

Monday 15th July 1878: 'Twas a cloudy afternoon in Newburgh, Scotland'

I'm counting to ten, watching little Isa between my fingers. She's left, she's right, she goes hardly any distance at all because she doesn't know how far away 'ten' is. She crouches down behind the corn sacks, enough to hide me from her view, but leaving a tartan pleat and a dirty sock-and-sandaled foot in my plain sight. It's so funny, the way she hides.

"Nine, ten, coming ready or no! Arghhh! Where be that lassie now?"

I stamp off in the opposite direction, kicking the wooden slats of the 'JOHN CAMERON' crates as I pass, watching sideways to make sure Isa doesn't run off towards the river. I circle around to put myself between the corn sacks and the quay, stepping carefully over the heavy, slimy mooring line that secures the square-rigged brig to a solid iron bollard.

Angus and the new first mate are on the boat, high above. I can hear Angus being boss, telling the mate to re-tie the rope. Angus misses George. I can tell by the way he gives the mate such a hard time. We all miss George, but Angus most of all.

Da comes round a corner of crates. I duck into the laneway of corn sacks, but it's too late. He sees me.

"William! Get these corn sacks on pallet for lifting to boat."

"Maw has me after Isa, Da."

"If that be the case, where be the lassie?" As if he doesn't believe my excuse. I point to the swatch of tartan and raise my voice.

"I'm sure the lassie be hidden here somewhere Da!"

Da hears Isa's giggle and his mood turns to a smile. "Where be your brothers then?"

My younger brothers are playing knuckles in one of the crate alleys. When I shrug, Da lets out one of his big bellows.

"Johnnie, Alex! Get your noggins up!"

Two heads pop up above the crates.

"Load them corn sacks, get on with ye! Angus be waiting!" In evidence Angus sends a rope snaking down onto an empty pallet lying next to the brig. Da moves to tie the corners.

The boys run to the pile of sacks and drag one each towards the pallet. Johnnie deliberately exposes Isa's hiding place. She shrieks and runs away towards the horse cart. I roar, in my best angry pirate voice, and give slow-chase.

"Take the lassie home William!" Da calls after me. "'Tis getting colder."

It was a dreadful wet winter and now, as summer sends up moldy vapors, everyone's been sick in bed except Da. George was taken worst; coughing so hard that Doctor told Da to send him to the farthest away end of the world. The babies are still sniffing. Isa is only just better and Maw, being poorly herself, couldn't keep the little tyke in bed today.

Isa is getting under the cart, which is a foolishness. Old Foxtrot is good, but if she startles him, she'll be run over. I sweep her up in my arms, and gobble her neck the way a hungry south-sea cannibal would. She struggles and shrieks with laughter.

She wants to play again. I tell her she must run along the riverbank towards our house, and when she gets to the chicken sheds she can hide.

She's too close to the river by the time I count four, so I skip straight to nine and go after her. I'm a dragon, breathing fire on the backstraps of her sandals. She darts off the riverbank down the side of the town drain, and that's where she slips in the mud and screams.