



What if?

by MaryPat Campbell

Was it my imagination or were my fellow inmates whispering to each other and either going silent abruptly when I approached, or shouting out loud curses in my direction? I had said nothing about my meeting with Lady Balloch in the superintendent's office, but news travels fast inside these walls.

Being unused to authority treating me with respect, I tended to disbelieve any good news and become suspicious that nothing good could ever come my way. I imagined all sorts of horrors. What if I got what I most wanted, out of here and a life of my own? What if Ursula could not be with me when I left? What if she could be with me, which would be worse? What if I was in fact dreaming and delusional as before, and none of it was true?

The superintendent seemed benign. He gave the impression of being interested, and I write that with a weight on my shoulders as it is good news if I dare believe it. But what will he get out of it, I wondered? His first impulse had been to stoke and build up the fire in his office, so that the two of us could be in the warmth of a shared endeavour, or so I dared to believe. These were my thoughts as I dug the big yellow potatoes, cleaning the heavy wet soil from them before pitching them into the basket.

A man approached and stood in the field to my left, slightly behind me and observed silently. I turned and saw that it was my friend Jarvis, and nodded to him. I was certain he too had heard the news of my new status in life. He continued to stand there, stiff and quiet in his long grey coat and muddy boots. Suddenly he bellowed, "what do we have here then?" and it was such a shock that I dropped the potatoes I had just lifted from the ground. "A man who has nothing much to say for himself," he continued, "and now we hear he's a son of the cloth, a bishop for a father no less."

My companions in the field straightened their backs, stood and listened, while I continued digging, pulling, cleaning and throwing with my ears burning and my heart pounding. Jarvis took a step towards me, and this time in a loud whisper, he spat in my ear, “the scandal of it, I don’t know how you can bear to live with it my friend.”

He then laughed at me and walked off. When I looked round, my fellow harvesters had all bent low again and had resumed their work of digging, pulling, cleaning and throwing.