

Excerpt from *Colonel Nichol and the Murdered Maiden* by Cheryl MacDonald

In August 1812, soon after the start of the War of 1812, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Nichol and his servant Wallace accompany General Isaac Brock to the Windsor area. Their mission is to repel invading Americans. As they prepare for battle, they find time to enjoy dinner at the home of a prominent merchant in Amherstburg. The next morning, Nichol and Wallace awake to horrific news.

- EIGHT -

I fell asleep the moment I curled up in my cot and likely would have slept until noon had I been allowed. Instead, the sun was just beginning to light up the sky when Mr. Robbie called my name, then shook me by the shoulder. "Wallace! Wallace, quickly! Get up!"

The urgency in his voice startled me. Were we under attack? Had the Americans invaded again? I sat up, rubbing my eyes.

"There's been a tragedy at the Briands. Michel wants me there immediately, and if the report I've been given is correct, I would be most grateful if you would accompany me."

A tragedy? I wondered if old Hector had finally given in to the burden of his many years and fallen down the stairs. As rapidly as I could, I put on some clothes, splashed a little water on my face, rubbed a hand quickly through my hair. There was no looking glass, and I hoped no feathers or lint had trapped themselves in the tight curls.

The Colonel and I said nothing on the brief journey to the scene of the previous night's dinner. The sky looked soft and clear in the early light, and somewhere close by a robin was trilling its morning song. Mr. Robbie was lost in his thoughts, moving at such a rapid pace that conversation would have been nearly impossible.

Hector answered our knock immediately. He looked twice as old as he had the night before, his face set in a mask of sorrow. From somewhere inside the house came the sound of heartrending sobs, a woman in the throes of an inconsolable grief, and the sounds of a light female voice trying to soothe her. My heart sank as I wondered what had caused Madame such heartbreak.

I found out soon enough. Hector had barely shut the door when Monsieur Briand approached us, his eyes red-rimmed with weeping. He was a tallish man, now somewhat stooped with age, and it seemed to me the stoop had increased in the few hours since we had parted. His large nose was nearly as red as his eyes. The tears flowed again as Mr. Robbie grasped his hand, murmuring condolences.

"She was so young, so full of life," the older man sobbed. "And now this – this horror." Mr. Robbie put his arm around his shoulder, with a bit of effort as Briand was a good six inches taller. "I am so sorry, my friend, so very sorry. But let us see what we can do to bring the man responsible to justice. Come, sit down and tell me all that you know."

Through an open door I caught a glimpse of Madame and Suzanne, trying to comfort each other and it came to me that it was Gabrielle who was dead. And that she had been murdered. For a moment the room seemed to close in upon me and I stumbled. Mr. Robbie, leading the way with his arm still around Briand, looked back. "Wallace? Will you manage?"

I nodded silently, wondering why he had been called, rather than the sheriff or someone else in authority. I was not kept in the dark for long.

Mr. Briand sat at the table in the dining room, the scene of our convivial dinner the evening before. Spying a mahogany cellarette near the window, Mr. Robbie lifted the lid, pulled

up two or three bottles from the partitioned container, then nodded when he found some whisky. He took three glasses from the sideboard, poured a generous amount of the liquor into each and handed one to Briand and one to me before taking a large swig himself. "Sip it slowly, Wallace," Mr. Robbie instructed. "I know you normally do not imbibe spirits, but it will help a little."

I did as commanded and sipped some of the fiery liquid as he turned to Briand, waiting.

"I do not know where to begin," the merchant said.

"When did you first realize something was amiss?"

Briand rubbed his forehead, speaking slowly. "It was Suzanne. She rises early, and the bedroom they share here faces east. As soon as there is any light at all, she wakes. This morning, she saw that Gabrielle was not in her bed.

"At first she thought nothing of it. Sometimes, especially after a social gathering, Gabrielle will fall asleep as soon as she sits still for a moment or two. Suzanne thought perhaps she had done just that, and decided she would look in the sitting room, but first she needed a trip to the privy." He paused and took a great gulp of whisky, his hand trembling so hard that it seemed the liquid would spill onto the table before it reached his lips.

"That is when she found her." Tears flowed again and it was several moments before he could continue.

Briand told how Suzanne's screams had wakened the whole household and they had rushed outside to find Gabrielle's body.

"Outside? Then you have moved her?" Mr. Robbie interjected.

"Yes. We carried her to the maid's room and sent for the doctor. We do not have a maid right now. Hector did not get along with the last girl. But the room is close to the kitchen. We put her on the bed and - " His voice trailed off as he blinked several times, his lips tightly pressed together, his heavy eyebrows pulled into downward diagonal slashes.

Mr. Robbie got to his feet. "My friend, this will be painful, but it would help if you could show me where she was. And tell me what you saw." He topped up Briand's drink and his own, glanced at me to see that I'd only taken a sip or two, and then led the way to the back of the house.

"There," Mr. Briand said, pointing to a spot about six feet beyond the kitchen door and slightly to the left. A substantial lilac shrub was planted there, the fragrant blossoms long since faded, but the heart-shaped leaves testifying to its identity. As we approached, Mr. Robbie's glance strayed to a large rock, the side of which was stained reddish brown. A number of pearls were scattered nearby.

"She was right there."

"Her head against the rock?"

Briand shook his head. "Beside it." He pointed.

"Face down?"

"No. On her side."

"Might she have tripped?"

Briand shrugged. "Perhaps. Pushed, most likely. Or she fell. "

"You are certain she was not alone and this was just some tragic mishap?"

Briand shook his head, his eyes flowing with tears. "No. She was not alone, and it was not an accident. Gabrielle was scalped."

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