



# MIDNIGHT AWAKENING

(June 3, 1679)

*"Suffering for Truth's sake*

*Is fortitude to highest victory,*

*And to the faithful, Death, the Gate of Life."*

*—John Milton, Paradise Lost, Book XII*

Angus M'Kethe lay on the chaff-filled contours of his bed vigorously working the muscles of his face in a series of silent contortions. Opening his mouth and eyes as wide as he could, then clamping shut his mouth and squinting his eyes tightly closed, he stretched the muscles of his forehead and cheeks until his skin felt like it would split apart.

A hint of silvery moonlight filtered through the narrow window of his corner in the family croft, and by it Angus could just make out the shadowy undersides of the rafters and heather thatch of the roof. A rustling noise came from up there, and he watched the moonlight glint on a stray bit of falling thatch and on a puff of dust drifting down from the

roof. His mother hated those rats that persistently scratched and gnawed above them, and no amount of determination on his family's part could get rid of the vermin. There had been one time when the rats left: thirteen years ago when King Charles's commander Dalziel burned their Galloway croft to the ground. The rats left then. So did Angus's family, fleeing for their lives north to the lonely moors of Ayrshire near the village of Newmilns, where they now lived.

Angus listened to the steady breathing coming from where his mother and father slept nearby, and he thought he heard his sister Jennie's calm breath—but he could never quite tell with Jennie.

Last night, when he desperately needed sleep, he could not sleep, he remembered ruefully. Tonight, when he needed to stay awake, he could barely keep his eyes open. Things were like that sometimes, he thought with a sigh, and returned to his contortions. This time he tried twisting his lips at grotesque angles, and then holding them until his lips felt like they might tear.

Sweat broke out on his forehead. Was that tearing a wee bit of what a condemned prisoner felt when the king's executioner in Glasgow laid him out on the rack and stretched until every creaking joint popped under the strain? With a shudder, he once again returned to his face-twisting contortions.

Moments later, he felt creeping over him that familiar expanding in his throat and mouth. He yawned, a great stretching yawn complete with a gleeking in the back of his throat. Part of him just wanted to give up, roll over, and go to sleep. A muscle in his cheek began an involuntary twitching, and he let his face relax . . . not all the way . . . and just for a moment.

*Tap, tap.*

Angus lay still. Through the oblivion of sleep, his breath now came in steady in-and-out draws.

*Tap, tap, tap!*

The last tap had that insistent tone that even slumber could not fully ignore. Angus's eyes popped open, and like a flood, he remembered all. His older brother Duncan had ordered him that afternoon to not let himself go to sleep, and to stand ready and alert until midnight. He would say no more. But it was clear from his brother's face that this was no childhood game. Duncan, eleven years older than Angus, was a grown man with wife and child. He was too old now for this to be some mere adventure for its own sake. What's more, Angus had seen in Duncan's steady gaze that whatever the mission was, his brother was dead earnest about it.

As silently as he could manage, Angus rolled onto his side and put his face to the narrow bit of rippled glass at the window. On the other side of the glass, he could just make out staring fiercely back at him his brother's eyes set deeply beneath a brow furrowed by irritation. Duncan held his dirk, its tip poised at the window for one last try at rousing his younger brother.

With his mouth set in a thin line, and a fixed, why-did-I-plan-to-bring-you-along look in his eyes, Duncan jerked his head sideways toward the door.

Angus silently wrapped his wool plaid around his shoulders, gathered his bow, and crept out of the croft.

"Och, then, Angus," said Duncan, halting in the shadows moments later when they had left the three M'Kethe crofts far enough behind them not to be heard. "Ye slept."

Duncan carried his musket, and Angus caught the gleam of moonlight on the basket hilt of his brother's claymore sheathed at his hip. And a brace of pistols stuck out of Duncan's wide leather belt.

"Aye, but if ye'd told me what we were going to be doing," said Angus, his eyes still surveying his brother's array of weapons, "I might have stayed awake for kenning of it."

“Ye’ll ken soon enough,” said Duncan. “Now, if ye’ll just be carrying this,” he added, handing Angus a spade and a coil of rope.

With that Duncan turned and set his steps down the moor toward the Irvine valley and the village of Newmilns. With a shrug and stifling a yawn, Angus slung the rope over his shoulder and followed.

“Where’s Paton?” whispered Angus, looking back at the croft. Since just after the Battle of Rullion Green, long years ago, Duncan’s black-and-white dog did all it could to never let its master out of its sight.

“Inside,” replied Duncan shortly. “Now keep close, and stay silent.”

Only two days ago, Angus along with Duncan and their father and brother-in-law, Jamie, had fought for Crown and Covenant at Drumclog, and God had scattered their enemies—Claverhouse and his murdering dragoons—before them. With the news of that victory all Scotland held its breath; it was as if the very air was alive with foreboding. Like never before men walked about with one hand on their claymore and the other fingering the trigger of their musket. The conflict was far from over.

King Charles in London was more determined than ever to crush in his maw Scotland’s Covenanted religion, and to bring the foul “plague of Presbyterianism” under his absolute control. After all, to control the church was to control the realm. So, to Charles, Drumclog represented only a minor setback in his plans. What’s more, he took smug pleasure in the thought that he now had even greater reasons to enact more severe measures on the Lowland rebels. Of course, as king, by divine right, he had no notion of needing *reasons* for any of his policies. Nevertheless, Drumclog would silence his Puritan critics. The Covenanter rebels had arranged their own exter-

mination, and the king was eager to set in motion the crushing reparations they deserved for what he had dubbed their “rendezvous of rebellion” at Drumclog.

For Angus, the events of Drumclog and his real part in the battle were never far out of his mind. The day after the battle he had felt a thrill at taking part, at actually doing something for the faithful minister Mr. King, who would have surely died without Angus. But he hadn't slept well last night. Sights and sounds haunted his memory: the wide horrified eyes as a claymore descended; the pleading screams of pain and terror; the mosshags littered with the grotesque remains of battle. When he thought of these things, the battle made him imagine what hell must be like. Mostly he felt a haunting sickness in the pit of his stomach and a deep longing for it all to be over.

The moon cast silvery shadows across the rolling folds of the moor, making Angus think of great sleeping giants—and he and Duncan making their way by stealth up and over the great heather-blanketed mounds. An owl rose with a haunting scream from the stretching branch of a sycamore tree. When Angus's heart settled back to normal, he thought of the screeching caws of Flinch his crow that lived in the dovecote with the pigeons. Somehow, over time Angus had managed to organize the bird's coarse raspings into words. He watched the great shadowy wings of the owl as it disappeared into the night.

Angus breathed in the misty night air scented by lush meadow grass and tens of thousands of tiny purple blooms of spring heather and seasoned by the rooty smells of peat and sod. As he moved, he watched glimmers of whiteness from the moonlight winking in the many bog pools scattered about the moor. He felt a swelling in his chest as he soaked in the midnight beauty and the quiet that lay all about him. If only it could always be like this. A silver-white streak of light in the

sky caught the corner of his eye but was gone by the time he looked directly at the place. In the darker part of the sky farthest from the cool orb of the moon, stars glittered and shone, and as he looked, it seemed that layer upon layer of brilliant starlight rose higher and farther into the deepness of the night sky beyond him. The swelling in his chest grew, and he felt a longing rising in his being, a longing deeper and more persistent than boyish hunger after a winter-day's tramp on the moor. Without realizing it, Angus no longer followed his brother. He stood stock still, and without actually meaning to, he found himself counting lines of meter and reciting softly to himself:

The heavens God's high glory tell,  
And lift my mind from earth and hell  
To thoughts divine and longings high—  
What peace, what wonder fills the sky!

"Aangus!" his brother hissed.

Like one jolted awake from a dream, Angus broke off and stared blankly in the direction of his brother's voice. Duncan spun on his heel and strode back to his brother.

"Angus, ye cannae stand here goggling away at the stars while we've got important work to be at." He paused, and his tone softened as he continued. "Now, come along, then. And do stay close."

"Sorry," said Angus, shaking himself and taking in a deep breath.

No sooner had they resumed walking than from back up the moor behind them, they both heard a sound.

"What was that?" whispered Angus, fully alert now and heart racing.

"Fall to the shadows!" hissed Duncan, and he and Angus

dropped flat on the moor and slithered into the heather. They lay rigid, their ears straining to catch the sound and identify it. Nighttime was rarely plundering and killing time for the king's dragoons, but one could never be too cautious. The sound came again.

"Sounds like a lamb bleating for its mother," whispered Angus.

"Sounds more like a suckling pig squealing to raise the dead," hissed Duncan in Angus's ear. "Listen!"

There it was again, clearer and more distinct this time.

"If it's a young pig," hissed Angus, "it's one, Brother, that kens yer name."

Off in the distance, but drawing closer, there was no mistaking the call now.

"Father Duncan! Uncle Angus!" came a terrified, high-pitched, eight-year-old cry.

"Och, and it kens yers, too," said Duncan. "He'll wake all the king's men in the shire with that racket. Malcolm, hush, lad," called Duncan into the darkness. "Now come this way, in silence."

"Father, is that ye?" the boy's voice quavered.

"Aye, lad. But, what are ye doing out of yer bed, then?" said Duncan, rising from the heather and taking up eight-year-old Malcolm in his arms. "Ye're shaking like a leaf, lad."

"I-I'm most glad ye're not a boggle, Father," he said in a tearful attempt at reassuring himself.

"There, now, lad. Yer uncle and I are no boggles. But what are ye doing out on the moor in the middle of the night? And a-shaking so? The moor at night's no place for a bairn—especially in times such as these. Och, and ye need yer sleep."

"Can I c-come with ye, Father?" stammered Malcolm, his plea muffled by the back of his hand making its way back and forth across his nose.

Duncan frowned and said nothing for a moment.

"P-please?" said Malcolm, pitifully.

"Lad, we're on an important mission, that . . . well," said Duncan, his voice trailing off as he stroked his son's wildly red locks, "well, it's not for wee ones to see."

Angus looked at his brother Duncan. What *were* they about to do?

Malcolm sucked in his breath, and even in the dim moonlight, Angus could see his little chest swell and a fierce set harden in his blue eyes.

"I'm no wee one, Father," said Malcolm. "And I'd close my eyes when ye said," he continued pleadingly.

Duncan looked back up the moor toward the M'Kethe ferm-toun, then down the valley toward Newmilns. He seemed to be weighing the time they would lose taking Malcolm home before continuing. He heaved a resigned sigh.

"Come along, then," he said, ruffling Malcolm's hair. "But ye must make no noise."

"Aye, Father. I'll make not a sound. And I do thank ye for letting me come."

"Aye, then," said Duncan, leading the way down the valley, Malcolm falling in behind his father and Angus taking up the rear.

Malcolm muffled a giggle that seemed to skidder gleefully down his whole body. "We'll have some adventure, then. And where, Father, did ye say we were off to?"

"I didnae say," said Duncan shortly.

"Aye, then," continued Malcolm, undaunted. "Aye, it doesnae really matter, then, being as how we're going there together, then. And, Uncle Angus, maybe ye'll be stringing yer bow and shooting more enemies of the Kirk tonight. And if it comes to claymores, well, Father, ye'll run 'em all through to the hilts. I ken ye will. He's good with the claymore, almost



as good as Grandfather. And while Father slashes with his claymore, Uncle, ye can shoot more arrows. And I'll, well, I'll— But don't hit Father. That'd be terrible if in battle ye hit one of yer own men. I wonder if that ever happens? But ye'd never do it, Uncle, I ken that. When I get bigger I'm going to be good with the claymore and with the bow. That is, Uncle, if ye'd be teaching me. Och, it sure is dark outside, even with the moon. Do ye think bloody Claver'll lose his command for getting defeated at Drumclog? Wouldnae it be just what he deserves to muck out the stables. Och, it's too bad about his horse getting killed in the battle. I wonder if there could be a rule where ye couldnae be running the horses through with pikes. It's not really their battle, then, is it? I'd be for making the rule: no more killing the horses. Mind ye, I'm glad we defeated him; it's just too bad about the horse. And I wish I could hae seen Clavers, running scared all the way to Glasgow. Father, can we get some horses? I'd like a big brown one with—”

“Mal-c<sup>o</sup>lm,” said Duncan, halting and leaning over so he could look his son full in his wide merry eyes. “Be silent! Och, lad. Ye said ye'd not make a sound. But ye've gone on for these five minutes and been making a whole string of sounds, hardly stopping long enough for breathing. No sound, indeed! And all full of very little sense, lad. Now, be silent. ”

“Aye, Father,” said the boy. “I'll be silent. I was only thinking of a horse—a brown one. Uncle, do ye like brown ones better or—”

“Silence!” hissed his father.

Angus covered his mouth with his hand and tried to smother the rising impulse to laugh.

“Now, the village lays just across the river,” continued Duncan, crouching low and studying the silent cottages rising in dark thatched rows.

The spire of the church stood out above the cottages, but the hard stone tower of Loudoun Keep rose still higher and broader, its crenellated ramparts looking like a gaping mouth with broad grinding teeth. Something about that ancient keep made Angus go cold inside. He fingered his bow nervously. Maybe it was the cruel reputation of Captain Inglis, commander of the dragoons garrisoned at the keep, and of his son Peter Inglis; they modeled their brand of soldiering after ruthless Turner and bloody Claverhouse.

“When do we attack?” cried Malcolm, wriggling with pent-up excitement and flailing the air with his arms.

“What?” said Duncan, looking incredulously at his son.

“When do we attack?” repeated Malcolm, his eyes flashing and his face screwed into a pudgy eight-year-old fierceness. “I’m ready, I am.”

“Malcolm, ye weary me with yer nonsense,” said Duncan shortly. “We’re not here to attack anyone.”

“Aye, but what *are* we here to do?” asked Angus. “Isnae it time ye let me in on the secret?”

“We’re here,” said Duncan, in a tone almost too faint to hear, “to bury an old friend.”