



Winter Fires

It was a perfect Halloween night, cold and clear, and Bobbie had come calling on Mary so they could walk out in the moonlight.

“Mary! Yer man’s at the door!”

“Coming!”

Mary ran to the door, wrapping a green shawl about herself.

“Ah brought a lantern in case it gets dark,” smiled Bobbie, holding up a turnip. “Howked it oot yesterday.”

“And whose face is this,” asked Mary, pointing at the crudely carved lantern “only it looks awfae like yerself.”

“Is that so?”

“Bobbie I have to take this shawl back to Katy. She’s jist doon at the bottom end o’ Charles Street. Will you walk with me there first?”

“Of course I will.”

Bobbie and Mary wandered out into the cold evening, already little flocks of goloshans scuttled busily between tenements, working hard for their bounty. But at the bottom of the street, one company did not look quite so happy.

“Look, it’s Katy’s youngest, ah better go and see what’s the matter.”

A small crowd of girls huddled around a sobbing girl, much younger than the rest.

“Betty? Betty what’s wrong?” asked Mary.

“They keelies knocked ower wee Betty’s curly kail.” explained an indignant young lady, pointing to a gang of boys, already disappearing around the corner

“Did they now?”

“Mah candle fell out.” She sniffed, holding up the broken kail-stock.

“That’s terrible Betty. You can have mah lantern if you like.”

Wee Betty smiled as Bobbie handed over his lantern.

“Ah yer face is lit up like a wee lantern itself.”

“C’mon Betty, we’re away tae yer mother’s jist now. Time fur you tae go home ah think.”

Happy with her new toy, Wee Betty skipped and sang the whole way home.

“Tell your mother we’re here Betty.” Said Mary, but Betty had already run into the house. Smiling, Katy waved them both in.

“Hello Katy, Bobbie and me are oot walkin’ and I jist wanted tae return yer shawl. And wee Betty.”

“Hullo you.” Said Katy as Wee Betty scurried over to her brother and sisters. “Thanks Mary, but ye didnae need tae hurry back wi’ it. Come away in.”

Katy’s house was bursting with children; half a dozen were crammed around the bath tub trying to get to the apples that floated there and a small group of older girls were whispering and laughing conspiratorially by the fireplace.

“Look whose come come tae visit!” said Katy “Mary, and her handsome young man Bobbie.”

“Hullo Katy! Hullo Bobbie!”

“Bobbie these wee yins aw dressed and dookin’ are Johnny, Kerr, Jamie, Conn and Morven. Ye’ve met wee Betty.”

“Bobbie gave me his lantern!” explained Betty.

“Handsome and a gentleman. Hang ontae this yin Mary. The lassies standin’ by the fire lookin’ aw shy and pretty are mah eldest Agnes and her friends Polly and Rhona.”

The girls giggled as Bobbie bowed

“Ye’ve jist missed the play.” Said Katy.

“I was Galatia!” said Kerr.

“And who wis the Doctor?” asked Bobbie, “Ah wis aye the Doctor.”

“Me!” squealed Johnny.

“Ah should’ve guessed! And what can you cure?”

Johnny smiled.

“The itch, the pitch, the palsy and the gout. If a man had nineteen de’ils in his skull, I’d cast twenty one of them out!”

“Ah bet ye would.” Laughed Bobbie.

“When are we burnin’ the nuts?” asked Agnes.

“Och ye’ve been harpin’ on aboot that aw night!”

“Please?”

“Right.” Said Katy “Stoke it up then, Johnny you fetch the nuts.”

“But ah want to dae the treacle scones.”

“You’ve jist had yer fun wi the Galoshans, it’s Agnes and the girls turn now.”

Johnny stomped off looking not at all amused.

“Who’s first?” asked Mary.

“Me Mary! Me!” said Agnes.

“Well then, and who’s the young man?”



“Stuart McGhee.” Laughed Morven.

“Oh really?” said Katy “The wee boy frae the market? Aye he’s fine right enough.”

“Mother!”

Johnny returned with a small bag of nuts, Mary took two from the bag and handed them to Agnes.

“On ye go then.”

Agnes placed the two nuts in the fire, and the room watched and waited until...with a tiny crack, the nuts burned and glowed together.

“Oh Agnes! There’s a good omen fur ye!” said Mary.

“Aye.” Agreed Bobbie “Look’s like ye’ll be goin’ tae a weddin’ Katy.”

“As long as ahm naw goin’ tae a christenin’ first ah don’t mind.” Said Katy, looking towards Agnes, now flushed scarlet with embarrassment.

“Who’s next?” asked Mary “Rhona?”

“Aye okay.” Said Rhona. “But ahm naw sure which boy ah prefer.”

“Well, let the fire decide fur ye!” said Mary.

“Right. Well ah’ll start wi Wullie Johnstone.”

“Rhona! He’s rotten!” said Polly.

“Aye well it’s naw up tae you is it? It’s up tae the fire.”

“Right ye are.” Said Mary.

Rhona put the two nuts in the fire, and again they waited...then once again, the nuts crackled and burned.

“His jumped Rhona!” said Polly. “His nut jumped away. See ah told ye. Try somebody else.”

Mary handed the bag to Polly and stood up.

“Are you no takin’ a turn Mary?”

“No thanks Polly. Ah think Bobbie and I should be off.”

Katy walked over from the stove.

“Are ye no stayin’ fur blind man’s buff and apple dumpling?”

“No Katy, sure Bobbie and me are going for a wee walk”

“So ye are. Here then.” Smiled Katy “You’ll be wanting this for later.”

Katy threw Mary an apple and winked.

“Huv a nice walk.”

Outside, gangs of lanterns still huddled together and bobbed along the cobbled paths, their candle light glowing around each and every corner of the densely packed streets.

The two wandered up towards the darkness of the Crow Mount, the chants of the children following them up the hill.

“Hallowe’en, a nicht at e’en,
Three witches on the green,
One black, one white,
One jumping over a dyke.”

Further up the hill, well beyond the path, a little orange column of smoke trickled up between the trees.

“Look there Mary.” said Bobbie, “Can you see the wee fire gaun?”

“Aye.”

“Well, the one burnin’ that fire is the Witch of Lochwinnoch.”

“Is that so?”

“It is Mary. It is. They say she comes down here every seventh Halloween for her own wee black mass.”

“It’s as like to be a farmer out burning leaves.” laughed Mary.

“Aye it could be. It could be right enough. Still...ye’ll huv heard aboot aw the witches doon at Inverkip.”

“Aye. Poor lassies.” Mary shook her head.

“Ye don’t believe in witches?”

“Mebbe there used tae be witches. Mebbe. But everyone knows they girls were killed for their faces didnae fit.”

“That’s as may be. But there are witches Mary. There’s witches around still.”

“Ach Bobbie stop tryin’ tae scare me.”

“Oh ahm no tryin’ tae scare ye. Ahm jist explainin’ the facts o’ the matter. There are still witches. They’re not all bad right enough. There’s a wee wifie down the coast still makes a decent livin’ oot o curin’ folk and tellin’ fortunes. Aye. Good witches, but there’s still plenty bad yins. It wis a grey day in December, naw too long ago, and a cousin of the local landowner wis to be laid tae rest in the family vault. Aw the mourners filed through the kirkyard up tae the crypt, which stood at the top end o’ the cemetery. As they passed an old grave, the turf split and tore and a witch jumped out shrieking. She started tearing at the hair of the lassie nearest her, and clawing at the men who came to her aid. This witch was an auld enemy of the landowner, and had cursed him and all his kin. Damned as she wis, she wisnae gonnae let the funeral pass. The men grabbed her, and tried tae push her back down intae the ground, but she hauled and howled and

whirled. At last aw the men were at her, tryin' tae push her back down tae hell, but she wis haudin on tae the cemetery wall. Pushin as hard as they could, the mourners kept forcing her back down and finally she lost her grip and she fell. And tae this day, if ye go up tae the back wall of the cemetery in Innerkip, ye'll see the five wee holes her gnarled old fingers left in the wa'."

"Is that true Bobbie?"

"Well ah've seen the holes fur maself Mary. As tae the story, well, ah've jist telt you as it wis telt tae me."

Mary stopped to sit by some rocks.

"Ah wonder if aw the girls have found true love at the fire yet."

"Ach they'll be there aw night wi' a list o' different names."

"We used tae do a thing a bit like that. Ye'd thraw a clue of blue yarn intae the kiln, and wind it back tae yerself. As ye've almost wound it aw back, somethin' will haud the thread. Ye pull on it and ask 'Who hauds?' Then, whatever's in the kiln has to tell ye the name of your true love."

"Playin' wi spirits! Ahm surprised at ye Mary."

"Ach nobody ever answered. Naw tae me anyway."

"Ye couldn't huv been askin' the right spirits."

For a time, the two sat in silence, watching the smoke from the hill fire drift in front of the moon.

"Walk me home Bobbie."

There were still a few groups of children wandering around the streets, but now, those little gangs of goloshans were giving way to older gangs of ne'er do wells, already thrown from the pubs and taverns at the far end of the town; they too had their songs and dances to perform, though people were less inclined to enjoy them.

Bobbie walked Mary to her door, and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"Goodnight then." She said.

"Night Mary." Said Bobbie "See ye soon."

Mary climbed the stairs to her house, and quietly opened the door. Everyone seemed to be sleeping, just as she'd hoped. Taking care not to make a sound, she took the comb and the candle from beneath her sheets where she had hidden them. The candle she placed by the looking glass, the comb she held in her left hand. Finally, she took the apple from her pocket. Mary lit the candle and took a bite from the apple Katy had given her. Closing her eyes, Mary slowly combed her hair, starting to feel a little silly. She counted to twenty and could manage no more, she opened her eyes and stared into the mirror. There was no one behind her. More disappointed than she would admit, Mary smiled to herself.

"No true love for me then."

She set the comb to one side and took to her bed, the laughter and songs of the children still echoing around the streets.