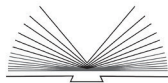


*A Scattering
of Light*



LORI
BENTON



STORYARCHITECT

YOUR STORY | TOLD WELL

A SCATTERING OF LIGHT

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To the far-flung sister-friends with whom I've corresponded, about the telling of stories, the doings of our lives, and the abundant grace that sees us through.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights... James 1:17

Scotland — 1721

Glen Feannag, Isle of Skye

I was there, ye ken, so I can tell ye how it started. The summer-dim had cast its twilight across the shieling, where the cattle grazed beneath a sky gone as deeply blue as ever it did, mid-June. Night's edge hung suspended, its touch a shyness. Even the larks among the heather had hushed, as if harkening to the story Will was telling.

William Wallace Crockett, fourth of the name, sat cross-legged outside the bothy, facing the milky glow that outlined the distant moor, behind which the sun dipped for a wee while, each of those short nights. With the peats cut and stacked to dry, we'd brought the cattle up to the lower shieling to graze. Once the beasts were moved to higher pasture, the women would come to stay, telling us when to sleep and rise. For now we'd freedom, and time for stories. Will was telling one of my favorites, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

I'd never said, but I kent no better teller of the tale than Will, except his grand-da, William Wallace Crockett, second of the name. Auld Will... well, wasn't he like one of the ancient bards, with all those tales gleaned far and wide droving the glen's cattle to market in distant Crieff each autumn, for just about forever?

On this night I'm telling of, 'twas Hamish MacDonald inter-

rupted ere Will had finished reviewing the story as told thus far—how Maeve, Queen of Connacht, and her kingly husband, Ailill, had compared each their wealth with the other's, finding the one thing Maeve lacked to match her husband's riches was a beast the like of Ailill's White-Horned Bull; how Maeve, to right this imbalance, sought the stud-loan of the famed Brown Bull of Ulster, but was denied; how Maeve raised an army to go and take the Brown Bull; how she and her warriors proceeded into Ulster, where the men languished under a curse that prevented them stopping her.

But back to Hamish. He's my brother, so our parents claim. He does resemble Mam, fair of hair and gray-eyed, while I take after Da—Angus Óg MacDonald, tacksman of our glen. Hamish favors Mam in other ways. He's eleven months my elder, ten already, but soft as pudding. In body *and* mind, did ye ask me.

"*Why* could the Ulster men no' stop her?" Hamish cut in. "I've ne'er understood that curse."

"Hamish," Will said with a deal more patience than I'd have shown, "the fighting-aged men of Ulster were cursed to groan in childbed pangs when'er danger threatened, so they could no' take up arms."

Hamish's eyes went round as pebbles, whites showing in the dim. "The *men* were having bairns?"

"Clot-head!" I shot a fist from where I sat just inside the bothy, giving my brother's arm a thumping. "The Ulstermen only *felt* the pangs of childbirth. No man's braw enough to birth a bairn, even if he could."

Rubbing his arm, Hamish glowered. "That Maeve was a greedy besom, though. So what if Ailill had a better bull? She'd everything else he did."

My anger flashed, like the pan of Da's musket when it fires. "Maeve wasn't *greedy*. Theirs was a marriage of equals! But then Ailill went and boasted of his bonny bull and provoked Maeve into seek-

ing one to match it, when he might have held his *wheest* and there'd been peace all 'round."

"Was she no' bullheaded herself," Hamish persisted, "to go lifting it when she could no' have the bull for the asking?"

I threw off the checked arisaid I'd brought for sleeping and leapt up, ducking the bothy's lintel stone. Feet planted outside the hut, I glared down at Hamish's pale face, scowling up at me. "Mind ye *why* she did it? Because the men sent to ask the loan boasted too—drunk in their cups—saying Maeve would *take* the Brown Bull if the deal was no' made, offending one and all. Had Maeve sent a *woman* to speak for her, she'd have kept her head *and* made the trade!"

"*Wheest*, the pair of ye," Will said.

"What?" I whirled, hands fisted on my petticoat. "Have ye scold to make against Maeve?"

Will laughed. "I want to go on telling the story. Besides, had it no' fallen out so, there'd be no *Táin Bó Cúailnge* to tell, aye?"

I stared down my nose at him staring back at me. In the dim, Will's eyes were dark, but in sunlight they shone like the sea, roiling on the edge of a storm, gray, green, and blue all mixed. Ignoring their teasing, I considered his point.

"Aye. I suppose."

No sooner had I taken my place again when a clatter of stones announced Rob Muldoon, back from his turn at counting the cows. Rob was eleven, black-haired and blue-eyed, kilted like Will and Hamish, though his plaid's weaving showed its age, frayed and faded. Rob's mam had married an Irish trader, who lived long enough to sire Rob then died and left them destitute. Now she worked for us, doing the drudgery Mam disdained.

"All accounted," Rob announced, hunkering beside Will. "What have I missed?"

"No' a thing." I cast my brother a dark look. "Hamish, just you be seeking no farther than Rob's mam for a woman able to do for

herself. Better than man or boy would get on did they lose wife or mother!”

A hush nipped the heels of my ill-considered words. Catching the gazes Rob and Hamish flicked to Will, I’d have recalled what I’d just said to my flippant tongue, if I could.

“Och, Will. I’m sorry...”

Will jerked his chin. “Aye. Ne’er mind it.”

I did, though. I minded it sore. Barely three months had passed since Will’s mam, Caitrin MacDonald Crockett, died of the grief slowly killing her since Will’s da fell in battle, when the exiled Stuarts tried and failed to retake King James’s lost throne. Seven years on from that battle, I minded William Wallace Crockett, third of the name, no more than did Will, though ’twas said he might have been his da’s twin, with those storm-sea eyes and hair the color of a red deer’s pelt. “A deer in *winter*,” Will insisted crossly whenever the likeness was made. “When their pelts lose their summer rust.”

I suppose there’s more brown than red in his hair, but not like my brown, dark and shiny. Anyway, it seemed they were doing all right, Will and his grand-da. I’m sure ’twas lonely in their cottage without his mam, but now all Will talked about was the coming autumn and Auld Will’s promise to start him learning the ways of the drove road. Rob, too. To hear them talk, no grander adventure existed than being on the road with the cattle, bound for market at Crieff.

“Will ye go on then, about Maeve?” Hamish prompted.

“Aye,” Will said, sounding glad to. “So... Queen Maeve and her army made their way into Ulster, set on lifting the fabled Brown Bull. But along with Maeve’s warriors had come a band of exiled Ulstermen. Their leader, Fergus mac Roich, gave warning: ‘While the Ulstermen of fighting age canno’ stop ye taking the prize ye seek, there’s one who can. Cúchulainn he’s called, a lad of seventeen, no’ yet come under the curse.’ Maeve scoffed at the warning. What could one lad do against her mighty host?”

“Deeper into Ulster they went. Sure enough, Cúchulainn discovered their incursion and took measures to turn them back. He set traps, devised clever riddles they must solve to advance, picked off their warriors when he found one alone. Fergus warned it would go worse if Maeve continued, for Cúchulainn was no mere mortal. His father hailed from the Otherworld. ‘There’s no more bloodthirsty wolf than Cúchulainn, his feats renowned in Ulster since he was a lad.’

“Maeve demanded to hear what feats such a youth could have done. Fergus happily listed them. ‘The feats of the sword-edge and the sloped shield; the feats of the javelin-throw and the heroic salmon-leap; the feats of the chariot-wheel and the shield-rim! Despite he’s a beardless youth, ye’ll no’ find in Ulster a warrior to equal Cúchulainn’s fame and valor, his fury and speed, his roar of—”

A distant noise, very like a roar, had us bolting to our feet, me ducking the bothy lintel again. “What now? We’ve no’ even got to the Finding of the Bull!”

’Twas a man’s voice we heard, making the clamor. Amongst the shouts rose the bellow of cows, and a collie’s bark.

“That’s Cam,” Will said. His grand-da’s dog. “Sounds like it’s coming from the rigs!”

We groaned at that. If any of the cows had wandered down into the barley rigs, we’d all catch it sore.

“We’d have heard them pass, though. And seen in this light.” Rob gestured to the slope below which the bothy crouched. Heathery turf rose to a level patch where the cows grazed, the trail from it visible. As would be any cow clomping by.

Still, some of the stirks were sly.

“Hamish,” Will said, “go count again—”

Before he could tell *me* what else needed doing, I’d kilted my skirts and sprinted for the trail leading down to the *clachan*—the cottages of Da’s tenants, clustered below our house.

By the time I'd met Da, banyan flapping behind him like a pair of wings as he ran for the rigs, 'twas all but over. Cattle *had* wandered into the rigs to trample in their grazing. Eight of them. They hadn't strayed into every rig, though. Just the Crocketts'. Their good spring crop, thick in its greening, not a hint of rot... was it to be ruined then?

Between Will, Rob, Cam, and Auld Will in his nightshirt, white hair fanning round his lined face, they drove the cows out onto the track, where plain to all—and to my relief—they weren't the small black *kyloes* of our clachan. These ravagers of grain were larger, their shaggy coats a reddish brown. Those drawn from their beds by the disturbance were asking each other whose cattle they were when the scuff of heeled shoes coming at a clip reached our ears.

Rounding the nearest hillslope came a lad Will and Hamish's age. Black-haired as Rob but sharp-featured as a crow, he panted from running up along the burn that raced beside the track in its winding to the sea, miles below. Halting at sight of the crowd gathered round the shaggy beasts, he narrowed his eyes, as if we were Maeve's warband on the march with lifted cattle and he the Ulster lad to stop us. In the lifting dim I noted the weave and dying of his plaid. Fine for a shieling lad. And uncommon clean.

Da stepped forward. "These your cows then, lad?"

"Or ones ye're meant to be minding!" Will's anger loosed his tongue, nor did I blame him. "They've got into our rig and spoilt the barley. We'll be bleeding our cattle by Hogmanay to survive the winter!"

Undaunted by such reception, the black-haired lad strode forward. "They're my father's cows. How they got here, I canno' say."

"Can ye no'?" I shouldered my way to stand beside Will. "Then be telling us who can!"

"*Wheest*, lass. 'Tis no' your matter to sort." Da pulled me to his

side, squinting at the lad. “Happen your father is Dougal MacInnes, and ye the one called Simon?”

“Aye, to both.” The lad, Simon, raised a pointy chin. “And when my da hears how *that* one...” If he’d meant a threat to go along with the glare he shot at Will Crockett, it trailed off at sound of an approaching pony’s clop.

Again we turned to look, and soon a brown garron rounded the bend, bearing a dark-haired man dressed in shirt and plaid, hose and buckled shoes. On his head rode a bonnet, jauntily cocked. He alighted the garron and, taking in the twilit scene, made us a bow.

“Dougal MacInnes,” he said by way of introduction, “lately of Sleat, come to settle in these parts. I’d be wishing ye a fair night save I see ’tis none for any here. For that ye’ve my apologies. And is it ye,” he added, addressing the lad, “we’ve to thank for whatever upset these cows of mine have wrought upon this clachan? Asleep, Simon, when ye were meant to be minding them?”

“No, Da. Nor do I ken they’ve caused any upset, aside the need for catching.”

I gasped at the outright lie. “Aye, ye do!”

Will stamped a bare foot. “We left *our* cows to drive these off our rig!”

“William.” Auld Will’s hand came to rest on his grandson’s rigid shoulder. “Let your elders speak to it.”

Dougal MacInnes led his garron forward. “I’d view the damage claimed, if some will help my lad hold the cattle here.”

Auld Will stepped forward. “I’ll take ye to my rig, where yon beasts have laid waste to a third of my barley. As for ye,” he told Will, still standing his ground. “Get ye back up to the shieling and mind the cows in your charge.”

Watching all this, I wondered where these MacInneses fell in the order of men. By the brooch upon his plaid, gleaming silver, Dougal MacInnes was of a station with Da. At least.

Clearly thinking the same, Da asked, “MacInnes of Sleat, ye say? My wife’s people are of Sleat. Her sister wed a Niall MacInnes there.”

“That will be Margaret MacInnes,” said Dougal, moving away with Da toward the rigs, Auld Will in his nightshirt trailing. “Niall is a cousin on my father’s side, making us kin by the marriage...”

Behind his da’s back, Simon smirked.

Will saw it. And wasn’t pleased. “Grand-da! What of our crop?”

Auld Will turned, face set firm in the gray of a sun already starting to rise. “Get ye back to our cows—do no’ make me tell ye again.”

Feet scuffing, Rob and Will headed for the shieling trail. With a last look at Simon MacInnes, standing smug with his big red cows, I followed, supposing it an end to the matter. It might have been had Hamish not later overheard Da say the only restitution the Crocketts could expect was the privilege of droving Dougal MacInnes’s red cows to Crieff that autumn, with a portion of one bull’s price granted to put toward their loss of grain.

“It won’t be enough, but we’ve survived lean winters,” Will said, cooler of head by then, though I saw the knowledge still chaffed. “Besides, Sir Alexander will ne’er see us starve.”

I supposed that true, Auld Will being the favorite stalker of our chieftain, Alexander MacDonald, always hired when the grand folk gathered to hunt the deer. Things might still have settled had we not heard also that Simon, having admitted to sleeping while the cattle strayed—and lying about it—had gone unpunished.

“No’ at all?” Will asked in disbelief. “I’d get my backside strapped did I let one cow, let alone *eight*, set teeth to a neighbor’s rig.”

“No’ everyone’s fit for a cattleman,” Hamish said. “Maybe Simon’s a’frighted of those great beasts of theirs. I’d be.”

“’Tis no excuse,” Rob countered before I could. “He’ll ne’er learn better if he’s no’ corrected, will he?”

The question rankled over the nights Will finished telling the *Táin*—how despite Cúchulainn’s interference, Maeve got away with

the lifted Brown Bull, only to have it challenge Ailill's White-Horned Bull and kill it, then itself die of fatigue, leaving the pair equals again.

Despite the Irish queen's plan gone a-gley, I suspect notions of cattle-raiding colored Will's brooding, for by the time the nights grew full dark again he'd worked out a plan to right a wrong no one else seemed minded to address.

Waiting until Hamish slept, he beckoned me and Rob among the feeding cattle. Rain had passed and a breeze was gusting, hard enough to keep the midges at bay. The sun shed bronzy light across soggy turf as Will announced, "I mean to go lifting the MacInnes's cows."

I nearly dropped the spindle I was using to make thread of the wool I'd brought to the shieling. "All their cows? I hear they've a right many."

Will snorted a laugh. "Just the eight that got into our rig. Or their match can I no' tell one from the other."

Rob's grin flashed in the slanting light. "Ye're no' leaving *me* behind."

"Good." Will looked at me, as if expecting I'd leap at the chance to go, but I frowned at my spindle, a bad feeling come o'er me. I held my *wheest* while they debated how to leave the shieling without alerting Hamish, who solved that problem himself. He woke feeling poorly, so he said, and went down to Mam's cossetting—not for the first time, mind. Another lad came up from the clachan. He agreed to mind the cows while Will and Rob went a'raiding.

"Just ye be back ere the women come up for the milking," I warned, still unsure why I felt uneasy.

"Aye, we will. It's only what, two miles?" Will asked.

"Three," I corrected, having learnt that too. "So there and back make six. I cheered your telling of the *Táin*, but this is no story, Will. Mind ye that to God belongs vengeance?"

I surprised myself, having never said a thing like that.

Surprise lit Will's gaze too. And mild affront. "I ne'er mean to keep the cows. I'm no *thief*."

"We're only borrowing them?" Rob asked, looking a mite deflated.

Will shrugged. "Something like."

I chewed my lip. "Still, in the dark, just ye two... it'll ne'er work."

"'Tis no' but a few cows—"

"I ken that," I said, sharp-eyeing him. "Even so, I'm going with ye."

"Listen," Will began, then what I said must have registered. "Wait—ye are?"

"It'll go better so—and ye ken it, Will Crockett, so don't argue."

Will shot a glance at Rob, who lifted a shoulder. "Far be it from me to rein in the daughter of Angus Óg, no' once she's got the bit between her teeth."

I shoved him.

"All right, *Maeve*," Will said, mischief in his eyes. "Come along with your champions, though 'tis eight cows we're lifting, no' just the one."

"Champions, is it?" I winged one eyebrow aloft, a trick I'd lately mastered. "We'll see. Just ne'er tell Mam I helped ye, or she'll be having a cow herself."



We made our way down to the shieling of a clachan set not far inland above the sea. There we found the red cows, three dozen, along with that clachan's kyloes, watched by two lads—and Simon MacInnes, wrapped in his plaid and snoring. When we made no secret of our purpose, the lads culled the very beasts that ravaged the Crocketts' barley, then all but waved us away up the glen.

"Pastures smooth, long and spreading. Grassy meads beneath your feet. The friendship of God the Son to bring ye home to the field of the fountains..." As we guided the beasts along, Will spoke

the blessing his grand-da, as topsman, uttered at the start of every autumn drove. “Closed be every pit to ye. Smoothed be every knoll. Cosey every exposure to ye, beside the cold mountains...”

We pastured the cows—one yearling bull among them—with the clachan’s cattle, then took it in turn to sleep until the sun rose and the women came with their milking stools and cogs. They were brought up short by sight of the strange red cows mingled with the blacks. Rob’s mam, pretty and dark-haired, regarded Will, who stood with his dirty feet planted across the trail, Rob on his left, me his right.

“Well now. Should I be crediting my eyes then?”

“What are they telling ye?” Rob asked.

“That those red cows are MacInnes’s. And with ye three bairnies standing there grinning like loons, what am I to think but that ye’ve gone raiding in the night?” She fell to laughing then, so hard she plunked down her milking stool and sat on it. Others laughed when the tale got ‘round, but we’d the morning to stew over what Dougal MacInnes would say when he came seeking his cows.

Come he did, astride his garron, Simon trotting scowl-faced behind. With Da and Auld Will they arrived at the shieling to find their twice-gone-missing cows feeding among our kyloes. Auld Will pressed his mouth into a stern line, but I saw the twinkle in the old man’s eyes. Dougal MacInnes was harder to read. By the time he, Auld Will, and Da returned from checking that the cows were none the worse for their night’s adventure, I suspected Will’s heart was thumping like a drum.

Dougal halted before him. “I’m told ’twas ye led this raid upon my cattle fold, Will Crockett.”

Will held the man’s gaze. “Aye, sir. It was.”

“Unrepentant, are ye?” Dougal pursed his lips then said, “Still, I take what ye meant by it. The price offered for your loss didn’t satisfy.

Had my beasts come to harm, I might think different, but as they're sound, I suppose I'll hold ye justified."

At this startling utterance, I looked at Simon. His narrow jaw had fallen slack, but he found his voice quick enough. "No, Da! He stole our cows. He should be punished!"

"So he shall be," Dougal said. "To the degree ye were for letting them stray to begin with. Go now and bring them."

Scarlet-faced, Simon trudged off to gather their cows, leaving Dougal MacInnes still regarding Will. "Have ye cattle of your own yet, lad?"

"No, sir. I'm to turn drover come autumn, though."

In truth, Will wouldn't be a proper drover for years, but no one corrected him. Auld Will stood beside his grandson as Simon brought the cows along. One by one, the red beasts passed. Across the path of the last, the bull, Dougal MacInnes stepped, halting it. He put a hand to the bull's head, giving the gingery forelock between its horns a fondling.

"A drover should have his own cattle," he told Will. "This shall be your first. Does that make for fair restitution in your eyes?"

I'd been relieved Will had made his point without inviting further trouble. This was generosity unlooked for.

"Aye, sir. It *really* does." Will appeared too stunned to look at anything but that big red bull. He wasn't the only one.

"That was to be *my* bull," Simon declared. "And ye give it to this *Lowlander*?"

"The cost of a lesson I've failed to teach ye," Dougal said. "And while 'tis true they bear the Crockett name, even Auld Will here is half-MacDonald. Son of a Lowlander or no', I'm tempted to foster ye on him to learn the fair-dealing sense he's instilled in his grandson."

Looking from Simon's dismay-struck face to Will's, I fell to giggling. Had I kent what would come of it all, I wouldn't have.