

## The Burning

She ran as fast as she could. Behind her the fire rumbled on. The sound rose and fell in the night and the shadows reached out to her as she sprinted across the flatlands. There was another sound, too. A horse. McCullen's horse. Her lungs were already worn thin but she tried to run faster still. It was closing in on her. She dared not look back but stumbled onwards, one hand lifting her skirt off the ground, the other stretched out to hold her balance on the uneven terrain. Then the ground suddenly disappeared beneath her feet and she plunged into darkness.

When she woke up it was still dark. At first she thought she was back by the burning house but as she slowly regained consciousness she realized that the flickering source of light was a bonfire. She saw the black outline of a man. McCullen. He had his back turned, so she risked lifting her head slightly to survey her surroundings.

She was in the dried-out riverbed. How stupid of her: in her panicked flight she had not taken note of the direction, and had come straight off one of the high banks. Her hands were tied behind her back. Just then her capturer turned to look at her.

He walked up to her. She was on her stomach and all she could see was his worn-out boots with their cracked, scarred leather. He stood there for a moment while she breathed heavily into the dry, fine sand left by the shrunken river. Then he dropped down on one knee, grabbed her by the hair and jerked her head upwards.

"Done running, princess?" He didn't wait for an answer but instead shook her head sideways as if she was giving him a silent No.

"A fine mess back there. Your mess, if I'm not much wrong." He let go of her hair.

He stood up and kicked something. With a sudden move he was down at her level again, but behind her so she couldn't see what he was doing. One large hand closed around her wrist. There was a sound, maybe leather and metal, and she had just enough time to realize that he had drawn his knife when she heard the blade against the rope. The next moment he stood up again and she could push herself off the ground with her freed hands.

A little water trickled through the sandy riverbed, and by a pebbly beach a shallow pond had collected. Above the banks the rising sun had ripened into a lemony glow. McCullen had sat down by the fire again. He looked up briefly but did not seem to have any more to say to her.

Like something just born she stumbled down to the stream. On her knees she scooped up water with a cupped hand and drank. She looked behind her but he had not moved. She stood up and shed everything she was wearing. The lawn dress, the petticoat, the slip.

The water was cool but not cold. The spring was miles up in the mountains, and there was plenty of time for it to warm up on the way down the flatlands. She carefully doused herself. Her skin felt hot, as though she now carried the fire inside her.

When she put her things back on something occurred to her. The gun was gone. She was sure it could not have fallen out of her pocket. She had sewn that pocket herself, and although its main function was to disguise the fact that she was carrying a gun, its secondary purpose was to make sure that said instrument would not make an untimely appearance. He must have taken it when she was unconscious. She was not surprised, but it did make her wonder what his conjectures had been when he had found it. She sat down by the fire.

"Now what?" she asked.

"Now we get going. Nothing left here, is there?"

The sun was high in the sky when they rode into town. She sat bareback on the mare, the only one of the horses to have survived the fire. Her dress was sooty and torn, something she only noticed when she saw people on the boardwalks in their Sunday best. She didn't care; she didn't even care to examine why she didn't care. She eyed the sheriff's office next to the courthouse. He saw that.

"You go ahead, princess. You go right ahead. But make sure you get your story straight first."

"Stop calling me princess."

"What's that?"

"I said stop calling me princess. I never had any pretensions. But perhaps it's useful for you to think so."

He didn't have anything to add to that and for the first time ever did she feel as though she wasn't simply Old Bunter's daughter. Just as well, what with her oh-so-dear papa being dead – charred, she hoped, so that no one would think to look for a bullet or two. Six. Six bullets altogether because when she did something she did it the Bunter-way, which demanded preparation, calculation, and careful execution.

She had shown patience, too, a trait not usually associated with the Bunters. She was still in short dresses when her father had begun to worry about her honor, and how well she would fare in the world – inhabited as it was by thieves and murderers. When she saw him one day cleaning his revolver she convinced him that given such threats, she ought to be able to defend herself. From then on she had practiced as often as he allowed it; if questioned about her enthusiasm she would refer him to his own grim vision of humanity. When the time came every single shot had met its target. She wanted to be sure the old devil (no

exaggeration) would not get up again. A job well done, but had she also covered her tracks?

Not that she feared punishment. She just didn't think there was anyone able to pass a fair judgment on her. They hadn't been in that house. So she reserved the right to let a higher authority be her judge when her time came.

McCullen was perhaps the only person who could fairly say whether her act warranted reckoning in this world. She was beginning to suspect that he was not going to play the role of her accuser, though: his anger did not strike her as the symptom of an offended sense of justice. But what was it then?

He was not supposed to have come back so soon. On Saturdays McCullen went to town and spent his wages (she assumed) on liquor and women, and did not return until Sunday evening. Her God-fearing father accepted this because Sunday in the Bunter household meant plenty of private contemplation that was no farmhand's business.

For once she had made plans of her own, though. With McCullen gone she had found her father's revolver in the great walnut desk from the old country, loaded it up and stuck it into that deep pocket of hers.

She liked the weight of it there, swinging lightly against her thigh as she moved about the kitchen. She had no second thoughts: her zeal had never flagged. The only time she had considered giving up her plan was that winter when her father caught a bad fever and it for a while looked as though he might die all by himself. When he pulled through she was strangely relieved. It was a revelation: she didn't just wish him dead, she wanted him to perish at her hand. That insight made her endure. All those weeks and months and years until had reached her majority, and would get whatever money the old man had holed up. And she suspected that it wouldn't be a little: his joy of making money far outweighed his desire to spend it. Her birthday had been on the Tuesday, and so her plan was to be executed on the Saturday following, at the first opportunity.

The shadows were long when he came in from the barn. He was carrying the whip, and so she knew that he had found the milk. The driver's horsewhip looked like a fishing rod with a very short line and was for special occasions only. A whole bucket of milk forgotten since the morning, long gone sour in the heat of the day, was such an occasion. She had done it on purpose. For all her determination she had thought it prudent to remind herself why it was time for the patriarch's departure, and so she had thought of a way of setting him off one last time.

Seeing his white knuckles over the slim grip of the whip was all it took for the thick, black soup in her stomach to start cooking. She let him come into the kitchen and start his speech. She felt the heavy, unrelenting metal of the revolver with the tips of her fingers.

"You forgot the milk this morning. A whole bucket of milk. Wasted. Have I brought you up to squander the Lord's gifts?"

"No, sir."

"And do you accept that I, as your father, have a duty to correct your wrongs, even if it forces me to lay hands on you?"

"I don't."

"Are you ready ... what?"

And that was his last words before him squaring it in the Beyond. The first couple of bullets hit him while he was still standing tall, white-haired and confused, the next two she put in his back after he had keeled over. Then she rolled him over and emptied the last chambers.

The stable catching fire was a mistake and the lives claimed there she could not shrug off. The house was already ablaze when she went to get the mare out to ride for help, sticking with the story of a kitchen accident, but the smell of smoke had made the horses wild with fear and she got jostled in the box and dropped the lamp on the hard floor. The oil spilled and drew a flaming fuse that quickly found some hay. She managed to get the mare out but got knocked again, her head suddenly feeling so heavy. She sank into darkness. So tempting to stay there. She had done what she wanted to do. What was there for her now, anyway?

Then the heat drew near, and she thought better of it. She stumbled out heaving for air, listening to the death cries of those left behind. The cows. Chickens. The sow and the hog. The little goat came shooting out like a Chinese cracker.

Just then McCullen rode in and pulled his horse to a halt. There was a crackle and the sound of something great and heavy breaking: the hayloft had collapsed. No more sounds of anything alive. His face was tight. There were miles to the next neighbour and only a bucket and a well with which to put out the fire.

“Where’s your father?” he asked and she jerked her head towards the house, a big box of flames.

Her attitude did not seem to please him. He steered his horse in a few circles around her. As far as she knew he had gotten along just fine with his employer; she doubted her father had ever felt compelled to correct any of McCullen’s wrongs. In fact, she had sometimes wondered if not McCullen was more precious to him than his own blood.

“What have you done?” he asked.

She drew away slowly. Another great crash: the roof of the barn fell in. A rain of sparks rose and fell and suddenly McCullen had enough to do with getting his horse under control. That was when she ran.

They continued through the town until they reached the few houses up on the slope. They were large houses encircled by white fences; there were swings in the shady trees. They stopped in front of one of them. He dismounted first and caught her as she slid off the mare's back. For a second they were eye to eye, then he let go of her and tied the horses to the fence.

"I want you to come in with me," she said and he nodded, a slight hesitation the only sign that he was surprised. But she might as well get it over with now: if he didn't support her story she wanted to know straight away.

It caused somewhat of an interruption to the Sunday peace when the two of them presented themselves at the door, but once their purpose had been explained, and it was discovered that one of them in a sense was a client, they were shown into the office.

"I came straight here," she said. "You are my father's oldest friend in this town. And I know he appreciated how you handled his business affairs. I thought you would know what to do. I ... I've got no one else to turn to."

She could talk like that when the spirit came over her. She'd had plenty of practice in flattery and submissiveness. McCullen was right to suspect that straight-talking was not how she got through life but his name-calling was an error of category: if anything she was the princess' handmaid.

The old lawyer looked at her. Years of good food and drink had reddened his cheeks but his eyes were alert. She did not shrink, though, and she did not feel she needed to perform. The tears came naturally. And who would have guessed that their cause was the death of dumb animals, not her father's?

"It was my fault," she said as she took the offered handkerchief. "I dropped a lamp in the kitchen. The oil went all over the floor. Father shouted that I should get out of the way before my dress caught fire. He rushed upstairs to get the

blankets from our beds. On his way down he tripped on one of them. It looked as though he was going to be all right for a moment. Then he fell. It looked so strange how he lay. Like when you see an animal and you already know ... I think I must have fainted. When I woke up the flames were everywhere. I tried to pull him out but he was so heavy and I could hardly breathe. I barely got out myself. That was when I realized the fire had spread to the barn, too. The sparks must have drifted. I managed to get one of the horses out but then it was too late. I collapsed outside. McCullen found me like that later.”

So far McCullen had reacted in none of the ways one might expect from a man who finds his employer dead and the farm on fire. Still, she was a little surprised, and relieved, when she felt the heavy hand of her new accomplice on her shoulder. That just gave her a new worry, though. Would people suspect the two of them had planned it together?

“The sheriff and I will ride out there and take a look. From what you say I guess we should ask Mr. Philips along, too. Perhaps you will accompany us?” He looked at McCullen.

She hoped Mr. Philips was just a little squeamish, in spite of his profession: perhaps the undertaker would deal with the body without too many close looks.

The men came back in the early evening, looking grave. They all gathered in the office again. By then she had been clothed in a dress left behind by a married daughter of the house, and had practiced her look of strained composure and grief.

There were no awkward questions. She hadn't thought so: the summer had been hot and the house had burned with ferocious speed. They might have been able to tell that the fire had started in the kitchen, but that was only what she had told them herself; more suspicious men might have wondered if the dead man, though found at the remains of the stairs, had also fallen from them, but then she did perhaps not strike them as a likely murderess. And McCullen, remembered so



kindly by innkeepers and whores, did not seem like the natural accomplice to the devout Bunter's young daughter.

Then the will was read. A sister out east received a sum. A cousin, a smaller one. The sum for the daughter was large: it would cover the cost of respectability for many years to come, or until a husband would take over that task. But Old Bunter had not forgotten his faithful farmhand, John Jack McCullum. His generosity in death certainly outshone that he had shown in life. If doubts remained as to whether his daughter and McCullen were in cahoots the expression on the young lady's face would be enough silence them, as it was obvious that she did not relish the thought of sharing the wealth. She was forgiven that breach of tact and charity, though: the child had had an upsetting day.

The weather being what it was the funeral was held the next morning. McCullum was there, and she contrived to exchange a few words once the other mourners were gone. It was not a large crowd: bar the lawyer and the undertaker it appeared no one cared about Old Bunter, at least not now that he was dead.

"Why did you come back? Why didn't you stay in town?"

He shrugged. "I had my own plans."

"Which were?"

He pondered this for a moment.

"I guess I might as well tell you. You can't really go blabbering now, can you? Your father told me about the will. I reckoned that the money was my only chance of ever getting my own land. I also reckoned that the old man was going to take his time dying."

"I beat you to it."

“You sure did. I was having a drink when a few things suddenly became one in my head. Your turning twenty-one. The tins you were forever shouting up down by the river. And then that bucket of milk I’d seen before I took off. I thought, She’ll get into trouble for that one. I nearly put it out of the way so your daddy wouldn’t see it. But then I wondered if it wouldn’t help my plan. I knew how angry he’d get and perhaps it would look like you for once got angry, too. I was sitting thinking things like that when it struck me that you just might have done some thinking of your own. So I rushed back.”

“You could have shot me and dumped me in the house.”

“Yeah.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t.”

“Why?”

“I just didn’t.”

And that was all he would say on the matter.