

1612.

For a while, the only moving thing in the dim room is the flickering flame of a candle. The only sound is the occasional tumble of coals in the grate.

The man in the bed is still, now that the fret of fever has quieted.

The woman in the chair drawn close beside, leans on her elbow watching him.

Her hair is a long red plait. She sighs, touches his hand slightly, then stands, for a moment lost in thought.

She moves to sit at a small table near the fire, lights more candles, and picks up a quill.

She glances back towards the bed and then, begins to write.

Chapter 1

I, JANE SOUTHWORTH, Lady of Samlesbury Lower Hall, determined now to set down certain recollections . . .

I, Jane, that was born Jane Shireburn, natural daughter of Richard Shireburn, great knight of the realm and Master Forester of Bowland, resolving now to give some account . . .

I, Jane Southworth, in the year of Our Lord 1612, at the hour of midnight, seated in the light of three candles, by the bedside of the living corpse of my poor husband . . .

I do not know in any way how to begin this writing.

I, Jane, wife of John Southworth, grandson of Sir John Southworth, ancient knight of the shire, loyal servitor to Queen Mary, and Defender of the Faith . . .

It will not do, I cannot begin. I do not know how - which Jane I am, which child, which soul.

How truly vexed I am, that I cannot now begin after so long a wait. Does the prohibition weigh so heavy, of this dying man?

I have so longed to write; to shuffle words on a white page, words that could break into voices, remembered voices. For it is my own life that I crave to record, for all its unimportance. My own memories to be set in something as hard as the amber that imprisons flies. To net forever a butterfly moment of gaiety, cage in the shadows of fear, preserve some pearls of tears.

I will write now what I remember, for myself alone. Whatever words will come, I'll scrub none out. Seeking to please no man, nor woman, and I'll not fear equivocation

neither, seeing as what pleases a papist would enrage a puritan, and what is given as a prayer may be spoken as a charm for a witch.

They say it is a lonesome thing to watch along the dying, and she certainly takes her time, the Lady Death, with my old husband, blueing his lips, pinching his nose, and fluttering his fingers. But still it drags on, and as I know her ways, I think I have some nights and days still to come, sitting here in this heavy room, waiting, waiting.

The world is quiet. Only the house stirs and creaks a little now and then, muttering in its old bones. And while I wait, Ellen comes to renew the candles and place another drink for me. At midnight, midsleep she comes in, greyer than her grey shawl now, a right grey mouse, she who was a little scurrying bright-eyed maid when first I took her on.

Her care is all for me, but still she pauses by the bed, to pull the covers, damp his forehead. Is her touch tenderer than mine that makes him stir?

“He spake my lady. Said a word, your name.” I heard it too, just. Upon a breath I think he whispered “Jaynie.” Two men only have used that softer form, and if my husband did some few times in early days, it was not by my leave.

Now Ellen is gone and the hollow hours stretch out before me, where I can use that license his feebleness has given me.



It was my father who first prettified my name, from “plain Jane and no nonsense” to a word that had more of affection in it. And my brother when he was pleased with me. But more often to torment me he would sing a jingle:

*Jane, Jane, plain as a drain
Sit in a corner and don't complain.*

My brother: Red Rick, as he was known. Thoughts come tumbling now, jostling to be remembered, and though I scratch a pen as fast as any clerk, I have some work to keep pace. We were all redheaded; my huge red-bearded, red-maned father, and my restless, nervy foxy-red brother, and my own that was coppery and too much of it to keep tidy, as complained my mother. All, that is, all the baseborn children, even little Grace with her carrotnob. Not one of us inherited my mother's colour, nor her looks neither. Isabella with her crow-black hair and her name that made some servants whisper of Spanish blood. But she was no friend of Spain, no zealot, not she, 'La Concubina'. It was the mistress of the house who cleaved most ardently to the old religion. But how she walked, my mother, when he called her up from the low end of the table, to sit by him. How she loved to go gorgeous in coloured velvets that were the fury of Lady Maud. And where is the surprise in that, the old legal wife, with a chin like a spade and a long pious nose? Looking as if God had grudged her the superfluous flesh that was so lavishly bestowed upon the concubine. For Isabella was all in rounds; round cheeks, round breasts, and dimpled elbows. The pout of her small mouth was round, and perfectly so was the single black birthmark that sat below her collarbone, as to draw attention to all that lay below, and certainly succeeded to catch the ever-straying fingers of her lord. I thought then – or perhaps I was older when I thought – that same dark mole held all her power over him. But I never thought it to be a thing of fear.

So she was the favourite and unlawful, accustomed to quick translations, taking whatever chance and favour

threw her. And I learnt that of my mother sure, for I too was often made a pet. I learnt – oh very early – the curious thing that I might be in two places, and all differently regarded, and still retain my single self. My dear Rick never learned it. Strove to make himself wholly in one world. But I took an odd pleasure in behaving in one way at the servants' table, sometimes waiting on them that were foremost, sometimes even taking a clout, or worse a fondling pinch, especially off that Simon Carter who took more liberties than ever his master knew. And then in the whisk of a rat's tail, I would be sat on my lord's lap and stroked and made much of, and given sweet things off his plate.

I did not flaunt though like Isabella. But I had my own ways of wheedling into his favour, which I very much desired to obtain. I suppose I was a pretty thing, but I know that I was clever, too clever for my boots, the servants said. My prattling, my inquisitive prattling, diverted him. And he would laugh with my forever asking why. He called me Jaynie Whyandwherefore. And said that I was as good as a wise fool to have in the house, with my asking why one was high and one was low, why brave virtue should be called base treason, why high and mighty Simon Carter could be so affrighted of an old beldame like Mother Goggins who was half out of her wits and all trembling with the palsy. He laughed a lot at me, my great father, but I do not recall that he ever answered my questions.

Of course not only I needed to learn dissimulation. The great hall of Stonyhurst had its own changes and secrets, sometime showing a jovial and convivial face to welcome all and sundry and keep the queen's favour, while its heart beat to a different tune: to quiet prayers behind doors, to hidden blessings and unspoken fervour, above all to the

massing priests and their secret comings and goings.

And in the ebb and flow of that house, I had some work to find a solid place to put my feet.

It was when I was still too young to navigate those currents properly that I was first led to trip from one side to the other. It was a fine Sunday morning and I think I remember that we had well breakfasted. Also I had pleased Sir Richard with some fanciful saying. He spread his large hands, snowy cuffs and thick fingers, flat upon the table as to demand attention, and pronounced quite slowly: "I go to Mitton Church this day, to please our lady queen and do her bidding."

Such a silence fell. Most looked at their plates, avoiding to look at Lady Maud. Her long face grew longer, but her eyes stared most intently. I know because I, who have always been too bold for my own good, watched both of them. Sir Richard caught my curious observing, and laughed. "Come Jaynie, you look uncommonly decent today. You can accompany me to the new-fangled ceremonial."

My mother, Isabella, stirred. She might almost have risen, but did not. But Maud stood, in all her righteous dignity. "My lord, is it not enough, not shame enough, that you forsake our ancient faith? What need, what good reason is there that you offer to take the child along?"

And he, so used to ruling the roost but on this theme always placatory with her: "Aye Maud, would you have me pay more recusancy fines and bleed this great house white? You know full well that my whole intention is to preserve the family of Shireburn."

"But how will we protect our religion, my lord, preserve the faith of our fathers, if you are seen to assist, and a child of this household along with you, at the reformed service?"

"In just this way my dear. By heeding the queen's

command, we will play the game of state and keep the letter of the law. I will be bored for an hour is all.”

“And if you do go there, in deference to the Crown” – Maud did not easily let go – “there is surely no need to take the child.”

“She’s not your child, Maud,” he said more roughly, “and her mother makes no objection.”

I can remember how Isabella dabbed her rosebud mouth with her napkin and looked into a distance.

He continued seriously.

“This girl may even be required to make a more politic alliance than we would wish. For God knows what discords still lie in wait, what protections we” – a heavy pause – “and your protégés may need” – then he muttered below his breath, but I heard – “as they come swarming now from Douai” – and loudly added – “No, no, I take some of my serving men also. I do not propose to attend Mitton as a yeoman farmer. And Jane will entertain me with questions on the sermon.”

He had me by the hand, but paused by the porch door to seize a handful of fleece from one of the bales stacked there, “Or else we’ll stuff our ears with this wool and not hear any of the heretical preachment, while you may spend this hour on your knees, Maud, praying for our immortal souls.”

It was a fine thing to go with my lord to Mitton Church on a Sunday, but that night I had to make confession to a senior servant, as there was no priest just then in the house, and I was sent to bed supperless to pray forgiveness for my precocious apostasy. If Goody Goody Two Shoes Gracie threw a triumphant glance at my punishment, my brother Rick was not wholly inclined to displeasure neither, taking the opportunity of another nonsense rhyme:

*Jane, Jane, silly and vain
Went to Mitton, favour to gain.
Pleased her lord, not Lady Maud
Got her a penance when home she came.*

But there were other times Maud was never set aside, when she took on the mantle of real authority. When any of the wild travelling priests came to be harboured, the house ran to her particular direction. She personally supervised refreshment for the exhausted travellers, and personally set out the vestments and laid the altar. She and her maid alone decorated the chapel room hidden high in the eaves. Servants were dispatched to invite in the faithful and give warning of any untoward visitors. And a hushed, careful reverence everywhere. Pale Maud and her pale children proudly placid, serious and devout, Sir Richard much quieted and shriven, and of course the plump Isabella and her offspring hidden away among the servants.

I had always wanted to see them come, dark-cloaked on cloth-shod horses, with that strong sense of danger – mortal danger – that they carried with them. Sometimes Rick and I tried to linger about to see them come, but it is hard for redheaded children to be inconspicuous, and a few times we earned a slap and more for our curiosity.

Young as they often were, weather worn, dirty and very hungry, when they entered, the household would come humbly to greet them. Even Sir Richard himself would bow the knee and lower that bass voice to a husky “Bless me Father.”

And when the folk trooped to make confession did my father confess all his sins? Did he confess to loving Isabella? Even to making a favourite of me? I wondered.

I do not now recall just how long after going to Mitton Church that I was first admitted to a secret mass. But in

my mind there is a feeling of connection. It may have been because I had the good sense not to talk about these visits; a good sense not normally attributable to me. However it was, Maud had me called in to her.

“You are of an age to keep your counsel and to understand how vital it is to all and every life and soul in this house that our visiting missionaries and our celebrations of the Holy Mass remain close secret within these walls.”

She paused and I did not speak.

“And it is my wish to save your soul, and return you to the grace of our Blessed Lord.”

She looked down her long nose not unkindly at me. And indeed often times she was not unkind. I do think her hatred of the redhead on the throne far surpassed any dislike she held for her husband’s bastard children.

Chapter 2

IT IS THE SECOND NIGHT of my lone watch. I am not sure that it serves a purpose to mark the intervals of this writing. John is sleeping placidly. My Lady Death holds him quite gently at this moment. Will I hereafter desire to measure his dying against my narrative?

I fear my own clumsiness. I do not know of any noble woman who has chosen to write in this fashion. I have no example to follow. But I am strangely coming to believe that this scrawling that I do, which diverts me from the close watching that I pretend, but helps to pass the long silent hours, that it is in some imperceptible way keeping him alive.

Or does She wait, knowing he is securely hers, to humour me?

For how long then? How long can my memories creep breath into his lungs?

Sleep on then John, as quietly as you may.



Of course we knew very well about the visitations but to know a secret and be privy to it is a different thing. And my first permitted – and obliged – attendance at the mass was a wonder to me.

Rick came with me but Grace was too young. And Isabella, not sorry of an excuse to avoid appearing drably clothed among the servants.

After the midnight hour was well passed, about two

o'clock of the morning, when one hoped all informers and searchers to be well abed, we climbed the narrow stair to the long attic in the roof. And even as we mounted I could already hear the hush, if that is not a nonsense thing to say.

But then on entry, my soul stood still, enrapt with so much light from myriads of candles, with hanging linens and banks of flowers. And clouds of incense from a great swinging silver censer, that made my head fairly swim.

All was transformation. Those servants that were allowed were cleanly dressed and combed, all waiting with lowered heads. Even Simon Carter was bowed in humility. My dear father knelt, all gravity in his face, while his two elder sons in surplice and lace were severe young acolytes fit to serve a king. The truly wondrous transformation was of the scarecrow outlaw who had arrived in such a sweat of haste the previous morning. Now robed in silken alb and chasuble of Maud's embroidering, he appeared to be almost an angelic spirit.

The solemnity began. I have always found delight in words. If children pick up vocables like pigeons pecking peas, I was surely one of the greediest. Syllables were to taste, to weigh, to treasure, howsoever elusive their meaning. As the hush gave way to the recital of soft admonishing Latin, like and unlike the binding spells I had heard quoted in the kitchens, I joined with fervour in the mysterious repetitions. To the stern *Agnus Dei* I soulfully responded with the deeply woeful *miserere nobis*. And I beat my chest devotedly for *Mea culpa*. I bowed my head like all the rest for the elevation of the Host, flesh of God. But it was the human flesh that drew my fascination. Gazing at the hands that held high the host above his head, my earth-fast mind was remembering tales that Rick had told me of the torturing of priests. I wondered how unbelievable

and terrible it would be to see the body beneath this glory stretched upon the rack, or hung in a noose, or disembowelled before his own living eyes. And I wondered at the ferocity of conviction that drove such a man to court those risks, to keep alive the flame of a forbidden faith, in the land of the Protestant queen. I did not then, nor do not now, fully comprehend it. But I was swept by the myth. And if Lady Maud had purposed to wean me from the humdrum services at Mitton, she entirely succeeded.

John, you neither speak nor stir. Neither will you ever read these words. But how my piety then would have pleased you now.

In my new-found devotion I found myself much reconciled with the severe lady of the house. I am sure that I did subdue my behaviour and I made some show of learning prayers. Truth to say I learned them better than any of the other children. I really believe that Lady Maud would have liked to like me, but her steadfast concern for the precedence of her own children prevented it. And she was forever insulted by my mother's presence. But life was peaceful for me in that house at that time.

Was it then weeks or months after we had started attending masses? Mayhap a year passed before the day when young Richard burst into the hall, crashing his whip upon the table with fury, and my Rick right behind him, with a fool grin he could not wipe off. Richard, his pale face grown quite flushed, shouting about this bastard boy, who had got himself, by who knows what parleying with the stablemen, too good a mount and led the chase.

Several of the local families had come for the hunt of a reputed fine large boar. It had been much talked of. I could easily see how Red Rick, shorter and broader than

his stepbrother, but so much more eager to be foremost, how he would outride, outmanoeuvre Richard. But he maintained to me that it was more by luck than craft that he found himself close by when the beast sidetracked into a clearing. And without waiting for Richard, my brother had spurred after, straight in its path, and got to thrust his spear into the pig's fat throat. Minutes later the son and heir arrived to find the glory of the day taken from him. And guests were heard to enquire as to whether the Shireburns often gave their servants the right to the kill. Rick was too elated, oh by far. He crowed his success long and loud. What more fearful stupidity could any baseborn boy have committed?

His grinning stopped when he saw Sir Richard's face. My father's voice matched his cold face. "How come you to be so ignorant of a huntsman's service to his lord? It seems you require to be taught your place. And you have yourself to thank for the lesson."

It was Simon Carter who hauled him out then, with what pleasure I could see, to be whipped in the stable yard. And Red Rick was forbidden any form of hunting, except to tend the traps of vermin and small game in our domains, which would now be his occupation.

Lady Maud applauded his ire. "They are unruly my lord, all three of Isabella's children. They lack piety and humility."

He noddingly agreed.

"They need to be restrained in their freedom, put to more diligent occupation. It were good to exhort them to much greater prayer, prayer and abstinence—"

This last was not a word of great appeal to the Master Forester. He shrugged as to tell her to conclude, but she clung to her last word. "It is that they must be made to understand their place and adhere to it."

So who should next be found most lamentably out of place?

I found life more tedious with my companionable brother sent gamekeeping on the estates. And I lacked his protection from Simon Carter, who troubled me from time to time. For these reasons, and if I tell the truth sometimes to escape a dull chore, I did occasionally steal into the study, which was forbidden me.

My father was even then engaged with architects in designing the greatest, gracefulest mansion in all the Ribble valley. In his plans he was envisaging a monumental library, but the present book room was not so very large a place. It had great peacefulness though, with long windows that cast sunlight full of trembling motes onto the deep carpet. And books of course everywhere, smelling of sweet strong leather, and always some great tome open upon the lectern. And frequently there were architects' plans open about the room, which I regarded with less curiosity than the picture books. I remember books of the lives of saints and strange martyrdoms, illustrated herbals, and a compendium of mythological beasts to be found beyond the seven seas. I was even fascinated by the print itself, those rows of marching hieroglyphs which mocked my attempts to decipher.

At this time we had amongst our visitors one Nicholas Owen, a monk called by everyone 'Little John', because he was not much more than a dwarf. He was crooked of gait also, but of great gifts, they said. I took him for a learned man, as he was so often in converse with our master, and they spent much time together with books and papers. But when Sir Richard was not in conference the book room was usually unoccupied. Maud's elder children were never bookish and we lower ones were not allowed there.

On the day when I knew my father was to be taken up

with Shireburn Rental Day, and all the household mightily occupied, I crept in there. On this day there was a great quantity of paper lying about which I disregarded. I was intent on locating a picture book of saints which I had seen before. I could not have been in that room more than a dozen moments before I heard the swish of skirts and the jingle of keys which could belong only to the mistress of the household.

I looked up to see Lady Maud and she was angry beyond my expectations. She strode briskly towards me, catching me with a lump of my hair. Her voice was like a rasp. "What do you do here, miss? So far out of your place? Presuming on a freedom of the house you do not possess."

I was hauled out of the library and forced to face Sir Richard, who was just then preparing for Rental Day. He was in discussion with the bailiff and not best pleased to be disturbed. But when she told on me he looked most grave. I thought it must come to a beating. And then he said, "So Jane Shireburn, where did your curiosity take you in my library?"

I answered humbly at first, "I was looking for a story book." He waited. Maud glared. I could think of no excuse for my disobedience. My head hurt where she had pulled me, but I wanted not to cry. And I think, not unlike Rick, fear made me impudent.

"I do greatly desire to read, but since I have no teacher, I am obliged to remain with picture books."

"Insolence!" The word scarcely escaped through Maud's teeth.

But my father looked at me thoughtfully, and then turned away to speak with the dwarf monk, who was still breakfasting. It was an urgent conversation but I could not see that it had to do with me. He came back, gestured for his cloak, and while he pulled it on he nodded towards me.

“Well Jaynie Wherefore, if it is a clerk you would be then come into the Bailiff’s court and give some help with the accounting.”

I dared not look at Lady Maud again, but I followed him out as meekly as any of his hounds.

And there am I seated at the long accounting table, covering with blots and scribble the lump of paper before me, in feeble imitation of the clerk’s tidy rows of figures and names.

I am half dazed by the turn of events, and deafened by the huge commotion of Rental Day. Part stifled too by the stench, for some had brought livestock with which to pay their dues. And so much laughter! My father, known to be a severe tax master when levying soldiery for the Crown, was a benevolent landlord to his own people. He knew, as did others, that there were tenants would gain more by their dinner than they paid in rent. He was loudest in the jocularly, as roars of mirth greeted the recited merits of produce brought up to the bailiff’s table, as to the turgescence of cucumbers, the magnitude of duck eggs, or the plumpness of pumpkins. I understood the jests little better than I understood the tallies of the clerk, but I recognised that they were an important part of the general good humour.

Flummoxed as I was, I tried hard to concentrate on my task. I endeavoured to comprehend and take note, though I was clearly incapable of making record, of the great variety of tithes and tributes brought before my father and his bailiff. And I had a puzzled interest in the variety and even whimsicality of some. Beside the receipt of livestock and harvest dues, there was the annual tithe of a penny, a pair of spurs, a pound of pepper, a barbed arrow. I guessed at some indulgent remissions made by my father in his cups. William Gaunt, a respected old man, brought his

single flower. My father took it seriously and carefully examined the velvet red rose. "It is as always a perfection, Master Gaunt," he said solemnly, "but I'll take it as a favour if in the future you will pay your dues to Mistress Jane Shireburn here."

There was applause for me then, as he laid the flower gracefully on the table before me. But he leaned over to me and beneath the noise his voice was quiet.

"You must and will be punished Jaynie. You understand that?"