

A Man's a Man for a' That.

It took a lot of organizing, times, buses, arrangements to be met but I felt that despite all the setbacks, problems and doubts, that it would be worthwhile. Of all people to invite to the Ayrshire Ladies' Homecraft Circle's Centenary Burns Supper, surely Robert Burns himself was the most appropriate.

He had been my hero (what an overused word to describe my obsession with him and his work) and the opportunity to meet him would be the highlight of my whole life. As President of the Ayrshire Ladies' Homecraft Circle in its centenary year, I felt it was my duty (and pleasure) to undertake the task of inviting him to speak. I had studied his works for many years and devoted my life to the reading of his poetry and to the visiting of his cottage and farms. Nothing was too much for me as far as he was concerned. In fact, I was prepared to die for him.

As I said, it took a bit of arranging. Time of death, means, whether or not it was to be temporary or permanent (I swithered on that one but then I'd miss the Burns Supper if I made it permanent) – these were all matters I discussed with the agent. There was also the delicate matter of where exactly he was. However, it was confirmed that despite some trouble with the seventh commandment, he had in fact been accepted above and not consigned to that other place.

The date was set for my demise. It was impossible (and prohibited) to prepare for the event. I was sorely tempted to tidy up my affairs and my underwear drawer but I left both severely alone. Instead, I concentrated on what my first words to the bard should be

and the works we at the Ladies' Circle would like him to recite. It was while I was turning over such weighty questions in my mind that I stepped out in front of the Intercity Special bus to Glasgow.

Despite knowing that this was the day, a surge of anger at the incompetence of drivers rose in me and I managed a weak shake of my fist at the underside of the bus before I succumbed.

The journey heavenwards was relatively pleasant although there was a tailback at the main junction. Apparently some people were protesting at having to take the other road but eventually I got through and made good time to the main gates. I must confess to being keen to see the pearly gates and St Peter with his open ledger, so I was extremely disappointed to find myself outside what looked like the entrance to an NCP car park. A metal pole blocked my way and in a small porter's lodge sat someone with his face hidden behind a copy of a newspaper (it was the Herald appropriately enough) and his feet on the table.

I coughed discreetly. When that evinced no response whatsoever, I tapped sharply on the window. The newspaper was laid aside and the glass slid open.

'Yes?'

'Are you St Peter?'

'No, I'm St Leger. It's St Peter's day off. What do you want?'

I showed him my special pass and he consulted a scruffy piece of paper decorated with coffee rings.

'Right, you can go in.'

He pressed a button and the barrier rose.

I walked into Heaven. Correction, I floated in. It was quiet and peaceful with groups of figures seated or strolling about. Where would I find my hero?

An angel was hovering nearby so I tapped him on the wing.

‘Gonnae no dae that?’ he snapped, shrugging his feathered shoulders aggressively.

‘I’m sorry. Can you tell me where I can find Robert Burns?’

‘Which one? Robert Burns, plumber and heating engineer, Robert Burns, the dearly beloved infant son of Margaret, Robert Burns, one time teacher of English, Sir Robert Burns, knighted for services to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, Robert...’

‘...the poet,’ I interrupted. ‘Scotland’s Bard.’

‘Aw him,’ replied the angel. ‘You’ll hae to go right back fur him. Follow the mists until you find him, ken. He’s aye staring at his feet and muttering.’

So he was still writing poetry, and writing about everyday things in Heaven. I wondered what he would choose and how many more mellifluous phrases had passed from his lips in the two centuries he’d been here. I quickened my pace and was enveloped in a soft cotton-wool haze. I walked on and on (or perhaps back and back in time) until eventually I emerged in a green and fertile valley full of nymphs and shepherds cavorting and singing. I listened to see if I could make out any of the words – perhaps *Comin’ through the Rye* or a snatch of *Ae Fond Kiss* – but although the sentiments were perhaps the same, the way they were expressed somewhat surprised me and I hurried on.

Then I saw him. He was sitting on a grassy knoll, with his chin resting on his fist and his eyes gazing ahead. A perfect sight, a vision of our greatest poet at work. I stood quietly, not daring to interrupt his reverie.

This was the moment I had been waiting for. There he was, Robert Burns, the Bard of Scotland, still communing with his Muse.

I stood there in silence. Unfortunately, the cream cheese and salmon sandwich with a dill pickle on the side which I'd had for lunch decided to come back on me and my stomach gurgled noisily.

'Got a wee touch o' wind in the baggie?' were his first immortal words.

'Mr. – er – Burns,' I stammered, my face reddening with embarrassment at the thought of what deathless prose my stomach had spoiled, 'I've been granted a short visit here in order to speak with you.'

'Are you frae Hell?' His face brightened visibly. 'Any chance o' getting me a transfer oot o' here?'

I was transfixed.

'Why would you want to go there?'

'Bit o' life, ye ken.'

I thought at first he winked, but it must have been a trick of the light.

'Unless of course, you fancy a bit of houghmagandie yersel?'

The wink this time was unmistakable, accompanied as it was by a nudge in the ribs. I understood. He was going to sing to me.

'I'd love that,' I enthused. 'Do you want me to join in? I'm afraid it's not one I'm familiar with, so would you rather I just sat back and let you perform by yourself?'

'Just do what you feel like, hen,' he said. 'I'm no that fussy after all this time.'

He took my hand.

'Are you the lady visitor?' a voice piped.

It was a rather fat cherub whose cloud kept slipping down to unseemly depths and which he was constantly hitching up.

‘Yes,’ I answered, cross that our tête-à-tête had been disturbed.

‘Bugger off!’ Burns remonstrated, rather rudely, I thought, but completely understandable under the circumstances. It does not do to interrupt the processes of creation.

‘You’d better watch him,’ the cherub said cheekily as he nipped smartly off.

‘He’s only got one thing on his mind.’

Of course he had. How else could he produce such phrasing, such sentiments, such beautiful lyrics if his mind was not constantly working on his poetry?

‘Mr. Burns,’ I began again, ‘or may I call you Rabbie?’

‘Why?’

‘Well, everybody else does. Rabbie Burns. It’s a well-known name.’

The swear word exploded from him. An Anglo-Saxon one that I was shocked to hear coming from him. He’d certainly never used it in any of his work that I had read.

‘Who tellt on me then? Was it that bitch o’ ... naw, naw, it was her wi’ the big... it was, wasn’t it?’

I looked at him blankly. He drew himself up to his full height, which was less than I’d expected from his portrait, and peered up into my face.

‘Who was it?’

‘Nobody,’ I tried to reassure him. ‘I only meant that you’re well known because of your poetry. You’re famous.’

‘Ma poetry? Are you still reading it?’

‘Oh yes,’ I sighed, and bursting into song, I gave him the opening lines of his loveliest.

O, my luvie is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June...

He didn’t seem to like it and muttered something about eldritch skriechs. I know I’m not a terribly good singer but I wanted him to realize that his words have lived on.

‘What else do you ken?’

‘Tam o’ Shanter, The Cotter’s Saturday Night, Address to a Haggis, To a Mouse, Scots Wha Hae, Ca’ the Yowes, Auld Lang Syne, Ae Fond Kiss...’ I paused for breath.

‘John Anderson, my Jo, Holy Wullie’s Prayer, To a Mountain daisy, To a Louse...’

Burns’ draw dropped.

‘You mean, it’s lasted aw this time? Aw these wee bits o’ scribbling? Ah cannae believe it.’

‘Yes, your poems are known throughout the world and Auld Lang Syne is sung everywhere and there are Burns’ Suppers held world wide on your birthday and not only that, I’m here to invite you to the Ayrshire Ladies’ Homecraft Circle’s Centenary Burns’ Supper.’

His eyes lit up and he laughed.

‘Aye there’ll be a fair when o’ Burns in Ayr by noo, are there no?’ He nudged me in the ribs again.

I paused. ‘Yes it’s a very common name. There’s.... and ...’ I mentioned two of Ayr’s worthies. ‘But I don’t know if they’re descended from your line.’

‘They probably are. I did my bit to help the population roon aboot.’ And he winked again.

That was just like Burns. To be so generous in helping out those less well off than himself. Man’s *humanity* to man, to paraphrase his own immortal words.

‘Ah’m looking forward to seeing the auld toon again,’ he continued. ‘There’s nothing to do up here aw day long. At least, if I was doon below, there would be a bit o’ life aboot the place. Mind you...’ He looked me up and down. ‘... you’d do at a pinch. Ye cannae be fussy about an old raincoat on a wet night.’

I pondered over the deeper significance of his utterings and was unaware of his arm moving around my waist until suddenly, he pulled me towards him and planted a slobby kiss on my lips.

‘Fair fa’ your honest, sonsie face,’ he began.

I tried to push him away but though he was small, he was strong – and desperate. His hands wrestled with my Marks and Sparks pure wool skirt and tangled with my underwear. I wished I’d done something about the state of it before my accident with the bus.

‘Mr. Burns!’ I shrieked. ‘Remember who you are!’

He obviously did for he redoubled his efforts and pushed me to the heavenly ground which was just as solid and lumpy as many more earthy parts I could recall.

Tho thou’s howe-backit now, and knaggie,

I’ve seen the day

Thou could hae ga’en like onie staggie

Out-owre the lay,

he murmured in my ear while pinioning my arms above my head.

I tried to remember what the lady self-defence expert had suggested when she spoke at the Ladies' Homecraft Circle and attempted to knee him but unfortunately missed.

'O flower of Scotland ...' he crooned in a pleasant baritone, while investigating the mechanics of my all-in-one stretch and control Lycra body.

Bells rang.

'That's not yours,' I said. 'You didn't write that.'

'Ah learnt it off a pal o' mine here,' he said. 'Good, isn't it?'

His hands were definitely where they shouldn't have been.

'This won't hurt,' he was saying. 'This won't hurt.'

'No, no,' I murmured as my strength failed, while part of me kept whispering, 'A man's a man for a' that...'

'This won't hurt.'

'No,' I said more loudly. 'It does. You are hurting me.'

'Only a moment more. We're nearly there.'

A jolt of pain shot through me and I opened my eyes. I found I was staring at the underside of the Intercity Special bus to Glasgow.

'This won't hurt,' a voice repeated and I looked round into the face of an ambulance man who was gently moving me on to a stretcher.

'You had a lucky escape,' he said.

I nodded.

So that's why Robert Burns will not be the guest speaker at the Ayrshire Ladies' Homecraft Circle's Centenary Burns Supper. In fact, we're not having a Burns Supper at all. I didn't feel it was appropriate in the circumstances and anyway, I've gone off him.