

The Story of the Wigtown Martyrs as told in 'Men of the Moss Hags.'

CHAPTER FIFTY THE BREAKING OF THE THIEVES' HOLE

So on the morrow, early in the morning, we fared on into the hills; and when we came to Tonskeen in the wilds, we found my mother and Kate there. They were both well in health and glad to greet us, though my mother was doleful because of the news of Sandy's taking, which had just been brought to her. Yet all of us did our best endeavours to be cheerful, as was the custom in Galloway at that time, when there was hardly a family that had not some cause of mourning and sorrow. Though I do think that there was not one so deep in the mire as our unfortunate house of Earlstoun.

At Tonskeen also we found Thomas Wilson, brother of our sweet little Margaret. He brought us sad news of her. She had been separated from Maisie and her father after the capture, and taken to Wigtown instead of accompanying them toward Edinburgh.

The lad told us that his sister was now confined in the Thieves' Hole at Wigtown. He told us of her sham trial, and, spite of our sore hearts, he almost made us laugh with his account of the indictment which Winram and Coltran—in their cups, as I presume—had laid against her. Along with our Margaret had been tried her little sister of thirteen named Agnes. Both these young things had been most barbarously treated by the noble judges of Wigtown—Sheriff Davie Graham, Lag, Strachan, and Winram. Worst of all was Davie Graham, for having his hands upon the fines, he desired above all to amerce Gilbert Wilson, the tenant of Glen Vernock in the parish of Peninghame. Gilbert was a man well to do, keeping a good stock both of nolt and sheep upon a large ground, and so the more apt to be fined. He was a quiet, thewless, pleasantly conforming man, that was willing to let his hearing of the curates keep his head. But he could not help his children, as alas! who can? For years he was harassed with having to go to Wigtown every court day. He was near eaten out of house and home with having soldiers constantly quartered upon him. And all because his children had chosen to endure hardship cheerfully for the good cause, and to serve under the blue banner that has the cross upon it—at least so far as young bairns may. So from a child Margaret Wilson had companied with those that spoke and loved the truth. She had spent much of her time, ever since she was a lassie of ten, with my sober Maisie Lennox at the Duchrae. And afterwards, when she grew to be of age when lassies think of the lads, Margaret, for the sake of her faith and for naught else, lived on the wild mountains, in the bogs and caves of the hillsides.

To me Margaret Wilson ever seemed the stillest of quiet maids; but, as our Maisie used to say, she was terribly set in her opinions when once she had taken her stand. Now at eighteen she was grown to a tall maid, with a great blowing mass of lint white hair that shone like gold with the sun on it. Well might she have been spared to be some man's delight, had she not been (as she said when the lads speered her) trysted to another lot. The first party of soldiers to whom she was delivered, pitying her youth, let her go to her own home from the crossing of the water at Cree. But by misadventure she travelled on to the town of Wigtown—where with the little lass Agnes in her hand, she was resting in a friend's house, when drunken Winram, ever keen of scent for an ill-conditioned deed, got track of her being in the town. He sent soldiers to take her on the spot, together with her sister of thirteen years, and bade thrust them into the Thieves' Hole that was in the Tolbooth of Wigtown, where they put only the most notorious malefactors.

All this and more Thomas Wilson told us—how that his sisters and an aged woman were confined there and guarded by most brutal soldiers—yea, had already been doomed to be drowned within the tide mark in a very short space of time—though the day of their death

as yet he knew not.

Whereat our brave Maisie Lennox was eager to go down to Wigtown and try for a rescue, if we could raise those that would help us. But we could not suffer her to go, though most ready to adventure ourselves. The good folk of Tonskeen were very willing to let my mother and the maids abide with them; for since the taking of Anton Lennox no soldiers had been seen in the district. And the slaying of wicked Mardrochat had feared the ill-set informing people greatly, so that for a long season there was no more of that.

It seemed strange, yet so it was, that Maisie Lennox, who had seen her father pass, as it were, to his death without a tear, wept constantly for her friend and gossip, Margaret of Glen Vernock.

‘They cannot condemn Margaret. They will not condemn little Margaret!’ she said over and over, as women use.

‘Ay, but condemned her they have!’ said her brother Thomas, ‘for they libel it against her and Agnes that they were guilty of rebellion at Bothwell Brig and Ayrsmoss.’

‘Tis plainly impossible,’ I said; ‘the judges cannot mean aught to their hurt. Why, at Bothwell, Margaret was but twelve, and little Agnes a paidling bairn of seven years. And as for Ayrsmoss, the poor bairns were never within twenty miles of the place in their lives.’

But Thomas Wilson, a quiet, plainfaced lad, only mistrustfully shook his head.

‘It is even true,’ he said, ‘they mean to make them suffer if they can. But we will hae a thraw at it, to see if we canna break through the Thieves' Hole and draw the lassies forth.’

So it was set for the following night, that we should make the attempt to break the Thieves' Hole. The morrow, when it came, proved to be a clear day and fine overhead, which augured not well for our attempt. We would rather have had the blackest and wildest night for our venture. But we had little time, and so we set off to travel by the road the weary miles to Wigtown. We hid all the afternoon in a wood at Machermore, and laid our plans. It was about eleven of the clock that we went down into Wigtown, with the breaking tools which Thomas had gotten from his father's farm, as we passed down through Peninghame.

At the door of the little hostelry in the town we heard a great rioting and crying, which was, as we understood, the soldiers of Winram and some of Strachan's officers drinking late with the Wigtown lawyers, as was their custom. A big, important-looking man went by us, swaying a little unsteadily. He made a great work with his elbows as he went, working them backward and forward at his sides as though he was oaring a boat. This, Thomas Wilson whispered, was Provost Coltran, going home to his town house, after he and David Graham had had their nightcap together. Very evidently the Provost was carrying his full load. For in the midst of the ill-kept square of Wigtown, where certain tall trees grow, he paused and looked upward among the leaves to where the crows were chattering late among their younglings.

‘Crawin' and splartin' deils,’ he said, shaking one fist up at them, and holding to a tree with the other. ‘I'll hae ye brocht afore the Toon Coouncil and fined—aye, an' a' your goods and gear shall be escheat to the Crown. Blood me gin I dinna, or my name is no Provost Cowtran! David Graham will be glad to hear o' this!’

So saying, he staggered away homeward, there to underlie the ill tongue of his wife for coming home in such a condition—albeit not much worse than was usual with him.

About the Tolbooth it was very quiet, and all was still also in Lag's lodging, whose windows looked down upon it. We got close to the window of the Hole, and crouched to wait for the deepest darkening behind some low ill-smelling sheds, in which pigs were grunting and snoring.

But even at this time of year it is very light at night, and especially in such a place as Wigtown—which sits not among the hills, but as it were on a knowe under a wide arch of sky, making it little and lonely under all that vastness.

Thomas Wilson was to gather a few trusty lads (for there were still such about the place), who should attempt to burn down the door of the Hole. While Wat and I with our crowbars or gellecks, our mallets and chisels, were to try our best with the window. What galled us most was the light in the west, which remained strangely lucid and even, as though the sky itself were shining clear in the midst of the night—a thing which I had never seen in my own hill lands, but often upon the flats of Wigtown.

Our hearts were beating, I warrant, when we stole out to make our attempt. This we did at eleven by the town clock, and there was no better or more kindly darkness to be looked for. It was silent in the Square of Wigtown, save for the crows that Provost Coltran had shaken his fist at. As we stole to the window, which indeed was no more than a hole wide enough, the bars being removed, to allow a man's body to pass through, we heard the praying of the prisoners within. It was the voice of our little Margaret Wilson. When last I heard that voice, it was in sweet and womanly converse with Maisie Lennox, concerning the light matters of which women love to speak, but are immediately silent about when a man comes by—aye, even if that man be their nearest. For this is the nature of woman.

At the first rasp of the chisel, there was silence within, for the prisoners knew well that only friends would try to enter in that way. We could hear the lads piling faggots at the outer door, as had been done once before with great success, when the bars were burnt through within half an hour. But, since the fire would assuredly bring the soldiers, it was put off till we had made our attempt upon the window.

Wat was stronger than I when it came to the forcing aside of the bars, and he it was that set his strength to mine, and with the long iron impelled out of its binding mortar the great central bar. Then after we had broken the lesser one above and below with much less stress, the window lay open. It seemed a practical enough breach. It came my time to mount and enter to see if I could help the women out, an enterprise which needed much caution.

Wat had scaled the roof to see if there was aught there that might be advantageous. I was up and scrambling with my toes against the rough wall, half of my body within, when I heard a scuffle and a sudden cry of warning from the other side of the tower. I heard Wat leap down with a shout, and I would have followed, but I received a mighty push which sent me headlong through the prison window into the Thieves' Hole. Here I sat, very astonished and dazed, with my head having taken the wall, till the door was opened and a figure, booted and spurred, cloaked also from head to heel, came in, and with a lantern bearer behind him, stood looking at us. The two young lassies, Margaret and Agnes, sat in a corner clasping one another's hands, and a very old woman sat near me with her head clasped in her hands. She never looked up so long as I saw her, and seemed to have quite lost both interest and hope.

I knew that the big man with the cloak was the Laird of Lag, for once with my father I had seen him on the street at Kirkcudbright, when he spoke us fairly enough—the matter one of cattle and crops belike.

‘Whom have we here,’ he said, ‘coming so late by the window to see the lassies? Young Whiggie, this is not proper wark; but who may you be?’

I sat and said nothing.

‘Stell him up,’ he said, ‘and let us see what like this breaker of maidens' chambers may be.’

But I stood up of my own accord, with my hand on the prison wall.

Then he appeared to recognise me, for he said sourly:

‘Ye'll be an Earlstoun Gordon, nae doot—ye favour the breed—though there's mair of the lawyer Hope nor the fechtin' Gordon about you. I hadna thocht ye had as muckle spunk.’

Then he ordered two soldiers to stand guard over the hole on the outside, and, setting a double guard on the Tolbooth, he cried, ‘Have young Gordon forth to my quarters.’ Which when they did, he entertained himself for several hours telling me how he would send me

with the utmost care to Edinburgh, and of the newly imported tortures that would be inflicted on Sandy and myself. He said that Sandy was to be tortured and that he had seen the precept from London with the order.

‘So ye’ll juist be in time to try on the new ‘boot.’ There’s a fine braw new-fangled pattern wi’ spikes, and I hear that the new thumbikins are excellently persuasive. Faith, they hae widened many a Whig’s thrapple already, and made it braw and wide in the swallow!’

Then, adding all the time cup to cup, he fell to cursing me and all our house, not letting even my mother alone, till I said to him:

‘John Graham had not treated a prisoner so. Nor you, Robert Grierson, if you thought that my kinsman Kenmure was at hand to strike his sword through your body—as once he came near doing in the street of Kirkcudbright in the matter of bell of Whiteside!’

Now this (as I knew) was a saying which angered him exceedingly, and he was for having out a file of soldiers and shooting me there and then. But luckily Winram came in to say that the other assailants of the Tolbooth had gotten cleanly off, and that a soldier was invalided with a sword-thrust through and through his shoulder, in which very clearly I recognised Wat’s handicraft.

CHAPTER FIFTY ONE THE SANDS OF WIGTOWN

The morning of the eleventh of May came as calm and sweet as the night had been, which had proved so disastrously clear for us. I slept little, as men may guess, thinking on the poor lassies; and sometimes also on the torture in the prison, and the death on the scaffold. For I knew that though there might be delay, there could be no such thing as pardon for one that had carried the standard at Sanquhar, charged the storming fray of Ayrsmoss, and sole of all in Cameron's muster had gotten clear away.

From early morning I could hear on the street the gathering of the folk from the country-side far and near. And then the soldiers came clattering by to their stations, laughing as they went like people going to look upon a show.

'There are but two of them to be 'pitten doon,' after all,' I heard one of the soldiers say. 'Gilbert Wilson has paid a hundred pound to get off his bit lassie Agnes.'

And that was the first intimation I had that only the elder woman, Margaret Lauchlison, whom I had seen in the Thieves' Hole with her head on her hands, and our own sweet Margaret were to be drowned within the flood-mark of the Blednoch.

Black, black day! Would that I could blot it out of my memory. Yet that men in after times may see what weak maids and ailing women bore with constancy in the dark years, I set down that day's doings as I saw them—but briefly, neither altering nor suppressing, because of this matter I cannot bear to write at large. It was but half an hour before the binding of the women that Lag sent for me—in order that I might see the thing which was done, and, as he said, carry the word to Sandy and the rest of the saints at Edinburgh.

And this, as I told him, with all constancy I should be very fond to do.

Now the Blednoch is a slow stream, which ordinarily flows in the deep ditch of its channel, wimpling and twining through the sands of the bay of Wigtown. The banks are but steep slopes of mud, on which if one slips he goes to the bottom with a slide. Up this deep channel the sea comes twice every day, damming back the sluggish stream and brimming the banks at full tide. When Lag's men took me down to the water edge, I saw the two women already tied to stakes set in the ooze of the Blednoch bank. At the sight my heart swelled within me at once sick and hot. Margaret Lauchlison was tethered deepest down, her stake set firm in the bottom and the post rising as high as her head.

Nigh half way up the steep bank stood our little Margaret, loosely reeved to a sunken stob, her hands clasped before her. She still wore the gown that I remember seeing upon her when she dwelt with us among the hills. But even in this pass she was cheerful, and lifting her eyes with a smile she bade me be so likewise, because that for her there was no fear and but a short pain. Also she called me very sweetly 'William,' and asked me to commend her to Maisie Lennox—a thing which more than all went to my heart. For it told me by the way she said it, that Maisie and she had talked together of loves and likings, as is all maidens' wont. The women were not tightly tied to the posts, but attached to them with a running rove of rope, by which they could be pulled close to the stakes, or else, at the will of the murderers, drawn up again to the bank, as one might draw a pitcher from a well.

Already was the salt tide water beginning to flow upwards along the Blednoch channel, bearing swirls of foam upon its breast.

Margaret Lauchlison, being an aged woman of eighty years, said no word as the tide rose above her breast, where lowest in the river bed she stood waiting. Her head hung down, and it was not till the water reached her lips that she began to struggle, nor did I see her make so much as a movement. Yet she was determined to die as she had lived, an honest, peaceable, Christian woman of a good confession—not learned, save in the scholarship of God, but therein of high attainment and great experience. And all honour be to her, for even

as she determined, so she died.

Then, when some of the soldiers were for fleecing with her to take the Test, Lag cried out (for he ever loved his devil's-broth served hot):

‘Bide ye there! 'Tis needless to speak to the old besom! Let her go quick to hell!’

But Provost Coltran, sober enough this morning, and with other things to think of than the crows, come to the bank edge. And standing where his feet were nearly on a level with our little Margaret's head, he said to her:

‘What see ye down there, Margaret Wilson? What think ye? Can you with constancy suffer the choking of the salt water when it comes to your turn?’

Now, though Coltran was a rude man, and pang full of oaths, he spoke not so unfeelingly. But to him Margaret replied, in a sweet voice that wafted up like the singing of a psalm, from the sweltering pit of pain:

‘I see naught but Christ struggling there in the water in the person of one of His saints!’

Then the Provost came nearer still, and bending down like an elder that gives counsel, said to her, ‘Margaret, ye are young and ken no better. We will give you your life gin ye pray for the King. Will ye say aloud 'God save the King'?’

‘I desire the salvation of all men,’ Margaret said. ‘May God save him an He will!’

Coltran rose with a flush of triumph in his eye. He was none so bad a man, only dazed with drink and bad company.

‘She has said it!’ he cried, and from far and near the people took up the cry ‘She has said it, she has said it!’ And some were glad and some shook their heads for what they counted the dishonour of the submission.

Now, Blednoch sands under Wigtown town were a sight to behold that day. They were black with folk, all in scattering, changing groups. There were many clouds of folk on the sands when the lassies were ‘pitten doon,’ and in every little company there was one praying. Through them patrolled the soldiers in fours, breaking up each little band of worshippers, which dissolved only to come together again as soon as they had passed.

Then the town officer, a cruel and ill-liked man, who never did well afterwards all his days, took his long-hafted halbert, and, standing on the verge of the bank, he set the end of it to Margaret Lauchlison's neck.

‘Bide ye doon there and clep wi' the partans, Margaret, my woman!’ he said, holding her head under water till it hung loose and the life went from it.

The elder woman thus having finished her course with joy, they unrove the nether rope and drew little Margaret up to the bank, exhorting her to cry aloud ‘God save the King!’ and also to pray for him, that she might get her liberty.

For they began to be in fear, knowing that this drowning of women would make a greater stir in the world than much shooting of men.

‘Lord, give him repentance, forgiveness, and, salvation!’ she said fervently and willingly.

But Lag cried out in his great hoarse voice, ‘Out upon the wretch! We want not such oaths nor prayers. Winram, get the Test through her teeth—or down with her again.’

But she steadfastly refused the wicked Test, the oath of sin. As indeed we that loved Scotland and the good way of religion had all learned to do.

‘I cannot forswear my faith. I am one of Christ's children. Let me go to Him!’ she said, being willing to depart, which she held to be far better.

‘Back with her into the water!’ cried Lag. ‘The sooner she will win to hell! 'Tis too good for a rebel like her!’

But Coltran said, ‘Ye are fair to see, Margaret, lass. Think weel, hinny! Hae ye nane that ye love?’

But she answered him not a word, being like one other before her, like a lamb led to the

slaughter.

So they tied her again to the stake, where the water was deeper now and lapped on her breast, swirling yellow and foul in oily bubbles.

Her great head coverture of hair—which, had I been her lad, I should have delighted to touch and stroke—now broke from the maiden's snood, and fell into the water. There it floated, making a fair golden shining in the grimy tide, like the halo which is about the sun when he rises. Also her face was as the face of an angel, being turned upward to God.

Then they began to drive the folk from the sands for fear of what they might see—the beauty of the dying maid, and go mad with anger at the sight.

Whereupon, being in extremity, she lifted her voice to sing, calm as though it had been an ordinary Sabbath morning, and she leading the worship at Glen Vernock, as indeed she did very well.

It was the twenty-fifth Psalm she sang, as followeth. And when she that was a pure maid sang of her sins, it went to my heart, thinking on my own greater need.

‘My sins and faults of youth Do Thou, O Lord, forget; After Thy mercies think on me, And for Thy goodness great.’

It was a sweet voice and carried far. But lest it should move the hearts of the people, Lag garred beat the drum. And as the drums began to roll, I saw the first salt wave touch the bonny maiden lips which no man had kissed in the way of love.

Then the guards plucked me by the arm roughly and dragged me away. The drums waxed still louder. But as we went farther away, the voice of the maiden praising God out of the floods of great waters, broke through them, rising clearer, besieging the throne of God and breaking down the hearts of men. I saw the tears hopping down many a rude soldier's cheek.

Nevertheless, they swore incessantly, cursing Lag and Winram back and forth, threatening to shoot them for devils thus to kill young maids and weakly women.

But once again in the pauses of the drums the words of Margaret's song came clear. Forget them shall I never, till I too be on my death-bed, and can remember nothing but ‘The Lord's my Shepherd,’ which every Scot minds on his dying day. These were the words she sang:

‘Turn unto me Thy face, And to me mercy show; Because that I am desolate, And am brought very low.

‘O do Thou keep my soul, Do Thou deliver me; And let me never be ashamed, Because I trust in Thee.’

After the last line there was a break and a silence, and no more—and no more! But after the silence had endured a space, there arose a wailing that went from the hill of Wigtown to the farthest shore of the Cree—the wailing of a whole country-side for a young lass done to death in the flower of her youth, in the untouched grace and favour of her virginity.

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