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A Scots Quair

Written by Lewis Grassic Gibbon

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Ploughing

Below and around where Chris Guthrie lay the June moors whispered and rustled and shook their cloaks, yellow with broom and powdered faintly with purple, that was the heather but not the full passion of its colour yet. And in the east against the cobalt blue of the sky lay the shimmer of the North Sea, that was by Bervie, and maybe the wind would veer there in an hour or so and you'd feel the change in the life and strum of the thing, bringing a streaming coolness out of the sea. But for days now the wind had been in the south, it shook and played in the moors and went dandering up the sleeping Grampians, the rushes pecked and quivered about the loch when its hand was upon them, but it brought more heat than cold, and all the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming. Up here the hills were brave with the beauty and the heat of it, but the hayfield was all a crackling dryness and in the potato park beyond the biggings the shaws drooped red and rusty already. Folk said there hadn't been such a drought since eighty-three and Long Rob of the Mill said you couldn't blame *this* one on Gladstone, anyway, and everybody laughed except father, God knows why.

Some said the North, up Aberdeen way, had had rain enough, with Dee in spate and bairns hooking stranded salmon down in the shallows, and that must be fine enough, but not a flick of the greeve weather had come over the hills, the roads you walked down to Kinraddie smithy or up to the Denburn were fair blistering in the heat, thick with dust so that the motor-cars went shooming through them like kettles under steam. And serve them right, they'd little care for anybody, the dirt that rode in motors, folk said; and one of them had nearly run over wee Wat Strachan a fortnight before and had skirled to a stop right bang in front of

Peesie's Knapp, Wat had yowled like a cat with a jobe under its tail and Chae had gone striding out and taken the motorist man by the shoulder. And *What the hell do you think you're up to?* Chae had asked. And the motorist, he was a fair toff with leggings and a hat cocked over his eyes, he'd said *Keep your damn children off the road in future.* And Chae had said *Keep a civil tongue in your head* and had clouted the motorist man one in the ear and down he had flumped in the stour and Mistress Strachan, her that was old Netherhill's daughter, she'd gone tearing out skirling *Mighty, you brute, you've killed the man!* and Chae had just laughed and said *Damn the fears!* and off he'd gone. But Mistress Strachan had helped the toff up to his feet and shook him and brushed him and apologised for Chae, real civil-like. And all the thanks she got was that Chae was summonsed for assault at Stonehaven and fined a pound, and came out of the courthouse saying there was no justice under capitalism, a revolution would soon sweep away its corrupted lackeys. And maybe it would, but faith! there was as little sign of a revolution, said Long Rob of the Mill, as there was of rain.

Maybe that was the reason for half the short tempers over the Howe. You could go never a road but farmer billies were leaning over the gates, glowering at the weather, and road-menders, poor stocks, chapping away at their hillocks with the sweat fair dripping off them, and the only folk that seemed to have a fine time were the shepherds up in the hills. But they swore themselves dry when folk cried that to them, the hill springs about a shepherd's herd would dry up or seep away all in an hour and the sheep go straying and baying and driving the man fair senseless till he'd led them weary miles to the nearest burn. So everybody was fair snappy, staring up at the sky, and the ministers all over the Howe were offering up prayers for rain in between the bit about the Army and the Prince of Wales' rheumatics. But feint the good it did for rain; and Long Rob of the Mill said he'd heard both Army and rheumatics were much the same as before.

Maybe father would have done better to keep a civil tongue in his head and stayed on in Echt, there was plenty of rain there, a fine land for rain, Aberdeen, you'd see it by day and night come

drenching and wheeling over the Barmekin and the Hill of Fare in the fine northern land. And mother would sigh, looking out from Blawearie's windows, *There's no land like Aberdeen or folk so fine as them that bide by Don.*

She'd bidden by Don all her life, mother, she'd been born in Kildrummie, her father a ploughman there, he'd got no more than thirteen shillings a week and he'd had thirteen of a family, to work things out in due ratio, maybe. But mother said they all got on fine, she was never happier in her life than those days when she tramped bare-footed the roads to the little school that nestled under the couthy hills. And at nine she left the school and they packed a basket for her and she bade her mother ta-ta and set out to her first fee, no shoes on her feet even then, she hadn't worn shoes till she was twelve years old. It hadn't been a real fee that first one, she'd done little more than scare the crows from the fields of an old bit farmer and sleep in a garret, but fine she'd liked it, she'd never forget the singing of the winds in those fields when she was young or the daft crying of the lambs she herded or the feel of the earth below her toes. *Oh, Chris, my lass, there are better things than your books or studies or loving or bedding, there's the countryside your own, you its, in the days when you're neither bairn nor woman.*

So mother had worked and ran the parks those days, she was blithe and sweet, you knew, you saw her against the sun as though you peered far down a tunnel of the years. She stayed long on her second fee, seven or eight years she was there till the day she met John Guthrie at a ploughing-match at Pittodrie. And often once she'd tell of that to Chris and Will, it was nothing grand of a match, the horses were poor and the ploughing worse and a coarse, cold wind was souging across the rigs and half Jean Murdoch made up her mind to go home. Then it was that it came the turn of a brave young childe with a red head and the swackest legs you ever saw, his horses were laced in ribbons, bonny and trig, and as soon as he began the drill you saw he'd carry off the prize. And carry it off he did, young John Guthrie, and not that alone. For as he rode from the park on one horse he patted the back of the other and cried to Jean Murdoch with a glint from his dour, sharp eye *Jump up if you like.* And she cried back *I like fine!* and caught the horse by its mane

and swung herself there till Guthrie's hand caught her and set her steady on the back of the beast. So out from the ploughing match at Pittodrie the two of them rode together, Jean sitting upon the hair of her, gold it was and so long, and laughing up into the dour, keen face that was Guthrie's.

So that was beginning of their lives together, she was sweet and kind to him, but he mightn't touch her, his face would go black with rage at her because of that sweetness that tempted his soul to hell. Yet in two-three years they'd chaved and saved enough for gear and furnishings, and were married at last, and syne Will was born, and syne Chris herself was born, and the Guthries rented a farm in Echt, Cairndhu it was, and sat themselves down there for many a year.

Winters or springs, summers or harvests, bristling or sunning the sides of Barmekin, and life ploughed its rigs and drove its teams and the dourness hardened, hard and cold, in the heart of Jean Guthrie's man. But still the glint of her hair could rouse him, Chris would hear him cry in agony at night as he went with her, mother's face grew queer and questioning, her eyes far back on those Springs she might never see again, dear and blithe they had been, she could kiss and hold them still a moment alone with Chris or Will. Dod came, then Alec came, and mother's fine face grew harder then. One night they heard her cry to John Guthrie *Four of a family's fine; there'll be no more*. And father thundered at her, that way he had *Fine? We'll have what God in His mercy may send to us, woman. See you to that*.

He wouldn't do anything against God's will, would father, and sure as anything God followed up Alec with the twins, born seven years later. Mother went about with a queer look on her face before they came, she lost that sweet blitheness that was hers, and once, maybe she was ill-like, she said to father when he spoke of arranging a doctor and things, *Don't worry about that. No doubt your friend Jehovah will see to it all*. Father seemed to freeze up, then, his face grew black, he said never a word, and Chris had wondered at that, seeing how mad he'd been when Will used the word, thoughtless-like, only a week before.

For Will had heard the word in the kirk of Echt where the elders

sit with shaven chins and the offering bags between their knees, waiting the sermon to end and to march with slow, sleekéd steps up through the pews, hearing the penny of penury clink shy-like against the threepenny of affluence. And Will one Sunday, sitting close to sleep, heard fall from the minister's lips the word *Jehovah*, and treasured it for the bonniness and the beauty of it, waiting till he might find a thing or a man or beast that would fit this word, well-shaped and hantled and grand.

Now that was in summer, the time of fleas and glegs and golochs in the fields, when stirks would start up from a drowsy cud-chewing to a wild and feckless racing, the glegs biting through hair and hide to the skin below the tail-rump. Echt was alive that year with the thunder of herds, the crackle of breaking gates, the splash of stirks in tarns, and last with the groans of Nell, the old horse of Guthrie's, caught in a daft swither of the Highland steers and her belly ripped like a rotten swede with the stroke of a great, curved horn.

Father saw the happening from high in a park where the hay was cut and they set the swathes in coles, and he swore out *Damn't to hell!* and started to run, fleetly as was his way, down to the groaning shambles that was Nell. And as he ran he picked up a scythe-blade, and as he neared to Nell he unhooked the blade and cried *Poor quean!* and Nell groaned, groaning blood and sweating, and turned away her neck, and father thrust the scythe at her neck, sawing till she died.

So that was the end of Nell, father waited till the hay was coled and then tramped into Aberdeen and bought a new horse, Bess, riding her home at evening to the raptured starings of Will. And Will took the horse and watered her and led her into the stall where Nell had slept and gave to her hay and a handful of corn, and set to grooming her, shoulder to heel, and her fine plump belly and the tail of her, long and curled. And Bess stood eating her corn and Chris leant against the door-jamb, her Latin Grammar held in her hand. So, working with fine, strong strokes, and happy, Will groomed till he finished the tail, and then as he lifted the brush to hit Bess on the flank that she might move to the other side of the stall and he complete his grooming there flashed in his mind the fine word he had treasured. *Come over, Jehovah!* he cried, smiting

her roundly, and John Guthrie heard the word out across the yard and came fleetly from the kitchen, wiping oatcake from his beard, and fleetly across the yard into the stable he came –

But he should not have stricken Will as he did, he fell below the feet of the horse and Bess turned her head, dripping corn, and looked down at Will, with his face bloody, and then swished her tail and stood still. And then John Guthrie dragged his son aside and paid no more heed to him, but picked up brush and curry-comb and cried *Whoa, lass!* and went on with the grooming. Chris had cried and hidden her face but now she looked again, Will was sitting up slowly, the blood on his face, and John Guthrie speaking to him, not looking at him, grooming Bess.

And mind, my mannie, if I ever hear you again take your Maker's name in vain, if I ever hear you use that word again, I'll libb you. Mind that. Libb you like a lamb.

So Will hated father, he was sixteen years of age and near a man, but father could still make him cry like a bairn. He would whisper his hate to Chris as they lay in their beds at night in the loft room high in the house and the harvest moon came sailing over the Barmekin and the peewits wheeped above the lands of Echt. And Chris would cover her ears and then listen, turning this cheek to the pillow and that, she hated also and she didn't hate, father, the land, the life of the land – oh, if only she knew!

For she'd met with books, she went into them to a magic land far from Echt, out and away and south. And at school they wrote she was the clever one and John Guthrie said she might have the education she needed if she stuck to her lessons. In time she might come out as a teacher then, and do him credit, that was fine of father the Guthrie whispered in her, but the Murdoch laughed with a blithe, sweet face. But more and more she turned from that laughter, resolute, loving to hear of the things in the histories and geographies, seldom thinking them funny, strange names and words like Too-long and Too-loose that convulsed the classes. And at arithmetic also she was more than good, doing great sums in her head so that always she was first in the class, they made her the dux and they gave her prizes, four prizes in four years she had.

And one book she'd thought fair daft, *Alice in Wonderland* it was, and there was no sense in it. And the second, it was *What Katy did at School*, and she loved Katy and envied her and wished like Katy she lived at a school, not tramping back in the splinter of a winter night to help muck the byre, with the smell of the sharn rising feuch! in her face. And the third book was *Rienzi, the Last of the Roman Tribunes*, and some bits were good and some fair wearying. He had a right bonny wife, Rienzi had, and he was sleeping with her, her white arms round his neck, when the Romans came to kill him at last. And the fourth book, new given her before the twins came to Cairndhu, was *The Humours of Scottish Life* and God! if that stite was fun she must have been born dull.

And these had been all her books that weren't lesson-books, they were all the books in Cairndhu but for the Bibles grandmother had left to them, one to Chris and one to Will, and in Chris's one were set the words *To my dawtie Chris: Trust in God and do the right*. For grandmother, she'd been father's mother, not mother's mother, had been fell religious and every Sunday, rain or shine, had tramped to the kirk at Echt, sitting below some four-five ministers there in all. And one minister she'd never forgiven, for he'd said not GAWD, as a decent man would, but GOHD, and it had been a mercy when he caught a bit cold, laid up he was, and quickly passed away; and maybe it had been a judgment on him.

So that was Chris and her reading and schooling, two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you'd waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you'd cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies. You saw their faces in firelight, father's and mother's and the neighbours', before the lamps lit up, tired and kind, faces dear and close to you, you wanted the words they'd known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true – for a while,

for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all.

But she sat for her bursary, won it, and began the conjugating Latin verbs, the easy ones only at first, *Amo, amas, I love a lass* and then you laughed out loud when the Dominie said that and he cried *Whist, whist* but was real pleased and smiled at you and you felt fine and tingly and above all the rest of the queans who weren't learning Latin or anything else, they were kitchen-maids in the bone. And then there was French, fair difficult, the u was the worst; and an inspector creature came to Echt and Chris near dropped through the schoolroom floor in shame when he made her stand out in front of them all and say *o-oo, o-oo, o-oo-butin*. And he said *Put your mouth as though you were going to weesel, but don't do it, and say 'o-oo, o-oo, o-oo'*. And she said it, she felt like a hen with a stone in its thrapple, after the inspector creature, an Englishman he was with an awful belly on him and he couldn't say whistle, only weesel. And he went away, down to the gig that was waiting to drive him to the station he went, and he left his brave leather bag behind, and the Dominie saw it and cried *Whist, Chrissie, run after the Inspector man with his bag*. So she did and caught him up at the foot of the playground, he gowked at her and said *Haw?* and then gave a bit laugh and said *Haw?* again and then *Thensks*. And Chris went back to the Dominie's room, the Dominie was waiting for her and he asked if the Inspector had given her anything, and Chris said *No*, and the Dominie looked sore disappointed.

But everybody knew that the English were awful mean and couldn't speak right and were cowards who captured Wallace and killed him by treachery. But they'd been beaten right well at Bannockburn, then, Edward the Second hadn't drawn rein till he was in Dunbar, and ever after that the English were beaten in all the wars, except Flodden and they won at Flodden by treachery again, just as it told in *The Flowers of the Forest*. Always she wanted to cry when she heard that played and a lot of folk singing it at a parish concert in Echt, for the sadness of it and the lads that came back never again to their lasses among the stooks, and the lasses that never married but sat and stared down south to the English border where their lads lay happed in blood and earth, with their

bloodied kilts and broken helmets. And she wrote an essay on that, telling all how it happened, the Dominie said it was fine and that sometime she should try to write poetry; like Mrs Hemans.

But then, just after writing the essay, the twins were born and mother had as awful a time as she'd always had. She was sobbing and ill when she went to bed, Chris boiled water in kettles for hours and hours and then towels came down, towels claired with stuff she didn't dare look at, she washed them quick and hung them to dry. The doctor came in with the evening, he stayed the whole night, and Dod and Alec shivered and cried in their room till father went up and skelped them right sore, they'd something to cry for then but they didn't dare. And father came down the stairs again, fleet as ever, though he hadn't been in bed for forty hours, and he closed the kitchen door and sat with his head between his hands and groaned and said he was a miserable sinner, God forgive him the lusts of the flesh. Something about the bonny hair of her also he said and then more about lust, but he hadn't intended Chris to hear for he looked up and saw her looking at him and he raged at her, telling her to spread a table with breakfast for the doctor – *through in the parlour there, and boil him an egg.*

And then mother began to scream, the doctor called down the stairs *Man, it's a fair tough case, I doubt I'll need your help*, and at that father turned grey as a sheet and covered his face again and cried *I dare not, I dare not!* Then the doctor childe called him again *Guthrie man, do you hear me?* and father jumped up in a rage and cried *Damn't to hell, I'm not deaf!* and ran up the stairs, fleet as ever, and then the door in the room closed fast and Chris could hear no more.

Not that she wanted to hear, she felt real ill herself, cooking the egg and laying a meal in the parlour, with a white cloth spread above the green plush cloth and all the furniture dark and shadowed and listening. Then Will came down the stair, he couldn't sleep because of mother, they sat together and Will said the old man was a fair beast and mother shouldn't be having a baby, she was far too old for that. And Chris stared at him with horrified imaginings in her mind, she hadn't known better then,

the English bit of her went sick, she whispered *What has father to do with it?* And Will stared back at her, shamed-faced, *Don't you know? What's a bull to do with a calf, you fool?*

But then they heard an awful scream that made them leap to their feet, it was as though mother were being torn and torn in the teeth of beasts and couldn't thole it longer; and then a little screech like a young pig made followed that scream and they tried not to hear more of the sounds above them, Chris boiled the egg over and over till it was as hard as iron. And then mother screamed again, Oh God! your heart stopped to hear it, and that was when the second twin came.

Then quietness followed, they heard the doctor coming down the stairs, the morning was close, it hung scared beyond the stilled parks and listened and waited. But the doctor cried *Hot water, jugs of it, pour me a basin of water, Chris, and put plenty of soap near by it.* She cried *Ay, doctor,* to that but she cried in a whisper, he didn't hear and was fell angry. *D'you hear me?* And Will said to him, calling up the stair, *Ay, doctor, only she's feared,* and the doctor said *She'll have a damned sight more to fear when she's having a bairn of her own. Pour out the water, quick!* So they poured it and went through to the parlour while the doctor passed them with his hands held away from them, and the smell of his hands was a horror that haunted Chris for a day and a night.

That was the coming of the twins at Cairndhu, there'd been barely room for them all before that time, now they'd have to live like tinks. But it was a fell good farm, John Guthrie loath to part with it though his lease was near its end, and when mother came down from her bed in a fortnight's time with the shine of the gold still in the sweet hair of her and her eyes clear eyes again, he raged and swore when she spoke to him. *More rooms? What more room do we want than we have? Do you think we're gentry?* he cried, and went on again to tell that when he was a bairn in Pittodrie his mother had nine bairns all at home, nought but a butt and ben they had and their father nought but a plough-childe. But fine they'd managed, God-fearing and decent all he'd made them, and if one of Jean Murdoch's bairns were half as good the shame need

never redden the face of her. And mother looked at him with the little smile on her lips, *Well, well, we're to bide on here, then?* and father shot out his beard at her and cried *Ay, that we are, content yourself.*

But the very next day he was driving back from the mart, old Bob in the cart, when round a corner below the Barmekin came a motor-car spitting and barking like a tink dog in distemper. Old Bob had made a jump and near landed the cart in the ditch and then stood like a rock, so feared he wouldn't move a step, the cart jammed fast across the road. And as father tried to haul the thrawn beast to the side a creature of a woman with her face all clamjam-fried with paint and powder and dirt, she thrust her bit head out from the window of the car and cried *You're causing an obstruction, my man.* And John Guthrie roused like a lion: *I'm not your man, thank God, for if I was I'd have your face scraped with a clart and then a scavenger wash it well.* The woman nearly burst with rage at that, she fell back in the car and said *You've not heard the last of this. Take note of his name-plate, James, d'you hear?* And the shover looked out, fair shamed he looked, and keeked at the name-plate underneath Bob's shelvin, and quavered *Yes, madam,* and they turned about and drove off. That was the way to deal with dirt like the gentry, but when father applied for his lease again he was told he couldn't have it.

So he took a look at the *People's Journal* and got into his fine best suit, Chris shook the moth-balls from it and found him his collar and the broad white front to cover his working sark; and John Guthrie tramped into Aberdeen and took a train to Banchory to look at a small place there. But the rent was awful high and he saw that nearly all the district was land of the large-like farm, he'd be squeezed to death and he'd stand no chance. It was fine land though, that nearly shook him, fine it looked and your hands they itched to be at it; but the agent called him *Guthrie*, and he fired up at the agent: *Who the hell are you Guthrie-ing? Mister Guthrie to you.* And the agent looked at him and turned right white about the gills and then gave a bit laugh and said *Ah well, Mr Guthrie, I'm afraid you wouldn't suit us.* And John Guthrie said *It's your place that doesn't suit me, let me tell you, you wee, dowp-licking clerk.* Poor

he might be but the creature wasn't yet clecked that might put on its airs with him, John Guthrie.

So back he came and began his searchings again. And the third day out he came back from far in the south. He'd taken a place, Blawearie, in Kinraddie of the Mearns.

Wild weather it was that January and the night on the Slug road smoring with sleet when John Guthrie crossed his family and gear from Aberdeen into the Mearns. Twice the great carts set with their shelvins that rustled still stray binder-twine from September's harvest-home laired in drifts before the ascent of the Slug faced the reluctant horses. Darkness came down like a wet, wet blanket, weariness below it and the crying of the twins to vex John Guthrie. Mother called him from her nook in the leading cart, there where she sat with now one twin at the breast and now another, and her skin bare and cold and white and a strand of her rust-gold hair draped down from the darkness about her face into the light of the swinging lantern: *We'd better loosen up at Portlethen and not try the Slug this night.*

But father swore at that *Damn't to hell, do you think I'm made of silver to put up the night at Portlethen?* and mother sighed and held off the wee twin, Robert, and the milk dripped creamily from the soft, sweet lips of him: *No, we're not made of silver, but maybe we'll lair again and all die of the night.*

Maybe he feared that himself, John Guthrie, his rage was his worriment with the night, but he'd no time to answer her for a great bellowing arose in the road by the winding scurry of peat-moss that lined the dying light of the moon. The cattle had bunched there, tails to the wind, refusing the Slug and the sting of the sleet, little Dod was wailing and crying at the beasts, Polled Angus and Shorthorns and half-bred Highland stirks who had fattened and fêted and loved their life in the haughs of Echt, south there across the uncouthy hills was a world cold and unchancy. But John Guthrie dropped the tarpaulin edge that shielded his wife and the twins and the furnishings of the best room and gear good and plentiful enough; and swiftly he ran past the head of the horse till he came to where the cattle bunched. And he swung Dod into the

ditch with one swipe of his hand and cried *Have you got no sense, you brat?* and uncoiled from his hand the length of hide that served him as a whip. Its crackle snarled down through the sting of the sleet, the hair rose in long serrations across the backs of the cattle, and one in a minute, a little Highland steer it was, mooded and ran forward and fell to a trot, and the rest followed after, slipping and sprawling with their cloven hooves, the reek of their dung sharp and bitter in the sleet smore of the night. Ahead Alec saw them coming and turned himself about again, and fell to a trot, leading up the Slug to Mearns and the south.

So, creaking and creaking, and the shelvins skirling under the weight of their loads, they passed that danger point, the carts plodded into motion again, the first with its hooded light and house gear and mother suckling the twins. In the next, Clyde's cart, the seed was loaded, potato and corn and barley, and bags of tools and implements, and graips and forks fast tied with esparto twine and two fine ploughs and a driller, and dairy things and a turnip machine with teeth that cut as a guillotine cuts. Head down to the wind and her reins loose and her bonny coat all mottled with sleet went Clyde, the load a nothing to her, fine and clean and sonsy she marched, following John Guthrie's cart with no other thing or soul to guide but that ever and now, in this half-mile and that she heard his voice cry cheerily *Fine, Clyde, fine. Come on then, lass.*

Chris and Will with the last cart, sixteen Will and fifteen Chris, the road wound up and up, straight and unwavering, and sometimes they hiddled in the lithe and the sleet sang past to left and right, white and glowing in the darkness. And sometimes they clambered down from the shelvins above the laboured drag of old Bob and ran beside him, one either side, and stamped for warmth in their feet, and saw the whin bushes climb black the white hills beside them and far and away the blink of lights across the moors where folk lay happed and warm. But then the upwards road would swerve, right or left, into this steep ledge or that, and the wind would be at them again and they'd gasp, climbing back to the shelvins, Will with freezing feet and hands and the batter of the sleet like needles in his face, Chris in worse case, colder and colder at every turn, her body numb and unhappy, knees and thighs and

stomach and breast, her breasts ached and ached so that nearly she wept. But of that she told nothing, she fell to a drowse through the cold, and a strange dream came to her as they plodded up through the ancient hills.

For out of the night ahead of them came running a man, father didn't see him or heed to him, though old Bob in the dream that was Chris's snorted and shied. And as he came he wrung his hands, he was mad and singing, a foreign creature, black-bearded, half-naked he was; and he cried in the Greek *The ships of Pytheas! The ships of Pytheas!* and went by into the smore of the sleet-storm on the Grampian hills, Chris never saw him again, queer dreaming that was. For her eyes were wide open, she rubbed them with never a need of that, if she hadn't been dreaming she must have been daft. They'd cleared the Slug, below was Stonehaven and the Mearns, and far beyond that, miles through the Howe, the twinkling point of light that shone from the flagstaff of Kinraddie.

So that was their coming to Blawearie, fell wearied all of them were the little of the night that was left them, and slept late into the next morning, coming cold and drizzly up from the sea by Bervie. All the darkness they heard that sea, a shoom-shoom that moaned by the cliffs of lone Kinneff. Not that John Guthrie listened to such dirt of sounds, but Chris and Will did, in the room where they'd made their shake-down beds. In the strangeness and cold and the sighing of that far-off water Chris could find no sleep till Will whispered *Let's sleep together*. So then they did, oxtering one the other till they were real warm. But at the first keek of day Will slipped back to the blankets of his own bed, he was feared what father would say if he found them lying like that. Chris thought of that angrily, puzzled and angry, the English Chris as sleep came on her again. Was it likely a brother and a sister would do anything if they slept together? And besides, she didn't know how.

But Will back in his bed had hardly a minute to get warm or a wink of sleep when John Guthrie was up and about the place, rousing them all, and the twins were wakened and crying for the breast, and Dod and Alec trying to light the fire. Father swore up and down the strange Blawearie stairs, chapping from door to

door, weren't they sick with shame lying stinking in bed and half the day gone? Then out he went, the house quietened down as he banged the door, and he cried back that he was off up the brae to look at the loch in Blawearie moor – *Get out and get on with the breakfast and get your work done ere I come back else I'll warm your lugs for you.*

And faith! it was queer that the notion took father to climb the brae at that hour. For as he went up through the broom he heard a shot, did John Guthrie, cracking the morning so dark and iron-like, and he stood astounded, was not Blawearie his and he the tenant of it? And rage took him and he ceased to dander. Up through the hill among the dead broom he sped like a hare and burst in sight of the loch, grass-fringed and chill then under the winter morning, with a sailing of wild geese above it, going out east to the sea. All but one winged east in burnished strokes under the steel-grey sky, but that one loped and swooped and stroked the air with burnished pinions, and John Guthrie saw the feathers drift down from it, it gave a wild cry like a bairn smored at night below the blankets, and down it plonked on the mere of the loch, not ten yards from where the man with the gun was standing. So John Guthrie he went cannily across the grass to this billy in the brave leggings and with the red face on him, and who was he standing so sure-like on Guthrie's land? He gave a bit jump, hearing Guthrie come, and then he swithered a laugh inside the foolish face of him, but John Guthrie didn't laugh. Instead, he whispered, quiet-like, *Ay, man, you've been shooting*, and the creature said *Ay, just that.* And John Guthrie said *Ay, you'll be a bit poacher, then?* and the billy said *No, I'll not be that, I'm Maitland, the foreman at Mains*, and John Guthrie whispered *You may be the archangel Gabriel, but you're not to shoot on MY land, d'you hear?*

The Standing Stones reared up above the two, marled and white-edged with snow they were, and a wind came blowing fit to freeze the chilblains on a brass monkey as they stood and glowered one at the other. Then Maitland muttered *Ellison at Mains will see about this*, and made off for all the world as if he feared the crack of a kick in the doup of him. And right fairly there, midmost his brave breeks John Guthrie might well have kicked but