



'A claymore-swinging,
heather-igniting
historical adventure'

Sunday Times

*White
Rose
Rebel*

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White Rose Rebel
by
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ONE

In the distance there was a drum beating and the faint skirl of slow pipes. It was a call to the clans, for a chief was dying. At such a time even bitter enemies forgot their grudges, laid their swords aside and set off to honour the call. Undisturbed by the distant beat, a roe deer grazed in the fading light of dusk among heather and rock on the foothills of the Cairngorms. A shot cracked off, then another, with barely a heartbeat between. The deer staggered, fell.

'*Trobhad!* Come on!' Calling out in Gaelic, a young girl, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, dashed from the thicket of nearby trees, her grubby face alert with joy as she ran barefoot towards the wounded beast, the musket in her hand still smoking. Her long dark hair was crazily tangled but her dress, though clearly Highland, was velvet and lace.

'Anne, *fuirich!* Wait!' An older youth in a chief's bonnet and kilted plaid emerged behind the girl, the second gun in his hand, the gleam of his red-gold hair still discernible in the gathering dark.

Anne did not heed or hesitate. She dropped the musket as she ran, drew a dirk from the belt at her waist and, to avoid its hooves, leapt over the injured deer, short sword poised. As she leapt, the terrified animal thrashed, trying to rise. Its flailing hooves smacked against her shin. Anne yelped, stumbling on to the heather. The youth, two steps behind, threw down his gun, drew his dirk, fell to his knees and yanked the deer's head back to finish it. Anne lunged forwards on to its chest to plunge her blade first into the animal's throat.

'I got him,' she said. There was challenge in her voice. The lad glanced at her across the shuddering carcass as the earthy stench of blood rose between them. 'All right, MacGillivray,' she conceded. 'We both got him.' Then she thrust her fingers into the slowing spurt from the deer's neck and, with the middle one, drew a bloodied line down the centre of her forehead. 'But it's my kill.'

Satisfied that her right was secured, she jumped to her feet. Pain twisted up through her body. The yelp was out before she could stop it. As she staggered, the young MacGillivray caught hold of her. Anne raised her long velvet skirt and looked down. Her right ankle had begun to swell. She tried again to put her weight on it, biting her lip so as not to squeal again with pain.

‘I’ll carry you,’ MacGillivray offered.

‘And what about the deer?’

‘It’ll have to wait.’

‘*Gu dearbh, fhèin, chan fhuirich!* Indeed it won’t!’ She would not lose the kill. There were few deer left on the hills, and they’d been lucky to find this one. Hungry folk were not the only hunters. ‘The wolves would have it before we were half-way home.’

‘I’ll put it in a tree.’

‘You’ll take it back to Invercauld. People won’t arrive to an empty larder now.’

‘They’ll bring food, if they can. It’s been a thin year for all of us.’

‘But he will eat.’ Her throat constricted. ‘And get strength from it.’ Her voice wavered. ‘Maybe then they can all go home again.’

MacGillivray stared down at her. At nineteen, he was a full head taller. He could remind her that the dying chief couldn’t eat, hadn’t for days. Instead, he caught her round the waist, lifted and slung her over his shoulder.

‘What are you doing?’ She struggled.

‘Putting you in the tree,’ he said as he strode back to the thicket.

While she shimmied her backside into the fork of the tree he put her in, MacGillivray primed and loaded her musket before handing it up.

‘But I still think it should be the deer.’

‘Will you go, Alexander?’

He slung his own musket to lie across his chest and swung the deer carcass across his shoulders. He was not happy at the prospect of returning without her. They were not his clan. These were not his lands.

‘MacGillivray,’ she called as he set off. He turned, still ready to hoist the deer into the tree and her out of it. ‘That way,’ she pointed. ‘Follow the drum.’

MacGillivray let his breath out, turned and headed the way she directed. The limp head of the deer banged against his back with every stride, blood still dripping.

‘Tell them I shot it,’ she yelled as he vanished out of sight.

Now she was alone. Among the rocks, two courting wildcats circled each other, yowling. A hunting owl hooted. The moon rose above the hills. Its light made the pool of deer blood gleam in the dark. From the valley beyond, a wolf bayed. Anne shifted in the tree. If the pack came this way, they’d pick up the blood-scent and be after it. MacGillivray had slung his musket first. To load it, he’d have to drop the deer. The wolves would dart in. They would be ravenous, their natural caution blunted. He’d get one shot in, and time to load and fire again as they dragged the deer away but, with only a dirk to use then, if there were more than two wolves, the kill could be lost. Anne looked around the tree, hung her musket on a short branch and drew the dirk from her belt.

By the time the moon reached eleven o’clock in the sky, the wolves had found the congealed puddle of blood. They could smell the sour stink of humans too, but hunger removes much reticence and the ribs of these three animals were visible through their scraggy pelts. One sniffed around the puddle. Another raised its head and yowled. The third picked up the trail of what to them was wounded prey and they all loped off, following it. The fork in the tree where Anne had been was empty. Near it, a jagged branch bore the pale white wood of a fresh cut.

Dribbles of deer blood shone on the rough track made by MacGillivray. Breathing hard, Anne hobbled across rock and heather, a crutch hacked from the tree under her left arm, the butt of her musket under the right, her swollen ankle roughly bandaged by cloth torn from her skirt. She had gone some way towards Invercauld but not enough. From behind her, further back on the trail, a wolf howled. She stopped, half-turned, listened, trying to gauge how far, how fast. The heather-clad ground and low trees were cut

against dark shadows deepened by the high moon. The front of Anne's dress shone darkly in its light.

Leaning on the musket butt, she touched the bloodstain with her hand. It was still wet. Wolves would not normally have troubled her. They were shy of folk but starvation changed both man and beast. That was why she was on the hill when she would rather be at home, and why she'd left the safety of her tree. Without thinking, she'd gone after MacGillivray to protect her kill. But in the time she'd taken, he could have reached Invercauld and be half-way back to fetch her so now, as the wolves followed the bloodspoor, they would find her instead, reeking of the deer they tracked.

Heart thumping, Anne gripped the musket butt tight, swung round and lurched forwards, intending to travel faster. Instead, she slammed into something solid. Winded and disoriented at the sudden presence, it took her a few seconds to realize it was a man she'd walked into. He was dark-headed, long black hair to his shoulders, but old, maybe even thirty, and he was a stranger. Without speaking, he reached out and, though she ducked, clamped his hand on the top of her head and wiped the blood trophy from her forehead with his thumb.

'Seadh, a-nis,' he said. 'So, it's a warrior I've found.'

Anne was sure that the tone of his voice betrayed a smile she could see no evidence of on his face. The lilt of it confirmed he didn't belong in this glen.

'Are you a MacDonald?'

He seemed to find the question even more amusing than her kill mark and bent down, his face close to hers.

'And if I was?'

Using all the length and strength of her arm, Anne swung her musket hard. The barrel cracked across the man's shin. He let out a yell and curled forwards instinctively, but the force of the blow threw her off balance. She lost her grip of the musket and staggered, about to fall. The man caught her shoulders, propped her up again on the makeshift crutch.

'A warrior would know,' he said, and there was no smile in his

voice this time. 'If you have a wounded leg, you attack with the opposite arm.'

Anne didn't need telling twice. She swung the wooden crutch. It, too, cracked across the man's shin. He yelled again, crumpling back a step from her. Anne swayed but, being ready for it this time, managed to keep her balance and stay upright. The man recovered quickly. His dark brows frowned over angry eyes. Furious, he grabbed the crutch from her grasp, broke it in two over his knee as if it were kindling and tossed it away into the heather. Then he snatched up her fallen musket, pointed it in her direction and, as she stared defiantly, wavering now without any support, he fired.

There was a loud yelp from behind her. Further down the trail, the lead wolf spun round as the ball bit into its shoulder. It whimpered and slunk off, limping. The other two halted and began to back away. Anne stared up at the man, her mouth open, impressed by his speed and accuracy. Her admiration came too late. The man glared back at her.

'Now for you,' he said.

At Invercauld, the pipes and drums played on, slow and steady. Torches flickered like fireflies on the hills. All around the chief's squat stone house small cooking fires flared in the dark. The air was heavy with expected sorrow and thick with murmurs. Beside the door of the house, the white rose of June bloomed, reflecting the moonlight from its ghostly perfumed flowers. Jean Forbes stood in the doorway watching the torch-bearing searchers return from the hills. She was on edge, irritated more than worried. The young girl who clung to her side sensed her mother's mood and seemed to be trying to hide among the folds of her skirts. MacGillivray hurried towards them.

'She was gone,' he said, his breath coming hard. 'We ran all the way, by the shortest path. But she wasn't there.'

'Och! Then where?'

MacGillivray spread puzzled hands. This was his responsibility and a heavy one at such a time.

‘Some of the men followed other roads home. She had cut a crutch and a tracker found her trail, but that will be slow.’

Jean, the Lady Farquharson, was much younger than her dying husband – his fourth wife – and Anne was not her daughter. The girl could never do as she was told, and this was not a night when the clan’s attention should be distracted by a wayward, foolish child.

‘My husband will not hold on much longer,’ she snapped at MacGillivray. ‘She must be found!’

MacGillivray had no answer for her ire, but he tried to frame one. As the first word of apology reached his tongue, a musket shot sounded behind him and silenced it. Alarmed, people turned towards the sound. In the muttering that followed, names were uttered, ‘M^cIntosh’, ‘Aeneas’, names spoken in recognition but with deference and respect. Then Aeneas M^cIntosh strode into the light from the doorway, musket smoking in his hand, Anne perched on his shoulders.

Relieved, Anne’s kinfolk crowded around. Lady Farquharson noticed the missing girl first but it was the man who carried her whose presence was the greater pleasure.

‘Aeneas! *Fàilte.*’

‘Lady Farquharson,’ Aeneas responded. ‘My uncle sends his regrets. In his poor health, the mountain pass defeats him.’

The woman nodded. The M^cIntosh was the elected head of Clan Chatton, the clan of the cat, a federation to which all those present belonged. Farquharson’s death would be dishonoured by his absence. But she and Aeneas were of similar age and maybe there were other benefits in his presence, so she hid her disappointment at his news.

‘We’re honoured to be in his thoughts,’ she said. ‘Will you take his place with the other Chatton chiefs?’

Aeneas was the nephew of a chief, not one of them. He’d come to pay his respects to a deserving warrior because he chose to, not simply to bring the M^cIntosh’s regards, and would have waited with the other kin outside. But he acquiesced, accepting the honour, and slid the now wriggling Anne from his shoulders to set her on the

ground. Lady Farquharson fixed the grubby bloodstained girl with a look of disdain.

‘Your father’s waiting,’ she said, then turned and, taking the child clinging to her skirts with her, vanished into the house. Anne glared at MacGillivray, furious, fingers clenched at her sides.

‘You didn’t come back for me!’

‘We couldn’t find you.’

Anne leapt at him, punching, and the ferocity of her attack bowled them both over into the rose bush.

‘We looked everywhere,’ he protested, struggling to grab her flailing fists.

Anne was lifted into the air, a white rose tangled in her tumbling hair. Aeneas had her by the back of her dress.

‘Is this what you do when your chief is dying?’ he thundered.

‘*Na can sin*, he is not,’ Anne shouted back at him. ‘He’s sick, that’s all!’

‘So you hunt without his permission, drag MacGillivray with you, then get yourself hurt so those who bring respect to a brave man must turn away to save a silly girl?’ Aeneas had not let go his hold of her, though even in his rage he was mindful of his shins. ‘But you will behave now, before you go in, or I will give you the spanking you have earned right here!’

Anne was at her own door surrounded by her own tribe. He wouldn’t dare. With all the icy sarcasm of superiority, she spat her answer at him.

‘You certainly will not, sir. For you are not my father or a chief!’

Without a word, and in one easy move, Aeneas dropped to one knee, pulled her over the other and administered a resounding smack on her backside, quite hard enough to thoroughly dent her pride. When he stood her back on her feet, she hesitated, glaring at him. When none of the watchers spoke or moved to defend her, she tossed her head and hobbled off on her swollen ankle into the house.

Aeneas studied MacGillivray. The young chief stared, resolutely, at the ground. A scratch on his cheek from a rose thorn oozed tiny beads of blood.

‘Maybe I should take over your training,’ Aeneas suggested. The hint of teasing in his voice went unnoticed. The youth’s head came up, eager.

‘Would you?’

‘I’ll speak to M^cIntosh when we return,’ Aeneas answered. His uncle was MacGillivray’s guardian. He would approve.

‘I would have waited for you,’ the lad blurted out, ‘but no one knew where you’d gone. I came yesterday –’ now his pride was returning ‘– to represent my people.’

‘As you should,’ Aeneas agreed.

Inside Invercauld, the crowded main room glowed with candles. A peat fire smouldered in the hearth. All the Clan Chatton chiefs, male and female, were gathered round with their husbands or wives, standing or sitting, waiting. James Farquharson, a youth of sixteen, sobbed quietly next to the low bed on which his father lay. Lady Farquharson, her young daughter, Elizabeth, still holding on to her skirts, turned from beside the bed as Anne entered.

‘Look at the state of you,’ she hissed.

Unheeding, Anne brushed past to the bedside. As she looked down at her father, her rebellious demeanour changed and, for the first time that evening, became that of a frightened little girl.

‘Daddy?’

The Farquharson’s eyes flickered open. His head turned towards her and he half-rose, gripping her shoulders.

‘I got a deer for you,’ Anne said. ‘A deer! Now you can eat well and get better.’

Just inside the doorway, Aeneas M^cIntosh stood beside the MacGillivray. He’d assumed the girl hunted for pleasure, indifferent to her father’s impending death.

‘No food,’ Farquharson said. He was fading, and it seemed everyone but his elder daughter could see the shadow of death on him.

‘Then I’ll have someone mix the blood with ale. That’ll strengthen you.’ She turned to her half-sister, still hiding behind her mother. ‘Elizabeth –’ she began.

‘No.’ Her father tightened his grip on her shoulders. ‘No, Anne.

It's you and James will need to be strong now. My time is finished.'

'*Chan eil! Chan eil idir!* I won't let you go.' Her voice broke, but she raised it, anguished, and glared at those standing around the bed, tears glittering in her eyes. 'Why do you all stand there? Do something!' No one moved or spoke, though there was some uncomfortable shuffling. Her stepmother put a hand on her shoulder. It might have been compassion, but Anne shook it away. 'Am I the only one?'

'*Isd, a ghràidh,*' her father said. 'Hush, lass.' But a faint smile lit his gaunt face. 'Your brother will be chief now, if the clan wishes it, but you, you'll always be my warrior.' With a trembling hand, he reached up and pulled the white rose from her hair. 'My Jacobite. When the Prince is man enough, he'll come,' his voice faded, 'in his father's place.'

The prince he spoke of was a boy of seventeen, living in exile. His grandfather had ruled the three independent nations of Scotland, England and Ireland but was deposed in 1689. When Scotland united with England in 1707, the Prince's father became the linchpin of revolt against that Union. Eight years later, Farquharson joined the rebellion of 1715, hoping to crown James Stuart as King of Scots and restore Scottish independence. The rising failed. King James returned to France. Now the cause invested hope of leadership in his young son.

'We'll fight,' his daughter promised. 'We'll fight for the Prince. You know we will.'

The Farquharson's breath shuddered in his chest.

'Fight,' he fell back on to the pillow, 'for your freedom.'

'We will. I promise.' Anne raised her head, grasping for the comfort of familiar words, and though she was half-blinded by tears, her voice rang strong. 'For prosperity, and no Union!'

And while her father could no longer hear the affirmation, people would remember that he died with the white rose symbol of their struggle in his hand as every person in the room repeated it.

'Prosperity and no Union!'