

The Breadalbane

Captain McEwan held the note in his left hand, gazing sternly out over the darkening waters of Loch Sunart at the two houses which constituted the port of Salen. Darkness had come rapidly that evening, with the setting in of a great mass of rain, from clouds which were darker than the dark leather binding of his massive Bible. Neither cloud nor note bode well for a comfortable night. He had lain here at anchor for a full day, awaiting the arrival from his home of John MacLeod, catechist, bound, according to the letter the Captain had received from Edinburgh, for the lonely island of St Kilda. Throughout that long day of waiting, there had been no sign of John MacLeod, catechist, who had, nevertheless, only to reach Salen from the village of Acharacle, barely a league or two distant to the north.

Others had come and gone that day. Two men from Strontian, and a fisherman from Salen had asked to come aboard, to see for themselves the great Work of God manifest in the lines of the yacht, *The Breadalbane*, of which he, Captain McEwan, was master. The yacht had been built barely two years ago, for the Free Church of Scotland, of oak, for to endure, under the expert and Godly eye of Robert Brown. It was but a small vessel, of thirty tons register, schooner-rigged and of great sailing virtue. As safe, said Captain McEwan to the many visitors who weekly came to find him at their shores, as safe as any sailing vessel upon the seas. Mr. MacKenzie, of Strontian, who came here today on his horse, having examined the cabins and the sturdiness of her rig, shook hands at great length with Captain McEwan and, with tears in his eyes, said that "He now saw that the Free Church is determined to send us the preaching of the Cross, and to look after our souls". Certainly, the Marquis of Breadalbane, who in the first flush of enthusiasm after the Disruption of 1843, had donated the money for the building of the yacht, would have been gratified at the reception it received in the many lochs, bays and anchorages which the Captain and his crew had so far visited, up and down the coast of Scotland, with frequently a minister of God in the passenger-cabin, each and all striving to bring back the Word of the Lord to the poor, neglected, deprived, subjugated people of the Highlands and the Western Isles.

The fisherman who had sailed his tiny boat alongside *The Breadalbane* while on his way to risk his life in the Sound of Mull had said almost nothing, but was clearly astonished and struck dumb by the simple piety of the cabins and their furnishings. The yacht had, apart from Captain McEwan's simple cabin, an after-cabin, in which all meals were taken, two state-rooms for the accommodation of ministers of the Kirk, and, in the main cabin, where acts of worship could and frequently did take place, two small benches allowed for the over-night accommodation of additional passengers. As many as six men of God could be carried on this yacht, and as many as six had been carried, bringing the Word of God to places where, hitherto, the True Gospel had been unknown. For Captain McEwan, this grand floating place of worship out-did in every degree and aspect his own modest home on the island of Rothesay. These were unworthy thoughts, he confessed, and sorely regretted their arrival in his head: he knew only that he was privileged and honoured to be given the charge of this mighty vessel of God's own great work, to use his skills and his judgement and his knowledge in the service of the Kirk reborn.

As now, as he awaited the arrival of John Macleod of Acharacle. *The Breadalbane* was, at this late season of the year, to make rendez-vous with Mr MacLeod at Salen, to take him out beyond Loch Sunart, beyond Ardnamurchan, beyond the inner and the outer isles, to the distant and dangerous island of St Kilda, where, so the Captain was informed, the islanders, crying out, awaiting his arrival, prayed for the new catechist to un-burden them of their dark despair and ignorance. It was already the second week of

October, even the crossing from Tobermory on the previous day had been unpleasant, the waves high, the wind threatening and veering to the south-east. Captain McEwan had every confidence in his crew of four - Mr Harris, Mr Kilpatrick, Mr Stewart and Mr Toomey - all trusted men, sound in the Word of God; he had faith also in the Hand of God, to protect His ship from the worst of the storms of Satan; notwithstanding which, Captain McEwan felt uneasy at approaching St Kilda at that time of year, when the winds were unpredictable and always strong, the seas massive, the light fickle.

It was the Captain's belief, confirmed by the terms of the letter received from Edinburgh, that few greater honours could be bestowed upon any man of God, than to be chosen for a ministry upon St Kilda or similar dark islands at the edge of the civilised world. Where else could a man suffer for God and the Word of God, be exposed for so long and so often to the miseries of human life, embattled by discomfort and spiritual distress and yet - and yet overcome all of this and bring true Christian knowledge to the poor people? For Captain McEwan, although his days and nights were at times comfortless, yet was he greatly comforted by the knowledge that he worked for God, that he sailed the seas in the eye of God, that he carried into the darkest places the men who, certainly more learned than he, would succour the soul of Scotland.

Almost incomprehensible then, that John MacLeod of Acharacle should not appear on the shore at the appointed hour, to be taken up into the vessel of the Kirk and transported to a place of trial and suffering. Nine o'clock, the agreed hour, had come and gone, as had ten. At eleven, Captain McEwan ordered Mr Stewart, who had some knowledge of these wild parts, to find horse, to ride to Acharacle and seek news of the missing catechist. At four in the afternoon, beset by a squall of needle-sharp rain, Mr Stewart had returned, alone, bearing only the note which the Captain now gripped in his left hand. He had not thought to open the note, although he knew he must. It would contain cowardly words, he did not doubt, words of refusal disguised by words of hesitation; words of treachery disguised as words of conditional loyalty. In the two short years of his captaincy, McEwan had seen such notes several times, as men facing bodily deprivation in the cause of the Gospel succumbed to the temptation of easier ministries. Few were those who, when chosen, accepted their tasks bravely or joyously: such men, though perhaps lacking in social graces, were strong spiring trunks of godliness in a young woodland of burgeoning faith. Men such as John MacLeod of Acharacle were, on the other hand, mere choking weeds on the forest floor, soon lost to the sunshine and trampled underfoot.

With a grim face, Captain McEwan retired to his cabin and open the note. As he had suspected, Mr MacLeod excused himself from his calling, citing a previous commitment to tend souls in Kinlochewe. He presented his apologies *etc etc*. Kinlochewe, as the Captain well knew, was a garden of bodily delights compared with the outer isles. The Captain had received no specific instruction on what to do should the catechist not present himself; the Free Church did not admit to human frailties. But Captain McEwan's further orders were to take the Reverend James MacDiarmid from Kilchoan to the island of Coll; *The Breadalbane* would have had two men of God aboard for a brief period, had Mr MacLeod carried out his duty. And now, but one. Such were the tribulations which the Free Church had to face and to turn aside.

With a heavy sigh, Captain McEwan summoned Mr Harris and advised him that they should raise anchor forthwith, delaying no longer, in order that they be at Kilchoan on the following morning. Mr Harris paled slightly, and glance at the worsening weather. "Aye, Mr Harris," said the Captain, "But we must act according to Gods' Will." "It is God's Will," agreed Mr Harris, and without further word turned to his duties. Within thirty minutes, with the storm worsening and all light sucked from the skies, *The Breadalbane* set sail into the west.

