

Fight! Fight! Fight!

‘What did you call me?’ The sharp scream cut through the cold Aberdeen morning, piercing eardrums and shattering the general chatter in the school yard. Mary was not having any of it. Thin, wiry and quick on her feet she turned to stare eyeball to eyeball with her accuser – a black haired, skinny little fellow with a cheeky grin. ‘What did you call me?’ she screamed once more.

‘I called you a filthy dirty stinker,’ he replied, smirking mischievously, ‘and so you are,’ he added. Mary’s bright red hair almost bristled in indignation at the brazen cheek of the little scamp.

‘You have nae right to call me anything... you’ve nae right to call me a stinker.’

‘I have too,’ piped up the little ruffian. ‘I saw your da’ last night, wobbling home.’ The boy’s impression of a drunken walk set the whole class laughing. The steely blue eyes of Mary bored through her enemy’s skull. Someone called out, ‘You’re for it now, man! Mad Mary’s going to have you!’ The cocky look changed to one of pure fright as the redhead’s fist

came shooting out of nowhere, laying the young boy flat on the ground.

‘Fight, Fight, Fight!’ The calls went up and soon every child in the school had thronged round the little redhead and her adversary. They all knew what Mad Mary was capable of or Fire as some of them preferred to call her. One young girl tugged at Mary’s sleeve. ‘Leave him, Mary. Sticks and stones might break your bones but names will never hurt you. Don’t take any notice. That fibber is always calling someone’s pa a drunk.’

But the pleas fell on deaf ears and soon Mary was in the thick of tearing hair and kicking shins. The fight was wild but then the headmaster’s voice boomed from the other side of the yard.

A big lump throbbed above Mary’s left eye and, unable to bear the thought of laughing classmates, Mary ran out of school. The beach beckoned and away she went. Mary cried as she ran, ‘None of them really know. None of them really know what goes on, I hope.’

They certainly didn’t know the extent of Mary’s problems. Many men in Mary’s street got drunk. But not every night. Mary’s dad did. They didn’t go to the pub and spend all their wages instead of bringing it home. Mary’s dad did. They didn’t hit their wives and children. Mary’s dad did.

Other children didn’t have to hide bruises behind tattered old rags. Mary did. Other children didn’t

have to listen to their mother's muffled screams behind the curtain as she tried to defend herself. Mary did. This was Mary's dreadful secret.

Fighting against the wind, Mary found her way out of the city to where the smell of the briny sea stung her nostrils, and the tip of her tongue tingled with the sensation of salt. As Mary finally reached the beach she gazed in rapture at the white horses rampaging along the coast line, leaping and prancing. The excitement caught in her throat as she joined in, racing the boiling waves one after the other. The small craft, moored in the harbour, bobbed up and down frantically. The beach was like a cauldron of nature. Mary thrilled to be in the middle of it. What did it matter if her feet got wet ... they would get dry. To give herself a chance to catch her breath she wandered aimlessly along and dreamed about lots of things. Her eye spotted a beautifully coloured mussel shell, all midnight blue and sparkly. Picking up the shell she remembered the times she had gone shell hunting with her brother Robert.

'Robert.' The name still made her want to cry. His death was still painful. 'Why did he have to die? He was my big brother. He was going to be the missionary that Ma wanted so much. Ma would have been so proud of him but God took him away.'

It was an accusation, Mary was a very angry little girl, but then she remembered something.

‘Mother misses Robert more than I do, but she feels differently about it. How is it that she can be so sad and yet so happy at the same time?’

Mary’s mother was glad that Robert was in heaven, but Mary just wanted him back here with her picking up shells and driftwood. ‘I suppose she is glad he is with Jesus.’ However, Mary still wasn’t convinced about God. But her mother trusted him and her mother was a good woman. Should she also trust this Jesus like her mother did?

A rogue gust of wind blew sand full in Mary’s face. It stung the cut just above her eye and she remembered the jeering classmates and the stinging remarks. It didn’t matter how many bruises she got it was always the unkind joke that hurt the most. Though her classmates stood in awe of the tough little redhead, inside was a soft, gentle child.

Mary remembered when it had been better... when her father hadn’t drunk so much. But when Robert died it was too much for Mr Slessor. Mary never felt safe around her father again.

But what horrified Mary most was her mother’s sobbing at night. ‘She thinks I can’t hear her when they go to bed. But I do and it’s frightening. It would kill Ma if she thought anyone knew what was going on.’ Mary stood at the edge of the icy cold ocean. It’s chill caught at her heart. She gasped. There was

so much she didn't understand and so much that confused her. Yet it still had the power to terrify her. The whimpers from her mother in the night, the frantic and urgent movements as her mother tried to escape the clutches, the grabbing hands, of her husband. Then there was the heavy sound of leather boots thumping and grinding against soft skin. Before Mary was tall enough to reach the top dresser drawer she knew to avoid her father when he had been drinking. Mary was growing up, knowing a lot of things. She knew what a man was capable of when blind drunk. She knew what it was like to see a man and woman live a life of hate and fear together. She knew what it was like to be a child watching it all.

Wiping the sand off her face, Mary flopped over into a dune, made a little nest for herself between some clumps of grass and started to play at school. The unusual thing about Mary's schools was that they always had African children. Her mother's stories about mission work in Africa, particularly Calabar, fuelled Mary's thirst for adventure.

Mary imagined she was a missionary in Africa instead of a schoolgirl by the North Sea. The icy wind and thrashing ocean became a balmy jungle breeze and steaming river. In her imagination her shells became a group of well-behaved little African children. 'Now I will teach you your alphabet... A is

for apple, B is for book.’ However as soon as Mary’s tummy rumbled she announced, ‘Well done class, top marks everyone, time to go home.’

As Mary got ready to leave she wondered if she would ever see Africa for herself. ‘What would it be like? Mum doesn’t think I’ll ever be a missionary. She laughed when someone suggested it.’ Mary a missionary? With her temper I doubt it!’ Ma says missionaries shouldn’t have bad tempers.’

Mary sighed, she just couldn’t help it. Words would come out of her mouth and into the air before she could catch them. Sometimes she could feel them on the tip of her tongue fighting with her teeth to get out and cause trouble for her. Sometimes she would tie them down inside her throat. More often than not they would just burst out causing havoc. But Mary knew that she didn’t help by adding a kick and punch to accompany the words on their way.

As she began the long walk home Mary remembered, ‘Ma gets paid today. If she’s quick and buys the food before she gets home then there’ll be less for Dad to waste down the pub.’

Sneaking in the back door, Mary was careful to avoid the heavy form of her sleeping father. It was after twelve and he was still out cold. ‘Must have been a heavy night,’ thought Mary... silently shutting it all behind her and skipping out into the yard.