

Danger on the Hill

‘Run! Run for your lives!’ a young boy screamed. Blood trickled down his face and his breath came in rough gasps as he tried to warn the people in the valley beneath him. The enemy was moments away but nobody heard or took any notice. Again the young boy screamed as he flung himself into the stream and tried to pull himself out the other side. ‘Run, everybody! Run! The soldiers are here!’

At the word *soldiers* they all stopped. As the joyful singing of psalms ceased everyone looked to the preacher and the preacher was silent. Young women clutched at children, old men looked around bemused and then a mother grabbed her child and ran. One by one others did the same. A shot was heard, whistling through the air before the thud as it hit the back of the young boy, desperately clambering out of the stream. He was the first to fall that summer’s afternoon, but he wasn’t the last.

As the first horse cleared the brow of the hill, the preacher stood and watched, horrified at what he saw happening before his eyes. Someone grabbed him from behind and flung him into the stream. A man holding a child stood in the water.

‘I’ve got two bairns here; I can’t carry both. Take one and run!’ And they did.

Others ran too. Women ran with their children to find safety. Old men and women tried to run but couldn’t. They were among the first to die. They were the easiest for the soldiers to pick off. The young people were harder for the soldiers to catch. They ran like deer, sure-footed, fit and fast. But even then some were cornered, helpless prey, and shot where they stood.

Thomas Wilson dragged his two sisters, Margaret and Agnes, away from the gathering to get them out of range of the muskets. The two girls stumbled in the thick, tangled heather. Terror clutched at their throats as they sped past others frantically trying to make their escape. Scrambling up some scree Thomas hid his sisters behind a lichen-covered rock, just big enough for the three of them. The mist seeped down over the hillside, chilling them to the bone. But it meant that at least their part of the mountain was out of vision. The rock was protecting them and the mist was covering them. Thomas felt secure enough to raise his head above the rock edge.

‘Margaret, there are soldiers close by but the mist is still thick enough here to keep you hidden. Lie low and keep quiet and you should be fine. I need to go and find some of the others ...’

Before Margaret could protest at his madness and the dangers involved Thomas had blended into the mist and was gone.

Pale-faced, with tears coursing down their cheeks, the two girls lay there, still and silent. In the distance swords slashed the bodies of young and old and screams echoed round the hill top. Margaret couldn't believe that this was happening in the Parish of Penningame. From the top of the mountain on a clear day you could see the edge of Glenvernock land. Glenvernock: her home. Safety.

'I wish I was there now,' she whispered. 'I want to be home. I want to be safe.'

This was supposed to be a gentle, Scottish farming community in the county of Wigton-shire. Massacres and women screaming – it wasn't supposed to be like this. But now a living nightmare had invaded her community.

As the afternoon drew on the killing continued and then, as dusk came, the soldiers turned, tired of their slaughter, and left the hill. Eventually a woman emerged from behind a high rock, clutching a baby. That afternoon she and others had been there, praying, singing psalms and hearing the word of God – now she was looking for the body of her young son, his last words being, 'Run, everybody! Run! The soldiers are here!'

Margaret, seventeen years old, and Agnes, twelve, stumbled across the woman as they emerged from their hiding-place. Agnes saw her place her baby on the grass and stoop over the body of her dead son. A strangled scream retched out of the woman's throat: 'My son! My son! I would have died for thee.'

The two girls stood, shocked and silent. ‘How do you comfort grief like this?’ Margaret asked herself. Instead she took Agnes’ hand and told her to find Thomas, their brother, while she tended to some of the wounded. As Agnes ran through the heather, Margaret looked at her young sister – alive, not a scratch on her and she was thankful. ‘How could I have gone and faced our parents if anything had happened to her?’

She felt guilty as she stepped around the corpses. She was one of the few that had escaped, untouched. Then she saw Thomas coming towards her holding Agnes firmly around the shoulders.

‘He’s alive,’ was her first thought, and then, ‘what do we do now?’

Agnes asked the same thing, ‘What do we do now, Thomas?’

‘We go home,’ he said quietly.

Margaret nodded her head. There was nothing more to do here. The wounded were being taken home by their families and the dead by mourning relatives. Margaret looked over to where the young boy had lain. A man stood there weeping. The mother, nursing the baby, sat on the rock staring vacantly into the mist.

‘How awful to lose your child,’ murmured Agnes.

‘Yes,’ agreed Thomas. ‘He was their oldest, a son. They have no sons now. Who knows what the future will bring for them?’

Margaret sighed. To lose any child was a tragedy but in the farming community, to lose an only son

meant you lost the future of the family and the farm.

‘What will the future bring for them? For any of us?’ thought Margaret anxiously as they began the slow descent down the hill.