

In the Blink of an Eye

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2. Harebells in Barley

St Andrews, Early Spring 1843

Jane Adamson watched the rain come in from the sea, casting its veil over the fields and hedgerows around the farm. By noon there was a suspicion of blue in the mist, like harebells in barley. When she'd taken the washing down from the pulley, she went to find her mother and said, 'I'm away to St Andrews.' Her mother's silence required a response. 'I could do with stretching my legs.'

At the top of the hill, beyond the church, the rain stopped and she took the coast path, shaking off the air of the farm kitchen - a steamy blanket that could give warmth and comfort or cling like a hair shirt. The conversation at home never changed: the weather and the washing, the price of beef in Cupar. Up here she could watch the sea shift under the changing sky and the gulls swoop over the Spindle Rock, knowing she would soon round the headland to where the skyline was punctured by the rooftops and spires of St Andrews.

She dropped down to the harbour with its stink of fish, then climbed the hill, hurrying past St Leonard's College with the wind snapping at her skirts, along the length of South Street until she came to her brother's front door. She paused to draw the corner of her shawl over the brass plate bearing his name, John Adamson M.D. He had spent years away from home, studying and traveling. The plate gave her hope he was here to stay.

Before she could reach for the bell-rope, the door opened and she was nearly bundled into the road by a body coming out. He raised his hat in belated apology, then strode off, hanging on to it in the strengthening breeze. Sir David Brewster, Principal of the University, was a blustering presence on which to hang her worries.

In the lobby she cocked her ear to the voices in the parlour. John's, the gravel on the river floor, and Robert's, the youngest of her brothers, rippling across it. She slipped through the lobby to leave her basket of eggs in the kitchen then went to join them. Robert was in front of the hearth, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. 'Janie, you should have come earlier. Brewster's only just gone.'

She took Rob's arm and drew him away from the fire. She'd spent long enough nursing him through fevers. 'He nearly knocked me over on his way out. And what was he fechtig about the day?'

John's smile was slow but infectious. 'No more fechtig. He had news from England. The Fox likes the calotypes we sent him. We can go ahead.'

The Fox and The Rooster, she called them, and the boys had liked her joke. Of the two, at least William Henry Fox Talbot was at a distance, holed up in his English den playing with his shadow pictures and writing, writing all the time: letters, books and papers that went to London, to Paris, to his friend in St Andrews, telling Brewster he had discovered how to capture light on paper. Brewster, too busy to perfect the method, had given the task to John. For a year he and Rob had been caught up in a ferment of picture-taking - crouching on street corners, squinting through the eye of their camera, bringing the paper home and persuading it to yield up the shadows hidden in the weave of its fibres.

Jane went to poke the fire. 'What about the patents?'

The Fox was wily. If there was money to be made, it would be his.

John spread his hands. 'He won't take out a patent here, not in Scotland.'

Her brother's skill had won Fox Talbot over. She took Rob's face in her hands.

'There you are then. Robert Adamson, calotyper. When will you put your plate up?'

He shook off her caress. 'Soon, it looks like.'

'And have you found a place?' Jane asked.

Rob's eagerness was as infectious as John's smile. Each week Jane brought in butter and eggs and took back her brothers' news, storing up their latest achievements to think about in the dull days in between. In St Andrews there was always something new in the air. Their eldest brother ran the farm and her mother had a girl to help. If Robert was to set up in business, Jane could keep house for him, do his books, help with his customers. Her mother would be the first to agree that Rob shouldn't be on his own.

John and Rob looked at each other. 'Brewster has heard of a house on the Calton, near Princes Street. The garden faces south, to get the light. Rob could go any time.'

One of the coals sparked and made a fizz on the hearth rug and she went to flick it away. Edinburgh. But it made perfect sense. How many pictures could you take in a wee place like this, perched on its lonely rock above the sea?

'I'll go with him,' John said, 'to see him settled.'

She caught John's eye. 'And after that?' John would come back to his doctoring. Who would look after Rob?

John's look warned her not to put difficulties in Rob's way. 'Och, we'll sort something out.' Rob was interested only in his work. 'Come and see what we've been doing.'

On her way through the lobby she picked up a shawl which she threw over Rob's shoulders.

In the acrid dampness of the wash-house, the chill went straight to her bones. The window was covered in a red cloth. Trays filled with different solutions blinked at her in the half light, each of them holding a different mystery. Above them, pictures hung on a cord, pegged by their corners like washing on a still day, the kind of day you got at the farm in the lea of the hill, not here in St Andrews where the wind was always from the sea.

These were negatives, the world turned around so that dark was light and light was dark. Soon, by some other method, the dark and the light would be reversed and the picture restored. Something about them caught at her innards, like a parallel world she hadn't known was there.

Beside her, Rob's freckles had faded over the winter, and his hair glinted copper and gold. He went to a drawer and pulled out pictures made the previous week. 'These are what Talbot saw. They're good,' he said, 'aren't they?'

They were pictures of the places she had passed that afternoon, the castle and the Spindle, the towers of the cathedral. And there were portraits too; John's face, narrow and kind, Brewster with his bulbous nose. She couldn't deny there was truth in them, but all of them were trapped in shades of grey or yellow or brown. 'If it's what folk want,' she said.

John, watching from the shadows, sent Rob away to the kitchen to see if there was to be tea. For once he did as he was told and made off down the hall, whistling to himself. She and John went back to the parlour, hearing Rob chaffing the maid in the kitchen and the girl pretending to scold him in return.

John closed the door and drew the curtains to keep out the early dark. 'You're not pleased,' he said.

Jane sighed. Rob had come to St Andrews to find work indoors and so that John could look after him. 'Edinburgh's full of soot and smoke...' she said. And much worse, she had heard. Here the relentless wind kept muck from hanging in the air and infection out of the streets.

John shook his head. 'It's what he wants. And he deserves it. He has the talent.'

According to John, Rob was the one who had perfected Talbot's method. He had discovered the part of the process that made the difference. She had misjudged her wee brother, the one they had fussed over all his life.

Something at the window had caught John's eye so that his back was towards her. 'Maybe you should go with him,' Jane forced out the words. She would miss John more than Rob.

John turned on his heels to face her. 'I have plenty to do. And he's a grown man. It's time he struck out.'

Struck out. Which of them other than John had struck out? And he, thank the Lord, had come back.

Rob was at the door with a tea tray. She went to take it from him, giving the cups an angry rattle as she set them on the side table. 'Are there no scones?' she said.

When Rob had come back with a plateful of pancakes, they sat together, slathering them with butter. Rob set down his cup and stretched out his arms and legs.

'Janie thinks you need somebody with you,' John said.

Rob licked a smear of butter off his thumb. John was right, he had found some well of confidence Jane hadn't seen before.

Rob pulled a face. 'John can come and help me find a lens maker. Choosing decent paper might take the longest. Or do you think I won't behave myself?'

Rob had never been one for high jinks. He always had his nose in a book or in some model he'd made just to see if it would work. She couldn't picture him so far from home with only a maid and a housekeeper, neither of whom would notice a change in his colour or listen for the deepening of a cough.

John was settled here. It occurred to neither of them that *she* could be part of Rob's adventure. But why would it? Rob said that it was drudgery to make a calotype, hours of preparing the paper, rinsing the negative, printing and rinsing again. Could she learn to see the ghostly faces, put her hands in the trays of winking water and bring out the magic of light?,

'Have you told Mother?' she said.

The men looked at each other. That would be her job.

With the darkness coming in, she said she would stay the night. She slept badly in the cold high-ceilinged room and when sleep finally came there was no crowing of the cock or bark of the collie to waken her so she rose late and took her breakfast alone. Rob had gone to his teaching in the college, John to some meeting with the Provost. She tried to cheer herself with the thought that John would stay here and nothing much would change. But what about Rob? What about herself?

She could be flung like driftwood between the farm and the town, along the coast path or clattering by coach through Boarhills. Or she could be the one to look after him in Auld Reekie, exchange the crumbling ruins for new monuments and marble statues, to stand in a south-facing garden with Edinburgh laid out before her?

Setting off for home, she walked round by the castle. Spring had come early and the ancient walls were taking on a downy coat of moss, the sea keeking in through the gaps. She thought about telling her mother that Rob was even cleverer than they knew

and needed to show it. And that Calton Hill was above the sooty air of Edinburgh, not so far from the sea.

Avoiding St Leonards in case she might blunder in and tell The Rooster to take his calotypes back where they had come from, she went down to the harbour by the pier. There were worse things than the stink of fish. She bought half a dozen herring for their dinner.

Ahead of her the bay had lost its green-grey mood and crashed sapphire black against the foot of Kinkell Braes. She knew her Latin and Greek, *Calotype* meant beautiful picture, but if Rob were to make a picture of the sea, it would be only a shadow, nothing like this living thing that sent up rainbow clouds of spray.



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