1

Dead Bishop's Castle

I was born in a castle. Hugh Douglas, Laird of Longniddry, was my father, and the only home I had known was the Douglas ancestral keep. Yet it makes too free with veracity to call it a castle. It was not a proper castle, one queens and fine ladies strut about within. In truth, it was a damp, smelly, crumbling fortified house, more akin to a vertical stone casket than a lavishly appointed bishop's castle.

Now, in late April 1547, I found myself—for good or ill—hemmed in by the fortifications of St. Andrews Castle, a proper castle, a veritable palace bedecked for a bishop, now a dead bishop. Much of the luxury of the place, so it seemed, had died with him. Cowering behind the crenellation that day, I mentally attempted to calculate the thickness and stoutness of the stones that made up the dead bishop's battlements facing the town. I breathed shallow so as to avoid the full force of the pinching odors of amassed humanity that hung palpably in the air.

The town rumbled with activity: shouting men, bawling oxen straining at their carts laden with timber and stone and with

victuals for the soldiers, laden with spades and barrows, and with other things as well—cannons, barrels of gunpowder, ball, shot, and the like—ordnance, I'd heard it termed. Above all, there were the shouts and cries of men. My shallow breathing, in truth, came less from the stench and far more from gnawing anxiety at the deadly preparations surrounding me and St. Andrews Castle.

With a shudder, I turned my back on the cacophony and eased myself away from the scene. Crossing the paving stones of the inner court of the castle, I mounted a narrow stairway that led up to the battlements of the dead bishop's castle jutting into the North Sea.

As I climbed, I tried to avert my eyes from the blackened stones of the blockhouse that contained the bottle dungeon. My abhorrence for enclosed places sent a shudder down my frame. The place was a veritable hellhole, a constricting cavern into which condemned prisoners were lowered on a rope; there they crouched amongst the putrid filth of former occupants, surrounded by the foul scratching and gnawing of rats to await the rack or the stake. For Mr. Wishart, as I had often heard, it had been the stake.

I broke into a run on the last few treads, leaving the dungeon behind me. Through a notch in the wall, I squinted into the distance where the gray water met the gray skyline. I'd heard talk that the Queen Regent had petitioned the French to send their navy, thereby hemming us in by both land and sea.

Since first hearing of her scheme, I often studied that horizon, my mind troubled. But as with other days, I saw no ships bearing toward St. Andrews in the grayness—not today. Perhaps they would not come. Navies were in much demand these days, so I had been told. Perhaps the French were occupied with busting down other castles, too busy for St. Andrews.

Inching my feet forward and steadying myself with my hands against the stone battlements, I eased closer to the edge. With my eyes clamped shut, I breathed in the salty air and listened to the foamy shying of the surf. I felt a lurching of my insides as I forced my eyes open and looked down the castle wall directly into the sea. My fingernails clawed the stone edge. A gull hovered in the breeze above me, wings spread wide in flight but going nowhere. It mocked me with its screeching. Far below, and surrounding three sides of the castle, the frigid North Sea pummeled the walls. In the backwater of that pummeling, the sea churned like boiling tar in a vast caldron. My stomach did much the same.

"George!"

For an instant my heart halted—so it seemed—and then thundered back to life. I nearly sank to my knees in fright.

"George, where've you been?" asked my brother. "And do be tending of your eyeballs, lad. They're a-bulging out of your head again. I swear, one of these days you'll be making them so wide and gogglee they'll come a-popping out of your sockets like when farmer McAllister is wringing the necks of his chickens and—"

I'd heard this all before and cut him off. "Francis, if you do that sort of thing again, I'll end up tottering clean over the battlements and splitting my crown on them rocks. And if there's anything left of me, I'll be drowned and battered in the sea. It'll be all your doing, brother."

"And eaten by a haddock," he added, clapping me on the back in what he intended to be a good-natured gesture, but one that I felt nearly launched me over the wall. "You're always fretting yourself, George. Eyes goggling out of your head. That's your problem."

There was no denying what he said. For weeks now I had felt myself in a perpetual state of fretfulness.

"Now, you must come along with me," he continued. "Master Knox'll be expecting us in the chapel for our lessons."

"There's time," I said.

"Which is what you always say," said Francis. "Which is why you're always late."

"I'll not be late."

This being besieged was all a game to my brother Francis and Alexander Cockburn, our childhood friend and fellow student. To me it was no game. Dutifully, I began following him down the narrow stone stairs.

"Why did they do it?" I blurted after him.

Francis stopped and turned slowly toward me. He heaved a sigh. "If you don't ken the answer to that, you've gone daft. 'Why did they do it?' you ask. They did it because fornicating Cardinal Beaton was a monster. His vows of chastity notwithstanding, his holiness fathered no less than seven bastard offspring. If anyone in God's universe had it coming to him, Beaton did. That's why they did it."

"Who counted?"

He scowled and shook his head. "Counted what?"

"His . . . well, his offspring?"

"Brother, there you've gone and clean missed the point again," he said.

"But it was murder," I persisted. "They murdered the man. And if they hadn't done it we wouldn't be trapped in this castle awaiting the cannons of the Queen Regent to smash it to rubbish—and us with it."

He held up his hand, eyes blinking rapidly, the expression of the longsuffering elder brother coming over his face. "Now,

George, there's many a thing about this world that you, tender of years that you be, have not the slightest notion of. 'Murder,' you call it? Well, then, do you call it murder when a man orders the hanging of four husbands and fathers, whose only crime was eating a haggis during Lent? And there's public record of what I'm telling you, you always wanting proof of everything. Beaton did it January 26, 1544, in . . . in Perth, I believe it was. Do you term that 'murder,' I'd like to know? Or do you call it 'murder' when an adulterous bishop arrests a fair young mother, wife of one of the hanged men and, by his holiness's order, has her drowned in the river? Do you call that 'murder'?"

"Beaton did that?" I said. "Why would he do that to the woman? There must be another side to the tale, Francis. Always is."

"Aye, that there is. Beaton ordered her drowned because in her labor pains with her new bairn she prayed to God in the sweet name of Jesus."

"Aye, and what's so wrong about all that?"

"The drowning?" Francis looked at me like I was offspring of a haddock.

"No, the praying. What was so wrong with it?"

"Have you a mincemeat for a brain, George? There's times I wonder at you. You're supposed to do your praying in the name of the Holy Virgin, not in the mere name of Jesus Christ. So says his holiness, Cardinal Beaton, Archbishop of St. Andrews—or as was. And still would be if James Melville and the others had not broken into this castle and ended the miserable life of Cardinal Beaton. It's he, dear brother, who is the murderer."

"So, since he was a murderer," I said, "that makes it acceptable for them to murder him?"

"It's no murdering of him," said Francis, all longsuffering gone. "It's justice. Plain and simple justice. That's what I call it. And have you gone and forgotten what he did to saintly George Wishart?"

I knew. It was often spoken of in these besieged walls.

"While you doddle," said Francis, "I'm off to the chapel. Don't you be late."

I watched Francis until he disappeared behind a stone buttress. Master Knox himself had told us of what happened to Mr. Wishart. So important was it to him, he'd made it part of our lessons. It was January 16, 1546, when Mr. Wishart told our father, Hugh Douglas, and Master Knox of the shortness of the time he had to labor, and of his death, the day whereof he had said was approaching nearer than any would believe. Master Knox had admitted his bewilderment, and he told us how he stood off and observed the anguish of his troubled mentor. By all accounts, our tutor had for a time been wielding a broadsword and had been acting the part of a bodyguard for the preacher. Beaton and others wanted the man dead, had even hired assassins to do the deed. Yet knowing all this, Mr. Wishart demanded the claymore from Master Knox, and when he had it from him, he held comfortable conversation on the death of God's chosen children. Always a man of the Psalms, the preacher then sang a version of Psalm 51 with his followers, expressing his desire that God would be granting all of them quiet rest. And then, amidst loud protests from them all, he sent the men away from him. Master Knox told us of his great reluctance to leave the man's side. But Mr. Wishart was not to be put off, and said, "Nay, return to your bairns, and God bless you. One is sufficient for a sacrifice."

We were those bairns, my brother Francis Douglas and my own self, along with Alexander Cockburn. Alexander's father was arrested some time after Mr. Wishart and held for a time in Edinburgh Castle.

Master Knox did return to us at Longniddry—for a time, schooling us in our Latin grammar. At times in his lessons, he broke off, some hapless Latin verb suspended in its conjugation, he stroking his beard and gazing out the window in silence. We knew it was his way of being anxious about the fate of his friend Mr. Wishart. Meanwhile, in those days it was not only Latin grammar Master Knox taught us. He became most animated in his lessons when he turned to the Evangel of Jesus Christ. That's what he called it, the Evangel.

Master Knox's lessons in the Gospels fairly made my mouth water. And I was not alone. Word spread, and folks from the village took to sitting under the windows so as to listen in on his explanations of the Gospel writer, and when all was damp and dreary, they'd make their way quietly into the hall where we read our lessons.

At long last, word of the fate of Mr. Wishart arrived at Longniddry. I'll not soon forget the anguished sobs of our master when that word was made known to us.

By all accounts, it was near midnight when Beaton's foul agent, the Earl of Bothwell, busted in Wishart's door and dragged him off to the infamous Bottle Dungeon in St. Andrews Castle. In the days that followed, the bastard Cardinal tried, convicted, and condemned Mr. Wishart to death by burning. Worried that supporters might attempt to rescue him at the stake, Beaton ordered armed guards to encircle the place of execution, and he charged his cannons with grapeshot and readied them from the

battlements to unleash their fury on the crowd should it become unruly at the burning. Then Beaton—it was so like the luxury-loving fool—made himself comfortable, watching the cruel spectacle from a window in his boudoir, hung with rich hangings and velvet cushions.

Master Knox was not there, as I've related, he dutifully schooling us in Longniddry. But we learned copious details of the foul deed. So loved was Mr. Wishart that eyewitness accounts proliferated throughout the realm. There was talk of little else. The story went like this. As the hangman chained the condemned man to the stake, Wishart said, "For this cause I was sent, that I should suffer this fire for Christ's sake. I fear not this fire. And I pray that you may not fear them that slay the body, but have no power to slay the soul." Then, the account goes, Wishart turned and kissed his executioner. "Lo, here is a token that I forgive thee. Do thine office." Just before Wishart expired in the flames, he turned to where Beaton reclined in the window and prophesied his soon-coming downfall. It was March 1, 1546.

As I've related, Beaton was a great fool. Wishart, who had preached throughout Scotland, and who was greatly loved throughout the realm, was now dead at the hands of a man who was now more than ever greatly damned and hated throughout the realm. What happened next, to any sane man, was as inevitable as rain drenching the moors in November.

From where I then stood musing to myself, I could just see the arch of the postern gate of the castle. That gate became the key to a scheme James Melville and several other noblemen's sons concocted to break into the castle. They knew from Beaton's philandering ways that one of his mistresses, Marion Ogilvy it was that night, would be let out the postern gate in the early hours

of the morning. So it was, May 29, 1546, that they surprised the porter at the gate and entered the bishop's stronghold. Moments later, they burst into the bedchamber of the reclining Beaton. "I am a priest!" he's said to have cried. "You will not slay me!" That did nothing to cool the rage of James Melville, who called on Beaton to repent of slaying Wishart, and after calling him an obstinate enemy against Jesus Christ, ran him through with his sword. Beaton's dying words were, "I am a priest. All is gone."

If the peasants throughout the realm took the side of Wishart and rejoiced at the downfall of Beaton, Roman clerics and the Queen Regent gnashed their teeth in their determination to crush the rising. In the midst of the tension, I had heard locals in Longniddry render their homespun prophesy, "Master George Wishart spoke never so plainly and yet he was burnt: even so will John Knox be." Master Knox had been a known follower of Wishart; what's more, he had publically gripped his broadsword in the man's defense. It was impossible for those who wielded the power in the realm not to connect our tutor with the martyred preacher.

With the henchmen of the Regent at our heels, Master Knox made good his escape from their grasp by fleeing Longniddry and taking to the heather. We rarely slept in the same bed twice—I say bed, but we more often slept like beasts in holes in the ground or cradled in the heather, the rain drenching us more than one night, and we only slept dry indoors when now and then a crofter took pity upon us and invited us to huddle about his peat fire and share his humble broth. Eventually at the urging of my father, who was himself equally a fugitive, Master Knox made his way here, joining the handful of young men who, for the moment, held St. Andrews Castle.