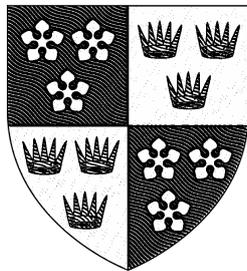


The *DEVIOUS LIFE*
& *ODIOUS DEATH* of
SIMON *The FOX*

Part One:
THE YOUNG MacSHIEMI



By
MARTIN PETER KIELTY

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To Claire, as usual



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CAST OF LEADING CHARACTERS

In order of appearance (denotes fictional characters)*

***Bolla:** An Aberdeen beggar

***Colin Campbell:** Clansman of the Earl of Breadalbane

Simon Fraser of Beaufort, “the Fox”:

Second son of the clan chief, MacShimi

Lord Mungo Murray: Son of the chief of Clan Murray, the Earl of Atholl

***Ben Ali Fraser:** Clansman and warrior

Lord Tom Fraser of Beaufort, The MacShimi:

17th clan chief and Simon’s father, later 10th Lord Lovat

Alexander Fraser: Lord Tom’s eldest son and Simon’s elder brother

***Andrew Fraser of Tanachiel:** A laird of the clan

John “Ian Cam” Murray, Earl of Tullibardine:

Eldest son of the Earl of Atholl, later Secretary of State for Scotland

***Kirsty Fraser:** Clanswoman, later wife of Bolla

Lady Amelia Fraser: Wife of Lord Hugh, sister of Ian Cam and Mungo

Lord Hugh Fraser of Lovat: 9th noble to hold the title

Captain Archibald “Baldy” Menzies: Soldier in Lord Murray’s Regiment

***Captain Diederick Ackermann:** Dutch privateer and pirate

***Lord George Murray:** Young son of Ian Cam

Alasdair MacIain MacDonald of Glencoe: 12th chief of that clan

***Cathal Hendrie:** MacIain’s ghillie

Alasdair Dubh MacDonell of Glengarry: Warrior and later clan chief

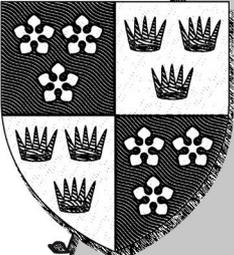
Father Robert Munro: Outlawed Catholic priest

John Fraser of Beaufort: Younger brother of Simon and son of MacShimi

***Sergeant Jamie Fraser:** Clansman serving in Lord Lovat’s Company

William Fraser, 12th Lord Saltoun: Member of junior sept of Clan Fraser

***Ben Callum Fraser:** Clansman and warrior, brother of Ben Ali



*KINGDOM
of
SCOTLAND*

Ireland

England

Aberdeen

Inverness

Perth

Edinburgh

Glasgow

Castle Doynie

Aoniack

Stratherrick

Invergarry Ca

Achnacarry Ca

Inverlochy Ca

Maryburgh (Ft William)

Glen Coe

Kilhorn Ca

Glen Dochart

Ardenbreck Ca

Pass of Killiecrankie

Huntingtower

The Bass Rock

Dunrobin Ca

Loch Eil

MACKAY

SINCLAIR

MACLEOD

MURRAY

MACKENZIE

ROSS

MACDONALD

MACLEOD

MACKENZIE

Castle Doynie

Inverness

CHISHOLM

MACINTOSH

GRANT

GORDON

FORBES

FARQUARSON

LINDSAY

MACDONALD

MACDONALD OF GLENGARRY

GRANT

CLACK FRASER

MACPHERSON

MACDONALD

MACDONALD OF KEPPOCH

CAMERON

Pass of Killiecrankie

Huntingtower

Perth

The Bass Rock

Edinburgh

Glasgow

CAMPBELL

MACLEAN

MACLEAN

STEWART

MENZIES

MACNAB

MACGREGOR

CAMPBELL

LIST OF GAELIC AND LATIN PHRASES

In alphabetical order

Amaideach: foolish, stupid

A Mhòr-fhaiche: Great restorer of ruins (Fraser clan slogan)

Athair: father

Audentes fortuna iuvat: “Fortune favours the bold” (Virgil)

Bean nighe: the washer woman, faerie messenger of death

Blaigeard: blackguard, scoundrel

Cac: rubbish (literally “excrement”)

Cailleach Bheur: goddess of winter

Chan eil mi a’ tuigsinn: I do not understand

Ciamar a tha thu?: How are you?

Co’an fear ud?: Who are you?

Concordia res parvae crescunt: “Through harmony small things grow”

Creachadh: plundering

Crom Dubh: “Crooked Black,” an ancient god

Domus et placens uxor: “A home and a pleasing wife” (Horace)
(**Et filiola:** “and young daughter”)

Dealbh: doll

De tha thu ag iarraidh?: What do you want?

Duine uasal: Highland gentleman or nobleman

Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:

“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country” (Ovid)

Durate et vosmet rebus servate secundis:

“Carry on and preserve yourselves for better times” (Virgil)

Fas est et ab hoste doceri:

“Right it is to be taught even by the enemy” (Ovid)

Fear-an-tigh: steward (literally “man of the house”)

Forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit: “It may be that in the future you will be helped by remembering the past” (Virgil)

Gorach: fool, idiot

Gràdh mo chrìdh: love of my heart

Hiems: winter

Là Fhèill Brìghde:

first day of spring, dedicated to St Bridget or the goddess Brigid

Ma ‘se do thoil e: Please (literally “if it is your will”)

Nam tua res agitur, paries cum proximus ardet:

“It is your concern when your neighbour's wall is on fire” (Horace)

Nunc est bibendum, nunc pede libero pulsanda tellus:

“Now is the time to drink, now is the time
to dance footloose upon the earth” (Horace)

Non semper erit aestas: “It will not always be summer”

Ochone: exclamation or surprise or regret

Oidhche mhath, mo tighearna: good night, my lords

Parturient montes, nascetur ridiculus mus: “The mountains will be
in labour, and a ridiculous mouse will be brought forth” (Horace)

Pibroch: a piece of bagpipe music, usually military

Sassenach: southerner, Saxon

Scunner: strong dislike, or that which inspires it

Sealgaire-mhor: great hunter

Se do bheatha: don't mention it, no problem

'S fhada bho nach fhaca mi thu: it is long since I have seen you

Siuthad: go

Slàinte mhor a h-uile là a chi ‘s nach fhaic:

Good health to you, every day I see you and every day I do not

'S math sin: it is good

Tapadh leat: thank you

Thusa a-nise: now you, your turn

PROLOGUE

Sunday, April 9, 1747

I DID NOT BELIEVE he would manage to retain his good humour to the last; yet he did. He had asked the presiding sheriff if I might be allowed to help him onto the platform where lay the execution block, “For,” said he, “Despite being the most malevolent creature who ever drew breath, as you know, I’m not fit enough to climb three steps myself.” That permission granted, I held his arm as he made his way, slowly and painfully, onto the last stage he would dominate. Old he may have been; but there was no lack of performance in his mind or mouth – that mouth, more than one had said, which would send him and many others to their graves.

The Londoners gathered upon the viewing platform had been anticipating the moment since his sentencing a month previously. Pamphlets had been printed and songs had been made about his life and career – and he had read and listened to many of them for his own entertainment while imprisoned in the Tower. At last the crowd gained the opportunity to meet the subject of their hatred; and I believe he made as much, or more, of it than they did, as he offered a regal wave in response to their jeers.

“So passes a dark cloud!” called a well-to-do gentleman.

“And it’s a grand day for it!”

“You’re dead, you Scotch dog!” shouted a woman.

“And you’re ugly, you English bitch!”

“There’s a dungeon waiting in Hell!” a man bellowed.

“See you there!”

We stopped, and he beheld the block. “*Ochone*, it’s lower than I thought it would be,” said he. “They don’t make it easy to die!” He called the executioner over and took a purse from his pocket. “It’s an ugly wee bag,” he said apologetically, “But it has ten guineas in it, to ensure a clean cut. It’s not your first day, is it? It’s mine, you see. This audience deserves better than two amateurs. May I see the axe?” The executioner nervously looked over to the sheriff, who nodded assent. “Aye, it’ll do. It’s not a good old Lochaber axe, but it’ll do.”

He turned to me. “Time to earn your shilling,” he said for the last time. “See that the paper is finished and published. And now, my lad, these final steps are mine.” I stammered silent syllables; but he smiled, touched my shoulder, and said: “Cheer up – don’t be afraid. I’m not! *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!*”

If I failed him, the people of London did not: they fell silent as his face drew stern and still as he looked round in the light rain; but the twinkle in his eye and the edges of his mouth betrayed what was to come. “I have never,” he began, “seen such a crowd of ugly hounds —”

The throng erupted in fury, and without the line of guards they might have rendered the executioner redundant. The dragoons held them back despite their pushing, growling and throwing of missiles; then a terrifying groan rose up from beneath them. Rage turned to horror as the great viewing platform gave way under stamping feet, and it thundered to the ground, taking much of the audience with it and leaving them broken and twisted, with many clearly dead.

Silence fell again – a shocked silence as a scene of blood and bones played out amid slowly-rising cries of pain and calls for assistance. Then, over and above it all, he laughed. “The more mischief, the better sport! It seems even gravity hates the English!” As some soldiers and onlookers went to assist the fallen, he called: “*Ochone*, let’s get on with it, shall we? I expect to be in Heaven by one o’clock.”

He knelt down, and, without prompting, placed himself in his final position on earth. He closed his eyes for a moment as he held up a handkerchief in his right hand. Then he looked at me, winked, and started laughing again. “It’s a grand end, isn’t it, my lad? Grand, just! Don’t let them take it out!”

Then he dropped the handkerchief, and the axe dropped with it, and

so ended the dance of Simon the Fox.

It was a dance that had begun for me fifty-eight years previously, near to the day. A dance between Clan Murray and Clan Campbell, who both saw our own clan as an instrument of war against the other. A dance of dead enemies, and as many dead friends, in a battle between kings that, I fear, will rage on for ever. A dance in which I gained all that I could ever have imagined – and yet lost more still.

His last charge to me was that I should ensure his story is told in his own words. Yet instead, I will perform one final act of betrayal; although I suspect he knew I would, and that he laughs at me still from wherever his soul now resides.

I will perform that act nonetheless: I will not tell *his* story. I will tell *mine*. Then I will leave this dance of deceit, depravity and death.

In reading this account, think nothing of me. Yet be cautious of thinking much of that Fox; for I can only hint at the amount of lives he touched — and I can only guess at the amount of lives he destroyed.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CUR OF THE COLLEGE

I WAS WAITING for the pain to stop. I had been hungry many times already in my young life and I knew from experience that, after a while, it hurt no longer; and instead, the difficulty would be forcing such food as I could find into my shrunken stomach. That was a different, but no less painful, moment to come – I hoped.

It had not been a successful day's begging. Indeed it had been a while since a day had gone so poorly. There was no reason to it, for the skies had been kind and even the late evening remained pleasantly warm for an Aberdeen spring. Then again, perhaps there was a reason after all: it was the time of year when attendees of the university found it impossible to ignore their studies any longer, and instead took to ignoring the ale-houses. The absence of drunk nobles was almost certainly directly related to the absence of coins in my pocket, and bread in my belly.

Three or four of us often patrolled the bridge, but my fellow unfortunates had abandoned their posts in the hope of better pickings further into the town. I had not joined them; for I well remembered the night, two years previously, when a desperate character, tear-stained and drink-riddled, had offered me two shillings to push him into the River Don beneath, lest he remain alive when his father discovered he had squandered the opportunity of learning and instead built up a gambling debt so great that there could be no bridging it. In exchange for money equal to a fourteen-night's eating I had agreed; then, ensuring his body did not fall direct into the deep water below and therefore

deny him his exit, I had scrambled down the bank and recovered many more shillings from his earthly remains.

Not that I expected a second such bounty – only, I thought, it seemed sensible to remain upon a course of action once decided upon. Then, from the deepening gloom I heard a sound which seemed to justify my commitment: tuneless, mirthful singing, the sure sign of a successful evening’s entertainment in William Ghillies’ tavern. Soon three men clad in the near-clerical attire of students, aged close to my own twenty or so years, appeared through the dusk, delivering an increasingly shrill and rough ballad about the adventures of a brothel keeper.

“*Oidhche mbath, mo tighearna,*” I said to the first.

He stopped mid-laugh. “Well, it’s been a good evening for us, I’ll say,” he replied. “It doesn’t seem like you can say the same. *De tha thu ag iarraidh?*”

“Just a coin or two, my lord, if you can spare it,” I said, attempting to appear attentive and respectful – although my instinct was near-shouting at me to disengage, having detected a threatening tone in the other’s voice, and beheld a flash of vindictive spirit in his thin, sharp face.

“Is that right? And tell me, my fine lad, what are you prepared to do for this coin or two?”

Bitter experience told me the chance to gain any money was gone; and the opportunity to retire without some form of assault was receding rapidly. My luck, it appeared, had not turned for the better.

“Pledge allegiance to the king!” said one of his companions.

That elicited a smirk. “Aye. Aye, tell us of your devotion to the king. King William, God bless him.”

“And Queen Mary,” added the second.

“And be brave about it,” continued the first, “For I am of the Clan Campbell, true servants of the right and proper king and queen.”

“God bless King William and Queen Mary,” I said dutifully, and it was no real hardship, since the name of whomsoever sat on the throne made little difference to the days of my life.

“God bless them!” the second of my opposites shouted warmly.

“Aye. But you’ve got to mean it,” the first said, leaning towards me.

“My lord Campbell, I assure you I do —” I began, but stopped, for

the glint of a small blade lit the shadow of his midriff. There was no further time for speaking; I could only pray the drink taken by three well-fed students would aid the chance of my escape as I burst past them and sped with all the force I could muster in the direction they had come from, towards the university town.

My prayers were not answered. They had been deep in their cups, but they were fit and agile, and the prospect of violent and deadly sport gave them an advantage set full against my terror. For they knew, as did I, that as fellows of the university they were under protection of the church and not subject to the laws of mere townfolk. They could kill and face no sanction — and I feared they planned to follow such a course of action.

I threw myself along the paths I knew so well, not so much running as falling time and time again, my chest tumbling to my knees with every stride, my forward foot somehow keeping me just enough aright to avoid complete collapse. The Campbell bellowed at his companions to stop me, and the knowledge he had breath to do so while running terrified me all the more. I should not have let it happen — but somehow in my mortal alarm I led myself into a vennel which stopped dead after twenty yards. Even as I realised my error, my assailants entered the alley behind me and slowed their approach, the better to enjoy the coming moments. There was but one chance of a haven: an open door with bright lights behind, while all else was dark and shut. I had no option; I paced forward and burst into a small ale-room where two young men sat eating and drinking, their conversation halted by my clattering entry. Bereft of breath and hope, there was nothing left for me to do but fall on their mercy, and I gasped: “*Ma ‘se do thoil e!*”

The Campbell arrived in the doorway as I dragged myself behind the two mens’ table. I could tell from their dress and manner that they, also, were students — if it turned out they were all companions together, then my hunger would never concern me again. One of those seated, with a face notable enough to strike an impression even in my dread, looked first at me and then at the Campbell, and it seemed he immediately surmised the situation.

“*Oidhche mbath,*” he said to the three at the door, each now with a dirk drawn. “This fellow is with us.”

“He is to die for treason,” spat the Campbell grandly. “And you may very well go with him — unless you step back.”

The seated one who had spoken looked at his companion with an expression which transmitted a simple message of confidence in what was to follow. “Treason indeed,” he repeated, presenting a show of deep consideration. “What did he do?”

Eyes flashing, but taken aback nevertheless, the Campbell appeared to take a moment to consider whether to respond, before saying: “He mocked the name of the king and queen.” Then, as if deciding that was not sufficient, he went on: “I have two witnesses of good standing.”

“Well, good staggering, I’d say,” laughed the one who clearly now controlled the proceedings. “Mocked the name of the king and queen,” he said slowly, before adding: “William and Mary – that couple of *gorachs*.”

It might have been expected that three men, recently so favourable to the notion of taking arms against one accused of pronouncing a royal salutation without proper regard, might be more inclined to violence against one who truly could be said to have committed treason of voice and spirit. Yet instead they remained motionless near the doorway as the taverner stood silently in the shadows, watching.

He who had offended the royal names before witnesses then turned from the Campbell and lifted a bowl of mutton from his table before holding it out to me, saying: “Will you accept this?”

It is remarkable how our animal instincts, conspiring to keep us alive, will topple over each other when more than one requires service. I was in fear for my life – but I was also sick from lack of sustenance. I made to grab the bowl, but he pulled it back. “Tell me you accept it from me,” he said, with a voice of command.

I stared at the mutton and then at him. His was a face of little beauty, with a notable flat nose, but of striking personality, and there was such life in his eyes that one felt it was the clearest and wisest thing in the world to do as he said. Later, and often, I was to have cause to regret experiencing such feeling.

“It’s not a trick,” he said. “Well, not much of one. Just say you take it.”

“I take it,” said I, and he handed me the bowl.

“Grand,” he replied. “Because that means you are in my protection.” He stood up and spoke as if he was continuing conversation with me,

although his words were directed at the Campbell. “And I am the Young MacShimi of the Clan Fraser!” He pivoted dramatically upon his heels and pointed to those at the door. “Who the devil are you?”

My attackers seemed to have lost much of their confidence, and bent slightly as they became aware of their recent exertions. In truth there was simply no question of anyone breaking this man’s mastery of the situation. Slightly breathless, the leader said: “I am Colin Campbell of —”

“There’s a surprise, a Campbell,” my saviour broke in with a roll of his eyes. “Well, Colin Campbell of —” he exaggerated the notion of not having let the other finish — “Your luck has failed you. Because the Young MacShimi, which is me, is in town as a guest of Lady Margaret Campbell, daughter of the tenth Earl of Argyll himself. Your clan chief – my good friend Archie.”

He picked up a jar of ale from the table and continued: “So you are going to stand —” and here he raised his voice to a furious rage — “stock still, while I do *this* —” he threw the jar’s contents over his counterpart’s face — “and *this* —” here he struck him across the right, then the left, side of his face — “and *this*!” He felt in the terrified Campbell’s outer pockets until he recovered a purse of money, and took the time to open it, appear pleasantly surprised by its contents, and throw it onto the table.

“And now,” he began to shout again, “You are going to be off... very, very fast!”

Without a moment’s hesitation the three turned and bolted from the room. My rescuer stepped out into the darkness behind him, where the entire vennel heard him shout: “And when you get there, be off from there too! Then do it again! And just keep being off!”

By the time he re-entered the ale-room he was shaking with unbound laughter. “Magnificent mischief!” he laughed. “Grand, just! What do you say, Mungo?”

His companion shook his head, but replied warmly: “Simon, you’ll get us killed one day – and a whole lot of others with us.”

“Good chance,” laughed the first, then turned his attention to me. “And what was that all about, my lad?” I began an attempt at an explanation but he stopped me with, “Wait – haven’t I met you before?”

I realised he had. “Yes, my lord,” I told him. “You have been kind to

me with a farthing or two when I sit on the bridge.”

“The man with no clan! I remember!” he said, and I recalled the lightly-teasing title he had given when, on asking me about my family history, I had been unable to recount anything. “Still, it’s strange to me – you’ll take a farthing, but you’ll not take good mutton? What’s wrong with you?”

I realised I was still holding the food. Surprised, I went to return it, but he was holding a spoon out to me. “Sit and eat it. You’ve taken it in good faith. But it’s unusual,” he continued as I sat, and, finally, addressed the terrible hunger that now felt all the worse for my frantic escape. “Normally it would be a boll of oatmeal.”

“I’m sorry, my lord, I don’t understand,” I said between mouthfuls.

He pushed a jug of ale towards me too, entreating the man in the shadows: “More fighting juice, Wattie — although you’ll be taking that *gorach* Campbell’s money for it!” As further provisions were prepared, I was told: “The Clan Fraser has a noble tradition. If you take a boll of oatmeal from the MacShimi, the chief of our clan, you fall under his protection, and that means every one of us is God-sworn to defend your life with ours. Lord Mungo here is a Murray of Atholl, son of the Earl of Tullibardine, but I’d like to think it applies to him too, at least in spirit.”

“But of course,” said he who had been introduced, bowing to me, although he did not stand up. His appearance matched his companion’s in expense of clothing, yet his features were much finer. I often felt, and I know others agreed, that there was never a more pleasing countenance to a man. I did not stand either – and in truth I did not realise that it was appropriate, such was the shock of the evening’s events. The man who had undoubtedly saved my life was no older than me, and perhaps a year or two younger; but he spoke with a voice of age and knowledge, despite his light tone. In his company it simply did not seem strange for a fatherless beggar to be taking food and drink with the close relative of a clan chief and the son of an earl.

“If you take the oatmeal you become what we call a ‘boll o’meal’ Fraser. But you – you’re a ‘boll o’meal’ Fraser. Well, actually, ‘bowl o’meal!’ That’s not happened before. So it’s a good night! What’s your name?”

I told him – and it is a name I have not used since that night, and will not use here, for it bears no relevance to the person I have become since that moment.

“I will call you ‘Boll O’Meat’, if that’ll do,” he said. “No, that’s *cac* – I’ll call you ‘Bolla’. Aye, I like that. ‘Bolla’. Will that do, Bolla?” I nodded assent. There was little else I could do. “You should think longer about it. Names are important. For example, I am not yet the MacShimi, but I am the Young MacShimi. Simon Fraser, of Beaufort, of Fraser —” he stood and bowed gracefully to me — “And that means something.”

“My lord, I do not know what to say,” I exclaimed. “You have...”

“Called a Campbell an arse?” he said. “Along with those usurpers of King Jamie’s throne? Just another day in my life. But mind, there’s a true and legal bond between us. You’re a Fraser now. I’ll have a letter of note drawn up and sent to my father, the MacShimi, and it will be legal. Now, you have to obey the word of your chiefs, as long as it’s fair word, do you understand?”

I nodded. Part of me wondered, and will wonder until I follow Simon Fraser to the grave, if there was any other direction my life could have taken. Then I think on the moments I have lived through: moments of joy, fear, blood, riches, love, hate and rage; and — comparing those to what could only have been a hundred nights or less begging on the Bridge of Don, until a student passed with a knife, and there was no rescuer — I conclude that no other direction might have seen me truly alive.

He poured some ale into my jug from his, saying: “My first word is: drink this and let’s talk *cac* with Mungo Murray. That’s not too bad an order to follow, eh, Bolla? *Nunc est bibendum, nunc pede libero pulsanda tellus!*” There were to be many worse orders.

THE ROAD TO GOD’S MERCY trodden by those who struggle to find regular food and drink does not often lead through tavern doors. While many of those who fell on hard times (a phrase too short and simple to describe a procession of moments of hardship piled upon hardship) took themselves too readily into their cups, people like myself – who had never fallen on such times but instead had only continually

struggled onward through them – were more given to remaining outside those premises, in the hope of gaining alms from those who entered with the intention of finding refuge in drunkenness.

So it was that, after an unexpected flight followed by an unexpected supper, it was beyond my capacity to manage well an equally unexpected supply of ale. I have little recollection of those first hours with Simon Fraser and Mungo Murray, save for his insistence that our meeting was ordained from on High, and his repetition of the phrase “*Concordia res parvae crescunt*,” which I later learned was the motto of Aberdeen and means “Through harmony small things grow.”

After a time we left Wattie Keith’s ale-room and Simon led us back over the roads I had recently traversed in fear of my life. We crossed the bridge upon which I spent most of my days, where I do recall my lord arguing strongly that despite many generals’ insistence that it was easily defensible, there was a form of attack which could provide great success for any who employed it. Mungo laughed down his suggestion and called on him to prove it; to which Simon replied that, in the fullness of time, he might very well do.

Presently we found ourselves climbing the stairs of a tenement towards the Fraser chambers, and my lord bade us both enter. The conversation was loud and the night was dark — and that, I submit, is how we came to be taken by surprise from out of a corner on the stairway. Without warning a shadow lurched forward. I was forced backward down the steep steps, only keeping my balance by throwing both arms towards the wall. By the time I secured my footing and looked up, Mungo was pinned against another wall by a tall, heavy-set character, while Simon was moving to make protest, arms outstretched.

“This does not concern you, Mr Fraser,” shouted the newcomer.

Mungo exclaimed nervously: “Mr McCaig!”

“And who else?” said the one now identified. “Set to beat you to within a heartbeat of the grave!”

“Dear Mr McCaig...” began Simon, only to be stopped again with a warning the matter was not his business. “That’s fine with me. But can we move the performance to somewhere a little more private?” He pushed on his chamber door and stepped aside; and after a moment McCaig, still grasping Mungo firmly, marched them within.

“Everything is well, sir,” Mungo pleaded as Simon lit some candles. “We’ve not been up to anything at all.”

“That is exactly the problem, young sir,” McCaig snapped back. “Yet again you have abandoned your studies — and I warned you what would happen. When your father learns of this...”

“There’s nothing to learn, sir,” Simon said easily, having recovered his composure. “We studied for some hours, then went out for a short break.”

“We’ve been in our books since before lunchtime,” offered Mungo.

“Aye,” said Simon. “See how drunk we’re not?”

McCaig let go of Mungo, who looked at me apologetically. “Mr McCaig, my tutor, engaged at my father’s request,” he shrugged. “His duty is to ensure my education.”

The size of the man made it unlikely teaching was his first profession; but it was clear to understand that someone of Mungo’s ilk, particularly in the company of someone of Simon’s ilk, might require a dominie of a more violent persuasion than some others. McCaig held up a book.

“And this —” he flipped through it by candlelight — “This is what you were studying.”

“I assure you my friend Mungo has been paying much attention,” said Simon.

McCaig held it up for us all to see it was a volume of illustrations of an erotic nature. “How is this of help to learning the law, Mr Fraser?”

“I prefer to be addresses as ‘the Young MacShimi.’”

“And maybe you do,” replied the tutor, “But it is not your title — and you do not answer my question, sir!”

“You can expect nothing from such as him,” Mungo said. “As you say, he uses a title that’s not his to use...”

“What’s this?” Simon exclaimed. “You challenge the very word of God, Mungo, and I will answer on His behalf with my sword!”

McCaig had clearly been the victim of such misdirection before. “Enough. Both of you,” he said, adjusting his posture in a manner slight but yet effective in making it clear the discourse was over. “Lord Mungo, you will come home with me now. And Mr Fraser, I will write to your father.”

“And I’m very sure,” beamed Simon, “That Lord Tom will write back

to you.”

Mungo bid a brief good-night to us both before the shadow of McCaig, then the closing of the door, took him from our sight. “He’s in for a bit of a beating,” Simon half-sang. “Probably do him good, may the devil choke him. Now, Bolla — pour me a claret, from that bottle there, and let me show you your couch.”

I did as I was bidden, with some little spillage as a result of my condition, and when I followed Simon into the small side room he had entered, I beheld him staring doubtfully upon a tent bed, over which he leaned to pull the blankets away. “What are you doing here?” he asked in surprise, as some of what I had presumed to be bedclothes resolved themselves into the form of a young woman, barely in any of her own clothes.

“You told me I could stay,” she told him in a tone which suggested she had just awoken from a long, deep slumber.

“No I didn’t!” he cried.

“Yes you did,” she insisted. “A shilling a day until the end of term, you said!”

Simon dropped the blankets down upon her, raised his eyebrows and looked towards me, before taking the glass of wine from my stilled hand. “Sorry, Bolla,” he said, looking back to the bed. “This is —” he gestured with his free arm, then dropped it — “a lassie.”

“Here!” she objected. “It wasn’t that last night!”

“It won’t be that tonight either,” he said firmly. “Get dressed and be off.”

“You promised!” she cried angrily.

“I must have been drunk.” He regarded her as she climbed from the bed and moved to gather her clothes from a corner of the room. “I absolutely must have been completely drunk.” He felt in his pocket and removed a few coins. “Here, take this. For services rendered... whatever they were.”

The girl grabbed the money quickly, as if she expected it to be removed from her reach. “What’s he got that I haven’t?” she demanded, gesturing her head towards me. “Oh, I see,” she grinned nastily. “It’s like that, is it?”

“You can give me a shilling back for your cheek!” Simon shouted,

before laughing. “Just get out of here.”

“See you next week?” she asked, giving me a considered glance as she passed me, while I attempted not to start back from her proximity.

“Maybe,” he said after a pause.

She threw a single finger in the air at him then moved towards the door, closing it silently behind her with the air of one who had reason to have practiced the operation. “Women... eh, Bolla?” Simon said with a sigh. “And where was I? Aye, so — this is your bed.”

It was a reflection of the impact made by that one’s character that at no moment did I feel required, or indeed able, to remove myself from his company. A simple bar-brawl, no matter its import to me, could not be said to be reason enough to attach oneself to a noble Highland clan; and yet it was clear that a contract had been made and set. So it was no great surprise that I was to spend the rest of our time in Aberdeen laying upon that tent bed as my own. Stranger than my change of fortune itself was my simple acceptance of it — and I settle that upon the fact that Simon at no time offered the suggestion that I owed him anything, regardless of whether I did; and instead we both understood that contract between us, which he told me he wrote to his father, the MacShimi, that same night. Since I had no reading or writing it would be have been valueless to let me see it, save for the notion of knowing I was worth having been read and written about.

Yet in the months to come, alongside several adventures equalling and surpassing that of our first, Simon ensured through his own labours that I became versed in certain skills such as shaving, the management of clothing, and those other abilities required of what he called his “footman”, the duties of which I undertook — although our understanding was never so simple and direct. He set me up with fine clothes of my own, once noting, “You’re tall enough, and good-looking enough, to get away with this stuff better than me,” followed with the addition of: “You handsome hero...”

Soon I was accustomed to a task which, at first, I dreaded: the running of errands to certain shops, the owners of which would have thought nothing of taking a broom to my back, had I dared to enter during my days on the bridge. I quickly became versed in the name and prices of bananas, pineapples, coffee, spices, and most particularly,

claret, which was a great favourite of Simon's.

Less than two months after my change of fortune a small event was unveiled in my lord's favourite vintners, which explained clearly to me how much the direction of my life had been altered: attending to procure a claret, I observed there was but one bottle remaining upon the shelf. I stretched out to recover it, only to find another hand within inches of my own, set on the same course. I glanced over — and there stood that Colin Campbell, so recently intent on my death. There was a moment between us; but I detected he was as doubtful as I over the outcome of our encounter; and so I bowed slightly to him and turned my hand over from the act of taking to the act of gesturing. He slowly took the bottle, and, still staring, bowed even more slightly than I had.

Then his demeanour changed, and I beheld something of the dark humour I had seen in his face the first time we had met. He offered a tight grin and said, so quietly that no one else could hear: "Do you think you've been saved? Do you think you've been bettered? That Fraser of yours has need of a footman — why? What happened to the last one?" With that he pushed past me, leaving a chill thought in my mind; for it was a fair question, and one I had not thought to ask myself.

On my return, Simon expressed himself disappointed to spend a night without claret, turning instead to whisky. I said nothing about my encounter with Campbell, telling him only that there was no wine to be had; and though I considered a number of ways to pose the question that other had raised, I could not find the strength even if I had found the words. Yet soon I managed to put the thought away from me, reflecting instead that, had I met the Campbell once more in any other manner than which I had, I could never have hoped for an outcome as positive as simply missing a bottle of wine.

Another task to which I quickly became accustomed was preparing for the visit of Simon's many ladies (as opposed to the passing "lassies," like she whom I had encountered upon my the night my fortunes changed). Each lady had her own preference of wine, food and flowers, which required my attention, and my lord had a collection of paintings, kept in a cupboard, one of which was to be hung above the fire according to the identity of that night's visitor. It was clearly a conceit which entertained him alone, for no matter how late into the night each

of his visitors remained, I never saw one of them declare an interest in the painting he had related to her. Frequently as a lady retired from our chambers and Simon sat back with a drink, he would turn his head slightly sideways in a gesture of knowingness, and say: “You know how it is, my lad: a man for all seasons needs a woman for all night.”

SPRING CHANGED QUICKLY to early summer, by which time the drinking, the fighting, the womanising, the arguing and the learning of letters were part of my everyday throng, such that I no longer considered a return to a life on the streets of Aberdeen. As I think back, I consider it may have been the happiest time of my life, and certainly my most carefree. Yet it lasted only weeks; and it was over when Simon first said to me: “Time to earn your shilling, Bolla.”

In the days before he said it, he had been unusually attentive to his writings, dashing off masses of discourse to the exclusion of all else – including, even, drinking with Mungo. The writing itself was not my main concern, astonished though I was to see him racing through bottles of ink, while I struggled beside him to make sense of the most basic shapes upon his papers. I was more intrigued by his behaviour after he seemed to have satisfied himself with the contents of a page: he then took the document and painted it with a brush from a pot of light brown liquid, before laying it carefully on the mantle above the fire.

Eventually I asked him what he was doing – and that triggered his first use of the sentence I would come to dread. “Time to earn your shilling, Bolla – I was going to do it myself but, damn it, why should I when I have you? Do you remember me talking about the Lady Margaret Campbell?” he went on. I confirmed it; in truth he spoke of her often, despite his many other admirers. “Well, I made a bit of a mistake with her... I wrote her some letters I probably shouldn’t have. So now, a certain distant relative of hers —” he nodded slowly and intently to me — “Well, he’s told her father, the Earl of Argyll, that she’s kept them all in her chamber. I’ve asked Mags to return them to me but I haven’t heard from her. I don’t think she’s in Aberdeen.

“So the problem is, Bolla... Archie Campbell will be here soon. He’s going to want to see some letters. And he can’t in the name of God see

the real letters. But — he can see these!” he waved at the fruit of his labours and read from a small number of them. “My dear Lady Margaret, it was a great honour to dine with you last Tuesday... Dear respected cousin, I was delighted to hear of your continued good health since last we met in the company of your noble father... Greetings, my Lady, and best warm wishes to you and all your exalted clan... Pish, pish, pish and more pish! But,” he grinned, “A lot better for keeping on the right side of Archie Campbell.”

“So you are going to replace one set of letters with the other?” I said.
“*Ochone*, no, Bolla. You are!”

Naturally I had no taste for the enterprise; yet again, equally naturally I understood there was no question of dissuading Simon from his plan. I had, it must be admitted, some experience of gaining access to the homes of such as those who might provide for my requirements, without their assent. On many occasions, particularly on winter nights, I had found shelter in outhouses or lofts, then made off with whatever I could hold before the house rose the next morning. Entering the private chambers of a noble lady — and such a noble lady — was, of course, far from my expertise. The nearest I could offer was that, on one freezing yuletide, I had broken my way into the ice store under the grounds of a laird’s big house, and it said much for the weather than I was warmer in an ice store than outside; and, on being marched into the mansion to be dealt with by the chief ghillie, I was welcomed and bade to share meat with him before being sent on my way with a few coins in my pocket and a fresh-cooked salmon. There would be no such timely generosity on breaking into the Earl of Argyll’s townhouse.

Simon knew what I was thinking, or at least surmised my conclusion, for he said: “You are the bowl o’ meat Fraser, the one and only. We have a bond, and I am the Young MacShimi.”

It was fortunate I had kept my beggars’ plaid, old and stolen as it was: its dull browns and greys were much more in keeping with my mission than the brighter red and green tartan in which Simon had dressed me. I took hope from my knowledge of making the most of such a disguise — until my lord told me the entire transaction would take place in mid-morning. “It’s a *scunner*, to be sure,” said he, “But you can get in from an outhouse round the back, and it’s so easy I’ve done

it myself a hundred times.” His words brought me no comfort.

So it was that, on the appointed day, one of those few still and silent summer mornings where the heat seems to stifle sound itself, Simon sat beside me on a rear wall and we looked over the yard of Argyll’s lodging in Aberdeen.

“You see that window, Bolla? Right above the lean-to roof? That’s the one. You get in there and it’s a wee chamber, and her room is right in front of you. The letters were in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe last time I saw them. In and out, and I’ll see you in Wattie Keith’s in, what —” he rested his hand warmly on my shoulder and shrugged — “Twenty minutes? Good luck, my lad.” He thrust the bundle of forged papers into my grasp, patted my shoulder and wandered away as if strolling in the sunshine.

Fortunately there was no activity in the yard. I assumed the earl’s household would be making final arrangements within for his imminent arrival — then realised that, if true, it made easy my approach, but nigh-on impossible my invasion. There was no other course than to push the letters into my plaid, drop down, and move swiftly and silently (a fashion known well to beggars) until I crushed myself into the corner between the yard’s far wall and the lean-to. A convenient ale barrel assisted my climb onto the low roof, but here the challenge became more alarming: I was standing over the yard with the sun behind me, casting a shadow so large it seemed to shout of my presence; and if anyone should approach I would be seen immediately. My next pause was under the window, mercifully open. I planned to gather my senses before climbing in, but the noise of motion below threatened fast detection, and so I rolled through the window as quietly as I could.

I might as well have been blind for the effect the indoor light had upon my eyes. If I was already seen I was lost; but there remained silence, save for low sounds of people moving on the floor below. I did not dare wait too long so I stepped fitfully towards where Simon had told me Lady Margaret’s chamber would be. I lifted the latch, ensured no one waited within, then swiftly opened, stepped past then closed the door, all in one motion.

My vision was still limited to vague shapes, but I could make out a bed, a washbowl, a foot-locker, a dresser – and a large wardrobe by the

window. I crept over, opened it, and pulled open the topmost of three drawers. It was empty; and after a frantic moment in which my panic led me to be louder than it was safe to be, I found the other two equally empty. I looked round again and gently stepped to the dresser, finding its six drawers full of the accoutrements of a lady's dress, but no letters. I found the bedclothes bereft of papers, under or in pillows and mattresses; the washbowl stand contained nothing; and unless there was some secret compartment in the room, of which I could know nothing, it had to be the foot-locker.

At that moment I became aware of sounds I should have been attending to more shortly: the arrival of horses outside, orders being shouted, and the household being summoned. Argyll had patently arrived — and there was little time left for care. Bellows of rage came from a man in the rooms below, while two women seemed to argue back. I threw open the foot-locker to see a container near full of clothes, shoes, and ladylike possessions. Furniture rumbled and clattered beneath me as the pattern of shouting, I could tell, reached the point at which conversation was no longer worth pursuit. I became frantic, pulling dresses, boots, combs and books out and letting them fall wherever they may. There came the thunder of footsteps on the stairway, and if I had been hot in the sun under my plaid before, I was in rivers of sweat at that moment. Finally, like a burst of gold light matching the weather outside, I spotted what could only be a set of papers like my own. I grasped them, pulled the new ones out, and without even pausing to compare the bundles I exchanged their places.

Immediately then the door burst open; and I stared into a noble, and black-furious, face. "*Co'an fear ud?*" spluttered he, astonished. There followed several moments of doubt on his part, and calculation on mine; had I moved faster I might have pushed him aside and made off through the window of my entry. But there had passed enough time for him to recover, and therefore I had two paths remaining: surrender, or test my fortune with the front window.

It too, was open, due to the weather. As I dashed towards it I saw there was a straight drop beneath, but hardly higher than the back wall. Yet Argyll (for I assumed it was he) had come to his senses and was a footstep or two behind me — leading me to vault through the open

space then swing myself round so I was facing the building, all pivoted on one hand on the windowsill. It is not an act I could have completed had I planned it; but somehow I broke my fall into two movements with the pivoting action, and landed, somewhat heavily, into the open street. Argyll appeared above me but I was not simpleton enough to look back. As he raged at his servants to follow me I was already off, running as hard as I had on the night I encountered his clansman.

Beasts, when hunted, will turn themselves toward high ground. I do not know that men have the same instinct; however, I know that we often face a crisis, even within panic, between choosing to continue our flight or seeking cover. I knew the streets of Aberdeen well, but I knew not whether those following me shared my wisdom. And even though Wattie Keith's was just a moment away, I could not risk it. Instead I made full-pace for the Bridge of Don. As I crossed the college park, abloom with couples and friends enjoying the day, I took the chance to look behind and beheld two tall, thin men giving chase, without sharing the exhausted gait under which I now laboured. If my previous dash had been hampered by lack of nourishment, I fear this one was victim to the opposite problem. I made the bridge with Argyll's men a matter of feet behind me; and I prayed my judgement was correct, for I had not been paying attention to the rainfall of recent weeks. I paused, just once, in the vain hope I was no longer chased, and in that moment it became impossible for me to avoid their grasp for more than a few seconds. Then I threw myself over the wall.

Over many nights in our cups, Simon, Mungo and I had cause to discuss the nature of existence, and whether it could be said to be broadly similar for all men, and whether it ended with the last beat of one's heart. I was never confident enough in my views to express a strong opinion, but I do know that certain moments of one's life last much longer than the mere counting of hours might insist. So it was with my fall into the Don – in the lives of Argyll's men, watching from above, it could only have lasted moments, but for me it continued far longer. I had time to consider many things about my time on earth, before I experienced the not unpleasant shock of impact with the cool rushing water. I had time to consider many more things while the forces of nature kept me beneath the surface. By the time my head rose above

the waves and I gasped for air, I felt I should be many miles from the bridge. I was not; I was only a matter of twenty paces — but it was far enough to secure my escape from the enraged Argyllmen, who watched helplessly as the current took me beyond their grasp.

I had observed the river in spate many times, and I knew the current appeared to curve towards the north bank some forty paces beyond the bridge. I could paddle, but not swim; yet that was enough, with the help of the watercourse, to settle me upon land just a short run from our chambers. I looked back to see the Campbells starting to give chase again, but as I closed the chamber door I knew I was safe.

Simon had persuaded me of the urgency he felt in setting his hands on the letters I had recovered; so, briefly stopping to ensure they were not seriously damaged, which they were not, I changed into my footman's clothes. That alone would secure my identity, I was sure, even if an entire clan of Campbells waited outside.

There was no one there; but on my return I found there was still much consternation in the town, centred round Argyll's house. I was confident I had nothing to fear, such that I dared to pass the earl's building as I made for Wattie Keith's. The window through which I had escaped was now closed, and behind it I could see the figure of a lady, seemingly with her arms to her head in distress. I could imagine the reasons for her condition, but it was no concern of mine.

In contrast, the absence of Simon in Wattie's ale-room was a great concern. It was empty save for a handful of faces I knew well. I believe my thoughts played across my face because Wattie waved me over to the corner where he stored his wares and said: "Looking for the Fox? I know where he is."

He had been given the pet-name only the previous week, but all of us in attendance, in view of our knowledge of the man, had agreed it was ideal, and it had already stuck fast. "Well?" I asked Wattie; but he shook his head.

"I'm not to tell you," he replied, "Until you've taken a drink. He says you'll need it."

My lord was not wrong, and I gratefully accepted the jug of mild ale offered to me. It did not take long, after which the taverner quietly told me: "You'll find him at Jenny's." I thanked him and sped through the

town to that other ale-room, only to find the same message: "I'll tell you where he is after you've taken a drink." I was no longer concerned. It was clearly another game of Simon's, and I suspected he had heard before my return that I had achieved at least partial success. Visits to four other establishments brought me the same message until, not entirely to my surprise, I was directed back to Wattie's – where I found Simon at table, with quite the most striking lady I had ever seen.

"Bolla!" he cried, pushing an ale jug towards me. "You made it! Spectacular sport!"

I sat down with the labours of the day beginning to tell on me. "A close thing, it was..." I said.

"Ach, *ca!*" he replied. "Nothing to a man of your talents. I'll bet they were never, what, closer than half a mile? *Audentes fortuna iuvat!*" he laughed long and loud. "This," he said, with his arm round his companion, "Is the Lady Margaret Campbell."

That noble smiled a beautiful smile to me. "The Young MacShimi tells me you have done him a great service," she said warmly.

"Aye, by drinking in every house in town before dinner-time," Simon said. "Naw, naw, that's not fair. You've done well, my lad." Then to Lady Margaret: "Balls of a bull, that one! That's what 'Bolla' means."

She laughed. "Simon, you introduce me to the most fascinating people!"

"That's what happens when you step out of the great castles and meet real folk," he replied. "Bolla, did you ever think you'd see the daughter of Scotland's foremost earl in Wattie's tavern?" I readily accepted I did not, and they both laughed again; before, turning serious, Simon said: "But, so — do you have something for me?"

I drew out the bundle of letters and offered them over. Simon took them, almost as if there was a fragment of the True Cross in his hand, gazed at them then looked up at me. "Good man," he said quietly, then, louder: "Good Fraser man!" Laughing, he took the papers over to the stove where Wattie kept a kettle warming, and began forcing them into the flames, where, after smoking for a few moments following their recent dampening, they burst alight one by one.

"What are those?" Lady Margaret asked me as we watched his actions.

Confused, since I had assumed she must know, I muttered, “Just papers, my lady.”

He glanced over each page before casting it into the fire, his face betraying delight in some of the passages he read. One caused him to let out a great yell of pleasure, and he leaned over to let Lady Margaret see the words. Almost immediately she stared up at him, her eyes and mouth rounded in horror, followed by a burst of mischievous laughter – most unladylike. “You filthy hound!” she exclaimed.

Simon smiled wickedly then returned to his task until all the papers were gone. Despite my tiredness and the effect of several cups of ale, I began to realise all was not the way I might have expected it to be. He saw my mind at work, shook his head slightly with a conspiratorial glance, then said, “Come on, let’s find a better drink.”

The townhouse of my earlier adventure lay between Wattie’s and Mungo’s residence. While much of the clamour had died down in the street without, there remained a number of men and horses – and the lady I had earlier seen remained at the window. As we passed, she began knocking on the pane; and, at last opening the window, she shouted Simon’s name across the road.

He simply looked surprised and waved politely back. That elicited a scream from the window, soon followed, as we moved on, by the appearance of Argyll himself in the street. “Simon Fraser!” That man shouted.

He turned. “It’s yourself, good baillie!” Simon said. “How the devil are you?”

I was no scholar, but I was sure insulting an earl in such a manner could almost certainly be said to lead to a death warrant, legal or otherwise. Instead, the other replied angrily: “What devilry has been done in my house this day? In your name, I warrant, Fraser!”

Simon looked shocked. “I haven’t a clue what your head is telling you,” he said calmly, before looking to the sky. “Have you had too much sun? There’s a lot of it about this weather.”

The other turned back to his house, where the lady in the window was crying bitterly, still shrieking the name of my companion. “Jane! Shut up and close that window now, I warn you!” From behind her appeared four arms, pulling her away from the glass and closing it.

“Sounds like you’re having a bad day,” Simon offered. “My mate Bolla here, he’s had one like it. So if you don’t mind we’re off for a drink. Oh – sorry, introductions.” He became the embodiment of grace as he said: “Lady Margaret Campbell, may I present Baillie Wishart of Aberdeen, as fine a local man as ever you’ll meet.”

She smiled, and the man I had thought was her father found some resilience of position, calmed himself and bowed: “My lady...”

Simon nodded politely and gestured for us to take our leave; but just as we turned away he added: “I trust you found those letters? The ones someone told you were shameful? And I trust they weren’t shameful in the least? Good. See you later, my dear baillie.” He put his arms round Lady Margaret and I, steering us away from the shocked townsman.

“What do you make of all that, my lad?” he asked me so that our companion could not hear, nudging my elbow. It seemed that my expression was more than enough answer, for, grinning, he nudged me again and said: “You’ll have gathered I wasn’t completely honest with you. The letters had to be rescued – but they were nothing to do with Margaret here. Poor Jane... Ach well, experience teaches fools. And, indeed, Baillie Wishart!” I suspect my face continued to betray me, as he continued: “No harm done for a wee tale, Bolla – and the more mischief, the better sport! But let’s find another tavern. Someone somewhere must have managed to get some damned claret.”