flit, an they cursed the warlock fa gart them shift wi his spells:

Dool tae the Warlock o Migvree
An dool tae Migvree's heir
Fur drivin us frae oor seely hame
Tae Leddrach's steeny lair

Stop hodgin, Minnie, an keep yer fingers straicht.'

It wis wearisome, haudin her hauns up in the air whyle her mither wippit the oo roon an roon inno a baa, bit it hid tae be dane if they winted socks or ganzies or mochles or scarves or toories tae haud oot the cauld aa winter. Minnie tried anither tack.

'Meg, fit d'ye ken aboot the Warlock o Leddrach?' she speired. 'Wis he as coorse as aabody sez?'

'Oh, fully, ay an mair,' quo Meg, timmerin on wi the dryin up o the plates, near up tae the oxters in hett sapples. 'Twa hunner year ago this verra nicht, the Warlock Laird o Leddrach wis pit tae bed bi his last seekness. Noo as ye'll aa ken (an here, Minnie cockit her lugs, fur she dinna ken ava), fin the laird wis a young loon, he traivelled frae Leddrach tae Padua ower in Italy tae attend a schule run bi the Deil fur them that wintit tae learn the inns an oots o the Blaik Airt, an aince there (here, Meg stoppit a meenit tae claw a daud o birsslit neep frae the foun o a pan wi a knife,

garrin it skreich like a banshee) the Deil gart aa his pupils pledge their immortal sowl in excheenge fur their seeven year learnin. An twa hunner year ago this verra nicht, the Deil cam ower tae Leddrach tae claim the warlock's sowl' quo Minnie, her een dauncin wi glee.

'Ay, bit thon wisna the eyn o't,' Sally Bruce buttit in. 'Even I ken that, an I'm frae a different pairish hyne awa. The warlock keepit fower birds as his familiars, ye see.'

Fit's a familiar, ma?

'Speerit servants that dae fit they're telt..nae like you ay hodgin aboot an drappin ma worsit'.

The quine quatened doon as her mither set aff again wippin the worsit roon an roon the baa an pickin up the threids o her story.

'Maist witches keepit a taed or a puddock or a kittlin aroon them. Bit nae the Warlock o Leddrach, na, he keepit fower birds. A corbie, a jackdaw, a hawk an a skreichin magpie. An fin he drew near tae deen....(an here, the wippin o the oo slawed doon fur fear the tale got raivelled) the Divil rode like the win tae claim his sowl, an sat in the mou o a cave in the gruns o the Hoose o Leddrach, wytin fur Daith tae feenish the coorse breet aff.

Minnie wis quate as a moose noo, struck dumb bi the verra thocht o the muckle black Deil cockin his hooves in the moo o a cave sae near. Her mither cairriet on faister wi the wippin o the worsit, an the tellin o the tale:

'Bit the Warlock Laird hid read langsyne in a buik that the mirled magpie wisna blaik aa throwe, an gin it focht fur his sowl agin the corbie, ay, an won the fecht, his sowl wad be saved frae the birsslin lowes o Hell. It wad bide ootside the Yetts o Heiven till God tuik peety on't an lat it in'.

At thon, Minnie near drappit the worsit aathegither wi excitement.

'Fa won, mither, fa won the fecht?

'Weel, the twa birds sterted the fecht on the tap o a steen, an fur seeven oors they flew an pykit an scrattit at ane anither, till wi an almichty craik the magpie tore the corbie clean in twa, an ruggit its hairt frae its briest, an won the laird's repreive. An yon's foo the Deil wis swickit, an the Warlock Laird lies beeriet in Steenhillock pairish kirk as if he'd bin a Christian body aa his mortal days'.

Nae tae be ootdane in the tellin o stories, Meg Ramsay cappit thon wi tales o chiels faa'd disappeared an niver bin seen again in this world again, till on Halloween, they'd reappeared wi the help o the fairy fowk:

The nicht is Halloween ladye
The morn is Hallowday
Then win me win me an ye will
For weel I wat ye may.

The baa o worsit wis knottit, the kitchie fire was dampit doon wi dross. Meg Ramsay wadna let Minnie awa till she'd pared an aipple hale an cowped the lang reid skin ower her left showder. It laundit wi a plowt on the grun an curled roon like an *a*.

'Thon's the first letter o the name o the chiel ye'll mairry', the kitchie maid cried, lauchin an clappin her hauns. 'Alec, Airchie, Arthur, Alan, Albert, Alister....Staun up on the chair Minnie, up ye go noo, that's it, cannie, an teet in the keekin glaiss ower the sideboord. Ye should see his likeneess growin ahin ye, there in the glaiss, ower yer left showder. Dye see't yet quinie?'

Minnie shook her heid. The glaiss wis teem forbyes the kitchie in shadda, lowpin wi fire an caunlelicht. The oorrie face o the lichtit neep teetit ower at her frae the table frae its slit een wi its sherp wee cuttit teeth gantin like a wolf's mawe, an the rikk risin up like a curl frae a hole in its eildritch heid.

'Wheesht Meg, yon's eneuch. We're nae seekin a weet bed the morn's mornin, ' the mistress o Steenhillock telt her skiffy, thinkin they'd mebbe gaen some far in fleggin the bairn. Sally Bruce drew ower a kitchie steel, an stude on't tae preen a sprig o rowan abeen the windae.

'There noo. We're safe eneuch. An Jock's pleated the horses' tails in braids, sae they'll be safe frae herm this nicht an aa.'

Meg rose at her mistress's tail tae draw the kitchie curtains ticht, shuttin oot the ferlies o the nicht. Syne on wearie, fleggit feet wi her caunle gutterin in her haun, Minnie traivelled the timmer stairs tae bed, feart tae luik in the braise rods haudin the carpet flat tae the steps fur fear o fit she nicht see there, gled that her faither Matthew wis a kirk precentor, fur the Divil wid niver daur meddle wi him.

An yon wis foo Samhuinn cam tae Steenhillock, the first Winter's nicht o the Celtic year, on frostit meenlicht feet ower the quate parks. The hale o thon frosty nicht, the youngest quine on the ferm tossed on her bowster an dreamt o the ghaistly laidder that raise frae the warld tae Heiven An a swan flew throwe her dream wi a harp at its snawy briest, fur the picturs frae Matty's buiks tuik reist in his sister's heid an daunced there awhile ahin her sleepin ee till the cock crawed in November abeen the midden an the lang deid months o cauld flittit in.