

CHAPTER ONE

I

Even now, when more than fifty years have passed, I find it difficult to imagine a less likely paladin. Yet paladin he was, to us, for he saved our lives, our sense of purpose, and our peace of mind, restoring our shattered dignity when we were at our lowest depth. Possibly the least attractive-looking man I ever saw, he quickly became one of the strongest anchors of my young life. But on that first evening when he startled us from an exhausted sleep, we saw only the monstrous, green-framed, and hairless face of a leering devil looming over us.

We were gibbering with terror, both of us, and our fear was real, because for two full days we had been running in terror, uphill and down, stumbling and falling and blinded with tears and grief, sobbing and incoherent most of the time and utterly convinced we would be caught and killed at any moment by the men pursuing us. We had no notion of the miles falling behind us or the distance we had covered. We knew only that we had to keep running. At times, rendered helpless by exhaustion, we had stopped to rest, huddling together in whatever place we had found that offered a hint of concealment, but we never dared stop for long, because the men hunting us had legs far longer than ours and they knew we could condemn them for the crimes we had seen them commit. And so, as soon as we could find the strength to run for our lives again, we ran. We drank whenever we found a stream, but we dared not stop to hunt or fish. We could not even steal food, because we fled through open country, avoiding people and places that might house our pursuers.

We had arrived at the top of a long moorland gradient and crouched there behind a tall clump of bracken ferns, looking back down the way we had come and astonished to discover that we could see for miles and that no one was chasing us. We strained our eyes for signs of movement on the sloping moor, but all we saw were hares and what might have been a wild boar, more than a mile below us. We finally accepted that no ravening murderers were hunting us.

Ahead of us, the hillside swept gently down for half a mile towards a grassy plain that was bounded on the right by the deep-cut, tree-filled gully of a mountain stream.

Will pointed towards the trees. "We'll go down there. No one will see us there and we can sleep."

As we set off, I felt myself reeling drunkenly, unable to think of anything except the fact that we would soon be able to sleep. It was late afternoon by then, and the sun was throwing our shadows far ahead of us. The grass beneath our feet was short and cropped here, and the going was easy. We soon reached the edge of the defile and jumped down into the first depression we found, a high-sided, grass-filled hollow enclosed by the tops of the trees that stretched up from below us in the steep, sheltered cleft. Within moments we were both asleep.

How long we slept I do not know. But something struck my foot, and I opened my eyes to see the most hideous face I had ever seen, glaring down at me, and I screamed, startling Will awake and sending us both scrambling to escape up the steep bank behind us, but the monster caught us easily, snatching me up to tuck me beneath one arm while pinning Will to the ground with a massive, booted foot. He silenced us with a mighty bellow of what I took to be raging blood lust, and then he thrust me down to huddle at his feet, after which he stepped back a pace and eyed both of us together. I reached out for Will and he squeezed my hand tightly, and we both prepared for the mutilation and death the apparition would surely visit upon us. But then the gargoyle turned its back on us, and we heard it speak.

“I thought you were thieves at first, bent upon robbing me. I was far away from you and thought you men.”

It was a strange voice, unexpectedly gentle, and the words were carefully articulated. He spoke in Scots, but with an alien lilt. We knew not what to think, and, still gripped by terror, stared at each other wild-eyed. Now that the giant’s back was to us, though, I was able to see that there was nothing supernatural about him. From behind, he was a man like any other, though enormous in his bulk. It was only when he faced you squarely that you saw him as hideous. He was dressed from head to foot in shades of green, his head concealed by a hooded cap that was a part of his tunic, and as I watched now, my heart beginning to slow down, he reached up and tugged, it appeared, at his forehead.

When he turned back to us, his face was covered by a mask of green cloth that he must have pulled down from his hooded cap. It was drawn tight beneath what chin he had, its only openings three ragged-edged holes, one for breathing and one for each eye. The right eye gleamed at me from its opening.

“There,” he said. “That’s better, no?”

“Better?” My voice was no more than a squeak.

“My face. It’s one to frighten children. So I keep it hidden—most of the time.” He tilted his head so he could look at Will. “So now that I can tell ye’re no’ here to rob me, I have some questions to ask you.” He bent suddenly and grasped my ankle and I stiffened with fear, but all he did was twist it gently and pull it up so he could look at the back of my leg. “Your legs are covered wi’ dried blood, caked with it. And so are yours,” he added, nodding at Will. “Why just your legs, and why just the backs of them?”

“You know fine well.” Will’s voice was little louder than my own, but I could hear defiance in it. “You did it—you and your friends. Used us like women ... like sheep.”

“I did *what*?” The giant stood for a moment, opening and closing one massive, craggy fist, and then he quickly stooped and grasped Will’s ankle as he had mine. “Lie still,” he growled as Will started to kick. “I’ll no’ hurt you.”

I had tensed, too, at his sudden move, ready to hurl myself to Will's defence, but then I remained still, sensing that there was no malice now in the man's intent. And so I watched as he flipped Will over to lie face down, then pinned him in place with a hand between his shoulders while he pulled up the hem of my cousin's single garment, exposing his lower back and buttocks and the ravages of what had been done to him. I had not seen what now lay exposed to me, for neither of us had spoken of what had happened, but I knew that what I was seeing was a mirror image of my own backside. I vomited painfully, hearing the giant say again, "Lie still, lad, lie still."

When I finished wiping my mouth they were both watching me, Will sitting up, ashen faced, and the giant leaning back, his shoulders against the steep bank at his back.

"Sweet Jesus," our captor said, in what we would come to know as his curious soft-edged and sometimes lisping voice. "Listen to me now, both of you. I know the sight of me frightened you. That happens often and I've grown used to it. But know this as well. I had no part in what was done to you, and no friend of mine would ever do such a thing. I know not who you are, nor where you came from, and I never saw you before you came across that ridge up there." He flicked a finger at Will. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday." Will's voice was a whisper.

"When? Daytime or night?"

"Daytime. In the morning."

"Where?"

"At home, near Ellerslie."

"Near *Ellerslie*? That's in Kyle, is it no'?"

Will nodded. "Aye, near Ayr."

"Carrick land. Bruce country. But that's thirty miles and more from here. How did you get here?"

"We ran."

"You *ran*? Thirty miles in two days? Bairns?"

"Aye, we ran," Will snapped. "They were chasing us. Sometimes we hid, but mostly we ran."

“Who was chasing you?”

“The ones who— The ones who murdered my father, Alan Wallace of Ellerslie. And my mother. My wee sister Jenny, too.” Now the tears were pouring down Will’s cheeks, etching clean channels through the caked-on dirt.

“Christ!” The green mask swung back to face me. “And who are you? His brother?”

I shook my head, feeling the tears trembling in my own eyes. “No, I’m his cousin Jamie, from Auchincruive. I came to live with Will when my family all died of the fever, two years ago.”

“Aha.” He looked back at Will. “Your name’s Will Wallace?”

“William.”

“Ah. William Wallace, then. My name is Ewan Scrymgeour. Archer Ewan, men call me. You can call me Ewan. So tell me then, exactly, what happened yesterday to start all this.”

It was a good thing he asked Will that and not me, for I had no idea what had happened. Everything had been too sudden and too violent, and all of it had fallen on me like a stone from a clear blue sky. Will, however, was two years older, and more than accustomed to being able to think for himself, since he had been taught for years, by both his parents, that knowledge and the ability to read and write are the greatest strengths a free man can possess. Will came from a clan of fighting men and women, as did I, but his father’s branch of our family had a natural ability for clerical things, and two of his uncles, as well as several of his cousins, were monks.

“They were Englishmen,” Will said, his voice still low, his brow furrowed as he sought to recall the events.

“*Englishmen?* They couldn’t have been. There are no English soldiery in Scotland.”

“I *saw* them! And I heard them talking. But I could tell from their armour even before I heard them growling at each other.”

“Jesus, that makes no kind of sense at all. We have no war with England and they have no soldiers here. Unless they were deserters, come north in search of booty and safety. But if that’s the case,

they'd have been safer to stay in England. King Alec's men will hunt them down like wolves. How many were there?"

"Ten on foot and a mounted knight in command of them. He had a white thing on his surcoat. A turret or a tower. Some kind of castle."

"And what happened?"

"I don't know." Will wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. "We were down by the old watchtower hunting squirrels, Jamie and me. We heard the noise and ran to see what was happening and we met my sister Jenny running away. She was witless, out o' her mind wi' terror. She couldna speak, didna even try. She just wailed, keenin' like an old wife at a death. I knew something terrible had happened. So I left her there wi' Jamie and ran to see." He fell silent, staring into emptiness, and a bleak look settled on his face.

"They were all dead," he said in a dulled voice I'd never heard before, "scattered in the gate yard. Jessie the cook, Angus the groom. Timothy and Charlie and Roddy and Daft Sammy. All dead ... split open and covered in blood an' ..." He sobbed then, a single, wrenching sound. "My da was sitting against the wall by the door with his head to one side and his eyes wide open, and I thought he was just lookin' at them, but then I saw the blood on him, too, all down his front ... And then I saw that his head was almost off, hangin' to one side. My mother was beside him, lyin' on her face, wi' a big spear sticking up between her shoulders. I could see her bare legs, high up. I'd never seen them before." He hiccupped and shuddered. "The ones alive were a' strangers, what the English call men-at-arms, a' wearin' helmets and jerkins and mail, forbye a knight on a horse. The men were a' talkin' and laughin', but the knight was just sittin' on his horse, cleanin' his sword on something yellow. And then one o' them saw me watchin' and gave a shout and I ran as fast as I could back to where I'd left Jamie and Jenny."

When he stopped this time, I thought he would say no more.

"What happened then?" Archer Ewan prodded.

"What?"

"What happened after you ran back to Jamie and your sister?"

“Oh ... We ran back the way we had come, but I had to carry Jenny and they caught us near the old watchtower. Five o’ them. One o’ them killed Jenny. Chopped off her head and didna even look at what he’d done. He was watchin’ Jamie, wi’ a terrible look on his face. And then they ... they did what they did to us and then they tied us up and left us there, in some bushes against the tower wall. They said they’d be back.”

“How did you escape? You did, didn’t you?”

Will nodded. “Aye. I kept a wee knife for skinnin’ squirrels under a stone by the tower door, close by where they left us. Jamie was closer to it than me, so I told him to get it for me. He rolled over and got it, then he crawled back, holdin’ it behind his back, and I took it and managed to cut his wrists free. It took a long time. Then he cut the ropes on his legs and set me loose. And then we ran.”

“And are you sure they chased you?”

Will looked up at the giant in surprise. “Oh, aye, they chased us, and they would ha’e caught us, too, except that there was a thunderstorm and you could hardly see through the rain and the dark. But we knew where we were going and they didna. So we gave them the slip and kept movin’ into the woods, deeper and deeper until we didna even know where we were. We ran all day. Then when it got dark we slept for a wee while and then got up and ran again. But they found our tracks and we could hear them comin’ after us, shoutin’ to us to gi’e up, for a long time.”

“Hmm.” The big man sat mulling that for a time, studying each of us closely with his one good eye, and I began to fear that he doubted all that Will had said, even though he must surely see our terror and exhaustion were real. “Well,” he said eventually, “all that matters is that you escaped and you’re here now and well away from them. Who were they working for, do you know?”

Will frowned. “Who were they *workin’* for? They werena workin’ for anybody. They were Englishmen! There’s no Englishmen in Carrick. The men there are all Bruce men. My da’s been the Countess o’ Carrick’s man all his life. He’s fierce proud o’ that.”

“Aye, no doubt. Then if you’re right, and they were Englishry, they must have been deserters, as I jaloused. Either that or your father must have crossed someone important. And powerful. Was he rich?”

“My da?” Will blinked. “No, he wasna rich. But he wasna poor, either. We’ve a fine herd o’ cattle.”

“That might have been what they were after. But whether yea or nay, those cattle winna be there now.” He sighed loudly and then clapped his hands together. “Fine, then, here’s what we’re going to do. I have a camp close by, down at the bottom of the gully, by the stream. We’ll go down there, where there’s a fine, sheltered fire, and I’ll make us a bite to eat, and then you two can wash yourselves in the burn and I’ll show you how to make a bed of bracken ferns. In the morning we’ll decide what you should do from here onwards. Away with you now.”

2

The water was frigid, but the rushing coldness of it against my heated body was intense enough to dull the worst of the searing pain in my backside. I gritted my eight-year-old teeth and grimly set about washing away the evidence of my shame and the sin I had endured. I could hear Will splashing close by, and hear his muttered curses, for he ever had a blazing, blistering way with words. When I could feel that my legs and buttocks were clean again, I did a brave thing. I knelt in the stream, bending forward to splash water over my face and head and scrub at both until I felt they too must be clean.

“I’m finished,” Will called to me as I was shaking the water from my hair, and we made our way together back towards the bank, stooped forward and fumbling with outstretched hands for river stones that could trip us.

Ewan’s campfire was well concealed in a stone-lined pit, but we could see the glow of it reflected up into the branches overhead, and