

## **FINGERLESS WILL NIXON**

In the early morning of March 5, in the year 1508, the crystal-clear sky was lit up by thousands of stars after months of chilly, drizzling winter rain.

Will Nixon stood up on the straw tick he had been asleep on, brushed a lock of fiery red hair from his sleepy green eyes and, with his long legs still bare, stepped over his two sleeping younger brothers, shivered, and reached to open the shutters.

No wonder it was so cold. His faithful dog must have heard something and let himself out. The shutters stood wide open. He saw the stars shining in the clear sky and that was what he needed to know. He pulled them shut.

It was a few hours before sunrise, but Will wanted to be gone before everyone woke up and disrupted his plans for the day. He silently dragged his clothes to the kitchen table and threw them in a pile. He stopped to enjoy the sharp, slightly cheesy smell of the wooden table.

Oftentimes the food was simply dumped on the top and everyone helped themselves, either with the knives they all carried with them, or with their hands and fingers.

He sorted his clothes: trousers, nightshirt, pullover shirt, wool cloak, shoes, wool stockings, hat, and his bedroll since he may not be back for a few days.

He cut a huge chunk of cheese and one of cooked beef and stuffed it in his saddle bags. For a welcome change, there was no wind whistling through the shutters or whining down the chimney.

All was eerily quiet except for the occasional splatter, sizzle, splat in the fireplace.

Yesterday, Will had nabbed one of the ganders, cut its head off, got it ready to smoke, put it into the metal basket, and hung it in the top of the chimney. The goose fat drippings landing on the embers made for a most tantalizing smell, making him think for a moment he should stay home, but the day could not be wasted. There were so few clear days in Scotland's springs of cold, rain, and drizzle that he had to venture out today.

While he dressed, he wondered where his dog was. It was not like that pooch to nuzzle the shutter open and leave a warm bed.

As he pulled his knee-length shirt over his head and donned his woolen, quilted vest, a quiet little mouse ran across the cupboard checking the crocks that held the barley, cheese, butter, and yesterday's beef. Already, the house cat's eyes gleamed from the corner of the fireplace as he contemplated a breakfast of tasty fresh mouse.

The cunning little mouse knew the cat was staring at him and held still, contemplating where he might dart off to avoid its coming attack. Will thought about the drama that was about to play out between the two, the predator and the prey.

He considered this: The mouse was cunning and intelligent and knew well how to best avoid the coming strike. The cat, on the other hand, was well-armed with teeth and claws. He held his lethal weaponry, now sheathed in soft paws, but ready in a split second to pounce and sink them into what it saw as an unsuspecting victim. Were Will part of this play, he knew he would much prefer to play the part of the cat, except for, he chuckled to himself, "If the cat be successful, I would rather eat me good porridge than a raw mouse!"

He dressed, picked up his knife in its stringed sheath and put it around his neck, gathered his bag, and was filling it with enough beef, bread, and cheese for two days when he felt a subtle change in the shadows emanating from the glow of the coals in the fireplace. He had a sudden eerie sense that he was being watched.

In the shadow of the opening to his parent's sleeping room stood a white shift with a formless face hidden in the dark. He had that old familiar feeling that he had been caught. His plan to leave, or better still, escape before anyone was awake, was about to be foiled.

His mother, ever alert, stepped out of the gloom and sizing him up with keen green eyes, the same emerald color as Will's, said, "I kenned ye were about to leave in the middle of the night when I saw ye drink four dippers of water last night!"

"And how would ye ken that, Mum?" Will asked, as he continued to busy himself.

She countered, her single braid—her hair glowing in the firelight, still showing the streaks of burnished copper that had crowned her youth through its now ever-increasing gray, "Because ye would have to rise and drain your water or ye would be like a bloated cow if ye slept the night through! So, what are ye up to and where are ye goin'?"

Will wanted to disappear but he knew she deserved an explanation. She was worried because Will, at age eighteen, was her stability, now that her husband, William the Elder, had been seriously injured, some weeks back, on a raid into the English territory.

It had happened as he was crossing the Line River. His horse stumbled on a rock and fell on top of William's left leg, leaving it badly broken. He now lay in the sleeping room, his leg stretched on a board and wrapped with twine, but he remained in great pain as the black blood in his veins angrily snaked up his leg.

Poultices would occasionally beat back the black blood, but then the infection would appear again, as it had with a vengeance yesterday. He had been bedridden for weeks since the accident and Morgianna feared for his life.

With all she had to worry about, and now Will was sneaking off somewhere into the Cheviot Mountains.... her eyes brimmed with unbidden tears.

Will tried to console her. He told her he was only going into the hills to look for good pasture where there could be enough stone to

build a house on land that no one else had yet claimed. It had the opposite effect.

Morgianna was stricken with the fear that she would not only lose her oldest son to a new location, but that she would also lose her security which now depended upon Will, who was the assumed head of the household since his father's disability. She made a lame demand.

"Will, ye need to care for the cows. They need milking and the haystacks need coverin' before the rain comes again."

Will said, "Mum, Jock and Geordie can do that. I'll only be gone a trifle, maybe two days at the most."

She knew the younger boys could easily take over these small tasks, and that her argument was lost.

She had a good reason to be afraid should something happen to Will. With William the Elder lying helpless with a broken leg and the infection in his veins, she was overcome with the need to keep Will from leaving the family in danger. She had seen the black blood in broken men before, and knew no good ever came of it.

She dare not let Will leave. And now, here he was, going to look for a place so far from her to build a house of his own. The thought filled her with terror.

Och, but she must try not to seem desperate. That would drive him away for sure. And maybe he would change his mind with gentle prodding. After all, there were so many places close by to build a fine house, if that was what he felt he needed to do. But he was so head- strong, and she knew there was no stopping him from leaving this morning. And maybe, it really would be only for a couple of days like he said.

Will opened the door looking for his dog. His unusual absence concerned Will, and he brushed away the worry, knowing Dog was probably fine, maybe just out chasing a hare? It was still dark, with a damp chill in the early March air, but any frost left in the ground was gone. The thaw brought the smell of goose shite and the sharp odor of spilled wet oats and barley on the stone steps of the house, heralding the early spring season.

Still no dog! Morgianna called Will back to the house and gave him his father's long leather boots. "If yer plannin' to be gone to the Cheviot Hills and stayin' overnight, ye'll be needin' a blanket so ye won't be catchin' the grippe like ye did three winter's back, and try to die on us again of the fever. I have enough to worry about with your da. And use yer head when ye cross the river. Ye know how it can be ragin' this time of the year." Will nodded and picked her up in a bear hug, a gesture so typical of the Scots, and told her not to worry.

He pulled on the boots, picked up his saddlebags and blanket, and went to the lean-to barn where his beloved, sturdy, little, chestnut-colored horse was waiting and ready for the saddle. Finally, a burst of fur and four- legged excitement caught Will's attention as the welcome sight of his dog, now twisting in delighted circles, told Will that something was up, at least in the collie's mind! And the dog assuredly knew something that Will did not.

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In the still dark of early morning, a man huddled on the hill overlooking the little village. He was warming himself in the thin heat of a tiny fire. His blanket was tied to a tree to conceal the fire, so no one in the sleeping town could tell he was watching; watching the town, watching for movement that might disrupt the mission he and his men were on. His horse was tied out of sight, back in a copse of nearby trees. As the man watched the town, a small, black border collie had been intently, motionlessly watching the man. The man and his gang had been up to no good in the little town of Gilnockie on the Scottish side of the English border where Will and his family dwelled. The man was watching to be certain the town remained sleeping until his gang was far enough away. And the little dog continued, at length, watching the stranger, until, with his dog's keen sense of hearing, his lippy ears stood, as he picked up the prolonged squeak of the opening

of a familiar door down in the village. He pricked his ears once again, and then, forgetting his curiosity over the stranger, he turned with a need to see his master that far outweighed his inquisitiveness, and ran back to where he had come from. His only desire now was to greet the opener of the door, whom he knew would be Will. The man, catching a glimpse of the dog, decided it was time to go before the village came to life and discovered what had happened. The starlit sky was bright enough for the watcher to saddle up, put out his small fire, and catch up with the others.

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Will walked his horse out of the lean-to into the paddock. The gate was open. There was enough light to see that all the cattle were out of the corral. This was strange. How had this happened? Stranger still, another

gate was open further down the stone fence and that corral, too, had been emptied of cows.

The dog was frantic, wanting Will to follow him up the hill. Once at the top, it was plain to see that someone, probably more than one someone, had been there just a short time ago. A quick look at the tracks and it was clear that there had been horses among the cattle. But...? No one rustled cattle in the spring! It was always done in the early fall after the crops were harvested, the cows fattened, the calves half grown, and after much of the fall butchering was done; but yet, every half winter-starved cow was gone, and along with them the lifeblood of the Nixon's and for that matter, that of all of the borderland Scots, whose diet was mostly beef. No cattle meant certain looming hunger and even possible starvation for the Nixon family.

The fresh trail was easy enough to follow in the dawn's light. The many tracks were headed toward a shallow crossing. There were no bridges to cross on the Line River on the way to the English border.

Whoever had taken the cattle was in a big hurry and they were pushing the animals hard. So hard, that soon Will came across the sorry sight of a cow mother, dead in mid-birth, the calf half emerged and dead, as well. This caught the little collie's interest and Will had to spend precious time coaxing his friend away from the carcasses.

The muddy trail was easy to follow. It led through a gently rolling pasture with sheep scattered everywhere. The collie, instinctively appalled by the disarray of the fluffy, four-legged creatures, felt an obligation to herd them back to the flock.

Will, searched briefly and spied the shepherd in charge, himself draped in a warm sheepskin cape and very much irritated by the collie's efforts, and threatening the dog with his staff. Will, trying to engage the man, quickly realized the poor shepherd was a halfwit, and attempted to calm the excited fellow down. He tried to get the shepherd to understand he needed his help, but the man could speak only in guttural grunts. No

use! Will whistled for his dog, who was still busy trying to herd sheep back to where he was convinced they belonged. More wasted time!

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It was now well into the short afternoon of early March, and it was still five miles to the Line River! Will had begun to wonder what he would do if he caught sight of the cattle thieves and decided that if he did, he would follow at a distance, as long as there was light on these short, March days. He knew they had a big head start, but driving cattle was far slower than one man on a horse, and Will knew he would most likely catch up to them. Will's dog was the first to get to the river crossing. Instead of plunging into the water as was his usual behavior, he stayed on the edge, running and looking back and forth, trying to send signals to Will to beware of what lurked on the other side of the bank. Will, ignoring his dog's efforts, walked his horse up to the river's edge. The horse was as skittish as the dog. Will carefully scanned the other bank but could see nothing amiss. He could tell by the once highly churned, now settling mud of the river bottom, that the cattle were already gone.

He pondered going back for help, but as happened on occasion, his impulses got the best of him and overwhelmed his reason. He spurred his horse into the shallows, onto the opposite bank of the river.

From their well-hidden position, seven horsemen poured out from the trees on both sides of Will, surrounding him. His horse tried to bolt but was hemmed in, surrounded, with nowhere to go.

Will's dog sniffed. He recognized and growled at the man who had been the watcher on the hill earlier in the day.

One rider reached over, grabbed Will's hair, and pulled him off his horse. Will hit the ground between all the horses' pounding hooves, pushed his way through, and pulled out his knife waving it at his snickering assailants.