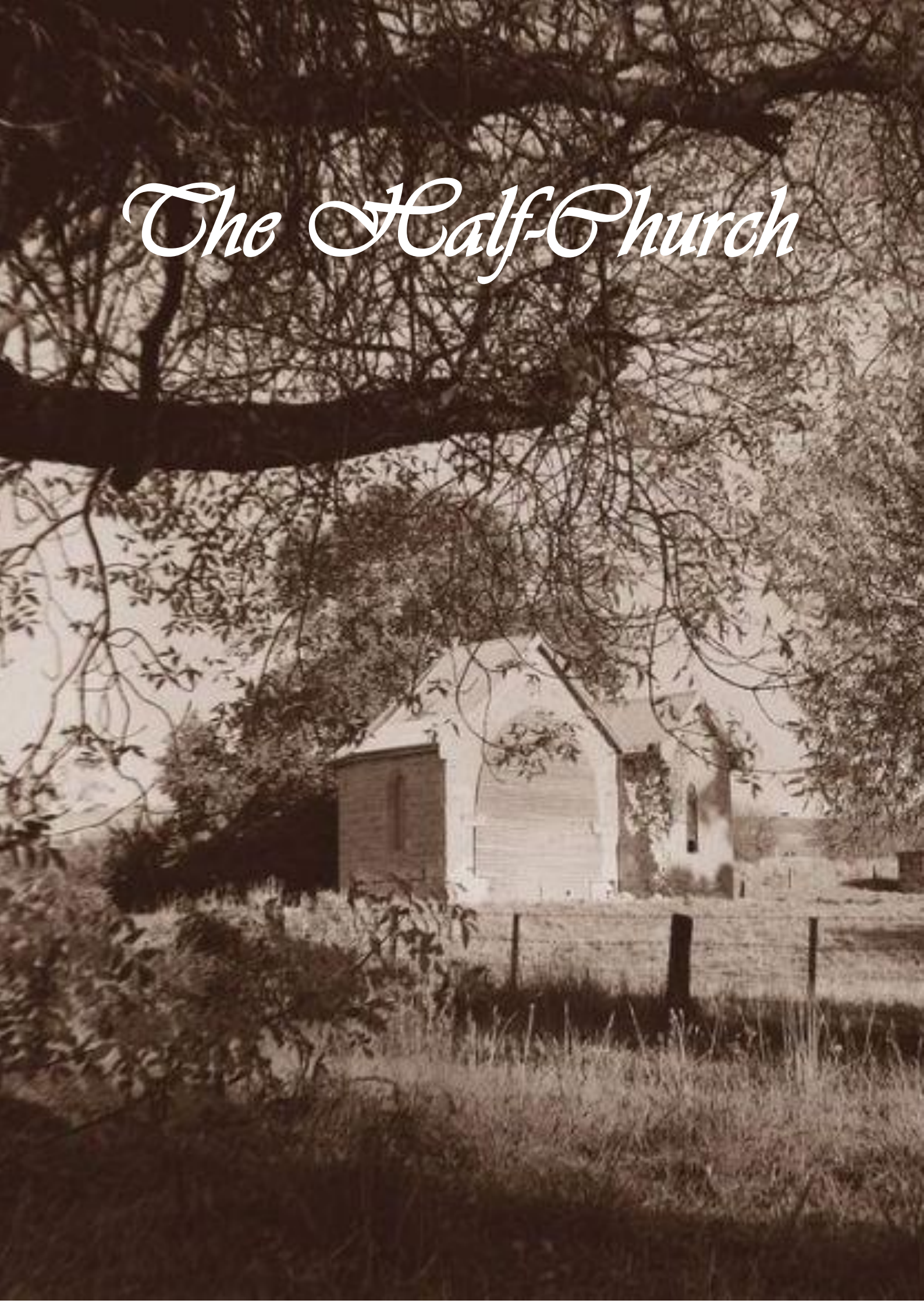


The Half-Church



“Grandmother?” Alice ran in from the old farmhouse yard, her blue skirts a whirl around her as she hurried in. Her grandmother, the widowed Mrs. Grace Pyke, sat in an old rocking chair by the fire, and in her hands she clasped a worn Bible.

“Why hello, Alice!” Grandmother smiled, bending down to be kissed. “What brings you on this cold day? And all the way from your house?”

“When we were walking home from school yesterday,” Alice said, pulling up a stool and fixing her small blue eyes on her grandmother, “we saw the old Half-Church at the corner as we always do, and I asked Mother to tell me more about it. Mother said to visit you, and you would tell me!”

Grandmother smiled and leaned back in her chair. Her hair, which was once raven-black and was now white, fell about her shoulders as she rocked back and forth. “Well, Alice, this is quite the story. It dates back 60 years, when I was born.”

“Tell me, tell me!” Alice said, with all the curiosity of a twelve-year-old.

Grandmother smiled and began, “Marilla from *Anne of Green Gables* once said, ‘When I was a child I heard a minister say that a house was not a real home until it had been consecrated by a birth, a wedding, and a death.’ Well, I believe that even though the Half-Church was consecrated with an official ceremony over 60 years ago, it

has only been consecrated in my mind about 10 years, since the death of your grandfather.

“When I was born to your great-grandmother, the Half-Church was only just built. The streets look different now than they did back then, Alice. The Half-Church was built right on the corner of what was the main street. The main street was not much of a street—just a few houses, hotels and a couple of businesses, not like how it is now. Most folks would travel to Ballarat or Ballan for the big things. When I was born, your great-grandparents decided to have me christened in the Half-Church. It was new back then—but still only half-built. I have been told I wore a little white dress, which has long since been buried in a trunk and lost when the old La Cote homestead burnt down.”

Alice leaned forward, completely captivated. “What was it like, Grandmother? Your christening?”

Grace’s eyes seemed to gaze back to another time. “Your great-grandmother Alice – yes, you are named after her – told me the morning was cool, and the dew had not yet lifted off the fields. She wrapped me in lace and linen that she had sewn herself. It was white, the purest white, and I fussed because of the scratchy embroidery at my neck.”

“But you were a *baby*, Grandmother!” Alice said, amazed.

“I was,” Grace laughed softly. “My sister and mother have told me this story so many times I can imagine it scratching my neck. And shared memories like that, even if they’re not our own, stay in our heart.”

She closed her eyes, her voice drifting as if carried by time itself. “Everyone would have walked from La Cote that morning, a mile down the hill. There were only a few of us—just family, the local midwife, and the parish priest. The sunlight streamed in from the east, lighting up the dust from the bare earth floor like gold specks. It was like being christened in heaven.”

“Did they pour the water over your head right there?” Alice whispered.

“Oh yes,” Grace said. “From a cracked ceramic bowl, no fancy ceremony for country people. Cold as creek water—which it was. And I wailed like I had been dumped in ice.”

Alice giggled and leaned her chin on her hands. “I can see it. All of it.”

Grace smiled, her heart a little lighter. “That’s because you have my imagination.”

After a moment of quiet, Grace continued. “Then there was our wedding. Now that, my dear, is a memory that is still so sharp, I can feel the breeze from that day.”

Alice’s eyes brightened. “Tell me everything.”

Grace smiled again, her face softening with the recollection. “It was spring, and everything smelled of wattle and flowers. The Half-Church was just boarded up at the back... they did not know then then that they were never going to finish it. We had to go in a little side entrance. There was no music for me to walk up the aisle

too, only the chorus of birds singing outside... so many birds singing you would have thought they were the choir.”

Alice moved closer, caught in the story. “What were you wearing?”

“A dress I stitched myself. Ivory, with lace sleeves and a blue ribbon that my sister, your great-aunt Nellie tied at my waist. And I wore a daisy chain in my hair. Thomas picked the flowers himself that morning, on his way from Pyke’s Flat. He walked all the way from Pyke’s Flat, past Glen Pedder’s fields where he picked the flowers, and still arrived at the Half-Church as fresh as if he'd driven.”

Alice gasped. “That’s so *romantic*.”

“It was,” Grace said, her voice softening. “I was seventeen, and Thomas was twenty. When the priest asked if I would love him for all my days, I said yes before he had finished asking. And Thomas’s smile was so adorable, the way he was trying to be all solemn, but right before the priest pronounced us man and wife, he winked, and I had to try so hard not to laugh. Then we walked out of the church, my cousins and family ringing little bells, or throwing rice and old shoes.”

“Just like in Anne’s House of Dreams!” Alice said, enthralled.

“Yes!” Grace laughed, her eyes twinkling. “Then Thomas and I got into the wagon and drove to our new home.”

“And then? When did you come back?”

“Well, back then the church was holding little services inside the built part. You could squeeze eighteen or so people in there... so some people had to alternate Sundays! People even stood outside, just to hear God’s word preached. Your father and my other three children attended the Sunday school, in little tin sheds they built out the front, under the shade of some trees. I even taught that Sunday school for a while, when the teacher, your other grandmother, had a baby.”

“And that was my mother!” Alice beamed.

“Yes,” Grace laughed. “I never knew then that the tiny little baby that Marianne Edwards brought in the next Sunday would be my future daughter-in-law, but that’s just what happened!”

Right on cue, there was a knock at the door and Alice’s father Jake appeared. “Hi Ma,” he walked over and hugged Grace. “Just here to take Alice home for lunch. She can come back afterwards if you two are in the middle of something?”

“Oh, yes, that would be nice.” Grace smiled.

Alice waved to her and followed her father out to the wagon. “Grandmother’s been telling me stories about you and Mother,” she teased once they were in the wagon and heading home.

“Really?” Jake looked down at his daughter from where he was driving the horses. “Did she tell you that Eliza and I were going to be married in that church too?”

“Why didn’t you?” Alice asked, her eyes curious.

“Well, it was a little small for all of Eliza’s family who wanted to come. So, we held it at the church in Ballan instead.”

“Aww,” Alice watched as one of the horses tossed his head. “It would’ve been special if you and Mother were married in the same church as Grandmother and Grandfather.”

Jake put an arm around his daughter. “Well, just because your mother and I were married in a different place, does not mean that it is any less special. It is special in its own way.”

Alice nodded and went quiet. She did not think her father really understood what she had meant. The Half-Church was becoming a place of fantasy for her, with the stained-glass windows as her grandmother described. It just would have been extra special if her Mother and Pa had been married in the same place as her grandparents! Anne of Green Gables would have understood.

When she walked in the door of their little farmhouse, Eliza handed her some hot bread and salad. “How has your time with your grandmother been?” she asked conversationally. “Has she told you about the Half-Church yet?”

“Yes, all about how she was christened there, and how she and Grandfather were married there too!”

Eliza placed a plate of vegetables on the table, and after she did so she placed a hand on her daughter's arm.

"Alice, you have got to understand that talking about Grandfather's funeral may still be a touchy subject with Grandmother. It has only been a few years."

Alice nodded. She had loved her grandfather. He was always willing to be her playmate or read to her from any of the Anne of Green Gables books.

Straight after lunch, Alice was back at her grandmother's little cottage. Grace gave her some biscuits, and then when they had sat down again, Alice remembered her mother's warning. She knew her Grandmother would understand her curiosity. So, she asked quietly, sensitive to her Grandmother's feelings "Grandmother, did you go back? To the church... after Grandfather...?"

Grace's eyes teared up a bit. The fire crackled, and the wind outside shifted as though the world itself was listening, waiting for her response.

"Yes. That evening after your grandfather's funeral in Ballan, once everyone had gone home, and the kettle had been boiled, emptied, and boiled again, and the well-wishers had left me alone—I took my shawl and walked out alone."

Her gaze seemed to travel beyond the room, out through the window to the hills. "The Half-Church was quiet, except for the wind around the building. The pews were there, and I sat in the same pew I had before our wedding

day. And I whispered to the sky that I had loved being married to him all those years.”

Alice did not speak for a moment, but she moved closer, sitting on the hearthrug now as if, in her own way, she wanted to be a part of the memory too.

“I left a sprig of rosemary on the old altar,” Grace added softly. “For remembrance. I think it is still there unless wind has blown it away or a bird has taken it. It’s been years now, and no one uses the Half-Church anymore. They never received the funds to build the rest of it. The ‘temporary’ boards on the side weren’t that temporary after all. The community became so small, there was no real need for it anymore. The people that do attend church here drive in their wagons to the Ballan Church. But it’s not as special for me as the Half-Church is. There’s probably holes in the roof, and moss on the seats, and mice and rats and goodness know what else living in there.”

“What happened to the Sunday School sheds?” Alice asked, remembering how Grandmother had said those were nearby.

“They’re still there, I think.” Grandmother said. “At least, they were last time I was there. Have you ever noticed that big hedge on one side?”

Alice nodded.

“Well, they’re in there somewhere. Dilapidated and falling to pieces, and the rabbits and wombats use it for homes now I reckon. No one really remembers that they existed.”

Alice was quiet for a moment. "Well..." she hesitated.
"Now I will."

They sat together for a while longer, watching the fire flicker and pop. The room was quiet, save for the soft murmurs of the wind outside. Grace looked at Alice, her heart full of affection.

"You know, we could go visit the Half-Church," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"We could?" Alice echoed, her eyes wide.

Grace smiled nervously. "Well, only if you want to. I think we can visit it together. If you are ready."

Alice practically leapt to her feet, her face lighting up. "I am! I've never been so ready for anything!"

Grace chuckled softly. "Well then, fetch your coat. We'll walk over before it gets dark."

Alice flew from the stool with a delighted gasp, grabbing her scarf and boots.

And as they stepped out into the chilly dusk - one tall and slow-moving, wearing an old blue gingham dress, a faded winter coat wrapped around her shoulders, the other a flurry of motion and excitement, dressed in worn boots, thick stockings and a blue pinafore - the wind seemed to hush for a moment, as though listening. The Half-Church waited, weathered and watchful at the end of the lane, ready to be part of another story, another memory, another sacred beginning.

Just as it always had.

As they walked towards the Half-Church, Alice's mind swirled with possibilities. She looked up at the worn stone walls, weathered and beaten, several stones missing from the left side, imagining how the building could be restored, how it could become a place where new stories, new families, could gather—just as her grandmother had once dreamed. She could see it in her mind: fresh flowers in the pews, the soft hum of voices filling the air, the old wooden beams restored and shining, the smoke from the candles in the air, the priest's solemn voice echoing in the building, the laughter of children, and the harmonies of a choir in the air.

They went around the side, where Grandmother pushed open a worn, faded and slightly broken wooden door. They walked inside, and it was just as Grandmother had said. The pews were covered with dirt, dust, moss, and droppings from numerous animals. There were spiderwebs everywhere, and some of the beautiful old stained-glass windows had cracks in them or were missing entirely. They stood for a few moments, Grandmother lost in thought, Alice lost in daydreams.

“Do you think... I mean, the Half-Church could be cleaned up? Not all new or anything. Just... tidied.” Alice said nervously, looking up at her grandmother.

Grace looked at her granddaughter with a softness that had grown in the years since Thomas's passing. The

suggestion was so like Alice—full of hope and imagination, with just enough heart to bring it to life.

“Tidied?”

Alice nodded eagerly. “I could sweep it. And hang some flowers. Maybe plant something in a pot beside the altar.”

Grace’s eyes grew soft, touched by the idea. “You want to care for it?”

Alice bit her lip, her cheeks flushing. “It is part of our story. Yours, Grandfather’s, Mother’s, Pa’s... I want it to be part of mine, now. I want it to be loved again.”

Grace smiled, a rare and tender smile that she had hidden away for so long. “That would make your grandfather very happy, I think. And it makes me happy too.”

“What if we could finish it, Grandmother?” Alice asked softly, her voice full of hope, growing stronger with every word. “What if the Half-Church could be more than just a memory? What if it could be made into a real, beautiful church for everyone again? We could take down the boards, and build a new part... With the same stone that it was built with! And we could clear away the hedges and bring back the Sunday School buildings... and plant a nice garden for the people to walk through... and...”

Grace’s eyes softened as she looked at Alice, realizing how much her granddaughter had inherited of her spirit. The suggestion was so like Alice—full of hope, full of faith, full of life.

“I think that would be a wonderful thing, my dear,” Grace said. “The world could always use more places like the Half-Church—full of love and possibility.”

And as granddaughter and grandmother left the old building again, the Half-Church itself seemed to hold its breath... as if the future had just been opened, and it was waiting to see what would happen next.