

THE HOUSE WHERE IT HAPPENED

PROLOGUE

Islandmagee, County Antrim, Ireland.

Tuesday, January 13th, 1641

From Maud Tweed to Frazer Tweed, Pall Mall, London.

My dearest husband,

I pray God you have not already heard of the violence which took place on Islandmagee two nights ago, for I know you would be consumed with worry about all of us here. I write to set your mind at rest that neither I nor our beloved children were caught up in the Fever which swept through the island. Indeed, Fever is the only way to describe the madness which has taken hold of the place, turning neighbour against neighbour and causing many to follow where Peter led – renouncing those they once knew well.

My nerves are all of a-twitch, my ears strained from listening for sounds (in relation to what, I scarcely dare to imagine), and I have not slept more than brief snatches these past three days.

Rumours abound: it is difficult to separate the truth from wild fancies. Yet the truth is already Dreadfull Enough without embroidery stitched over its face. However, there will always be those who seek to exaggerate what is gruesome enough in its own right. Anyhow, my dearest, I cling to the hope that the storm has now passed.

The first inkling we had about something afoot came on Saturday, when our good friend inside Carrickfergus Castle sent word advising the household to stay indoors during the coming days.

He was quite explicit, and more than a little Alarming. On no account were we to stir abroad if we valued our lives. He urged that the livestock be brought into the barn, all doors and casements bolted, and no callers admitted, under any circumstances, even if they were friends and neighbours

we knew and relied on. TRUST NONE, he said, underlining those two words so heavily that the page was ripped. Unsettled though I was by his counsel, I was swift to follow it. For as you are only too well aware, we have been quaking over reports of the most shocking atrocities carried out by the Irish against our people in other parts of Ulster. Their abominable rebellion proves them to be the Savages we always suspected they were.

As soon as I read the communication from the Castle, I made sure to keep close by me at all times, primed and loaded, the musket you left for our protection when you were forced to travel far from home during these Incendiary Times. (A journey that went sorely against your inclination, Frazer, as I know right well.) Do not be alarmed, for we are all safe – despite the madness that has gripped Islandmagee.

And now I must tell you what I witnessed, though I have to confess to doubting my memory when I go to set down these events. As you know, the entire region has been in a state of agitation for months but we convinced ourselves it might pass us by, here in our small patch of Heaven on Earth. It was not to be. Still, I must hold fast to the belief that what happened has acted as a fire does, cleansing and purifying.

But back to that Sunday (can it only be two short days ago?) when the GATES OF HELL opened before my eyes. All day long I felt considerable unease. In part, it was because of the message from the Castle, grateful though I was to be forewarned. And in part it was because we were trapped inside our home, and Islandmagee, which had always seemed to embrace us, took on a more sinister hue. The children were restless, begging to go outside to play. I hardened my heart and refused every plea, and for most of the day we sat quietly in the parlour, while I read aloud from the Bible. I made the three of them memorize a passage from Isaiah (“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand”) and, as I tested them on it, I confess my powers of concentration were woefully impaired.

When night fell, my disquiet did not diminish. I took the musket to bed with me, wishing you were by my side instead of this half-yard of cold metal, but determined to protect our home and our chicks as you would have done. Eventually I fell into a troubled sleep, strange shapes flitting through my slumbers, until a Fearfull Clamour woke me. Without stopping to light a candle, I raced to the window, where the moonlight spread its timid light over a scene of Utter Havoc. A handful of yards from our door, a scramble of people were being swept along in a great jumble of panic and confusion. I watched, not quite comprehending what was before my eyes, until all at once I understood they were being chased. No sooner had this realization overtaken me than I saw it was all women and children in flight. Most of the women had babies in their arms, and some also carried a tiny passenger on their backs, while the bigger children clung to their mothers' skirts and tripped along at their heels.

Behind them was a band of foot soldiers with axes and broadswords in their hands. A few more were on horseback, officers I presume, who appeared to be holding back their mounts to stay with the body of men. Such whoops and filthy oaths issued from them that I wanted to stop my ears. They howled at the women, telling them to get ready to meet their master the Devil. There must have been at least twenty women, possibly more, and each of them appeared to have at least one or more small children. Burdened though they were, the women were outrunning the soldiers. Strange to say, no noise came from the hunted that I could hear, though they must have been panting from their exertions. I wonder if the mothers were too intent on escape, the children too terrified even to cry?

I lifted your spyglass to continue observing their progress, and as I put it to my eye I saw a small boy trip and lose his grip on his mother's skirt. His was the first child's voice I heard raised.

"Mammy! Mammy!" he called. The wind snatched up the Pitifull Bleat and blew it back to me. She twisted her head, searching for her offspring as she was propelled forward, and shouted out a name – I think it may have been Owen. But the poor woman was caught fast in the charge and could not turn back. The boy, who can have been no more than three or four years, was knocked

to the ground in the stampede, and as he lay there a pair of mounted soldiers came upon him. To my horror, they made no effort to avoid the child. Frazer, he was trampled underfoot. His soft little body must have been ripped into ribbons beneath their horses' hooves.

Now the Gobbins Cliffs were reached. There was nowhere left for the runners to go. Sea stretched before them, soldiers behind. The pursued pulled up short, huddling at the brink. A sound came at last from the women. You could not call it a wail because this noise was not human. It was the moan an animal makes when it is caught in a trap, and can find no way out short of gnawing off its own leg. If I live to be a hundred, I hope never to hear such a cry again.

I continued watching: afraid to keep looking, and just as afraid to turn away. Moonlight glinted off the unsheathed blades of the soldiers, and bounced off the faces of the women and children as they turned to face their hunters. A few, not many, fell to their knees. I saw one supplicant hauled back to her feet by a companion. Hands cradling small heads, they gathered their children closer to them. And waited.

Even as I go to write what happened next, I can hardly bring myself to frame the words. I shudder to think such a scene could be played out in our beloved Islandmagee, this Bed of Roses transformed before my disbelieving eyes into a Crown of Thorns. I know the soldiers were our own troops, charged with defending our lives and our holdings in the name of His Gracious Majesty King Charles, and these people they hunted down were our enemies. Yet what I saw will Haunt me for as long as I live.

The women and children stood at bay. A pause seemed to hang there, and I had enough time to notice the pursuers outnumbered their prey by more than two to one. Having cornered them, the soldiers were hesitant about their next step. "Remember, this is God's work! God and the King's!" shouted one of the men on horseback – I suppose he must have been their captain. "Time to finish what we started!" called another. And the soldiers advanced.

[Fragment of letter ends here. The Tweed Letters are held in the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, Northern Ireland – part of a collection relating to the 1641-2 rebellion in Ulster.]

“The Devil came to me and bid me serve him.” Tituba, a black slave hanged as a witch at Salem in 1692.

Chapter 1

It poured fit to need the Ark again when Mary Dunbar came among us.

The night before she arrived, I woke ahead of daybreak. I wasn't given to fancies, but something unsettled me, and I lit a candle stub to keep the shadows in their place, though the mistress would have scolded about waste if she caught me. It wasn't the rain or wind that alarmed me. I slept in the loft, and the elements were closer to you there – many's the night you heard a creaking through the beams, as if a giant saw was cutting through the roof. I was used to any racket the weather could make. When a maid-of-all-work finally gets to her bed, nothing stands between her and sleep. My ma said it was God's reward for honest labour, and told me I was lucky to have a room – when she was a servant she slept on the kitchen floor.

I daresay it was the night whimsies disturbing me, and no wonder after the upset we had all winter long. A death in the house can go hard on those left living in it, especially when it's a slow passing. Old Mistress Haltridge wasn't long in her grave and had made no easy end of it. We were all of us still on edge.

Peggy McGregor, the cook, snored in bed beside me. Comforted by the candlelight, I lay listening to the storm, and to Peggy's whistles and groans. But then I fell to fretting about my monthly courses, and what would happen if they did not come. I counted. They were overdue by three weeks now, and I was trying not to dwell on it, because I heard it said that watching for the blood only served to hold it back. But it was hard not to worry.

The rooster clearing his throat in the yard below brought my duties to mind. There was a visitor expected that day, and a guest would mean extra work. I was no lady's maid, but I would have to

lend a hand with Mary Dunbar, brushing her clothes and fetching her hot water and so forth. Not that I minded too much. It made a change from the everyday. Besides, it might cheer us up to have company. The house had been cloaked in gloom since the death of my master's mother, with the bairns scurrying from one corner to another like nervous wee mice, hoping nobody would notice them. We were too quiet here now: the stream of callers trotting in and out to see the old dame, as if every day was market day, had dried up. Some called us a household in mourning, but that's not the right of it.

We were a household on edge. Watchful for what might follow.

Christian woman though she was, old Mistress Haltridge's death proved a vexing business. It should have been a relief, finally, when she breathed her last. Everybody wanted to believe her passing would bring the troubles to a halt. But something crackled in the air of Knowehead House still. Something bent on mischief.

The rooster crowed again and I had to set aside my fears for myself, as well as for the goings-on at Knowehead. Downstairs to the kitchen I took myself. I always liked early morning, before my bones ached and folk pulled me this way and that, wanting the sun, moon and stars from me. Oftentimes I would dawdle over a sup of milk, yawning and stretching to my heart's content.

Waiting for the day to reveal itself.

But I had no liking for what it revealed this day.

At first, I failed to spot it. I went to the larder for the milk, and then I opened the top of the kitchen half-door a splinter, rain or no rain, to let in a breath of air. It was only when I crossed to the fireplace to see if there was any life left in the embers that I found it. A big, blue-black crow lay in the ashes. Dead as last summer. It had come down the chimney in the night, and must have been done for before it landed, because it stayed where it fell. Its feathers were singed by its resting place, but it wasn't the burnt reek that bothered me. No, what gave me the dry heaves was them two eyes like beads. Wide open and full of wickedness. But I breathed deep, stretched out my hand and lifted the bird by its scaly feet. Then I ran outside to dump it on the midden heap before

anyone else saw the trespasser and made a fuss about omens. We had enough to put up with at Knowehead, never mind dead crows setting tongues wagging.

Knowehead House is on Islandmagee, a wheen of miles – fifteen or thereabouts – from Carrickfergus. The island is tucked into the north-east coast of Ireland, in the county of Antrim, and a nicer, more fertile wee nook you'd be hard pushed to find. It has been a God-fearing place since the Scotch folk settled it, these hundred years and more. What was papist, and pagan before that, was put aside. Everything was made tidy, with ditches between fields so you knowed what was what and whose. Aye, the planters were bent on taming wildness.

Yet something dark stirred on Islandmagee towards the heel-end of 1710, like an animal nosing out of its winter sleep. And by these early weeks of 1711, evil was abroad. Happenings to make you shiver were gathering pace. An old sheepdog, soft as butter, turned savage for no reason and attacked the Orrs' baby, leaving its life hanging by a thread. Another time, the sky turned dim and a black circle crawled across the sun, blocking its light. All that was left was a fiery ring round the outside. The darkness slid away after some minutes, but not before causing terror far and wide, with folk sinking to their knees and wailing about the end of the world. Even after it passed, all were certain it would bring down bad luck.

Worst of all were the whispers about Hamilton Lock being spotted again, walking about at night as though he was lord and master of the island – though by rights he should have been turned to dust some forty-five years ago. If ever a man ought to be keeping the demons busy, piling on the faggots, Hamilton Lock was him.

If the ghost of Hamilton Lock was abroad, folk agreed misfortune would surely follow, for there never was a man born of woman to match him in wickedness. From the stories you'd hear, he was a fellow could trick his way into the New Jerusalem and make merry mayhem among the saved. Anybody that clapped eyes on him always saw him near-hand to Knowehead House. One of the elders who called over to pray with the old mistress spied him by our barn, called out his name – and was thrown by his mount as soon as the words left his lips.

No two ways about it, it was ill-starred for Knowehead House that such a fiend should pitch up to mock and frighten us, just as the old dame turned feverish and took to screeching all manner of ungodly things. It left folk thinking he had some hold over her. Especially as strange things began taking place at Knowehead at the same time.

Belongings went missing, disappearing for days before turning up in the rarest places. I found wee Sarah's rag doll at the bottom of the turf basket, and the key for winding my master's tall clock in a pitcher of milk. When I cut into an apple tart, what should be inside but one of the mistress's shoe buckles? Before long, the hens stopped laying and we had to send out for eggs, while my master's greyhounds refused to come into the house – even with bones to tempt them.

Then there was the day Peggy McGregor found a hoof-mark outside the front door, sunk deep in the earth as if meant to act as a warning. Soon after, wee Sarah said she could hear feet on the roof at night, dancing a jig to fiddle music. Another time, her brother Jamesey insisted he saw a black dog with a long red tongue at the casement. The young master swore it spoke to him in a man's voice, asking him to slip out and follow him. The childer took to refusing to kiss their grandmother goodnight, as had been their habit – they said whispers came from a big wooden chest in her bedchamber.

Your head would be noddled trying to follow what was going on. The best you could do was say your prayers and mean them, and sleep two or more to a bed. And, during it all, old Mistress Haltridge was raving away, saying evil had returned to Islandmagee.

But maybes the evil was there all along, biding its time. Looking for folk to use.

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I was twelve when I went to live at Knowehead House as maid to the Haltridges, with plenty to keep me going from sun-up to sunset. My master was James Haltridge, Gentleman, born on the island same as myself, and he loved it the way I do though both his parents were reared in

Scotland. My life has been commonplace, but my master was well-travelled. He visited lands where he conversed with men whose faces were as black as boot leather and as red as roof-tiles. He saw bears baited by a pack of dogs, and oxen roasted whole on a river wider than the length of Islandmagee, turned entirely to ice. He was chased on the high seas by French privateers, aye, and outran them, too. But for all those sights, he said there was nowhere on earth to match Islandmagee with its braes and its burns. “It burrows into your heart and spoils you for anywhere else,” he said oftentimes. I don’t seek to make a paradise of it, but I have to agree with him.

Mind you, every paradise has its serpent.

The mistress never cared for the place. Maybes Knowehead never took to her, nor her to the house. It can be hard on a woman to leave her people and live among strangers when she weds. What was happening inside her own four walls made her nervous, forbye. She stopped feeling safe in bed at night, especially when my master was away from home. That winter he was oftentimes in Scotland, trying to smooth over a legal dispute in the family involving an inheritance. It meant the mistress had most of the burden of the old dame’s illness, and she became a tricky patient to manage as her fancies took hold.

Old Mistress Haltridge took to screeching that Knowehead should be tumbled down, stone by stone – once, she even leaped out of bed and tore at the plaster on the walls till her fingers bled. That was odd, for a woman who used to say in the whole of her health, “Don’t think me boastful, but Knowehead House is surely one of the finest properties on the island.”

Nobody could argue with that. It was built for my master’s father when he was minister here in the parish of Kilcoan More. I always loved how the road curved away just in front of Knowehead, pushing uphill, inviting you to catch your breath and notice how everything belonging to it was as neat as a new pin. Looking back, you saw a long, thatched house with lime-washed stone walls, rising two floors high, when only a few here were built to such a height. Trees planted near-hand gave shelter, and every year blackbirds nested in them – it did the heart a power of good to see them wee scaldies with their wide-open beaks. One of the trees

always gave a fair crop of apples, and many's the tart we filled with them.

We had a dairy and a hen coop, as well as stabling for the horses, while at the far end of the yard stood a barn. The piggery and cow byre were on the downward slope, on account of the smell and mess. Dirt never bothered me, nor my master. The mistress was town-bred though, and never accepted the way the hens had the run of the yard. The notions she took would put a duchess to shame.

We ate well in Knowehead. The land looked after you if you looked after the land. The Scotch settlers believed in working it, and the new folk were busier than the Irish they replaced. They ploughed and dug. They pulled rocks out of the yellow soil and gathered seaweed to use as manure on the potato crop. They fattened and enriched the fields so there was no need to let them lie fallow. "God helps those who help themselves," said the planters. But the Irish called them cuckoos, and every now and again tried to shake them out of their nests. Except the Scotch weren't for being pushed out. They built sturdy nests, and defended them with arms – aye, and with soldiers from Carrickfergus Castle.

Some might say Knowehead could have been fancier, but I say it was a house built for living in rather than admiring. Rooms were added on as my master prospered. It was a solid, practical place, fit for purpose and serviceable, like a gown that gives years of wear and takes kindly to patching. The mistress was right about Knowehead, all the same. There was something other about the house. I noticed it the first time ever I set foot in it. Once in a while, it could give you a feeling – as if something was there, just out of the corner of your eye. A movement, quick as a fish through water. And your heart would skip in your chest. It was a house made up not of doors and floors alone. That's the best way I can explain it. You'd have to stand inside Knowehead and breathe it in to understand what I'm trying to put across.

"I'd sooner go to the poorhouse than spend a night in Knowehead," my friend Mercy Hunter said every now and again. It never stopped her accepting gifts from old Mistress Haltridge, though, to pass on to her mother – like warm stockings the good dame knitted, though her fingers ached from

holding the needles, and a blanket handed over with a blessing one bitter winter. Many's the one had the benefit of her kindness about these parts.

I stood up for Knowehead when anybody passed remarks about it. All the same, I knowed something was not quite right. The place was twisty somehow, like the horns you see on the odd cow.

But it was a manageable twisty. Till Mary Dunbar landed in on top of us. She was a beauty, and beauty causes a disturbance. It brings disorder, despite seeming orderly to the eye. There was something twisty about her, daisy-fresh though she was.

The reason Mary Dunbar came among us was because my master was obliged to make another trip, and felt guilty about leaving his lady yet again. Mary Dunbar was cousin to the mistress, and would keep her company. My master was a merchant, part-owner of a schooner that traded between Ireland and Barbados. Since he was a Presbyterian, he could not earn his living from the law, nor from any government position such as the courts or the excise office. And whether he attended it or not, he had to pay tithes to the established Church. As he said himself, you might just as well be a papist, except you'd be damned in the afterlife.

Word came that a shipment of sugar, delayed by ill winds, had docked at last, and he needed to go to the Custom House in Dublin to see about selling on the cargo. But my master could see his lady was having a time of it, between nursing his mother and trying to hold her head high against the gossip – not that he ever allowed there was anything in it. He was blind about what went on at Knowehead House but he could not fail to notice how jumpy the mistress had become. He insisted it was lack of sleep from nursing his mother that made his lady give way to imaginings. But that wasn't it at all. Her nerves were in ribbons from what she witnessed in the house.

I saw some of the same things myself and they couldn't easily be explained. It was near-impossible to keep a candle lit by old Mistress Haltridge's bedside because something kept snuffing them out. And at times, when you sat with her, you'd hear footsteps in the yard below, circling the house. A man's footsteps, heavy and purposeful. But there was never anybody there. I never clapped eyes

on ghost or demon – I could not have stayed in service with the Haltridges if I did. But there was definitely a shadow in her bedchamber that took the shape of a man, though if you looked hard it melted away.

Towards the end, the old dame kept up a caterwauling that would make a body's ears bleed. One night, from dusk till dawn, she called on the Devil by all his names: Satan, Beelzebub, Lucifer, Anti-Christ, Fallen Angel. When my master was told, he made out she was railing against the Devil, but Peggy McGregor and I were agreed it sounded more like she was calling on him.

My master could pretend all he liked – and he would never accept there was anything untoward at Knowehead – but the strain took its toll on the household. I daresay he was just as upset as his wife, but at least he was able to saddle up his horse and leave everything behind. The mistress was tied to the house. And the household's habits were turned throughother, between the doctor calling every second day, the neighbours in and out like Jack-in-the-boxes, and the minister and elders spending a good deal of time under our roof praying over the old dame – all of them needing to be fed.

His lady was at the end of her tether, so my master came up with the notion of inviting Mary Dunbar to leave her parents' home in Armagh and visit with us in Islandmagee.

“You can't ask someone to be a guest in a household where death might knock on the door any day,” said the mistress. “Your mother could take her last breath this very night.”

“Who knows God's design, Isabel? And you need a companion. No harm in sending an invitation – you often speak of Mary.”

Ten years lay between the cousins, but they were on friendly terms before the mistress married my master. Back then, before the Dunbars moved away, they lived near-hand to one another in Belfast. As a wee mite, Mary Dunbar used to follow the mistress about, and she made a pet of her. My master had only met her once, and scarcely knew the young lady.

It was on Candlemas Day that the mistress sat down at her writing desk to ask if Mary might pay a visit. I recall it clearly: the weather was sunny, and I thought I'd get a head-start on the cleaning.

“This is shapin’ up to be the best day in months, mistress. I’ve a good mind to put the beddin’ on a bush to air, and have a go at beatin’ out the rugs.”

“Mind you don’t disturb your master’s mother, Ellen. She’s asleep now after another restless night. I could do nothing to pacify her.”

“I’ll work well away from her side of the house. But it would be a shame not to take advantage of the sunshine, even if there’s no heat to it.”

“Do as you like, I cannot direct you. I have my household accounts to tally, and a letter to send by Noah Spears to Port Davy if it’s to make the post. Money goes nowhere these days. It’s scandalous it will cost me thruppence to get word to Aunt Dunbar.” She straightened her cap and wiped a mark from her skirts. Fierce particular about her appearance, was the mistress.

“Never you worry about me, mistress. I’ll look about for what needs doin’. A day like this is a gift from the Almighty and it’s a sin to waste it.”

“I’d rather see it dull, today of all days. ‘If Candlemas Day be fair and bright, winter will have another flight.’ That means it’s bound to turn wintry again. The old sayings have the right of it.”

The mistress was always looking for causes to be unhappy. She was never one to see the good in anything. She whinged about all the time my master spent away from home on business, without being grateful for the presents brought back for her – he never returned without a trinket in his knapsack. I remember a pair of buttercup-yellow stockings – silk, if you don’t mind. Worsted ones weren’t fancy enough for her. No wonder the minister spoke to her about the sin of vanity. She was the most prideful woman on Islandmagee.

It gave the mistress a lift when her aunt answered by return of post. She was excited enough to read it out to my master, not noticing I was there, polishing the furniture with beeswax, the smell making my head light.

“Listen, James, Aunt Dunbar writes she can spare my cousin right willingly: ‘The change of scene is exactly what Mary needs after being cooped up all winter. Your uncle and I have been racking our brains for some place we could send her to take her out of herself. We worry about her being

too much alone and prey to her thoughts. An only child can be somewhat isolated. It goes hardest on sensitive girls such as our Mary – their fancies seem to take shape more readily. However, I feel confident the fresh air and company on Islandmagee will do her a world of good. Your invitation is a godsend.’ Do you think we might be able to keep her till after Easter, James?”

“She might stay for good if we find her a husband, sweetheart. And that should be no trouble if she takes after your side of the family.”

“I know you’re anxious to attend to business. Will you still be here when she arrives?”

“It depends on Mother. What kind of son would I be, to go haring off to Dublin and risk missing her last words? I’ll just have to be patient. It’s only twice in our lives we’re obliged to wait around:

the first time for birth and the second for death. I can spare my mother a few more days. The poor soul is agitated enough without me taking off, and causing more distress. These visions of hers are the rarest thing – I never knew the like of them. I daresay if my father was alive he could find the words to put her mind at rest. But I can’t seem to make her understand she’s safe here in Knowehead. I’m afeared she’s not in her right mind at all. You know, only the other day she begged me to take her away from here.”

“I heard her. James, would you not think of humouring her? She must have her reasons.”

“I’m surprised at you, Isabel. She’s not well enough to travel. Besides, Knowehead House is where she belongs. It’s where we all belong.”

“But if it’s causing her agitation. If she sees things that unsettle her . . .”

“It’s all in her mind. I’ll hear no more on the subject.”

Aye, he could order his lady silent, but he couldn’t force his mother to stay quiet. Only the night before, the old mistress had roused herself to cry, “The Haltridges are being punished! It willnae stop at me. There’s a curse on this family. It will hang over us till there isnae a Haltridge left on Islandmagee!”

“What are we being punished for?” asked the young mistress, but my master stepped in and started spooning a potion into his mother, before answer could be made.

I thought the old dame would resist, and force him to listen to her, but by then she was spent. She fell back on the pillows, her strength used up.

Old Mistress Haltridge died on the 8th day of February, and as soon as ever she was in her grave my master started making arrangements to leave. Don't think him cold-blooded – he loved his mother, his eyes were red-rimmed at the funeral. But time and tide wait for no man. “It's the living I need to consider now,” he told his friend Frazer Tweed.