

A Legend Of Edinburgh.

Even Freeman and Burgesses of Edinburgh's West Wynd, believed that convicted necromancer Major Thomas Weir still passed through the streets in his flaming coach two hundred years after his execution.

Which was why, late one September night in 1873, Deacon Dickson, in company with Treasurer Kerr, referred to the notion as they meandered home.

Content in their days endeavours on behalf of the citizens of the city, the men, were filled with satisfaction and liquor.

Dickson had imbibed the most and was the more emboldened and loquacious for it. Confident of his impending success in thwarting the efforts of Provost Drummond in building a bridge over the North Loch, a folly if ever there was one, he was buoyed by having secured more votes in his support.

Kerr, a little "afared" given the lateness of the hour, their state of intoxication and the respective receptions that may be awaiting them from their spouses, was more sombre.

A full moon cast ample light, throwing long shadows.

"Truth be told deacon, Kerr observed, we have tarried too long in Luckie Bell tonight, it has struck twelve! It is already tomorrow! What shall I say to the wife?"

"Sht, man, don't whine so, Are you afraid of your Kate?" Laughing the Deacon declared that "tomorrow must take care of itself".

Kerr, hoping to succeed his companion at the next election, had delayed his own return home to chaperone his sponsor.

Addressing the treasurer the deacon noted "you walk by my side as sober as if you were afraid to meet Major Weir in his coach on your way down the wynd."

The deacon, then recounted the history of how, he was sure, Drummond and his "conspirators" had seen to it that his outside staircase was destroyed. The perpetrators only fined two shillings a piece for the destruction; His application to replace was refused.

Objectors stating it was an obstruction; The cost of rebuilding it within his walls, coming to ten good pounds. As he ended his tale, Kerr drew his attention to "a high white wall across the High Street" that was blocking their way.

"He has done it to vex me" the deacon observed. "Since I came down to Luckie Bell's; he must have had a hundred masons at it. I'll see he repents this frolic to-morrow"

Dickson enraged, started to denounce the provost publicly, loudly. The Treasurers prudently placed hand stymied the words from awakening residents.

Kerr then persuaded Dickson that the two should make their way directly to his home via Fishmarket Close.

The two men, whose commercial and civic success manifested in their corpulence, continued to the Deacon's at a pace commensurate to their sizes and intoxication. Here they received a warm welcome from Dickson's wife, who was curious as to the reason for their late return and noted her husbands agitated and vexed state.

From him she heard of the "immense wall, some three storeys high, that the provost had caused to be built, from the Crames to the Royal Exchange; and of the great length of time he had been detained in identifying a way to get over or through it"—Accepting the account the deaconess endorsed her husbands derision of the provost.

Kerr took his leave.

The Dickson's retired to bed.

The sun had risen by the time the deaconess hurried with her water stoups to the public well at the Bowhead. Anxious to share details of the provost's conduct in raising the wall of partition.

Many women were already there despite the early hour. Shrill voices mixed with the sonorous tones of the highland water-carriers, filling the air.

The deaconesses tale of the wall caused a sensation. Soon the company determined they should go as a body, led by the deaconess, to examine this bold encroachment upon the citizens.

Passing the goal and the three story Luckenbooth tenements, they rounded the corner to where the wall was said to stand.

Shouts of laughter and derision erupted from the front of the group as they arrived. To the deaconess' mortification there was no wall.

Teased for her credulity in accepting her husbands pitiful drunken excuse for his late return she vowed to raise the matter with him. Noting, nonetheless, "There must have been some witchcraft played off upon him and the treasurer last night; For they baith said they saw it with their een. I fear Major Weir is playing more tricks than just riding his coach."

After leaving the couple the treasurer found he was not now so muddled by alcohol.

Continuing home he came to the Bow Foot Well he came across a sobbing woman Identifying her as the widow, Mrs. Horner, he enquired,

What has happened? Why are you here at this untimous hour? "

"Thomas Kerr," she replied, "I am a poor unfortunate woman, whom God alone can help. Pass on, leave me to my misery."

Protesting he could not leave her, he offered to take her home only to learn she no longer had one, having been cast out by her son.

In distress she had gone to late husbands grave, there "to lie upon it joining him and their babes in eternal rest".

Fear of unearthly apparitions and the moanings that came from Bloody Mackenzie's tomb caused her to flee to the Well.

And so she concluded, "I shall tarry here, and die in sight of the gallows stone where my only brother, killed by a shot from Porteous' gun, fell: Leave me, Thomas Kerr—leave me to my destiny, thrown out by my son I shall not be comforted."

Kerr, feeling awkward in the circumstance, paused.

Unsure whether he should stay or follow her direction. His humanity pressed for the former, caution, avarice and a fear of his spouse, the latter. Standing, briefly irresolute, he then ran like a guilty criminal from her side.

The wailing of the crushed person he left awakened his conscience. The cause for his agitation was the striking similarity between his mothers situation and that of Widow Horner.

Kerr's father and Widow Horner's husband had been industrious, and, for their rank in life, wealthy burgesses of the city. Each was survived by a widow and only child. The women managed well their estates until their sons were old enough to take over.

By 25 Kerr was married. His mother, finding his prospective wife wanting, had tried to dissuade him from the match. So the couple wed in secret. Neighbours passing on the news.

Despite her reservations, his mother resolved to receive her daughter-in-law with all the kindness she could assume.

Her daughter-in-law, Kate, an overbearing, calculating, cunning and vindictive woman, was not minded to reciprocate.

On moving into the Kerr family home, the new Mrs Kerr fought for supremacy and the removal of her rival.

An indulged only child "Tammy" loved and esteemed his mother. Consequently Kate was left to employ covert schemes to advance her cause. In company all was harmony in the house. When alone she said and did a thousand little things to try her mother-in-law.

The widow raised these cruelties with her son. He, was always won over by Kate's tearful persuasions.

Gradually, his affection for his mother withered.

Though his mother had made over all her possessions to him, Kate remained unsatisfied. The widow, so crushed that she ceased to complain still had further wickednesses visited upon her.

Thomas, manipulated and brow beaten was completely subdued to his wife's dictation.

Accordingly, the encounter with widow Horner enabled him to see his own weak acts of unkindness to his mother. As memories of Kate's behaviour to his mother, conducted under his passive observation, returned, he was overwhelmed by remorse.

Whilst running a fevered inner turmoil on how to remedy these wrongs occupied him. Even as approached home, his courage already failing him.

In this pitiable state he reached the foot of College Wynd, and the sound of a rapidly approaching carriage.

Terrified he rushed into a stair foot. Placing both hands over his eyes he leaned hard into the wall.

As it drew up beside him a sepulchral voice from the coach asked—"Is he here?"

"O God! have mercy on my sinful soul!" screamed the treasurer, sinking senseless out of the foot of the stair onto the street.

Afterwards he could give no account of how long he remained unconscious nor what passed.

On regaining consciousness, he found himself seated inside the carriage supported between two headless bodies. The heads, visible by moonlight, detached and dangling.

Paralysed, unable to even beg for mercy, he would have sunk to the floor but, vice like fingers held him upright.

Commanded to—he sat and confessed his sins hoping for mercy from the Major for his honesty.

"Recounting his sins and neglected duties, tears of remorse filled his eyes.

Then, the carriage stopped.

A door opened violently.

He, painfully alive and aware, listened as the disembodied voice broke the silence.

"Thomas Kerr, your sincerity and contrition have delivered you from my power this once. Go and do the duty of a good son. A worse man on earth than ever I was. I, at least, have my parent's blessing to soothe my wretchedness."

Bewildered, as if fallen from the clouds Kerr sat on the ground. All around impenetrable darkness.

On gaining his senses he thanked God, imploring pardon and protection. Then he remained, sitting, awaiting daybreak.

Fearing ever being able to survive the night, at last he heard the tramp of a horse and a cheery whistle.

Springing to his feet, he could discern a carrier's cart. "Stop friend, he cried, take me up beside you."

The carrier, wary at first, declined, urging his horse on. A desperate Kerr persisted. "Stop, if you are a Christian".

Kerr's speaking enabled the carrier, Watty Clinkscales of North-Berwick, to recognise Kerr. Once aboard Kerr carefully parried Watty's questions as to how he came to be at Figgate Whins at that hour in the morning.

Arriving home as first light rose over the city, Kerr was exhausted.

Met by his anxious mother, who had waited the whole night, tears started into his eyes. He took her hand begging that she pardon his undutiful behaviour.

"Tammy, my bairn," she replied, "what have I to pardon? Is not all my pleasure in life to see you happy? But you are ill, very ill!"

On this last he agreed. Having received her blessing he allowed her to guide him to his bedroom. His spouse opened the door. Her berating of him for keeping untimely hours stopped on hearing his command and on seeing the night of suffering reflected in his countenance.

His sleep, troubled and delirious, lasted for days. Periods of delusional shouting were triggered by the smallest sound. The horrors of that night plagued him. A physician declared his life to be in extreme danger for many days.

Clinkscales recounted where he had found him.

Dickson, the hour Kerr left him.

Kerr's ravings filled the space.

It was widely accepted that the treasurer had been transported to the Figgate Whins in the Major's coach.

Two of the incorporation had, that same night, been alarmed by a coach they heard driving furiously down the Cowgate. Others had been awoken by the noise of a carriage.

Now, no-one was going out after dark.

Magistrates declared this state of alarm could not be allowed to continue, resolving to investigate the affair.

Testimony was taken, the treasurer, too ill, could not be spoken to. There was harmony in the accounts. Sounds, the horses' feet, the rumbling of a carriage.

The authorities were stumped. How to proceed?

Following private meetings the provost's committee sent for the captain of the train-bands. It was agreed that twelve of the band and six of the town-guard should form a watch. Should the coach appear, they would investigate. The committee were sure the coach had some unlawful purpose.

Volunteers for the duty were few. They feared the devil not criminals and would rather be fined than take the shifts.

For several nights the watch was strictly kept by towns people. No coach appeared. Fear and panic dissipated.

Election week for the deacon of crafts arrived. City politics ran high as candidates canvassed for votes. The treasurer, although recovered, was still too weak to take an active part.

Dickson, redoubled his exertions to have one of his party elected in his place. As Kerr had not recovered he was dropped as a candidate.

On the evening of the election a party issued into the High Street. Deacon Dickson and his successor at its' head.

None tipsy; all were relaxed. There was no talk of Weirs coach.

Scarce had the head of the procession emerged from Merlins' Wynd when, the sound of a rapidly approaching carriage could be heard.

Stopping, the leaders would have retreated back, but those behind, unaware of the cause, pressed on.

In the street the two deacons seized the reins of the horses.

In a second, the head of the coachman launched from his hand felling Dickson to the ground.

Stunned, he kept hold of the reins, calling on his companions to cut the traces.

Meanwhile, having secured the return of his head, the coachman launched forth, with various effect, on the aggressors as other heads flew from the carriage.

The cries of the assailants resounded through the stillness of the night.

Candles began to appear at windows. The assailants numbers were swelled by other residents.

Dickson, never relinquished his hold, despite being severely hurt.

In spite of the resistance, at the moment the carriage reached the foot of the wynd, a door burst open, and two figures leapt out. Disappearing with their coachman in the confusion.

In the coach all that remained were greatcoats. Basket work within the shoulders of which had concealed the head and neck of the wearer. Artificial heads were attached by cords.

Of the contents of the coach, well.

The wives of some tradesmen in the Cowgate were seen in new silk gowns. People had better and stronger tea and they abounded in tobacco for many weeks to come.

The coach and horses, the prize of Dickson and his friends, remained unclaimed. Though badly bruised from the encounter Dickson recovered well.

Feted by all for his role in achieving with his friends, what the train-bands and city-guard had failed to accomplish, greatly contented him.

He visited his friend the treasurer to congratulate him on his re-election and share the tale of his own adventure.

Kerr listened with intense interest and a feeling of horror.

"Do you really think they were devils? Was it really their own heads they threw about?" enquired the treasurer when his friend had finished.

"Maybe not devils but they fought like devils. They could not be anything canny; for they got out from among our hands like a flash of light." replied his companion.

"Whatever they were, the horses are as bonny blacks as anyone could wish for. I am proposing they and the Major's coach be sold. The proceeds to be spent in a treat to the incorporation".

The treasurer's spirits lifted as the tale unfurled; His countenance and mind brightened.

"Deacon," he observed, I feel a new man. This whole business has been a bold contrivance of the smugglers to run their goods.

I am still puzzled though at how I survived. But, you, my friend, have restored peace to my mind."

The treasurer recovered rapidly thereafter. Able to take up his affairs as before.

For a few days Kate struggled hard to retain her power in the household, weeping and threatening desertion. Kerr, listened unmoved.

His mother was restored to her proper station, Kate learned to live within this new order.

Several years passed. The next election saw the Deaconship pass to Kerr who served with credit; his business prospered.

The adventure with the Major's coach was seldom mentioned. Until, that is, one forenoon. An elderly man in much soiled seaman's dress entered Kerr's workshop.

Addressing Kerr by name he asked if he might be employed. Kerr agreed to take him on a trial basis.

Once engaged the man proved an excellent craftsman.

Letting slip knowledge of matters known only to Kerr and his family, he piqued Kerr's curiosity so much that one evening he invited the man home.

The stranger, once in the house, became pensive and reserved—his eyes, wandering to the mother of his master.

Then, he addressed her with some emotion.

"My ever-revered mistress! have you entirely forgot Wattie Brown, the runaway apprentice of your husband?"

Confirming she remembered the lad she refused to believe this man, with grey hair, was him

She continued, "How time flies. The Porteous mob is in my mind as if it had happened last week. O Wattie! always a reckless lad, regretting no doubt your action that night, tell us what has come of you since?"

And so he recounted his tale.

Like other apprentices of Edinburgh he was furious with Captain Porteous and his slaughter of the townsmen at Robinsion's execution.

Porteous at first condemned, received an 11th hour Pardon.

This bloodshedder of the innocent was to be free.

Such injustice could not be endured. Incandescent in their rage the drums of the city called them to arms.

Wattie, on learning of the mob's intention, "'To execute righteous judgment!" took from the shop a forehammer and joined the throng.

He arrived at the door of the jail house with the leaders and attacked the door with his hammer. The beating did not breach the door. The fire, others lit, did.

A stranger advised, "If you are like to come to trouble for this night's work, fly to Anstruther, and you will find a friend."

Wattie, seeing the mob dragging Porteous' pitiable form out of the jail departed. Unable to forget the image of the wretched man he soon learned of his fate. On hearing of the fatal lynching Wattie became alarmed for his own safety.

With some others he took a boat to Fife. On the voyage he made acquaintance with the captain. A merchant keen not to overburden Revenue Officers with work, the man had been the intimate friend of Robinson. Wattie joined his crew.

For the next thirty-seven years he was either stationary and working at his trade, or, at sea.

His principle home had been Rotterdam; but his heart was ever in Auld Reekie. Keen to return often he would join a vessel simply to sail past the city.

Once he learned he could return safely, he did not rush to do so, unable to bear the thought of having to serve out his apprenticeship.

Years passed and he had accumulated several hundred guilder upon which he could live out his days in Edinburgh. Meeting a townsman engaged in smuggling, he invested his life savings with him.

The man's colleagues on shore had provided a coach and horses, with suitable dresses, to personate Major Weir's carriage as a vehicle to move dutiable goods about the city.

Departing, this friend left to join the venture.

Eventually the man returned, utterly impoverished. All had been lost.

Wattie was sanguine. The man had lost 10 times more than him. A revenue cutter ran them ashore near St Andrews. He got away with only his clothes and the little cash he had aboard.

Making his way to the city the coach was rigged out. On reaching the Cowgate, it was attacked and captured by the townspeople. The rest, Wattie said, you know.

Despite having nothing, Wattie determined to come home.

"Did your partner make no mention of carrying off one of the townsmen in the coach?" asked the treasurer.

"Excuse me, master, for not mentioning it," replied Walter. "He gave me a full account of all that happened to you, regretting that he made you so ill.

Driven to act in self-preservation, when you fell out of the stair he knew not who you were—a friend or, revenue officer. As alarmed as you until he found you were insensible. When the goods were hurried out. You were placed in the carriage. His first intention was to convey you to Holland and sell you.

But, your terror, the sincerity of your confession, and your belief that you were in the power of the Major, saved you. You know the rest."

Kate and Tammy's mother scarce breathed whilst Wattie related this danger: Thomas shuddered.

Wattie Brown continued as foreman for many years living to a good old age. Widow Horner, sadly, died of a broken heart.

Thomas Kerr prospered.

Walter Horner, once the richer, died in poverty, more despised than pitied.

And of Major Weir's Coach, well, you venture into the Cowgate after dark and let me know.....

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