

THOUGH HELL SHOULD BAR THE WAY

by

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Mist...

Mist it was, insubstantial and barely seen. The mist rose above a mound of weedy, winter-blighted grass, hesitating beside the iron-barred fence. Inside lay the kirkyard proper, hallowed ground where headstones bore mute testimony that this one or that had once lived, once loved...once died..

Mist it was. Wispy-white in the light of the silver crescent Moon, incorporeal as smoke. Feeble, drifting Awareness awakened. The Awareness struggled to survive, to grow stronger, to Know.

What am I? How and why did I come here?

The mist moved, in response to a barely sensed need. It flowed onto a ribbon of moon-washed road, gaining strength, coherence, identity...

I am...I...was. Was. Dead now, but was...I must...

Must what?

Unknown. Despite the cold, brutal wind that assaulted it, the mist thickened, steadied. Now it had Substance.

It? No, not "it." She had substance.

Knowing her sex brought a moment of pride, and included a vision of herself. A woman, wearing a rust-colored dress, white apron. Long black hair, wound with a red ribbon...a ribbon tied in a love-knot as crimson as blood.

Memory supplied a face. Large, coal-dark eyes, strong jaw. There was beauty, yes, tempered and honed by strength, and by love...

The cold ribbon of road led her, drifting over frozen slush bearing the marks of hooves and wagon wheels, to a town. She knew, somehow, that she should know it. Here, a baker's shop, closed and still, about which the aroma of bread still clung. There, a tavern that serviced the garrison that topped the hill.

Baker. Tavern. I know these things. I. Know.

The building by the tavern drew her. No sign, only a candle guttering in a hanging globe of red glass. Memory supplied distaste for what transpired within, but she found herself at the window, experiencing a moment's distress as her fingers went through the solid pane. Peering inside, she found that, despite the whorls in the thick, greenish glass, she could see and hear clearly.

The sounds of laughter drifted out, interspersed with drunken singing, accompanied by off-key music from a fife and a pennywhistle. Women dressed in chemises and robes, their breasts spilling free from their bodices, their hair hanging lank, laughed shrilly as they sat in the laps of men who had discarded their uniform jackets and weapons, and sometimes even their breeches.

Why? she wondered. *Why here?* Yet, disgusted as she was, she could not move.

Then she saw him. A man sat in the corner by the fire. Hate flowed into her, hot as the flames. She wasn't sure how, but she knew him. He had iron-colored hair, tied back with a ribbon, and pale, thin features. A flush of hectic color stained his cheekbones, and his eyes glittered feverishly. A woman clad only in a scanty chemise brought him a pewter mug, laughing as she handed it to him. Fear and loathing washed through the observer at the window. *Why? Why him? What is he -- or was he -- to me?*

The blowsy woman giggled as the man guzzled. "Thirsty tonight, ain't we, Captain?" The man nodded and shivered, pulling his red coat with its shining buttons and fringed epaulets close. "Sure you wouldn't like a nip of something warmer?" she cooed, cupping her barely-covered breasts.

The officer guffawed, but the laugh turned into a wheeze. He coughed, burying his face in a handkerchief. The whore backed away from him, eyes wide. When he took the white linen away from his lips, it was spattered with red.

The watcher's full lips curved in a cruel smile. *If I could drink, brave Captain, I'd drink to your death. May it be long and painful and but a taste of the Hell you are bound for!*

She did not know why her curse was merited, but she had no doubt that it was, and richly so. Turning away from the tavern, she headed up the street, misty feet barely touching the cobblestones. A soldier on his way back to the garrison staggered into her, then through her, without ever seeing her, leaving her saddened, but not really surprised. She'd realized quite some time ago that she was a ghost.

Barely glancing at the surrounding buildings, she drifted on, drawn by her unknown goal. A large, half-timbered structure loomed before her in the moonlight. She slowed, stopped, and gazed up at the creaking sign.

The Black Mare. Beneath the words, a black horse pranced on the whitewashed wood. She blinked, confused. No, that was wrong, it wasn't The Black Mare, the name of the inn, was...was...it was... The White Swan.

With a choked sob, she fell, crumpling into the snow without marring its virgin drifts, or feeling the cold. Sobbing, incorporeal tears pouring down transparent cheeks, she remembered...remembered the inn, remembered...

Names.

Father. Jamie. Bess.

She was Bess, the landlord's daughter, and she had stood at that window to watch her beloved Jamie come riding, riding up to the old inn door. He'd promised to come to her, the dashing highwayman, with his pistol butts gleaming in the liquid moonlight, though hell should bar the way. Jamie. Bess.

And hell had come, in the form of King George's soldiers, and--and-- "Oh, merciful God," she wept, now remembering what had happened on that night, the iron hardness of a muzzle pressing the warm flesh of her breast. Now she knew why she not been allowed to rest in hallowed ground.

#

"Are you certain you can't go on?" Lieutenant Robert Larrimer asked his wife.

Anna, pale, rubbed her swollen belly and nodded, just as the carriage gave a particularly savage lurch. "I'm sorry, my love, but the jouncing..." she bit her lip, then, and gasped. "Oh! A cramp, Robert!"

"Birth pangs?" he demanded, frightened. Anna was more than a month from her time.

"I don't think so. But I must stop! Please, Robert!"

He nodded, and leaned out to shout to the coachman to head for the village that lay a few miles away. He had hoped to avoid the place.

They had neither relatives nor friends in the vicinity, and that meant they must stop at a public lodging-place.

There was only one inn in that little northern town -- and that place held only bitter memory for him. He gazed anxiously at Anna, who sat braced against the bumps, one hand pressed to her belly, the other grasping the locket with both their pictures that she wore strung on a crimson ribbon. Larrimer's heart swelled with love. They had been wed barely a year. He would rather be tormented by memories than see her suffer, or risk their child.

Anna knew nothing of the...incident, in fact had wed him after his transfer to another unit had been granted. He didn't want her to find out. *Perhaps no one will recognize me...*

Larrimer licked lips suddenly gone dry, and shivered despite the cape he wore over his red coat with its bright buttons.

#

Dawn came, and cockcrow. Bess expected to vanish -- wasn't that what happened to ghosts at sunrise? - but she remained.

Her memories had returned, but she still had no idea why she was here, what she must do. Her control over her movements and form was better, now, and she could see herself, even feel herself. She watched the inn, saw a slatternly girl come out to empty slops, and a brawny middle-aged cook bustling about. Tasks that she herself had done, when alive. But where was her father? Drifting, she entered the inn and glided through the rooms, familiar, yes, but strangely altered, and not for the better. Dust lay in the corners of the furniture, and dirt and cobwebs had invaded every corner. The floor appeared not to have been swept for a fortnight or more. Bess tried to pick up her old broom from its corner, but, of course, her misty hands could not grasp a solid object.

She drifted past the room where she had died, and, after a single hasty glance, averted her eyes. A dark stain still married the floorboards before the window.

In her father's room, a man slept in the bed. Not her father. Bess stared in horror at the white face, the closed eyes that mercifully hid the dark, mad gaze of Tim Alcott, the ostler.

Tim was master of the inn now? How could that be? Tim was half-mad and simple, as stupid and dull as a beast, and nigh as dumb as one. In all the times he'd trailed about after her in life, gazing at her with smoldering eyes, Bess had only heard Tim mutter a few garbled monosyllables.

As Bess watched, Tim stirred, rolled over, groaned, then sat up and scratched. "Damned bedbugs!" he snarled. "I'll beat that lazy slut silly for this! I TOLD her to change these sheets!" Bess gasped silently. *He can speak! Sweet Jesu, how can this be?* Whirling, she retreated down the hallway and raced out of the inn.

Determined to leave this place that brought only pain, she headed for the street. But she could not leave, she discovered. Some unseen force tethered her to the grounds of the inn. Bess flung herself forward, only to rebound, unable to take another step. She moaned, longing for the peace of her un-consecrated grave.

Back in the courtyard, Bess "sat" upon the mounting block, gazing at her surroundings, utterly bewildered. Why was she held here? Who had summoned her? What was she supposed to do?

Memories...memories filled her, though she tried to push them away.

Jamie, her Jamie, had stood upon this mounting block. He had tethered

his horse over there. Over there, in the shadow of the bayberry bush, he had kissed her, long and sweet. Tears filled her eyes.

Jamie. Oh, my love. I hope you made a clean escape. I hope it was worth it.

Perhaps that was why she was here. She was a suicide, albeit a suicide in a noble cause--to save the life of the man she loved. Perhaps she had to make atonement, or some such?

She wondered what day it was, what year it was, and then she realized, with a jolt, that it was already early afternoon. The light had changed, become robust and golden instead of thin and pale. Time had passed, for her, in the blink of an eye.

Rising from the mounting block, she drifted about the courtyard, then into the stable. As she moved past the horses, it became obvious that, if humans could not see her, the horses could. Their eyes rolled white-rimmed, and they backed away, snorting.

Bess came nearer, talking in low tones, but many animals panicked, rearing and kicking. Others simply stood, sweating and trembling.

"Good boy, good girl," she tried to soothe them, but to no avail. She stood wringing her spectral hands in distress.

"They do not understand. Stupid creatures."

Bess whirled. She found her gaze locked with the large, intelligent brown eyes of a shining black mare who might have been the inspiration for the inn's new name. *No, surely not....*

"Yes, it was." The mare nodded her head. The "voice" had echoed inside Bess's head, but it was clearly the mare that had "spoken."

Bess shrank back from something so unnatural. *A beast, talking?*

"How...why...?"

"Oh, in your present state, we can all speak with you if we wished. But they are too afraid. As I said, they're stupid creatures. Dogs will snarl and whimper, and most cats, save witch familiars, will hiss. Ravens...they care not if one is spirit or flesh, they view everything without wings as beneath contempt."

Bess laughed, a strained, shocked sound. "Merciful Heaven," she breathed. "Are you a witch then, in the shape of a mare?"

The horse nickered, as if laughing itself. "I hardly think a self-respecting minion of Satan would permit herself to be locked up all day, fed poor hay, and be tended to by the loving kindness of Tim Alcott. No, I am what I seem -- a mare. A living creature, one who pities you, Miss Bess."

"Tim," said Bess, slowly. "He was asleep in Father's bed. He can speak, now. He used to be dumb and simple. How can this be?" She rubbed her arms, feeling a chill not of body.

"Yes, he is now the innkeeper of The Black Mare. As to how he gained his new wit and wagging tongue, I remind you of what they say about those who wager with the Horned One. Great power may be granted -- for the gamble of a soul."

"He wagered with the Evil One? For wits and speech?" Bess gasped, shocked. She'd never thought of Tim as a good man, had always known there was something *wrong* about him, but to risk one's immortal soul...

"For that...and for the opportunity to become master here at the inn. Wager he did, and he got what he bargained for -- all except for one thing." The mare snorted, fixing eyes the color of peat upon her. Bess ran her tongue across her lips, frightened. "And what was that?" She asked reluctantly, already knowing the answer.

"Your own sweet self, Bess. You cheated him out of what he wanted most."

Somehow she'd always known. Tim's lust for her had been something she'd tried to ignore, to avoid acknowledging. She'd been too wrapped up in Jamie, and between Jamie and Tim...well, the contrast between them was laughable. Bess drew a deep breath and asked the question that could be put off no longer -- though she dreaded the answer.

"What happened...to my father?" *And to Jamie?* her mind added, but she could not force herself to ask that, yet. As long as she did not ask, she could hope that Jamie was safe.

The mare took a step toward Bess and attempted to nuzzle her comfortingly. The velvet muzzle passed right through Bess's misty form. "Your father died the same night you did," she said softly inside Bess's head. "Found dead with a knife in his throat. The soldiers always claimed that your highwayman did it, but..." The mare tossed her mane in the equine equivalent of a shrug, and said no more. Bess closed her eyes. *Hasn't there been enough pain and death and suffering?* she thought miserably. A memory floated back to her; Tim, listening intently to the captain, then hastening off on some task. *It was Tim all along, god rot him.*

A sudden bustle and clatter in the courtyard distracted her. Bess turned to listen, heard voices.

"Welcome to The Black Mare, young sir. And the missus, I take it." Tim's voice, and it fitted the rest of him. Even dead, Bess felt her skin crawl at the raspy, obsequious tones.

"Thank you," came a man's voice. Young. Earnest. *Familiar, though. I've heard him speak before. Who is he?*

"Here now," said Tim, "don't I be knowin' you, sir?"

Curious, Bess left her equine friend and floated to the entrance of the stables. In the center of the courtyard, a carriage had pulled up. The horses stood puffing steam from their nostrils, and the coachman flung a blanket's over their sweating bodies. A young soldier stepped out. He turned to extend his hand to a pretty young woman, probably his wife, whose belly was heavy with child.

"I know you," Bess whispered softly. "I remember you..."

"No," said the young redcoat, addressing Tim but seeming to avoid the ostler's gaze. "We've not met."

"Liar," said Bess. "Oh, you liar, you were there, that evil day."

Tim's eyes widened, then he touched his forelock in exaggerated deference and gave the soldier a sly wink. "All you soldiers, I s'pose you look the same. Well, I'll give you m'best, for your lady to rest in, sir. Please to follow me."

"You? But I thought the landlord was --" The soldier stopped in mid-sentence, and his shoulders sagged. Bess's lips twisted in a silent snarl. Ah, but he was handsome, wasn't he, with his wide blue eyes and fair hair tied back with a red ribbon. She remembered his name: Lieutenant Robert Larrimer.

The innkeep and his guests walked away, and Bess returned to the mare.

"That was Larrimer! He was one of them!"

"Balance," the mare replied, pawing with one black hoof. "The wheel turns. It has been one year since your death, Bess."

"And he has come, this day of days," said Bess. Her spectral hands closed into translucent fists.

"Now you know what drew you here," the mare's "voice" was intense, a hot needle piercing Bess's mind. "Larrimer is the reason you rose from your uneasy rest. He is one of those responsible for your death, and the death of your beloved. Revenge is yours to grasp, Bess."

"My beloved -- merciful Heaven," Bess could scarcely speak. Breath was agony in her throat, and tears sprang to her eyes. "They killed Jamie, too?"

She had given her life so that Jamie might be warned of the ambush, might flee. And her sacrifice had been for naught! Sobs choked her. The horse nodded, and her eyes were sad. "The next day, he returned. In broad daylight. He knew only that you were gone, and he couldn't live without you. They gunned him down, Miss Bess...shot him down like a rabid dog, on the highway. Larrimer was there when they did it. Your Jamie died in a pool of his own red blood, and they buried him at the crossroads, in an unmarked grave."

Bess buried her face in her hands, weeping wildly. "No! No!"

The mare was relentless as she finished, "And now, one of the men responsible is out there. It is your turn to kill."

Bess shook her head. "But Larrimer -- he didn't -- he tried to stop them."

The mare was inexorable. "He was one of them. Never forget that! And he is within your grasp. Heaven is merciful, Bess, for it's given you a chance to win your passage on to the afterlife. Kill the man who killed your love, and the balance is restored. An eye for an eye."

"But I can't..." Bess protested.

"Do as you will," the horse said, suddenly indifferent. She reached for a mouthful of hay, began chewing. "You can always stay here with me. I enjoy the conversation. You're much more lively to talk to than the other horses. All they talk about is eating and foaling."

Trapped here in the inn forever? Bess shuddered at the idea. *If I'm being given the chance to go on, to leave the earth for the afterlife, hadn't I better take it?*

"How do you know all this?" she whispered. "Who are you?"

"Just a mare. My name is Midnight, but Tim calls me 'Night,' Miss Bess. As to how I know...well, beasts know things, see things, that humans wot not of," the mare lipped up another wisp of hay and chewed.

"Just as we can see you, where they cannot, we know things."

"I see," Bess whispered. It made sense. The stories always talked about animals being sensitive to Otherworldly forces, able to see spirits. She thought of Larrimer again. That handsome young man, alive, married, the father of a child, while her darling Jamie lay in unhallowed ground, trodden on by man and beast alike. "It's not fair!" she cried.

"No, it isn't," the mare agreed.

Bess nodded, her mind made up. It could not be mere coincidence. She, dead by her own hand, a ghost returning on the eve of her death, and he, one of the men who had killed her, returning as if by fate.

Larrimer, he's the key to the afterlife. Jamie's dead, but perhaps if I avenge him we can both rest.

Tonight. Please God, she would have revenge tonight, hurt that handsome, sweet-faced youth as badly as he had hurt her, as badly as he'd hurt Jamie. The thought filled her with hot pleasure. Bess turned back to the horse and smiled, and the mare closed one eye in a conspiratorial wink.

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Larrimer was appalled to realize that "the best room" was the one in which Bess had died. Anna, tired and drained, had been too distracted to notice her husband's reaction to their quarters. After the midwife

had examined her, given her a potion, and prescribed a day's rest, Anna eased her bulk onto the bed, and was asleep in minutes.

Her husband sat in a chair near the window, his head buried in his hands. The memories haunted him at night, lurked on the edges of his consciousness by day. And here, in this room, where the worst of it had happened, they flooded his mind and would not be dismissed...

"Is that all the ale you've got?" Captain Jennings bellowed, slamming his empty tankard down on the table in the taproom. The innkeeper, a tall, thin man, shook his head. "But, Captain, you've not paid --" "Bring me more ale, damn you!" thundered Jennings, and the landlord scurried to obey.

Larrimer cleared his throat. "Captain, with due respect, we ought to pay the man for--"

"Larrimer, you irritate me," growled the older man. "He's been giving aid to a killer. Taking his ale is little enough punishment. Ha, look how he sends his daughter to wait on us!" His voice dropped. "I've got other plans for her tonight."

Larrimer closed his mouth in miserable compliance. Bess, he believed the girl's name was. It was she who had been consorting with the highwayman James "Bonnie Jamie" MacLaren.

The girl wore a dress of dull red, and a white apron. Her feet were bare as she walked over the cold stone floor, and her breasts moved with quick, shallow breaths. Larrimer could see she was terrified.

"Miss," he said gently. She turned sloe-dark eyes upon him. "Our orders are to capture Bonnie Jamie, so he can be tried, but he's never harmed anyone. Likely the judge will spare his life."

She smiled then, red lips curving hesitantly, shyly. Sweet Jesu, but she was lovely.

"Ha! The Colonel said if he resists, he's a dead man!" Jennings snarled, and then showed crooked teeth in a cruel smile. "Miss Bess...I'm glad you're here. Lads, did you know that if you wish to catch the big fish, you need proper bait? I'd say this slut is proper bait indeed!"

As Bess backed away, furious but too frightened to defend herself, Jennings made a sudden, deadly lunge. Clamping a hand upon Bess's arm, he dragged her into his lap. She struggled, then froze, a drop of sweat trickling down her suddenly pale face, as Jennings placed the muzzle of his pistol to her throat.

Larrimer bolted to his feet. "Captain, this is outrageous! I will not--"

Then he, too, fell silent and still as a tiny sound--the almost unnoticeable click as the pistol was cocked--reached his ears. Smith, Jennings' second in command, had drawn his own pistol and now stared down the sight directly at Larrimer.

"We soldiers work hard," said Captain Jennings in a deceptively gentle voice. "We deserve a little...sport...now and then. The girl's a whore, Robbie, and we've got the authority to send her whole bloody family to a very nasty gaol cell if we so choose. All I'm asking is that she help us snare her elusive fox of a highwayman." Without removing the pistol, he tangled his fingers in her hair, tugged her face down to his, and kissed her wetly.

Larrimer looked away, sick. He'd accepted the offer of a commission in the King's army, thinking that the life of a soldier would be filled with travel and excitement. He'd had no idea that officers like Jennings even existed -- men who enjoyed causing others pain. But Jennings was in command. What could he do?

He wished for a moment that he could leave on some pretext -- leave and warn the highwayman not to come. That ugly scarecrow of an ostler, Tim, speaking in a voice that sounded rough and somehow unused had told Jennings that he'd overheard MacLaren promise to come to Bess "by moonlight, Cap'n. He said he'd come t'her by moonlight, though Hell should bar the way. His very words, Cap'n."

Larrimer cursed silently as he stared at Bess's terrified face. Bonnie Jamie MacLaren had robbed a good many travelers on the road, 'twas true, and had been a thorn in the side of the law for almost four years now. Capturing him would be quite a coup. But MacLaren's glittering pistols and rapier had always been for show. No one had ever been injured by the highwayman--save, perhaps, their pride.

He remembered something else that Tim had said. At the time he hadn't understood, but now he did, all too well. "Don't forget, Cap'n. When you're done wi' Miss Bess..."

"Yes, yes," Jennings had said. "You have my word. Now hurry along and attend to that other matter we discussed, Tim, that's a good lad."

The ostler had tugged his forelock, and melted into the shadows.

Now Larrimer knew what Tim had meant when he'd said, "when you're done..."

My God, Larrimer thought, in horror, I can't let this go on! I must do something!

But he hadn't, had he? Larrimer lifted his head from his hands, not at all surprised that his face was wet. "I should have done something, damn it," he said aloud to the dark stain on the floor.

His words had woken Anna. She stretched, and smiled sleepily at him.

Larrimer's heart turned over. He went to her and kissed her softly, sweetly. The shadows had fallen outside as well as in his own heart, and he told her, "It's time for supper, love."

#

Bess hovered over them as they ate.

The serving wench commented on the strange chill that haunted that corner of the otherwise cosy, firelit taproom. Pale, pregnant Anna shivered and put on her shawl. Lieutenant Robbie Larrimer rubbed his cold hands and glanced reflexively behind him. Bess watched them, excitement flowing through her. *Soon...soon...*

The words of the black mare in the stable, Night, spurred Bess on, warmed her. Revenge would win her rest -- revenge, and nothing else. Before retiring, Larrimer and Anna sat beside the fire in the taproom for a while. As the minutes stretched by, Larrimer grew increasingly uncomfortable. Bess drank in his apprehension like wine. He was nervous, nervous about lying down to sleep with his warm wife and baby-to-be in a room where he'd watched an innocent seventeen year old girl die.

Be nervous, Robbie, Bess silently urged. Be nervous while you still can...

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Surely it was his imagination that had him so rattled, Larrimer consoled himself. He didn't believe in ghosts, not in this rational Age of Enlightenment. He was haunted, true enough, but by memories and shame, not by specters.

Despite the diligent application of a bedwarmer, Larrimer was cold. His wife slept peacefully, her breast rising and falling, the swell of her stomach arching up beneath the covers. Larrimer tossed and turned. It had been a year ago, tonight, in this room, and he had tried, but not hard enough...

They tossed the sobbing girl back and forth between them, each of them taking crueller and more vulgar liberties. The harder Bess sobbed, the louder they laughed, slobbering and pawing and pinching. Larrimer stood by, feeling wretched. He could no more have stopped this than he could have stopped the moon from rising in a few hours. The Lieutenant glanced out the casement at the road that waited in the darkness like a serpent, and himself hoping that the highwayman would break his promise -- that Bess would not have to watch Bonny Jamie Maclaren die in the ambush Jennings was planning.

"That's enough, lads," the Captain said, finally. Larrimer sighed with relief. They'd had their fun, they'd let her go, now, lock her in her little room in the attic, while they waited for her lover. Bess was rumpled and sore from pinches, but mostly unhurt, save for her dignity. Larrimer turned back from the window and winced. They had torn her dress, using a bit of cloth as a crude gag.

Chuckling, Jennings took a dagger and slit the chemise that peeked through her torn bodice. The men laughed and slavered as the girl's breasts bobbed free, white and rose-tipped in the candlelight.

"Now, watch this," said Jennings. He took a musket and rubbed its muzzle over the girl's nipples, then made lewd sounds when they stiffened in response to the cold iron. The soldiers hooted.

"Good God, Jennings!" Larrimer protested. "Haven't you done enough?"

"You and I will have to have a talk when this is over, Lieutenant," replied the captain, his eyes never leaving the wide, frightened ones of the girl.

"Yes," said Larrimer, in a strong voice that shocked even him with its edge. "Before God, we will."

Surprised at Larrimer's tone, Jennings turned his head and regarded him. The younger man stood his ground, sticking out his chin. "You and Smith keep watch, then," Larrimer said. "See that the girl doesn't escape. And to make your task a bit easier--"

He bent and propped the musket up on its butt, wedging the barrel firmly beneath the girl's left breast. "Oh, good job!" said one of the men, who began to tie the weapon against Bess's body.

"Now, keep good watch!" laughed Jennings. He removed the gag and kissed her lips, then jerked back, his hand to his mouth. "You bitch!" he cried, staring at the blood on his hand. "The wench bit me!"

He cracked her across the face with his hand. Larrimer winced. Bess's eyes filled with tears and the imprint of Jennings' hand welled up red on her face, but there was no surrender in her expression.

Angrily, Jennings shoved the gag back in her mouth. "I had half a mind to keep you for myself, and not give you over to that madman of an ostler -- but now, you get what you deserve."

The Captain straightened and glared at Larrimer. "Watch her." And then he was gone.

Silence fell. The minutes crawled by. Larrimer and Smith alternately stood by the window, and sprawled in chairs. Larrimer tried not to look directly at Bess, sparing her what small amount of humiliation he could, but once he caught her in the act of twisting her hands against the knots. When she saw him looking, she froze like a frightened deer. Trying to get the blood back into her hands, poor lass, Larrimer

thought, and he looked away again, wishing he could loosen the knots. But Smith would never stand for it.

The minutes stretched into hours, and more than once Larrimer caught himself drowsing. The moon rose like a silver ship tossed on cloud-waves.

Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot. Hoofbeats along the road.

"Bastard's on his way," said Smith softly. He began to prime his musket. "And it looks like we'll have a clear shot at 'im from here." Larrimer realized that they weren't even going to allow Bonnie Jamie the opportunity to surrender. They were just going to kill him in cold blood. Sickened, he heard Bess take a breath, a deep, deep breath, and he turned toward her.

Afterward, he was never sure what he planned to do--free her, perhaps. But time suddenly seemed to slow as he faced her. He realized, too late, that she had managed to work a finger free--one finger, placed on the trigger of the musket, and she gave him a blazing look of triumph as she pressed down and --

"Bess, no!" Larrimer screamed, bolting awake.

"Oh, yes," came a soft, angry whisper. His heart slamming against his chest, Larrimer looked wildly around the room.

She stood beside the open casement, transparent as gauze, white as moonlight, floating a foot above the floor.

"Bess," he breathed. His skin erupted with gooseflesh and his blood was mountain water in his veins. "You've come back!"

She nodded, and floated nearer. "Yes, I've come back. For you."

He would have thought it impossible for his fear to deepen, but it did. He clutched the coverlet. Somehow, impossibly, Anna slept on.

"Bess, I tried to stop them--I tried--"

"But you didn't," she interrupted. She moved closer still, floating gracefully toward him like milkweed down. "You didn't stop them. You didn't save me. And you helped murder my Jamie!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Larrimer noticed that a pile of rope was slowly uncoiling. It undulated like a snake in the air. His pistol floated upward, too, as if borne by an unseen hand.

He opened his mouth to protest, but that was all she needed. Her body contorted into a slim thread and she dove down his throat.

She was there, inside him, and Larrimer felt the terror, the same terror she'd felt that night one year ago. The pain, the humiliation, the fear, the futile hope that her sacrifice would save her beloved... And suddenly Bess saw what Robbie had seen, that night one year ago. Through his eyes, through his memories, she saw her own death. The gun exploded, shattering her breast. She convulsed, but she was already dead, had to be dead, with a hole in her chest and the red blood spattered, trickling down her pale features like red ribbons, like the love-knot in her black, black hair....

With her spirit animating him, Larrimer moved. He climbed out of the bed, and stood beside the open casement, against the bedpost while the rope snaked around him, binding the primed pistol into place, the muzzle pressing into his chest. His fingers writhed, seeking release from the tight bonds, stretching, stretching...but not to find release, only to touch the trigger.

Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot. Hooves on the cobblestones. For a wild moment, both ghost and mortal thought the highwayman had returned, as he had vowed, for his black-eyed Bess. But a shadow moved across the courtyard, trotting over to the window; a black horse, riderless. And

beside it, a man, a white-faced man with eyes the color of madness, and hair the color of moldy hay.

"Come," said a voice inside his (her) head. "Take your revenge, Bess, and let me bear you away to a better place."

And his mortal ears heard the ostler's rasping tones, "Kill him, Bess! He killed your Jamie!"

Blood oozed from his bound hands, staining the ropes as Larrimer's fingers strained to reach the trigger. *This is justice!* Bess's wild exultation reached Larrimer. *A life for a life – your life for Jamie's!*

Larrimer knew he had only seconds to live. Images from his life flashed through his mind -- and Bess shared them. She saw Robbie, in civilian garb, approaching the highwayman at a tavern, delivering the sad news with a warning to come not near the inn. Larrimer had wept as he'd spoken to Jamie. And then, later, when Jamie lay dead, Larrimer had challenged his Captain, had dueled with him, rapiers flashing by torchlight -- and he would have won, save for the Colonel's interference. Larrimer's report had ended any chance of Jennings achieving his longed-for promotion and reassignment. Instead the Captain had been permanently assigned here, to this backwater village, the site of his disgrace, to languish.

Pity flowed through Bess, as she lived Larrimer's torment, his grief, his guilt and shame. He'd suffered for a year, suffered as much as any prisoner locked in a gaol of his own making...

"No!" echoed words that Larrimer somehow understood came from the black horse. "No, do what you must, Bess! You must avenge your Jamie, for vengeance is sweet!"

More than one life, Bess thought, even as Larrimer's fingers, under her guidance, brushed the trigger. *More than one life lost and ruined...Jamie's, mine, Father's...* She turned her (his) head back over the shoulder, to see the sleeping woman on the bed. *Shall there be three more lives, ruined, then? Larrimer's and Anna's and the wee babe's shattered this time not by Jennings, but by ME?*

"No!" shrieked Bess, pulling herself abruptly out of Larrimer's body. The soldier sagged against his bonds, gasping. "I will not do this! I will not ruin more lives because mine was cut short!" She wept freely, and tried to touch Larrimer's face. Her fingers passed right through him. "Larrimer, Robbie, I forgive you. I forgive you with all my heart."

The soldier staggered as the rope fell as if it had been abruptly cut. He dropped to his knees.

Bess leaned out the casement and confronted the mare, who half reared, her eyes glaring wildly in the moonlight. "He had no part in it, Night! How will killing him send me on to eternal peace? It cannot be right, it cannot!"

Bess's gaze fastened on Tim, who was staring up at her in horror, horror, she realized, that had nothing to do with seeing a ghost.

"Night," Bess said, slowly, in confusion, "Night, why is Tim with you?" She stared down at the ostler, frightened now. "Tim killed my father, he betrayed Jamie and me. He is no friend to either of us!"

Larrimer crawled over to the casement, beside Bess's spectral image, and looked out. The horse screamed, a harsh, unnatural sound, and then -- Larrimer moaned with terror -- it began to change.

The creature retained the outward seeming of a horse, but its pawing hooves left trails of fire. Its mane and tail erupted in sheets of black flame. Larrimer could feel infernal heat against his face. The black beast roared angrily, exposing sharp teeth -- the teeth of a

carnivore. Its eyes flashed red, and sulfurous smoke belched from its nostrils.

Beside Larrimer, Bess sank to her knees and he heard her gabbling something that sounded like a prayer.

The creature turned to Tim, who had fallen to his knees and was groveling in fear. "We wagered for a soul, and you wagered that I'd have hers, Tim," it thundered in a terrible silent "voice" that filled the night. "She is proving...difficult."

"Take her! She vowed to kill him, and by doing so, damned herself," Tim urged. "Take her, take her!"

"Take her I shall," the beast growled.

The beast suddenly grew long arms, black as pitch. They reached for the specter. Bess cried out and struggled, but unlike human hands, these were able to close upon her misty form. The hands clasped her arms. Bess shrieked, a lost, desolate sound.

"Leave her be!" cried Larrimer. He was determined to fight for Bess, as he had not fought before. His gaze darted desperately around the room, seeking something to serve as a cross.

Nothing...but wait! With a gasp, he dragged his rapier from its sheath, and, with one swift snap, he broke it across his knee, ignoring the blood that slicked his fingers. To make a cross, he needed something...rope, or ribbon...

The spectral arms pulled Bess up from her knees, until she was poised at the end of the casement. One good pull, and she would be through it.

"Fight, Bess! Fight it!" he shouted.

Larrimer's fingers fumbled at the nightstand, and then they closed on the ribbon Anna used to hold her locket. Feverishly, Larrimer bound the broken sword into a cross.

Larrimer thrust his makeshift weapon between Bess, who was half through the casement, and the Nightmare, brandishing the holy symbol in the face of the thing from Hell. It hissed violently, and drew back, but it did not release the ghost girl. "I am no simple demon, foolish mortal! Think you a simple cross can defeat me?"

Larrimer felt his conviction waver, but he looked at the locket, then at Bess. "Ah, but this is no simple cross!" he declared. "I have broken my sword, and will never wield it against man nor woman again. And I have bound it with a symbol of the deepest love of which man is capable--my vow to my wife. I challenge you in the name of a God that bade us show mercy and love -- as Bess has shown mercy and love to a poor, unworthy soldier!"

The Nightmare cried out, a low, ululating sound, and fell back. "I wagered for a soul, and a soul I shall have!" it shrieked.

Tim was already up and running across the courtyard. The Nightmare was upon him in a single leap, her hooves clattering against the cobblestones, leaving ribbons of fire writhing in her wake.

"Noooooooo!" screamed Tim, as the beast, never pausing in her giant strides, swept him up, onto her back. He shrieked, but stayed on as if tied there.

A moment later, the Nightmare, bearing its damned burden, was gone. Bess fell back into the room in a heap. Larrimer's "cross" fell from nerveless fingers, and he clutched the casement sill to steady himself. He drew a deep breath, then another. Finally, he looked down at Bess. She was not looking at him. Slowly, she gathered herself, then sat up. Her head was cocked, in a listening pose. Then Larrimer heard it too. Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot. Hoofbeats on the road.

Bess smiled, the secret smile that only women in love can know, and leaned over the casement, looking out. She began to loosen her hair. Larrimer could see him now, coming along the ribbon of highway--a man on a horse, a smoky dappled beast that shone like mist in the moonlight.

There he was, the French-cocked hat, the thigh-high boots, the doeskin breeches. His spurs glistened and jingled. It was Bonnie Jamie MacLaren, come at last, as he had promised so long ago, for his Bess. The highwayman paused beneath the window, to fondle a length of hair that had once been black, inhaling its sweetness. "My love," he said in the rumbling, warm burr that Larrimer had heard once before, when he'd broken the news of Bess's death. "My love, I've been waiting. But I could not come for thee until the stain of thy suicide was purged. Had thou killed yon soldier boy, I'd have never been allowed to see thee again."

"Jamie..." Bess whispered. "Oh, Jamie..."

The highwayman held out his arms, and Bess slipped over the casement sill. He clasped her close, and then bent his head to kiss the landlord's daughter -- kissed her with a fierce tenderness that Larrimer understood, had shared with his Anna.

Neither of them looked back, as the ghostly figure spurred his spectral steed. Away they went, following the highway until, at last, they were gone.

The cock crowed. Larrimer slumped against the window sill, his eyes filled with tears of joy. Softly, he whispered a blessing upon both of them.

It was, finally, over. He need not carry his burden of guilt a step further. He was free to hold his head high, to love his wife and child, with no secrets between them. For the highwayman had come for his love by moonlight, as he had vowed, though Hell had barred the way.

-THE END-