

Skim

Outside, the wind from Ben Clachan was cold but not unbearable when Bryn Davies limped to the peat store to fill his bucket. Far, far above, grazing sheep showed as lighter dots against the surrounding heather and bracken. Almost wild now that she was gone, they obeyed their instincts and took shelter only when it was really necessary. Then, in order of ascension, they saw to their own survival and huddled in an untidy thicket of greasy, ammoniac wool behind any windbreak they could find.

Replenished, the mounting flames were taking on the colour of her hair, the tawny bronze that had faded only late in life. Unless she covered it with a scarf it had been a bright beacon, more readily seen than her drab working clothes when she was with the sheep on the slopes, the dog mostly unseen amongst the gorse as it worked the flock.

It was something they had never discussed; that she should take on man's work while he did what he could, hampered by a leg that would not bend, and that at times, seemed to have a will of its own. When the dog became her dog it was as natural as everything else they did after his accident and was part of what he had to bear.

None of this prepared him for her death. That there was nothing he could do about it comforted him not at all. When Bryn returned from the hospital, alone and shrunken in his overcoat, the puzzlement of the dog would have been comical in other circumstances. As the bus groaned to a stop on the rutted road below the croft, he had seen it first as a motionless black speck outside the cottage. Before it streaked down the worn path to the road and pulled up short, in that three feet on the ground, one forepaw cocked stance more typical of a pointer than a shepherd's dog.

He had climbed down to the road, picked up the suitcase and cardboard box with her few things and called to the dog as the bus grated into motion again. It flattened its ears and glanced at him, then took a few hesitant steps after the bus. His second call brought it back to him, although it stopped a number of times to stare back intently – as though the woman would materialise on the road below. Lost in his own grief, he hardly noticed.

Together, they went about the things that were necessary, by autumn resuming their former relationship; the way it had been before his accident. But for a time, the dog's head would jerk up and it would slink outside to investigate some strange sound that might have signalled her return. Gradually this stopped and the dog again shadowed his every move.

Mikey Reynolds came, two or three times, more it seemed, out of a sense of duty than as a good neighbour. They would sit on the rough bench outside the cottage, the stonework still warm from the day's sun, Mikey fiddling with his pipe more than he smoked it and staring out across the patchwork of fields below.

"Whit is it ye're thinking, Skim?" he asked once, to break the silence. Lying before them, with her head on her paws and watching Bryn as always, she twitched her ears at the sound of her name and patted the short grass just twice with her plume of a tail. She knew Mikey, but treated him with the polite reserve of her kind.

“She’s wondering why it is we don’t work the sheep.” murmured Bryn without taking his eyes off the blue distance.

“Well...it’s supposing I am that that will change in time.” Mikey had said, trying to avoid focusing on the leg that stuck out sideways from the bench on which they sat. The bottle that he had brought stood, unbroached, under the bench, rough but palatable pot still bearing one of the Widow Jones’ smeary, hand-written labels. When Mikey left, it was still there.

Now, two months later, there was a small pile of them, out of sight behind the peat shed, as though Bryn, himself, did not wish to be reminded of them. As if the comfort they had given him was a shameful thing - like the visible presence of a bought woman after her purpose has been achieved.

On the mantle, the cups and trophies had long ceased to reflect any light at all. They had tarnished and discoloured in the damp air and above them were cheaply framed and yellowing newspaper cuttings. For the first time in a long time, he allowed himself to study them. Mostly, under the mildew, they showed seemingly empty expanses of meadow with a black dot near a group of pale flecks, occasionally an erect, dark shape or two that might have been men.

From left to right, he scanned them, lips moving almost soundlessly as he recited the captions from memory. Occasionally the dog’s head would twitch at a muttered command or a familiar name, but mostly she sat, passive and content under his hand, absorbing his voice.

The more experienced writers who had covered those trials had eulogised over the economy of movement and effort by both man and dog. Whether in the contrived circumstances of the show-grounds or on their home slopes, Jack’s steadiness and control were something the most cynical rival watched with varying emotions. It was in the genes, said those inclined to the view that good dogs are born and not made. It was Bryn Davies, said those who admired his almost negligent stance and signals and tried to emulate them in their own work, confusing lesser dogs and making Jack’s victories easier.

One frame contained a small, black-bordered cutting headlined “PASSING OF A LEGEND” and the terse journalese recorded the death of Jack, Grand Champion and friend, in a working accident that had injured his owner, Bryn Davies of Lansdowne.

Bryn stirred in his chair, his hand fondling more roughly as memories crowded back. Skim whimpered gently, either in sympathy or because his fingers pulled too hard at her ears, and the tension eased out of him again. Bending forward, he paused in the act of sloshing more whiskey, listening to the rising wind fretting at the window catches.

“A bad one, girl. Sheep will need fetching down.” She sank obediently to her belly at the last word and he released her with a chuckle, “That’ll do,” so that she rose and went to the door with a questioning look. Bryn sat there, looking at her for a moment. Then, he nodded

twice, as though he had decided something, threw back the whiskey and rose unsteadily. He found his boots and struggled into them before dragging his storm jacket from the peg.

When he opened the door, the wind was an insistent intruder, pushing its way in and stirring things in the cottage. Skim was out and standing there at the farthest edge of the little front yard, her eyes alight and every muscle taut – watching him and waiting.

Pausing to slip the bottle into a pocket, he pulled on his gloves. A movement of his head was all Skim needed to assure her that they were indeed heading out for more than a chore or her own needs and she streaked away in a burst of speed that took her from immobility to a flat run with no visible acceleration. Drunk as he was, Bryn felt that familiar, involuntary twitch at the corners of his mouth as he watched her go, then settled himself for the long haul in her flying wake.

The collie was fast disappearing into the middle distance when he whistled, his lips clumsy from the drink, so that he had to concentrate and do it again. At the second signal, as though on curved rails, she broke away to her right, travelling in a huge joyous arc that swung her around and back to him.

In moments she was there, dancing along sideways to watch his face, keeping pace with his slow progress, that pink tongue lolling happily and her tail down under bunched hindquarters trembling to catapult her away at his bidding. He grunted and dealt with his own efforts to negotiate the increasingly broken ground.

“Time enough for running when we get there. Save it, girl. It’s little help to you I’ll be, that’s certain.” She understood none of the words, but his tone sobered her and her ears went down as she fell in behind him, content for the moment to be out of the cottage.

When Bryn stopped to rest, halfway to the upper pen, he was surprised to see how far they had climbed. The croft was spread out below them, tiny Monopoly buildings on a brown and green chequered cloth. He was unsteadily pleased with himself. Considering a swig to lighten the bottle, bulky under his jacket, he decided to save that pleasure for his arrival at the pen.

Even at this relatively low elevation, the drop in temperature was noticeable and he shrugged deeper into his jacket to resume his trudge. The good leg was doing much of the work and he set his mind to sharing the load of his bodyweight more equally.

Like all ordeals, there was an end to it, and with a relieved curse, he laid both his hands on the lichen-furred top stones of the wall, rested his head on them and panted out his exhaustion. Skim stole closer and laid her head against his knee. Now, almost sober again, he stroked her neck absently and tried to gather his thoughts. The bottle was forgotten for the moment.

The sheep had fended for themselves since the last major storm of the year before, but that had been before his wife’s death and she had brought them in safely with Skim to help her. His crofter’s instincts told him that they would not survive this one if he did not pen them,

fodder them and make his own way back home. The fact that he would have to return to release them when the storm was over was something he would not allow himself to think about.

The first flake fell on his sleeve and he watched it fade into a wet spot. He rose, pulled open the wicker gate and studied the feed cribs. They were half full and the fodder was dry, so that much was in his favour, he thought grimly. He limped back outside and took Skim to the bottom of the upper slopes. From where they stood, the plateau above could not be seen. It was there, he knew, that the bulk of the sheep would have gathered for the easy grazing. In a blizzard, their survival depended on shelter from the wind chill that could turn the plateau into a wide, frozen snowfield dotted with their stiffened carcasses.

Bryn took Skim's head in his hands and held her face almost to his own. She held his intense stare for just a moment before her natural aversion to direct human eye contact took over and she rolled her whites this way and that, stealing brief glances at his face as he spoke.

"Up to you, girl. Do your best. Bring in what you can. These boogers are wilder than they were last time y'saw them. Show 'em who's in charge." Then he stood up and called her to heel, took one step forward and made the gesture she had been yearning for.

This time when she sped away, there was no whistle to call her back, and she flowed over the uneven ground like the shadow of a passing cloud, took the long slope with no change of pace and disappeared over the crest. Bryn stood there a long moment and then turned back to the feed cribs, fumbling for his pocket-knife. He cut the twine on six bales and dumped the fodder, separating the compacted mass.

Remembering, he took out the half-full bottle and uncorked it. Shuddering at the first raw bite of spirit, he was surprised at how it affected his co-ordination when he tackled the other feed bales. The Widow Jones certainly gave value for money, he thought wryly, and allowed himself another gulp. He turned to look up towards the plateau. Two or three snowflakes struck his face and he wiped them away unconsciously. The whiskey made his situation less daunting.

Skim was a good pup, he told himself. Working out of sight of its handler placed enormous responsibility on any dog. Like any shepherd, he knew this all too well. Recalcitrant stock, unknown terrain and sudden loss of power all tested the confidence of any dog. Skim would have to rely on intelligence, speed, inborn instincts and limited experience to get the job done. Before the accident, Bryn had taught her everything she knew, but like all good teachers, he knew the extent of her ability and now he cursed himself for expecting this of her. His mood had swung, proportionate to the level in the bottle.

Twenty minutes passed. The snow was drifting in quite steadily now, in little clumps that hit the ground or flattened themselves audibly against the weathered walls of the pen. Bryn began to pace, stopping to stare up at the crest.

Far above, Skim was having the time of her life. She had ranged high up the mountain, registering as she passed, the position of each of the scattered flock and storing it for the

time when she would begin her drive downward. She could smell the heavy, dank breath of the storm and it gave her an instinctive urgency and heightened concentration. Nevertheless, she was caught by surprise at a deep gully into which three old rams had backed themselves, where their combined experience told them they could weather any storm.

Other sheep had jerked up their heads, startled, as she raced silently past, staring stupidly after her disappearing black and white form, their strange, pale eyes wide and vacant until they lost interest and resumed their grazing.

The rams were a different proposition. They both heard and scented her coming and when she burst through a screen of vegetation, they lowered their horned heads and challenged her, united against the interloper and ready to resist her attack. Non-plussed, Skim skidded to a panting halt, momentarily shaken in her purpose. She tried a slow stalk to break their stand.

Shoulder to shoulder, they shook their horns and stamped, unmoved and unmoveable. She barked and snarled, but although startled and nervous, they sensed their security and did not budge, trusting the barrier of chipped horn that they presented. She rushed them and they retreated hurriedly, wedging themselves even more tightly in their refuge.

Puzzled, she lay down and stared at them, whining softly in frustration. Then she did a remarkable thing. According them a lower priority, she left to continue upwards where eventually, she found the few sheep that her instincts told her were the last of the flock. Casting back and forth above these, she began to ease them gently down the slope. They were hill sheep, fast and agile as chamois, even the ewes carrying horn and the young rams already showing the beginnings of impressive bosses, like those of her three old opponents.

Slowly, the gathering process bore fruit and the flock had grown considerably when they reached the plateau below. It was a tribute to her skill and judgement that the sheep were at a sedate walk when the first squall struck and Skim was forced to increase her tempo, racing endlessly back and forth to maintain her invisible cordon. Gradually they calmed, until, the snow falling without let-up, they stood, heads down on the unprotected flat. Assessing their mood, she shook her coat free of snow and trotted back the way she had come to collect her rams.

The wind had shifted somewhat and she was coming from a different angle, so this time, she scented them from above their open gully. The snow muffled her approach and she found herself looking down at them. They were still huddled together, facing outwards, fleeces and breath mingled and steaming in the cold, snugly unaware. She paused above their broad backs, tail waving in anticipation of her impending triumph.

When she dropped the intervening three feet to land behind them, there was just one startled moment before her gleeful snapping at their defenceless hocks sent them exploding out onto the frigid slope, baaing shamelessly and scampering in different directions, unity forgotten in their haste to escape the unseen terror behind.

Grimly Skim set out to run them down, one by one, turning them yard by tortuous yard, towards each other, until at last, after miles of running, they succumbed to her will and trotted nervous, but docilely enough, to where she had left the flock. Surprisingly, the others had stayed more or less where they were, but now at the approach of the veterans, some young rams began to fidget and show signs of bolting, the more timid souls trotting away from the flock so that Skim's work was cut out to harry them back and hold them. The snow was six inches deep now and still falling, driven by a wind that carried with it the threat of far worse to come.

Bryn paced and drank more whiskey to help dull the cold. He had eaten nothing since the night before and the spirit was taking more and more effect. Once, carried thinly on the wind, he thought in his anxiety that he heard Skim's bark, but it was not repeated. Impatient and clumsy, he climbed up onto the wall and there he stood, squinting through the white flurries. He shifted his position, was too slow to react to the loose stone that turned under his foot and plunged heavily backwards.

He landed, shoulders first, outside the wall, the crack of his skull hitting the ground quite crisp and distinct in the frigid air. He was still there when the first sheep arrived. They stopped uncertainly, sniffing at the sprawled figure barring their path to the pen, until the pressure from behind pushed them forward and they were forced to pass him.

Behind them, Skim worked tirelessly, swinging this way and that way, kneading away at the amorphous mass of the flock. Shaping it. Fortunately the old ewe in the lead saw the gap in the wall as an escape route and drew the flock after her in a steady stream. At last, only a few disorientated stragglers remained and these Skim was forced to worry until they joined the others and she was able to bar their escape by flopping down in the gateway to wait for Bryn, tongue at full stretch and her flanks heaving.

When Bryn did not join her, she eased reluctantly away from the gate to look for him. She licked his face until he opened his eyes. His voice was tight and strange when he spoke to her.

"That'll do Jack. Leave it. Jones the Judge doesn't like it – cuts points for silliness, although – look you, the rules don't...." Then the concussion took over again and his eyes lost all focus. She whined and nuzzled him, licking some of the snow off his chest and staring intently into his slack face.

It was almost dark when she returned to the pen. The sheep were still there, as though choosing shelter over freedom. She went back to lie beside Bryn, her head on his thigh. A thin layer of snow covered them within minutes. She sensed that he could not lie exposed like this. Now that her exertions had ceased, her own body heat was dropping; even her own thick coat was no protection in this bitter cold.

Back and forth between the sheep and Bryn she trotted, until for the second time that day she showed her powers of reasoning. Squeezing into their midst, she turned and began to drive a sizeable portion of the flock back out through the gate.

Reluctantly, they gave way before her, until they were out in the open and milling aimlessly. Slowly, Skim drove them back to where Bryn lay, forcing them against their limited wills to crowd over his motionless body, the tide of their bodies halted by the outside of the wall against which he lay. There they stood dumbly, waiting for something to be decided for them.

Bryn had disappeared under the sheep and even Skim's keen sense of smell could hardly detect his scent in the massed stink of the animals. In the icy darkness, some began to duck their heads in that strange way sheep have, standing bunched and motionless with their heads down.

The temperature at their feet rose imperceptibly from their combined exhalations, melting the snow that continued to fall on their insulated backs. Occasionally, one of the flock would remember the shelter of the enclosure and break away to seek it. Skim would rise painfully to her feet and head it off, driving it back to Bryn.

By two o'clock the snow had stopped and the small flock outside the pen had ceased to move at all.

In a bleak dawn, the rotor beat of a police Alouette preceded the whine of its turbo by some seconds before it appeared and idled along the white hillsides in the first sweep of a search pattern. Thirty minutes later, it landed to inspect a remote crofter's cottage and when the ground team emerged from the building at a trot, it lifted and in seconds, had clattered its way up the mountain that had challenged Bryn Davies so.

At the hover, the crew stared down at a crowded stone pen from which panicked sheep were now emerging in twos and threes and scattering across the snowfields. Outside, against the walled enclosure, a strange snow blanketed mass stood immobile, and under the frozen sheep they found Bryn Davies, just barely alive.

All around, crossing and re-crossing itself, a rosary of bright red splashes showed clearly against the blinding white surface how she had kept her faithful vigil. Only when the last sheep died, had she laid down herself and that was where they found her. They were surprised into silence, when they gently brushed away the snow, to see that her eyes were open, as though, nose on her ruined paws, she had watched over him until the last.