the drunk. He patted her hand and whispered, as if he were telling her there was no harm in him. And indeed there wasn't, for he seemed to be lost in a dream of his own. Mrs Scott, too, was disgusted at the drunk.

'Mind you keep away from him,' she said to Iain. The time had passed for her to persuade him to stay.

'I can look after myself,' he replied, smiling in that defenceless way of his. Soon the boats would be coming to take the emigrants out to the ship, which was riding with white sails on the grey metallic water, crinkled like the face of an old woman. It was going to be hard for her to return to her house tonight, Mrs Scott was thinking. The drunk got up and did a little dance, quite spontaneously, looking at them defiantly when he had finished, then sat down again just as suddenly, his head on his breast. He stopped singing, his head swaying to and fro, his unshaven bluish face making him look like a tramp. The others kept away from him. Suddenly the piper began to pace purposefully up and down, his plaid flying about him in the breeze, tuning his pipes. The first boat came towards the shore. Iain made as if to rise but she kept him back, down on the trunk.

'And make sure that you wear that new jersey,' she said. 'They say that Canada is a very cold place.'

He smiled.

'And change your socks after you've been working hard.'

'Yes, mother.'

'And read the Bible I gave you. Make sure you do that. And pray.'

His eyes were on the boat into which people were clambering. The piper had now gone down to the shore and was playing a tune of farewell, his fingers slowly locking and unlocking the holes in the chanter. He looked proud and private as if set apart in a world of his own, of which he was very conscious, his cheeks puffed out, his bearing martial and erect.

'Write as often as you can,' she was saying, her black hood stirred by the breeze.

'Are you sure you've put all your stockings in?'

'Yes, mother.'

To their right a woman was crying. The first boat was

now heading back towards the ship. Some object had fallen out and the sailors were fishing at it with an oar. The drunk had wakened up and was walking up and down behind the piper, parodying him and doing little skips in between, his cheeks puffed up and his hands on his chest as if he were playing a chanter. A child giggled. This pleased the drunk who continued to pace up and down more energetically. Finally, as an inspired gesture, he put the neck of the bottle in his mouth and tapped on it with his fingers as if he were playing. A drop or two which had been left at the bottom dripped out of the bottle. Mrs Scott gazed at him with distaste but was not surprised to see that Iain was laughing.

'And make sure that you make decent friends,' she whispered. 'And look after your money. And don't go spending it on drink, whatever you do.'

The piper took no notice of the drunk parading up and down behind him like a distorted shadow. Perhaps he hadn't even seen him, immersed as he was in his own dignified, complicated music. Across the water sounded the elegiac notes and from the ship came the first faint fluttering of handkerchiefs. The drunkard came to a halt and waved back with a dirty scarf. He suddenly offered the last oozings of his bottle to a tall dignified looking man with a drip at the end of his nose. But the man turned away.

'Ah well,' the drunk said to the crowd. 'Farewell. . .' And he began to sing again as he went down to the place where the boat from the ship would be coming in.

Far an d'fhuair mi m'àrach òg. . .
(Where I was reared when I was young.)

Then, his mouth open, he slumped to the ground and fell asleep. The piper played on, ignoring everything and everybody around him, but by this time he was standing absolutely still. The boat came and went. At last, Iain had to go. Mrs Scott's face crumpled, but she didn't cry.

'And make sure that you eat your food,' she said.

He bent and kissed her and turned to go. As he did so she took out of her pocket her father's gold watch and put it in his breast pocket.

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'Take it with you,' she said. 'It will keep good time for you.'

He looked at her as if in surprise, then put his hand on the pocket where the watch was. He turned at the shore and waved, then climbed briskly into the boat, sitting there with his back to her. She put her hand over her mouth but didn't cry. One of the sailors was saying something to Iain but she couldn't hear what he answered.

It was the last boat and as it reached the ship the piper suddenly stopped playing. There was a great silence. As if awakened from a dream she looked around her and saw the dozen or so people left, all women and children. The piper began to put his pipes away. Without thinking, as she watched the ship, the wind stirring its sails, and watched the loch and seagulls swooping low over it, she began to sing the Old Hundredth:

> Togadh gach tir àrd-iolach glaoidh
> do Dhia Iehobhah mór.
> Thigibh is dèanaibh seirbhis ait
> 'na làthairsan le ceòl.

Through blinding tears she heard the tune being raised by the other women. The piper was standing stiffly at attention on the shore. She stopped singing because her voice was beginning to crack, and it was only then that she heard the answering voices floating across the water, the two groups – those on the ship and those on shore – united across water by the psalm, amongst the best-loved and gravest of all Gaelic psalms. Seagulls wove edgy patterns across the psalm, and behind it too one could hear the restless movement of the water as it flowed to and from the beach. When it was ended they all, as if by instinct, turned away in the direction of home. She kept a little behind, wishing to be by herself. She always believed in keeping her griefs private. That night was the worst in her life. To come to the door and know that she would find no one: to see a house completely empty. It was like coming to her tomb while she was still alive.

When she entered the house she went down on her knees and prayed. She wept and prayed for what seemed years. After that she walked aimlessly about the house, opening and shutting drawers. She took out the Bible and read chapter after chapter aloud as if it were some kind of drug,

and always in front of her flickered the white wings of the ship like an angel which concealed in its holds a devilish plague.

She saw Iain sitting in the boat. He was sailing away, and in spite of everything he was happy. That was the worst thing of all to bear, if there was anything more she could bear. Big Betty came in and said:

'I was making some scones anyway. . .'

So it all began again.

ELEVEN

She could tell she wasn't in her own bed. She could tell this because she didn't seem to be facing in the right direction. As well as this the pillows were very high. In the distance she could hear a number of voices, faint, as if talking through water. The room was cool and dark like her own room, though she knew it wasn't her room.

She opened her eyes slowly, carefully. There was something on her head, a tight cloth of some kind. She didn't want to move but, perfectly still, watched through half-closed eyes the white-washed wall in front of her. She had never seen it before. In the high corner between the wall and the ceiling slightly to her left there was a spider's web, but she couldn't see any spider. She watched it but no flies appeared either. It was a delicate structure swaying outwards from the rings at the centre. She was quite content to watch it and the whitewashed wall. She had no desire to move, and sensed that if she did she would be in discomfort. Outside, she heard a cow mooing, then a child shouting. Someone spoke and the child was immediately silent. She wished they hadn't told it to be quiet, whoever they were. She closed her eyes again. When she opened them particles of sunlight were dancing on the wall, like water sparkling. They flickered gaily and seemed to flare up and then go out. This puzzled her but she just watched their flickering. This time she slowly moved her head, feeling the band over it. In front of her eyes was a window set in the wall with curtains across it. The curtains were stirring in the breeze. That was why the sunlight flickered and seemed to go out. The curtains were billowing out slightly, allowing the sunlight in and afterwards shutting and locking it off.

She let her gaze travel through the window between the

curtains when they opened. In the distance she could see vague blue hills. Then the curtains swelled again and shut them off. The curtains had flowers on them, all different colours. They billowed outwards, then stiffened inwards in the breeze. There was no other movement. The house seemed completely silent, as if it were a Sunday. She could tell it wasn't the silence of emptiness. It was a silence of hushed voices. It was a full silence, a silence of secretiveness, a silence of hidden flurries like a stream. A stream. What was it about a stream? She turned away from that. There was a tall bed-board at the foot of the bed. Sunlight flickered on it also, a minute sea of little dots. Slowly, carefully, she stretched her legs and touched the board with them. The sunlight flickered more quickly now. She closed her eyes and slept.

TWELVE

When she opened her eyes again it was growing dusk. She couldn't see through the window and the whitewashed wall had darkened, had become thicker as it seemed. She felt strangely at peace but she missed the little trout motion of the sunlight.

She curled up inside herself in the dusk which was slowly falling and deepening. A bird twittered outside the window, one long note, followed by shorter ones, then there was a silence as if it were listening. In the distance she heard the clink of a pail but no human voices. The bird twittered again. She was listening to it now as if its message was for her, as if it knew that she was lying in there in the darkness.

The light slowly thickened so that the room began to fill up slowly, like a well. Now she could hardly see the wall at all. All hard-edged objects had become softer. She felt that the curtains had ceased moving. Perhaps someone had shut the window. The dusk closed over her. There was no light to be seen anywhere. She closed her eyes again to get away from the dusk.

When she opened them much later the room had changed. Now there was a soft yellow light. And when she looked towards the window she saw the moon, all yellow, shining by itself in the sky, looking in. It was a full moon, very yellow, very warm. It seemed to have a face and eyes like a human face, delicately shaded here and there on the rim of the yellow, looking like one of the maps Iain had. The wall in front of her was now barred with light from the moon, the yellow of corn and the pallor of whitewash. She had forgotten about the spider's web for she couldn't see it high up there in the corner. The moon seemed to be slowly moving away and she couldn't stop it. It was going off and leaving

her. She didn't want this to happen, but she couldn't stop it. It had looked her full in the eyes and was now departing as if it had seen enough.

She closed her eyes again against the dusk and the darkening wall. She turned over on her side towards the window, feeling the band on her head. Slowly, carefully, she put her hand up towards it and touched it. She could tell it was a bandage and made of linen. Suddenly she was frightened. What was it for? Why was she in this strange house? Whose bed was this? She opened her mouth and screamed. She thought someone would come running but no one came. Perhaps her voice couldn't be heard. She screamed again, listening restlessly. No one came this time either. She was about to scream again when a great weariness streamed over her. Her eyes shut and she fell asleep. The room filled completely with darkness.

A woman came to the door and listened, then went away again. The woman looked happier than she had done for a long time. There was a stranger – well, not really a stranger – in the house. She hushed the children and made up a bed for them in the kitchen. It had become a game, this putting her fingers to her mouth, and they were liking it. They would now put their fingers to their own mouths if they seemed to be making a noise.

THIRTEEN

She heard a dog barking as if it were chasing a cat or something. There was a flurry of wings as of birds rising and then a squawking. The tart smell of burning tar drifted in through the window. The wall was now buttered with sunlight. A chair sat against the wall. It was a tall straight chair with four slats.

She took her hands out from under the bedclothes and pushed away the blanket on the top, which was creamy with black stripes down the side. She raised her hands, exploring, and they touched the bedboard behind her. She knocked lightly on the bedboard with her knuckles. Beside the bed was another chair. She could feel new energy surging through her. She looked in the direction of the window. In a high blue sky a bird was wheeling, light flashing from its wings. Outside, she heard children shouting and again the squawking of hens and a dog barking.

The door opened and there was Mrs Macleod, smiling at her.

'Would you like some soup?' she was saying.

She looked brisker and more alert than she had ever seen her. The black hair was tied neatly in a bun and looked smoother than she remembered seeing it. Mrs Scott realised she was hungry. 'Yes, thank you,' she said.

Mrs Macleod smiled again and went out. Mrs Scott leaned back on the pillow, completely relaxed, listening vaguely to the sounds which came into the room from outside. Someone seemed to be hammering, perhaps trying to break a stone. But she just lay back there, letting the sounds drift over her. She felt entirely rested. She kept her eyes on the door. After a while Mrs Macleod came in, carrying a tray with bowl of soup on it. She laid it down on the chair and said: 'Can you

sit up?' She helped her to sit up and sat beside her while she drank the soup which was full of vegetables, carrots, turnips, onions. She dipped the scone into it, relishing the freshness and the wetness together. She didn't take long to finish it, without a word being said. Mrs Macleod wiped her mouth for her with a cloth, then went out with the tray. She herself leaned back on the pillows. A child of about six looked in the door, its fingers in its mouth, but was hauled unceremoniously into the next room. She was going to say that she didn't want the child taken away but she didn't say anything. She didn't have the right.

So this was where she was, Mrs Macleod's house. But she didn't want to think about why she was here. She felt it was dangerous to think too much at this time, though various shadows were edging at her mind. She veered away from them.

After another while Mrs Macleod returned with a plate of meat and potatoes.

'You'll be feeling better now,' she said, sitting on the chair while Mrs Scott ate. She was ravenously hungry. She couldn't remember when meat and potatoes had tasted so sweet. The meat was flank, well salted, with the red sandwiched between the white, and the potatoes were fat and floury as if they were bursting to be eaten, laughing at her. The meat melted in her mouth. Soon she was finished. Mrs Macleod got up and said: 'I'll get you a cup of tea.' So far she had made no mention of why Mrs Scott was here. She suddenly thought: Perhaps they put me out of my house and I can't remember. Perhaps that's why I am here. But she couldn't remember having been put out of her house. Nevertheless a hook was fishing at the corners of her mind but she slid past trying not to see it, trying not to let it sink itself in her head as she cruised along. How much better Mrs Macleod looked. Why, she was smiling and happy as if she had done some wonderful deed which had changed her. Mrs Macleod came in with the cup. She was carrying one for herself as well. She sat down on the chair. She allowed Mrs Scott to drink some tea, then said:

'You'll be wondering why you're here?'

Mrs Scott didn't say anything.

'Well, it was like this. Three days ago you went to see the minister. You were talking to me and then you went off across the moor. I was thinking you looked poorly. So I said to myself after I didn't see you coming back: "I wonder if anything happened to Mrs Scott?" But I put it out of my head. I had a lot to do, with Donald away that day.'

Mrs Scott's face clouded. What was this about three days?

'Anyway, I was making some butter when Norman came in – he's twelve you know – he and another boy were playing down by the river and he came in at full speed and was shouting: "Mrs Scott's fallen into the scream." That's what he said, he was so mixed up: "Mrs Scott's fallen into the scream." Well, I ran over for Big Betty and she got her husband and then we met Mr Macmillan so we got you out of there. You couldn't say a word. We brought you here as it was the nearest house. And here you are. We had the doctor and he just said to let you rest. Have you finished your tea? I'll take it then. I thought I should tell you because you would be worrying if I didn't.' She continued: 'The minister was . . .'

'No!'

Mrs Macleod looked at her in surprise.

'Well, he came the day after, you see. He came to the gate and my man went out to him. You have to understand that you talked a lot when you were in bed, to yourself, you understand, and we knew what had happened. So the minister came and he was standing there at the gate wearing that black hat of his and carrying a walking-stick. My man Donald stood on this side of the gate and he kept it locked. He didn't say a word. I was looking out the window, you see, behind the curtain. Donald told me to stay inside and not to say anything. He was very angry and I didn't want to say anything against him. When he goes very white I know he's angry, though I must say that it's not often. Well, Mr Macmillan too had told him you were at the minister's, and he had seen you walking off and he said you looked very sick but he didn't want to say anything at the time because he thought it might be something private. Anyway, we all put two and two together from what you had said now and again, and Big Betty told us that she thought you had gone to see

the minister about the house. So that was how it was when the minister came to the gate and he was dressed very smart with his hat and his walking-stick and he was wearing gloves.

'"I should like to see Mrs Scott," I heard him say, for I was looking through the window behind the curtains, you understand, and the window was open. Well, my man didn't say anything. He just put his hand on the gate. He looked at the minister, and didn't say a word. The minister raised his voice. It was like a squeak. "I demand to see Mrs Scott," he said. "She is one of my parishioners. If you don't let me in I'll report you." Still Donald didn't say anything. The minister came up to the gate as if he was going to come in anyway. Then I heard Donald speaking. He was quite quiet but his voice carried: "Though you're a man of the cloth," he said, "whatever cloth it is," (that's what he said, "Whatever cloth it is"), "if you try to come into my house I'll do you bodily harm." That's what he said, "bodily harm". I didn't know what to say. I nearly went out to stop him saying things like that to the minister. You'll know that he doesn't go to church. Everyone knows that and they cast it up to me often enough, though they don't say it so often now. And to the children. I mean other people's children have cast it up to my children, and often give them a black eye over it. Anyway, that's what he said to the minister.

'I was very nervous myself. I'm not very strong, you see, but Donald's strong. The people here don't know how strong he is. What he puts in his head, he puts in his feet, as the saying goes. Well, the minister looked at him for a long time and then he turned on his heel. He didn't say a word, and off he went swinging his stick. Donald came back into the house. He was laughing like a boy. "That's the end of him," he said, and he was in a good mood all the rest of the day. "That did me good," he said "I've wanted to do that for a long time." And then he forgot all about it.'

The room seemed to be spinning about Mrs Scott again. She lay back on the bed and the ceiling seemed to rush at her, dizzying her. But she clung to the one idea. If you faint now, Mrs Macleod will be blamed for it. She shouldn't have told me all this but if I faint now she will be blamed. There seemed to be two Mrs Scotts, the one who was speaking in

her mind and the one to whom she was speaking. Over and over the one Mrs Scott repeated: 'If you faint now, Mrs Macleod will be blamed for it.' She hung on like a boat in a driving sea, going up and down, up and down, up and down. She pressed her legs against the bedboard and drew a deep breath. The sea steadied. She swam out of it to find Mrs Macleod leaning over her very white.

'I'm all right,' she said. 'Mrs Macleod, I'm all right.'

Mrs Macleod heaved a deep sigh. 'Thank God,' she said. 'Thank God. If you had fainted and all because of my blethering I would never have heard the end of it. Are you sure you're all right?'

'Yes, yes, thank you. I'm right enough. Thank you for the food.' She lay back again. 'I think I'll just sleep for a little while. I'm sorry to be such a bother.'

'You're no bother at all,' said Mrs Macleod, looking at her doubtfully with the cups in her hands. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Are you sure you're all right?' she'd say to her mother and her mother would look back at her saying: 'Yes, I'm sure I'm all right.'

Mrs Macleod smiled at her, patted her hand and then was gone. She closed her eyes and slept.

FOURTEEN

The following day she decided to get up. Not that it wouldn't have been easy for her to stay in bed, for she was very comfortable, more comfortable than she had been for a long time. But, at the same time, some instinct was warning her that she must not become too soft or relax too much. It had been a long time since she had been served with food in bed and it was both too late and too early to begin.

In the afternoon she determinedly got out of bed and stood weakly on the floor. She found all her clothes, as she suspected, in the trunk in one corner of the room and her shoes under the bed. There was no mirror so she could not tell what she looked like. But she felt very scraggy and thinner than she had been. Her face had been washed that morning in a blue basin which Mrs Macleod had brought in, and her hair had been combed. Then, after dressing, she straightened her back, assumed a smile, opened the door and went into the kitchen.

At first they didn't see her. Three people were kneeling on the floor playing with toy soldiers. One of them was Donald Macleod, the other two were children: Norman, whom Mrs Macleod had already mentioned by name, and the little girl whose name she did not know. They all seemed to be taking part in some kind of game which made them oblivious to her presence.

'I've got you this time,' shouted Donald triumphantly. 'Your men are caught in a crossfire.'

The little girl stared up at Norman to see what he would do, then bounced excitedly up and down on the floor.

'What are you going to do now?' said Donald, gazing hard at the boy, who was studying the toy soldiers very intently.

'My soldiers are Highlanders,' he said. 'They're not afraid of your crossfire.'

'Huh. All soldiers are afraid of crossfire,' said his father.

'All right then,' said the boy. 'They're going on anyway. You can't kill all of them.'

Donald looked sadly at the boy. 'I was afraid you'd say that. That was what Wellington said at Waterloo. He was talking about Highland soldiers too. Why do Highlanders always get themselves into such hopeless positions?'

'It's not hopeless, father, it's not hopeless. You can't kill all of them.'

'Can I not? See if I don't.'

The little girl was looking from one to the other, serious and excited. She poked her hand forward tentatively to touch one of the soldiers.

'Leave them alone, Marjory,' said the boy quickly. 'They're mine.'

Donald looked at him. 'What did you say, Norman?'

'They're mine, that's what I said.'

'No, Norman, they're not yours. They're for the two of you. I brought them from Edinburgh for the two of you.'

'She doesn't. . . .'

'Norman, they're for the two of you. Anyway, I shouldn't have brought them. They're putting me off my work. I've got some writing to do. Go outside and play. And put them away first. No, not you. Marjory will put them away.'

Marjory made a grab for them and started putting them in their box while Norman stared glumly at the floor.

'Mind you, Norman, there are no woman soldiers. And that's something. It's the women who tidy things up, isn't it?'

'Yes, that's right, father. Girls do that, don't they?'

'Outside, the two of you.' He got up, and as he did so saw Mrs Scott. 'Oh. Should you not be in bed, Mrs Scott?'

Norman was staring at her and so was the little girl, caught in the process of putting the tin soldiers back in the box.

'Can I see them?' she asked Marjory, who looked at her father. When he nodded she came over with them and showed them to Mrs Scott.

'They're very pretty,' said Mrs Scott, picking one of them up and returning it to the box as if dissatisfied. Then she picked another one up and, looking at it, said:

'That's a Highlander, isn't it?'

'Answer Mrs Scott, Norman.'

'Yes, it's a Highlander, Mrs Scott.'

'Yes, my husband used to have a uniform like that. It's very pretty.'

'Now run along, you two,' said their father briskly. 'And say Good day to Mrs Scott.'

Marjory put the box in a drawer in the dresser and then they ran out.

'I'm sorry my wife is out,' said Donald Macleod. 'Are you sure you're all right?'

'Yes, I'm all right.'

'Please sit down.' Donald Macleod seemed rather ill at ease. She sat down. 'The older children are all away from home,' he said at last. Her eyes strayed to the table, covered with papers.

'Sometimes when I'm slack I can manage to do some writing,' he said.

She hadn't realised how sturdy he was. His head was perfectly bald with his hair greying a little round the sides. His eyes were blue and bulbous, and his nose prominent. As he arranged the papers she saw him glance up quickly at her, revealing sharp quick intelligent eyes. He lowered them quickly again.

'I've just come back from Edinburgh, you see, and I brought them that present. You should see Edinburgh, Mrs Scott. The people. You've never seen so many people. I shouldn't like to stay there, though I go there in connection with my work. You feel as if you're closed in. And then there are the lights at night. When you look at the reflections in the people's faces you think they have the plague. I can never get used to the place, the speed at which everything goes.'

He had the papers arranged now in a neat pile.

'Thank you, Mr Macleod, for having me in your house,' she said.

He laughed and then was serious again.

'What would you have done yourself, Mrs Scott? We have to look after each other.' Again she felt these startlingly quick eyes on her and felt that there was a hidden meaning in the words. He continued:

'There was something I meant to say, Mrs Scott. When I was coming home I heard stories that they intend to have us put out of our houses sooner than we think. I saw a good many flocks of sheep. You've never seen so many sheep before. The land is white with them south of us. They'll go through with it. Oh, they'll go through with it all right, Patrick Sellar and the rest of them. You see, Mrs Scott,' he went on, weighing his words carefully, 'to them we're not people. That's what we've got to understand. They don't think of us as people. When I go through to Edinburgh I learn it. Whenever they hear my Highland tongue they half-smile as if I were a fool and they could cheat me as a matter of course. It is this I hate above all.' His face and neck reddened with anger. But then he smiled again: 'When did you hear from Iain?'

'It's months now, Mr Macleod,' she said.

She was trying to take it all in. This was the first time she had spoken to Donald Macleod for years. She didn't know him well. True, he went about the countryside building houses and not everybody could do this. But, after all, it wasn't only in this village that he built them. That was one of the reasons why she didn't know him very well, because he was so often away.

'You know,' he said, 'you were quite right about Iain. Elizabeth wouldn't have done for him. O, true enough, she's very pretty but she wouldn't have done for him just the same,' he said, shaking his head. 'Iain has high standards. He's a bit adventurous. Who isn't at that age? But, no, she wouldn't have done for him. She's seen too much of Glasgow. Like the rest of them, she's only interested in clothes and money and who'll give them to her. If she's lucky she may end up marrying a fat merchant who'll spend all the week cheating everybody and his Sunday praying.'

She thought this speech most peculiar. Though she herself didn't care much for her sister she wouldn't have spoken as freely as this about her to her neighbours, nor would she have run her down like this.

'You'll be wanting to go back to your own house, and I don't blame you,' said Mr Macleod again.

'I saw the elder and the minister,' she said, 'and they wouldn't help me.'

'Do you see these papers?' he said seriously. 'These papers on the table? I'm not a very educated man, Mrs Scott. I wish I had more education. I left school when I was fourteen like the rest of them. But my father had this business and I went into it. Now my father was a great Bible reader and I would never dare argue with him. One day he fell off the roof of a house he was building, because of the rain. He was well over sixty at the time but you couldn't get him to stop working. As he lay there on the ground I knew he was dying, and I knelt beside him. I don't know how it was but as he lay there I thought to myself: There's my father now, he was a great Bible reader, he always went to church, he was a good living man, and there he is on the ground with the blood pouring out of his mouth, all because he slid off the roof because it was raining. I could do nothing about it. So that's what he came to, I thought. But I shouldn't be saying this, Mrs Scott. Please forgive me. What I set out to say was – I mean at the beginning – I have seen and heard of our people being treated like animals and it angers me. So I began to write little articles for little magazines here and there, and then the newspapers. You won't have seen them. Very few have. And I learnt to write as I was going along, because I was angry, you see. I don't do it for my own amusement. I do it to tell the truth of what is happening to us. But I've said enough. You'll think I'm praising myself. That's what people will say. And who am I anyway? I'm just a stone mason and not a very educated one.'

'Did the man on the white horse come and see you too?' asked Mrs Scott.

'Patrick Sellar, you mean? I'm one of his marked ones. Yes, he came to see me. And I told him to leave. But he'll come back. He'll come back all right. I want to tell you a story, Mrs Scott, and after that you can go to your bed. I have a brother and he lives in a village not far from here. Cruachan, you'll have heard of it? Now, my brother is like

me in some ways and he's like my father in others. He's very religious for one thing, like my father, but he's stubborn like me. Well, about three years ago when the rumours first started that they were going to put the land under sheep, you remember there was an outbreak of sickness because of the poor harvest. And the Duchess sent her medicines. You'll remember that? Well, when they came with the medicines, the agent she sent – it wasn't Patrick Sellar, he hadn't come then – my brother you see is a very stubborn man, said to this agent:

'"I hear you're going to put us out and put the land under sheep?"

'"Where did you hear that?" said the agent.

'"Never you mind,' said my brother. "I hear it anyway. Is it the truth?"

'The agent hummed and hawed but at the end he was forced to admit that there was something in it. My brother is a tall strong man and when he gets his teeth into something he won't let go. He said:

'"Well, if you came here to keep us healthy so that you can put us out at the end, you can keep your medicines."

'And that's what the agent did.

'Only my brother's child died. She was three years old. And his wife has never forgiven him for it. So you see, Mrs Scott, what I think of Patrick Sellar and his kind.' His voice changed again and he said:

'And now you must go back to bed, and I must get on with my writing. I'll end up an exile yet but I'll tell the truth before I go.'

As she made her way to the door he said: 'Mrs Scott, you'll find my father's Bible in the drawer if you need it.'

FIFTEEN

The following day, sitting outside on a chair in the sun, she wrote a letter to her son. She spent a long time over this letter because it wasn't like the previous letters she had written and because she had to be careful what she said. She wrote in a round childish hand, much as she would have written years ago in school when that Mary Macdonald, long dead, used to swoop on them like a hawk.

'My dear beloved son,' she wrote. 'It is a long time since I didn't get a letter from you. I hope you are well. Be sure to look after yourself, for they say that Canada is very cold.

'I am well myself and you don't need to worry. You will remember Sheila's girl. She brings the water to me every day but the well has been dried up now for a long time and she goes all the way to the spring. I am hoping that I will have the peats home soon. I get eggs every day from the hen. Big Betty comes in every day to ask me if I need anything so you don't need to worry. Death has taken away Domhnull Donn. He was seventy-seven years old and only his wife is left in the house now. There was a lot of people at his funeral.

'I am going to send you a jersey that I made for you but I don't know how to send it.

'I was thinking of sending you crowdie but they say that it would go bad before it got to you.

'I have to tell you that a man. . .'

She stopped, and on further consideration stroked through the last words and began again.

'I have to tell you that I was speaking to Donald Macleod and that he has a good word for you. He was telling me to remember him to you.

'I am closing now with all my love to you, my beloved son.

'Your loving mother, and write soon.'

She read the letter carefully a few times. It was not exactly the kind of letter she usually wrote. She had thought of telling him about the man on the white horse but decided against it. He had enough to worry about. As she was folding the letter up, Donald Macleod came round the corner of the house in his shirt sleeves and carrying a scythe. He said:

'How are you feeling today?'

He was going to continue past her on his way to the shimmering cornfield when something in her attitude stopped him.

'I see you have been writing,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, 'to Iain.'

'Of course.'

'Mr Macleod,' she said at last. 'I wish you would read the letter.'

'But . . .' He stopped. 'Yes, if you like. If you are sure you want that. But I'm sure you can write a better letter than me. I'm not a good letter writer.'

He took the letter and read it rapidly.

'I see you haven't mentioned anything about Patrick Sellar,' he said. 'I think you're wise. You won't want to worry him.'

But he was puzzled by something else as well and he couldn't discover what it was. It hovered like an angry wasp just off the edge of his mind. There was something missing in the letter and he couldn't think what it was, yet she obviously expected him to understand and he knew that it was important to her, this old woman dressed in black sitting in the chair outside his house on a bright summer's day. And he knew it was because of this that she had shown him the letter.

Distracted by the heady scent of the flowers, he cast about in his mind. True, the letter was very bare. There was hardly any news but it was not to be expected that there would be much, for nothing of importance ever happened in the village, until recently and she had decided against writing of that. But that wasn't it: there was something that ought to have been in the letter and wasn't. He brooded. It was as if she was giving him a message but at the same time didn't

wish to tell him directly, as if she was relying on his intelligence to work it all out for himself. He tried to think of the letters his father and mother used to write. Strange thing about her, she wasn't as he had imagined she would be. There had been her poor husband whom she had driven off across the seas. And then there had been the way she had brought up that son of hers, always interfering. Really, people like that could be so stupid and could do such irretrievable damage. Did they not see how they appeared to others with their damned destructive pride, destroying both others and themselves? Their self-righteousness, their religious. . . He stopped. So that was it!

He read the letter again very carefully. So that was it indeed! Not a word about God in it from beginning to end, not a word about ministers. Wasn't there something wrong with that ending? Shouldn't it have read 'And may God bless you, my beloved son.' No, nothing at all about God or religion. He put down his scythe carefully and handed the letter back to her. Then he spoke very carefully at first, then more passionately.

'You know, Mrs Scott, living in a small village can be very difficult. And yet whenever I go to Edinburgh I want back to this village. You wouldn't think that, would you? For people talk. They talk all the time. You'd think that was all they had to do. What was it like, those years when you looked after your mother?'

For a moment she stared at him with hatred in her eyes. Then, her fingers clutching the chair and emptying themselves of it, she began to tell. He listened with horror, with great pity. What she told him was outside his experience, but he could understand it. That sacrifice, which he considered absurd, was recognisable. He forgot about the scythe and the corn which he was supposed to be reaping, and was inside that house with that woman, dead to hope. She told him of her mother's attempt to kill herself (why had he sided quite so unthinkingly with the husband before?), about her son Iain, and his going off to Canada. She told him of the emptiness to which she had returned night after night. She told him of the long struggle to bring Iain up, and of the nights she had stayed awake, brooding, and wondering from

where the next bit of bread was to come. And as he listened, the scythe forgotten in his hand, it was as if she was relating a history that had always been and might always be, like a sea rising and falling for ever. But, no, he said firmly to himself, it will not always be, this waste, this terrible waste.

A wasp settled on his hand. He hit it venomously, watching the dead body fall to the ground where it struggled for a while with all the poisonous energy of its being, all black and gold, before becoming still after a final quiver. He was thinking that he should have known of all this before. His protest against Sellar, he now thought, might perhaps have been from the mind. No, not all of it but some of it had been. Perhaps some of it had even been vanity. Had he really wanted to get his name in the papers? Was that all it was? No, not all of it, for he remembered his brother's child and, more particularly, his brother, that stern man in love with the truth who was now being crucified by his own wife. But some of what he had written had been purely intellectual, like his chapter, now almost finished, based on that Colonel's book about the Black Watch and showing how well behaved and moral Highland troops had always been. Perhaps he shouldn't be using intellectual arguments at all. Perhaps he should be relying on the pure venom of anger.

But as he stood there listening – no, by now he was kneeling, as if like a child at the breast of a mother who would tell him everything in the form of a story he would never forget – he knew that his hatred was not simply for those who were bent on destroying the Highlands, not simply for the Patrick Sellars, but for the Patrick Sellars in the Highlanders, those interior Patrick Sellars with the faces of old Highlanders who evicted emotions and burnt down love. These people needed a voice to speak for them. Could he be that voice, torn between the world into which they were born and hating the world Patrick Sellar would make for them, his hatred and contempt? Absentmindedly, he stroked the blade of the scythe which he had sharpened to its finest edge, and without thinking found he had a spot of blood on his hand. He turned the scythe so that it was facing away from him and licked the blood with his lips. Then he brought the scythe back to where it had been before.

Listening, he had been transported into a world of such pure horror that his head ached at it. Why had she not told anyone about this before? He looked at the face which was half-turned away from the bright light, the sunshine falling on the old lines which were like a net, and thought of all the pain, and all the dead, and all the sorrow of those who had lived in this world. When she had finished he said:

'You should have told someone of this before.'

She looked at him, her hands crossed in her lap and said simply:

'Who could I have told?'

He found the letter still clutched firmly in his hand, and all sweaty. He handed it to her. What could he tell her? How could he tell her of the destruction which was coming to the Highlands? How could he tell her of that dazzling light of violence which was going to shine soon like a new sword? How could he tell her of a Duke who cared only for money and for his own pleasures, his own paintings? Of a Duchess who during her holidays did beautiful water colours of a Sutherland which would soon be no more? She couldn't understand all this for she hadn't been taught to think on general lines. All she could understand was what was personal. And he knew too that being human she would hate him for this, that in her moment of weakness she had been tricked, as she would consider it, into telling the story of her life. The human heart and the human mind, how infinitely complicated they were! How could one bring them under order? Even Patrick Sellar wouldn't be able to do that. What could he say to her? The space between them, how infinitely large it was, he kneeling and she seated on the chair.

With great patience he sought for something to say, but couldn't find anything at all which would bring him closer to her. So there they were in the humming day, both looking at the ground as if they were effigies, while the summer flowed around them in interpenetrating colour and scent. Finally, he got up and said: 'Thank you for showing me the letter.' He hadn't found the spell which would release them, the word that he could say and she could understand. And this tormented him. Obscurely he felt that it was important to him to find the word and to be able to say it, so that he would

be united with her and what she was. Perhaps only the poets would be able to find that word. Or perhaps it didn't exist. But it must exist. Somewhere it lay concealed under lies and differences, like the soot in a black house which could be used to fertilise the land. Somewhere, if he could tear the beams apart, the dry old beams, he would find it and build a new kind of house. For after all, he was a mason. He would find it if he was worthy.

He thought of the day Patrick Sellar had come to his house. This was the enemy, this little man, servant of those who were greater than he.

'We know about you,' Sellar had said. 'We know about your writings. But there's nothing you can do anyway.'

'I can tell the truth.'

'The truth!' Sellar had laughed. 'The truth? What's that? Don't you know that the day has come when the truth is what we care to make it? Surely a man like you who has the reputation of being an atheist ought to know that.'

It was as if for a moment, by a strange wayward luxury, Sellar had almost condescended to argue with someone from the other side whom he recognised to be reasonably intelligent, as if, knowing he would win anyway, he could afford the pleasure of debate.

'No, Macleod, you can't oppose the movement of the age, and that movement is against your old-world survival. Do you know, some day one of you will come to me, having returned from Canada with a map in your hand and a Balmoral on your head, and you'll thank me for having put you in the way of making a fortune? Why, we might even have a glass of whisky together and talk of old times.'

'What about those who won't come back and have lost their maps?'

'My dear Macleod, the progress of civilisation demands sacrifice. Where would the world be if there was no one willing to move into the future? Can you not understand that?'

'Is it moving into the future to send these people into hovels by a sea which is strange to them and to a fishing to which they have never been used?'

'They will grow used to it. The human mind is infinitely adaptable.'

'And what of yourself? Do you wish to emigrate or to live in a hovel?'

'Me? The question doesn't arise for me. You see, Macleod, I'm a lawyer by training. I don't come from the Highlands. I can see your lives, I may say, dispassionately. I state a case and I am very lucky in that I am on the side of the question in which I believe; and, even better than that, one whose answer is inevitable.'

'If it is as inevitable as you say, why do you have to use force? Why can't you wait?'

'There isn't time.'

As he looked at Sellar as they talked together, it seemed as if this confrontation had been going on for ever and would go on for ever, in a time which was palpable as weather itself.

'So you are a happy man, Sellar. On the side of history and making a profit from it?'

Something flickered for a moment in Sellar's eyes, as if it were an insect about to sting.

'Who can say what happiness is, and whether one is ever happy? But there's one thing sure, Macleod, if you don't put a stop to your writings, you won't be very happy.'

He himself had almost been caught for a moment in the net of an academic discussion about happiness which he would have enjoyed. Instead of pursuing metaphysics, he said:

'What can you do about it?'

'Oh, there are many things. Our methods need not be public, but we have them. I can tell you something. No, better still, I'll put it in the form of a question. Whose side do you think the law will be on?'

'Oh, I'm sure the law we have will be on your side.'

'Yes, Macleod, that's the beautiful thing about the law. It's not interested in emotion, as law. And, anyway, are you implying that there is some other law?'

The question was darted out quickly as if Macleod were a witness he was trying to trap into a damaging admission, as if he were saying:

'Well, is it the law of God you're thinking of?'

'Oh, yes, Mr Sellar. There is another kind of law.'

'And which is that?' he asked, turning at the door.

'Perhaps you don't know about it. Have you ever read any poetry? We in the Highlands are very fond of poetry.'

'Poetry?' He was uncomprehending.

'Well, I'll tell you. There are some poets, we call them bards, who have written songs about you. Did you know that? Shall I quote a bit? "Patrick Sellar, I see you roasted in Hell like a herring and the oil running over your head." That, of course, is only part of it. You see, Mr Sellar, you will become a legend. You have become a legend. Are you flattered? Is that perhaps what you wanted? You talk about the future. Yes, true enough, you too will have a future. Children will sing about you in the streets in different countries, countries you will never visit. They may even recite poems about you in the schools. Yes, your name will be on people's lips.'

'Who reads these Gaelic poems anyway?'

'Who, indeed? Nevertheless, they exist. And, who knows, perhaps some day it will be fashionable to read them. The descendants of the class who employ you may take them up out of idleness. You never know what idle people will do. You see, that is a law you didn't know about. It is also a law of the future.'

Patrick Sellar had looked at him for a long time, as if trying to imprint his image on his memory, and then without another word had walked out of the house. Since then he had not seen him. But he would be back, there was no doubt of that. Oh, there was no doubt of that. And he himself might very well end up in Canada, as Sellar had said, in bitterness writing articles that no one would ever read.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I'd better get on with my scything.'

She didn't say anything, almost as if she had forgotten him. As he was going, Big Betty came round the side of the house.

'I came to see the invalid,' she shouted gaily. 'Now you go off and do your scything. She'll be well enough till you come back.'

He went down to the cornfield.

'And how are you, Mrs Scott?' said Big Betty.

'I'm better now. I'll be going home soon.'

'I'm sure you'll be glad of that. Everyone wants to be in his own house. Isn't that right? Well, Mrs Scott,' she boomed. 'They looked after you well here.' And then in a whisper, 'Didn't they?'

'They were very good to me, Betty.'

'Yes, I'm sure of that,' said Betty in a rather disappointed voice. 'When we found you there we didn't know what to say.'

There came to Mrs Scott a thought which left her suddenly almost breathless. Perhaps they had wondered if she had been trying to kill herself! Perhaps that was what they had been thinking all the time. Perhaps that was why Donald Macleod had been questioning her?

Betty continued: 'But we're all very glad that you are all right now. Even my man is asking for you and he doesn't think about anything but himself most of the time.' She whispered again: 'And how is Mrs Macleod keeping?'

'I think she is down in the field. She is quite well.'

'Ah, that husband of hers has a lot to do,' said Betty, raising her voice. 'I have been hearing a lot since you fell ill. The things people say.'

'What about, Betty?'

'Oh, about Mr Macmillan, but you mustn't say a word of this to anyone. Why hadn't he seen that Mrs Scott wasn't herself, they say? But of course I tell them that the poor man was working. How was he to know that you weren't well? Poor fellow, with that sister of his. She's a proper bitch, Mrs Scott, if you'll excuse me.'

'What else do they say?'

'I was meaning to tell you. Did you know that Sheila has a brother who lives farther south than us? And he was put out of his house and has been shifted to one of these houses up by the sea. Well, Mrs Scott, you wouldn't believe the things he told her.'

'What things?'

'Well, I'll tell you, and this is what Sheila told me. He said that when they went up there the houses hadn't been built. They had to build them themselves. Do you know what they

were living on? On sea shells, that's what he said. Sea shells. They were starving, Mrs Scott. Mind you, you have to watch what Sheila says to you just the same. But that's what she told me. And another thing, if it hadn't been good weather they would have died. I wonder if there's a chair I can sit on. . .'

'I'm sure if you. . .'

'No, I'll just sit on the stone. Ah, that's better.' She levered herself down with much puffing, her cheeks becoming redder and redder till she had settled herself. 'Well, and they told them they would have boats but there were no boats either. So they had to make a boat. Imagine that, eh? Sheila's brother! And he never was any good with his hands. I mind the day when he couldn't even put the thatch on the house. So they had to build a boat and they went out in it and one of the boys was drowned. Sheila says they never got his body, just one boot. You wouldn't believe it, would you?

'Well, as I was saying, she told me something else. When they were starving some of them used to climb the rocks for eggs of these seabirds. I don't know their names. And do you know, one of them fell and was killed. He slipped on the rock, you see. And that's the place they're going to send us to. Well, there's one thing sure: my man won't like it. He's never climbed anything in his life. He's so scared he won't even climb up the chimney.'

'What else did he say?'

'Isn't that enough, woman? Well, he did say that the cows didn't like the place and tried to run away. The poor beasts! They couldn't get to sleep at night because of the mooing and the lowing. They made tents for themselves, you see. And to think that some of the little boys used to do that in the summer. It's changed days indeed. And how do you think Mrs Macleod will get on?' she whispered. 'Eh? What does himself say about it? I was hearing that he and Patrick Sellar had a quarrel. I don't blame him for that, that little beggar; begging your pardon, Mrs Scott.'

Big Betty heaved herself about the stone in a companionable silence.

'This stone is eating into my buttocks,' she said, 'but I'm resting my feet just the same. They're not what they used to be. And there's something else, Mrs Scott. They are saying that Patrick Sellar will be back soon and this time he will be putting us out. The first time was just a warning. They have to give us notice according to the law. They can't put us out without any warning. They have to give us notice of a week or two. Even the servant girls in Glasgow have to be given their notice so that they can make preparations. Ay, that's the law. It would be terrible if there was no law, wouldn't it, Mrs Scott?' She sighed massively. 'I'm just wondering what we'll do about that big dresser my man's mother had. I'm sure he won't be able to carry it on his back.' This seemed to amuse her and she giggled fatly to herself. 'Anyway, I'm glad to see you looking so well, Mrs Scott.' Then, 'What did the minister say to you?'

When she had told her Big Betty said:

'Ay, his congregation is falling off now, I can tell you, after last Sunday's sermon. He told them that they would have to leave and, do you know, he said they were like the children of Israel – imagine that – saying they would have to put up with tribulations and they would have to cross the desert and they would come to the Promised Land. Anyone would think he was Moses himself, the way he was talking. And then he talked of those amongst us who don't worship God. It was Donald Macleod he was meaning, of course. Everyone else here worships God and goes to church regularly but he said we were great sinners just the same. Mind you, some of them were crying. Imagine Dolly. She was crying and she's been single all her days. What sin did she do? Eh? She's never seen a real man yet, if you'll excuse me, Mrs Scott. And she's always running after the minister though he wouldn't look at the likes of her. It's Mr Brown this and Mr Brown that and Mr Brown can I clean out the church for you.'

She paused, then said: 'They do say that Patrick Sellar has something against Donald Macleod. I wonder what it is.'

'He writes papers about him.'

'What?'

'He writes papers about him. Papers. He had them on the table.'

'Oh, is that what it is? Papers. Do you know what Sheila's other brother says – the lame one – he thinks he knows

everything just because he sits by that dike every day and speaks to the passers-by. Why even the children are afraid of him with that stick of his. Well, he says that Patrick Sellar won't put us out at all, that the Government will stop him. He says that at the last moment the Government will take Patrick Sellar down to London and then they'll charge him. He says that he's read books about it, that if anyone is doing wrong and putting people out of their houses the Government will charge him. He says that there's an act and it says you can't be put out of your house. They were asking him where he had seen this act and he said he'd seen it in a book and if he could only find the book he'd tell them about it. But he says it's a very old act and that's why he can't find it. They're calling him "The Act" now and he gets redder and redder in the face and he takes hold of that stick and you'd think he was going to hit you over the head with it. His hands are just like glass because he's always out in the cold weather but they say he's very strong. But I don't like his moustache. I don't like a moustache on a man. I like a beard but not a moustache. Your own father had a fine beard on him, Mrs Scott. Well, I'm glad to see you're looking so well. I didn't think you were going to get over it so quickly, but you'll have to look after yourself for a while.'

She got up unsteadily: 'Drat that stone. My backside's all cut by it.' She leaned closer: 'Ay,' she said. 'Everyone's saying that we'll have to go quietly, else they'll send the soldiers after us.'

'The soldiers?'

'Ay, the Highland soldiers. Mind your own man? He was in one of them regiments as they call them. There's a place called Fort George where they stay. They're saying they use the soldiers if people won't move for them. And they say the soldiers have to do what they're told. Orders, you understand! When they get their orders they have to do what they're told. Of course, not all of them are Highlanders. Some of them are foreign. They won't use the ones who were in the Highlands all the time. They'll use the other ones who have been foreign. That's what they're saying anyway.'

'Who was saying that?'

'Sheila's brother told her. They didn't use them on them but he said they used them in another village. You don't know what they'll do. Oh, well, I must be going. Mrs Macleod isn't in, you said?'

'No, she went down to the fields.'

'Ay, she'll be working on the corn, though who knows what will happen to it. Some people aren't cutting it at all. It'll be a handsome soldier who'll take me out of my house, I'm telling you. I've seen the day they would look at me twice. You could put a ring round my waist in those days. You'd think I had nothing to do, the way I go gallivanting around. And do you know another thing I heard? Up there, in the north by the sea, they say the people aren't nearly as friendly. They are all for themselves. You have to knock on the door before you get in. Would you believe that? Ay, if you were sick no one would look after you up there. That's what they say. Well, I must be off this time. And make sure that you look after yourself. Mar sin leat.'

She went off round the house. Mrs Scott could hear her opening and shutting the gate, and then her footsteps on the road. After Big Betty had gone, Mrs Scott still sat there, the letter in her hand, staring unseeingly down towards the cornfield, where she could see the flash of Donald Macleod's scythe. Part of the field was mown, part was not. She could hear the children shouting faintly and a dog barking. And she noticed that there were few people working in the fields, just as Big Betty had said.

Suddenly on an impulse she arose and went into the house. She stood for a moment hesitantly in the doorway of the kitchen, not at first knowing what she wanted to do. Then she walked over to the dresser where the toys had been put away. She opened the top drawer and there was the box. She didn't open it, only glanced at the picture on the outside, two regiments drawn up facing each other, some on horses and some not. She shut that drawer and opened the next one. Immediately she recognised the papers that Donald Macleod had had on the table. She took them out and glanced at them. Among them was a paper with 'Edinburgh Gazette' written on it. She put it down and found a book below it. She opened it but couldn't make anything of it. The author seemed to be

some kind of foreigner. There were long words in it which she did not understand but here and there she saw words which she recognised, like 'crofts' and 'Sutherland'. She put it away, thinking that if she had been cleverer she would have been able to follow it, and regretting her lack of education.

Then she turned to the papers written by Donald Macleod himself. She took one of them over to the light and began to read it. It said 'The Highland Clearances' by Donald Macleod. She could understand some of it. He talked of the Highland regiments and how they had made themselves famous all over the world and how the men were coming home to find that their crofts had been burnt to the ground. But she was still dissatisfied. It wasn't what she wanted, though she didn't know what she wanted. She put it down with the other papers, then closed that drawer.

She opened another which was full of clothes, children's clothes, all the time thinking that she wished she could understand more clearly what all these papers were about. Beneath the clothes she found a portrait of an old man with a white moustache and a beard and an angry looking face. It was most likely Donald Macleod's father. She looked at it for a moment and then put it back, glancing at the clock. It was three o'clock. She rummaged about but found nothing else in that drawer.

She opened the bottom one. She found a small packet of letters tied with a rubber band. She held the rubber band and pulled the letters out. Then she looked out of the window but could see no one. Trembling, she opened the first letter which looked yellow with age and had a queer old fashioned handwriting.

Dear Emily (it said)

How I yearned for you when I saw you in church today, with your beautiful new bonnet. I am sure that every eye was on you as mine was, even in this douce city of Edinburgh. How I wish that I, a poor student, were as rich as our merchants and that I could give you silks for your dress and diamonds for your hair. But of one thing I am sure – no one can love you as much as I do. And do not write to me in future that you are but a poor servant girl and I am a student. You might as well say that I am a 'poor' student who is almost neglecting his books because of you – but do not blame yourself for that! It is you also who maintain me when I am weary of the books, the law, its grammar and its barrenness. Oh, if you know how much I long for you! But then I think of my good fortune that you should exist at all and that I should have met you, which is the greatest good fortune of all. I can almost forgive addle-pated Mackay for having been so accidentally clever as to have singled out for lodgings the place in which I should meet you. Shall I see you this Monday night? Please write at once to say that I shall, for otherwise I tell you with hand on heart that I shall throw myself from Arthur's Seat.

Your half-demented
Robert

Hastily she turned to the next letter, dated a month later.

My dear Emily,

I write this at midnight. Listen. The bell has just tolled. Do you not hear it? Of course you can hear it. I fancy that it unites us as it united us last night. Why do I write? I can't tell except that my feelings demand utterance. My sweet one, how could I have known? How could we have known? Shall I always hear that cry of a startled thrush – was it a thrush? And that moon – shall I remember it always? It was I, I who was to blame, if blame there was. Yet how could we have foretold how the blame itself – the sense that there would be blame – was overwhelmed by that other sense. My dear Emily, how in future I must curb myself though the Devil himself were tempting me! How chaste we shall be, though God knows how much I shall long to take you in my arms. The bell has completed its tolling.

From me to you at midnight,

Yours for ever,
Robert

My dear Emily, (dated much later)

I cannot sleep for thinking what you told me. What

Fury is it that drives me to writing, for what will writing avail? But it is as if when I'm not with you in the flesh I need to be with you in the spirit, and I had thought the writing of letters would be sufficiently harmless.

What are we going to do? (I do not wish to worry you but I am writing this out as if to find an answer to our troubles.) Not that I regret – even if I felt blame – what we are to each other. But I foresee the future and know what will be. You should not trouble yourself so much about the future. There will always be something to do. But though large, Edinburgh is really a small town and soon they will be at our throats. Do not deceive yourself. The minister who condescends to talk to you now when he visits your master and mistress will soon be an enemy. And do not imagine that you will be allowed to maintain the situation that you have. You and I will be outcasts. We have to confront this in all its truth. . .

Slowly spelling out the letters, Mrs Scott in her intense interest had forgotten herself. Very gently a hand removed the letter from her hand. Very gently the hand put the letter back in the band, replaced all the letters in the drawer and shut it. Very gently Donald Macleod said:

'Well, I must confess that that is a habit of my own, Mrs Scott. I have a natural curiosity which nothing can abate. You know, a lot of people have wondered about me. A man who keeps himself to himself must expect that curiosity. What do you think of these letters?' he asked, looking at her keenly.

'I don't know,' she said hesitantly, looking down at the ground. 'I'm sorry. I didn't. . .'

He laughed. 'You don't think they are family letters?' he said at last. 'No, no. Mrs Scott, I'm not illegitimate or anything like that. These letters . . . I'll tell you now how they came into my possession. One day I wandered through Edinburgh and I came to this man who was selling books from a barrow, old books. And I looked through them. You haven't heard about novels, Mrs Scott?'

No, she hadn't heard about novels.

'Yes, well, they're stories that people write to amuse

themselves. I sometimes read one or two when I have time.'

Naturally she didn't know anything about novels.

'Well, I picked out this particular book carelessly and then when I opened the book I found these letters inside the cover. I don't know whether they are real letters or whether they are part of a book the man who had the novel originally was going to write. You can't tell. Do you think they're real?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Scott in a confused manner, still ashamed of herself for having been so absorbed in them that she hadn't heard Donald Macleod approaching. 'They were very beautiful,' she said at last.

'Yes, they are in a way,' said Donald Macleod offhandedly. 'Though I must say that the style doesn't appeal to me.'

She didn't know what he meant by style.

'Please forgive me,' she said with a curious dignity. 'I don't know why I did what I did after your hospitality.'

'Don't say anything more about it, Mrs Scott. It just shows that you're interested in human beings, that's all. It's a good thing.'

But she wondered just the same why she did it. Was it because she wanted to find out something shameful about him, some weakness he had been concealing all these years?

'I should like to go home tomorrow, Mr Macleod,' she said at last.

'Yes. Yes, of course. But only if you want to, mind. Only if you're feeling well enough.'

'Mr Macleod?'

'Yes?'

'I'm sorry I can't understand your writings.'

'Oh, these. Who can? Don't worry about that, Mrs Scott. You're not the only one.'

'You're a very strange man.'

'Oh, I'm not so strange. It's just that because I'm playful people don't think I'm serious. They think in the Highlands that only serious people are serious. You know, I should have let the minister see these letters. It would have given him ammunition enough. You must admit that I could have great fun from them. Why, I could even change the names.'

Then, more seriously, 'You know, Mrs Scott, your son and I used to have great talks.'

'I know.'

'I suppose you disapproved of them. But I never spoke to him about religion. I just think there should be more fun about. I nearly said to you just now that Emily was supposed to be my mother, and I could have built up a marvellous story, just for fun. Would you have believed me?'

'I know that your mother's name wasn't Emily.'

'Ay, that would have spoiled it right enough. And you shall go home tomorrow if that is what you want. But don't think we won't miss you. It did my wife good to nurse you. She'll be back in a minute. She likes nursing people, especially old people. I haven't seen her so happy for years. And these letters, now. They're quite beautiful in a way. Aren't they? I suppose there must be a reason why I kept them. I don't know. I like these old things. And there's something very touching about them. Even I can feel that.' He paused, then said: 'It's funny how you can't tell whether they are real or part of a book a man was going to write. They sound real just the same. There are stories like that in the Bible too,' he added with a smile, 'only they took place much longer ago, and not in Edinburgh! I thought at first they were real too, but there was something about the style, something that didn't quite ring true. No, I think someone made them up. I think they're fiction.'

SIXTEEN

Night fell over Spain, over Canada, over the Highland villages, over the sheep and the sheepdogs, over the shepherds, over castle and thatched house, over London, over old and young, over the couple making love in the cornfield, over the old people turned away from each other.

And she dreamt an old woman's dreams. She dreamt of her husband on a white horse putting her out of the house with a gun in his hand. She dreamt of her son writing letters to Elizabeth and hiding them in an old dresser. A man in a black gown was standing at a door and behind him a river was flowing. In the river was a dead sheep with a human face, and she could not tell whose it was. Big Betty was standing on the bridge waving a letter and shouting words which she could not hear. The river became a torrent and huge rocks rose on each side of it. A boy was climbing one of the rocks while a piper played below. The boy turned his smiling face and she saw that it was Iain. As he climbed she looked again at the piper but he had changed. He was now a drunkard capering about and lashing himself with a whip. His face was her husband's face. He was grinning at her and posturing on the cliff, at the top of which a man was preaching a sermon, his gown flowing in the wind. Again she couldn't hear a word he was saying though his mouth opened and shut.

The scene changed. There was a room and in the room a man was writing a book. The book appeared to be a Bible but the man was writing on its pages as if they were blank. He would look up thoughtfully now and again as if thinking and then continue writing. When he was finished he put the Bible away in a big box in which he rummaged. He brought dresses and a ring. A little girl came in and he put the ring on her hand and she danced out again. Then he went into

another room where someone was lying on a bed. He took another big book from beside the bed and took it down to the table as before and began to write on the pages as if they were blank leaves. Then he locked it away again. The person on the bed couldn't move and she couldn't make out whether it was a man or a woman.

Mrs Scott sighed and turned restlessly in her bed. She seemed to be speaking but the man, standing at the bedroom door, couldn't hear what she was saying as she lay there in the moonlight, though he could see her lips move. He listened for a long time and heard her sigh again. Everyone was in bed but himself and the lamp was lit in the kitchen. His face looked grimmer than it had done when he was talking to her that afternoon. It was as if he were debating something within himself. After a long time his face changed and became more tranquil, as if he had come closer to an answer though perhaps he had not yet fully perceived it.

Mrs Scott turned restlessly, her dark shape humped, but he didn't go near her. Instead, he went back to the table and began to write in the glow of the lamp. This was the time when he could get most of his writing done. He looked up his book by the Swiss economist and read of what had happened to the Swiss peasants, and of what the author had to say about the Highlands. After a while he pushed the book away impatiently and put down the pen with which he had been taking notes. His brow wrinkled as if he were thinking out not a speculative problem but a personal one to which there was no ready answer. Later, he put his papers away and went to bed.

SEVENTEEN

Mrs Scott did not leave the Macleods till the following afternoon, as she was asked to look after the two children in the morning. It was Donald Macleod who asked her to do this.

'We'll be working in the field,' he said, 'and we'll have to try to get it finished. You never know, the weather might break soon.'

But there was no sign that the weather would break. The day was like the previous ones, perfectly blue, perfectly clear, perfectly balanced. Lines suddenly swam into her mind like a fish rising out of a haze, lines from an author whose name she could not recall, if they had an author:

O mosglamaid gu suilbhir ait
le sunndachd ghasd is eireamaid.

Lines in praise of a summer morning and one's urge to get up and be about in it.

So she found herself alone with the two children. The dishes had all been washed and put away. At first the boy was suspicious and went over to the dresser by the open window, then began to hunt about in the drawers. He took out the toy soldiers, laid them on the floor and stared at them half-heartedly. The girl looked at Mrs Scott. Then she too went over to where the boy was. She poked at the soldiers.

'Do you like going to school?' said Mrs Scott at last to the boy, for want of something to say.

'No.'

There was a silence. Marjory got up from the floor, and stood looking at Mrs Scott.

'You took off your blandage,' she said at last, accusingly.

'Bandage, not blandage,' said Norman, impatiently and crossly.

'No, I don't need it now,' said Mrs Scott.

'I found you in the stream,' said Norman suddenly. 'What were you doing in the stream?'

'I fainted. I fell in.'

'Oh.' He seemed disappointed.

'We get trout there,' he said at last. 'We catch them with our hands. Have you ever caught any trout?'

'No, but my son used to catch them.'

'Does he go to school?'

At this point Marjory began to laugh uproariously.

'A soldier fell,' she said triumphantly. 'He fell.' And sure enough one of the soldiers had fallen on its side.

'No, he's too old,' said Mrs Scott.

'Are you going home today?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I don't like school. They give us sums. I like English Composition, but I don't like sums.'

Marjory had planted herself in front of Mrs Scott and was shouting:

'Tell us a story, Granny Scott. Tell us a story, Granny Scott.'

Her brother turned to her and said in someone else's voice:

'Don't be so impudent, Marjory.' Then he turned away from her. 'I got a worm yesterday, Mrs Scott. It was under a big stone, and I took it along to the river to see if a trout would come after it.'

'And did it?'

'Did what?'

'Did a trout come after it?' It was really so difficult to follow the conversation of children, they seemed to be dancing about all the time.

'No, they said a trout would come after it but it didn't.'

'Who said that?'

'Billy and Dell said, but it didn't.'

'Tell us a story, Granny Scott.'

'Will you keep quiet, Marjory? She's only five, Mrs Scott. Do you always wear black clothes?'

'Yes.'

'My mother sometimes wears black clothes. Will we get a holiday if they put us out of the house?'

'What did you say?'

He looked at her scornfully.

'If they put us out will we get a holiday?'

'I suppose so.'

'Good. I hate Miss Macdonald. She hits the desk with a ruler. And she puts spit on the slate.'

'Spit?'

'She doesn't use the cloth. She puts spit on it.'

Marjory came up close. 'Tell us a story, Mrs Scott.'

A story? What story? She had no stories. She couldn't remember any stories. And yet, long long ago, she knew that there had been stories though she couldn't remember any of them.

'My father always tells her stories,' said Norman contemptuously.

'Sometimes he reads them out of a book.' He obviously didn't expect her to tell a story.

'Yes,' she began, hearing her own voice with some surprise. 'I will tell you a story.' She stopped, and then began: 'Once upon a time there was a man. . .'

'What did he look like?'

'He was small and fat and he . . . yes, he carried a whip in his hand. And he rode a white horse.'

There was no other story that she could think of.

'A white horse? I've never seen a white horse.'

'Yes, he rode a white horse and one day he came to this house.'

'What was the house like, Granny Scott?'

'The house? It was like . . . it was a very old house.'

She added triumphantly, 'It had a chimney.'

'Was the chimney very big?'

'No, it wasn't very big. It wasn't a very big house and the chimney wasn't very big. Well, the little fat man rode on his white horse till he came to this house. Then he got off his horse and tied it up.'

'What did he tie it to?' Norman asked. He hadn't really been listening.

'There was an iron stake in the ground they used to tie the cows to.'

'We've got one of those,' said Norman.

'Yes. So he tied his horse to this iron stake and he went to the door and he . . . he banged on the door with his whip.'

'How could he bang with a whip?' Norman spoke again.

'It had a thing at the top of it, a knob made of gold.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Gold?' said Marjory, round-eyed.

'Yes, it was made of gold, and he banged on the door with it and an old woman. . .'

'I bet she was a witch,' said Marjory, jumping up and down. 'I bet she was a witch. Wasn't she, Granny Scott?'

'No, she . . .' then realising that Marjory was becoming disappointed, she said: 'She didn't know she was a witch.'

Marjory looked at her uncomprehendingly.

'All right then,' Mrs Scott surrendered. 'She was a witch.'

'Anyway, the old woman went to the door to see who was there.'

'Did she have a cat?' Marjory asked. 'Witches always have a cat.'

'Yes, she had a cat. She went to the door, and the man said' (here her voice became stronger) '"Am I speaking to Mrs Mackay?" And she said: "Yes" and he said. . .'

She didn't know what to say next. Marjory looked up at her and said:

'She had put a spell on his horse.'

'Yes, that's right, she had put a spell on his horse. Yes, that's right. "He won't do what I tell him," said the man to her.'

'How could she put a spell on a horse?' said Norman scornfully.

'Ah, you don't believe it but I've seen it. There was an old woman here who used to put a spell on the cows so that they wouldn't give any milk, and there was another one and she used to tell when a person was going to die. She would come into the ceilidh house with her feet and her clothes wet and she would say that she had been carrying that person's coffin across a river. . .'

Marjory had fastened on the essential point.

'She put a spell on his horse?'

'Yes, and he said: "This horse used to go anywhere I asked him and he used to go to all the houses and I would put the people out of the houses but –"'

'Why was he putting the people out of all the houses?'

'He was an . . . officer,' she said lamely.

'You mean official, don't you Mrs Scott?' said Norman looking at her keenly.

'Official? What's official?' said Marjory.

'Mrs Scott means that the Government sent him,' said Norman.

Mrs Scott continued desperately, 'And he said to the witch: "You put a spell on my horse and he didn't want to come to your house. See," and he took her out, and she saw that the white horse was all covered with blood, because he had been whipped so badly. And she went up to the white horse and was going to pat him but the man said: "Leave him alone."'

'I know about the white horse,' said Norman.

Marjory turned on him. 'You keep quiet. You're always spoiling my stories.' Surprisingly, Norman did keep quiet and Mrs Scott felt more and more uncomfortable.

She stumbled on: 'And he was covered with blood. And the man said "I want you to take the spell off my horse, because he won't do what I tell him, or I'll come back with a lot of men and put you out as well." So the witch didn't know what to do. She had put the spell on the white horse but she hadn't covered him with blood. It was the man who had whipped him. And, anyway, the white horse didn't really belong to the man. The white horse didn't like the man. The man had taken the white horse from someone else, and the white horse didn't understand what the man was saying to him.'

'What sort of spell had the witch put on the white horse?'

'The white horse didn't like the witch and he didn't like the man,' she said vaguely. 'The white horse came from a foreign place. He used to belong to the army and he was very happy and then he was taken about to put people out of their houses.'

'And he didn't like it.'

'Perhaps the witch didn't put a spell on him at all,' said Marjory. 'Perhaps the man was just saying that.'

'No, she had put a spell on him,' Mrs Scott insisted. 'And the horse didn't know what to do. Anyway, after the man had told this he got on his horse which was snarling and trying to throw his rider off, and he told her that she would have to take the spell off or he would come back and put her out. But the witch shouted at him, "Your white horse will never come back," and he shouted back, "Yes, he will come back." So she sat down. . .'

'With her cat . . .' said Marjory.

'With her cat, and she thought what she would do.'

'She thought and thought,' said Marjory.

'Yes, she thought and thought. All that day she thought and thought. And the next day, and the next night. For three days and nights she thought and thought but she didn't know what to do. So on the fourth day she got up and she took her broom – no, I'm telling a lie – just when she was going out another witch came to see her. . .'

'Another witch?'

'Yes. And the two of them talked about it and she said: "What am I going to do about the white horse?" And the other witch said, "There's nothing you can do about the white horse." And he. . .'

'You said it was a witch.'

'Yes, and she said: "You can't do anything about the white horse or they'll put a spell on you." So the witch went away and after a while she began to cry because she thought the other witch would help her.'

'Was she a big witch?'

'Yes, she was a big witch. Anyway, she went away and the other witch thought and thought. For seven days and seven nights she thought and thought, and then she said to herself: "I am going up to the castle where the chief of all the witches lives." So she put on her head dress and her black overall. . .'

'Gown.'

'Black gown and she took her broomstick and she went off. And she came to a deep. . .'

'You're doing very well,' said Donald Macleod, coming in smiling. But she knew that she wasn't, and that she couldn't tell a proper story. All the time she had got more and more muddled and she didn't even know how the story was to end.

EIGHTEEN

She was back in her own house again. Donald Macleod had lit the fire before he left her, and she was sitting in her own chair once more. After the turmoil and noise she rested, closing her eyes and listening to the sound made by the fire leaping up the chimney. The brown peat burned quickly and left only a little ash behind it. The black peat burned more brightly with a white radiance.

Around her, the house was absolutely silent except for the sound made by the pendulum of the grandfather clock, which she had rewound. It felt, however, curiously tranquil, as if some pressure had been removed from it. She had looked with a certain amount of surprise at the plates which she had left on the table before she had gone to see the minister. They seemed to belong to a distant world. She had smiled, realising that this had been the longest period she had ever been out of her house, the best part of a week. And so many things had happened to her in just a week – the man on the horse, the journey to see the minister, her fall into the stream, the waking in a strange room, the talks to Donald Macleod, the incident of the letters, and the story of the witch. Tired by them, yet in some way refreshed, she dozed contentedly while the fire crackled in the chimney. She felt better than she had done for years.

Two hours must have passed like this before her first visitor came. This was Sheila who had come to ask her about the ring she had given the Linnet. She had forgotten all about it.

'Yes, I gave her the ring,' said Mrs Scott.

'Oh, that's all right then. But you see she. . .'

'No, she didn't steal it,' said Mrs Scott.

Sheila looked at her in surprise for stating her own

suspicions so bluntly.

'Oh, I don't mean that. It's just that you shouldn't give her any presents for taking the water in to you.'

'It was a ring I used to have myself. It's not worth much.'

'In that case I'll give it back to her. I must admit she said you had given it to her. To tell you the truth, she was crying. She will come tomorrow as usual.'

'Thank you.'

Sheila looked at her curiously and then said:

'It's not easy to bring them up. Sometimes you're too soft and sometimes too hard. But she's a good girl, no matter what anyone says. She has a heart of gold.' She continued: 'But sometimes William doesn't feel well and we get behind with the work and then . . . well, there are others with more money than us and the children are at us to. . .' William was a big fat apparently jovial fellow who had been working on a stone house for at least four years but much of the time he stood in his canvas jersey gazing vaguely down the road, his barrow abandoned beside a partly-unearthed stone. 'And it's even worse now because no one wants to do anything in case we have to go.'

'Is that what's happening?'

'Yes, I'm not looking forward to it after all those years. I just don't know what we're going to do. Imagine all these children by the sea. We'll have to watch them all the time. We won't get anything done. They might pick things up and poison themselves. And there'll be strangers. You won't know who they'll be mixing with. But the better-off ones will be all right,' she said bitterly. 'And the strong ones. Big Betty will be all right. She's as strong as a horse. The likes of us won't be so well off.'

'So they're all going, then?'

'Oh, they are. One thing I hope is that it will be good weather. Think if it was pouring with rain. Everything would be ruined. Not that I have so much, but a few things I have got in Glasgow. But if the rain comes on, then I don't know what will happen. And where's the well to be? I ask them. Are we going to drink salt water? But they don't know anything about it. They're leaving it to the last minute. Except Murray; he'll make a good thing out of it with his

cart. The people who can pay him, they'll get all their goods up there. Well, as they say there won't come a low tide without a high tide after it, perhaps it won't be so bad as we think.' She got up. 'Anyway, thank you for the ring but you shouldn't be giving her things.'

'Wait a minute,' said Mrs Scott, and on an impulse went up to the other room, rummaged about in the chest and found an old globe which her husband had once bought for Iain. She held it in her hands for a moment, then below it she saw a pair of green stockings with orange diamonds at the top which she had once knitted for him. She took them out quickly and went into the room where Sheila was, peering at the flowered cups displayed on the dresser. She turned when she saw Mrs Scott, who said:

'And give these to the boys. They won't be so jealous of the ring then, and she won't have to hide it.'

'Oh, how beautiful, Mrs Scott! Did you knit them yourself? But of course you did. I used to envy the way you dressed Iain with all those lovely woollen suits. I don't know where you learned to do it.'

'My mother taught me,' said Mrs Scott briefly, adding after a while: 'She was a good knitter till she fell sick.'

Sheila held the globe in her hands, staring at it without comprehension.

'And this is very pretty too with all the different colours,' she said.

'It'll help him with his schooling,' said Mrs Scott.

'Ay, but I'm afraid that Danny isn't very good at his lessons, not like some who become ministers and school teachers.' Sheila stared vaguely out of the window, the globe spinning restlessly in her hands. 'But we can't all be clever,' she said at last, 'though I'm sure we would all wish it.'

'No, we can't,' said Mrs Scott, thinking of the minister.

'I often wish I had learned my lessons better,' said Sheila. 'But I didn't have a good head. Many's the time I was thrashed for it. But a good thrashing doesn't do anyone any harm. Still, as they say, what comes in at one ear goes out the other. Anyway, thank you Mrs Scott, for the lovely stockings and the globe. And be sure to ask if you want

anything done. She's not doing much anyway and it keeps her out of mischief.'

Then she was gone, carrying the globe with her, awkwardly nestled under her arm, looking rather comic in a way.

Her second visitor was Mr Macmillan, who came to ask her how she was. He sat on the seat where Patrick Sellar had sat, his huge red hands protruding from his cuffs and his cap beside him.

'I am sorry I did not come to ask you if you were well,' he said with the embarrassment of one who is not used to visiting people much. At one time he had been a postman but the responsibility had proved too much for him, for he would deliver his letters only to those to whom they were addressed even though this meant, as it often did, going down to the fields to hand them over to them. He wouldn't even give them to members of the addressee's family.

'You don't have to blame yourself, Mr Macmillan,' she said. He didn't seem to have anything to say so she added:

'And how is your sister?'

'She is as well as we can expect, praise be to God.'

'I am glad to hear that.'

'Yes, I don't know what I'll do when we have to leave. She doesn't like being moved from her bed. But God in his mercy will send sustenance in his own time.' There was another long silence while he twisted and untwisted his cap. Then he said:

'Perhaps it is God's will that we have to go. We do not know the day or the hour.'

Suddenly he got up: 'I only came along to find out how you were. I can't leave her for long,' he said confusedly. She didn't know why he had come. Had he heard that some people were saying he was to blame? Even the good have to suffer scandal, she thought.

'You're not to blame,' she said. 'How could you have known?'

The eyes brightened in the reddish weather-beaten face.

'I'm glad to know that you think that. Glad to know. . .' he mumbled. 'Perhaps I think of myself too much. . .'

Then, ducking under the low-lintel, he too was gone, abashed and happy. And she was left alone again, feeling curiously restless as if she were waiting for something to happen, walking about the house touching this object, then that. The restfulness she had felt when she came back first had worn off. She went to the window and looked out as if expecting to see someone else come to the door, though she did not know whom she could be expecting. She was listening for voices but they were voices containing laughter. Whom did she expect to see, walking or dancing up to the door demanding admittance? Yet all she could see was what she always saw, fields, houses, fences, a road with no one on it, ditches empty of water and slowly darkening.

This was the time of night, she realised, when there would be the music of the melodeon. But there was no music tonight. Perhaps there would never be music again. And she realised she was sorry. Perhaps she had loved that music all her days and someone had taken it away from her. So many of the dancers were now at the ends of the earth, or under it, so many occupied with fighting pain, and so many old. Why, even Mr Macmillan had danced there at one time: even his sister had been as gay as the rest. So had Sheila before she got married to the fat lazy man who had probably lain with her, in his more handsome days or nights, in a cornfield in the autumn. And the footballers too, all the young footballers had streamed home across the moor, sweating and high coloured in their big tackety boots, their short trousers and their long. In the ghostly moonlight they had played, shooting a ghostly ball into a ghostly goal mouth, diving and dribbling about in the ebbing light as if under water. Were they still there – presences on the moor and at the end of the road? No, she said firmly, turning away from the window. They are not still there. Nor is there anything in the shadows but shadows. And, bolting the door, there is no one here but me and I'd better send that letter to Iain tomorrow. The Linnet can take it when she's going to the spring for water. And no, she decided. I won't tell him anything about what happened to me. And it's time I was going to bed. I'm getting too old for fairies. And I will have to live the way I am and I do not regret telling Donald Macleod what I told him.

Now someone else knows it too and I won't have to speak of it again. She undressed by the light of the lamp, slowly and deliberately, put out the light and went to bed.

But she prayed just the same, knowing that never again would she go to that church and that her Sundays here were for ever her own. For hadn't the long years of sacrifice taught her anything? Yes, they had taught her to endure more than she thought she could endure. And you couldn't judge God by his servants. As well as this, you could find God in those who weren't his servants. This might not last but for tonight it lasted, and she had learned to get through her life, night after night and day after day. Hadn't Christ himself said: 'Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow will take care of itself'?

And the light of the lamp was yellow like the lily. . .

And she slept.

NINETEEN

On the following day Patrick Sellar returned. This time he had another man with him. And they were on horseback as before, one on a white horse and one on a black horse. This other man was taller than Patrick Sellar, calmer, thinner, speaking less, watching more, and greater than Patrick Sellar, for when Patrick Sellar spoke to him he spoke to him gently as a servant does to a master. But this other man was watching everything all the time, even Patrick Sellar. Yet he wasn't the Duke for she had seen the Duke. And this other man's eyes seemed to see more deeply yet more calmly than the small hot ones of Patrick Sellar. They were very blue eyes which after a while you came to notice.

This time they knocked on the door. The man with Patrick Sellar had thought of that, she was sure, for she wasn't quite as innocent as she once had been. But she didn't offer them tea though she was sure they would have accepted it while the white horse and the black horse chewed the grass outside in an air which had become slightly thundery. And this time Patrick Sellar carried a big wallet with papers in it, though she was sure he was carrying it for the other man.

'Mrs Scott,' said Patrick Sellar, after he had sat down on the seat. The other man looked round the room, then at her, and sat on the chair. 'This is Mr John Loch.'

'I am pleased to meet you, Mrs Scott.'

And he sounded as if he meant it, looking at her curiously.

'Now, Mrs Scott,' said Patrick Sellar, coming down to business. 'You will remember that I was here before and you will remember what I said to you.'

She didn't answer.

'And you might have taken away a bad opinion of me. But we understand that. It is not easy for an old woman to leave her house.'

Mr Loch seemed to be studying Patrick Sellar, as much as he was studying her, sitting there so quietly, waiting.

'I spoke to Mr Loch about you and he knows all our conversation.'

He looked at Mr Loch who made no sign.

'But further. . .'

'Circumstances,' said Mr Loch. He had a habit of not appearing to be listening, and screwing up one of his eyes, looking around him all the time.

'Further circumstances have come to our attention which put your case in a new light. I think it is fair to say that,' went on Patrick Sellar, with a slight questioning air as if he were holding a secret dialogue with his master, who spoke suddenly.

'Yes, Mrs Scott. Certain new circumstances have arisen which made us have a second look at your case.' He signed almost imperceptibly to Patrick Sellar to continue.

'You see, Mrs Scott, we have heard from your minister, a very fine man – oh, nothing against you Mrs Scott, in fact he gave the highest account of you – we have heard of a certain incident which occurred recently.'

'You see, Mrs Scott,' said the other man. 'The minister tells us that you are acquainted with a person known as Donald Macleod, a confessed atheist. Now, we know that under normal and usual circumstances this acquaintanceship would not be voluntary – on your part.'

'Mr Loch means of your own free will.'

'Thank you, Mr Sellar. We cannot believe – your minister and I and Mr Sellar – we cannot believe that a woman such as you, brought up on Christian principles, would of your own free will associate with such a man, and therefore we believe – and Mr Sellar is quite willing to blame himself for this. That is, leaving you in a state of loneliness which would drive you to seek the help of such a man, if seek his help you did and he did not impose it on you – in fact we believe that Mr Macleod did at one point prevent you from seeing your minister. Now Mrs Scott, you don't need to answer just yet.'

'In your own interests, Mrs Scott, you should listen to the proposal which Mr Loch will put to you.'

'Mrs Scott, I'm afraid I will have to make a long speech and you will have to be patient with me. I have the honour of advising the Duke of Sutherland, who is also your chief. Some years ago the Duke, whom I have the honour of serving, decided that in the interests of humanity these villages, in one of which you live, should be eliminated and that their population should be moved to the north to the coast, there to subsist on fishing from which in the course of time a thriving industry should emerge. To this end he considered long and carefully, moved thereto by the number of instances of famine which had been reported to him in recent years and the evident difficulty under which these people were labouring in making their livelihood here. Now, as a woman of intelligence, you will see that in this the Duke was exercising humanity and generosity. Not that he grudged the money and resources with which to relieve such famines but that he believed it would be in the interest of the people to remove themselves, for in this new region they would find better houses, an abundance of fish and the opportunity to make a better life for themselves. You understand all this? Good.

'I was given the signal honour of being put in charge of the proceedings and I can say, Mrs Scott, that I haven't regretted such an opportunity. You will imagine, therefore, how astounded I was when in certain newspapers and journals I read remarks by a certain Donald Macleod in which, by building a fabric of lies, he was seeking to destroy all that I was doing. Mr Sellar, will you please read portions of what this Donald Macleod has written so that Mrs Scott will understand more clearly what we have come to say?'

'Certainly, Mr Loch. Mrs Scott, I pick these passages, as you will see at random. Please listen carefully. This is what Mr Macleod had the temerity to write: "It is clear, therefore, that not content with sending our soldiers to die on the field of battle for what they do not understand, these men – if I can call them men – have decided not only to destroy these soldiers but their families as well." Now, Mrs Scott, you told me when I was here that your husband was a soldier who

died an honourable death. Would you not say that this was a slander of the dead, and those who are dead are unable to defend themselves?'

Mr Loch looked at her gravely: 'I was struck immediately by what Mr Sellar had told me of your husband, and this is one of the reasons why I am reading you some of these extracts. Please continue, Mr Sellar.'

'Not content with this then, Mrs Scott, Mr Macleod also writes as follows: "It may be true that we are a long-suffering people, and God knows we have been so in the past, and it may be true that our religion has forced us to endure pains which we might not otherwise have been willing to endure. . ." I need read no more. Notice, Mrs Scott, how he blames God for his sufferings. And notice, too, the blasphemous way in which he says, "And God knows we have been so in the past".'

'Thank you Mr Sellar. And now, Mrs Scott, you see the kind of man with whom we have to deal, one who slanders the dead and mocks God. We could read more, much more, of what this godless person has to say. But one other extract will suffice. Mr Sellar?'

'Here is the last extract, Mrs Scott. Though, as Mr Loch rightly says, we could read many more. Please listen: ". . . and we shall have to become robbers and thieves and murderers ourselves in order to fight this oppression." Thieves and murderers. That's what he wants you to become.'

He put the paper back in his case and the two of them looked at her for some time, as if expecting her to say something. Then Mr Loch continued. 'Mrs Scott, after Mr Sellar called on you that night I am sure you must have felt very distressed and very lonely. That is natural. And please believe me when I say again that Mr Sellar is perfectly willing to take the blame for that.'

Patrick Sellar looked down at the floor, then up again.

'These things have to be done but there are ways of doing them,' Mr Loch continued, smiling a little. 'Be sure I gave him a good talking to. Now, Mrs Scott, I am sure that you must have been in great despair. Here you are, an old woman of seventy or more and you do not know what to do. I am

sure Mr Sellar must have explained to you about the new house and all the conveniences but you couldn't take it all in. I can understand that. After all, you have lived here all your days. So when Mr Macleod came to see you and incited you to go and see the minister, knowing that the minister could not in all justice help you to do what was wrong–'

'Mr Macleod didn't come to see me. . .'

Mr Loch turned to Patrick Sellar and said in a firmer voice which at the same time had a queer tone in it which she could not place:

'But surely, Mr Sellar, you came to tell Mrs Scott about the decision we had reached that she was to be allowed to stay here for six months and to receive a pension?'

What was this about a pension and being allowed to stay six months? Mr Sellar seemed to turn pale, or was that her imagination? This man was certainly giving it to him.

'Mr Sellar?' Loch stood up to his full height. 'Do you mean to tell me that you didn't come to inform Mrs Scott of our decision? Especially after she had been so badly treated by Macleod? Who turned her against the minister and tried to influence her decision?'

'I am sorry Mr Loch. . .' How puny Mr Sellar appeared. 'I have been so busy calling at houses. . .'

'This is utterly inexcusable, Mr Sellar. I told you specifically to go and tell Mrs Scott immediately, then she wouldn't have been put in such a position by Mr Macleod. And now that she can help us with Mr Macleod you tell me that you have been too busy.'

'I told you, Mr Loch, I'm sorry,' said Patrick Sellar, shuffling uneasily. 'I simply forgot.'

'Forgot! You wouldn't have forgotten if you had been going to get a pension. Mrs Scott,' he said, opening his arms, letting them drop and then sitting down again. 'You see what servants I have. Anyway, now that the matter's cleared up, we can proceed.'

Outside the window she saw the white horse and the black cropping side by side, while the sky had turned a coppery thundery colour.

'Do you mean,' she said, 'that the Duke . . . that I'm going to get a pension?'

'Yes. And be allowed to stay here for another six months,' said Mr Loch. 'But,' raising his finger and smiling, 'only on one condition – which I will have to tell you about myself since I can't trust Mr Sellar with anything.' Again there was something about the voice. . . 'Now then, Mrs Scott, you have heard me speak of Donald Macleod. In a short time he is to be brought to trial for statements made in these papers which you and I and every Christian must be horrified by, though of course our Mr Macleod thinks himself too good to be a Christian as the rest of us ordinary people are. You can rest assured that I'm telling you no more and no less than the truth when I say that he will be brought to trial within a month. The law is preparing charges now and he will be tried with its full rigour at Inverness. Any friends of his, if implicated in his work, may expect short shrift. For this is now a Government matter, Mrs Scott.' His face becoming very grave he spoke again. 'A Government matter, Mrs Scott. And it will not be in the hands of incompetents like our Patrick Sellar. If found guilty he will be imprisoned and fined heavily. And let me tell you, Mrs Scott, well in advance of any other member of the public, that our law has enough honesty to make sure that he *is* found guilty. Now, Mr Sellar, have you anything to say to Mrs Scott at this juncture?'

'I was merely, Mr Loch, about to advise Mrs Scott that in such a situation it would be wise for her to have nothing more to do with Mr Macleod.'

'Anything else, Mr Sellar?'

'Under your pardon, Mr Loch, I was also going to suggest that she should tell us how Mr Macleod sent her to the minister, knowing full well that the latter has no power or desire to oppose what is legal and right, and how later he took her to his house and used her as a means of stirring up hatred against the minister and the Duke in this village.'

In the distance she could see a cloud full of thunder, black but coppery at the edges, and in the forefront the horses moving restlessly, raising and lowering their maned heads with little snickerings.

'You have missed something out,' said Mr Loch.

'I'm sorry. What have I missed?'

'Mr Sellar has some papers for you to sign, Mrs Scott, and then you will have nothing to worry about. As we have said, the minister speaks highly of you. Will you please take out the papers, Mr Sellar?'

Rapidly, Mr Sellar took them out, went over to the table and laid them flat, waiting.

'Well, Mrs Scott,' said Mr Loch, looking at her brightly and keenly. She looked out helplessly into the eye of the coming storm. The grass was now beginning to stir slightly. Her hands felt sweaty and unclean.

'Well, Mrs Scott,' said Patrick Sellar, repeating what his superior had said.

'It is worth saying, Mrs Scott,' said Mr Loch quietly, 'that if you don't sign the papers which, if you like, we will read to you – and you must remember that they are Government papers – you will be put out of your house, if you still persist in your refusal, at the end of two days exactly. We are beginning to eject tenants on that day.'

'Mrs Scott, we can't wait much longer,' said Mr Sellar. 'Mr Loch has much to do and. . .'

Mrs Scott looked straight into the other room, at the bed, with the curtains drawn across it.

'No,' she said quietly. And then again she said 'No.'

Mr Loch looked at Sellar, who said frantically:

'But I thought you wanted to stay. You were determined to stay.'

'I have changed my mind,' she said quite clearly. Is that what they had come for, to make her betray Donald Macleod? Their voices were false, all false, like the voice of the minister.

'No,' she shouted again, then almost screamed, like the voice that she had been used to hearing once, 'NO.' And finally, as if exhausted, she said in a lower voice, 'I won't sign anything.'

'But think of the pension,' said Mr Sellar.

'It is too late for the pension,' she said.

Mr Loch raised his hand.

'Mrs Scott knows what she's saying, Mr Sellar. It's just that we want to be clear about it. In two days' time she will have to leave unless she signs this paper. You do understand

that, Mrs Scott?'

'Yes,' she said, quietly without energy.

Mr Loch stood up. 'I see. All right, Mr Sellar, I think we're wasting our time to say more at this juncture.' He walked to the door, Mr Sellar about to speak again, but swallowing the words.

'Two days, Mrs Scott.'

Mr Sellar was now putting the papers back in the wallet unwillingly.

'Perhaps when we come back in two days she'll have changed her mind.'

'Your house will be burnt to the ground, Mrs Scott,' said Mr Sellar angrily.

'It may not come to that, Mr Sellar,' said Mr Loch. 'She has two days to think about it. You can't say that we aren't giving you every chance, Mrs Scott. Come, Mr Sellar.'

Mr Sellar followed Mr Loch half heartedly as if he wanted to say more, and also as if he had failed and would be held to account for it.

'I think it will be a stormy night, Mrs Scott. We'd better be on our way, before the rain comes down. I shouldn't be surprised if there was thunder and lightning as well.'

The two of them went out to the horses – the black and the white – which were stirring restlessly where the grass was being driven by the rising wind. Clouds were now banking black in the west above the hills. There was no sound to be heard apart from the rising wind. The birds had fallen silent. One of the horses reared his head suddenly, shaking it as if he was casting off flies, and she could see the whites of his eyes. His mane was lifting in the racing wind. The other was pawing at the ground with his hooves.

The two men climbed on to the horses with difficulty. The wind was rapidly becoming higher and making a whistling sound. In the centre of the uneasiness she heard a cock crowing. The horses edged sideways as the men mounted, then still moving obstinately sideways seemed to be heading for the shelter of her house. But Mr Sellar produced a whip and lashed his horse once. It dashed forward, racing blindly into the wind, and was followed by Mr Loch's. They rushed into the storm, their hooves

sometimes ringing on stone, sometimes muffled by the grass.

When they could no longer be seen she turned away from the window. Lightning flashed about the room, illuminating the dresser and then letting it fall into darkness. She quickly put a cloth on the mirror, in which for a moment she saw her astonished face lit by a sudden sheet of brightness. Thunder rumbled heavily like someone speaking with a deep deep voice and then stumbled onwards from cloud to cloud, a giant walking with one foot on the road and one in the ditch. The furniture was lit and then it went out again. Fire flickered at it and then withdrew like a ravenous tide. Sometimes the dresser was clearly there, then it seemed to disappear. The threatening voice of the thunder rumbled heavy and old as if it had lost its memory, and was followed by these flickering flashes, tongues licking.

She put her hands over her eyes lest she should be blinded. Her father's bearded face looked down at her from the wall. The lightning flickered over her husband's uniform and then left it in darkness. Startled, she heard a cow mooing. Outside, the rope on which she hung her washing bounced up and down.

Then the rain came lashing, the earth bouncing from it. With astonishing rapidity pockets in the ground filled. The road was blind with rain as if it couldn't see where it was going. The whole sky darkened, a level blanket without edges muffling the earth. The thunder and lightning ceased and there was only the drumming of the rain. She got out a bucket, for a steady drip was coming in through the roof. Bang, bang, the raindrops went in the bucket, hitting the sides and rebounding. Eventually it slowed down, like someone becoming quiet after speaking too fast. At last it was a steady drip at longer intervals, not violent, but there all the time like the toothache for which one waited. Plop, plop, it became at last, softer against the rising water in the bucket. And the world stopped heaving and banging. It steadied and returned to what it was, the kind of order it had. The ditches were now full of water and the road full of puddles.

And at last there was silence.

But when she made the tea she felt the teapot shaking in her hand. She looked down at her hand but it wouldn't stop

shaking and it was the same with the spoon that clattered against the side of the cup. She drank the tea, even while it was spilling and her hand was refusing to stop its shaking. She held her two hands together, unable to light the lamp for a long time, till they stopped shaking at last. But she had stared into centuries of fear these minutes, into a drenched alien light like the light of fish leaping about in their own element and unknown to man. Her heart was beating in her breast: hammer, hammer, hammer. Finally the hammering ceased and she was out of the sea, stranded on a rock. Safe for the moment.

Another day had passed.

TWENTY

Short and stout and bald-headed, Donald Macleod stood in the doorway, his boots gleaming with rain. She stood up, wondering what he wanted.

'I came over,' he said, 'to see how you were getting on in that storm.' He added, 'Especially after these people had been.'

'Did they go to your house too?' she asked.

'Yes. They gave me two days.'

'Before they came here?'

'Yes.'

'They gave me two days too.'

'Mrs Scott,' he began again after a long silence, looking down at the drops of rain on his boots. 'Can I ask you a favour?'

'What favour is that?'

He paused again, then lifted his head, staring steadily at her:

'I wonder if you would come and stay with us.'

This was the answer to his question, the answer that he had been trying to find, the only answer. And that was it out. He had thought about it very carefully. He knew what he was letting himself in for. At least he thought he did. She would be difficult. As the proverb said, the twist in the old piece of wood is difficult to take out.

'My wife would like to have you, and the children.' He added, 'and I would.'

She looked at him for a long time without speaking. It would be very easy for her, she was thinking, to go with him. She was alone and there would be few to help her in the future. If she went with him someone would be there when she died. She thought again of the way her hands had

shaken and wouldn't stop.

A verse from 'Ruth', her favourite book in the Bible, came into her mind. 'Whither thou goest I will go . . . and where thou diest I will die and there will I be buried.' 'No, thank you,' she said, and then: 'Thank you, very much. But I must stay by myself.' Too much had happened to her all these years. She added, 'but if you would help me when I have to move with my furniture.' She decided that she wouldn't say anything about the proposal put to her by her visitors. Some day she might mention it, but not today.

'Of course, Mrs Scott. We'll help you any way we can. We will look after you.' He paused and then asked again, 'Are you sure you won't come?'

'No, Mr Macleod, thank you very much. I'm an old woman now.'

'I see. Anyway, we'll be neighbours.'

'Yes, we'll be neighbours.'

He said: 'And what did your visitors say?'

'Nothing,' she replied. 'They didn't say anything.'

He looked at her half questioningly but decided not to press her further.

'I see.'

She was thinking that it wasn't easy to be tempted by kindness and lies all in the one day.

'You see, Mr Macleod, I have my own ways of doing things. I would try to change but I wouldn't be able to. I wouldn't be good for the children.'

'Why, you were telling them a story when I came in.'

'It was the only story I had, Mr Macleod. I'm not good at making up stories.'

'But what will you do? Will you go to church again?'

'No, I won't go to church. But I'll manage just the same.'

He turned at the door and opened his mouth as if to speak again, but just nodded his head helplessly and went.

When he had gone she went to the bedroom and looked down at the bed. Then staring down at the invisible face she stood there thinking. Perhaps she had beaten it after all, that face, that voice, knowing at the same time that there are far more defeats than victories, and that the victories last only a short time while the defeats last for ever. For as yet she had

made only a beginning and there might be no further progress.

You could turn the old proverb the other way and say: There is no high tide without a low tide after it.

But, just the same, things came in on the high tide which you could keep when the tide was going out again.