

The Death of Lady Macbeth

by Grace Cullen

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. For a moment there was nothing but a dreadful silence, then I heard her faint command. Slowly, I stepped inside. The light was hazy. The candles burned low in their wicks and the room flickered in shadows. She was alone.

‘What news?’ She spoke from the farthest corner, her voice as light as sparrow wings.

They’d let the fire die whilst I was away and now its glowing embers blinked like fading stars. I stepped forward, curtsying as I did so. I could see her more clearly now. She was curled up in her chair, her knees drawn up tightly against her chest. Her furs had fallen to the floor and her shoulders were bare, a shock of white against the cold. Her hair hung long and loose and I watched as she twisted it around her finger, tighter and tighter, bringing it close to her lips then letting it fall. She looked like a broken child.

‘They were not there, my Lady.’

‘But of course they were. Where else would they be? Where else?’ Her voice was high and breathless.

‘My Lady?’

‘You must return. You must search them out. How dare you come back with news of nothing.’

‘I searched, my Lady, where you bid me. I looked for them.’

I thought of the cold dark rock hidden within the whispering trees. I had listened to the wind and the call of the birds. I had searched the ground with my fingertips, digging at the roots and the soil, looking for their signs. But there were no ashes, no darkened stains. The undergrowth was undisturbed and the air was clean. I wondered if they had ever been there; those three women with their words of Kings.

'I trusted you and now we are lost. The blood is spilling over. Can't you see it?'

She took my wrist and pulled it sharply towards her. Her long thin fingers tightened their grip. She raised my hand towards the quivering candle light and twisted it whilst she examined me. I held my breath at the sharpness of the pain. I prayed I wouldn't fall, but then she dropped my hand and lifted her own instead.

'Can't you see?' She scratched at her skin.

'My Lady?'

'You must leave. Leave now. I need word. What is their plan? What have they seen for us?'

'My Lady, forgive me, but they are not there and I cannot leave you.'

The servants had fled whilst I was away. All those who could had slipped into the shadows, taking what they could carry. The Great Hall once decked in silver and gold, the candlesticks, the plates and chalices had melted with them into the darkness. The men who stayed patrolled the battlements above, so for now the castle was empty. I was all she had left. I crouched low before her and gently lifted the furs from the cold stone. I placed them around her bare shoulders. Her skin was like ice on the loch in the first days of winter.

'The army has come, my Lady.'

'The army?'

'Yes, my Lady. They hide in Birnam Wood. I saw them as I returned. They are cutting the trees. They mean to breach the castle.'

'They are coming?'

'Yes, my Lady, they are very close.'

She was suddenly still, her face frozen like the statues that look out upon our enemies at the gate. She raised her hands and held them out to me, turning them this way and that, as if she were pleading or begging.

'But can't you see it?'

'My Lady, we can't stay. The soldiers will be here soon. It's not safe, we must leave.'

She stood up and squared her slight shoulders. She looked down upon me like the Queen she always meant to be. I draped her furs and cloaks around her shoulders. I lifted her long hair and lay it so it fell like a wave of silver down her back. The beaten band of gold lay discarded on the floor. I picked it up and placed it gently on her head.

I followed her through the damp castle, along the empty passages and winding stairs. We saw no one, but the sounds of men readying for war pressed down on us. She climbed higher and higher until at last we stood before a hard oak door. There she stopped and waited.

I stepped before her, twisted the heavy key and pushed with all my strength until the door gave way. A fierce shock of wind pulled at my hair, my skin. The sharp ice in the rain stung at my eyes and I stepped back, cowed by the storm.

‘My Lady, this is no place for you. Come inside. Please, my Lady.’

She walked past me and stepped into the tempest of the night, but she did not notice. Then she dropped her cloaks, slipped off her gown and stood naked before the moon. It was as if I watched her ghost.

She walked to the edge of the battlements and climbed so that her pale feet balanced on the lip of the stone. She said not a word. She did not look back. She took one final step and was gone.

The sound escaped my mouth before I could stop it. My scream sang deep into the night. I covered my mouth with my hands but its echo escaped me and for a moment I was heard. The wind and the rain calmed and stilled. The angry calls for battle quietened. The moving trees that walked in shadows slowed. The world stopped and listened to my cry.

She was gone.