

A SEASON TO FORGIVE

By

Julie Dron

John paused at his desk as the sweet harmonies of the madrigals drifted through the house. He smiled to himself; his family were preparing for Christmas. Finally, late in life, he could enjoy the festivities without feeling sadness, without feeling guilt. These modern songs, he observed, included much more *fa la la* than when he was young, probably because of the playwright, Shakespeare, who everyone spoke so highly of and was even popular at King James' court.

The beauty of the melodies awoke a yearning within him to visit his old home that he hadn't seen for over forty years. He leaned back in his chair, the house now vivid in his mind's eye. The Manor House, a wattle and daub half-timbered creation that rested on a bed of sandstone, not far from the banks of a wide river and surrounded by fields and farms and orchards and woods. His great grandfather had built the original house, and each generation had added to it. John's father had built the final west wing before John was born, when young Edward was King, before Queen Mary had ascended to the throne. The west wing, with its secrets.

John noticed that as he grew older, the vision of his childhood home became stronger, more defined. He could almost smell the grass, feel it beneath his feet, as if he were young again running barefoot across its damp softness. His family had been wealthy merchants based in the Northwest of England, and his life—until that terrible time when his family had been torn apart—had been carefree and happy. He was the youngest child of twelve children and had spent most of his time exploring the house or roaming the fields with his fearless older brother Thomas. He could see Thomas now, his rusty red hair and watery blue eyes, always laughing, always cheerful and full of fun. Thomas taught John to climb trees, from the tops of which he would point out the Welsh hills across the river. They would chase each other through the farms surrounding the estate, paddle in the muddy water at the riverbank, and pester the servants.

John no longer tried to suppress memories, as he had done for many years. He was amazed at how much was buried in his mind, surfacing quite regularly now. Perhaps because he was allowing his thoughts to flow, without blocking anything

he considered unpleasant. Perhaps because he had learnt to forgive himself. He now recalled that rainy day, during a Latin class, when Thomas whispered that he had discovered a secret. John had been excited, wondering what this secret could be. He was unable to concentrate on his studies, and the teacher would at intervals pick up the stick from the corner of the room and thwack John's desk, and sometimes his upturned palms. As soon as the class ended, John followed Thomas along the narrow corridors, up the creaking stairs that led to the west wing, to one of the bedrooms. Thomas slowly pushed the large oak door, peeking inside, beckoning John to follow him.

The room wasn't very big, but it was majestic, with impressive tapestries hanging from ceiling to the floor, covering the wood panelling. A four-poster bed occupied most of the room, displaying intricate carvings. A large hearth, smelling of unswept ash and pine twigs, faced the bed. Thomas pulled back one of the tapestries, pressing the wood panelling, and to John's great surprise a secret door suddenly sprung open. John could see a narrow passage with a ladder running upwards parallel to the chimney breast. John had followed Thomas nervously into the dark, stepping carefully on each rung. At the top was a small room, a makeshift bed with a mattress of hay, and a candle. Two spy holes in the brick work provided light and views over the distant woods and lanes. Anyone approaching the Manor House, even from a great distance away, would be spotted. For a while, the boys had used this secret room for their games, watching for approaching marauders, for Vikings, or Roman soldiers. Eventually, they lost interest, and turned their attention elsewhere, roaming further afield to the local villages, and for a time the secret room was forgotten.

John's solitary reminiscing was interrupted by a soft tapping on the door, and a servant entered to place a lighted candle on his desk. John thanked the servant, pushing his work to one side. His thoughts drifted again, returning to past times, and Christmases long gone. If there was one thing John had loved more than his brother Thomas, it was Christmas. John thought of it now, smiling sadly to himself. His five grown up children were all musical, and as he watched the flame flickering in the draught from the doorway, he heard the sad, haunting opening lines of "Coventry Carol". He remembered Anne singing this song, so many years ago, such a remarkable voice! He had never heard anything like it before or since. He pushed his chair back, standing and moving to the small diamond-paned window.

Looking out he noticed that snowflakes were falling softly onto the London street. *How crowded London has become in recent years*, he thought and again felt a deep desire to return to the Manor House, to race through the fields, to be a child again, to be a part of the excitement of a large Manor House preparing for Christmas. Every year he would help gather the holly and ivy that would adorn the rooms, and particularly the Great Hall, where all the festivities would take place. For a short time, between Christmas and New Year, social boundaries would disappear, and everyone would take part in the games and music and dancing. His parents were kind and generous people, and all the servants were included in the celebrations at Yuletide. John loved to watch the wood cutters chopping the tree to prepare the massive Yule log, which he would help roll along from the woods to the house, to be placed in the enormous hearth.

There was only one thing that John didn't like and that was Midnight Mass, or Mass at any time. His parents were strict Roman Catholics, and Mass would be very long, and read in Latin, which he didn't understand despite the efforts of his tutor. He would stare at the white cambric ruff under the priest's chin, that would quiver as the priest read from the large, heavy Bible. Focussing on this helped John stay awake, because if he fell asleep his father or eldest brother would slap him across the head or his mother would poke him harshly in his back. Mass took place in the parlour in the west wing, with only family members and some long-standing servants attending. The arrival of the priest was always shrouded in secrecy. The priest would enter the room before removing his large hooded cloak, and sit in the high-backed, richly carved chair facing his small congregation. His servant would move to the window seat, where he would remain alert, eyes fixed on the drive.

John sensed the tension in the room during Mass and noted how his sisters would jump with a start whenever a spark shot noisily from the smouldering logs. He understood on one level, that they weren't supposed to have Mass, and Thomas told him if the Queen found out they would be hung, drawn, and quartered. But, being the youngest child, and with his parents and older siblings being so busy, no one ever took the time to fully explain the situation to him. He had grown up with these strange secretive ways, with the priest hurried from room to room and servants watching at windows. To John, as a young child, it was perfectly normal.

John's mother loved music, but all her children had sadly proved to not have a musical bone in their bodies. Thus, every Christmas, she would either invite or hire singers and musicians to entertain them. For John, it was the highlight of the celebrations, to hear the perfect harmony of madrigals, the singing of Italian poems

or old English folk songs, followed by the instruments, recorders and lutes, to accompany the dancing.

It was during his thirteenth year, that his life changed dramatically. First, his parents had decided to send Thomas to cousins who lived in Ireland. John had been heartbroken, at the loss of his brother, ally, and friend. Yet, as the months passed, and Christmas came around again, he experienced that same excitement that he always had. That year, there were soft snowflakes falling too, John remembered. How could he ever forget? He had helped to collect the holly and ivy as usual, and he became a pest in the kitchen which was a flurry of activity. A large boar had been killed, and the head was being prepared. Geese were being plucked, ready for cooking, and a number of servants were kneading pastry, for pies.

Later he had hurried to the Great Hall for the singing and music and had been struck by the beauty of one of the singers. Her hair was black, as black as a raven's wings, and her eyes were as blue as a field of spring bluebells; but it was her voice, so pure, so perfect, he felt as if he were being transported to another realm. A heavenly realm. After the performance, he approached her, and discovered her name was Anne. He wondered how old she was, but thought it was rude to ask.

They sat together on the long bench in the Great Hall, and he ran back and forth with food and drinks that she requested. He knew he was being silly and foolish, but he couldn't seem to take his eyes off her or leave her side. She was quite haughty and talked of all the grand halls she had visited, much grander than the Manor House, she said. John had suddenly felt ashamed of his house. Perhaps it wasn't as big or grand as he had always thought. She had looked around with a bored expression, as family members and servants dashed back and forth in preparation for Christmas. John offered to show her the parlour in the west wing, with its carvings in the wood around the fireplace. He explained that the carvings depicted all the family members, and there he was, the youngest, at the end of the line of children. Anne had not looked impressed. John suddenly remembered the secret passage and asked her if any house she had visited had a secret door, and a secret room.

At last, her eyes had shown interest and surprise, and she followed him up the winding stairs in semidarkness to the bedroom that Thomas had led him to years before. She had gasped when he had pulled back the tapestry and revealed the secret door in the panelling. She had peered up into the passage, not wanting to climb the ladder, but listening in awe as John described the small room and lookout

holes in the brickwork. John then closed the door, pulling the tapestry back, and they left the room.

He was pleased that he had finally made an impression. They stood for a while by the windows in the corridor, and John pointed to the two yew trees in the cobbled courtyard, which were three hundred years old. There was activity in the courtyard, a man dismounting his horse, covered in a large hooded cloak and assisted by two servants. John whispered that it was probably the priest arriving for Midnight Mass. He told her how much he hated Mass because it was so boring, and he had heard the priest would be here for the whole of the Christmas period, maybe longer. He laughed and pulled a face, and she had smiled at him. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, she turned to bid him goodnight. She was very tired, she told him. He suddenly felt alone as he watched her rustle down the corridor in her long gown, and he turned to join his family in the Great Hall.

That evening, the family had gathered in the parlour for Midnight Mass. It was a different priest, which wasn't unusual, but this time he was French. He talked for a short time with John's parents and older brothers, in a language John couldn't understand. All through the Mass, John could only think of Anne, her beauty, her grace, her ethereal voice. He received a few smacks, for not paying attention, but hardly noticed. The next day was Christmas Day, and for the first time John didn't help roll the yule log to the hearth. He searched instead for Anne. She was nowhere to be found, and this time, as he listened to the singing that normally enthralled him, he only felt an emptiness inside.

It was two days later, when life as he had known it came to an abrupt end. It was the Sunday after Christmas, and the parlour had been prepared for Mass, with the French Priest settling into the large carved chair. His servant, the lookout at the window, had suddenly begun to shout in French, words that John didn't understand. But there was a commotion like he had never before seen. The Queen's men had arrived, Walsingham's men he later discovered. There was the sound of horses clattering outside, of shouting and screams as the men thudded on the great doors that led to the courtyard, yelling, and demanding to enter. The priest and his servants were hastily escorted from the parlour, and John could see his sisters were crying with panic, while his father ordered them to go to their rooms and calm down. The men thumped up the stairs while John's father stood at the door of the parlour to face them.

“Who on earth gave you the right to enter my house uninvited and cause such a disturbance at Christmas?” he had demanded with a confidence that he didn't feel. The officer in charge stared at him, a stare that would put the fear of God into any man, then he laughed, ordering some of his men to restrain the people in the parlour, while he and three other men strode up the stairs and straight to the room with the secret door. It happened so quickly, that John and his family could only watch with horror as the French priest and his servants were removed from the secret room and led to the courtyard with their hands bound. John's parents and two older brothers were then formally arrested despite their cries and protests, and along with three of the old servants, they were all bound and placed in an open cart with the priest and his servants. John watched from the window with a fear he had never before experienced, as the cart was led away down the drive, surrounded by the Queen's men on horseback.

John had run to hide behind the space in the eaves that overlooked the Great Hall. He curled up into a ball, shivering and shaking. The servants and remaining family members had gathered in the Hall to weep and clutch themselves with fear, not knowing what to do. John could hear their discussions between family members and servants, as he remained in the eaves.

“How did they know where to look? They went straight to that room!” his eldest sister had sobbed. “How did they know?”

“I believe one of the singers was a spy. That's what I heard.”

The servants nodded as the head groom spoke.

“Yes, it was the pretty girl with the black hair. She is from Queen Elizabeth's court. A spy for Walsingham!”

John had been distraught, but no one suspected him as the enemy who had revealed the family secrets. He never mentioned it to anyone, not even his wife, but at times the guilt had almost destroyed him. His sisters sent him to live with cousins in London, cousins who followed the Protestant faith. “You will be safe there, with a Protestant family,” they had assured him. He remained with the family, until he eventually married. The charges against his family were serious, as the French priest was believed to have been involved in a plot against Queen Elizabeth. They had all been released eventually, but their time in prison had destroyed his parents

mentally. John only returned to the Manor House twice, for the funerals of his parents.

“Father! Father!”

John was suddenly brought back to the present, hearing his eldest daughter calling up the stairs, and her heavy footsteps as she hurried along the corridor to his study. She stopped, shocked, when she saw him standing in the wavering light of the candle, the tears glistening on his cheeks. She ran to him, concerned. He patted her hand and smiled.

“I’m just a silly old fool! Your singing is so beautiful, it took me back to when I was a boy!”

They walked downstairs together, his daughter on his arm, and he was immediately surrounded by his family. He asked them to sing for him.

“Something cheerful please! Something modern! Something from a recent Shakespeare play!”

He knew how much they loved the theatre, their barge trips along the Thames to The Globe. He felt uplifted by the music, by the love of his family. He finally understood that his actions all those years ago had only been the innocent mistakes of a naive thirteen-year-old boy. He would enjoy this Christmas, with his musical family, and lay the past to rest.

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