

## *The Red Door*

When Murdo woke up after Hallowe'en and went out into the cold air to see whether anything was stirring in the world around him, he discovered that his door which had formerly been painted green was now painted red. He stared at it for a long time, scratching his head slowly as if at first he didn't believe that it was his own door. In fact he went into the house again and had a look at his frugally prepared breakfast - porridge, scones and tea - and even studied the damp patch on the wall before he convinced himself that it was his own house.

Now Murdo was a bachelor who had never brought himself to propose marriage to anyone. He lived by himself, prepared his own food, darned his own socks, washed his own clothes and cultivated his own small piece of ground. He was liked by everybody since he didn't offend anyone by gossiping and maintained a long silence unless he had something of importance to say.

The previous night children had knocked on his door and sung songs to him. He had given them apples, oranges, and nuts which he had bought specially from a shop. He had gazed in amazement at the mask of senility on one face, at the mask of a wildcat on another and at the mask of a spaceman on the face of a little boy whom he could swear he knew.

Having made sure that he was in his own house again he went out and studied the door for a second time. When he touched the red paint he found that it was quite dry. He had no feeling of anger at all, only puzzlement. After all, no one in his experience had had a red door in the village before. Green doors, yellow doors, and even blue doors, but never a red door. It certainly singled him out. The door was as red as the winter sun he saw in the sky.

Murdo had never in his life done anything unusual. Indeed because he was a bachelor he felt it necessary that he should be as like the other villagers as possible. He read the *Daily Record* as they did, after dinner he slept by the fire as they did, he would converse with his neighbour while hammering a post into the ground. He would even play draughts with one of them sometimes.

Nevertheless there were times when he felt that there was more to life than that. He would feel this especially on summer nights when the harvest moon was in the sky – the moon that ripened the barley – and the earth was painted with an unearthly glow and the sea was like a strange volume which none could read except by means of the imagination.

At times too he would find it difficult to get up in the morning but would lie in a pleasant half dream looking up at the ceiling. He would say to himself, 'After all, I have nothing to get up for really. I could if I liked stay in bed all day and all night and none would notice the difference. I used to do this when I was a child. Why can't I do it now?'

For he had been a very serious child who found it difficult to talk to children even of his own age. Only once had he shown enthusiasm and that was when in a school playground he had seen in the sky an aeroplane and had lisped excitedly, 'Thee, an aeroplane', a rather ambiguous not to say almost unintelligible exclamation which had been repeated as a sign of his foolishness. He had never taken part in the school sports because he was rather clumsy: and his accomplishments in mathematics were meagre. When he became an adolescent he had taken a job as cook on board a fishing boat but had lost the job because he had put sugar instead of salt into the soup thus causing much diarrhoea.

Most of the time – while his father and mother dreamed their way towards death – he spent working on the land in a dull concentrated manner. In summer and autumn he would be seen with a scythe in the fields, the sunlight sparkling from the blade while he himself, squat and dull, swung it remorselessly. There had in fact been one romance in his life. He had made overtures – if such tentative motions might even be called

that – to a spinster in the village who lived with her grossly religious mother in the house opposite him and who was very stout. However he had ceased to visit her when once she had provided him with cocoa and salt herring for his supper, a diet so ferocious that even he could not look forward to its repetition with tranquillity.

There was another spinster in the village who wrote poetry and who lived by herself and he had certain feelings too tenuous to be called love towards her. Her name was Mary and she had inherited from her mother a large number of books in brown leather covers. She dressed in red clothes and was seen pottering vaguely about during the day and sometimes during the night as well. But she was more good looking than the first though she neglected herself in the service of books and poetry and was considered slightly odd by the villagers. Murdo thought that anybody who read a lot of books and wrote poetry must be very clever.

As he stared at the door he felt strange flutterings within him. First of all the door had been painted very lovingly so that it shone with a deep inward shine such as one might find in pictures. And indeed it looked like a picture against the rest of the house which wasn't at all modern but on the contrary was old and intertwined with all sorts of rusty pipes like snakes.

He went back from the door and looked at it from a distance as people in art galleries have to do when studying an oil painting. The more he regarded it the more he liked it. It certainly stood out against the drab landscape as if it were a work of art. On the other hand the more he looked at it the more it seemed to express something in himself which had been deeply buried for years. After a while there was something boring about green and as for blue it wouldn't have suited the door at all. Blue would have been too blatant in a cold way. And anyway the sky was already blue.

But mixed with his satisfaction he felt what could only be described as puzzlement, a slight deviation from the normal as if his head were spinning and he were going round in circles. What would the neighbours say about it, he wondered. Never in the history of the village had there been a red door before.

For that matter he couldn't remember seeing even a blue door himself, though he had heard of the existence of one.

The morning was breaking all over the village as he looked. Blue smoke was ascending from chimneys, a cock was crowing, belligerent and heraldic, its red claws sunk into the earth, its metallic breast oriental and strange. There was a dew all about him and lying on the fences ahead of him. He recognised that the village would wake to a new morning, for the red door would gather attention to itself.

And he thought to himself, 'I have always sought to hide among other people. I agree to whatever anybody tells me to do. If they think I should go to church, I go to church. If they want me to cut peats for them, I do. I have never,' he thought with wonder, 'been myself.' He looked down at his grey fisherman's jersey and his wellingtons and he thought, 'I have always worn these things because everybody else does. I have never had the courage to wear what I wanted to wear, for example a coloured waistcoat and a coloured jacket.'

The red door stood out against the whiteness of the frost and the glimmerings of snow. It seemed to be saying something to him, to be asking him a question. Perhaps it was pleading with him not to destroy it. Perhaps it was saying, 'I don't want to be green. There must be a place somewhere for me as myself. I wish to be red. What is wrong with red anyway?' The door seemed to him to have its own courage.

Wine of course was red and so was blood. He drank none of the former and only saw the latter when he cut himself while repairing a fence or working with wood when a nail would prick his finger.

But really was he happy? That was the question. When he considered it carefully he knew that he wasn't. He didn't like eating alone, he didn't like sitting in the house alone, he didn't like having none who belonged to him, to whom he could tell his secret thoughts, for example that such and such was a mean devil and that that other one was an ungrateful rat.

He had to keep a perpetually smiling face to the world, that was his trouble. But the red door didn't do that. It was foreign and confident. It seemed to be saying what it was, not what it

thought others expected it to say. On the other hand, he didn't like wellingtons and a fisherman's jersey. He hated them in fact: they had no elegance.

Now Mary had elegance. Though she was a bit odd, she had elegance. It was true that the villagers didn't understand her but that was because she read many books, her father having been a teacher. And on the other hand she made no concessions to anybody. She seemed to be saying, 'You can take me or leave me.' She never gossiped. She was proud and distant. She had a world of her own. She paid for everything on the nail. She was quite well off. But her world was her own, depending on none.

She was very fond of children and used to make up masks for them at Hallowe'en. As well as this she would walk by herself at night, which argued that she was romantic. And it was said that she had sudden bursts of rage which too might be the sign of a spirit without servility. One couldn't marry a clod.

Murdo stared at the door and as he looked at it he seemed to be drawn inside it into its deep caves with all sorts of veins and passages. It was like a magic door out of the village but at the same time it pulsed with a deep red light which made it appear alive. It was all very odd and very puzzling, to think that a red door could make such a difference to house and moors and streams.

Solid and heavy he stood in front of it in his wellingtons, scratching his head. But the red door was not a mirror and he couldn't see himself in it. Rather he was sucked into it as if it were a place of heat and colour and reality. But it was different and it was his.

It was true that the villagers when they woke would see it and perhaps make fun of it, and would advise him to repaint it. They might not even want him in the village if he insisted on having a red door. Still they could all have red doors if they wanted to. Or they could hunt him out of the village.

Hunt him out of the village? He paused for a moment, stunned by the thought. It had never occurred to him that he could leave the village, especially at his age, forty-six. But then other people had left the village and some had prospered though it was true that many had failed. As for himself, he

could work hard, he had always done so. And perhaps he had never really belonged to the village. Perhaps his belonging had been like the Hallowe'en mask. If he were a true villager would he like the door so much? Other villagers would have been angry if their door had been painted red in the night, their anger reflected in the red door, but he didn't feel at all angry, in fact he felt admiration that someone should actually have thought of this, should actually have seen the possibility of a red door, in a green and black landscape.

He felt a certain childlikeness stirring within him as if he were on Christmas day stealing barefooted over the cold red linoleum to the stocking hanging at the chimney, to see if Santa Claus had come in the night while he slept.

Having studied the door for a while and having had a long look round the village which was rousing itself to a new day, repetitive as all the previous ones, he turned into the house. He ate his breakfast and thinking carefully and joyously and having washed the dishes he set off to see Mary though in fact it was still early.

His wellingtons creaked among the sparkling frost. Its virginal new diamonds glittered around him, millions of them. Before he knocked on her door he looked at his own door from a distance. It shone bravely against the frost and the drab patches without frost or snow. There was pride and spirit about it. It had emerged out of the old and the habitual, brightly and vulnerably. It said, 'Please let me live my own life.' He knocked on the door.