

FAERIES, FARMS AND FOLK by Carmel McMurdo Audsley

Chapter 1 (1659)

Weeding out the Devil's Advocates

The widely-opened eyes, set deep into the dour, long, lined face of the minister, burned into the congregation as he stood in the pulpit at Dumfries Kirk in south-west Scotland. He held a bible in his right hand, thrust high for all to see, as his left hand thumped the pulpit.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live – Exodus 22:18," he shouted at the congregation. "And the word of God is further fortified by Roman Law which condemned sorcerers to die by fire.

"By the laws of the Church of Scotland, it is illegal for a witch to live within the vicinity of good, God-fearing people and it is illegal for any member of our congregation to consult a witch. We will not stand for such pagan practices."

Again he thumped the pulpit with his left hand, then placed the bible in front of him. He adjusted the white tie around his neck as the perspiration dripped from his head, and continued.

"There are those among us who are under suspicion of the abominable sin of witchcraft," he said as his eyes surveyed the congregation. "And these sorcerers, charmers and soothsayers have been pointed out to the Church by some of the law-abiding members of our congregation. The full force of the law shall be waged against these evil-doers and they shall be cast from our midst," declared the minister with a flourish of his left hand, his sweat-stained face red with rage.

In the week preceding the minister's sermon, it had come to the attention of the Kirk Session of Dumfries, that ten women were being accused of the heinous sin of witchcraft and must be dealt with without delay. The accusations had been made by their Christian neighbours. Once the charges were reported and considered by the Session, the minister was required to announce to his congregation from the pulpit that all persons with evidence to give against the alleged offenders should report to the Session without delay.

The Kirk Session of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, made up of the minister and appointed elders of the church, was charged with maintaining Christian standards of behaviour in the parish and they took their roles very seriously. The power of the Kirk Session was wide and this group of men took it upon themselves to hunt out fornicators and adulterers and anyone suspected of conducting witchcraft. The Session also oversaw the care of the poor and wretched within the community, but it was the moral welfare of their flock that was their main regard. The minister and church elders often relied upon the reporting of wrongdoings by gossiping neighbours, and punishments in the form of fines and public penitence were doled out in humiliating displays before the whole congregation.

The minister continued. "We know that witchcraft is an abomination against Almighty God and unlawful under the laws of this country. We have among us ten women who are accused variously of meeting with the Devil himself, dancing and taking intoxicating liquor in the wee small hours in the kirkyard, and causing harm and alarm to the God-fearing folk among us."

The minister paused and picked up a piece of paper from the pulpit. Wiping the sweat from his face, he took his round reading glasses from the inside pocket of his black tunic, and peered over them at the congregation as he began to read the names of the accused.

"I charge that the following women will be brought before the court on the second day of April, to be brought to trial. The parish of Dumfries adjudges Agnes Comenes, Janet M'Gowane, Jean Tomson, Margaret Clerk, Janet M'Kendrig, Agnes Clerk, Janet Corsane, Helen Moorhead, Helen Tait and Janet Callon on various and several acts of witchcraft."

After the names were read the church erupted, with men calling for the women to be punished even before a hearing was held, and women speaking in a low hum to each other in that superior way that people affect when they feel power over the afflicted.

"I ask that you pray for the souls of these devil worshippers, and that you will bear witness to their punishment in the usual way. May God go with you," the minister said as he dismissed his flock to go about their business.

The women were brought before the court, and over the following three days they were questioned by eight members of the Session. In order to get the evidence to prove their guilt, the women were deprived of sleep and some began to hallucinate after days without sleep or appropriate food. Some were hung by their thumbs, and lighted candles set to the soles of their feet, while others were forced to wear hair shirts dipped in vinegar to rub off their skin. Those who stood strong and refused to confess to being witches were forced to watch their family members endure the same agonies. It was torture for the women but necessary so far as the members of the Session were concerned, to get the required outcome, so feared were witches in the burgh. It was the church that inflicted these agonies, without apology, and the men of the Kirk Session drank wine while the indictments against the accused were drawn up, before handing over to the magistrates for final disposal.

By the fifth day of April, the Church elders, after due consideration, were satisfied that all but one of the ten accused women were guilty of devilish practices and should receive the severest form of discipline that the Kirk could mete out.

One of the accused, Helen Tait, escaped punishment as the claims against her could not be clearly proven. Before being dismissed, she was required to find the huge sum of 50 pounds sterling before being released on a good behaviour bond and a promise that she would banish herself from the parish. Helen sold all her meagre possessions but did not pay the fine, instead fleeing the parish without leaving a trail behind her. The rumour quickly spread around the village that she had disappeared in a puff of smoke never to be seen or heard from again.

The remaining nine were not so fortunate. The court room was packed with onlookers curious to see the witches, and sympathisers who felt pity for the women. The hum of chatter abated as the trial began. It was a swift affair, and merely a matter of the Kirk Session being seen to do the right thing. All of the nine accused women were convicted of committing the sin of witchcraft against the church and the congregation. They stood together, weak from lack of sleep and food, as their punishment was read out by the magistrate.

"In the Parish of Drumfries, on the fifth day of April, in the year of our Lord 1659, the Commissioner adjudges Agnes Comenes, Janet M'Gowane, Jean Tomson, Margaret Clerk, Janet M'Kendrig, Agnes Clerk, Janet Corsane, Helen Moorhead, and Janet Callon, as found guilty of the several articles of witchcraft mentioned, to be taken upon Wednesday come eight days, to the ordinary place of execution for the burgh of Drumfries, and there, betwixt two and four hours of the afternoon, to be strangled at stakes till they be dead, and thereafter their bodies to be burned to ashes ."

The magistrate paused to take a breath, but continued on without emotion.

"The eight good men who were appointed to question the women - Mr Hugh Henrison, Mr William M'Gore, Mr George Campbell, Mr John Brown, Mr Jo Welsh, Mr George Johnston, Mr William Hay and Mr Gabriel Semple – are ordered to assist the brethren of Dumfries and Galloway, on the day of the execution."

The men of the Kirk Session believed that they were doing God's work and were held in high esteem by the people of the parish. The women, convicted witches but made of flesh and blood, were left starving in rags while they awaited their final, cruel fate.