

BEN CRUACHAN by MARY A. TURZILLO THE LAD, HIS GREATCOAT drenched, ice clinging to his hair and lashes, brought the cold smell of sleet into the castle hall with him. "I beg hospitality of the laird, if you are he," the lad said, his voice wee as a bairn's. Duncan motioned for his manservant to build up the fire. "I'm Laird Campbell, and do you think I would turn away a stranger?" The lad nodded, not taking his huge, frightened eyes off Duncan. "Bring hot porridge, whiskey, and a straw tick," said Duncan to the manservant. Both he and the manservant were muzzy, pulled out of sound sleep by the pounding on the door. "Why are you on the road in such weather?" "Men track me like an animal," said the lad. "I've run these ten miles, and if I go a step further, I shall fall down in the cold and sleep forever." "Give me your wet clothes," said Duncan, "and take this plaid to wrap around you. You may sleep before the fire if you wish." The lad flinched away from Duncan, but surrendered his sodden greatcoat, smelling of wet wool, and took the plaid. The manservant had brought a bowl of oats fragrant with added whiskey, and the lad ate it in neat, quick spoonfuls. "Why should they make an outlaw of so young a lad, bonnie as you are?" "I have gone afool of a powerful laird." The lad sank down by the fire and closed his dark eyes. "Laird Duncan, I beg a boon." "Ask your boon, lad, and I'll give it." "Swear to take me under your protection." "It is sworn, lad." "By Ben Cruachan, swear." The mountain? Ben Cruachan was the sight he saw always from his home. It was beloved ground. But he had already sworn. "By Ben Cruachan, then, if you must." The lad pulled the plaid over his shoulders and sank down on the straw tick, turning away from Duncan. Duncan dreamt hideous dreams that night. His cousin Donald, to whose sister Elizabeth he was betrothed, came in the dream and addressed him sternly, saying he had said what he should not have said, and done ill by him who was to be his brother-in-law. Duncan woke in a cold sweat and dozed only fitfully the rest of the night. At dawn, Duncan's bagpiper -- for Duncan kept a piper in defiance of the ban -- woke the household with a military air, "Are You Waking Yet, Johnny Cope?" and then played a sad song, "The Flowers of the Forest Have Faded Away," which always made Duncan think of his father's funeral. His father had been dear to him, and he remembered strolling with him during that last spring, plucking sprigs of forget-me-not, Jacob's ladder, and primrose for the lasses. But the piper's wail put courage back in Duncan's heart; forgetting his ill dreams, he went down to greet his guest. The youth was up and neatly dressed, looking less like a drowned cat than the night before. A comely lad, younger than Duncan himself, whose father's death had made him laird when he was scarcely a man. The lad's fresh complexion and dark, flashing eyes pleased Duncan, as did his elegant manners. "What may be your name, that you ask hospitality of the Campbells?" "I am Angus Stewart." The lad looked bashfully away. The Stewarts were on ill terms with the Campbells, and Duncan frowned. He immediately regretted taking in this child of discord. But he was a man of honor, and so sent for bannocks and tea with milk before questioning Angus Stewart further. "May I know your crime?" he asked, as soon as was civil. Angus looked Duncan in the eye. "I killed a man in a fair fight. He had insulted my honor. Please -- ' Angus held up a hand, "remember your pledge." "You extracted this promise from me by trickery," said Duncan thoughtfully, "but if your cause was honorable, I am bound by it." Angus fell to his knees and kissed Duncan's hand. "I shall do you whatever service you wish, if you will shelter me." Duncan, come so recently to his title, was embarrassed. Such toadying was unmanly, and if the lad was to stay, he would have to learn better ways. It was unseemly to ask a lad not much younger than he himself to work for his keep, yet noble lads -- Duncan felt sure Angus was of noble birth -- often did menial, hard labor. "I trust you know horse grooming?" "My Laird, I would serve you by playing the pipes." An odd request, but Duncan called old Andrew, his piper, and asked that the Stewart lad be instructed along with young Andrew, the piper's son. All day long, as Duncan went over his accounts before the fire, he heard tunes played: "Carls w' the Breeks," "The Old Sword's Lament," and "The Fried Periwig." Angus had some knowledge, it seemed, for it was only by listening closely that Duncan could hear when the tune was played by the

master, and when by young Angus. Daylight brightened, the storm abated, and a man beat on Duncan's gate: old Robert Campbell, his uncle who was to be his father-in-law. Robert Campbell strode into the hall and tore off his bonnet. "You harbor one who has spilled blood, Duncan Campbell, and you must give the murderer up." In the far corner of the castle, Duncan could hear the bagpipe lessons going on: "The Bells of Perth." The skirl of the practice chanter made the hair of his neck suddenly stand on end. He rose and with two strides was at the mantel where his claymore lay. "I have sworn protection to the killer." Robert put his hand to his own claymore. "Then I fear you've done unwisely, Duncan, and it shall go ill with you when you come to fetch Elizabeth as your bride. The one you shelter has murdered Donald, your own cousin." Horror and confusion rose in Duncan's heart, but he had given his word. He said, "Be that as it is. My word is my bond." His hand tightened on the claymore. "You will regret that pledge," said Robert. Duncan stood in the open door and watched Robert mount and ride away in the freezing rain. Duncan's anger boiled within him. Angus Stewart had made him give his word, after killing his cousin and his friend, the man who was brother to his beloved! He strode into the chamber where old Andrew instructed the lad, and curtly dismissed his piper. "What do you mean, seeking the oath of the cousin of the man you killed?" he said. "I have done nothing --" Duncan struck the lad on the cheek, knocking him backward into the wall. Young Stewart sank to his knees before Duncan and tore open his shirt. Duncan staggered backward. No flat chest, hairy as a man's or smooth as a boy's, was revealed beneath that shirt, but two full, bonny breasts as ripe as September apples. "Do what you will with me," said the stranger, "but remember your pledge." Duncan raked a hand through his beard. "What manner of creature are you?" "I am a lass," said young Stewart. "My true name is Annie, and I disguised myself in man's dress." She fluffed out her dark hair, bit her lips and flushed, and he marveled how he could ever have thought her a lad. "Well, cover yourself," Duncan said, feeling the color creep over his own face. Instead she reached her arms out. "Remember your pledge! Donald your cousin tried to ravish me, and I defended myself as a good woman ought. I didn't mean to kill him, but my wee knife slipped." Duncan turned his eyes away, but the lass seized his hands and pressed them to her lips. He could feel the heat of her bosom, smell her skin, and he was moved by dark passions. "This must be a lie," he said. "Donald was a mild man, married to the bonniest lass in Inverawe save my own beloved. He cannot have tried to ravish you." She sobbed, "I swear to you, by Ben Cruachan, and by St. Andrew." "You are free with oaths, lass." Duncan tried halfheartedly to pull his hand away. "See these bruises on my neck and bosom," she said. "I got them in defense of my maidenhead." Duncan looked, as she opened the shirt further and displayed a few faint marks, one on the base of her throat, and another near her roseblush nipple. He was always a passionate man, and in his anger, the sight stirred him. "Honor your word," she said in a wee voice. Duncan jerked his hand away. "Stay far from my piper and my other people," he said. "Robert will be back. I do na doubt that he went to get his other sons." Then he seized her hand and dragged her back into the hall. There, he called for a servant to make up a bundle of bread, whiskey, and woolen rugs. "I know of a cave where I played when I was a lad," said Duncan. "Robert will not find you there." And when she hesitated, "Come. Darkness is falling and the way will be treacherous for the horse." All the way to the cave they rode Duncan's fine mare, Annie Stewart riding astride in her lad's clothes, her arms around Duncan. When Duncan lifted her down in the cold dark, he smelled her hair, fragrant despite her hard dealings. "I shall freeze here," she said. "Do na think of making a fire," Duncan said. "I can leave you the one rug. Wrap tight in it and stay deep in the cave." She held out her arms to him. "Warm me before you go." Duncan knew well that she was enticing him, this murderer of his bride's brother, but he went to her, lay on the thick woolen rug with her and wrapped it around them. "You'll be warm enough with a nip of whiskey," he said. She held him the tighter, wrapping narrow, strong arms about his waist. She did not seem cold; indeed her thinly covered bosom pressed against his chest with feverish

heat. "That's enough, lass," he said. "You'll be warm enough till morning. Then you can move around and stir your blood." She buried her face in the hollow of his neck. Her hair fell silkily across his cheek, and the odor of her sweat stirred him. "Your arms are strong," she said in a low husky tone. "I wish it had been you instead of Donald." Despite her wiles, desire rose in him, unquiet and harsh. He asked, "What do you want with me?" "Swear to protect me, Duncan. Swear by Ben Cruachan, on your dirk." She reached down and took his dirk from its sheath. The dirk, shaped like Christ's cross, betokened a man's honor. Placing it against her bosom, she took his hand and pressed against it. "Swear." "I've sworn," he said. "Again." "Yes, yes, I swear!" He lay longer with her, and her hands strayed under his kilt like flowers blown against his naked skin. Beyond thinking, he stroked her hips. His hands without his will undid her male disguise and she took him into her. Whether she was maiden or not, Duncan could not tell. She might have been, was his last waking thought. As he slept on the hard, rocky floor of the cave, wrapped with this murderer-lass, a dream came to him. "Duncan, beware! You lie with a witch, a changeling." Duncan, in his dream, sat upright and cried, "Donald, cousin! What do you want of me?" "Revenge. Take up your dirk and kill the witch." "Donald, forgive me, but I swore on that very dirk to protect her." "You have sworn ill, cousin." And from the face and breast of the apparition streamed blood, splattering Duncan until he woke. "By Christ, Donald! Have pity on me." Annie Stewart opened her eyes sleepily. "Honey-love, what's wrong?" Despite his shame his passions rose again and he went into her. Shivering when the cold air hit his sweating body, Duncan went to the mouth of the cave and looked out. First light crept across the valley. His horse he could see dimly in a patch of gorse down the path, where it had sheltered. "I must be gone," he muttered. From somewhere below came the drone of bagpipes so faint Duncan could scarcely make out the tune: "The Flowers of the Forest." Seized with fear, he looked over his shoulder. But Annie was still asleep in the darkness. When he looked again into the valley, he thought he saw a man walk up the path. The wail of the bagpipes grew louder as the dark figure loomed nearer. Duncan's hair stood on end, and he smelled the bitter, bright odor lightning makes in the air. The apparition stopped and said: "Farewell, cousin! Since you will na revenge my death, I shall see you na more till Ticonderoga." Duncan fell to his knees on the path, doubled over with horror and guilt. Finally, he felt for his dirk in its sheath, but he had left it beside Annie in the cave. THE NEXT YEAR, Duncan smoothed over his quarrel with Robert by saying that he had cast the murderer out where she was sure to die of cold, and so he was able to marry Donald's sister Elizabeth. He was perhaps too quick to forgive himself the sin of ill-advised swearing but reasoned that he had been tricked. When his wife asked why he always wanted to roam, to go with the soldiers, he said only that he feared his death at a place called Ticonderoga. Since Donald had spoken of it, it must be a place nearby, so he would rove far. Duncan and Elizabeth had sons, fine military men, and Duncan himself became a major in the Forty-second Highlanders. Everywhere that his regiment went, Duncan asked if one had heard this strange name, Ticonderoga, and no one knew even what land it was in, though some avowed it must be an Irish or a Scottish village so far set in the mountains that none had heard of it. When Duncan was a man of forty-five, his Majesty sent the Forty-second Highlanders to serve under General James Abercromby, to take a colonial fortification, Fort Carillon, from the French. With Duncan went his eldest son and young Albert, the piper whose father had served when Duncan was young. Duncan was used to cold, and rain, and meager rations, but the colonies imposed a different kind of hardship. When the Forty-second landed at Lake George, his brogues, stockings, and legs were covered with mud after only a few paces on the bank. Insects stung him, and in his Black Watch tartan the heat made his skin itch. Instead of the fine vistas of his homeland, there seemed only the endless lake, stinking of mud and shadowed by an impassably thick forest. The French who held Fort Carillon under Montcalm were known to be few and poorly provisioned, but the French-allied Natives were fierce fighters who tortured their captives. Their weakness, he understood, was whiskey, and

Duncan, like all his men, carried with him a small flask of Scotch whiskey, a possible barter for his life. Duncan had private misgivings about Abercromby, who was never an enterprising commander, and at the moment, he suspected, had the flux from bad water. Fort Carillon, Duncan understood, was a gateway to Lake Champlain and the other freshwater seas that the French held. Abercromby did have the imagination to realize that the thick forest was enemy to those who did not know the land. A magnificent waterfall was near the site of the fort, and yet the thunder of its waters seemed to come from all directions. So Abercromby determined that a small advance force, led by Lord Howe, his charismatic second in command, should scout the land around the falls and the fort, and should draw up maps for a plan of battle. Howe's men stumbled into a French reconnaissance force and defeated it. But Howe, who had always been more popular than Abercromby, was killed, which much demoralized the entire army. Abercromby determined that a smaller force should scout further, and Duncan was to lead this group. So at dawn, Duncan and a group of Forty-second Highlanders, taking with them a bagpiper for communication and morale, set out toward the falls, led by the American colonial scout, Horatio "Polecat" Spotswood. The troop trudged through deep wood and meadow, Polecat pointing out landscape features. Near the falls, they encountered a deep ravine. "By St. Andrew, there must be a clearing beyond," Duncan announced, "A good place for the French to reconnoiter." "Tarnation, sir! There's foul water and varmints down there!" Polecat warned. But Duncan crashed through thicket to the bottom, crossed a lively brook canopied by forest, and climbed the other side. He clambered up, hauling himself by vines and roots smelling of crushed leaves, until, near the other side, he had to stop and rest. His hands and knees were raw from the rough bark and stones. The falls thundered nearby, but unseen, and he longed to plunge into cold water, to soothe the rash he had from the three-leaved vines and the insect bites. As he drew breath, he saw a pair of dark, naked legs, only a few feet above him. He raised his gaze to look into the sardonic eyes of a dark Native, who seemed amused by a kilted Scotsman's Black Watch tartan, sporran, and other regalia. Indeed, Duncan would have been equally amused at the outrageous costume of the painted Native, with its beads, leathers, and feathers, had his position not been so precarious. "Je vais vous crever!" Duncan yelled, groping for his pistol. It was the direst French threat he could think, and he was certain this was a French allied Indian. Worse luck, the man probably spoke no white man's language. The Native held up a musket, still with an air of detached amusement. "I speak your language, English man. Your uniform, however, is strange. More beautiful than the French, the English, or any of the colonials." "I'm Scots, damn it," said Duncan, lowering the pistol, but not putting it away. The Indian did not have a red ribbon tied around his musket to signal British alliance, and the weapon itself appeared to be of French issue. "Of the Forty-second Highlanders." "Tell me why I should not kill you now," said the Native. Duncan heaved himself up to the level of the Native and looked him in the eye. "I do not fear death today." "All men die. Perhaps I have your death in my gun here. Or perhaps I shall put you to the test. Will you cry out, Highlander, when my brothers peel off your scalp, or roast you slowly? Can you keep silent, grub-colored man?" Duncan thought he could hear his heart beat, even over the roar of the falls. "I may be mortal, but I shall not die here, lad. A ghost has doomed that I shall die at a place called Ticonderoga." The enemy laughed, a single barking laugh. "Do you not know the name of this place, Highlander?" "The name is Fort Carillon, for the sound of the falls, which are called Carillon Falls." "Listen to the water." And Duncan listened to the chime-like falls. "My people have a fancy that the falls sing a sound like Ti-con-deroga." Duncan felt cold wash over his skin as if the falls themselves had drenched him. At the same time, bagpipe music liked over the ravine, playing "The Flowers of the Forest." Duncan glanced away from the Native, and when he looked back, the man was gone. He shook his head, as if he had seen another ghost. Ticonderoga! The pipe music stopped, and the piper started another tune, "The Lament for the Only Son." It was his own piper, playing to lead him back to the scouting party. When Duncan reported to

Abercromby, he told the General that there was highground, called by the colonial American Mount Defiance, and that Abercromby should put his cannon atop it, from whence he could bombard the Fort and force the French to surrender. "No time, no time," said Abercromby, chewing his thumbnail. "Montcalm has reinforcements of seven thousand men who will join him by nightfall, and with them a huge complement of redskins." "Begging your pardon, sir, but the Fort will contain no more than four hundred." "They'll hold the Heights of Carillon, which is high ground, Major Campbell." So the cannon sat useless, still on the batteries, and Abercromby ordered a Superintendent Johnson with his Natives to the top of Mount Defiance. Duncan bowed his head stoically before that stupidity, knowing their muskets did not have the range to discomfit the French. Duncan fell asleep thinking of his homeland, which he knew he would never see again, of the gorse and bracken, the scent of purple heather, of beautiful Ben Cruachan and Inverawe, the lochs and the mountains all soft gray and green, of his sons at home and his son who was with him, and of his sweet Elizabeth. He dreamed that night of a man's voice, familiar from the shades of time: "Duncan, you may not turn away. Go to your death with honor." And a woman's: "Fly, Duncan. There is still time. In the forest your Black Watch tartan will be nearly invisible and you can after join your comrades and pretend you were in the battle." "How could I face men who had braved death when I fled? How could I face my sons, or my Elizabeth?" "Ah, Duncan, Duncan! You could be a landholder here. For women's company, you could have a Native lass, or I would come to you, not as a wraith, but alive and warm." Duncan felt himself bum with love for life; he remembered the scent of every lass he had ever loved. He wanted to live. But he wanted his own wife, his own sons, his own Highland castle, and most of all himself -- his honor. He awoke to the certainty of his fate. When the day of the battle dawned, Abercromby ordered his infantry, together with the Forty-second Highlanders, to storm the French defenses. And then it became apparent what defenses the French had created. Montcalm, the French General, had ordered his men to fell trees, top branches sharpened and pointing toward the English enemy. It created an impenetrable thicket of branches and sharpened poles, all pointing outward. This wall of thorns and log-spears -- called an abatis -- was higher than a man's head, and thirty to forty feet in depth. French musketeers could hide in its depths and fire at will, but the British allies would be pierced on the branches, open to enemy fire. Their own bullets would do no good against the wall of branches. When Duncan saw this he knew that he had met his doom. Abercromby was mad to think that anything short of cannon could make a hole in this wall. It was his fate to lead his men against this wall, his deadly fate. The pipers played the tune that called for advance, and Duncan waded into the fray, loading and firing at every glint that might have been a French fleur-de-lis. Gunsmoke smelled harsh and hot as he fought. When he ran out of balls, he knelt amid the thicket and struck sparks with his flint. He managed to set several fires; but when he retreated a few paces, French soldiers quenched them with water. Duncan still had his sword. Knowing that he was to die gave him a strange freedom. It was as if all the bonds of his nature had been cut loose. He struck at the branches with his sword, making headway toward the enemy. He had almost crawled through the last space into the French defenses when a sharp pain blossomed in his chest. He stumbled a few feet further, then fell, hearing the piper play, "Are You Waking Yet, Johnny Cope?" A dark shape materialized above him. "Whiskey," he said, soundlessly, and by some miracle the shape -- it was his own son -- bent over him and dribbled a few sweet drops on his lips. I will die with my mouth full of Scotland after all, thought Duncan. And then he was in a mist. His son was gone, along with the roar of the battle. And yet he could smell the smoke and the raw, torn wood. A tall man came up on his right side. "Duncan, I've come for you. You swore amiss those years ago when you protected the Stewart woman. She was a liar, a witch, and a murderess, but she dazzled you as she did me, and I forgive you." "Donald," said Duncan. "Up with you, my kinsman. A short walk, and we can rest forever." He offered his hand. But there was another shape, too. Breathless, its hair a dark corona,

faceshadowed by the blaze behind its head, it knelt and put a hand to Duncan's lips, wiping away the whiskey that had spilled from his mouth. "Duncan, true love! I've come to save you." "Annie," said Duncan. He remembered the murderer's name, Annie Stewart, though he had not thought of her for twenty years. "Let me but kiss your wounds and we will fly from here. I will show you delights that the godly do na dream of." Duncan could still see his dead cousin Donald looking down with warning. "I can say na more," said the ghost. "You know what she is." And Duncan gave her such a look that she stepped back. From his death in a land between Ticonderoga and the afterworld, Duncan looked up at the fair-faced woman and at his cousin. The smell of gunpowder and new-fallen trees had faded, but he heard pipes softly playing "The Flowers of the Forest," and it seemed that he lay in a bower fragrant with the strange flowers of a new world. He reached out, and his hand clasped a dirk. By the work on its handle he knew it to be the same blade he had sworn upon and left with Annie Stewart in a cave twenty years before. But it was his no longer. It had lain in Annie Stewart's bosom, and lost all sacred meaning. It was as cold as if it had lain for twenty years beneath the falls of Ticonderoga. He had kept his oath, and Donald had forgiven him. He had no need of Annie, or of the dirk. It fell from his fingers and he heard the wind sigh over the heather below Ben Cruachan. He clasped Donald's hand and rose to walk the mountain of his soul's home.