

One of the other boats had some rotten strakes, and they were knocking them out and cutting new ones to replace them. It was a fiddly job, and they were all in a fine temper. Ten days they'd been cooped in by storms, and now the fine weather had come back on a Friday – and no-one would risk disaster by going out first on the unluckiest day of the week. So they were all frustrated and on edge – but dad turned to us with a smile as usual.

“Well, now, if it's no' my big girl, an' my big boy, eh? What's this? My bite? Well, who's a clever loon to carry it ower without droppin' it! And broth too, eh? No' a drop spilled. That's fine, just what I needed.”

Dad could always make you feel that what you did was valuable. He sat down by us, his broad shoulders and barrel chest all gritty with sand stuck to the sweat.

“Well, now, what's the news?” he asked.

Pleased to be first with it, I said, “The gipsies are back, dad.”

He looked surprised. “What? Already?”

“There's some o' them comin' across the ford now,” I said. Everybody looked. Sure enough, two figures were walking round the first dune. A boy and a girl.

“Thievin' tinks!” growled a voice.

“Now, Davie,” dad said quietly.

“They're early this year,” said my cousin Donnie. “A hard winter comin', maybe.”

“Speakin’ from experience, eh?” Jaikie Mackenzie, the fourth man in dad’s boat, broke in with a grin.

I watched with interest as Donnie blushed – even his ears. Although at sixteen he had done a man’s work for years on the boat, he was still shy, and went even redder as the daffing spread through the group and the men relaxed.

Several other children and wives had arrived, with bowls and baskets. A couple of lads started a friendly tussle in the sliding sand, and somebody got a spray of sand in his meat. There was a shout and a couple of clipped ears, and dad handed the bowl back, empty.

“That was grand, Jean. Say thanks to your mam for me. Now off you go an’ leave us get on, or Kennie’s boatie’ll no’ be ready for the New Year, let alone the tide the morn.” Without waiting to see us go, he turned back to his work. “Look, Kennie. That bittie there’ll have to come out as well, or we’re just wastin’ our time. You canna fix sound wood on done wood an’ expect it to last. It’ll come in on you with the first big wave.” And the arguments started again.

Kennie always tried to skimp a job. He never scraped his boat – dad said he didn’t dare, it was just the barnacles held it together.

“Come on, Jeannie!” Isaac tugged on the rope. He had his wee eyes fixed on the driftwood fire. To humour him, I moved over, away from the rest, to where Duggie sat alone as usual. None of the men liked him, though he was a strong, reliable worker. Not even my dad, who liked most folk, and rowed beside him. Mam avoided him. Some of the women didn’t, though they tried to hide it; for he was fine and handsome, well over six feet, with curly fair hair and beard. We children were warily polite to him, and kept out of his long reach. But with dad only thirty feet away...

“Comin’ to speak to me, eh?” he said sourly. “I’m honoured.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing, my eyes on the big pot perched on three stones above the hot glow. Isaac moved towards it, and reached out to touch it. Duggie was right by, and I expected him to put his hand out to stop Isaac, but he just sat and watched him with a half-smile. I pulled the rope and jerked the wee one back just in time. “Aye,” Duggie smiled, “you’ll need to watch him close, Jeannie. He’ll get hurted some day if you dinna mind him.” Aye, and no thanks to you if he didna, I thought, shocked.

Suddenly I heard a foot on the gravel beside me. The gipsy girl stood there, about

thirteen or fourteen. She had silver earrings. I gazed fascinated at them gleaming through her black ringlets.

Duggie scowled. "What dae ye want?" he snarled. "There's naethin' here worth the stealin'." beside him and lifted him away. As he squirmed to get out of her arms, I stepped forward protectively, but then, surprisingly, he turned his head quickly and The girl's olive skin flushed slightly under the dirt. "Ach, I wasna for stealin' anythin' at a'," she protested.

"Well, it'll be the first time ever," Duggie jeered at her.

Isaac was still trying to get at the pot, and she knelt down gave her a kiss on the cheek. She looked near as taken aback as I was myself, but she laughed, and kissed him in return.

Duggie was not pleased. "Put that bairn down and clear out of here," he ordered her. "We dinna want any o' you tinkies round. What d'ye want, anyway?"

"Hae ye a droppie tar to spare?" she asked.

"Tar? That's a new ane."

"The garron's gone lame, and the old man says the pine resin'll no' dae this time," she said. I could hear the professional gipsy whine coming in her voice now. "We'll pay if ye canna spare it."

For a moment I thought that the insult she had implied, that Duggie was too poor to be able to give away a little tar, had done its work. She thought so too, for she held out an iron pan. Duggie even reached towards the ladle, but then his hand drew back and he laughed. “Na, na, ye’ll no’ get away with that ane,” he said. “Ye can hae your tar, but ye’ll have to pay for it.”

After a moment she shrugged. “How much?” she asked, and her hand moved into the folds of her ragged plaid.

“I’ll tell ye what,” he said. “Ye can hae it for naethin’.” We all three looked at him in distrust, as his teeth grinned wide and white. “Just a kiss,” he said. “Like the bairn. Ye kissed him – weel, kiss me the same, an’ ye can hae the fill o’ your pannie o’ tar.”

Well! What would Annie Ralph say if she knew her husband was kissing dirty tinks? I looked around for advice, but my dad and all the other folk were watching the gipsy lad doing handsprings for farthings on the far side of the group. I looked again at the girl. She was pretty – black hair and eyes, and full red lips, and a kind of swing to her that our hard-working, hard-worked lassies seldom had, and soon lost. Poor Annie!

“Kiss ye?” She sounded alarmed – but not very.

“Aye. One wee kiss, that’s a’. A bonny quean like you must hae been kissed afore. Come awa’, now, ye’ll enjoy it.” She didn’t look as if she’d enjoy it. As he rose, so did she, leaving Isaac standing. “Dae ye no’ want your tar? Just a wee kiss an’ a cuddle.” Here, in front of everybody?

She hesitated, but shook her head and started to turn. He lunged out fast and caught her wrist. She tried to jerk away from his grip. When she failed, she bent her head and set her teeth in his hand, kicking silently, writhing like a snake. He winced, and clouted her across the side of the face with his other hand, hard enough to make her teeth clack. As she fell backwards, he jumped towards her, and his foot caught in the trailing rope that joined Isaac and me. Isaac, dragged off his feet, scraped his knees on the gravel and started to scream. Duggie fell yelling, and twisted sideways to keep out of the fire, but one flailing leg knocked the pot of tar spinning and spilling from the fire to the boat, running a black splash over the dry wood that instantly yellowed with little licking flames.

It all happened in a second. When dad and the rest turned at Isaac’s cry, they saw the gipsy girl sprawled in the gravel while Duggie on his knees threw sand on the boat to put out the flames.

It was all clear enough, as he explained it. The gipsy had begged for some tar, and when he refused it had kicked over the pot in spite. The girl, held by two of the men, had tossed her hair down over her face and stood sullenly silent, as she had fought. She answered no questions, as if she knew she would not be believed, or was too proud to explain. The boy had disappeared.

Mutters of anger ran through the group. Sensing a drama, more folk from the houses came running over the dune.

“That damned tinks – worse every year – dae somethin’ – the bailies – ach, they’re useless – damned tinkies – thievin’ an’ burnin’ – should burn them – aye, that’s it, burn them! Burn them out!”

Whoever said it, it found instant agreement. There were about a hundred folk there now, and the noise mounting. They milled about, shouting, and the dogs starting to bark in excitement.

The girl’s head lifted for a moment, and her eyes glinted through her hair, but then she looked down again hopelessly.

“Whit d’ye say to that, eh, my quean?” one wife screamed at her. “Ye’ll get some o’ your ain back – burnin’ our boats, eh? Would ye dare? Here, gie her to me an’ Katie, we’ll hold her for ye!” It wasn’t hold she meant.

“Ye canna let them get awa’ with this, John Main!” Duggie Ralph shouted. And my dad finally nodded, and agreed it had to be done.

It was the triumphant sneer on Duggie Ralph’s face that forced me into action. I had been brought up not to argue or contradict my elders – and speaking against Duggie Ralph was worse than that. But I couldn’t let my dad go on with this. I felt, if I didn’t stop dad, Duggie would have beaten him somehow. It just wasn’t right.

I untied the rope and told Isaac to hold the bowlie and keep out of folks’ way, and then shoved and wriggled between the skirts and legs, my bare toes suffering from hard heels, until I could grasp dad’s shirt. He was talking to some of the men, organising a runner to go out to the boats at Lochloy, for he knew there would be a fair number of gipsy men at the big campsite, and they would fight like devils. He would need all the help he could gather. They were saying somebody would get killed for sure, and laughing excitedly.

I tugged at his arm until at last he realised I was there. “On ye go hame, Jeannie, I haena’ time for ye just now.”

“But dad –”

“Off wi’ ye!” he snapped.

“But it’s no’ true!” I screamed – but he wasn’t listening. Someone in the crowd

bumped me, and I fell backwards over a dog. I was growing desperate.

“What are ye haverin’ about?” Donald dragged me up as dad turned impatiently away to speak to another man. “Awa’ tae your mam!”

“But what Duggie said – it’s a lie!” I screeched in his ear. At last I had somebody’s attention. And my dad turned, hearing the word ‘lie’ above the din.

“What’s a lie? Quiet a minute, Alec. What is it, Jeannie – quick, now!”

I hesitated, suddenly overcome and afraid, as eyes started to turn to me. I saw Duggie’s face beginning to twist and redden with anger, and nearly lost my courage. But then the gipsy girl looked up. Her face had a red welt across it where Duggie had hit her, and blood where the women had been scratching. Someone had torn out her earrings. The words rushed out almost in spite of me.

“It was Duggie kicked ower the tar. He said he’d gie her some tar if she’d kiss him, and she wouldna, and so he tried to kiss her anyway, an’ fell ower the rope, an’ the tar went. It wasna her, it was him.” I started to sniff.

The faces turned from me to Duggie.

“She’s lyin’. She’s a lyin’ wee bitch.” No-one spoke. “It was the tinkie that done

it, no' me." There were more than two hundred there now, and scarce a sound but my sniffs and the gulls crying. A hint of desperation dimmed the temper in his voice. "Would you credit a stupid wee lass instead o' me?"

But they all knew him too well. Yes, some of them did believe me, and others weren't sure.

My dad took me from Donald's arms. He wiped my face with a corner of my apron, set me carefully on my feet, and stepped back, so that I was alone. I looked up at him, and from him to Donald and Jaikie and all the other stern faces. I stood up straight, and tried to stop sniffing and trembling.

"Now, Jeannie, tak' your time. Swear to me, Jeannie, by God Almighty, that what ye said was the truth. Now think – if ye said it just to save the lass there, we'll understand, an' ye'll no' get in bother for a kind thought, but ye must tell us true. By your faith in God, Jeannie – who kicked over the tar?"

My dad had never spoken to me so seriously before. I could feel Duggie's rage behind me, like a cold wind burning my back. But there was nothing else for it. Now I could only tell the truth, whatever happened.

"It was Duggie. He's the mark on his hand where she bit him."

That mark, and the fact that he hadn't mentioned it, convinced the last doubters. Duggie stood scarlet with rage and humiliation, as the mutters rose again, but in a different tone.

I pushed over to the gipsy girl. "Are ye a' right?" I asked. The women holding her had slipped away in the crowd. She was rubbing her arms where they had gripped and hit her. Still silent, she glanced at me, then up to what was happening behind me,

"Ye'd hae had us dae murder on innocent men for your lies!" dad was saying in disgust and anger.

"Ach awa', man!" shouted Duggie. "Innocent? They're but tinks! There's no' ane o' them innocent. If they didna do this, they've done worse. Will ye be the next minister? Damn ye an' that red-heided bizzom o' yours – she's aye been unlucky! But what can ye expect if ye wed a Hielan' bitch –"

And my dad hit him.

It was a terrible fight. The whole of the fishers were there, cheering and jeering, and eventually falling silent as they surged round the men, up and down the dunes, in and out of the water. Annie Ralph was there, white and shaking. My mam was there, holding Isaac, jostling and screaming among the rest. Even Ellen was there, on the edges.

At first, I was afraid for dad. Duggie was far bigger, tall, strong, tough, with a long reach and stride. He punched dad from a distance, and the blood spattered wide. But my dad, though eight inches shorter, was not small; he was burly, with huge shoulders from pulling an oar or a rope all his life. And he had sailed when he was young to Rotterdam, Hamburg, and Stockholm, and learned to fight in those fierce cities.

So while Duggie punched at his face, dad caught what blows he could on his arms and shoulders, or ducked his head into them, and that hurt Duggie's hands; and all the time he was thud, thudding at Duggie's stomach and chest.

Gasping, Duggie broke away at one point, and tried to leave. But the crowd would not let him go. He'd lied to them, near got some of them killed. The men, and women too, circled him solidly and drove him back to where dad was gasping too, waiting for him.

He could, and did, fight on. He tried everything he knew. He punched, and he wrestled, and he kicked. He grabbed an oar, and half-stunned my dad, but dad wrenched it away from him and broke it over his back. Once when they were in the waist-deep pool he held dad face down for a year; my heart near stopped, and mam turned linen-white, but at last with a huge splash dad heaved

out again and threw him off. Duggie tried for an adze, too, but one of the women kicked it out of reach just in time.

After an age they were both so spent they could scarcely lift an arm, and covered in blood. Most of it was dad's, and his face was an awful sight, but he kept on going; though eventually they were on their knees more than their feet, too tired almost to stand. You could see the huge effort it took dad to carry on, to go on hammering his fists at Duggie, but he would never stop while life was in him; and at last Duggie understood that.

I had once heard a man say he would rather face the wrath of God than John Main when he was roused. Now I saw what he meant.

And in the end, my mam stepped forward and stopped it.

There was a queer stillness as we walked down the hill of sand. Even the dogs fell silent. Nobody spoke; nobody cheered. Only here and there a man said "Ah!" like after a full meal, or a woman gulped. They just opened a space in front of us and we walked through, dad resting one battered hand – and more weight than he'd want anyone to know – on my shoulder, and the blood trickling down my back into my shift; mam quietly supporting him on the other side,

and Isaac, shocked to speechlessness for once, holding mam's skirts for comfort.

Even when the Bailies' men arrived, carefully late as usual, and asked dad how he got in this state, and he told them the usual answer, that he'd fallen in the boat – for fisher matters were none of the Town's affair – the normal laughter and jeering were missing. Everyone just stood and watched in an odd, shamefaced way. For this had been no ordinary fight.

Annie knelt alone, sobbing wretchedly over her man's unconscious body. I wondered how she was going to get him home.