

The Washerwoman

By Lesley Capitanchik

Ye widnae believe the morning ah've hid. Fowk rushing in and oot, aw shoutin' and panicky, lookin' fer weapons and bits o' armour. And they expect me tae ken far it is! Shoutin' in ma face, even though maist o' the time they look through me like ah'm a ghost. Aye, ye ken somethin' gaun wrang faun the gentry are spikkin' tae the auld biddie that washes their claes fer them. Stupit buggers.

Fashin' aboot who ah'd been spikkin' tae. Ah mean, ah told them, ah keep maself tae maself. Ah dinnae gossip. But they look at ye wi' those frouns. Aye. Ye think if ye hid a' that siller and a' those castles, ye wid be a bit happier. Ah, mean, King Duncan. He hid his faults and ah ken he wis worriet aboot the Norse invading and that traitor but he wis awa' polite like whaun he spoke. But nowadays, losh, ye cannae e'en hae a banquet withoot the king seein' visions. Visions, aye? Even the queen suggested he'd ta'ken a little too much mead aforehand. Still, it wis a guid nicht in the kitchen. Ah hid never tasted meat sae fine. And the mead slipped doon yer throat 'til ye were unco' merry. It wisnae fine the next day mind. Doon by the freezing shore o' the burn. That wisnae pleasant that day. Sittin' amongst the frozen grass, trying tae dry those cloots fae the night before, the clear water turnin' reid as it flowed intae the Seamaw. A knight went by on his horse and fair pale he turned whaun he saw me. He didnae speak but ah could see him staring at the water.

"Aye, it's an unco' sight fer a cauld morning," ah said tae him, conversational like, 'cos ye hae tae be careful. A woman o' ma age wi' ma job can be easily mistook fer something else. That's why ah've never hid a cat. Ye say win wrang thing and afore ye know it yer up in front of the magistrate. And he kens yer guilty afore ye even spik. Aw he wints ye tae do is to name ithers. So I find it easiest to keep tae masel'.

"That is true," he replies, grand-like. He his tae watch too. Whit he says may be written doon by some scribe so he his tae get it richt. His horse snorts wi' impatience. Ah feel sorry fer the brute.

They aya' look fed-up they've tae carry some muckle brute aroond who winnae let them jist dae as they please. And it cannae be pleasant haein' that wee bit o' metal in your mooth, hittin' yer gums if ye dinnae wint tae head towards a' those men holding pikes in' daggers in' claymores.

"The water..."

"Sir, ah jist dae as ah'm telt. Bit ah kin assure you it's nae me sir."

"The water turns red. The owl turns on the falcon. It is dark when it should be light."

Ah dinnae want tae interrupt him but it's a'ways dark at this time o' year. He's maybe spent tae mich time in that Holy Land far there's mare sun. Ah dinnae ken. A lot o' the young men like tae go oot there noo'adays tae dae whatever young men need tae do tae get it oot o' their systems. They say they're ca'd by God bit ah dinnae get why a God wid be aye wintin' people tae be fightin' o'er his own land. Bit ye cannae say onythin' or they'll hae ye in the gaol and strung up as soon as look at ye. So I nod. And he smiles grimly.

"You are wise, old woman. You will have your reward."

Aye, so ah will. In Heaven, cos it'll nae be here. So he gallops back towards Birnam and ah heft my washin' back in ma basket and carry it up tae the castle. Nae horses fer us that really needs it.

Fan a' get in, one o' the sodjer billies comes up tae me.

"Fa wis that spikkin' tae ye?"

Ah ken whit ah wint tae say but it widnae be a guid idea. So ah jist shrug. "Oh, jist some sodjer billy. He rode back towards the woods." Weel. Whit a commotion that stirred up.

"Yer nae tae leave the castle withoot permission again!" he shouts, then he goes clattering up the stairs. There'll be mair noise whaun they realise they'll nae get their claes washed cos ah cannae get oot tae the burn. Men never think o' things like this. But ah dae.

So ah lay oot ma laundry in the yard, only fer some ither sodjer billy tae yell in ma face tae move it as they need to muster an army. Aye. Weel. They'll nae need mich room. The thanes hivnae bin sae quick tae throw their lot in wi' the maister since they saw whit happened tae the Thane of Fife's family. Ye think that nae bugger would o' been coorse enough tae kill a wife and her bairns, but someone was. And then Banquo and his son. That wis awfa. His son jist turnt twelve too. Huntin' in the woods. It jist shows ye that naewhere is safe noo'adays. Ah dinnae think mich o' the ones who remain. Ah try tae pick up ma cloots bit they jist let their horses gallop in and trample them intae their glaur. The horses snort and champ, clouds o' steam rising frem their flaunks. And their maister's armour glints in the sunlight. And aw ah kin think of is ah'm gaunt tae get it whaun there's nae clean sheets fer their beds. Still, nithin' tae dae noo bit watch. Ah'm no keen tae go and tell Cook whit happened until ah hiv tae.

And then he enters. Michty. Power fair ages a person. Ah remember he wis eence a haundsome man, tall and fair. Noo, he looks old, troubled. But somethin' in his mind reminds him o' that young thane and he straightens his back, and he speaks oot in that ringing tone that dis somethin' tae yer blood. By the end of it, ah wint tae fight too. But ah'm more needed here. Ah kin see someone beckoning tae me. It's Elsie. Ah sneek roond the edge o' the yard. It's nae easy getting past a' those muckle beasts. Ah hiv tae dodge a few polished hooves. Ma shoes and dress are covered in glaur by the time ah get tae the door.

“Yes, Mistress Scott?”

“Whit are ye daein’ oot here? Yer needed in the Mistress’ chamber. Get in!”

She grabs me roughly, and pulls me up the stairs, towards the lady’s chamber. Ah ken whit ah’ll find. And ah dinnae wint tae go. Ah’ve seen too much o’ that, the last few months. Ah try tae resist bit she grips me wrist tighter.

“Ye hiv tae go.”

And ah still see him. The wee bairn. Oh, she fed him hersel’. Nae usual fer a lady o’ her station. But she insistit. And at first he thrived. His wee cheeks were rosy. He wid coil his fingers roond his mither’s haund and hauld them in a tight grip and she wid laugh quietly at his strength. Bit the faerie fowk were jealous. They didnae like a mortal haein’ sae bonny a bairn, even though they were gentry. So they took the bairn in the middle o’ the night and left a changeling in it’s place, a weak wee soul that quickly wastit away tae skin and bone awa’ fae its home. Every day she sat wi’ that bairn, tryin’ tae coax it tae tak her milk bit it wisnae interested. It wid turn its head and wail till ye winted tae dash its brains oot tae mak it stop. Ye heard her pleadin’ wi’ it bit it didnae understaund. After it passed, they couldnae get her tae let it go, except by force. Ah still remember her screams as they dragged her doon the dark passage tae inither chamber. After that, she wisnae the same. Oh, she came oot a few days later. Bit a piece o’ her hid gone intae the groond wi’ that wee bairn, and she wid never get it back. After that, ye’d find in her parts o’ the castle the gentry dinnae normally venture into, mutterin’ tae hersel’. And if there wisnae a letter fae the maister waitin’ fer her, losh, she wid be cryin’ her heart oot.

And he changed too. Ah mean. Dinnae get me wrong. Ah never conversed wi' them. But though ah keep ma mooth shut, ah still hae eyes. And ah could see he wisnae the same as before. When they were first mairret, he would spin her roond and there wis a laugh in his voice. But aifter that terrible thing wi' the bairn, he wis like a whipped cur aroond her, afraid tae say onythin' in case it set her off again. She wis tae be denied nothin' in case it set her off again.

Bit she mist hae been glad whaun we moved sooth. We even started tae entertain guests again. She hid awa's been known as a bonny hostess, and soon we hid a'sorts tae stay at the castle. Ah remember the run up tae King Duncan's visit. Aye, we were aw rinnin' aroon like dafties tryin' tae make the castle fine and trig fer his visit. And it wis fine tae hear frae the porter how he praised the castle as he entered on his fine horse. He wis a fine man, a guid man. Puir chiel. Ah didnae think ah wid be sponging the blood of o' his face and body a few 'oors later afore the Priest arrived. Who wid murder an auld man in his bed? Ah wis sittin' wi' him, talkin' tae him gently, whaun the two lords came in. Whit a shock. Ah mean, ye expect sich sights in war but nae whaun the country is at peace. They looked at the two sodjers, their bodies lyin' whaur they fell, and nudged them gently with their boots, but they were nae gien' their secrets awa' noo. Then I slipped back intae the shadows so they could inspect the body. They didnae notice me.

Naebody notices a washerwoman.

Ah sometimes wander hoo ah ended up here. Ah hae vague memories of a huddle o' houses, clingin' on tae the edge of the sea. And ither bairns, raggedy and barefoot like masel', covered in glaur and sharn. And an auld woman that tocht us tae bide our tongues wi' the back o' her haund. Ah dinnae ken how ah ended up sae far frae home. Ye cannae see the sea here, only the still waters of the loch. And trees. Ye cannae see onythin' bit trees.

“Will ye quit dreamin’? Come quick.”

Ah stumble on the uneven steps. There nae designed for a’body in a hurry. Ah shake ma head.

“Ah cannae dae this.”

“Ye can, and ye will. The Priest is waiting. He cannae see her like that.”

“A priest willnae do her ony good now.”

“Shush or ah will tell the Steward what you said. Quick! Quick!”

Outside, metal clashes against metal. Men haverin’, the king going clear skite. But neen of it matters tae her now. Instead, she lies in bed like een asleep. I tak’ her haund gently and start tae wipe the blood of it. I talk tae her softly about her boy, her wee bairn, gently wipe underneath the locket that contains his lock of hair and smooth the hair awa’ from her face. As I wash, I see the bonny blithe craitur that hid wince brightened the halls of Cawdor return. I closed the curtains round her bed tae muffle the sounds of the battle outside. And then gently withdrew. It wis getting’ dark. And soon, night wid fall.