

Goldeneye

Chapter 1

IT BEGAN AT THE WATERFALL, over the hill, beyond sight of the little croft. Catherine often went there to wash herself all over, where her father wouldn't see her. His eyes were always on her, ever since her mother died. He wouldn't stop looking at her. In the wash-house, his eye was at the knotholes. When she crossed to the byre or hung out the wash, he gazed on her from slant corners or beyond the blind glass of the windows. Since the mother died there was no peace from him.

Catherine had gone to the waterfall that evening, not to wash, but to let Huey MacLintock kiss her. But her father had spied them out. Not idly was he nicknamed An Dóiteán – the great fire. He nearly killed poor Huey. She thought he would kill her, too. But instead he fell to his knees in the torrent of white water and threw his arms around her in a hug that begged her understanding – and so much else besides. But she could not forgive, nor give, nor understand.

She ran from him, from his everywhere eyes. She ran from herself, fearing herself. She fled that whole country. It was the spring of 1919.

She had no idea Scotland was so big. The long, anxious miles the train had brought her from Fort William were a revelation. And Glasgow was reassuringly huge. Yet her memory of the old, sepia-toned globe in the corner of the schoolroom at Strath told her she had not yet travelled a measurable fraction of the earth's surface. Its alien vastness began to frighten her. If Uncle Murdo had not left her the money for this voyage, if Uncle Murdo were not waiting for her in Canada, she would turn around and go home.

No! There was one thing she feared more: her father. She feared his anger, his angry, devouring eyes, his angry, burning hair, his fiercely freckled brow and cheeks, his furious possession of her ... his implacable love. Fear of him had driven her here, this bright embarkation morning.

Fear of his merciless, loving eyes harried her down over the cobblestones and granite setts, down through grime that all the rain in Scotland would not cleanse, down through the bleary daybreak, down to the tar-daubed quay, where the promise was all of North America.

HECTOR was the name around the vessel's stern. She was a salt-stained cargo carrier with room for ten first-class passengers and as many steerage as could be packed in without revolt. Below her name ran the legend JOHN

BROWN – GLASGOW. In a way, then, *Hector* was at home here. *In what way?* Catherine wondered. *In the same way as me.* She stepped hesitantly up the gangplank.

“We sail in two hours,” a seaman told her. He sounded oddly reproachful.

Catherine looked puzzled; two hours – surely that meant she was in good time?

“The rest of your baggage,” the man explained. He looked at her battered suitcase, then at her face. “Is that all?”

“Aye.”

He shrugged. One less worry. “Female steerage is on the deck below this. Up forrard. Ye may walk on this deck in the hours of daylight and the forrard well deck at any time, but only when the hatches are battened. If the covers are off, you stay clear. Ye’ll see Mrs MacEuan, the stewardess, for a berth.”

She thanked him and went to the companionway. MacEuan. A good Highland name. There were MacEuans in Strath; one farmed near Beinn Uidhe. *Petty, vindictive, small-souled informers!* The memory of her father’s judgement rolled in like thunder from the lowland hills around Greenock and Gourock, where *Hector* lay, waiting for the seaward pluck of the tide.

Catherine was weary. Her joints ached. Soon she could rest for ten days – perhaps more.

Two women, who might have been gentlefolk in better days, were walking arm in arm around the forward well deck. The hatches were uncovered but no one told the women off. Another seaman was signalling down the last few bales of some late cargo – sealskins? Hides? The giant dried leaves of some plant? Even their colour was indeterminate. The man eyed her, frankly admiring, as she passed. He spoke, but when a Glaswegian speaks he sounds merely as if he is clearing his throat. She did not understand one single grunt in that machine-gun rattle of glottal stops.

“Whisht!” she said. The safest reply.

His admiration – or, rather, the open and honest joy of his admiration – frightened her. She was used to the hooded glance, the pinched and furtive inspection. Only one young man had hacked his way through those thickets of shame. Huey MacLintock. “You are beautiful, Catherine,” he had said. And she had run to the secret place on the far side of Beinn Uidhe, where she kept hidden a fragment of a looking glass, to see what ‘beautiful’ was. For that, her father had nearly killed Huey MacLintock. For that, Huey MacLintock was now bound for Canada, too. Somewhere. On some other ship. There had been no time to see him before he left.

Mrs MacEuan was a good soul, and a careful judge. Catherine, who had expected steerage passengers to be treated like cattle, was surprised at the woman’s smile, her pleasant greetings, her unhurried air. In fact, the stewardess could not at once decide whether Catherine was genteel or rough.

The first half-dozen genteels went into the six-berth cabin; the roughs and the rest went into the mess.

“Would you be coming from these parts, Miss Hamilton?” she asked. It was the first Highland voice Catherine had heard since she had run from home.

“I would not, Mistress MacEuan. I would be coming from Strath, in Inverness.”

“You are welcome, so.” Mrs MacEuan led her to the six-berth cabin and gave her pride-of-place on one of the two up-berths. As Highlanders they dropped naturally into the Gaelic. Mrs MacEuan told Catherine that her cabin companions were two Sassenach ladies, Mistress Wharton and Mistress Jones, widows since the Great War, and a Lowland Scotswoman and her daughter (she called them Sassenachs, too) who were joining a brother on a farm in Canada; the husband was in the male-steerage mess. Their name was Wilkie.

“And don’t be worrying yourself. We’ll find a good person for the sixth berth,” Mrs MacEuan promised. “Did you ever go to sea before?”

“Only for the lobster creels.”

The image hit her with a sudden, visceral intensity: the wickerwork and the trapped crustaceans shimmering upward through the dark-green-blue-black sea, bursting through the roof of their world in a foaming of light. And other images: the black peat soil of Beinn Uidhe in her hands, squeezing from it the golden water. She would never see and do these things again – yet, such is the curse of memory, she would never cease to see and do them.

“Are you quite well, Miss Hamilton?” Anxious eyes looking at her.

“I was not feeling altogether well these days that went past, Mistress MacEuan. But I’m well to be on this ship, and well to be going where she is going.”

She leaned against the rail, her back to the grim little port, and opened her Bible, seeking an omen. The sun rose above Glasgow, away to the east, but could not struggle through the smoke. A fan of its red fingers spanned that half of the sky. *Red of a morning ..._no*, that was not the Word of God. Not an omen.

Psalms. Good – her favourites. Psalm LV. *Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself ...* She knew it. Her eye fell down the page, seeking the word *wanderer ... wandering ... wander*. It was there, somewhere. It was an Omen!

And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and be at rest.

Lo, then would I wander far off and remain in the wilderness.

I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest.

Destroy, O Lord ...

It was not the sort of omen she wanted. Her unsatisfied eyes slid across to the neighbouring column. Psalm LVI.

Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?

When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back:
this I know; for God is for me.

She sighed. The omen was good.

A darkening fell across the book. Her body flinched, preparing to meet her father, for his was the only shadow ever to dim those pages. Her ears were ready to hear him say: 'Get some work into your hands, girl!' Her eyes, when they lifted to his, would see that ginger fierceness; his brows would burn red, his freckles scream.

The darkness resolved into a skirt, a pleasant face, a smile. "So you're for Canada too!" Bewilderment must have lingered in her own face, because the woman frowned and said, "Miss Hamilton, is it not? I'm Mrs Wilkie."

Catherine hugged her Bible to her and, smiling now, nodded. She told the woman: "Yes, I'm going to Hawk Ridge in Saskatchewan, to join my uncle, Murdo Hamilton, and his family."

Murdo, who had said, 'For the love of God, girl, if you stay here that man will be killing you – or worse!' Murdo, who had left the money for her passage with Mistress Menzies, the postmistress in Strath, and the letter for the Immigration.

"We're going to my brother-in-law in Dauphin, Manitoba. Iain Wilkie. He has a farm there."

Catherine, damned with a camera's memory, saw it on the map of central Canada that she already carried in her mind. *L. Dauphin* to the northeast, *Riding Mt.* to the southwest, a mottling of pools above it, interspersed with grass tufts. What sort of land was that? Like the sedge marsh at Camas Mor?

"That would be the very edge of the settlements," Catherine said.

"You know it!"

"Only from the atlas."

"They say it's as well to go through New York as Halifax. There are terrible strikes in Winnipeg and they may spread across Canada."

Catherine could not imagine a strike. Untended lobster creels ... the kine not milked. It was not possible.

"The ticket agent said the ship bound for Halifax would not be good," she told the woman.

"They were telling us the same. Wilkie says it's just that they would be getting a bigger commission from the owners of this ship."

There were so many things that made no sense – strikes ... commission. What were they all? Her legs and arms ached from the walking and carrying. But she didn't want to go below and rest. She wanted to watch Scotland slip away. She wanted that camera in her head to capture the last possible memories of hill and island, cloud and water.

Mrs Willkie's daughter joined them, a lively, gap-toothed girl of six or seven. "Cohn says the –"

"Who's Cohn?" her mother interrupted.

"A sailor. Cohn says the decks'll be going round and round soon," she told them.

"Not the decks. The propellor."

"He says we'll be seeing Arran and Prestwick and Ayr and everything."

"Aye," Mrs Wilkie said heavily, meaning it would be no pleasure to her. "I doubt we will."

The little girl's mistranslation of the sailor's words was close to the truth, though. The *Hector* was hardly out into the Firth of Clyde before it seemed to Catherine that the decks were, indeed, going round and round. She knew then that she was about to be a dreadful sailor. She had rowed through storms to save the lobster creels and her little boat had tossed like a cork, but she could not take the slower, queasier motion of these big decks.

She went to the door where the companionway led down to her cabin, but one whiff of the warm, oily air overlaid with traces of steam and burning coal was enough to send her to the leeward rail (and to send her breakfast even farther). Empty, she felt easier. She faced the wind and drew deep lungfuls of the sea air. She yawned a hundred times and wiped the damp skin where the breeze pushed the water from her eyes back horizontally. The dried salt of those tears was silky to touch; but the dried salt of the seawater, thrown up in a stinging spray from the bows, was tacky.

She did not know that she was really very ill. Her seasickness masked the fever. The sea wind and the cold spray chilled her skin, which would otherwise have burned. When she watched the coast of her homeland tilt and jerk as it receded, she thought it was a side effect of her heaving innards. And it was the same with the blackness that crept in and seeped up and stole down across her field of view.

All day she endured the misery, shrinking from the touch of her clothing, boiled up by her fever, chilled by the wind, smiling wanly in return at smiles from fellow sufferers (as she thought them), refusing all suggestions of food.

"It would be best," Mrs MacEuan advised.

"I will be fine the morn, Mistress MacEuan, just fine," Catherine promised.

That night she was one of six groaning sufferers, all of whom prayed they might be 'just fine' come the morn.

Three of them were – the two war widows and the little girl, Mina. It was Mrs Wharton who first realized Catherine had been stricken by something far more serious than mere seasickness. Even Catherine understood it by then as she blinked out on a world where fact and delirium mingled with baffling promiscuity.

A thermometer burned under her tongue. There was a worried man looking at it. There was ice in bags all about her; it burned, too.

She was in another room, alone except for a smiling woman who dabbed her brow. Every joint ached; even the act of breathing hurt her ribs.

For long periods she left the ship and wandered again over the crofts and glens of Bienn Uidhe.

A man with bright freckles and burning eyes watched her in the bathhouse. Those eyes watched her at the breadmaking. They watched her stooping to gather eggs ... milking ... tying the lobsters' claws with deft loops of string while his ginger-freckled hands clamped them firm.

The dusty road was an almost blinding white against the black dresses of the two women, who leaned toward each other and flayed the moral state of the population with unsmiling joy. Child Catherine, who could not hear a word, knew every word they spoke. Their talk was of sin, which she did not then understand.

A young man ran away from her, away from the waterfall, down the glen. She could not see his face but she knew it well – and knew it was stained with tears. She even knew that the tears were of rage, impotent rage.

A man with bright freckles and burning eyes silenced the whole kirk congregation with his shout: 'Lewd! Lewd! Lewd! Ye're all damned! Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her bath committed adultery with her already in his heart. Will ye take your hellish, hoorin' eyes off her and keep them off!'

A young man was pleading with her, urgently.

She stopped using the bathhouse and took to bathing in the burn where it cascaded down the glen – and where an overhang of rock gave shelter from those piercing eyes.

A young man stood by that cascade and put his lips to hers; he detonated all her sense: 'Catherine, you are beautiful.' Veins of an unsuspected fire branched through her body, shining a sudden light of meaning on a hundred puzzling prelections, or sermons. At last she understood sin. Delicious childhood ended; the grown-up world was there instead, beckoning without inviting. Fear-ridden, unforgiving. And delicious, too.

A young man ran away from the waterfall, down the glen.

A man with burning eyes shouted, 'Lewd! Lewd! Lewd!' He held the young man high over his head. The young man was petrified and did not struggle. The older man sought this way and that among the gravestones, looking for one sharp enough to impale the young man or break his back. The minister and people leaped upon him and bore him down before he could kill the young man.

'For God's sake, Ian – it's your own wife's grave you're desecrating!' the minister shouted.

A young man ran away from her, down the glen.

She and the man with the burning eyes tended a sick woman. The stillborn child was wrapped in sailcloth outside. There was a monstrous, unspoken fear between them that the sick woman would die – for her departure from that house would place intolerable strains on the two who would be left. She, Catherine, did not know it; but he did. And the fear it put on him was passed on to her, though she did not understand it.

A young man put his lips to hers – and then she understood the fear. His lips detonated all her understanding.

The sick woman died and the piercing eyes of the freckled man screamed at her: ‘Lewd! Lewd! Lewd!’ Those eyes harried her through two summers and three eternal winters. ‘What is it that’s come upon you?’ she asked, weeping. ‘Why are you never kindly to me as you were before she died! What is it I’ve done?’

A young man put his lips to hers, and inserted fear in place of that question. He detonated fear. She feared beauty and how it kindled men. She feared men and how they kindled her.

The burning eyes watched her everywhere.

A young man ran away from her, away from the waterfall, away from the glen. He was crying, too.

“I do believe it’s over,” a voice said.

Catherine was too exhausted to turn and see who spoke. Half of her still wandered in the nightmare lands.

Later – it could have been minutes or hours – she opened her eyes and actually managed to look about her. The nurse saw the movement.

“Are you going again?” she asked, and answered herself with a smile. “No. I think this time you’ll stay with us.”

Catherine frowned. “*Hector*,” she said.

“That’s it! Och, ye’ll be just fine. Mrs MacEuan has good friends here in New York. You’ll likely stop there. She’s away now to make the arrangements.”

There were so many questions Catherine wanted to ask the nurse. Deep inside herself they seemed important, but as they struggled to the surface, to that part of her mind where they were assembled into words, their importance drained away. The very act of searching for the words (and not always finding them) seemed to rob the questions themselves of meaning.

It was not a side effect of her illness, though her exhaustion made it easier to lie passive. She had always been so. At school, in the kirk (especially listening to prelections), on the farm, out in the little boat, the impulse to ask questions had often stirred her, but rarely to the point where they survived translation into words. Usually, if she stayed silent, people or life itself would provide the answers.

A prattling child, the daughter of a rich and rare holidaymaker in Strath, had once come out to the lobster creels. “And why do you tie their claws?” she

had asked. Moments later a yet-to-be-tied lobster gave her a painful nip. Then she had cried; but even through her tears she had forced the words, “Why did he pinch me?”

Catherine had never asked the first of those questions because the answer was immediately obvious. The second was just as obvious but not so immediate; it had taken nineteen years of living to understand that life itself was brutal and would bide its time until it saw the chance to hurt.

So time answered all questions, as young Huey MacLintock’s kiss that evening in the glen – and the unsuspected passions it had exploded within her – had told her all she had ever wondered about the power of sin, and her father’s obsessive vigilance, and his lunatic anger in the kirk ... and why his eyes never left her face and body.

“You know you had the Spanish flu,” the nurse said. “You’re lucky to be alive. It’s killed millions.” She said it the Glasgow way: *moo-yuns*, which Catherine did not understand.

The words lodged in her mind and sank; on more unasked question – did they blame her for the death of this other passenger with a name like Moe Yuns? She looked around her.

The nurse saw the movement. “It’s the sick bay. Really it’s the first class. We had to turn out Mrs Fawcett, puir thing! She must have looked forward for months to being seasick and pampered for the whole crossing. Och, she wasn’t too pleased, I dare tell you!” She laughed.

While the nurse changed the sheets, Catherine sat, palsied with weakness, on a chair. It was of heavy red mahogany, held to the floor with a large brass hook. She felt an impulse to take a cloth and fetch up the rich shine on both, wood and metal. Polishing a thing was one way to possess it and be at home with it. She knew as much from polishing the kirk benches and her father’s carver chair.

“A wee walk to the heads?” the nurse suggested; and she helped Catherine to the lavatory at the end of the passage outside. In the looking glass there she was not beautiful.

Back between the sheets Catherine felt their crisp softness and had, a sudden vague memory of waking here a hundred times when the sheets grated like sandpaper and her joints and bones had flinched at the very touch. In this new world, a universe away from Beinn Uidhe, the memory was enough to justify the sin of lying there, no longer ill.

The nurse put a thermometer in her mouth, but told her she already knew it would read normal. Then she gave Catherine a shrewd, sidelong glance; her tongue lingered on her lip before she asked, “And who’s Huey? Is he the same as MacLintock?” She expected the deadpan face but was astonished that her fingers felt no change in the girl’s pulse. This lack of response embarrassed her. She had wanted to provoke a blush, a little teasing, a warm, giggling

confession, and a heart-to-heart. She herself yearned for a young man who was half a world away.

Now she had to rise above this petty failure. “Such goings on!” she said. “And here was me thinking Highland life was all rain, mist, work, and whisky! I never heard of such capers! Talk about the Highland Games!”

Catherine, understanding this sudden flood of banter (though she could never have put that understanding into words), rewarded her at last with a blush and a small, voiceless laugh, enough to release the woman.

“Go on!” the nurse said as she took out the thermometer. “Who is he? Is he your young man?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“He was kissing me the once.”

That was all Catherine had intended saying but, somehow, the rest poured out. She listened to herself with surprise. “My father burst his head open with his fist and was standing on him in the burn until he thought him drowned.”

The professional reasserted itself inside the nurse when she saw Catherine’s agitation. “There now! Dinnae fash yourself now. Lie quiet till Mrs MacEuan returns.”

It was an easy order to obey. Outside ordinary people were doing all sorts of ordinary work. She heard the slopping of a water-filled pail, someone scrubbing a deck, someone (the same?) whistling, a clatter of china and cutlery, a seagull, the deep, mechanical throb of a winch, a shout ...

One day, soon, she would have a pail to slop, a cow to milk, a song to sing as she worked. But for the moment it was glory to close her eyes and let the sounds become as alien as the sea. Untroubled sleep was such a luxury.

Hours later she was awakened by Mrs MacEuan, who was trying so hard not to wake her. Their eyes met. Catherine smiled and stretched.

“So it’s yourself at last!” Mrs MacEuan beamed as she came over and felt Catherine’s forehead. “There were times we gave you up for lost.”

Catherine smiled again.

“Well, you’re silent enough now!”

“Was I talking in the fever, Mistress MacEuan?”

“You may say so!” The stewardess stared at her until Catherine grew uncomfortable; but it was some internal argument that consumed the woman. At length she said, “Well, if I would be washed ashore at Strath, I daresay I’d not be scorning the help of your heretic hands. A Free Kirk blanket’s as warm as a nun’s, I’m thinking. And Free Kirk soup’s as nourishing.”

She leaned forward to straighten the sheets and, for the first time, Catherine noticed the crucifix that hung about her neck. She wondered at the blasphemy – that anyone could wear such a thing merely in the way of jewellery.