

An excerpt from the novel

BITTER MAGIC

By Nancy Hayes Kilgore

Auldearn, Scotland, 1660

Chapter 1

The wind blustered and Margaret pulled her cape tighter, walking briskly past the fields of flax, past the loch, and across the dunes.

She scrambled down the path, slipping on the scree as pebbles tumbled down the dune side. Landing on her feet, she walked toward the sea. *Alone in this wide land*, Margaret thought, except for the gulls that swooped and shrieked above.

And in the distance, a figure, gray and brown against the sandbar.

The woman's dress blew around her as she bent and raked. She was plucking cockles and placing them in a basket. Steady motions, bending and raking and plucking, in tune with the rhythm of the waves and the tide. Just a barefoot peasant, like generations before her and those to come after, people harvesting from the sea and blending with its melodies.

But there was something else about this woman.

A dignity. Or self-possession. An unusual stillness, as if she were a world in and of herself.

The sea churned, and two dark humps rose and fell in the green water. Dolphins. The gray-brown woman faced the sea and raised her arms as if beckoning to them.

Margaret hesitated, then walked across the sandbar as the woman straightened and looked back at her. The hood of her plaid flapped in the wind, hiding and then revealing

light eyes in a pale face. Her look was both open and inscrutable. She stared at Margaret and nodded, almost as if she had been expecting her.

Suddenly Margaret stumbled, confused. Though she was just seventeen, the peasants usually bowed or curtsied when they saw her, but this woman did not. Perhaps she should have been insulted, but instead, she was curious. Who was she?

The woman lifted her arms, swinging them back and forth as if conducting an orchestra. The dolphins jumped and flipped in the air. Could they be following her commands? These were the two dolphins that were here so often, showing off and commanding attention like children. Margaret had always felt that they knew her. Did they know this woman, too?

Margaret clapped her hands—as she always did at their performance—so as not to let them down. “Excellent!” she shouted.

The woman peered at her again. She was younger than Margaret had thought, perhaps closer to thirty, and now she looked familiar...one of the farmtown women. Her face was marked by the pox, and her fixed stare shifted as the corners of her mouth curved up. Light seemed to shimmer around her body.

“Titania and Oberon,” cried Margaret.

The woman furrowed her brows. “What say ye, mistress?”

“Those are the names I’ve given them. After the fairy queen and king.” The dolphins jumped again and dived beneath the surface.

“The fairies, ye say?”

“Yes, in Mister Shakespeare’s play.” It had been something she wasn’t supposed to read, but when she’d found the volume containing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in Aunt

Grissel's library, she'd begged and begged until she was allowed to read it. When Margaret opened the book, she found herself stepping into another world, a world where fairies danced and frolicked.

The dolphins came close, smiling and raising their soft snouts out of the water. They seemed to recognize Margaret, too, and she called their names again. "Oberon! Titania!" Now there were two or three more, and they cavorted and jumped in the water.

"Mister Shakespeare's been to Elfane," the woman said, "but ye need not travel to London to find it." It was as if she knew Margaret's thoughts and her longing to go to London, now that the ban on theater was lifted, to see a real play.

"Elfane?"

"The fairy kingdom."

The fairy kingdom. Mister Harry preached about this belief in fairies, this "superstition of the devil to keep the people ignorant and away from God."

The woman turned again, flicked her wrist, and called out a rhyme:

"Go with the fisheries gone to sea

and bring home mickle fish to me

bring the mickle fish to me

go out with the fisheries gone to sea.

In the name of the Trinity three

The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost,

In the name of St. Andrew and Trinity three,

Bring the mickle fish to me."

The dolphins dived and disappeared. Margaret gaped. “Did they understand you?”

“Aye, mistress, and they’ll do my bidding. I’ll have a good harvest when the boats come in.”

“How did you learn to talk with the dolphins?”

The woman looked around and lowered her voice. “Nay, ’tis not to say.”

The woman launched into Gaelic now. Though Margaret spoke it a little, this was too fast for her. There was one word she understood: *shin*, or *fairies*.

Was this magic? Margaret felt her legs shaking and looked around to make sure her family was not watching, even though she knew they were far away in the castle. If they could see her now, talking about fairies...or if, God forbid, Mister Harry, the minister, were about. She shuddered, but forced herself to stand firm. “Have you seen the fairies?”

“I have *an da shealladh*, mistress.”

“What?”

“The two sights.”

Second sight.

“I see the other world, the place of the spirits, where be the fairies.”

Margaret’s eyes widened. “The other world?” According to Mister Harry, fairies were devils, and people who associated with them were evil. She had never heard about this *other world* here on Earth where fairies lived. What did it mean? Was it like in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*?

The woman bowed her head in assent. Veiled but piercing eyes looked up at Margaret. “And where be the dead.”

The dead? Margaret shivered.

The wind had picked up, and the woman wrapped her plaid round her shoulders. “I
mun go now.”

“But—” Margaret wanted to ask, “How?” and “When?” but she was sore afraid,
and the words stuck in her throat.

Without another word, the woman of second sight turned and started back along the
strand. Margaret could only watch as she walked away, her body small and graceful beneath her
garments

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