

MATHILDA GLENDENNING

Once on the deer trail, there was enough light from the setting sun and a rising moon to follow the trail where it might lead. The late evening of early spring brought a cold chill to the air. Will had no clothes except for the bloody, wet shirt the rustling villains had not taken. To keep warm, he leaned forward and hugged the horse's neck absorbing the needed heat from its large body.

After what seemed like hours on the trail, Will was so cold he stopped, dismounted, took the saddle off the tired horse, and dropped it on the ground. He wished his faithful friend were still with him and that he could curl up under his warm fur, as he often did on cold nights in the cottage. But he would now have to depend upon the saddleless horse for the heat he needed to live through this cold, cloudless, March night.

The horse began acting skittish, nickering and tossing his head, stamping his feet, and turning in half circles. Will took a tight grip on the reins. Then, he heard a noisy rustle from behind them. What, he wondered, was making the horse so agitated? His heart began to beat faster, and his senses prickled. Something or someone was crashing through the quiet of night, coming on fast. He was so sorry he had removed the saddle. He was set to make a run for it, this time leaving the horse behind to deflect whatever was coming at him, be it man, bear, or wild boar--when he heard a familiar lone yip. It approached, wagging its tail so hard, it seemed to be the force spinning his furry, black body in circles. It was Will's lost friend, and his heart slowed as it thrilled to see his little dog in good shape and in good spirits. Will spent some time hugging his dog. And the little fellow lapped at Will's face, as both joyed in the pleasure and warmth they gave to each other. They reveled in each other's company for a short time, until both felt the need to move on. Then, Will, begrudgingly decided to leave the beautiful saddle behind in exchange for the horse's body heat, mounted, and hugged its neck, using its warmth to stay alive on what had become a clear, starry, bitterly cold night in March on the Scottish borderlands.

After riding this way for a short time, the trail began to widen and, in a few minutes, Will came to a clearing. In the moonlight, a frost-covered, enclosed pasture with stone wall fencing began to appear. Will got a whiff of the slightly acrid odor of oak smoke from a fireplace and at the smell his stomach clenched and growled as it reminded him, he had not eaten since early morning. After a few minutes, a small stone cottage loomed up in the dark.

He was so cold. He threw caution to the wind and approached the welcoming yellow flickering light coming from around the vellum that shrouded the windows against the frosty night. He tied the steed to the hitching post, went to the door, and tapped as soft a knock as he could, so as not to bring alarm to the owner. He waited a few moments, then knocked a bit harder as he tried to hide the bloody part of his long shirt, which hung almost to his knees, should someone come to the door.

A rough voice behind the door demanded, "Who's there and what's yer business in the middle of the night?"

Will answered, "Me name is Will Nixon the younger from the fork in the Esk and Line Rivers. If I could warm meself by yer fire fer a wee bit, then I'll be on me way."

The voice from behind the door asked, "Are ye armed, and are ye alone?"

Will answered, "Nay, I be not armed but I have with me, me horse and me dog."

The latch clicked and the bolt was removed. The door creaked open enough for Will to feel the warmth pour out. The man on the other side of the door took one look at the tall, elegant horse and asked in an astonished voice, "Where did ye get a horse like that? Did ye steal it from the English? Is that why ye have blood on yer shirt? And where are your trousers and shoes?"

Before Will could explain, the door slammed shut. A squabble erupted behind the door. Then it opened again, and a snippy, young bit of a girl appeared and questioned, "Are ye William Nixon's kin? Ye look a bit like old William. If ye are, ye are welcome here!"

Then her da piped in and asked, "Is someone chasing ye and lookin' fer that horse? Cause if they are..." The girl wielded some kind of authority and told her father to give him a chance to explain his strange appearance this late in the night.

Will told them his family's cattle had been stolen, and when he'd caught up with the reivers on the Line River, he was ambushed. It was easy to see he had been injured, as his hand still dripped with blood. The girl could see his distress and cut her father's complaints off in midsentence, and asked again if anyone was following him. She had to be sure, or she would have to send him away for the safety of her family and their stock. Will assured her the reivers who had attacked him had all moved on with the cattle and a fancy lord. Besides, no one in their right mind would try to plow their way through that deer trail in the dark!

She could see he was freezing and let him in the house.

Will said, "I'm so grateful to ye fer letting me into your warm home. If I can warm meself just a wee bit, I'll then be on me way."

She interrupted, "From the looks of yer shirt, and what's left of yer hand, ye had better stay the night, Will Nixon!"

Her father had a scowl on his face but gave in, as Will suspected he most often did to his forceful daughter--and, by the looks of things, the only girl. Will assumed she was the oldest of the four children.

He found himself staring at her. Her fresh beauty nearly took his breath from his body. He looked away as, horrified, he felt the blood rising to his face reddening his cheeks. To avoid her catching him in this blush, he turned his attention to the three younger boys who stood looking on, their mouths agape and their eyes bulging, looking at Will's bloody hand with its finger dangling and his bloodied shirt.

He smiled at their freckled, curious faces. They were just the distraction he needed to keep what little he had left of his dignity.

He was escorted by the girl to the fireplace, and after warming himself for a minute he said, "I must go outside and tend to the horse. If ye 'ave a bit of rope I might use to hobble its legs so it di'not run off, I can take the bridle off and the bit from its mouth. Yer grass is covered with frost and should slake the creature's thirst."

She said, "Will, ye'll not get very fer tryin' to hobble a horse with yer finger hangin' off yer hand and sportin' a couple of bloody stumps, such as it is! Johnny, put yer coat on and go help him. Put a leg on it and then get back inside. It's cold out there, and you could catch the grippe and die a horrible death."

The two took care of the horse and hurried in, only to come face to face with the girl holding a pair of trousers.

"Here! Put these on so ye do'na look like a fool traipsing around half naked."

Will wondered how such a bonnie wee creature, such as she was, could be so bossy, abrupt, and demanding, and could still end a sentence with a bit of ridiculous nonsense like, "Catch the grippe and die a horrible death."

While Will was putting the oversized pants on, she reappeared with another threat. Winking at her younger brother, she told Will, “I’m goin’ to take me knife and cut the rest of yer finger off, and then I’m goin’ to feed it to me cat. So ye just hold tight and put yer trousers on, and we can get to it!”

Will was sure this was the bossiest girl he had ever met. There was no doubt about who ruled the roost in this cottage!

Will, suspecting he was even more fond of his finger than the cat might be, said, “Could ye tell me yer name before ye turn me finger into cat food?”

He thought he heard a little huff when she put the knife she had in her hand back in its sheath, put her hands on her hips, and said, “Me name is Mathilda, but everyone calls me Mattie, Mattie Glendenning. So look the other way if you do’na want to watch while I take care of yer hand.” Will said, “If ye please, will ye kindly not feed me remains to the cat, since there is no doubt, that finger surely belongs to me, and I do have a plan fer it.”

Mattie rolled her eyes, pulled the knife from the sheath that hung round her neck, cut the dangling finger loose, and handed it to Will. Will grimaced, but did not cry out. The girl then wrapped his bleeding hand with some clean rags. Through his pain, Will wondered at the warmth he felt flowing into his body as she held his hand and bandaged his wounds.

She asked him when he last had anything to eat. He told her how his horse, and his knapsack and food along with it, had fallen into the hands of the reivers.

She brought him a piece of bread and some barley mush from the kettle near the fireplace. She shooed her nosey brothers and father to bed.

It was late, and she showed Will where he should sleep. She gestured to a corner in the cabin by the closed door and said, “There was a calf borned too early, and this is where we kept it until it died. I think this be a fresh pile of straw where ye can sleep tonight.”

Then, off she went up the ladder to the sleeping loft. Will could smell that it wasn’t fresh straw, but it was soft, warm, and dry, and after almost freezing to death, it felt as close to heaven as Will could imagine, at least at this moment. While curled up, waiting for sleep to settle upon him, he began to realize something was missing in this house. There was no sign of a mother.

Will was up long before the morning sun cleared the treetops. He opened the cottage door as quietly as he could. His dog--named Dog-- was already waiting on the steps, ears pricked and tail wagging, in eager anticipation of Will's arrival. The two went looking for the horse.

Will found the animal not too far from the cottage, grazing contentedly. He was satisfied it had not wandered off in the night. On his way back to the house, he noticed some neatly piled rocks on the top of a small rise a few hundred yards from the cottage. Curious, he walked up the hill. At the head of the neatly piled stones was a post with a board nailed to it.

Carved into the board in simple but careful letters was the inscription:

MARY GLENDENNING/BORN IN THE YEAR 1470/DIED 1505.

So, this is where the mother was laid to rest.

He immediately thought of his father with his shattered leg and the black blood in his veins. He couldn't put it out of his mind. He needed to ready himself to go home.

His dog was acting strangely--alert, and staring intently at the western horizon, looking back and forth between that and Will.

As the sun broke over the horizon, Will now could see three riders coming his way. He was certain it was the return of the English reivers who had taken his fingers, come back to claim the horse--and Will's life!

He ran to the barn, his heart pounding, grabbed a pitchfork, and readied himself. "No!" He decided it was more important to hide the horse. It was probably the horse they would be looking for, and he needed to be sure none of these hooligans would know it was there. He was not only worried for himself. He knew the Glendennings would also surely suffer should the horse be found. He ran to look behind the barn where he had last seen the beast, but the animal had wandered its way over the rise and out of sight.

All right then! The horse is obscured for the moment. Now...they are so close...I must quickly hide meself in the barn, thought Will as he made to run and secure himself.

The collie growled and stood his ground. Then the little guy visibly relaxed and began wagging his tail and spinning around in circles. Excited, he ran toward the riders.

The riders were Will's neighbors and cousins, the Crosiers... "Well, look what we found wandering around the Glendennings! Did ye get lost trailin' yer cows and wound up here?" queried one of the cutups, who were many among the Crosiers.

Will quipped back, "I might ask ye loafers the same question! Did ye lose that near mile-wide trail left by me cows last night and end up here, lost...again? There bein' only eighty-some cows millin' about, tearin' up the ground on that cattle drive, 'tain't no wonder ye lost the trail!"

"Naw, Willy boy," said his cousin and best friend, Robbie Crosier, "we first ran into a dead cow and half-birthed calf which some of the lads are carving up for supper tonight. The whole village mounted up this morning, including yer old granda. His witchy-looking wife, yer grandmam, was gonna beat him with a broom for goin'. Ye Should'a seen it, Will. It was sooo funny!"

Will chuckled at the thought of his grandmam and said, "She been doin' that since as far back as I can remember! And still tis' a funny sight to see, I ken that!"

Robbie continued, "They was all headed to the river, so we was just comin this way to see if the Glendenning's, too, mighta' lost any cattle. And guess what we found? YE yerself, Will Nixon, and yer mongrel dog!

And, by the way, did ye just get done butchering a hog? By the looks a ye, ye seem to have found some way to make a bloody mess outa yer shirt. And did ye rob them pants offun' some fat bugger? And, yer looking pale as a ghost to boot!"

"Well," said Will, "I seem to have got meself ambushed at the river crossin' while I was single-handed huntin' me cattle and now, I seem to be a bit single-handed fer sure. I did get meself chopped up a bit."

Will held up his wounded hand showing the boys the now-bloody wrap that swathed his painful, amputated fingers.

The Crosiers winced as Robbie grimaced and said, "Och, ye look a mess, laddy. How bad is it? Let's have a look-see."

Will carefully un- wrapped the bandage, flinching each time he peeled the pieces of rag that were stuck to his now-drying blood.

Robbie, flinching each time Will did, said in an accusingly sympathetic tone, "Laddy, that looks so bad! Why did ye not come fer us to help ye? What were ye thinkin', tryin' to go it alone?"