

Two Pounds Reward

The wooden cart, laden with belongings, bounced and swayed up the steep track as it wound its way to the summit of the hill. Mary glanced back towards Ayton village and the sandstone castle, standing proudly on the brae, basking in the May sunshine. Tears welled up in her eyes as she gazed down at the long row of matching cottages where she had lived with her widowed father for the last five years, working the land alongside him, until the baby had been born just 8 weeks ago. The bairn stirred in her arms and her thoughts were jolted back to the present. Her Father had been hired as the new shepherd at Ford Castle now that she could no longer work in the fields. Flitting day had come round quickly and Ford was a long way from where Mary was planning to start a new life with her baby's father, a young soldier from Berwick.

The furniture wobbled precariously as the cart began its descent towards the Duns Road. The sea sparkled in the distance, breaking on the curving golden sands that reached out to a small island. Wrapping her tiny son in a thick Paisley shawl, Mary picked up the basket which contained all she needed for the next few days. Her father steadied the horse and turned round to bid his daughter and grandchild a gruff farewell.

" Take good care of my grandson and look out for yourself in the town."

Mary hugged her father and then, with tears running down her cheeks, she climbed down from the cart, tied the baby round her waist, and began her long walk into Berwick.

Heading over the rise she soon saw the town ahead of her with its proud and elegant railway bridge spanning the wide mouth of the River Tweed. Her heart lifted at the thought of what lay ahead. The baby was contented, enjoying the warm spring air. As large houses came into view, she followed the cobbled road down into the town. It soon joined the Great North Road by a toll house and the railway station. Mary had never been on a train and she watched in fear and admiration as the giant engine with its pistons pumping billowed smoke into the sky.

Crossing Castle Bridge, thoughts of her own journey returned and she cuddled the baby as he started to cry, startled by the noise of the town. The road was busy with carts and people as she passed through the Scot Gate and entered Marygate. This was the very centre of the town with its long line of buildings snaking down the hill. She thought of it as her street. It was the place she had first met with Robert, when she came to the market over a year ago. How smart he had looked that day in the tartan uniform of the King' Own Borderers regiment. She kept to the pavement as more carts and a flock of sheep filled the road. Her eyes were drawn to the elegant spire of the Guild Hall with its black faced clock and it reminded her of the need for a quicker pace if she was to avoid being late. She passed the stall holders and squeezed through the narrow passageway into Church Street. Walking quickly Mary sang to the baby as she looked for the narrow alley where her new home was to be.

The cobbles were very uneven as the alley opened out into a court yard, with a row of small narrow houses filling each side. These were the married quarters for the regiments soldiers. It was peaceful after the bustle of the town. No one was in sight apart from a maid hanging out washing in the garden of a large house at the end, the officers accommodation no

doubt. She lowered herself onto the old bench where Robert had arranged to meet her. In the shade of a tree covered in blossom she decided to feed the baby, who was getting restless and over heated in all his layers of clothing. Her eyes continuously scanned the entrance to the courtyard, hoping she wouldn't have to wait too long before Robert arrived. She knew no one in the town, but felt she would soon get to know the neighbours living so closely together. She started to wonder who might live in each house and imagined Robert introducing her as his wife. Time passed as she built up a picture of how different her new life would be in this bustling town. She had heard about the balls in the Corn Exchange with the women in fine gowns and carriages lining Hide Hill.

With her son now sleeping peacefully Mary felt the cooler air on her face and noticed the shadows starting to lengthen across the yard. She glanced down the passageway looking for Robert. Where was he? She began to pace up and down. A young soldier appeared in the uniform of the KOB and her heart leapt, but he was quickly followed by a woman and they entered the house opposite. Her legs and arms felt stiff and she realised that it was long past the hour of their meeting. A young couple came out of the building and Mary decided to pluck up courage and ask them about Robert. She approached them nervously but they walked quickly out of the courtyard and headed up the street towards the Barracks. Mary snatched up the basket and the baby and followed them, praying that they would be able to help her find Robert.

Mary hadn't walked far when the narrow street suddenly widened and she saw the parade ground was in front of her. Soldiers were being drilled by a sergeant who barked instructions continuously. She stared at the soldier's faces but they all looked similar, dressed in their tartan uniforms. The couple she had been following disappeared in the crowd. Mary spun around and noticed a soldier leaning on the church gates. His relaxed stance gave her confidence and she approached him.

"Excuse me," she stuttered.

The soldier looked at Mary and smiled.

"I'm looking for Robert Cameron," she continued, "He's a private in your regiment."

The soldier gave her a blank look.

"I don't know anyone by that name, lass."

Mary's heart raced. She grabbed the soldier's arm and repeated her question. The man glanced at the baby in Mary's arms.

"Sorry lass, I can't help you."

The baby began to cry and Mary released her grip on the soldier's arm and turned away from him. The parading soldiers were marching back into the barracks. Mary raced after them, but as she reached the entrance gates one of the sentries stepped across her path.

"Oh no lassie, you can't go in there."

Mary tried to push past him and was grabbed by the arms and shoved aside. She stumbled, but managed to stay on her feet and keep hold of the baby, who was now screaming loudly. The sentry stepped forward.

"I should get off home afore the lamps are lit lassie."

Mary decided to heed the soldier's warning. She couldn't risk a night in Berwick alone with the bairn. She would return in the morning to look for Robert. She started to walk back towards the station. Mary felt the coins in her purse. She hoped she would have enough to

pay for a train ticket to Reston. She hurried along the street, soon passing the alley where Robert should have been waiting for her. The courtyard was empty and tears welled up in Mary's eyes.

The baby now heavy in her arms, Mary saw the station ahead and, with a feeling of relief, she entered the turreted building. Feeling again the coins in her purse, she approached the ticket office. Her Northumbrian dialect was always stronger when she was nervous and the man in uniform behind the desk asked her several times to repeat her request. Mary began to weep when she was informed that the last train that day had already departed.

"Where can I go? What can I do?" she implored.

"I'm shutting up the station now lass, you'll have to go."

Leaving the station and heading out of town, Mary had no clear plan in her mind. She walked blindly, noticing no one. She thought she recalled a barn on the Duns road where they could shelter for the night and decided to make her way to it. The lamps were being lit as Mary made her way up Castle Terrace and the light was starting to fail as she left the town. She had been walking for some time before she realised that she was lost and was following the wrong road away from the town. Peering anxiously ahead, she was able to make out a cart at the side of the road. She jumped when a young lad appeared.

"Aye, aye missus, what are you doing out so late?"

Mary explained that she was lost and asked the lad for help. He tried to give her directions back to the Duns road but she was tired and hungry and struggled to understand what he was saying. He showed her the turn to the nearest farm, Lethamshank and Mary began to walk towards it.

Dusk was falling as Mary warily approached the farmhouse. Candles lit the lower windows and she could see the shadows of people moving about the room. A series of barns and outbuildings flanked one side of the house. Creeping silently along the wall she pushed open a barn door and stepped inside. It was very dark but the floor was dry and a low bench was positioned right by the door. Mary sat down and quickly started to feed her hungry baby wrapping him in a plaid shawl to keep out the chilly night air. She felt dizzy and weak from lack of food and an overwhelming fear about the day's events. What had happened to Robert? Why hadn't he come? These thoughts went round and round in her head as she nursed her precious son. Moonlight poured through the door and she heard voices across the yard. Thoughts of the soldiers warning about the dark returned. Carefully she placed her sleeping child in the basket which she gently placed in the corner behind a small pile of coal and logs. Peering through a crack in the door she saw the shadow of someone move across the yard. Her heart began to beat faster and her mouth felt dry. Cold air crept in under the door and she started to shiver. There was something about the shadowy silhouette that seemed familiar. Leaving the baby warm and safely hidden from view, Mary eased the door open a crack. A shaft of moonlight illuminated the end of the barn wall and she caught sight of the retreating figure of a soldier in uniform. She called out:

"Robert?"

There was no answer and it seemed as if the darkness had swallowed her words. She called again:

"Robert, is that you. Its me Mary."

There was no reply. Mary crept out into the yard. She had to find Robert.

Early next morning the maid was sent to the barn to fetch the coal and sticks to light the kitchen fire. As she reached for the handle on the old wooden door she was startled to hear the whimpering cries of a young baby. Entering the barn she realised that the sound was coming from behind the coal pile. She tip-toed round the logs and was startled to see a small baby, wrapped in a plaid shawl, lying in an old wicker basket. It's face was red and covered in tears. The maid bent down and gently lifted the baby from the basket. She cradled it in her arms.

“Where’s your mammy, little one?”

Christine Fleetwood

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