

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

M. C. BEATON

“On a scale of one to ten, Constable Hamish Macbeth
merits a ten plus.”—*Buffalo News*



Death of a Nag

A Hamish Macbeth Mystery

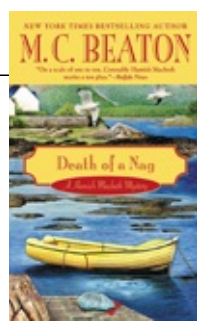
M. C. BEATON

Death *of a* Nag



GRAND CENTRAL
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NEW YORK BOSTON



[**Begin Reading**](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Preview of *Death of Yesterday*](#)

[A Preview of *Death of an Outsider*](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Chapter One



*O the disgrace of it!—The scandal,
the incredible come-down!*

—Sir Max Beerbohm

Hamish Macbeth awoke to another day. His dog, Towser, was lying across his feet, snoring rhythmically. Sunlight slanted through the gap in the curtains. The telephone in the police office part of the house shrilled and then the answering machine clicked on. He should rise and go and find out what it was. It was his duty as a police constable of the village of Lochdubh and part of the surrounding area of the county of Sutherland. But all he wanted to do was pull the duvet over his head and go back to sleep.

He could not really think of any good reason for getting up to face the day.

He had, until his demotion from sergeant back to constable and the end of his engagement with Priscilla Halburton-Smythe, daughter of a local hotelier, been very popular, a happy state of affairs he had taken for granted. But somehow the story had got about that he had cruelly jilted Priscilla, she who had been too good for him in the first place, and so, when he went about his duties, he was met with reproachful looks. Although Chief Superintendent Peter Daviot had also been angry with him over the end of the engagement, that was not why Hamish had been demoted. He had solved a murder mystery by producing what he firmly believed was the body of the murdered man to elicit a shocking confession from the guilty party. The ruse had worked, but he had had the wrong body. It had turned out to be a fine example of Pictish man and the police were accused of being clod-hopping morons for having so roughly handled and used such a prime exhibit. Someone had to be punished, and naturally that someone was Hamish Macbeth.

Hamish was not an ambitious man. In fact, he was quite happy with his lot as ordinary police constable, but he felt the displeasure of the village people keenly. His days before his disgrace had pleasantly been given up to mooching around the village and gossiping. Now no one seemed to want to spend the time of the day with him, or that was the way it seemed to his gloomy mind. If Priscilla, whom Hamish considered remarkably unaffected by the end to the romance, had stayed around to demonstrate that fact, then he would not be in bad odour. But she had left to stay with friends in Gloucestershire for an extended visit, so as far as the villagers were concerned, Hamish had driven her off and she was down in “foreign” parts, nursing a broken heart.

Mrs. Halburton-Smythe did not help matters by shaking her head and murmuring “Poor Priscilla” whenever Hamish’s name was mentioned, although what Mrs. Halburton-Smythe was sad about was that she was beginning to believe that her cool and aloof daughter did not want to marry anyone.

With a groan, Hamish made the effort and got up. Towser gave a grumbling sound in the back of his throat and slid to the floor and padded off towards the kitchen.

Hamish jerked back the curtains. The police station was on the waterfront and overlooked the sea loch, which lay that morning as calm as a sheet of glass.

He washed and dressed and went through to the police office. The message was from headquarters in Strathbane reminding him he had not sent in a full statement about a break-in at a small hotel on the road to Drum. He ambled into the kitchen and made himself a breakfast of bread and cheese, for he had forgotten to light the stove. Priscilla had presented him with a brand-new electric cooker, but he had childishly sent it back.

He fed Towser and stood on one leg, irresolute, looking like a heron brooding over a pond. Depression was new to him. He had to take action, to do something to lift it. He could start by typing that report. On the other hand, Towser needed a walk.

The phone began to ring again and so he quickly left the police station with Towser at his heels and set out along the waterfront in the hot morning sun. And it was hot, a most unusual state of affairs for the north of Scotland. He pushed his peaked cap back on his fiery-red hair and his hazel eyes saw irritation heading his way in the form of the Currie sisters, Jessie and Nessie.

The eyes of the village spinsters constantly accused him of being a heartless flirt. He touched his cap and said, "Fine morning."

"It is for some. It is for some," said Jessie, who had an irritating habit of repeating things. "Some on the other hand, are breaking their hearts."

Hamish skirted round them and went on his way. Resentment and self-pity warred in his bosom. He had once helped the Currie sisters out of a dangerous jam and had destroyed evidence to do so. Damn it, he had helped a lot of people in this village. Why should he be made to feel guilty?

His thoughts turned to Angela Brodie, the doctor's wife. Now *she* had not turned against him. He walked up the short path leading to the doctor's house, went round the back and knocked at the kitchen door. Angela answered it, the dogs yapping at her feet. She pushed her fine wispy hair out of her eyes and said vaguely, "Hamish! How nice. Come in and have coffee."

She cleared a space for him at the kitchen table by lifting piles of books off it and placing them on the floor.

"I don't seem to have had a chat with you in ages," said Angela cheerfully. "Heard from Priscilla?"

Hamish, who had just been lowering his bottom onto a kitchen chair, stood up again. "If you are going to start as well..." he began huffily.

"Sit down," said Angela, startled. "Start what?"

Hamish slowly sat down again. "You haff been the only one who hass not gone on about Priscilla," he said, his Highland accent becoming more sibilant, as it always did when he was angry or upset.

"Oh, I see," said Angela, pouring him a mug of coffee and sliding it across the table towards him. "I only asked about Priscilla because I assumed that you and she were still friends."

"And so we are!" said Hamish. "But ye wouldnae think so with this lot in Lochdubh. You would think I wass some sort of Victorian philanderer the way they go on."

"It'll blow over," said Angela comfortably. "These sort of ideas spread through these villages like an infection. Mrs. Wellington started it." Mrs. Wellington was the minister's wife. "She started it by complaining that you were a feckless womanizer and things like that. You know how she goes on. But you brought that on yourself!"

"How?"

"She happened to overhear you doing a very good impression of her to delight the boy scouts."

“Ah.”

“~~And so she got a resentment to you and shared it around. Resentment is very infectious. It has~~ always fascinated me the way, for example, one malcontent can bring a whole factory out on strike and keep everyone out on strike until the firm folds and they all lose their jobs. Also, you’re going around being so gloomy. That fuels it. You look like a guilty man.”

“I’m a bit down,” confessed Hamish. “The fact is I’ve taken a scunner tae Lockdubh and everyone in it.”

“Hamish! You love the place!”

“Not at the moment.”

“You’re due some leave, aren’t you? Get right away on holiday. You could get one of those cheap holidays in Spain. Or some of the African package holidays are very cheap.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Hamish moodily. “I might just take a wee holiday somewhere in Scotland, seeing that the weather’s fine.”

Angela got up and began to rummage through a pile of old magazines on a kitchen chair. She extracted a battered Sunday-paper colour supplement. “What about this place?” she said, flipping open the pages. “Skag. Have you been to Skag?”

“That’s over on the Moray Firth. I havenae been there, though I’ve been into Forres, which is quite close.” He looked at the coloured photographs. It looked like a Cornish resort with long white beaches, a pretty village and harbour. There was also a page of advertisements for hotels and boarding-houses in Skag. “I’ll take this with me, Angela, if you don’t mind.”

“Keep it,” said the doctor’s wife. “It’s one less piece of junk. I can never bring myself to throw magazines out or even take them along to the waiting-room.”

“What’s the latest gossip?” asked Hamish.

She sipped her coffee and looked at him in that vague way she always had. Then she put down her coffee-cup and said, “Well, the biggest piece of gossip apart from yourself is Jessie Currie.”

“What about her?”

“Angus Macdonald, the seer, told her she would be married before the year’s out.”

Hamish’s hazel eyes lit up with amusement. “She didnae believe him, did she?”

“She says she didn’t, but she’s been casting a speculative eye over the men of the village and Nessie is worrying about being left alone.”

“And who is this charmer who’s going to sweep our Jessie off her feet?”

“Angus will only say it’s going to be a divorced fisherman.”

“We don’t have any divorced fishermen!”

“I pointed that out to Jessie and she said, ‘Not yet.’ ”

“Chance’ll be a fine thing,” said Hamish. “Dried-up old spinster like her.”

“Hamish! That’s cruel.”

“Aye, well, she should mind her own business instead of ither folks’.”

“I really do think you need to get away. Willie Lamont was saying the other day that when you go to the restaurant, you’re always complaining about something.”

Willie Lamont, Hamish’s one-time sidekick, had left the police force to marry a young relative of the owner of the Italian restaurant and worked there much harder than he had ever done when he was a police constable.

“The portions are getting smaller and smaller and the prices higher.”

“Still, it’s not like you to complain. I’ll bet if you had a break from all of us, you’d be very happy to come back and see us again.”

Hamish got up. "We'll see. Thanks for the coffee."

~~He walked along the waterfront and perched on the harbour wall. Towser sighed and lay down.~~ Hamish studied the magazine article. There was an advertisement from a boarding-house called The Friendly House "situated right on the beach with commanding sea views, old-fashioned cooking and special low terms for July, halfboard."

Hamish lowered the magazine and looked over at the village. It was a largely Georgian village built all in the same year by one of the dukes of Sutherland to enlarge the fishing industry, trim little square whitewashed houses facing the sea loch. He knew everyone in the village, from people who had lived there all their lives like the Currie sisters, to the latest incomers. He felt better now he had talked to Angela, much better. He had been seeing things through a distorting glass, imagining everyone was against him.

So when he saw Mrs. Maclean, Archie, the fisherman's wife, stumping along towards him, carrying a heavy shopping basket, he gave her a cheery smile. "Lazing about as usual?" demanded Mrs. Maclean. She was a ferocious housekeeper, never seen without a pinafore and smelling strongly of soap and disinfectant. Her hair was twisted up in foam rollers and covered with a headscarf.

"I am enjoying the day," said Hamish mildly.

"How ye can enjoy anything wi' that poor lassie down in England eating her heart out is beyond me," said Mrs. Maclean.

Hamish studied her thoughtfully and then a gleam of malice came into his eyes. "Priscilla isn't nursing a broken heart, but some poor fisherman's wife is soon going tae be."

"Whit dae ye mean?"

Hamish slid down from the wall, rolled up the colour supplement and put it in his trousers pocket. "Aye, Angus Macdonald told Jessie Currie she'd be married afore the year was out and tae a fisherman, a *divorced* fisherman. How's Archie these days?"

"Archie's jist fine," said Mrs. Maclean, her eyes roving this way and that, as if expecting to see her husband. It was well known in the village that Archie, when not fishing, spent most of the day avoiding his wife, in case she scrubbed him to death, as he put it. "Anyway, it's all havers," she said. "Jessie Currie. The very idea."

And then, to Hamish's delight, he saw Archie in the distance. He came abreast of the Currie cottage and Jessie called something to him over the garden hedge and he stopped to talk to her.

"There's your man ower there," said Hamish happily, "and talking tae Jessie."

Mrs. Maclean stared in the direction he pointed and gave something that sounded like a yelp and set off at speed. But Archie saw her coming and left Jessie and darted up one of the lanes leading up to the back village and was gone from view.

Hamish strolled back to the police station, phoned Strathbane and said he wanted to take three weeks' immediate holiday. Permission was easily granted. The bane of his life, Detective Chief Inspector Blair, was in Glasgow, there had been virtually no crime at all for months, and so it was agreed that Sergeant Macgregor over at Cnothan could take over Hamish's duties as well as his own. He was free to leave at the end of the week. He phoned the boarding-house in Skag and learned to his delight that, thanks to a cancellation, they had one room free for the very time he wanted, and ye dogs were allowed.

Feeling happier than he had felt for some time, he then set out to arrange for his sheep to be looked after, his hens and ducks as well, and then decided to pay a visit to the seer to find out what had possessed the old sinner to wind Jessie up like that.

Angus Macdonald, the seer, a big, craggy man like one of the minor prophets, peered all around

Hamish looking for a present before he let him in. The villagers usually brought him something, bottle of whisky or a cake.

“No, I didnae bring you anything,” said Hamish, following him into his small living-room. “I don’t want your services. I simply want to know what you were doing telling Jessie she was going tae marra a divorced fisherman.”

“I seed it,” said Angus huffily. “I dinnae make things up.”

“Come on, man. Jessie!”

“Well, that’s whit I seed.”

“That sort o’ rubbish could start gossip.”

“Maybe that’s whit you’re hoping fur, Hamish.”

“How’s that?”

“Stop them gossiping about you and your lassie.”

“I think you’re an old fraud,” said Hamish. “I’ve always thought you were an old faker.”

“You’re jist bad-tempered because ye think nobody loves ye. Here’s Mrs. Wellington coming.”

Hamish jumped up in alarm. He scampered off and ran down the hill, seemingly deaf to the booming hail of the minister’s wife.

“That man,” said the tweedy Mrs. Wellington as she plumped herself down in an armchair. “I’ll be glad to see the back of him.”

“Is he going somewhere?” asked Angus.

“I met Mrs. Brodie just before I came up here. She said that Hamish was thinking of going over to Skag for a holiday.”

“Oh, aye,” said Angus. “Now whit can I dae for you, Mrs. Wellington?”

“This business about Jessie Currie. It can’t be true.” Her eyes sharpened. “Unless you’ve heard something.”

“I see things,” said the Angus.

“And you hear more gossip than anyone I know,” said Mrs. Wellington sharply. “I brought you one of my fruitcakes. It’s over on the counter. You see, Mr. Patel at the stores told me that he had seen Archie Maclean talking to Jessie Currie and when he saw his wife at the other end of the waterfront coming towards him, he ran away.”

“I’m saying nothing,” said Angus mysteriously. “But we’ll jist have a wee cup o’ tea and try the cake.”

Early on Saturday morning, Hamish Macbeth hung a sign on the door of the police station, referring all inquiries to Sergeant Macgregor at Cnothan. He locked the police Land Rover up in the garage, put Towser on the leash, and picked up his suitcase. Then the phone in the police station began to ring. He decided to answer it in the hope that someone in the village might have phoned up to wish him a happy holiday.

The voice of the seer sounded down the line. “I wouldnae go tae Skag if I were you, Hamish.”

Hamish felt a superstitious feeling of dread.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I see death. I see death and trouble fur you, Hamish Macbeth.”

“I havenae time to listen to your rubbish,” said Hamish sharply and put the receiver down.

At the other end of the line, Angus listened to that click and smiled. Called him a fraud, had he? Well, that should give Hamish Macbeth something to think about!

Hamish left the police station and walked along to the end of the harbour to get the bus to Bonar Bridge. From Bonar Bridge he would get another bus to Inverness and then buses from Inverness over to Skag.

The bus was, as usual, late, twenty minutes late, in fact. Hamish was the only passenger. He often thought the driver, Peter Dunwiddy, deliberately started off late so as to have an excuse to break the speed limit, even with a policeman on board. Hamish hung on tightly and Towser flattened himself on the floor of the bus as it hurtled up out of Lochdubh and then began to scream around the hairpin bends on its way to Bonar Bridge. He expected to feel a lightness of heart as Lochdubh and all its residents fell away behind him. But he felt an odd tugging sadness at his heart. To match his mood, the day was grey, all colour bleached out of the landscape, like a Japanese print. He hoped the good weather would return. Perhaps he should not have been so parochial as to holiday in Scotland. What did Scotland ever guarantee sunny weather and water warm enough to go for a swim?

By the time he reached the village of Skag, he felt as tired as if he had walked there. He asked for directions to The Friendly House and then set out. It was about two miles outside the village, and not on the beach exactly but behind a row of sand dunes set a quarter of a mile back from the North Sea.

It was an old Victorian villa, vaguely Swiss-chalet design, with fretted-wood balconies and blue shutters. He glanced at his watch. Half past five. Tea was at six.

He entered a dim hallway furnished with a side-table holding an assortment of tourist brochures, a large brass bowl holding dusty pampas-grass, a carved chair, and an assortment of wellington boots. He pressed a bell on the wall and a door at the back of the wall opened and a thick, heavy-set man came towards him. He had blond hair and bright-blue eyes and a skin which had a strange high gloss on it, like china. Hamish thought he was probably in his fifties.

“You must be our Mr. Macbeth,” he said breezily. “The name’s Rogers, Harry Rogers. You’ll find us one happy family here. Come upstairs and I’ll show you and the doggie your room.”

The room boasted none of the modern luxuries like telephone or television. But the bed looked comfortable, and through the window Hamish could see the grey line of the North Sea. “The bathroom’s at the end of the corridor,” said Mr. Rogers. “As you see, there’s a wash-hand basin in the corner there. Tea’s at six. Yes, none of this dinner business. Good old-fashioned high tea.”

Hamish thanked him and Mr. Rogers left. Towser, tired after the long walk, crawled onto the bed and closed his eyes. Hamish quickly unpacked, taking out a bowl which he filled with water for the dog, and a can of dog food, a can opener, and another bowl. He filled the second bowl with the dog food and put it on the floor beside the water. Spoilt Towser did not like dog food, but, reflecting on Hamish, he would just need to put up with it for the duration of the holiday. Of course, maybe he could buy him some cold ham as a treat. Towser was partial to cold ham. He changed into a pair of jeans and a checked shirt, debated whether to wear a tie and decided against it, and then went downstairs and pushed open a door marked “Dining-Room.” A small, birdlike woman who turned out to be Mrs. Rogers, hailed him. “Mr. Macbeth, your table’s here... with Miss Gunnery.”

Hamish nodded to Miss Gunnery and sat down. All the other diners were already seated. Mrs. Rogers appeared and introduced everyone to everyone else. Hamish’s quick policeman’s mind noted all the names and his sharp eyes took in the appearance of the other guests.

Miss Gunnery on the other side of the table had the sort of appearance which even in these modern days screamed spinster. She had a severe face, gold-rimmed glasses and a mouth like a trap. Her flat-chested figure was dressed despite the humidity of the day in a green tweed suit worn over a white shirt blouse.

At the next table was a man with his wife, a Mr. and Mrs. Harris. Both were middle-aged. She had

neatly permed brown hair and neat, closed features, and was dressed in a woollen sweater and cardigan and a black skirt. Her husband was wearing an open-necked shirt and a trendy black leather jacket and jeans, the sort of outfit that tired businessmen in a search for fading youth have taken to wearing almost like a uniform. He was grey-haired, had large staring eyes and a bulbous nose.

Beyond them were Mr. and Mrs. Brett and their three children, Heather, Callum, and Fiona, aged seven, four, and three, respectively. Mr. Brett was a comfortable, chubby man with glasses and an air of benign stupidity. His wife was an artificial redhead with a petty face and pencilled eyebrows. Either they were plucked, a rare fashion these days, thought Hamish, or they had fallen off, or she had been born that way. She had pencilled in arches of eyebrows, which gave her a look of perpetual surprise.

At the window table were two girls called Tracey Fink and Cheryl Gamble, both from Glasgow. They both had hair sun-streaked by chemicals rather than sunlight and white pinched faces under a load of make-up, and both were wearing identical outfits, striped black-and-white sweaters and black ski pants with straps under the instep and dirty sneakers. And in a far corner was a solitary man who had the honour of having a table to himself. His name was Mr. Andrew Biggar. He had a tanned face and thick brown hair streaked with grey, small clever brown eyes, and a long, humorous mouth.

High tea, that famous Scottish meal now hardly ever served, consists of one main dish, usually corned ham, and salad and chips, washed down with tea. In the middle of each table was a cake stand. On the bottom were thin slices of white bread scraped with butter. On the next layer were scones and teacakes, and on the top, cakes filled with ersatz cream and covered in violently coloured icing.

“Grand day,” said Hamish conversationally to Miss Gunnery, for every day in Scotland where it is not exactly freezing cold and pouring wet is designated a “grand day.”

Her eyes snapped at him through her glasses. “Is it? I find it damp and overcast.”

Hamish relapsed into a crushed silence. He wished he had not come. But Mr. Harris’s voice rose above the conversation at the other tables, he of the trendy leather jacket, and caught Hamish’s attention.

“Well, this holiday was your idea, Doris,” he said.

“I only said the tea was a trifle weak,” protested his wife.

“Always finding fault, that’s your problem,” said Mr. Harris. “If you exercised more and thought less about your stomach, you might be as fit as me.”

“I only said—”

“You said. You said,” he jeered. He looked around the room. “That’s women for you. Always nit-picking.”

“Bob, *please*,” whispered his wife.

“Please what?”

“*You* know.” She cast a scared look around the dining-room. “Everyone’s listening.”

“Let them listen. I’m not bound by your suburban little fears, my dear.” His voice rose to a high falsetto. “What *will* the neighbours think.”

And so he went on and on.

The severe Miss Gunnery, who prided herself on “keeping herself to herself,” was driven to open her mouth and say to the tall, lanky, red-headed man opposite, “That fellow is a nag.”

“Aye, the worst kind,” agreed Hamish, and then smiled, and at that smile, Miss Gunnery thawed even more. “Mrs. Harris is right,” she said. “The tea is disgustingly weak, the ham is mostly fat, and those cakes look vile. I know this place is cheap...”

“Maybe there’s a fish-and-chip shop in the village,” said Hamish hopefully. “I might take a walk there later. My dog likes fish and chips.”

“Oh, you have a dog? What breed?”

“Towser’s a mixture of every kind of breed.”

Miss Gunnery looked amused. “Towser! I didn’t think anyone called a dog Towser these days—
Rover, for that matter.”

“It started as a wee bit o’ a joke, that name,” said Hamish, “and then the poor animal got stuck with it.”

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Macbeth?”

The nag’s voice had temporarily ceased. There was silence in the dining-room. “I’m a civil servant,” said Hamish. He did not like telling people he was a policeman because they usually shrank away from him. And he had found that when he said he was a civil servant, it sounded so boring that no one ever asked him where he worked or in what branch of the organization.

“I’m a schoolteacher,” said Miss Gunnery. “I’ve never been to Skag before. It seemed a good chance to get a cheap holiday.”

“When did you arrive?”

“Today, like the rest. We’re all the new intake.”

Mr. Rogers and his wife hovered about among the tables, snatching away plates as soon as any diner looked as if he or she was finished. “We have television in the lounge across the hall,” announced Mr. Rogers. His wife was carefully packing away uneaten cakes into a large plastic box. Hamish guessed, and as it turned out correctly, that they would make their appearance again during the following days until they had all either been eaten or gone stale.

The company moved through to the lounge. Bob Harris had temporarily given up baiting his wife, but Andrew Biggar made the mistake of asking Doris Harris what she would like to see.

“‘Coronation Street’ is just about to come on,” said Doris shyly. “I would like to see that if no one else minds.”

Her husband’s voice cut across the murmur of assent. “Trust you to inflict your penchant for soap operas on everyone else. How you can watch that pap is beyond me.”

Hamish walked over to the television set, found “Coronation Street,” and turned up the volume. “I like ‘Coronation Street,’ ” he lied to Doris. “Always watch it.”

He sat down next to Miss Gunnery. He was aware of the nag’s voice all through the programme, sneering and jeering at the characters. He sighed and looked about the room. The chairs were arranged in a half-circle in front of the television set. The fireplace was blocked up and a two-bar electric heater stood in front of it. There was a set of bookshelves containing battered paperbacks, no doubt left behind by previous guests. The Rogerses were probably too mean to buy any. The chairs were upholstered in a scratchy fabric. The carpet was a worn-out green with faded yellow flowers. There were various dim pictures on the walls, Highland cattle in Highland mist, and a grim photograph of a Victorian lady who stared down on all. Probably the original owner, thought Hamish.

At the end of the programme, which he had only stayed to watch for Mrs. Harris’s sake, he rose and said to Miss Gunnery, “I’m going to walk my dog along to the village and see if there’s a fish-and-chips shop. Want to come?”

“I don’t eat fish and chips,” she said primly, looking down her nose.

The tetchiness that had been in him for months rose to the surface again. “So you prefer that high-class muck we had for tea?”

There was an edge of contempt to his light Highland voice and Miss Gunnery flushed. “I’m being silly,” she said, getting to her feet. “I’d enjoy the walk.”

Hamish went up to get Towser, but when he descended to the hall again it was to find not only Miss

Gunnery waiting for him but the rest of the party, with the exception of the Harrises.

~~They did not say anything like “We’ve decided to come too,” but merely fell into line behind the~~ police-man like obedient children being taken for a walk.

Mr. Brett was the first to break the silence. “A stone’s throw from the sea,” he exclaimed. “You would need to have a strong arm to throw a stone that distance.”

“Are ye sure there’s a chip shop, Jimmy?” asked Cheryl. She hailed from Glasgow, where everyone was called Jimmy, or so it seemed, if you listened to the inhabitants.

“I don’t know,” said Hamish. “May be something in the pub.”

“I’m starving,” confided Tracey, stooping to pat Towser. “I could eat a horse between two bread vans.”

Cheryl slapped her playfully on the back and both girls giggled.

“It’s a pity little Mrs. Harris couldn’t come as well,” said Andrew Biggar. “Don’t suppose she gets much fun. Are you in the army, by any chance, Mr. Macbeth?”

“Hamish. I’m called Hamish. No, Andrew. Civil servant. What makes ye say that?”

“When I first saw you, I thought you were probably usually in uniform. Got it wrong. I’m an army man myself. Forcibly retired.”

“Oh, those dreadful redundancies,” said Miss Gunnery sympathetically. “And us so soon to be at war with Russia again.”

“Don’t say that,” said Mrs. Brett, whose name turned out to be June, and her husband’s, Dermott. “It’s been a grim-enough start. That man Harris should be shot.”

“You can say that again,” said Dermott Brett, so June predictably did and the couple roared with laughter at their own killing wit.

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to bear this holiday,” murmured Miss Gunnery to Hamish.

“Och,” said Hamish, who was beginning to feel better, “I think they’re a nice enough bunch of people and there’s nothing like a common resentment for banding people together.” He winced remembering how common resentment had turned the villagers of Lochdubh against him.

“Harris, you mean,” said Miss Gunnery. “But his voice does go on and on and it’s not a very bright place.”

They arrived at the village of Skag. It consisted of rows of stone houses, some of them thatched, built on a point. The river Skag ran on one side of the point and on the other side was the broad expanse of the North Sea. The main street was cobbled but the little side streets were not surfaced and the prevalent white sand blew everywhere, dancing in little eddies on a rising breeze. “Getting fresher,” said Hamish. “Look there. A bit of blue sky.”

They walked down to the harbour and stood at the edge. The tide was coming in and the water sucked greedily at the wooden piles underneath them. Great bunches of seaweed rose and fell. Above them, the grey canopy rolled back until bright sunlight blazed down.

Hamish sniffed the air. “I smell fish and chips,” he said, “coming from over there.”

They set out after him and found a small fish-and-chips shop. Hamish suggested they walk to the beach and eat their fish and chips there.

They made their way with their packets past the other side of the harbour, where yachts were moored in a small basin, the rising wind humming and thrumming in the shrouds. There was a sleazy café overlooking the yacht basin, still open but empty of customers, the lights of a fruit machine winking in the gloom inside.

A path led round the back of the café, past rusting abandoned cars and fridges, old sofas and broken tables, to a rise of shingle and then down to where the shingle ended and the long white beach began.

“You spoil that dog,” said Miss Gunnery as Hamish placed a fish supper on its cardboard tray down in front of Towser.

Hamish did not reply. He knew he spoilt Towser but did not like anyone to comment on the fact.

“Why does a woman like Doris marry a pillock like that?” asked Andrew Biggar.

June Brett nudged her chubby husband playfully in the ribs. “They’re all saints before you marry them and then the beast comes out.”

Dermott Brett snarled at her and his wife shrieked with delight. Faces could be misleading, though Hamish. June looked rather petty and mean when she was not speaking, but when she did, she became transformed into a good-natured woman. The Brett children were making sandcastles down by the water. They were remarkably well behaved. Heather, the seven-year-old, was looking after her younger brother and toddling sister, making sure the little Fiona did not wander into the water. Long ribbons of white sand snaked along the harder damp surface of the sand underneath and then there came a haunting humming sound, “Whit’s that?” cried Cheryl, clutching Tracey.

“Singing sands,” said Hamish. “I remember hearing there were singing sands here but I forgot about it.”

“It’s eerie,” said Miss Gunnery. “In fact, the whole place is a bit odd. It never gets dark this time of year, does it, Hamish?”

He shook his head, thinking that the place was indeed eerie. Because of the bank of shingle behind the beach and the flatness of the land behind, there was a feeling of being cut off from the rest of the world. He remembered the seer’s prediction with a shudder and then his common sense took over. Angus had heard the gossip about his holiday and had invented death and trouble to pay Hamish back for having called him a fraud.

Miss Gunnery was carefully collecting everyone’s fish-and-chip-papers when Hamish heard Dermott Brett say, “He’s got worse.”

“Who?” asked Andrew, lazily scraping in the sand for shells.

“Bob Harris.”

“You know him?” asked Hamish.

“Yes, he was here last year.”

Miss Gunnery paused in her paper-gathering. “You mean you stayed here and *came back!*”

“New management,” said Dermott Brett. “It was owned by a couple of old biddies. They did a good tea, but their prices were quite high for a boarding-house. We weren’t going to come back, because with the three kids it was coming to quite a bit. Then June saw the ad with the new cheap prices, but she said nothing about new management.”

“What happened to the old women who owned it?” asked Hamish, ever curious.

“They were the Blane sisters, the Misses Blane. Rogers said they took a small house for themselves in Skag. Might call on them, if I can find them.”

“So Harris is worse now?” pursued Hamish.

“He was bad enough last year, but in fits and starts. Didn’t go on like he does now the whole time. Maybe he’ll have settled down by tomorrow. Doris Harris wanted to come with us, but he ranted on at her when you were upstairs getting your dog about wasting good money on fish and chips when she had already eaten.”

There was a scream of delight from the Brett children. Heather had placed the three-year-old Fiona on Towser’s back. Towser was standing patiently, looking puzzled, his eyes rolling in Hamish’s direction for help.

“Leave him be,” shouted Hamish. Heather obediently lifted Fiona off Towser’s back and Towser

lolloped up the beach and lay panting at Hamish's feet.

"Time I got those kids in bed," said June. "They've been on the train all day."

"Come far?" asked Hamish.

"From London."

Dermott got to his feet and brushed sand from his trousers. He walked up to the children and swung the toddler onto his shoulders. June joined him, and the family set off together in the direction of the boarding-house.

"That's a nice family," said Miss Gunnery, returning from a rubbish bin on the other side of the shingle, where she had put the papers. "Perhaps we should be getting back as well."

"Whit about the night-life o' Skag?" sniggered Cheryl. "Me and Tracey'd like a drink."

"How old are you?" demanded Miss Gunnery severely.

Cheryl tossed her long blonde hair. "Old enough," she said. Her heavily made-up eyes flirted at Hamish. "Aye, old enough fur anything, isn't that right, Tracey?"

"Sure is," said Tracey in a dreadful imitation American accent. "So let's just mosey along to the pub."

"Bound to be bottled beer up here," said Andrew, "but I'm willing to try it. What about you, Hamish?"

"As long as they'll let Towser in."

"He's married tae his dug!" shrieked Cheryl.

Hamish's thin, sensitive face flushed angrily. He was ashamed of his affection for his dog, and ashamed sometimes of Towser's yellowish mongrel appearance.

"I think a drink's just what we all need," said Andrew quickly. "Come along, Hamish."

Hamish had a sudden desire to sulk. But Miss Gunnery said, "I saw the pub near the harbour. It looked quite pretty. I think I'll go after all." She linked a bony arm in Hamish's as he stood up and the small party set off.

It was a pretty thatched pub with tubs of flowers at the door, more like an English inn than a Scottish one. But inside it was as plastic and dreary as the worst of Scottish pubs. A juke-box blared in the corner and a spotty moron was operating the fruit machine with monotonous regularity, his mouth hanging open as he fed in the coins. Hamish had noticed a table and chairs outside and suggested they take their drinks there. Cheryl and Tracey had rums and Coke, Miss Gunnery, a gin and tonic, Andrew a bottle of beer, and Hamish, a whisky and a bag of potato crisps for Towser.

"There's a carnival here tomorrow," said Hamish. "Sideshowes and everything. I saw a poster about it on the pub wall."

"I didn't see a fairground," said Andrew.

"It'll be here tomorrow all right," said Hamish, wise in the ways of Highland gypsies. "They come in the night like a medieval army and the next day, there they all are."

They finished their drinks and walked slowly back to the boarding-house. Cheryl and Tracey had decided to compete for the attention of Hamish Macbeth and so they walked arm in arm with him while Miss Gunnery and Andrew followed behind.

When they went into the boarding-house, Hamish collected a couple of paperbacks from the bookshelves in the lounge and went up the stairs to his room.

It was then that he found out that the Harrises had the room next door. Bob Harris's voice rose and fell, going on and on and on, punctuated by an occasional whimper from his wife.

Hamish wondered whether to go next door and tell the man to shut up, but as a policeman he had found out the folly of interfering in marital problems. Doris would probably round on him and tell him

to leave her husband alone.

Or rather, that's what the lazy Hamish Macbeth told himself.

Chapter Two



*A tart temper never mellows with age, and
a sharp tongue is the only edged tool that
grows keener with constant use.*

—Washington Irving

Hamish rose early and took Towser for a walk along the deserted dunes outside the hotel. The day was grey and warm and misty. Somewhere a foghorn sounded like some lost sea creature. The midges and those pestilent Scottish mosquitoes which he had naïvely thought he had left behind him on the west coast, were out in force. He automatically felt in his shirt pocket for a stick of repellent and found he had none and remembered there was one in his suitcase.

He returned to his room and pulled his suitcase out from under the bed and flipped back the lid. It was then that he realized it had been searched. It was not precisely that things had been disturbed, there was more a *smell*, a feeling, that things had been gone through. Not that there was much left in the suitcase. He had unpacked nearly everything. He found a stick of repellent in one of the pockets lining the back of the case. There were a few books and sweaters he had not yet put away in the drawers, and oh, God, his police identification card, his notebook, and a pair of handcuffs. He sat back on his heels, his mind ranging busily over the guests. He had not bothered to lock his bedroom door when he had gone out with Towser. Rogers? Was it plain nosiness? He could complain, and complain loudly, but he had no real proof. He fished out the suitcase keys from a back pocket and locked the case and pushed it back under the bed. Pointless thing to bother about doing now. Someone in the hotel now knew he was a policeman. He would study their reactions to him today.

The only good thing about breakfast was the surly silence of Bob Harris. The food was awful: fried haggis and watery eggs; hard, dry rolls with margarine; and marmalade so thin it could have been watered.

“I’m going to the carnival,” said Hamish to Miss Gunnery. “Would you like to come?”

Before she could reply, Dermott Brett called over. “Going to the carnival? We’ll come too, Hamish, and take the kids.”

And so, to Miss Gunnery’s disappointment, for she had murmured to Hamish, “I hate crowds,” the others came along as well, minus the Harrises. They had gone a little way towards Skag when the sound of running footsteps made them turn around. Doris Harris was running to catch up with them, her face flushed.

“Bob doesn’t want to come,” she said breathlessly.

As they walked on, they all found they were searching for new topics of conversation, the main one

having hitherto been what a pig Bob Harris was. Hamish's stick of repellent was gradually getting worn down as everyone kept borrowing it. Hands flapped at the stinging, biting midges. "Let's hope they leave us when we get to the carnival," said Hamish. A thin drizzle had started to fall.

An air of gloom was descending on the party. Hamish had a desire to lighten it for Doris's sake. Her life with Bob was surely misery enough. She should enjoy this bit of freedom. He stared up at the sky, willing the weather to change. There was a whisper of a breeze against his cheek. "Anyone heard the weather forecast?" he asked.

"Said it might get sunny later," said Andrew.

The children began to chatter with excitement, for the fair was now in view in a field outside Skag.

Hamish looked at his watch. "There're floats and some sort of procession through the village first. Let's go and watch that."

The rain was falling heavier as they huddled in a group and watched a series of tacky floats move past. A Scottish bank had a traditional jazz band on the back of a truck which momentarily brightened things as it slowly cruised by them, but the rest of the floats were mostly tableaux by the children, with children with grease-paint running down their faces in the rain. Then there was the crowning of the carnival queen, a singularly ill-favoured little girl; but as Hamish learned, she was the daughter of the publican, who had contributed a large sum of money to the carnival, so that explained the choice.

They all walked with Hamish to the fairground, all occasionally looking hopefully at him like tourists at their guide.

"I know," said Hamish, "let's go on the dodgem cars. What about it, Miss Gunnery?"

"It's a mither complex, that's whit it is," said Cheryl sourly to Tracey, but Hamish decided to ignore the gibe. And then, as they crashed their way about in the dodgem cars, Doris with Andrew, Hamish with Miss Gunnery, Cheryl and Tracey screaming together and eyeing the local talent Dermott and June with their toddler on their knee while the other two children took up another car, the weather made one of its lightning changes. Again the grey rolled back out to sea, like a curtain being swept back on the transformation scene in a pantomime.

After the dodgems, Hamish bought candy floss for the children and then looked about for more amusement. He was determined to keep "his" little party happy. He was beginning to catch a glimpse of his own easygoing happiness coming back again and he did not want to lose it. So they obediently followed him to the ghost train and he had the delight and pleasure of hearing the prim Miss Gunnery beside him in the car shrieking her head off. She gave him a rueful look afterwards. "I don't often let my hair down like that."

Hamish looked at her glossy brown hair, which was scraped into a severe knot on top of her head. "You should," he said. "You've got pretty hair."

Miss Gunnery gave him such a warm glowing look that he moved away from her uneasily. But he found that leaving her side was to get the undivided attention of Cheryl and Tracey, so he returned to her and continued to lead his party on and off roundabouts all over the fairground until Dermott Bre said the children were weary and it was nearly time for tea. They had made a lunch of hot dogs, candy floss, and chocolate bars, and as they all headed back to the hotel, the thought of the tea that was probably awaiting them damped their appetites further.

The Brett children began to invent awful menus from fried snails to roast baby until they were helpless with giggles. Doris was laughing. She looked a changed woman. Hamish thought she had probably been quite pretty when she was younger. Andrew Biggar was walking beside her, looking delighted with her company.

Hamish, covertly watching them, began to feel uneasy. He felt he was looking at the ingredients for

a disaster: crushed wife, nasty husband, gentle and decent man—mix all together and what do you get? Murder, said a voice in his brain.

He shook himself to get rid of the thought. Husbands and wives nagged each other up and down the length of the British Isles, but they didn't murder each other—or not all of them did.

The main dish of high tea was a mixed grill: one small sausage, one kidney, one tomato, and the inevitable chips. Bob Harris was there, and drunk. He was so drunk that his voice was lowered to an almost incomprehensible whining mumble. Hamish was just able to make out that the burden of his complaint was that Doris had actually defied him by going off to the fair.

After tea, Doris got to her feet and said quietly that she was tired and was going to have an early night. They all expected Bob Harris to join her but he followed them through to the lounge, just sobbing enough after the dreadful tea to turn his viciousness on the group. His first target was Andrew Biggar. “You army men are all the same,” he jeered. “The only reason you go into the army is because you can't adapt to civilian life. Have to be told what to do.”

Andrew, who had picked up a book, put it down and said evenly, “Just shut up.”

Heather, the seven-year-old, gave a nervous laugh. Bob's bulbous eyes focused on the child. “Your trouble is, you're spoilt,” he said.

“Here, that's enough,” protested Dermott. “Why don't you go upstairs and sleep it off.”

“I can hold my drink,” said Bob truculently. “And don't you come the high and mighty with me. I could tell this lot a thing or two about you and—”

“I'm taking the children up to bed and out of this,” shouted June. She gathered up the toddler and left, with the other two children following close behind.

“You are one of the nastiest men I have ever come across,” said Miss Gunnery.

“Well, there can't be many men who've come across you, or got their leg over you, if any,” sneered Bob. “You remind me of an old dried-up stick of a French teacher I used to have. You—”

He let out a yelp of pain. Hamish Macbeth had twisted his arm up his back. “Off to bed,” said Hamish pleasantly. He marched him to the door, released him and shoved him outside and slammed the door in his face.

“That's that,” said Hamish as Dermott, Andrew, and Miss Gunnery, Cheryl and Tracey stared at him in awe. He looked out the window. “The sun's still blazing down. Anyone brave enough for a swim?”

“I think I would like that,” said Miss Gunnery, surprising them all.

“Wait till you see what we've got to wear,” cried Cheryl.

Andrew said quietly, “I wonder if Doris would like to come.”

“I wouldn't bother,” said Hamish quickly.

But when they all had gathered in the hall, that is Miss Gunnery, Hamish, Cheryl and Tracey, and Andrew Biggar, Doris came down the stairs to join them, carrying a large beach towel over one arm.

“Bob's asleep,” she said. “Andrew heard the snores through the door, so he knocked and told me you were going.”

Hamish looked at Andrew and Doris uneasily. They made such a suitable couple. He fought down a nagging feeling of apprehension.

The party walked across the sand dunes in front of the hotel and then over the shingle rise which ran all the way from the harbour along the back of the beach and so down to the blowing sand. The sun was very warm for Scotland.

They were all wearing their bathing-suits under their clothes. Tracey and Cheryl stripped down to string bikinis, exposing skinny acres of shark's-belly-white skin. Miss Gunnery was wearing a mode-

one-piece. She had a surprisingly trim, muscled, if flat-chested body, and long legs. Doris, also in one-piece, ran down to the water with Andrew, plunged in and then let out a scream. "It's freezing," she called back.

Hamish, used to swimming in cold Highland streams and lochs, found the waters of the North Sea quite bearable. But the others gave up quite quickly and huddled in their beach towels, and when Hamish came running up the beach, they turned to him like hopeful children.

"There's still the fair," he said, "unless you're all tired of it."

This was hailed with enthusiasm, so they went back to the boarding-house to change. Doris was carrying a beach bag, and with a little guilty flush, she asked Miss Gunnery if she could use her room to change, "... so as not to disturb Bob."

Hamish again felt that uneasiness as Miss Gunnery agreed. He felt they were all becoming conspirators in encouraging a highly dangerous romance between Doris and Andrew Biggar.

The Bretts were seated in the lounge. They looked wistful when they heard the others were going to the fair, but they had better stay and look after the children.

Hamish found himself cursing Bob Harris again as they all set out. Normally, they would have remained a typical group of British holiday-makers, restrained and separate and wary of each other. But the common resentment against the nag had drawn them all together so quickly, which might have been a good thing had it not been for the shy glow on Doris's face when she looked at Andrew.

He had a sudden sharp longing for Priscilla Halburton-Smythe's cool assessment of the situation. But Priscilla, his ex-fiancée, was down in England. She had seemed very comfortable and at ease in his company before she had left. Whatever she had once felt for him—and he often wondered now what that something had been—had gone. And what am I doing, Hamish Macbeth, he wondered, holidaying with this odd bunch? He automatically stooped to pat Towser for comfort and then remembered he had left the dog behind at the boarding-house.

As they approached Skag, the wind rose, making the sands sing, blowing white sand about them. That they were glad to get in amongst the comparative shelter of the fair booths and roundabouts. Hamish waited until they all had piled onto a roundabout and then slid off quietly to see a bit of Skag and have some time to himself. He wandered away from the fairground, hearing the harsh carousel music fading behind him, reaching him only now and then in snatches borne by the ever-increasing wind. He walked through the narrow streets, noticing, here and there, the larger window in front of a cottage denoting that it was once a shop, before the days of cars and cheap supermarkets at the nearest town. Some of the cottages were thatched, odd in Scotland, when the only cottages that were once thatched had been the black houses covered in heather, the ones without chimneys, now only maintained as museum pieces. And yet the buildings were surely not that old, late Victorian, perhaps. He saw a building with a sign "Museum" outside and went in for a look around.

There had evidently been a village on the point between the river Skag and the North Sea for as long as anyone could remember, but in the 1880s, weeks of torrential rain and high winds and high tides had caused river and sea to meet in one roaring flood which had covered the whole village. The village had remained drowned for weeks before the waters had receded. Ten years later, when the village had been rebuilt and was thriving again, great gales had come tearing over the North Sea from Scandinavia, whipping up the white sand and eventually burying the whole village. After the houses had been excavated, trees and razor-grass had been planted on the other side of the river, where the Scottish Sahara of white sand dunes stretched for miles to stop the sand from shifting.

He bought a small book on the history of the village and went back out without stopping to look at any of the exhibits in glass cases. The narrow, unsurfaced streets were deserted. Ribbons of sand

snaked along them like feelers put out by some alien creature. The trouble with Scottish villages like this, thought Hamish, was that all the community life had been bled out of them. Cars took the villagers out at night to the bright lights of the town. The villagers would often blame the incomers for having destroyed village life, but it was the automobile which had done that, making nomads of even the elderly. There was no putting the clock back now.

And then Hamish thought he was falling into the messy ways of thinking of so many—that the good old days had been better. Not so long ago, Skag would have been a closed-in fishing community, repressed and dark and secretive, everything kept under wraps—incest, drunkenness, violence, child abuse, pregnant girls forced to marry men who did not want them, all the miseries coloured by the overriding horror of living in poverty or the fear of having to.

So now the young people left the quiet Scottish villages and were replaced by incomers from the south, who claimed they had come in search of “the quality of life” which meant they got regular drinks and were drunk with all the other incomers fleeing from reality. But the village did have an odd eerie charm, filled as it was with the sound of rushing water from the river and the susurrations of the gritty white sand blowing in the streets. There was one shop still open, manned by the inevitable Asian. A Scottish shopkeeper closed up at tea-time, no matter how bad trade was. It sold newspapers, sweets, postcards and toys, and an odd assortment of household goods. Next to it was a dress-shop, Paris Fashions, with two dresses drooping in the window and with price-tags marking the gowns down from £120 to £8. Hamish wondered if they would ever sell. But where tea-shops used to be the last refuge of the genteel, now it was dress-shops, which opened their doors for a few months before facing up to the fact that with cheap clothes so near at hand in the local town, it was folly to try to sell Bond Street fashions at Bond Street prices.

There were two churches, one Free Church of Scotland and one Church of Scotland. A poster outside the Church of Scotland was half torn and fluttering in the wind. It said, “Life is Fragile. Handle with Prayer.”

Turning away from it, Hamish saw Bob Harris. He was coming out of a house at the end of the main street, his walk denoting that he was still drunk. His face was flushed and he had a triumphant smile on his face. He’s just made someone’s life a misery, thought Hamish. I wonder who lives there. Then he suddenly did not want to know anything more about Bob Harris and about whom he had been possibly persecuting. He walked instead to the harbour and sat on a bollard and looked down into the water.

The wind suddenly dropped and all was very quiet and still. He reflected that it must be the turn of the tide. It was a phenomenon he had noticed before. Just at the turn of the tide, nature held its breath—no bird sang, everything seemed to be waiting and waiting. And then, sure enough, as if someone had flicked a switch, every-thing started in motion again.

He got up and decided to go straight back to the hotel, collect a couple of paperbacks, and walk Towser along the beach. He occasionally wondered who it was who had searched his case but decided it had probably been Rogers, whose motive had been nothing more sinister than vulgar curiosity.

He felt a pang of guilt at not rejoining the others, but then reminded himself severely that he was not related to them, barely knew them, neither was he on police duty. If Bob Harris murdered his wife then that was his business. And so, comforting himself with these callous thoughts, he loped home, collected Towser and the paperbacks, and set out along the beach in the opposite direction from Skag. He found a comfortable hollow and settled down to read with Towser at his feet. It would not get really dark. A pearly twilight would settle down about one in the morning for about two hours.

He read a tough-cop American detective story. The detective in it seemed to get results but

punching confessions out of people, which gave Hamish a vicarious thrill as he thought of the scandal and miles of red tape that would descend on his head if he tried to do the same thing. The story ended satisfactorily with the detective incinerating the villains in a warehouse and getting a medal for bravery from the mayor in front of a cheering crowd on the steps of City Hall. America must be a marvellous country, thought Hamish wryly, if any of this was real. He imagined what would happen to him if he did the same thing. He would be hauled up before his superiors, who would want to know first of all why he had tackled the villains single-handed and not called for back-up, and why he had wrecked three police cars. Then he would be told that when he had finished writing all that out in triplicate, he would be interviewed by the gentlemen who owned the warehouse and their insurance company to explain why he had torched billions of dollars' worth of stock.

With a sigh of satisfaction, he stood up and stretched and set back along the beach for the boarding-house.

He had been looking forward to reading the other book, but Bob Harris was berating his wife next door and she was crying. Hamish ripped up pieces of tissue paper to form ear-plugs, buried his head under the pillow and fell asleep.

Hamish had fully intended to keep the next day for himself, but when he entered the dining-room for breakfast, all eyes turned to him hopefully. It was the sight of Doris's sad face that made up his mind for him. He suddenly did not care whether Doris fell in love with Andrew or not. She might have a little happiness to remember in her otherwise miserable life.

"What are we daein' the day, Hamish?" Cheryl called over to him.

"I thought you would all have had enough of bloody civil servants," growled Bob Harris. "Pet a little bureaucrats."

Hamish ignored him. "I was down at the harbour yesterday evening," he said, "and I noticed that you can hire a boat and fishing tackle. Anyone for fishing?"

They all agreed, with the exception of Bob, who sneered, "Fishing's for fools."

Dermott Brett said he would take his car into Skag because he didn't want the children too tired with the walk before the day started. "Are you taking Towser?" asked Heather.

"Yes," said Hamish. "He likes boats."

Miss Gunnery said she would take her car as well and offered Hamish a lift. She frowned when Cheryl and Tracey begged a lift as well but said reluctantly that they could come too. Andrew and Doris said nothing. Hamish sensed a *waiting* in Doris. She was hoping she could slip away.

Nonetheless he was surprised when they all gathered on the harbour to find that Andrew had driven Doris in his car.

"Where's Bob?" asked Dermott.

"He doesn't want to come," said Doris curtly.

They went to a hut at the back of the harbour where a surly man said he would supply them with tackle and take them out. They all paid their share of the cost. It was a large open boat with an outboard. The day was grey and still, the water flat and oily.

The boat owner, Jamie MacPherson, issued them with old life-jackets and even found some smaller ones for the children. He tried to object to Towser until he saw the party was going to cancel the trip and the dog wasn't allowed on board.

They all climbed down a seaweed-slippery ladder from the jetty and onto the boat. Hamish had taken a dislike to Jamie, but he had to admit the man was efficient. He had small rods for Heather and

Callum and even a small stick with a thread and a bent pin on it for the toddler, Fiona. They chugged out into the North Sea until the boat stopped and they began to rig up their lines. There were various false alarms. Doris caught a bit of seaweed and June Brett, an old shoe.

The day was hazy and lazy and then Heather said suddenly, "Someone ought to kill Mr. Harris."

"That's enough of that, miss," said her mother sharply and then looked apologetically at Doris.

"A lot of people want to kill Bob," said Doris. "Don't get angry with the child."

"Why did you marry him?" asked Heather in her clear piping voice.

"People change," said Doris on a sigh.

"It's not easy to kill someone," said Hamish, wondering if one of them might betray that he or she had searched his suitcase and knew he was a policeman.

Andrew laughed and then asked the question Hamish had been dreading. "Which branch of the civil service are you in, Hamish?"

"Min of Ag and Fish," said Hamish, meaning the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

"Anyone there you would like to kill?"

"Aye," said Hamish, thinking of the bane of his life, Detective Chief Inspector Blair, "there's that big fat Glaswegian wi' a sewer mouth."

"I always think the best murders are when they are committed by someone who didn't know the victim," said Miss Gunnery.

"There iss no such thing as a good murder," said Hamish repressively. His Highland accent took on that sibilancy it always did when he was upset. "There iss nothing good in the taking of another life."

"Well, I think that awfy Bob Harris waud be better dead," said Tracey.

"Please do not say such things in front of Doris," said Andrew sharply.

"She waud be glad tae see the last o' him," retorted Cheryl.

"In a book I was reading at school, the wicked girl in the remove was killed with a rare South African poison," said Heather.

"You won't get rare South African poisons in Skag," said Hamish. "Murders are usually done in a rage and they're dreary and simple—a blow tae the head, a push down the stairs, an electric heater chucked in the bath, or something that looks like a climbing accident."

"If he had come with us," said Heather eagerly, "we could have pushed him overboard and said it was an accident."

"What about Mr. MacPherson there?" said Hamish, jerking his thumb at the surly man at the tiller.

"We would need to pay him hush money," said Heather.

She was told sharply by her mother to be quiet, but the fish weren't biting and somehow the subject of killing Bob Harris just wouldn't go away. Miss Gunnery raised a laugh by saying the food at the boarding-house was enough to kill anyone, and that started a discussion of the various methods of poisoning, from simple broken glass in the pudding to arsenic in the tea.

Hamish was relieved when they drifted into a shoal of mackerel and shrieks of excitement as the fish were landed drove thoughts of murder out of the heads of the party. Hamish agreed as they made their way back to the harbour that he would phone the hotel and tell the Rogerses that he would cook the mackerel for their tea. They ate sandwiches in the pub and then headed home with their catches. Hamish having found out that there was to be a dance in the Church of Scotland hall that evening and suggesting they all go. Dermott said he would stay behind with the children so that June could have a night out. They seemed to have the ideal marriage.

He did not expect that Doris would be able to go with them, but Bob Harris was absent from the t

table as they laughed and joked and ate grilled mackerel and voted Hamish cook of the year.

~~They gathered in the lounge to sort out who would go in which car. Cheryl and Tracey were both wearing very short black leather skirts with very high heels and skimpy tops with plunging necklines. Their blonded hair had been backcombed and left to stand on end. Miss Gunnery was a surprise. She had left off her glasses and her brown hair was combed down to her shoulders, soft and wavy. She was wearing a plain white blouse and black skirt and modest heels but she looked softer and more vulnerable. June was amazing in a shocking-pink chiffon dress with thin straps and a fake diamond necklace. Doris Brett had brushed down her hair and put on a plain black dress. She had a very good figure and Hamish noticed gloomily that Andrew Biggar was taking in that fact as well.~~

Miss Gunnery asked Hamish to drive her car, saying she couldn't see a thing without her glasses. Cheryl and Tracey went with them.

Hamish had thought it would be a sort of ceilidh with reels and country dances, but it turned out to be a disco full of thin, badly nourished teenagers, brought up on a diet of bread and frozen food. Scotland has one of the worst diets in the world, shunning fresh fruit and green vegetables. Scotland is also famous for bad teeth and Hamish noticed that some of the young teenagers had dentures. The old idea still prevailed. If you have a toothache, get the tooth extracted.

"I can't do that sort of dancing," said Miss Gunnery. "They look like a lot of dervishes."

"Oh, you jist throw yourself around," said Hamish amiably. "Follow me."

His long, gangling figure threw itself this way and that, and since his movements seemed to have absolutely nothing to do with the beat of the music, the others joined him on the floor. If Hamish could make such a fool of himself, then they could, too.

It turned out to be a happy evening, and the teenagers who came up to talk to them turned out to be ordinary pleasant young people. One youth approached Hamish and whispered, "Hey, Mac, we got to drink outside." Glad to see some of the old Highland traditions still existed, Hamish followed him outside, where he joined a group of youths. One passed him a half bottle of Scotch and Hamish took a hearty swig.

"Nice to see young people still around the villages," he said. "I thought you would all be in town for the evening."

"We hiv our ain fun," said one, proving it by lighting up a joint. "Fancy a bit o' skirt, grand-dad?"

Hamish, who was in his thirties, ignored the "grand-dad" and the smell of cannabis. He was on holiday, and unless someone slew someone in front of him, he did not plan to become a policeman again until the holiday was over.

"I'm with my own party," he said amiably.

"Och, them," said the youth derisively. "I mean bint, get a leg ower."

"Oh," said Hamish, the light dawning. "You mean a brothel."

"Aye, Maggie Simpson's, down the end of the main street."

Hamish wondered suddenly if that had been the house he had seen Bob Harris leaving. "Not tonight," he said. He crossed the road to the pub, bought a half bottle of whisky, and returned and passed it around. He found that not one of the youths was employed, that all dreamt of going to London or Glasgow. The boredom of their days was alleviated by a combination of drink, hash, and videos. And yet they seemed a nice enough bunch. A generation or two ago, before the dole was enough to drink on, they would have found work in fishing or farming. But they were as much slaves to pleasure and idleness as any dilettante aristocrat of a century ago.

He went back into the church hall and stared in delight at the spectacle of Miss Gunnery dancing with a slim leather-clad youth. Miss Gunnery appeared to have left her inhibitions behind with her

glasses and hairpins. She was shaking and moving with the best of them. In a dark corner of the hall Doris and Andrew were sitting side by side, talking intensely.

He took June Brett up for a dance, but she said she couldn't abide "this modern stuff" and insisted on shuffling around trying to get him to do a foxtrot to a disco beat.

Hamish could not but help feeling pleased with himself. He knew his efforts were making it a happy holiday, even for such as the dreadful Cheryl and Tracey, who were dancing with stiff stork-like movements in their very high heels, their faces animated under their masks of dead-white make-up and purple eye-shadow.

It certainly never crossed his mind that this would be their last happy evening together, and that he himself would do something before the night was out that would start a chain of events leading to murder.

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