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M.C. BEATON

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A Highland Christmas

A Hamish Macbeth Mystery



M.C. BEATON

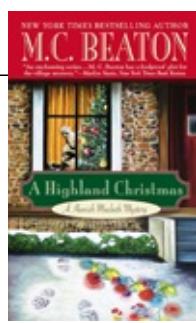


A HIGHLAND
CHRISTMAS



GRAND CENTRAL
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*For Brian and Judith Harris
and their son, Adam
With love*



Chapter One

More and more people each year are going abroad for Christmas. To celebrate the season of goodwill towards men, British Airways slams an extra one hundred and four pounds on each air ticket. But the airports are still jammed.

For so many people are fleeing Christmas.

Fed up with the fact that commercial Christmas starts in October. Fed up with carols. Dreading the arrival of Christmas cards from people they have forgotten to send a card to. Unable to bear yet another family get-together with Auntie Mary puking up in the corner after sampling too much of the punch. You see at the airports the triumphant glitter in the eyes of people who are leaving it all behind, including the hundredth rerun of *Miracle on 34th Street*.

But in Lochdubh, in Sutherland, in the very far north of Scotland, there is nothing to flee from. Christmas, thought Hamish Macbeth gloomily, as he walked along the waterfront, his shoulders hunched against a tearing wind, was not coming to Lochdubh this year any more than it had come the previous years.

There was a strong Calvinist element in Lochdubh which frowned on Christmas. Christmas had nothing to do with the birth of Christ, they said, but was really the old Roman Saturnalia which the early Christians had taken over. And as for Santa Claus—forget it.

So there were no Christmas lights, no tree, nothing to sparkle in the dark winter.

P. C. Hamish Macbeth was feeling particularly sour, for his family had taken off for Florida for a winter vacation. His mother had won a family holiday for thinking up a slogan for a new soap powder—“Whiter Than The Mountain Snow”—and Hamish could not go with them. Sergeant Macgregor over at Cnothan was ill in hospital with a grumbling appendix and Hamish had been instructed to take over the sergeant’s beat as well as do his own.

Hamish’s family were unusual in that they had always celebrated Christmas—tree, turkey, presents and all. In parts of the Highlands, like Lochdubh, the old spirit of John Knox still wandered, blasting anyone with hellfire should they dare to celebrate this heathen festival.

Hamish had often pointed out that none other than Luther was credited with the idea of the Christmas tree, having been struck by the sight of stars shining through the branches of an evergreen.

But to no avail. Lochdubh lay silent and dark beside the black waters of the loch.

He turned back towards the police station. The wind was becoming even more ferocious. The wind of Sutherland can sound frightening as it moves up from ordinary tumult to a high-pitched screech and then a deep booming roar.

Hamish decided to settle down with a glass of whisky in front of the television. He was just reaching up for the whisky bottle in one of the kitchen cupboards when he realized he had not checked the answering machine. He went through to the police office. There was one message, and it was Mrs. Gallagher saying she wanted him to call on her immediately as she wished to report a burglary.

Hamish groaned. "This is all I need," he said to the dingy, uncaring walls of the police office. He loathed Mrs. Gallagher. She was a tough, wiry old lady who ran her small croft single-handed. She lived out on the Cnothan road and was generally detested. She was described as crabbit, meaning "sourpuss." Mrs. Gallagher never had a good word to say for anybody. She had a genius for sniffing out the vulnerable points in anyone's character and going in for the kill.

In the far north of Scotland in winter, there are only a few hours of daylight. Hamish glanced at his watch. "Three o'clock and black as hell already," he muttered.

The wind cut like a knife as he climbed into the police Land Rover. As he held the wheel tightly against the buffeting of the wind and drove along the curving road out of the village, he realized that he had never questioned Mrs. Gallagher's bitterness. It had simply been one of those unpleasant facts of his existence since he had started policing in Lochdubh.

At last he bumped up the rutted track leading to the low croft house where Mrs. Gallagher lived. Bending his head against the ferocity of the wind, he rapped at the door. He waited as he heard her fumbling with locks and bolts. What was she afraid of? Most crofters didn't bother locking their doors.

Then he saw the gleam of an eye through the door, which she opened on a chain. She had always hated all those locks. How on earth could anyone manage to get in and burgle her?

"Police," he said.

The chain dropped and the door opened wide. "Come ben," she said curtly.

He ducked his head and followed her in.

As in most croft houses, the kitchen was used as a living room with the parlour being kept for "best." That meant the parlour was usually only used for weddings and funerals. Mrs. Gallagher's kitchen was cosy and cheerful, belying the permanently sour expression on her face. She had a mass of thick crinkly pepper-and-salt hair. The skin of her face was like old leather, beaten into a permanent tan by working outdoors. Her eyes were that peculiar light grey, almost silver, you still see in the Highlands. Emotions flitted over the surface of such eyes like cloud shadows on the sea and yet rarely gave anything away.

"What's been taken?" asked Hamish.

"Sit down and stop looming over me," she snapped. Hamish obediently sat down. "My cat, Smoky, has been stolen." Hamish had started to tug out his notebook, then left it alone.

"How long's the cat been gone?"

"Twenty-four hours."

"Look here, Mrs. Gallagher, it's probably strayed, gone wild or been killed by the fox." Like "the devil," it was always "the fox" in the Highlands of Scotland, where crofters had no sentimentality about an animal they damned as the worst piece of vermin in the countryside.

"Havers!" said Mrs. Gallagher. "If I say it is stolen, then it is stolen and it is your duty to get it back."

“I’ll have a look around for it,” said Hamish, struggling to rise out of the low chair on which he was sitting. ~~“Is there any sign of a break-in? Any doors, locks or windows been tampered with?”~~——

“Not a sign. But they could be too cunning for the likes of you. I want you to get a SOCO team out here,” said Mrs. Gallagher. Hamish, who watched police soaps as well, knew she meant a Scene of Crime Operatives team. “Smoky was here with me. He didn’t go out.”

“Did you go out yourself?”

“Yes, I went to feed the sheep.”

“And wouldn’t Smoky nip out after you?”

“No, Smoky never goes out until dinnertime.” Hamish interpreted “dinnertime” to mean midday. In most houses in and around Lochdubh, dinner was still in the middle of the day and high tea, that is, one course followed by bread and scones and cakes and washed down with tea, in the early evening.



“I cannot order a forensic team frae Strathbane for a missing cat,” said Hamish. “Anyway, they chust wouldn’t come.”

“Your trouble,” said Mrs. Gallagher, “is that you are lazy. That is why you are still unmarried. You are too damn lazy to get off your scrawny backside to even court a lassie.”

Hamish stood up and looked down at her. “I will look around outside for your cat and post a notice at the police station,” he said evenly. “That iss all I can do.” His Highland accent became more sibilant when he was angry or distressed.

“You have not even checked the doors or windows to see where they might have got in!” shouted Mrs. Gallagher. “I’ll report you.”

“Do that.” Hamish put on his cap and let himself out.

The wind had died as suddenly as it had sprung up. It was still blowing hard far up in the sky, for ragged black clouds were tearing across a small cold moon. He set off over the surrounding fields calling “Smoky!” but there was no sign of any cat.

He wearily returned to the croft house and knocked on the door. Again he waited and called out “Police” in answer to her sharp demand to know who was there. “Have you got a photo of the cat?” he called. After some time, the door opened on the chain. She handed a photograph to him. “I want a receipt,” she said. He wrote out a receipt and went on his way.

• • •

The next day, Hamish forgot about the cat. He had a more important burglary to investigate in a

neighboring village.

Cnothan, less rigid on the subject of Christmas than Lochdubh, had planned to decorate its main street with fairy lights. Now they were gone. He set out, enjoying the faint glow from a red sun which shone low on the hills. All was still after the gales of the day before. Smoke rose up from cottage chimneys in straight lines. The waters of the sea loch were flat and still, one great mirror reflecting the clouds and mountains above.

Hamish did not like Cnothan, the least friendly place in the Highlands. He marvelled that Cnothan all places should want to brighten the place up with lights. He went to the home of the chairman of the parish council, a Mr. Sinclair, who had reported the burglary. The door was opened by Mrs. Sinclair who told him he would find her husband at his shop in the main street. The shop, it turned out, sold electrical goods. Hamish grinned. Nothing like Highland enterprise when it came to making money.

Mr. Sinclair was a smooth, pompous man. There is not much of a pecking order in the north of Scotland and so often the shopkeeper is head of the social world. He had an unlined olive face, despite his age which Hamish judged to be around fifty. His unnaturally black hair was combed straight back and oiled.

“Was the shop burgled?” asked Hamish, looking around.

“No, we didnae have the lights here,” said Mr. Sinclair. “They were kept in a shed up by the community hall.”

“Maybe you’d better take me there.”

“You’ll need to wait until I’m closed for lunch. This is my busiest season.”

Hamish looked around the empty shop. “Doesn’t look busy now.”

“Temporary lull. Temporary lull.”

Hamish looked at his watch. Ten to one. Oh, well, only ten minutes to wait. Sod’s law, he thought bitterly as a woman came in at exactly two minutes to one and started asking about washing machines.

It was quarter past one before she finished asking questions and left without buying anything. “I hate that sort of woman,” grumbled Mr. Sinclair after he had locked up and led the way up the main street at a brisk trot. “I think they come in just to pass the time. Here we are.”

The door of the shed was open. A smashed padlock lay on the ground. “Did they take anything other than the lights?” asked Hamish.

“Yes,” said Mr. Sinclair. “They took the big Christmas tree as well.”

“Och, man, someone must hae seen someone carrying a great big tree!”

“You can ask. I’ve asked. Has anyone seen a thing? No.”

Hamish squatted down and studied the ground. “There’s no dragging marks,” he said. “Must have been more than one o’ them. How big was the tree?”

“About eight feet.”

“Aye, well, one man would ha’ dragged it. So it was several of them. And no one saw them. So it stands to reason they must have gone up the back way.” He stood up and looked down at Mr. Sinclair from his greater height. “I never heard afore that the folks of Cnothan wanted anything to do with Christmas.”

“I was elected chairman of the council this year and I managed to persuade them. I was backed by the minister. We took up a collection.”

“And your shop supplied the lights?”

“Yes. Do you mind if I get home for something to eat?”

“You run along. I’ll let you know if I find out anything.”

Behind the community hall, Hamish noticed common grazing land. There was a gate leading into it

Hamish bent down again. There were little bits of fir needles on the ground. So they had gone this way. Where to? Who would want to take a Christmas tree and lights?

After searching around some more, he went into a cafe and ordered a sausage roll and a cup of coffee. The roll was greasy and the coffee, weak. He approached the slattern who ran the cafe and asked, "Are there folks in Cnothan who were against having Christmas lights in the main street?"

She blinked at him through the steam from a pot on the cooker behind her. With her wild unkempt hair, her thin face and red eyes, she looked like one of the witches who had appeared to the other Macbeth.

"Aye, there's some o' those," she said.

"Like who?"

"Like Hugh McPhee. He went on and on about them."

"And where can I find him?"

"Down at the fishing shop by the loch."

At the bottom of the main street lay the loch, one of those products of the hydroelectricity board. Hamish could remember his mother telling him about how people had been moved out of their villages to make way for these artificial lochs. But they had all been promised that water power would mean cheap electricity and only found out too late that the resultant electricity was not cheap at all. There was a drowned village under Loch Cnothan at the far end. There was something dismal about these man-made stretches of water, he reflected. There weren't any of the trees and bushes around them that you found in the natural ones. At one end of the loch was a great ugly dam. The sun was already going down when Hamish reached Mr. McPhee's shop.

Mr. McPhee sat like a gnome behind the counter of his dark shop among fishing tackle.

Hamish explained the purpose of his visit. "So what's it got to do with me?" asked Mr. McPhee. He was a small gnarled man with arthritic hands.

"I heard you were against the whole business o' the lights," said Hamish.

"'Course I was. It was that man, Sinclair. Get's hisself elected tae the council and afore you know it he's got an order for the lights."

"So you weren't objecting on religious grounds?"

"No, you'll need tae go tae Bessie Ward for that. She says the lights are the devil's beacons."

"And where will I find her?"

"Her cottage is at the top o' the main street. It's called Crianlarich."

"Right, I'll try her."

Back up the main street. It was bitter cold and the light was fading fast. He found a small bungalow with the legend CRIANLARICH done in pokerwork on a small wooden board hung over the door on two chains.

He rang the doorbell, which played a parody of Big Ben.

"What is it? Is it my sister, Annie?" asked a solid-looking matron on seeing a uniformed policeman.

"No, nothing like that," said Hamish soothingly. "I am asking questions about the missing Christmas lights."

"Whoever did it was doing the work of the Lord," she said. "You'd best come in."

Hamish followed her into a highly disciplined living room. Church magazines on a low table were arranged in neat squares. Brass objects on the mantel glittered and shone. Cushions were plumped up. Against the outside streetlights, the windows sparkled. The room was cold.

Hamish took off his cap and balanced it on his knees. "I am asking various prominent residents of Cnothan if they might have any idea who did it," began Hamish.

“I neither know nor care.” Mrs. Ward sat down opposite him. Her tight tweed skirt rucked up over her thick legs, showing the embarrassed Hamish support hose ending in long pink knickers, those old-fashioned kind with elastic at the bottoms. “The Lord moves in mysterious ways,” she added sententiously.

Hamish was about to point out that the Lord did not break padlocks but did not want to offend her. “You look like a verra intelligent woman tae me,” he said. Mrs. Ward preened and a coquettish look appeared in her eyes as she surveyed the tall policeman with the hazel eyes and flaming red hair. “Have there be any strangers around here?”

“There’s some come and go for the forestry. It’s all the fault of that awful man, Sinclair. You know the reason he forced through the collection for the lights? Because he sold them.”

“But if there was enough in the collection for the lights,” said Hamish, “it follows that some of the people here want them.”

“I blame the incomers,” she snapped. “Godless lot.”

Hamish did not bother asking who the incomers were. She probably meant people who had settled in Cnothan during the last twenty years. Once a newcomer, always a newcomer. That’s the way things were in Cnothan. And you never really got to know anyone in Cnothan. In other villages, he called in at houses on his beat for a chat. He had never dared make an unofficial call on anyone in Cnothan. He surmised that such a respectable house-proud matron would not have anything to do with a theft. He was suddenly anxious to take his leave. But Mrs. Ward pressed him to stay for tea and he weakly agreed.

After he left, he took in great gulps of fresh air outside. He felt he had been trapped in that glittering living room forever. He decided to go back to Lochdubh.

In friendly Lochdubh where everyone gossiped freely, he would have more chance of picking up news of any strangers in the area. He was sure it was the work of strangers. Surely even the most rabid Calvinist would not stoop to crime.

Back in Lochdubh, he parked the Land Rover and walked along to the doctor’s cottage. Angela Brodie, the doctor’s wife, answered the door to him. “Come in, Hamish,” she said, putting a wisp of hair back from her thin face. “I’m just decorating the Christmas tree.”



“I’m glad someone in Lochdubh has a Christmas tree,” remarked Hamish.

“Come on, Hamish, you know a lot of us have them behind closed doors.” She led the way into the cluttered sitting room. The tree was half decorated and Angela’s cats were having a great game swiping at the brightly colored glass balls with their paws. Angela gave a cluck of annoyance and scooped up the cats and carried them out to the kitchen.

“So what have you been up to?” she asked when she returned.

Hamish told her about the theft of the Cnothan lights.

“There was a lot of feeling against having the lights by some of the older residents,” said Angela.

“Might not one of them have taken them?”

“No, I don’t think so. You see a large Christmas tree was taken as well. If someone wanted to stop the lights and tree being put up for religious reasons, then they’d probably have smashed the lights and chopped up the tree. Someone’s probably down in the streets of Inverness or somewhere like that trying to sell them. In fact, when I get back to the police station, I’ll phone the police in Inverness and Strathbane and ask them to keep a lookout for the missing lights.”

Hamish passed a pleasant hour helping Angela with the decorations and then went back to the police station. He went into the office and played back the messages on the answering machine. There was a curt one from the bane of his life, Detective Chief Inspector Blair, asking him to phone immediately on his return.

Hamish rang police headquarters and was put through to Blair.

“Listen, pillock,” said Blair with all his usual truculence, “there’s some auld biddie in your neck o’ the woods, a Mrs. Gallagher.”

“What about her? She’s only missing a cat.”

“Well, find the damn animal. She’s complained about you, right to Superintendent Daviot. Says you’re lazy and neglecting your duties. Says you’re a disgrace to community policing.”

Hamish sighed. Community policing were the current buzzwords at Strathbane.

“So you get out there and find that cat, dead or alive.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *what?*”

“Yes, sir.”

Hamish rang off. He decided to eat first and then tackle the horrible Mrs. Gallagher again.

• • •

An hour and a half later, he knocked once more at Mrs. Gallagher’s cottage. Frost was glittering on the grass round about and his breath came out in white puffs.

He waited patiently while the locks were unlocked and the bolts were drawn back.

She let him in. He was about to give her a row for having made trouble for him at headquarters, but he noticed she had been crying and his face softened.

“Look, Mrs. Gallagher,” he said gently, “I was not neglecting my duties. But you must know what it’s like. The cat could be anywhere. And why would anyone break in and steal a cat? And how could anyone break in with all the locks and bolts you have? You even have bolts on the windows.”

“Someone did,” she said stubbornly.

“Have you ever been burgled afore?”

“No, never.”

“So why all the locks and bolts?”

“There’s a lot of evil people around. And unintelligent ones, too. If you had any intelligence, you wouldn’t still be a policeman.”

“I choose to stay a policeman,” said Hamish, “and if you expected that remark to hurt, it didn’t.” It was amazing how little anyone knew of Mrs. Gallagher, he reflected, even though she had been in Lochdubh longer than himself. But then she was damned as a nasty old woman and that was that. It must be a lonely life and she had been crying over the loss of her cat.

“Let’s start again, Mrs. Gallagher,” he said firmly, “and stop the insults or we won’t get anywhere. The mystery here, and it iss where I would like to start, is why you bar and bolt yourself in and why you should immediately think that someone had broken in.”

She sat very still, her red work-worn hands folded on her aproned lap. “Can’t you just find Smoky?” she pleaded at last.

“I’m giving a talk at the school tomorrow and I’ll ask the children if they’ll help me to look for Smoky. School’s nearly finished. But you have not yet answered my question.” He looked at her shrewdly. “Who iss it you are afraid of, Mrs. Gallagher?”

She studied him for a long moment with those odd silver eyes of hers. Then she said abruptly, “Will you be taking a dram with me?”

“Aye, that would be grand.”

A flash of humor lit her eyes. “I thought you didn’t drink on duty.”

“Only on a cold winter’s night,” said Hamish.

She went to a handsome dresser against the wall and took out two glasses and a bottle of malt whisky. She poured two generous measures, gave him one and then sat back down in her chair, cradling her glass.

“Slainte!” said Hamish, raising his glass with the Gallic toast.

“Slainte,” she echoed.

The peat fire sent out a puff of aromatic smoke and an old clock on the mantel gave an asthmatic wheeze before chiming out the hour.

“So,” said Hamish curiously, “what brought you up here?”

“My father was a farmer. I was brought up on a farm.”

“Where?”

“Over near Oban. I knew I could make a go of it myself.”

“You must know country people and country ways. Why all the security?”

A little sigh escaped her. “I always thought one day he would come back.”

“He?”

“My husband.”

“I thought you were a widow.”

“I hope I am. It’s been a long time.”

“Was he violent?”

Again that sigh. “There you have it. Yes.”

“Tell me about it.”

“No, it’s my business. Finish your drink and go.”

Hamish studied her. “Was he in prison?”

“Get out of here, you tiresome man. I’m weary.”

Hamish finished his drink and stood up.

“Think about it,” he said. “There’s no use asking the police for help and then withholding information.”

But she did not reply or rise from her chair. He stood looking down at her for a few moments and then he put on his cap and let himself out.

His Highland curiosity was rampant. Why had he never stopped before to wonder about Mrs. Gallagher? She would appear in the village from time to time to stock up on groceries. If someone tried to speak to her she would be so cutting and rude that gradually she had come to be left alone. In the morning he would visit one of the older residents and see if he could find out some facts about her mysterious husband.



Chapter Two

The following day, before he was due to talk to the local schoolchildren, he set out to call on Angus Macdonald. Angus was the local seer, credited with having the gift of second sight. Hamish was cynical about the seer's alleged powers, guessing that Angus relied on a fund of local gossip to fuel his predictions.

He went out to the freezer in the shed at the back of the house and took out two trout he had poached in the summer. The seer always expected a present.

The day was cold and crisp and so he decided to walk up the hill at the back of the village to where Angus lived. Hamish thought cynically that Angus kept the interior of his cottage deliberately old-fashioned, from the oil lamps to the blackened kettle on its chain over the peat fire. His fame had spread far and wide. The dark, old-fashioned living room, Hamish was sure, added to the legends about Angus's gifts.

"It's yourself, Hamish," said Angus, looking more than ever like one of the minor prophets with his shaggy grey hair and long beard.

"Brought you some trout for your tea, Angus."

"Fine, fine. Chust put them down on the counter there. A dram?"

"Better not, Angus. I'm going to give a talk to the schoolchildren and I don't want the smell o' whisky on my breath."

"Sit yourself down and tell me what brings ye."

"Now, now," mocked Hamish, "I thought the grand seer like yourself wouldnae even have to ask."

Angus leaned back and half closed his eyes. "She isnae coming back this Christmas."

Hamish scowled horribly. He knew Angus was referring to the once love of his life, Priscilla Halburton-Smythe.

"I didn't come about that," said Hamish crossly. "Mrs. Gallagher's cat is missing." He opened his notebook, took out the black-and-white photograph of Smoky and handed it to the seer.

"It iss grey and white, that cat," said the seer.

"You've seen it?"

"No, I chust know."

“So tell me about Mrs. Gallagher. I wasn’t around when she came to Lochdubh. There’s something about her husband. Know anything about that?”

“I thought she was a widow.”

“So you don’t know everything, Angus.”

“No one can know everything,” said Angus huffily. “You will need to give me a bittie o’ time to consult the spirits.”

“Aye, you do that,” said Hamish, heading for the door.

The seer’s voice followed him. “I find a bit o’ steak does wonders for the memory.”

Hamish swung round. “I gave you two trout!”

“Aye, but there’s nothing like a bit of steak for helping an auld man’s memory.”

“Aren’t you frightened of the mad cow’s disease?”

“Not me,” said Angus with a grin.

“Aye, you’ve probably got it already,” muttered Hamish as he walked down the frosty hill.

The village school only catered for young children. The older ones were bused to the high school in Strathbane. There was a new schoolteacher, a Miss Maisie Pease, and it was she who had suggested that Hamish talk to the children. She was a small, neat woman with shiny black hair, a rather large prominent nose and fine brown eyes like peaty water. Hamish judged her to be in her thirties.

“Now, Officer,” she began.

“Hamish.”

“Well, Hamish it is, and I’m Maisie. I feel that children are never too young to learn about the perils of drugs, as well as all the usual cautions about not talking to strangers.”

“Right. Are the children ready for me?”

“They’re all in the main classroom.”

Hamish walked with her along a corridor to the classroom. As he neared it, he could hear the row of unsupervised children. When he pushed open the door, there came a frantic scrabbling of small pupils rushing back to their desks. Maisie followed him in.

“This is P. C. Macbeth, children,” she said. “I want you to sit quietly and pay attention.”

Hamish looked round the faces of twenty-four children, ranging in ages from five to eleven years old, rosy-cheeked Highland faces with bright eyes.

He started off by talking about the evils of bullying and of stealing. He warned them against talking to strangers or accepting lifts from strangers and then moved on to the subject of drugs. Not so very long ago, he reflected, such a talk would have been unnecessary. But drugs had found their way even up into the Highlands of Scotland. He then asked for questions.

After a polite silence, one little boy put up his hand. “Is wacky baccie bad?”

Hamish, identifying “wacky baccie” as pot, said, “Yes, it is. It’s against the law. But a lot of people will tell you there’s nothing to it. It’s better than booze. But it’s not. You can get sicker quicker and it destroys short-term memory. Just say no.”

Another boy put up his hand. “My brither wants to know where he can get Viagra.”

“Ask Dr. Brodie,” said Hamish. The boy relapsed, sniggering with his friends. So much for the innocence of youth, thought Hamish.

He then asked them what Santa Claus was bringing them. He was answered by a chorus of voices calling out that they wanted dolls or mountain bikes or dogs or cats. Hamish was glad that the children were not going to be denied Christmas, however Calvinistic the parents, although in the Lochdubh way, it would probably be celebrated behind closed doors.

“I’m going to talk to you now about pets,” said Hamish. He thought briefly of his own dog, Towser

long dead, and felt a pang of sadness. “Don’t ask your parents for a dog or a cat unless you’re very sure what looking after an animal entails. A dog, for instance, has to be house-trained, walked and fed possibly for the next fifteen years of your life. A cat even longer. It’s cruel to want an animal as a sort of toy. If I were you, I’d wait until you’re a bit older. Dogs have to be properly trained up here or you’ll have some animal worrying the sheep.

“While I remember,” he said, “someone or some people have stolen the Christmas lights that were meant to decorate the street in Cnothan. I want you to let me know if you hear anything about strangers in the Cnothan area. There’s a bit o’ detective work for you. Ask your older brothers or sisters or your parents and if there’s anything at all, let me know. Also, Mrs. Gallagher has lost a cat. I’m going to pass round a photograph of the cat and I want you all to study it carefully and then search for this cat. There’ll be a reward.”

Schoolteacher Maisie then showed him out. “I see you don’t have the classroom decorated,” said Hamish.

“We were going to make some paper decorations but you know how it is. Some of the parents objected. They said they didn’t mind giving their children a present, but that they were against what they call pagan celebrations. It’s hard on the children because they all watch television and they are all in love with the idea of a Christmas tree and lights and all those things. Oh, well, it’s only at Christmas that they get stropky. Other times, this must be the nicest place in the Highlands.”

“It is that,” said Hamish. “Maybe you’d like to have a bite of dinner with me one night?”

She looked startled and then smiled. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

Hamish thought gloomily about his unlucky love life and said quickly, “Chust a friendly meal.”

“Then that would be nice.”

“What about tomorrow evening? At the Italian restaurant? About eight?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Grand,” said Hamish, giving her a dazzling smile.

Mrs. Wellington, the minister’s wife, was just arriving and heard the exchange. She waited until Hamish had left and then said in her booming voice, “I feel I should warn you against that man, Miss Pease.”

“Oh, why?” asked the schoolteacher. “He’s not married, is he?”

“No, more’s the pity. He is a philanderer.”

“Dear me.”

“He was engaged to Priscilla Halburton-Smythe, daughter of Colonel Halburton-Smythe who owns the Tommel Castle Hotel. He broke off the engagement and broke her heart.”

Miss Pease had already heard quite a lot of Lochdubh gossip, and the gossips had it the other way round, that Priscilla had broken Hamish’s heart.

“Oh, well,” said Miss Pease, “he can’t do much to me over dinner.”

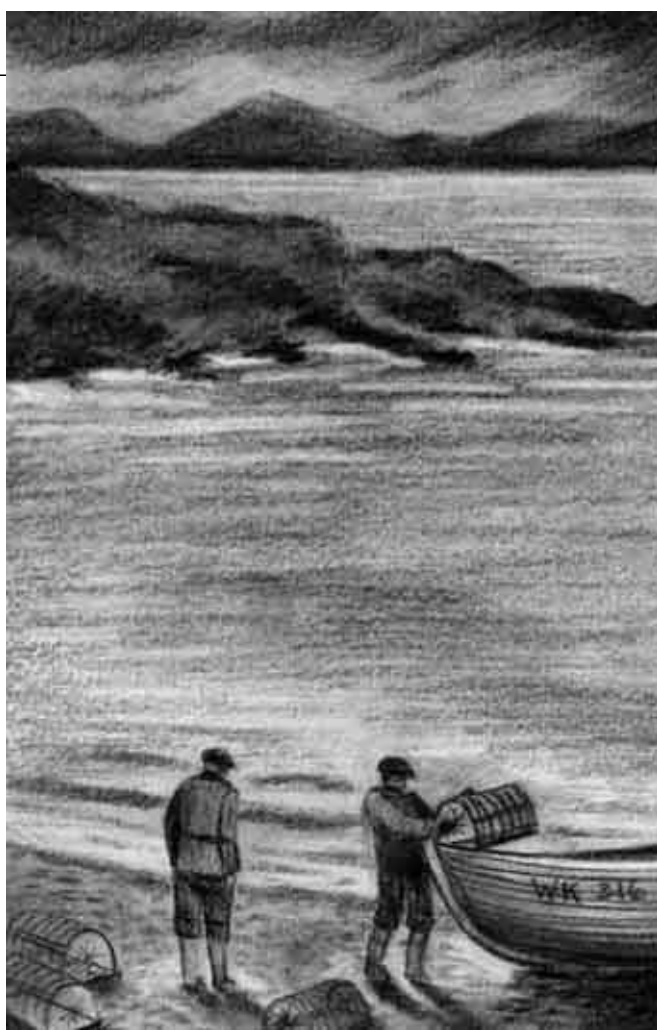
“That’s what you think,” said Mrs. Wellington awfully. “Now about the Sunday school . . .”

• • •

Hamish walked along the waterfront and met one of the fishermen, Archie Maclean. The locals said that Archie’s wife boiled all his clothes, and certainly they always looked too tight for his small figure, as if every one had been shrunk and then starched and ironed. The creases in his trousers were like knife blades and his tweed jacket was stretched tightly across his stooped shoulders.

“Getting ready for Christmas, Archie?” Hamish hailed him.

“When wass there effer the Christmas in our house?” grumbled Archie.





“I didn’t think the wife was religious.”

“No, but herself says she’s having none of those nasty Christmas trees shedding needles in her house, nor any of that nasty tinsel. You ken we’ve the only washhouse left in Lochdubh?”

Hamish nodded. The washhouse at the back of Archie’s cottage had been used in the old days before washing machines. It contained a huge copper basin set in limestone brick where the clothes were once boiled on wash-day.

“Well, the neighbors have been dropping by tae use it tae boil up their cloutie dumplings. But dae you think I’ll get a piece. Naw!”

Cloutie dumpling, that Scottish Christmas special, is a large pudding made of raisins, sultanas, dates, flour and suet, all boiled in a large cloth or pillowcase. Some families still kept silver sixpence from the old days before decimal coinage to drop into the pudding. Large and brown and steaming and rich, it was placed on the table at Christmas and decorated with a sprig of holly. It was so large it lasted for weeks, slices of it even being served fried with bacon for breakfast.

“In fact,” said Archie, “the only one what’s offered me a piece is Mrs. Brodie.”

“Angela? The doctor’s wife?”

“Herself.”

“But Angela can’t cook!”

“I know that fine. But herself says she’s going to try this year. Herself says it’s surely chust like a scientific experiment. You measure out the exact amounts.”

“It never works with Angela,” said Hamish. “Her cakes are like rocks. Come for a dram, Archie. I’ve been talking to the schoolchildren and it’s thirsty work.”

They walked into the Lochdubh bar together.

When they were settled at a corner table with glasses of whisky, Hamish asked, "Do you know any gossip about Mrs. Gallagher?"

"Her, out the Cnothan road? Why?"

"I've been thinking. We all know her as a sour-faced bitch. But why?"

"Cos she's a sour-faced bitch. Postman says she's got the place like Fort Knox wi' locks and bolts."

"I mean, what soured her? Was she always like that?"

"I think so. Good sheep. Doesn't have dogs. She just whistles to the sheep, different whistles and they do what she wants. She had one friend."

"Who?"

"I don't know if the woman iss still alive. She bought the croft from her. Mrs. Dunwiddy. She went to live with a daughter in Inverness. Wait a bit. Maybe two years back now, someone says to me that Mrs. Dunwiddy had a stroke and she's in an old folks home in Inverness. What's she done?"

"She done nothing. She thinks someone's pinched her cat."

"Gone wild probably or the fox got it."

"That's what I told her."

"So what d'ye want to know about her for?"

"Curious. That's all. I think she's a verra frightened woman."

"Listen, Hamish, if I lived up there and never spoke to a body except to do a deal for sheep at the sales at Lairg, I'd get frightened as well."

"I think there's more to it than that. Oh, and if you hear of someone selling Christmas lights, let me know. Cnothan's had theirs stolen."

"There's a lot o' Free Presbyterians o'er there."

The great essayist Bernard Levin once described the Free Presbyterian as the sort of people who thought that if they did not keep the blankets tight over their feet at night, the pope would nip down the chimney and bite their toes.

"Maybe," said Hamish. "But I doubt it. The lights were taken along with a tree out of that shed at the community hall. The padlock was smashed. Any loose elements roaming the countryside?"

"Haven't heard. Don't get them in the winter."

"If you hear anything, let me know."

• • •

Hamish returned to the police station to collect the Land Rover and drive to Cnothan.

He was once more examining the shed when Mr. Sinclair came up to him. "You're not wearing gloves," he accused.

"Why should I?"

"You'll be destroying fingerprints."

Hamish sighed. He knew Strathbane would not send out a team of forensic experts to help solve the mere theft of a Christmas tree and lights.

Ignoring Mr. Sinclair, he set out, stooped over the ground, following the trail of pine needles. He went through the gate into the common grazing ground. No more needles. There must have been more than one. He could imagine them getting it over the gate and then lifting it onto their shoulders. He set off up the hill, doubled over, studying the ground. He guessed they would go fast and in a straight line.

Mr. Sinclair stood watching him until the tall figure had disappeared over the crest of the hill. "That man's a useless fool," he said to the frosty air. "It's a pity Sergeant Macgregor is off ill." He quite

forgot that Sergeant Macgregor would have considered such a trivial theft not worth bothering about. Mr. Sinclair was feeling particularly righteous. He had supplied a new set of lights, which were being put up on the main street at that moment, and he had not charged for them.

Hamish spent the rest of the day searching over the common grazing ground until he came upon the peat stacks on the other side of the hill. There, in muddy, watery ground, he came across tire tracks. They could have been made by one of the locals, but as he studied them, he saw a little cluster of pine needles and some marks made by, he thought, running shoes. He counted the different footprints. Four sets of them. They'd probably come to thief peats and then thought they might stroll over towards the village to see if there was anything they could lift. He stood studying the prints, trying to build up a mental picture of the robbers. There had been a lot of petty theft over towards Lairg, tools lifted from garden sheds, things like that. He decided to put a full report into headquarters and ask for a printout of areas of recent petty theft in Sutherland. That way he might find the area they were operating from. Because of the pettiness of the other thefts, not much police work had gone into finding the culprits. They would possibly be unemployed, hard drinkers, the sort who preyed on farmhouses and cottages during agricultural shows when they knew people would be away from home.

• • •

As Hamish prepared a meal for himself that evening, he thought about the schoolteacher. It would be pleasant to talk to someone new. He stopped, about to drain the potatoes into the colander. There had been something wrong in that classroom. He had picked up at one point a little atmosphere of fear. Then he shrugged. He would ask Maisie Pease about it.

• • •

The following morning, he decided to run down to Inverness and do some last-minute Christmas shopping. The presents he had already bought for his family were waiting at the police station, but he needed to buy a few little presents for his friends in the village. He would phone in regularly to his answering machine just in case anything cropped up.

It was ten o'clock when he set off and the sun was just struggling up over the horizon. It was one of those unexpectedly mild winter days when a west wind blows in over the Gulf Stream.

As all the main stores in Inverness are crammed into the centre of the town, he found the main street as full of shoppers as ever. Inverness was always busy. Finally, when he had accumulated a supply of various presents, he returned to the police Land Rover. He phoned his answering machine but there were no messages. It was then he remembered Mrs. Gallagher's friend, Mrs. Dunwiddy.

He went to the central police station and asked if he could use the phone. Hamish had his mobile phone with him, but he wanted to phone around to old folks homes in the area and so he wanted a warm desk, a phone book and a police phone where the cost would not appear on his own phone bill.

On the sixth try, he landed lucky. Yes, they had a Mrs. Dunwiddy, but she was very frail and rambled most of the time. Nonetheless, he said he would call and see her.

He found the old folks home out on old Beauly Road. What was it like, he wondered as he parked in the gravelled drive, to end up in one of these places when you were old? He walked inside. There was a lounge to the right where several elderly people sat staring at a television set. The lounge was decorated with glittering colored chains of tinsel. An overdecorated Christmas tree stood beside the television set, dripping with glass balls and tinsel. Somehow, the festive decorations made the

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