

HIGHLAND RECOLLECTIONS

*ANOTHER TALE FROM INVER  
VILLAGE*©

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*Beneath the rule of men entirely great  
The pen is mightier than the sword*



## MORE HIGHLAND RECOLLECTIONS

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I was born the son of a Highland crofter at a time of the year when any stranger to our district would jealously view my father's few acres of arable land and hill grazing and deceive themselves into thinking that this was indeed a secluded paradise, a solace of peace, a haven of rest.

For here in the month of June not only could one see the meadow and moor, river and loch, mountain and sea, but one could hear the cries of Curlew and Lapwing and the peculiar goat-like drumming of the Snipe as he lowered himself from the blue sky, his Gaelic name being Gabhaur Speur meaning, 'the sky goat'.

The crofter's lot was hard and my father toiled winter and summer from dawn to dusk, just as his forefathers did before him, just to derive a meagre existence from the soil. His only diversion from continuous labour was in the form of a little fishing and shooting, pursued chiefly from a food-procuring point of view.

I was taught to handle a gun from a very early age. It was part of my duty outside school hours, when not otherwise engaged on the croft to try and procure something suitable for the table, a task that was always agreeable to me, whether it was shooting, fishing, trapping, snaring or chasing rabbits with my little dog Freddie.

He was only a little brown mongrel and when he was six weeks old I got him in exchange for three well worn gin traps. I certainly got the best of the bargain and by the time he had lived another six weeks I wouldn't have changed him for all the gin traps in the world.

My father taught me that to become a good wildfowler first of all I must wear clothes of similar colour to the environment where I intended to shoot. But for all the discussions we had on the subject, my real knowledge of wildfowling was to be acquired through practical experience, a hard experience, but to Freddie and me our many hundreds of outings in search of wildfowl were always a source of joy untold. Sometimes the cold would be so intense that I would be forced to tuck my hands inside my deep-sea fisherman's type of jersey, carry my eight and a half pound twelve bore underlever the best way I could and make for home by the shortest possible way, to regain the comfort of a good log fire.

It was on a bleak December evening on my way home from school in company with the ever faithful Freddie that I came across Alli Dhu (Black Alex) knee deep in a trench trying to dig out a laid up ferret. On the bank beside him was his old muzzle loader and also Alli's dog Buller, a cross between a Collie and a Spaniel. Gun, ferret and dog were nigh all Alli's worldly possessions. He lived alone in a two-roomed thatched cottage that was neither wind nor watertight. In this same cottage he was born and it was there that he died. Life and death the only two problems that mattered to him.

Alli was a skilled wildfowler, he had to be, part of his livelihood depended on it. After he had recovered his ferret and the cause for its delay (a dead rabbit). He began to talk half in English and half in Gaelic as he asked me if I cared to accompany him next morning as he intended going Graylag hunting.

'It will be a good morning for them,' he said, 'I can smell a nice south wind getting up by morning and that is just what we want as it will be dead against them on their morning flight from the Saltings.'

Without consulting my parents I said I would go and we arranged to meet at the top of the school road about 5.30 am. On the following morning we duly met at the appointed place, Alli, Buller, Freddie and me, and as Alli had forecast, there was quite a strong south wind blowing.

I didn't feel too optimistic about this outing, I never did when going after wild geese, they had disappointed me on so many previous outings, either being too high or too wide. They seemed to know on approaching the mainland that the enemy would be somewhere in ambush. Often I had watched them come over the water at a height no more than forty yards but immediately they approached the shore up and up they would go well out of shooting range. But this morning it would be different, Alli told me so.

'This is the very morning for them,' he said. Alli did all the talking on the way out chiefly about the past when men were men and a good strong whisky was 2/6 a bottle. 'The good old days,' he said, 'when Tares were measured and sold by the bushel, but now they're weighed on a fancy weighing machine. (Ripening Tares are the Woodpigeon's most desired food).

We eventually reached our shooting ground and we could hear the whee-oos of thousands of Wigeon that had congregated on the mud scaups about two hundred yards in front of us. 'No use trying to get a shot at them,' said Alli, 'their guts are full and off they will be at the first sound, and they won't come our way either.'

Alli was right, for they must have heard his voice as they took to the wing and bid adieu for the day to their much frequented mud scaups.

The first rays of the morning sun could now be seen over the Dornoch Firth far out beyond the Tarbatness Lighthouse, so we decided to take up our positions. Alli directed me to an old muddy ditch, telling me to get as low as possible and that he was going to conceal himself in a similar ditch about two hundred yards away. I watched him disappear in the dawning light and then selected the most suitable place in the ditch where Freddie and I could conveniently sit on my game bag as a protection against the mud, or Loupperich as Alli called it in his native language.

Daylight was fast approaching. I could now plainly see the mud scaups which twenty minutes ago were invisible in the darkness and the tide was almost ebbd. With a pair of thigh waders one could cross to the other side of the small arm of water that is an inlet from the Dornoch Firth.

The strong south wind still continued to blow and I felt somewhat disappointed that on a morning of this kind, up until now not even a stray Curlew or a few Golden Plover came within shooting range, but what did it matter?' I had shot quite a number this season already and would probably shoot a good many yet. It was Gray Lay I was after this morning and the first gaggle of them I could plainly see coming in my direction and very low too.

On and on they came at the same height and straight towards me, about forty of them in their usual 'V' formation. Alli must have been watching them too though they were too wide for him but not for me and as they came closer I made sure that the hammers of my underlever twelve bore was at full cock. I remained for a few more moments stiff as the broken clods around me until the geese came within 30 yards but bearing a little to the left.

Now was my chance, so raising my gun to my shoulder, I took aim at the nearest bird, yet not forgetting to pull on the swing and down the bird came twisting and turning like a broken weighty umbrella until plump it went among the Loupperich. The remainder, taken by surprise began to gaggle hysterically and turned away from me at an increased speed. I quickly took aim for a second time, pulled the left trigger and down came another one in a similar fashion.

Freddie knew well what had occurred during those few moments and didn't require any polite or coaxing language to send him off at high speed in the direction of the fallen birds. This time it wasn't a Mallard or a Wigeon or a Teal he had to contend with, but a winged Gray Lag and it was his first encounter with one.

He got hold of the nearest bird and hopelessly tried to bring it to me, a task which proved too much for him and out of utter disgust he turned his attention to goose number two which proved a similar difficulty. Out of sheer determination he and in a rather angry mood he returned to number one which again was too much for him and realising his inability as a perfect retriever began to bark loudly, then with a final snap at the goose's breast feathers he came running back to me, the feathers still adhering to his nose and mouth and an expression which seemed to say 'what the devil do you expect me to do with this lot?'

He intently watched me carry out my further work of destruction (dispatching the wounded birds) and then we returned to our hide on the Loupperich. Scarcely had we resumed our former position when I saw another five geese coming straight for us and only a few minutes elapsed before another goose was sprawling on the mud.

When we returned to our hide for a second time I could distinctly see lights in the distance coming from a shooting lodge windows and it told me that the gentry had come north for Christmas. I looked in the direction of the lights for a few minutes, then at Freddie and at the dead geese beside me and wondered if it were possible for any human being to be more content or happier than I was at the present moment? I a poor ill-clad crofter's son, splattered with mud, sitting on a windswept shore on a morning in December.

During this time Alli had a few shots but what he had killed I had yet to know. However my curiosity would soon be satisfied as I saw Alli rising from his hide and pick up his spoils before walking towards me. Before he could make his voice heard I could see he had shot four geese and it came as no surprise to him when I proudly displayed my shot three.

'I knew you got them,' he said, 'I saw them falling.' And with the remark, 'I told you it would be a good morning for shooting geese,' we set forth on our homeward journey. ©

Related by the late John Skinner, Inver.

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