

The Auld Kirk

Although it was warm, the rain that had threatened all day came down in anaemic drops as I entered the Kirk yard. I'd already seen the other attractions. The cottage, for instance, was a work of art well worthy of preservation. My legs ached a little from climbing the stairs to the monument.

Now I was here. A well-thumbed paperback copy of his poems was in my backpack, my favourite of them all covered five pages of close-spun print.

I walked about the grounds. The area around the Auld Kirk contained some weathered gravestones. The writing on most of these was illegible except for that of -

"William Burnes," I said aloud, standing there in the thin summer rain.

"Curious spelling on 'Burns'" rumbled a voice beside me. There, having melted into existence stood a big man in a dark business suit, white shirt, dark tie patterned with blood-red diamonds. His voice had a pleasant, cultured Scottish burr in sharp contrast to my harsh Kilmarnock tones

I got over my shock enough to answer him with my superior knowledge.

"Names were not always written the same way in those days. It was quite possible for a name to change in a single generation. His grandfather was probably called Burness."

The stranger looked at me keenly. He was big all right, but his features were sharp enough and his green eyes were almost hypnotic. His hair was black but he somehow gave the impression of great age. His lips were curved in a gentle, frightening smile.

"I haven't been here for a while. I've never seen this one."

"It was a replacement, bought by subscription by the followers of his son. Look at how deep the writing is."

"And the stone isn't too weathered. I see what you mean. So, what's your name young man?"

"Jonathan," I said, "what's yours?" I was not flattered by his 'young man' comment, since I am, in fact, in my forties. But I was talking to a broad, retreating back.

"I'm just going to look at the inside," he threw at me over his left shoulder. I could have turned then and left, but some impulse made me follow.

The Auld Kirk seems to have - no it does have - a tree growing out of the stonework itself. The spreading canopy gives the building the air of a Tolkien fantasy especially as the church has no roof and hasn't had one for hundreds of years. The building is divided into two unequal parts, the main one being where the congregation would have worshipped.

As I came in the big man stood facing the wall where the plain altar would have been. They – the Protestant clergy – would have none of your fancy church dressings in the Lord's house in these parts. I could imagine the congregation crowded in here on a Sunday, landed gentry at the front, peasant farmers at the back. To our right was a deep niche recessed into the thick wall with only a tiny square hole where the window would have been.

Glass was expensive in the days when the Kirk was built.

"That's where the piper would have sat," said the big man amiably.

"They didn't have pipers in churches - oh you mean the poem," I said, "a great work of fancy."

"Is it?"

"His best."

"I don't mean the poem, I mean the tale from which it came."

"Come on, Witches and Warlocks dancing, lanterns made of human skulls and dead people holding candles, and unearthly music -" I stopped. Above us the sky was smeared with dark clouds and the persistent rain pricked our faces like tiny needles.

"It was a memory handed down to him by his mother, Agnes Broun," said the stranger. We were both strangers here.

"So what do you do for a living?" His voice was casual.

"I'm a support worker, helping people with mental health issues and learning disabilities."

"Pay well?"

"I make a living. It pays the mortgage," in point of fact I enjoy my job. I'm a lone worker and it suits my nature. Interaction with the human race in general has never been my strong point. The people I work with are alienated by their nature. So I find I can relate to them quite easily. We have a common bond.

"It's smaller than I remember," said the big man. I wondered how he could remember the interior if he hadn't seen the restored tombstone before. It was many years old, erected before my birth.

The stranger patted his breast pocket.

"I've taken a liking to you Jonathan. How would you feel if I told you I have in here a little proposition that will make you an independent man?"

"I don't know -"

"I didn't say rich, but you can be rich; have power, women, whatever, as they say in these times, 'floats your boat'?"

For a moment I was tempted more than I can say. He was a man with a compelling presence, and when he was there talking to me I could *feel* all those things he had spoken about just within my grasp. Women didn't bother me although I was between relationships right now and I'd never been that good at attracting them in the first place. Money and power would soon solve that problem.

"You don't get something for nothing," I said, keeping my voice calm.

“Indeed you don’t, and I’ll be expecting something in return. Isn’t that the way of the world and life in general? Come on son, sign your name and you’ll be with me.”

He smiled broadly. His suit must have cost hundreds of pounds and I could see the cream colour of a contract he was starting to take out of his inside pocket. Then I had the absurd thought that the rain would be wash my name away and the whole thing would be null and void anyway.

"Give me your mobile number and we'll arrange a proper meeting," I said. "Then you can put your proposition to me." My job had trained me to be cautious, no matter that every part of me was screaming out for the contract and my fingers were twitching to sign.

He closed his immaculately tailored jacket and his hand slid to his side.

"Sorry son, this business works on trust. You've missed your chance.”

I could feel a deep well of disappointment opening inside me, but paired with this was a feeling of relief. His attention was caught by another feature. "Look, that window on the left is where Tam would have sat on his horse and watched the celebrations."

"Celebrations? It seemed to be an odd word use for a witch’s coven but I suppose to them that's what their revels would have been. I wondered over to look at the space. How small these gaps in the stonework were.

"Imagine how dim this church must have been when the roof was on. They must have had to light candles even in daytime," I said. The stranger did not reply, so I turned around to insist on my point. He wasn't there, yet I hadn't heard him leave.

The rain was clearing now and the atmosphere was damp and fresh. Yet there was a faint scent in the air I recognised from long ago. It was an odour I associated with smokers, and not from cigarettes, but matches.