



Sons of an Ancient Glory- An Emerald Ballad, **Book 4**

by B.J. Hoff

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New York City, 1849

Billy Hogan lay curled on his side in the cellar. His feet were drawn up almost to his chin. His entire body shook from the cold, for he wasn't allowed to have a jacket in the cellar. Bearing the cold was part of his punishment, Uncle Sorley said.

He tried to remember what, exactly, he was being punished for this time. He must have done something very bad, for it seemed he'd been here a long time. Longer than any time before. Days, perhaps an entire week.

He remembered the thrashing, remembered Uncle Sorley throwing himself at him, pounding at him, his huge, bruising hands hammering at his head, his ears. He remembered being hauled and kicked down the stairs, then thrown inside the storage press. And he remembered Uncle Sorley looming over him, the red, angry gash of his mouth shouting at him over and over, the fire in his eyes, the whiskey smell...

"THIS TIME YOU'LL STAY, BOY! YOU'LL STAY DOWN HERE TILL YOU LEARN TO KEEP THAT BOLD MOUTH OF YOURS SHUT!"

Then hours...days...of nothing but cold and darkness and pain. The difference between daylight and dark was vague, for he could barely see. His eyes were so swollen, the cellar so dark, he could scarcely make out anything in the storage press. At first there had been hunger, for he wasn't allowed food, but for the most part, the hunger had passed. His belly still ached some and burned, but he no longer thought much about food.

Most of the time he slept. His head and shoulders hurt so bad that he welcomed sleep, actually sought it. Even when he dreamed about Uncle Sorley or the rats lurking in the corners, he craved sleep, for it was his only comfort.

His belly cramped, and he drew his legs up as tightly as he could. Except for the burning in his belly, he didn't feel much of anything at all. The weakness was on him bad again.

He felt numb and lifeless. Even his feet were numb, like they had been that time back home, when he trekked a snowstorm to find his dog, Reg.

He remembered Reg, his old red dog, as if they had parted only yesterday. He had cried and begged to be allowed to bring him to America, for he knew poor old Reg would die without anyone to feed and look after him. The dog was almost blind, and he counted on Billy to bring him his food, to rub his ears and sometimes sing him a tune.

For weeks after leaving Ireland, Billy had prayed that someone with a kind heart would take Reg in, would give him a new home so he wouldn't be lonely or hungry. Sometimes he still thought about him, wondered what had happened to him. An old dog like Reg wouldn't live long without food or someone to talk kind to him now and then....

His mind began to drift, as it did more often than not when the weakness was on him. He wanted to go to sleep, but the thought of his mother and brothers roused him.

Had Mum asked about him, he wondered? Did she or the wee boys miss him at all? Were his little brothers all right without him?

What if Uncle Sorley started beating on them in his absence?

Billy didn't think he would. Uncle Sorley pretty much ignored the younger boys. And his mum. He paid her little heed, except to snarl at her now and then if supper wasn't to his liking.

Perhaps Patrick or Liam would coax Mum to go looking for him, while Uncle Sorley was at work. Surely someone would miss him.

But even if they did try to find him, how could they? No one knew where he was.

Uncle Sorley had brought him down to the cellar while Mum was at work and the wee boys were playing out front in the street. He said Billy had to stay here until he learned not to talk back. Billy was impudent, he said.

Billy didn't even know exactly what impudent meant. And he didn't remember talking back, he truly didn't. That's what Uncle Sorley always accused him of, though most of the time Billy didn't remember his offense. In fact, by the time the beatings were over, he could scarcely remember anything.

This time when he got out, he would be extra careful not to talk back. Not ever again. He would guard every word and say nothing that could possibly rile Uncle Sorley.

This time when he got out, he would be the best a boy could be. The best.

His head felt light again, yet he wasn't all that drowsy. He stiffened suddenly at a rustling noise from the opposite wall. Squeezing his eyes shut, he waited. After a moment, he realized he was grinding his teeth together. The pain in his jaws surprised him.

There was something...something he needed to remember...

It came to him, then, what kept the rats away. He began to hum, his voice sounding distant and strange in his ears. Words came, words that Mr. Evan had taught them. Mr. Evan often said that singing God's music or speak God's Word was like building a fort around yourself...a fort of protection, for the things of darkness couldn't bear things of the Light...

"Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,

Naught is all else to me, save that Thou art.

Thou my best thought by day and by night,

Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light..."

Unable to remember the rest of the ancient hymn, for his mind was like a tide drifting out to sea, Billy went on singing the same words, over and over, until the scratching sounds in the corner finally ceased.

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