

A Yule Tale

By: Roberta Kelm

It was said of the town of Fallwydd, "If you blink while passing through, you may miss it." At one point in time, it had been a bustling center of commerce and activity, but by 1068, it was practically deserted. In fact, it was stretching things greatly to call it a town; the only distinguishing feature was the small building that passed for a church. The rest of the meager buildings had long been abandoned, their occupants having either died or moved on to one of the larger cities to find fortune.

Father Stephen MacInnis looked out the sacristy window at the snow falling heavily on the town, and sighed deeply. With weather like this, it was unlikely that any of his parishioners would make it from their farms to attend the Midnight Mass. Not that there were many parishioners, especially at harvest time; indeed, every year or so, he had received pointed letters from the Bishop regarding the need for his parish at all -- surely there was another parish that could suffice, or perhaps an itinerant priest could come once a month to celebrate the Sacraments for the few people left. Fortunately, being so far north of the Cathedral had its benefits, for shortly after the letters, the Bishop would forget about Father Stephen and his dwindling congregation for another year. It would not last; when he finally went to join the Great Thanksgiving before the Throne of God, the Bishop would probably not send a replacement, and most of the people would probably not even notice.

Father Stephen sighed again. The Midnight Mass had always been one of his favorite services, even without the choir and pageantry found in the large cathedrals of Grecotha, Rhemuth, or Valoret. He smiled as he remembered attending the service as a young child; he had been in Valoret visiting his uncle, and that night as he joined in the celebration of the coming of the Christ Child, he had felt the first stirrings of his Call to the priesthood. He left the sacristy and genuflected as he passed the altar; he would meditate for a bit on the prie-dieu before retiring to his rectory, and pray that the weather might break by tomorrow morning to allow at least some attendance at Christmas Day services.

A pounding at the church door interrupted his reverie. Who could that be at this hour, and in this weather? Curious, he picked up a candle and proceeded to the doorway. En route, he grabbed the processional cross; bandits were not unheard of in the region, and most would have no qualms about looting the house of God.

Cautiously, he opened the door and held up the lantern. "God keep you, sir," a clear young voice said. "We have traveled far, and seek shelter from the storm. We saw the light of candles in the window."

Father Stephen opened the door a little wider. A young man, possibly in his early twenties, stood before him. His arm surrounded a young woman protectively, her form just barely distinguishable in her voluminous cloak. In her arms, she protectively held a bundle; a baby? Yes, a baby, not more than a few weeks old.

He pulled the door open wide. "Come in, children," he said, holding his candle high. "'Tis no fit night for man or beast -- or woman and child, for that matter," he added.

He held his candle up as the trio entered the church. "I would invite you to the rectory," Father Stephen said as he led them down the aisle, "but truth be told, the shelter is better here. Ay, the roof is in much need of repair."

"Unfortunately, we cannot stay long, Father," the young man said, "else I would be glad to help with repairs in return for your kindness."

"No trouble at all, my son," Father Stephen replied. "I only wish I could take you there to feed you."

"We have food," the woman said, speaking for the first time. "But we should not eat in church."

"It is all right, daughter," Father Stephen said. "It's my church and I'll make the rules here!"

The family sat in the front pew of the church. Father Stephen's curiosity finally got to him. "What are your names, children? And what causes you to be on the road on such a night as this?"

The couple looked at each other. "Perhaps, Father, it is best you do not know too much about us," the young man said softly. "My name is Connor, my wife is Alaya, and this," he said, a little pride in his voice, "is our firstborn son, Tomais." He took the bundle from Alaya and pulled back the blanket covering the face. "We named him for my father -- may he rest in peace." The young man crossed himself; the woman and Father Stephen echoed the gesture.

Father Stephen took the child from Connor. "Ah, a fine lad indeed," Father Stephen murmured, gazing into the open brown eyes. "You do well to be proud. Has he been christened yet?"

Alaya looked at the floor. "We were to have him christened at Twelfth Night, but who knows where we shall be then?" She looked at Connor.

"We shall be safe, my love," he whispered softly, kissing the top of her head.

Father Stephen frowned inwardly. Obviously this family was in some sort of danger, but for what reason?

"Would you care to sup with us, Father?" Connor asked. "We do not have much, but we would share our hospitality in gratitude for yours."

Father Stephen shook his head, handing the now-sleeping child back to his mother. "No, my son, you and your good wife need the nourishment," he said. "I have food waiting for me in the rectory." Rising to his feet, he went to the prie-dieu and knelt. He picked up the Holy Scriptures from the floor beside the prie-dieu and opened them to the Gospels; perhaps he would read Luke's recounting of the birth of Christ before meditating and retiring.

To his surprise, his eyes fell not to the familiar story from Luke, but on a passage from Matthew:

And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him. "When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.

Another pounding at the door roused Father Stephen from his reverie. Alaya looked up, her eyes wide. "They have found us! We are lost!"

Father Stephen wasted no time. "Quickly, children, into the sacristy. I will see who is out there and what they want." Grabbing his candle and the processional cross once again, he proceeded to the door.

But no ordinary horde of bandits awaited him this time either. The torches of the Episcopal troops dwarfed his candle as he peered out the doorway.

"Good even, Father," the captain said, bowing his head slightly. "We come from the Archbishop's regiment. There was word of a band of Deryni trying to escape, and we heard they may be in this region." He showed a parchment to the priest; Father Stephen recognized the Archbishop's Seal at the bottom of a long document.

Father Stephen would have laughed to think of the young trio as "a band", were he not shocked to hear what they were. Deryni? Here? Those three? He opened the door wider; to leave Episcopal troops outside would not only raise suspicions, but would probably bring his parish under closer inspection. "I have no idea what you are talking about, but come in out of the cold," he said. "I was just about ready to retire; this weather will most likely keep my parishioners away from a Midnight Mass."

The troop entered, about twenty or so men. So many men to pursue a young man and his family!, Father Stephen mused to himself. The men settled down in the back pews to pray while Father Stephen and their captain proceeded to the front of the church. Genuflecting before the altar, they sat in the first row of pews -- where Connor and his family had just been, Father Stephen realized.

"So, what is this band of Deryni you are looking for?" Father Stephen asked.

"We seek three: a man, woman, and little child," the captain replied. "The father of the young man was caught teaching magic to a group of young Deryni children, in direct violation of the Statutes of Ramos. He and some others were killed. The children would have been burned but for another of their accursed kind. The people of the town were able to blind him, but he was rescued before he too faced the righteous flames. Archbishop Balthasar d'Archiac himself directed us to search for these heretics, that they may be brought to God's justice."

Father Stephen did all he could to resist looking toward the sacristy. It was his duty to turn them in, in obedience to the Archbishop, and to God. Deryni were heretics, possessors of evil magical powers; that was well known by all.

Yet, he remembered the passage from Matthew, and the story of the Holy Innocents. Those soldiers as well were acting in obedience to Herod. Yet the Christ Child had been saved by

the angel appearing to Joseph. Why had he been led to read that particular passage on this night? Perhaps God had sent the trio to him, to keep them from the flames for purposes of His own.

He stood up. "Truly, sir, I have not seen any band of Deryni," he said, half truthfully. After all, perhaps the three were not the ones the soldiers were seeking -- though he doubted it. "However, it is late, and it is the Eve of Christmas. Let me at least celebrate a Mass for you and your men before you go on with your search."

The captain inclined his head. "We are grateful to you, Father."

Genuflecting at the altar, Father Stephen entered the sacristy. He would warn the family, and see them on their way. At least celebrating a Mass for the soldiers would delay pursuit.

The family was not there. The sacristy was deserted. Instead, a note rested in the middle of the curiously carved octagonal floor tile in the corner of the room:

Father Stephen,

We thank you for your hospitality and shelter. We cannot reveal how, but we have found an escape and a way to reach safety. We now know that there are truly men of honor in Gwynedd, even among those in the priesthood.

I cannot tell you where we have gone, but we will raise our son to be a man of honor and wisdom as well as Deryni, and if someday he too feels the Call to be God's Priest, I hope he will be one such as you.

Connor, Alaya, and our son, Tomais Stephen

Father Stephen blinked, then nodded. He held the parchment to a lit candle and watched as it burned, then crushed it beneath his heel in the center of the tile. Taking the stole from its rack, he kissed it and placed it around his neck, before proceeding to prepare for Mass, a smile on his face.

~ Finis ~

Wishing All of you a Wonderful Holiday Season!