

Memories of an Orkney Family

HENRIETTA GROUNDWATER

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This downloaded volume by Henrietta Groundwater is available due to the hard work by two individuals with an interest in Orkney's literary past, namely Meg Greenwood and Mike Clouston. It is also available for download from Meg Greenwood's page on *Extracts from the Records of the Free Churches of Scotland for births in the parishes of Orphir and Stenness*, available at <http://meg-greenwood.110mb.com/>.

Because of the hard work of members of the Orkney Singers project "The Big Orkney Song Project", Henrietta Groundwater once more came into the spotlight. Whilst researching a song called "Hurrah for the Orkneys", it became clear after a visit to the Orkney Library and Archive that the singer who sang so graciously for Ernest Marwick was also most likely the author, Henrietta Groundwater.

And so – just as she had wished – this volume is freely available to anyone who wishes it. Enjoy her memories of a time long past!

<http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/ORKNEYSINGERS/>.

The Big Orkney Song Project

The Big Orkney Song Project is a two year project set up to collect, catalogue and record Orkney songs, so creating the Big Orkney Song Collection, which everyone can have free access to. It will be kept in the Orkney Library and Archive. The hope is to reinvigorate a song tradition in Orkney and preserve our rich and diverse song heritage.

<http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/ORKNEYSINGERS/>

To
A. W. G.
AND
E. W. M

Printed by W. R. Mackintosh,
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FOREWORD

Miss Henrietta Groundwater is a Kirkwall lady who recently celebrated her 87th birthday. She has a remarkable memory. A year or two ago, as I sat listening to her descriptions of life in the nineteenth century, I said to her: "I wish this could be set down on paper," little thinking that, at her time of life, she would summon up the energy to write a long, intimate account of her family's adventures and misadventures in an Orkney which her younger readers will have difficulty in recognising.

Months passed; we continued our conversations; then, one day, Miss Groundwater handed me a thick manuscript-book, whose pages were filled with beautifully even handwriting. My friend placed it in my hands, with instructions to do whatever I liked with it.

It was obvious at once that her memories ought to be shared with her fellow Orcadians. They are quietly written, with no attempt to do anything other than tell the simple truth. Perhaps this is why they are so convincing, so appealing, and often so entertaining. I had better say that Miss Groundwater has written without recourse to reference books, and she is aware that an occasional slip, possibly in regard to dating of events, may be noted. But I think that these must be extremely few.

In preparing her book for publication I have had an easy task. For reasons of space the original text has had to be pruned, but I dare to hope that nothing which really matters has been lost. The observations and the style are still very much their author's, and all the better for that.

This little saga has significance for every Orcadian, for the way of life which Miss Groundwater has described with such clarity is our common background. Many an Orkney family has had similar struggles and has experienced the same compensations, which are the fruit of faith and courage, sweetened by humour and gratitude.

Ernest W. Marwick.

CHAPTER 1

Early Days in Orphir

Alexander Groundwater was born on July 31, 1819, just two months and one week after the birth of the Princess Victoria of Kent, who afterwards became Queen Victoria. Alex's father, William Groundwater, was a farmer in Orphir, and his mother was Catherine Robertson, sister of Andrew Robertson, of the Breck, between Swanbister and Houton, and aunt of William Robertson – who lived in Stromness and was reputed to have built half of Stromness of that day. Alex was the fourth son and sixth child in a family of five sons and seven daughters.

The farm on which they were brought up was reckoned to be a good-sized farm then, at a rental of £20 per annum. The runrig system had given place to numerous small farms and crofts, rented out to tenants at from 10/- to 15/- per acre according to the quality of the soil, some having richer ground and others poorer. Their farm of Piggar was mostly of very good soil. For more than one hundred and twenty years, it has been incorporated into Swanbister, one of the largest and best farms on the mainland of Orkney.

Alex had several uncles who left their home parish of Orphir to live elsewhere. One went to Sanday, one to Flotta and one to Kirkwall, where he carried on a tailor's business, and he had two aunts who lived with his uncle in Kirkwall. There may have been others of whom I know nothing. As a boy of ten years old he used to visit his relatives in Kirkwall along with his father. He always got a supply of buttons from his uncle.

Buttons were greatly prized by young boys, who used them to play a game called "Buttons". Several boys could play together, each one contributing one button for each game played. If a player knocked out a button he claimed the button and the owner of it had to supply another. In the case of "knock-out" the player claimed all the buttons and the other players had to put down one each for the next game. Marbles came into use afterwards and were played in the same way.

When Alex was still under school age he was given his first responsible job of work on the farm. He was entrusted with preventing the flock of geese from raising flight and settling down in a neighbour's field. To do this he had to keep a special watch on the gander, for if he succeeded in getting into the air, the whole flock would follow. One day a neighbour boy came into the field where Alex was keeping watch, and showed him a splendid new pocket knife he had just received as a present. Alex admired it so much that the boy offered to give it to him in return for a pocketful of buttons. With alacrity Alex emptied his pocketful of buttons into the hands of his pal. But when it came to his friend's turn to hand over the pocket knife, he refused to give it up and went off laughing and jingling the buttons.

As Alex looked up after the boy he saw his father hurrying towards him and suddenly remembering the geese, which he had momentarily forgotten, he saw that the field was empty and that the geese were feeding in a neighbouring cornfield. This was the last straw. In spite of all he could do to prevent it, Alex burst into tears of self-pity, for now he could expect to be severely punished. When his father saw he was crying as if his heart would break, he asked what was the matter. When he heard how Alex had been cheated, he wisely concluded that Alex had already been well and truly punished, so together they went and drove the geese back into their own field again without even one word of rebuke. This incident made such an impression on Alex that he vowed if he grew up to have a farm of his own one day he would never keep geese. This vow he always kept.

When Alex could not have been more than twelve years old, his father died. Dr. Duguid came out from Kirkwall to attend him. Although his patient was beyond his power to help, he charged £2 for his ten mile journey.

The boy was now the eldest of the family still at home with his mother. With one brother and five sisters younger than himself to support, Alex helped his mother to carry on the farm for a few years, until it became incorporated in Swanbister home farm.

When he was about thirteen years old he earned what he called his first big money, by taking part in caa'ing whales. For this he received £2 as his share of the day's work. When a school of whales was sighted coming into Scapa Flow through Hoy Sound, the word was sent through the parish for every boat to be manned and come to the chase. Alex being the only "man" in his house, armed himself with his father's whaling lance, and a large tin to beat, so as to make as much noise as possible in the wake of the whales and prevent them from turning around and making good their escape. There was great excitement among the crews of the various boats, each trying to outdo the other in the amount of din they could produce. They succeeded in beaching the whole school, but it was a grisly and disgusting job.

Alex often spoke about the "Holes of Cobstermong" and the "Binks o' Birnorrie" as being places where the boys went to bathe and dive. He said that the other boys closed their eyes before going into the water and then found they could not open them when in the water. But he himself kept his eyes open and sank to the bottom like a stone. Then he would walk about and admire all the wonderful things on the floor of the pools. They had no aqualungs and had to depend on their own lungs for the oxygen they needed, so they could not stay any length of time without having come up again to breathe. Even so, a trip to the bottom of the sea became one of the highlights of their otherwise arduous days.

On one occasion Alex was sitting on one of the high banks at the "Binks o' Birnorrie" looking out over the wonderful expanse of Swanbister Bay, lost in the long, long thoughts of youth. It was a lovely summer's day of sunshine and calm, when suddenly the sea seemed to come to the boil just a yard or two from where he was sitting, and the strangest sea creature he had ever seen raised its head out of the water and regarded him steadily for a few seconds. Then it reared itself up out of the water and tried to get hold of his feet, which were dangling over the edge of the bank. Luckily for Alex he was out of reach, for he was so astonished he could not have moved away. The creature had a broad head and a wide mouth, with large teeth or tusks, and baleful eyes that looked hungrily at him. It also had long hair from the top of the head right along the back of its neck which reminded Alex of a horse's mane. It made several attempts to reach him, bouncing up out of the water. When at last it gave up, it dived down, then rose up and shook its head and mane and sent a shower of raindrops cascading all around. Alex went back many times hoping and fearing, but he never again saw the creature.

When Alex's mother received notice that her farm was to become part of the home farm of Swanbister and that she would have to remove at the November term, it so happened that the farm of Dykend on the Smoogro estate required a tenant. Along with her second eldest son, James, as tenant, she moved to Dykend. In this way James' future was secured and the family still had a home.

Alex was now old enough to leave home and become a "bothy boy". His eldest brother, William, was grieve at Lingro in St. Ola, so Alex went to work with him. He liked working with his brother there, but he was not happy in his off-time. All the bothy boys in the neighbourhood, as soon as they were free in the evening, walked to Kirkwall and spent their time and money drinking in the various "pubs". When they got home they were half drunk.

This did not suit Alex at all so he looked for some place further away from the temptations of the town. This he found with the father of the late James Johnston of Coubister and Gyre in Orphir, then a young newly-married man whose wife was expecting soon to be confined with their first child. One cold dark night Alex was aroused and told he had to ride post haste to Finstown to fetch the “Howdy” (midwife), leading another horse for her use on the return journey. He said it was a “dreich” journey over the hills, with no road, and no guide but the stars, but he finally reached Finstown, located the house, and safely rode back to Gyre in time for the “Howdy” to deliver the child, a daughter.

Many, many years later I had the pleasure of fitting and making a black silk dress for this daughter, then an old lady, whose only demand was that her dress must be buttoned closely from neck to hem. Although this was an unheard-of request at that time, the style being very old-fashioned, I complied with her request and won her gratitude and praise.

From Gyre, Alex went to Yarpa in Smoogro to be grieve there for Dr. Still and Mrs. Still, who owned the Smoogro estate. When he was settled there he married Phoebe Corner, also of the parish of Orphir. I know very little about her, except that she had a beautiful head of golden reddish hair and the clear complexion that accompanies it.

When their first child, Mary, was old enough to be weaned, Alex asked Dr. Still if he could get a little more milk, now that their child was needing it. Dr. Still refused point blank, saying he would not give them one drop more. To this Alex quietly replied: “Well, if you won’t give it, I will go to them that will.” Accordingly, next evening Alex dressed himself in his best, and went to Swanbister to see Colonel Fortescue who, with his grandson Lieutenant Fortescue, was in residence at the time. He was well received, and, when he had told his errand, found that he had chosen an auspicious moment to call, for Colonel Fortescue was needing a grieve to take charge of his farm of Naversdale.

He said that if Alex could accept the conditions the job would be his. The conditions were – in part - £10 cash annually, his cost of meal, the milk of one cow for his own use, and liberty to keep a small flock of hens. These being considered adequate, the bargain was struck and Alex went home to his wife, rejoicing that he could give in his notice to leave. The doctor received this intimation and had to accept it, though grudgingly.

As soon as the time came, Alex and family moved into Naversdale, and began to feel that life was taking on a brighter aspect. The work was congenial. With milk to spare, they could now have a bit of butter and cheese of their own making, and eggs and an occasional chicken made meals more of a luxury. They were very happy, all unaware that it would not last long and that Alex was on the threshold of the first deep sorrow of his life.

When a second child was born to Alex and his wife Phoebe, the mother asked if it was a boy or a girl. When she was told it was a girl, she turned around in bed with her face to the wall and did not make any comment. Thinking she was perhaps grieving over the fact that the child was a girl and not the boy she had been hoping for, the midwife went to talk to her, and found to her utter surprise that she was dead. She had slipped away so quietly that they did not know just when she drew her last breath. According to the custom of that time, a small mirror was held close to her nose and mouth, but there was no sign of breath.

It was not till after the funeral, when Alex returned home to see his two infants sleeping, and no mother, that the full impact of his loss came home to him. He staggered out of the house to a quiet spot at the back where he collapsed on the grass and gave vent to his hitherto pent-up grief. After the first paroxysm had passed he was lying in a sort of be-numbed stupor when his

sister-in-law came looking for him. She told him he must not give way now that he had two children to think about.

In fact, she had come to offer to take them both home with her, to keep and look after them till they were old enough to come back to him. He thanked her from the bottom of his heart for her offer, which he felt he must accept for the infant, but he could not part with them both. He would look after Mary himself and she would be company for him and give him something to do to prevent him from brooding. So it was agreed, and Phoebe, named after her mother, was taken home by her aunt and stayed with her till she was old enough, not to return to her father, but to go to Balfour Hospital to train as a nurse.

After two years as a widower, Alex fell deeply in love with a handsome woman with dark-brown warm eyes and American apple-red cheeks. When he proposed to her, she accepted, but said she must tell her people. Her mother was loud in opposition, saying she could do much better for herself than marry a widower with two children. To this she replied: "I've got the offer of him, and I'm going to take it." And from that decision she could not be moved. Her name was Isabella Halcrow, and she was a daughter of James Halcrow of Highbreck and his wife "Ceesie" Ballantyne. They were married and lived very happily together for some nine years. They had a family of four – one son, William, and three daughters, Maria, Isabella and Alexina.

At one period – just exactly when I don't know – they decided to leave Orkney and emigrate to Australia, as so many families had been doing. They sold off all their possessions, except the personal ones they were taking with them, and set off on their long journey from Kirkwall to Australia.

On the first lap of that journey Bella was so sea-sick that she flatly refused to go any further than Granton. Alex could go on if he liked; she would even let him take the children with him; but she was going back to Orkney to her mother if he would not return. An acquaintance who also happened to be going, tried to persuade Alex to let his wife go back but to come on himself. She said she would look after him and his family. That seems to have helped Alex to make up his mind, much as it was against his will, to return home again from Granton (which was the port for Edinburgh before Leith became the port).

Back to Kirkwall they all came, to find Bella's mother on the pier ready to convey them home. She had brought two carts and horses for themselves and their trunks, as she was so sure they would not go after all. No doubt they were glad to see her and trundle all the way back again to Orphir, after their short voyage.

That must have been a year or two after Alex left Naversdale, where he had lived for ten years. One thing Alex missed at Naversdale was the evenings at sea, fishing for cod or haddocks. He loved those trips. Although he had no boat of his own, he could always get a place as "crew" to help in the work. For this he would get his equal share of the catch along with all the others, including the owner. If the owner could not come at any time, they could still have the boat, on condition that the owner was given his share of the fish, always equally divided among the men.

One evening they were returning from the haddock grounds and were about half way to the shore, when suddenly, without warning, and for no apparent cause, a solid column of water rose out of the sea, only a few yards off. It could not have been a sea creature or whale coming up to blow, for there was no admixture of air in the water, just a solid column that rose up and then gradually subsided, till there was nothing to show where it had been or why it had risen. None of the crew had ever witnessed such a phenomenon before, and only one of the older men in the party had heard of anything similar, which he said had been called a water spout.

Stories were always told on those fishing trips. One story affected Alex very deeply at the time, not knowing it was to be of help to himself many years afterwards.

Several young men had been out on a regular evening fishing trip and were nearly at the landing place when one of the youths became as white as a sheet and collapsed into the bottom of the boat. He seemed to be in a dead faint, but they could not get him to come out of it. They got ashore as quickly as possible, found an old gate to use for a stretcher, and carried him home to his own house, which was not very far from the shore. His people decided that he must be in what at that time was called a 'trance'. He lay as if dead, but they waited hopefully, and after some days he opened his eyes and wanted to know what had happened, and why he was lying there. Slowly he recovered and came back to normal, married a wife, had two of a family, and lived to a good old age, apparently none the worse of the incident.

During the ten years of Alex's grievousness of Naversdale his cash wages of £10 a year had been put into the bank. In ten years he had £100 to his credit. With this amount, he thought it was time he began to farm as a tenant on his own.

The farm of Oback was to let, so Alex applied for the tenancy and got it, then went to Colonel Fortescue to give notice that he was leaving at the next term. When asked why he wanted to leave, Alex did not beat about the bush, but stated plainly that with an increasing family he needed more money. To this Fortescue said he would have given him more money if he had asked for it. Alex replied that if he was worth more money he should have been given it without having to ask for it. Fortescue said if he would change his mind and stay on he would give him more money but Alex answered that the offer had come too late, for he has accepted the tenancy of a small farm and was thinking to give it a trial. Fortescue asked Alex if he had considered the risks he ran, of losing animals, bad crops, and so on. Did he think he could expect to make a success of it? To all of which Alex retorted: "If I work as well for myself as I have done for you for the past ten years, I have every reason to believe that I shall be successful."

Thus, the Colonel had to look for another grievous, and Alex launched out on his own as a tenant farmer at Oback. It was after he had been there for a couple of years, and had made good, that Alex got the urge to emigrate to Australia and sold off everything, as related previously. Actually they returned to Oback, which had not still got another tenant.

The family were getting along very well until the youngest child, born shortly after their return, was one year old. Then sorrow again interrupted their happy home life. Alex's wife, Bella, was a buxom well set up woman and looked the very picture of health. But she now became very ill with what was at this time called a "galloping consumption of the bowels." She was reduced to practically a skeleton in one week. Nothing could be done for her and she became very weak.

Finally, she lay so still that Alex's mother, who had come to their help, thought she was dead. She did not appear to be breathing, but Alex remembering the story of the youth who had lain like this for days and then recovered, would not give up hope, especially as a spot just over her heart remained warm, although the rest of her body was as cold as a corpse. Feeling sure she was dead, and that her loss had affected Alex so deeply that he could not realise his loss, his mother implored him to let her "tak' aboot her" and ride away himself for the "straikin' board." This Alex firmly refused to let her do, saying he was sure Bella would not leave him without giving him a farewell message.

So they both sat beside her, Alex at the side of the bed and Granny at the foot. For three days and three nights they kept constant watch so that one would be there when she woke up. From Thursday morning to Sunday morning they continued their vigil, day and night, Alex still

refusing to listen to his mother's pleadings. Sunday morning was a beautiful one, with the sun streaming in through the window right across the room to the bed where Bella lay, with Alex sitting at the side and Granny at the foot. Then a strange thing happened – a light brighter than the sunshine came in through the window and glided along the sunbeam until it reached Bella.

As soon as it reached her, she sat up as if she were strong and well, and said to them in her usual voice: "This is the beautiful Sabbath morning on which our Lord arose from the dead. I have been having a sweet conversation with Jesus, and have seen and heard many things that are not to be revealed to this world, and now I am going to be with him for ever," saying which she lay down again and the bright light passed out on the sunbeam.

When they went to her she was gone. Alex turned to his mother and said: "Thoo can tak' aboot her noo and I will ride away for the straikin' board and the undertaker." Granny was too shocked to rally at once, for when she saw what she believed to be a dead body come back to life she thought she was seeing a ghost (spirit) and she had thrown both her hands above her head and screamed, but the calm words spoken at last convinced her that Alex had been right and that Bella had not been dead then. Now she knew that she was, and she herself had work to do to prepare the body for its burial.

I have heard my father, Alex Groundwater, tell about this many times, and he always finished after a short silence by saying: "Before that I never thought much about God, but I have been a great lover of Jesus ever since." It had made a new man of him.

CHAPTER TWO

A Dream that Came True

After Bella's death, with one son and four daughters growing up to look after things and help him on the farm, Alex thought he did not need to look for another wife, so he remained a widower for eleven years, ten at Oback and one as a tenant of Yarpa in Smoogro.

All this time, his second eldest daughter Phoebe had lived with her aunt, her mother's sister; but when she was old enough to earn her own living she became a trainee nurse at the Balfour Hospital in Main Street, Kirkwall. She had every alternate week-end free and on those occasions Alex loved to meet her and accompany her on the latter part of her journey home, across the hills on foot, thus cutting off two miles by road. One Saturday afternoon he set out as usual to meet Phoebe. As he was going up one hill he saw Phoebe on the top of the next, and watched until she disappeared down the side into the valley where they usually met. By the time he got to the brow of the hill she was not anywhere in sight. Puzzled, Alex looked all around, wondering if she could be playing a trick on him by hiding somewhere. After assuring himself that she could not be hidden, he went on towards Kirkwall and arrived at the Hospital, where he was told that she had been very ill for a day or two previously and had died a short time before his arrival. It became clear that she had died about the very time that he had seen her. So he always believed that though her body could not come, her spirit had come to say goodbye.

Some time after this break in the family, Alex's eldest daughter, Mary (Phoebe's sister) informed her father that she was engaged to marry John Omand Brough of Netherhouse, and as he was the only son they would be making their future home at Netherhouse. With both daughters by his first marriage gone, and the four children by his second marriage fast growing up, Alex began to think that in a few more years they would all be married and away, so perhaps he had better be looking out for another wife. He had been thirty-seven years of age when he became a widower for the second time, and now he was forty-eight, so he was not too old yet to take another wife. He had now been one year at Yarpa.

With this thought he set out one evening, dressed for a call, intending to make the purchase of a cow, which he knew the prospective bride wanted to sell, an excuse for his visit. During the bargaining he would have a good chance to see whether the woman pleased him or not. On the way he met an acquaintance, who hailed him and kept him talking. He still had plenty of time, but he had not gone very far when another acquaintance turned up and delayed him so long that Alex decided it was now too late to call on a widow woman living alone. On the way home Alex began to think that perhaps Providence was indicating that she was not the woman for him, seeing he had been so definitely prevented twice from going to see her.

That night Alex had a very realistic dream. He dreamt that Dr. and Mrs. Still were coming back soon to the "Big House" – Smoogro House – and that they had engaged two servants, one of whom was to be his wife.

The very next morning he received a letter from the Stills, telling him that they were coming home in about a week. They were sending two servants in advance to prepare the house for their return, and they wanted Alex to supervise and assist them. They mentioned the names of the girls who were coming, one of whom was an Orphir girl and known to Alex by hearsay. Of her he thought enough to say to himself: "It won't be her anyway. I wonder what the other one will be like?"

She was a Kirkwall girl, travelling out next day by horse-drawn coach, and he was to meet her and take her into the house. On the way out in the coach this girl, Jessie, was recognised at once as a stranger and was asked where she was going. On saying that she was engaged by Mrs. Still at Smoogro and was on her way there, she was told there were two eligible men at the farm house, a young man and a widower, and they thought she would marry the widower. To this she indignantly replied: "You can keep your widowers to yourselves, for I want none of them." Now when Alex met her at the coach, and as soon as he saw her, he said to himself with conviction: "She's going to be my wife."

Jessie had often to go to the farm house for eggs, milk and butter, so she was constantly meeting Alex and his family. Having no thought about marriage, she wondered why Alex was constantly wanting her to come in and talk with him when she came on her errands, She would always say, with a laugh, that she had no time.

One evening there was a party, perhaps a muckle supper, and Alex was sitting with others at the upper end of the room. Jessie was dancing and having a fine hilarious time among the young people, but just as she and her partner were passing Alex, Jessie tripped over something and would have fallen if Alex had not put out his arm and caught her just in time for her to sit down on his knee, where he kept her a prisoner for a minute or two before letting her go.

One day Jessie's mother came out for the day from Kirkwall to see how she was liking the place. As it happened, Alex had been called to speak to Mrs. Still and had to pass through the kitchen, where he left his hat, a quilted tweed soft pull-on fashionable at that time. When Alex had gone in, for sheer mischief, Jessie threw his hat on the floor and danced on it, saying to her mother: "This is my man's hat," for which her mother rebuked her severely. Jessie little thought that day that Alex would become her "man," but Alex had plenty of experience to help him, so he wooed her until he won her.

They were married at Quoys in Evie, where her mother and father were living at the time. Being a builder, her father went to live wherever he had a lot of building in prospect. It was not simply a matter of going to church for the ceremony and hiring a hall for the reception afterwards. A wedding meant a lot of work for the bride's mother, for, besides the baking, the but and ben had to be dismantled; even the beds had to be taken down and piled with the furniture along a wall to leave room for eating and drinking in one room, and dancing and singing in the other room.

The guests carried gifts with them in those days. The women usually brought something to eat and the men brought something to drink. The Bride's Cog was much in evidence, and before the evening was half through the men were beginning to be "fou" and the girls were seeing the walls of the room run round. Jessie's parents, temperate people themselves, could do nothing to prevent this happening, because their guests had brought whisky, rum or brandy and insisted on everyone sampling their special treat. When Jessie was offered spirits she always refused; for she could be the jolliest one there without tasting a drop.

When the time came to start out for her new home, there arose a terrific storm of wind. So bad was it that Jessie was afraid the cart they were driving in would be blown completely off the road. To reassure her, Alex told her not to be afraid of the wind, for the wind was one of the Almighty's treasures. But she was glad when their long dark journey from Quoys in Evie to Yarpa in Smoogro was over and they could get to a fire, after being nearly stiff with cold.

When Alex had been back for some years at Oback he had increased his stock to the point where he had either to sell some, or look for a larger farm. At this time Dr. Still asked Alex if he would come back to Yarpa as tenant. Alex reminded the doctor of the reason why he had

left, to which the doctor replied that what a man would not give at one time, he might be prepared to give at another.

So Dr. Still gave Alex a nineteen years' lease of Yarpa at an annual rent of seventy pounds. But after six years Alex had improved the place so much, and had got on so well, that the doctor became obsessed with the idea that he could run the place now himself. Alex, when approached by the doctor, reminded him of his nineteen years' lease, which had been promised. Yes, but it had only been by word of mouth, and Alex had no writing to prove it, so the doctor went back on his word and took over the farm for himself. He offered to give Alex any other farm on his two estates of Smoogro in Orphir and Burgar in Evie, to make up to him for putting him out. There were only two farms that Alex thought it worth to consider – Dykend in Smoogro, where his brother James was the tenant (and he would not think of putting his brother out) and a farm in Burgar, where the tenant was a widow woman with six of a family. He could not consent to put her out either, so he had to look elsewhere.

Several years previous to this, there had been quite an immigration to Orkney of farmers from Aberdeenshire. These were able to offer higher rents for the farms than the Orkney farmers could, owing to their better methods of farming, so they snapped up every good farm as soon as a chance occurred. This influx was the cause of the rise in population at that time, and it was followed shortly afterwards by the emigration of numbers of farm-less Orcadians, which brought the population back to normal again. This occurred at two well-defined periods in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But now in the twentieth century the tide has turned, for many of these incomers are finding their way back again to Aberdeenshire. Alex used often to say that the influx of Aberdonians was the first thing that put Orkney farming on its feet, and able to compete with any other county in Scotland.

While Alex was tenant of Yarpa he did much to improve the soil by draining and ditching fields that were too wet. He also built drystone dykes around the fields, so that there would be no need for cattle herds to keep the cattle from straying on to the growing crops. There was a place in the meadow between the house and the bay that was called the ever-lasting midden.

Whenever there was a spare day he had the men cart from this midden and spread it out on land to be ploughed. They also went to sea of an evening to catch dog-fish, a kind of small shark that was too numerous and did much damage to the herring nets, getting into a drift after the herring and tearing the nets and the fish so badly that much of the catch had to be classed as “torn-bellies” and sold as manure. They dried some of the “dogs” for winter food and made up the midden with the rest of them and the torn herring. The fish, mixed with manure from stable and byre and ware from the seashore, provided enough manure for most purposes, so that artificial fertiliser was confined to guano. Lime could be had in sufficient quantity from the shell sand on some beaches.

Alex claimed to be the first farmer on the Mainland to introduce a reaping machine, and he used to tell how people came from all parts of the Mainland to see it in action.

They killed their own meat: a young bullock, for winter use, salted down and called “The Mert”. A pig was also slaughtered and salted for use. Mutton was added to the winter stock of meat. So, with poultry, ducks, and pigeons, they were well provided for the proverbial rainy day. And, of course, there was always plenty of fresh fish for the taking. Scapa flow having strong tides from the Atlantic Ocean in two directions.

Alex's wife Jessie was often heard to say: “I was never lonesome at Yarpa.” It was the most lightsome farm to be on, with plenty of people to do the work, and plenty of work for all

the people to do. When she first came to live there after her marriage to Alex, she was very surprised to find there were no sheets or pillow-cases on any of the beds. When she asked her three stepdaughters the reason for this, they told her that their stepsister, Mary, the eldest child of Alex's first marriage, had got all that kind of thing as her dowry, because she had never been paid any wages for all the years she had spent looking after the house and bringing up the family of her stepmother.

To make temporary bedclothes, Jessie found a pile of flour bags, which she unpicked, washed, bleached, and made up. It took four sacks joined together to make one sizeable sheet, and each bag made a single pillow-slip. So, all working together, they soon had enough rough and ready bed linen to tide them over till they could get better.

There was a like dearth of quilts, and Jessie found a temporary solution by washing guano sacks, of which there was a plentiful supply, lining them with flour bags and covering the outside with print, the only material that had to be bought.

The women washed the household clothing for a whole day once a month, all four of them working together. The girls were old enough now to take their share in all that had to be done, the eldest being sixteen, the youngest twelve, and the middlemost one fourteen. After the main washing was done, they used to cast lots to determine which one would have to do which of four chores, namely, wash the moleskins worn by the men, feed the swine, take in the kye from the field to the byre and give them their neeps, or prepare the evening meal. Jessie always hoped she would have the moleskins to do, as she loved to wash.

Jessie's first child was a boy, Thomas, her second a daughter, Jessie Ann, and her third was another son, named Alexander. When they left Yarpa this Alex, born in February, was nine months old. They left in November 1871.

One year at muckle-supper time Jessie said to Alex, her husband: "I wish you would bring me twa-three doos to make pigeon pie." Alex went out and shortly returned with twenty-one pigeons and handed them over, saying: "There's twa-three doos tae thee." They had a large doo-cot, and when Jessie Ann was a toddler she loved to be taken for a walk with her father, who would tell her the story of "The bonnie shining doo wi' the bonnie shining wing." She would listen enchanted.

It was about this time that Alex brought home the reaping machine, and wee Tom soon knew where all the screws were, better than his elders.

They kept a sow, and when the piglets were too young to take care of themselves, Jessie would tell Tom to listen, and when he heard the sow getting up, to run and tell her to come. This he learned faithfully to do, and would run and call to her, saying: "Moddie, come noo, for all the peedie piggies is eeskin."

One by one Jessie's step-children married and left the old home. After William married, he and his wife emigrated to Canada. She died shortly after their first child, a son, was born. William wrote to his sister Maria, asking her to come out to him to look after his son, which she did. Later on, William set out for one of the areas where gold had been discovered. On the way, the little party to which he belonged were attacked by Indians under cover of night and there were no survivors.

Alexina, the youngest daughter, married James Stewart from Shetland and lived there her whole married life.

When Alex had to leave Yarpa he tried to get another farm, but, as previously stated, all the best farms had been taken over by farmers from Aberdeen, who outbade the Orkney farmers in the amount of rent they agreed to pay. For example, Alex had the offer of the farm of

Warrenfield near Kirkwall, between the Holm and new Deerness Roads, at the rent of £70, which Alex was prepared to pay, but Frank Douglas offered to pay £100 rent in competition, so Alex did not bid against him, because he thought the farm was not worth that much. Many years later, Frank Douglas owned that Alex had been the wiser man, as he, Frank Douglas, had never been able to get his own back out of the place.

Eventually Alex decided to retire from farming altogether, and make his home in Kirkwall. To this end he bought an old house, the property of one John Milne. The price, including the transfer and title deeds, was the modest sum of £103. Jessie was a native of Kirkwall and her father and mother were still living in Kirkwall, and with them the youngest of their thirteen daughters. Each of the nine who survived the perils of youth grew up and was married in the order of her birth, between the ages of twenty and twenty-two. Not one made a “brig” of her older sister.

Jessie’s father was a builder and slater so he was given the contract of building the block of buildings known for many years as Groundwater’s Buildings until the Junction Road houses were given numbers, when the block went under the address of 55 Junction Road.

When Alex left Yarpha and went to live in Kirkwall, Dr. Still took over the farm himself, but he soon found there was more to farm management than he had supposed. He was a retired Army surgeon, so when one of his cows had eaten too much clover her first day on it and was showing signs of great distress owing to indigestion, the doctor operated on her, opened the “muckle-bag,” took about a barrowful of clover out of her stomach and sewed her up again. The next morning she was found lying dead in her stall. Alex had often used a primitive cure for this condition which always effected a cure without undue suffering to the beast. He pierced a hole with an auger through a certain spot on the side of the cow where the muckle-bag could be reached and pierced. He then inserted the long hollow part of a goose’s quill and the wind passed out through the quill. As soon as the wind and gas from the new clover had passed off, digestion became normal and the quill was left in until the hole healed up and then the quill dropped off.

Worse was to follow, for disease struck all the stock – horses, cattle, sheep, pigs and even poultry became ill with some strange disease and very many of them died. After this happened Dr. and Mrs. Still paid a visit to Alex’s new home in Kirkwall to see how he was liking town life. Alex had a suspicion that they had come to see if he would come back again, but when they saw him so comfortably settled, they went away without saying anything. Shortly after their visit John Brough, the husband of Alex’s eldest daughter, Mary, came in and told them Dr. Still had offered him a lease of Yarpha, but he wanted Alex’s advice before he would decide. Netherhouse, where he was living with his parents, was a much smaller farm and did not have enough stock for a farm like Yarpha. What would Alex advise him to do? Alex advised him to take the offer by all means, as he could soon increase his stock and it was a good chance not to be missed. But he advised him to have his agreement put on paper and signed before he took over the farm. This he did, and spent all his farming life there.

But living in town was no easy matter for Alex. Having no trade, he tried to work as a drover, buying and selling cattle. He had good skill, and could tell a good beast that would be worth to buy, but most of the farmers who had beasts to sell were the Aberdeen men, and Alex soon found he was no match for them. They had ways of conducting business that were new to Alex, and he found that they used words and expressions which he had never heard before and did not even know the meaning of. So after a short time he gave it up and set up in business as a grocer.

Here again he had no success, for he gave goods “on tick” to anyone who came with a hard-up story and a promise to pay later. He found that when they did have money, they went elsewhere with it and would pop into a shop or down a lane rather than meet him. After about two years Alex had lost £200 through bad debts, so he decided it was time to put up his shutters. He had thought people in the town would be like people in the country who could get their seed on credit, if necessary, and pay after the harvest returns were in. He was very disappointed when he found how wrong he had been.

Now he did not know what to turn to, and by this time his third family had increased to three sons and two daughters. His eldest daughter, Jessie Ann and his second son, Alex, both developed diphtheria, from which the daughter recovered, but the son died at the age of six years.

CHAPTER THREE

A Harray Laird

Alex suddenly decided he had had enough of town life, and began looking for a small farm where he would not need much capital to make a start. He heard of such a farm in Harray, which he purchased for the cash price of £100. This place, which they called “Comely Bank”, was three miles from shop and church, across a peat moor, and the furthest and last house in the valley of Chinnaden.

Alex was now a “Harray Laird”, on his own farm, and he was duly happy because once more he knew his job, and could do it; but Jessie, his wife, was not so content. She felt so isolated that she thought she would die of loneliness. The day they moved to Harray their bedding and clothes were soaked in a downpour before they reached Finstown, so by the time they got home they were cold and wet and miserable.

Jessie’s sister, Ann, went with them to help get them settled down. When they came to the house they met the wife of the previous owner sweeping out the place after the upheaval of flitting. She was taken aback at being caught, but Ann laughed off her apologies, saying: “Where there’s suck, there’s luck.” The idea was to take all the luck away by leaving the place clean swept, but she had not been able to manage it, hence Ann’s reference to luck.

After a few days Alex had to go in to Kirkwall, twelve miles away by road, to bring out the rest of their belongings. While he was in the town there came the worst snowstorm that had then been known. The roads were all blocked with drifted snow. Some drifts were ten or more feet deep. Alex was forced to stay in Kirkwall to look after the horses he had taken with him to bring back the loads of furniture and other belongings. Ann had returned with him, and that left Jessie with the youngest child, fourteen months old, the next one four-and-a-half, and the two older ones, Jessie Ann, nine, and Tom, eleven.

There was no peat stack at the house, the peats being still up on the peat banks in the hill. Tom made a rough sledge from pieces of wood in the barn, and together Tom and his sister Jessie Ann fought their way up the hill through the deep snow and the long heather. They dug the snow off the peats and sledged them home.

They had literally to dig up turnips for the cows from the drills covered with snow. It was a cheerless beginning.

Jessie was worried sick with the thought that Alex might have seen the snow coming and started out expecting to get home before the roads got so blocked. The people at the next farm were most kind and did all they could to cheer her up, but as day after day passed and Alex did not come back, the elder son, Willie Clouston, undertook to walk to Kirkwall to find out if Alex was all right. When he arrived and found what had happened he walked all the way back again the same day to let Jessie know that Alex was waiting for the thaw so that he could get through with his two carts. By the time Willie got home he was utterly exhausted, but he was so glad to be bringing good news that he made light of his twenty-four mile trudge. Jessie could never get over this great kindness to an utter stranger.

When digging the potato patch later Alex was surprised and delighted to find some potatoes in the ground, which had been missed when the crop had been lifted. They were the largest and most delicious tasting potatoes Alex had ever seen. Instead of eating them he kept them for planting, and had a bumper crop the next year, enough to eat and for seed. The present day potato nearest to the appearance of this potato (which Alex called “Ham Reids”) is “Kerr’s

Pink,” but it is darker pink. The Ham Reids were a glowing red in appearance when being lifted out of the black soil. They were much larger, being long and broad and rather flat than round, a truly handsome find.

Alex gave seed to his son-in-law, James Stewart, to take back with him to Mid Yell. They did well in the Shetland soil, and James gave seed to so many people that hardly any other kind was grown. Even after Alex had left Harray and returned to Kirkwall, James repaid Alex in kind by sending him a bag of potatoes, freight pre-paid, for several years, until finally disease attacked them after being grown in the same soil for such a long time. They were then no longer worth paying the freight on, and James sent Alex the freight charge in cash instead, as well as the price of a bag of potatoes.

There was not enough work on such a small place for Tom and Jessie Ann to stay home when they were old enough to earn their own living. Tom went to work at the farm of Wasdale near Seatter in Firth, just over the hill from Comely Bank, and came home on alternate weekends for his clean clothes. Jessie Ann went to the manse to work for Mrs. Anderson, the minister’s mother.

Tom made a little box on runners and used to take me all over the place when I was hardly able to walk. I used to watch for him coming over the hill on his week-end off, then run to meet him: he would lift me up and carry me home shoulder-high. Whenever I think of those days, among the happiest of my life, I am glad I spent my earliest years in the country, so close to nature, because I think it has enriched my whole after-life to have the quiet beauty of the changing seasons stamped upon my spirit.

The family had been at Comely Bank for about a year and a half before I came upon the scene, and in rather an unusual way. My mother had arranged for my grandmother to come out to look after things while she was having her baby, and for her sister Ann, who was a certificated midwife, to be with her to deliver the child. Grandmother was there when labour began, and the word was sent post haste for Ann to come, but when she arrived mother got better. Ann could not stay with her, as she had two other expectant mothers to attend at any moment when called, so here was a fine to-do. It was decided that the best thing to do was for Ann to take Jessie back to Kirkwall with her, so Alex yoked his work-ox into a cart and took them both and their “bundles” of necessaries by bullock cart as far as Quanterness, on the new Stromness road. He set them down there with four miles to walk and carry their packs, for he was afraid to take the ox nearer the town in case he might become unmanageable, not being used to passing traffic.

Alex had found that he could not afford to keep work horses because they needed more feed than the farm could afford, so he bought an ox to do the work, with the help of a cow, and sold him as soon as he did not need him for work: so he had a new ox every year, and that made it necessary to take the precaution of not bringing him too near the town.

My mother said afterwards that she thought several times on the way in to Kirkwall that I was going to be born in the ditch at the side of the road. However, they did arrive with time to spare, as I believe I was born at half past eleven o’clock on a Saturday night, 17th April, 1880.

My brother used to chaff me that I was born late, and had been late ever since. That will perhaps explain why I have waited until my eighty-fifth year before putting pen to paper. But the truth is I have never had the leisure to do it until now. I hope I may be able to complete what I have often thought I would like to do – give a true account of life in Orkney during the nineteenth century, using my father’s life to illustrate it, both in town and country.

The next story may seem impossible, but I have a vivid picture of it whenever I think about it. I have read arguments about how young a child can be and yet remember events which

it can actually claim to have seen. Well, the night I was born, my Aunt Ann, the midwife, said of me that of all the babies she had brought into the world she had never known one who looked all around the room as I did, as if wondering where I had got to. My mother and I were sleeping in my grandmother's bed. My aunt's two children, a boy and a girl, were sleeping in the same room in a folding-down bed in a corner of the room next to the back window. In the middle of the night, the boy, who sometimes had been known to walk in his sleep, got up out of bed and stumbled over something. Putting out his hand to save himself, he thrust his hand through the window and cut his arm. Brought wide awake by the pain, he cried out. This awakened his sister and she began to scream with fright. The noise brought their mother with a lighted lamp to see what was going on, and she joined in the hullabaloo. She was always a loud speaker, and the din was something to remember. I always say I can see my Aunt Ann holding the lamp and hear her shouting and see my cousin with the blood streaming from the cut in his arm, and hear my two cousins screaming and crying. I am told I only think I see and remember it because I have heard about it so often, yet I cannot think it is possible to picture so vividly a scene I have not actually seen.

When I was ten days old, my sister Jessie Ann, ten years old, walked all the way from Harray by herself, for she was so eager to know how her mother was and to see here new baby sister. I had blue eyes when I was born, but my Aunt Ann said I would have brown eyes after about three weeks, and so I did, with a head of very black shining hair. From now on I shall refer to my mother when ever necessary as Janet, that being her baptismal name, to prevent confusing her with my sister Jessie Ann, which was her real name.

My next memory of childhood days has to do with a thunder and lightning storm. My Aunt Henna (short for Henrietta) had taken me for a walk and it was getting dark. There had been thunder; I can remember all the sky red with sheet lightning and an occasional dart of forked lightning. Naturally, being only about three years old, I was rather awed and walked close to my aunt, my hand held firmly in hers. She talked to me about how the thunder was caused by the hot and cold air meeting, and said there was nothing to be afraid of in the noise made by the explosion. She talked so naturally and reassuringly that she succeeded in calming my fears, and I have never felt panicky during the worst thunderstorms ever since that time.

I remember another storm, this time of wind. In case the wind should blow the thatched roof off the house, our mother put all of us children to bed in the barn. I can remember that when the others were sound asleep I lay wide awake listening to the wind howling and shrieking around the barn. Through a hole in the roof I could see one star shining very far away. My mother and father spent the night arm-in-arm dragging all the heavy machinery and carts and barrows to the corn-screws and leaning them up against the stacks to prevent them from getting blown down. When morning came, they saw that their efforts had saved their entire crop from disaster. Many of the farms lost practically all their crops.

Never have I felt lonesome in the country, as there always seemed to be something interesting to see. There was, for example, the day my Aunt Jane clipped the "gunners" in the mouth of a cow, who always stole the washing and ate it, if she could get hold of it. My father tied the cow to a staple in the wall of the house and held her mouth open while my aunt applied the scissors to the gunners; that cured her of clothes stealing.

My father liked to take me with him around the farm whenever he could. I had a brown sealskin coat (he called me his peedie broon otter) and a black velvet hood, so I was able to go out in most weathers. One day he was carting home loads of peats, and when the load was emptied he took me part of the way back to the hill. I discovered a little hole in the floor of the

cart and lay down watching the ground running past underneath. When my father thought he had taken me far enough, he lifted me down. I was so dizzy that I could not stand, and I also felt sick. This gave him quite a scare until I told him what I had been doing.

One day when they were threshing, I had been safely tucked up on the winlins of straw at the far end of the barn, where I was supposed to be safely out of the way. But an oat “mettin” flew out of the mill and struck the eyeball of my right eye. It was very painful and I expect I cried, for mother came and carried me into the house and bathed my eye and put on a bandage to protect it from the light. She made me lie down in the ben bed and drew the curtains in the hope that I would be able to sleep. But when she went out to return to the barn, what with the pain, and the feeling of loneliness caused by the quietness of the house, I could not sleep, and never felt so forsaken.

How glad I was when dinner time arrived, and they all came trooping in, talking and laughing, and making the house come to life again. My joy was dashed a bit when I found that all we had for dinner that day was mashed potato, supped with cold sweet milk in the same way as porridge, something I never could like. Many a time a visitor would say, because of my sturdy growth and good colouring, that I was the one who looked like my porridge, yet I was actually the only one of the family who did not like it and was allowed to have tea instead.

We had several ways of entertaining ourselves. My elder sister, Bina, six years my senior, was always on the go, thinking of something we could do. She had the bottom part of an old iron three-toed pot that she kept in a secret hidie-hole. When we had the chance, we would each take some sugar, and a small piece of butter, and a few peats, and set out for the hill on a fine Saturday afternoon. There Bina would build up a peat fire, and when it glowed red hot she would set the pot on it with the sugar and butter, and make toffee, of which we all had a share. It was a delectable morsel, even if we got our fingers and tongues burnt by trying to eat it while it was too hot.

At a certain time of the early spring Bina would organise a heath-burning expedition, taking mother’s bellows to help start the fire blazing. On one such occasion she had left the bellows lying and I went to get them. But the leathers were burnt and the two wooden parts were just held together by the “stroup”. I could not lift them as they were still hot, so I called to her to come. In the meantime the fire had almost surrounded me, so she had some trouble in trying to rescue both me and the bellows, beating out the fire to get to us. I was not only afraid of the fire, but of what mother would say when she saw the remains of her good bellows. However, when she heard the story she was so glad no one was hurt that she only said, “The bellows will be all right with new leathers!”

Another outdoor treat was robbing bees’ nests to get the honey. There was a dyke built of slabs of grassy soil, called in Harray a “feelie dyke” – made of feels or divots, and the bees liked to make their nests there. The whole area was rich with the smell of honey, enough to make little mouths water. Each of us had to get a bunch of tall-growing heather to hold up above our heads for the bees to alight on to prevent them settling and stinging us. The dry grass round the hive was set on fire to smoke the bees out of the hive, and the honey was there for the taking, before the smoke cleared and the bees came back.

I had not managed to hold my bunch of heather properly, so I got stung on my lip. Two bees attacked my brother, three years older. He had taken off his cap to thrash them away – a great mistake – so they swarmed around him and two settled on his face. He had dropped his cap when he was attacked. I picked it up and got hold of one of the bees, and it stung my thumb right through the cap. By this time our elder sister, who was doing the robbing, had got enough honey

to share with us, and said it was time now to make our get-away before all the bees became angry and chased us. They did buzz around for a while, but finally decided to return to the hive.

The burn that ran from a small loch on the top of the hill, where the three parishes of Firth, Harray and Rendall meet, was a continual source of pleasure. Just alongside our house was a waterfall with about a five feet drop. One day mother told me to fetch some water to put into the kettle. I took a two-pint pail kept for this purpose and went across the burn to get the water, as there was a gentle slope with steps cut out in the bank to get to a part of the fall where the water ran as if from a tap. As mother had told me to hurry, I thought it would take too long to hold the pail under this part, so held the pail under the main fall. It was filled so quickly, and was so heavy, it would have pulled me over into the pool where I could easily have been drowned if my mother had not sent my sister to see what was keeping me as I was being dragged over by the weight of the pail.

Up the far side of the burn from the house there was a round mound that went by the name of the Broon Brae. Father had his planticreu on top of it, and I often went with him when he went to do weeding. Here one day I met, what were to me, two fearsome looking animals, and called out to father to come and see them. He told me I need not be afraid of them, for neither would harm me if I let them alone. One was the common big shiny black beetle often seen among the peat and sometimes among coal. The other was the dull black burying beetle commonly known as The Devil's Coach-horse, because of the aggressive way it had of turning up its tail and making it look menacing. In this planticreu father grew his own vegetable seeds and plants and even had some for sale.

A little way further up the burn there was a large oblong block of stone half in and half out of the water, which we children called "The Summer Seat", and on fine sunny days we played houses, the stone making a fine dining-room table, or we took off our boots and stockings and sat with our feet in the water. I never knew the burn to dry up, yet the loch at its source was very small. The older children loved to wade and even bathe in it, the water being nice and warm with the sun shining on it all day.

One day a short distance down from this loch, I was having a walk along the burn with father and strayed away from the burnside. I saw several large round holes among the long heather, all about four or five feet deep and seemingly connected to each other by underground tunnels. My father said they could have been made by otters, as they were known to be breeding somewhere in Harray. My elder brother, when he was about five, ran in one day to tell mother, "Muddie, me sa' a hill cat" (wild cat). I have never heard of wildcats in Harray, so I have often thought it might have been a young otter that he saw and took to be a wildcat.

Still lower down the hill between the otter holes and The Broon Brae there were two circles of green grass among the heather. We called them Fairy Rings because they were always green, and when we danced on them they bounced under our feet and were always slightly wet, but never boggy or marshy.

Just by the side of the barn, the machinery of which was turned by the water from a burn on an under-driven wheel, there was a small pond we spoke of as the Duckie Pond, because the ducks spent most of their time on it. One day I found an old grass hook and tried to cut the grass that grew long at the edges of this pool. How it happened I never could tell, for I only knew that I had cut my hand instead of the grass, when I saw the blood dripping from the wound. I had gashed the little bit of webbed-looking skin that stretches from the hand to the base of the thumb. It was believed by Orcadians to be a dangerous wound, which often caused lockjaw (Tetanus), so my mother got rather a shock when I ran to show her the cut. Getting out a clean handkerchief

and a basin with water and a towel, she asked my sister to run ben and turn the chairs bottom up, telling her that if she found a newly-spun spider web to loosen it carefully and bring it to her. Chair after chair was turned up without success, until only the armchairs were left. Under the first one there was a lovely large silver-grey web and the spider not at home. Detaching it carefully, my sister brought it to mother, and was greatly surprised when mother doubled it up and applied it to the cut on my hand, which she then bandaged with the handkerchief. This was an old cure to stop bleeding and prevent infection from germs. It must have been a good cure, for I remember no more about it after the spider web was put on.

One day I was being bathed in front of the fire on a rather cold winter's day, when mother said to father: "Could thoo pit some heather scrogs on the fire to warm up the hoose a bit?" He went out to the barn, where he had been winding "simmans" on a "cra cruik" fixed to the wall of the barn, and turned by some connection with the water from the burn, which I never could understand, and brought in a "scurtful of scrogs", that had to be cut out, as they could not be wound into the "simmans".

He piled them all on to the fire and up the chimney, saying: "That'll soon warm the hoose tae thee," and went back to the barn. The scrogs, being practically bone dry, went off with a roar, and the whole chimney was soon filled with red-hot scrogs of all shapes and sizes. One of them jumped out of the fire and went down my sister's back under her dress. It didn't take my mother long to bundle me up in a towel and lay me in the cradle, and take off my sister's dress to get to the burning scrog. Then she took a clean cotton cloth and spread it with treacle, just ordinary black treacle, and laid it on the burnt place and bandaged it to keep out the air. This eased the pain and cured the burn and kept it from festering.

My mother knew about the treacle, because she had heard her mother tell of how she (mother) had been treated when she was very badly burnt when a child. I can't remember how that accident happened, but the burn was rather extensive. My grandmother had taken a clean cotton sheet, doubled it and laid it along the table. Then she took a jar of treacle and poured it all over the centre of the sheet and spread it out, then took the child and rolled it in the treacle-covered sheet, making sure that all the burnt area was well covered with the treacle. This primitive cure was quite effective and no marks showed afterwards.

Our nearest neighbour was a weaver who had one room to hold his weaver's beam. I often went to spend a little while beside him, fascinated to watch the shuttle being thrown, brightly shining, from one side of the web to the other. One day they had some new kittens, and I could not tear myself away until his wife came to tell me that the light was failing, so perhaps I had better go, to get home before it was quite dark. To prevent me from worrying too much about going out unaccompanied she gave me two hen eggs, one in each hand, to think about, and told me to take care not to fall and break them. I can well remember how comforting the feel of those eggs was as I crossed over the burn and walked through the field to Comely Bank.

We were a long way from the church and school, across three miles of peat moss; several of the peat banks being full enough of water for a child to drown in. In the winter months this was a great worry to mother, when her two children of school age, Bina and Johnny, had to cross this moss in the dark. As a guide mother placed a lighted paraffin lamp in the kitchen window. If they took a straight line towards the light it kept them from straying into the centre of the moss. The burn was also a help for part of the way.

One evening at Comely Bank has a special place in my memory. It was Muckle Supper evening and we were all excited, expecting our eldest sister to come home from the manse for the night, also our eldest brother from Wasdale. There had been the usual lavish preparations for

the feast, and an unusual and unexpected item formed a large part of the food. Meat was not very plentiful on this small farm, so when a flock of whitemaas flew inland searching for food, father took his old blunderbuss and sent a shot along the garden dyke where they were sitting in a solid row. The shot was principally meant to scare them away, because they soon made away with any poultry food put out. But when the flock raised flight a few got left behind, and they were either dead or too badly wounded to get away, so they were plucked, cleaned and cooked and added to eke out the scanty meat supply. Although they had a slightly fishy taste, they were nice and plump and made pretty good eating.

When it became obvious that another addition to the family was on the way, Alex my father, remembering the experience when I was expected, thought it was time to sell the farm and return to our house in Kirkwall, which had been let during our stay in Harray. Alex was over sixty-five and beginning to feel the work too much for him. He had found it very different to run a small place where he had all the hard work to do himself, from overseeing a large farm where there were several people to share the work. So Alex put Comely Bank up for sale and had the offer of £20 more for it than he had paid. He sold it for £120 and returned to Kirkwall.

During his six years in Comely Bank he had increased the arable acreage by two methods: by ploughing up old grassland, and by making a "lazy bed" and planting potatoes on heathery ground.

When it became known that we were leaving, several of the school children came up to our house and held a garden party on the green surrounding the house. It was a lovely gesture that we all appreciated very much.

My mother saw our belongings packed and loaded on to carts on the way to Kirkwall, then she and I went in the last one as far as Finstown, where we joined Nicolson's coach. I shall never forget my first sight of Kirkwall as we came along Grainshore and the Ayre Road. It was dark and the lights were all lit, including the lighthouse on the end of the pier. After the dark nights among the hills of Harray, it looked so bright and cheery that we felt as if we were coming home rather than leaving it.

We were to spend the night with my grandmother in the very room and bed in which I had been born four-and-a-half years before. Everything was shining in the warm glow of a blazing coal fire and, together with grandmother's loving welcome, it made an ideal homecoming.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there were very few wheeled vehicles in Orkney. All the crop or any load that had to be moved from one place to another was carried on the backs of ponies, and of men, women and children, the weight being graduated to suit the bearer, the men taking the heaviest load next to the ponies. When Alex invested in his first cart, his mother was terrified in case it might capsize with him underneath it. Carts and wheelbarrows to do the transporting were a great innovation and advance. Then steel single furrow ploughs took over from the primitive wooden plough. Scufflers did the weeding formerly done by hand with a hoe; sowing machines did the seeding that used to be broadcast by hand from a temporary hold-all made by tying a bed sheet on the sower by knotting two corners together at the back of his neck and the other two corners at the back of his waist. Alex was a two-handed sower, meaning that he could sow a strip on his right side with his right hand and a strip on his left with his left hand, sowing a double strip, and thus saving a good deal of time used by a sower who could only sow a single strip with his right hand. Next came a threshing machine to make the backbreaking labour of the flail a lost art, and fanners to create a mechanical draught to blow away the chaff from the grain.

When, wonder of wonders, the reaping machine arrived to mow down the crop, and took the place of hook and scythe, the work of the farmer was well on the way to the present day equivalent of an engineer with a machine for every job on the farm. (So it goes on. At the present day the advent of the Combine has again changed the whole process of harvesting.)

No longer do people walk bare-footed from the country nine or ten miles to church over the hills on a Sunday, and put on their country boots and home-knitted black woollen stockings when they come within sight of the town. Nor do they wear black silk coats stiff enough almost to stand by themselves, blowing out like balloons at their backs in the wild Orkney breeze.

Motor cars have superseded the horse and gig, and motor buses have taken the place of the coach-and-four on the long drives from the outlying parishes. My father (Alex) could never understand how a motor car could go by itself without a horse to pull it. One day he got out of bed, where he lay for eleven years, to sit at a front window where he could see the cars passing. I had to go out and watch until I saw a car coming, then run in and tell him to look out now. It all seemed to be working out well when we heard his disappointed cry that the car had passed by so quickly he hadn't been able to see it. My mother (Janet) had been in Edinburgh on a visit when the first four or six cars came there, and her nephew had taken her for a ride in one of them, right down Leith Walk and back again. Her description to Alex of this dangerous ride, when she expected at every moment to come into collision with some of the other traffic, had whetted his appetite for a sight of the strange new vehicle which could propel itself.

The cruise lamp, which had been the only illumination in the home at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had long been relegated to the scrap heap when paraffin lamps were introduced; now even the improved Tilley lamp has given way to electric light. It is a great advance from the days when rashes were peeled for wicks, and cod, haddock and dogfish livers were "breathed" at home to get oil to fill the small upper container of the cruise lamp, and one or more peeled rashes were placed in the oil to give the amount of light required, according to the work in hand.

A programme on the T.V. called "Bewitched" reminded me of a strange thing that happened when Alex was at Yarpa. He had one cow that gave a great deal more milk than any of the others, and her fame spread through the parish. One day a neighbour, who lived a short distance away, came to the house and wanted to buy this cow; but Alex had no intention of selling her, and said so. "Well," said the man, "if you won't sell the cow would you give me one pint of her milk, unmixed with milk from another cow?" "Oh yes," said Alex, "I have no objection to letting you have a pint of her milk," and after he had received it he went on his way.

Now the peculiar thing is that from that moment no-one could get this cow to give her milk, although she had plenty there to give. Greatly puzzled by this unheard-of unwillingness to give up her milk. Alex told another neighbour about the man who had wanted to buy the cow and got milk instead. "Sell the cow," advised the neighbour, "and break the spell." Although it was the last thing Alex had wanted to do, he saw the cow was suffering, so he reluctantly sold her. Immediately she was led away the milk started to stream from her. The spell was cast on her to prevent Alex from profiting by her prodigality, as he had heard the man mutter as he went away with the pint of her milk, "You will get no more good of her from now on." He came to the conclusion that the cow had been bewitched.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jessie's Family Background

Both my father and mother left school when they were ten years of age. My mother had gone to the Infant School in Kirkwall and my father to the Parish School in Orphir, both of which charged school fees. The Bible was my father's only reading book, and, along with a "Sum" book and a "Copy" book for writing, these three were all the school books then in use. Any other items of information were written by the teacher (usually one man to one school) on the blackboard.

When he left school, my father could read well, clearly and intelligently. He could add, subtract, multiply and divide, and he could write beautifully in copperplate style, which he continued to do while he had the strength to be up and going about.

By contrast, my mother learned to read after she left school by spelling out the words on any piece of paper that she could find, but she never became a good reader, always faltering and stumbling over words with more than two syllables, but she had an excellent grasp of the meaning of words, and could always supply another word with a similar meaning when her children were doing their homework and were stuck for want of a word. Practically the only arithmetic she knew consisted in handling the £ S D of the weekly family budget, at which she became very expert. She knew just how far her income would stretch and how much it would cover, and never in any circumstances would she try to make a purchase unless she had the money there to pay for it. She had the utmost horror of being in debt, and only on one occasion during her forty-eight years of married life did she find herself in most desperate straits. She had three children coming home from school, hungry, and expecting to get their dinner. But she had no food in the house, and not so much as one penny in her purse. Any of the shops would have readily given her credit, but she could not bring herself to go and ask for it.

Her father, who had died as the result of an accident at the building of the Free Church in King Street, Kirkwall, had been a truly good man and had brought up his family to believe in God as their loving Father in Heaven and a present help in any time of trouble. Therefore, being in great trouble of spirit, she naturally turned to her Bible for comfort and reassurance. Asking to be guided to a place of her Father's choosing, she closed her eyes, opened her Bible, placed her finger on the page, and when she looked this was what she read: "Trust in the Lord and do good, so shalt thou dwell in the land and verily thou shalt be fed."

She was both astonished and awed. It seemed as if God has spoken directly to her and her worry melted away, for she believed the word which had been given so long ago, yet which was so adequately fitted to her situation. Less than half-an-hour had elapsed when a knock sounded on the door and there stood her brother-in-law from Tankerness. He had come in to Kirkwall with a horse and cart to fetch home some things from the town, and had brought in the cart a small keg of buttermilk and a bag with about two stones of oatmeal, a sack with potatoes and some turnips and a few home-dried fish. He had been on the road more than an hour before she had lifted her Bible to seek consolation from its pages. This proved to her the truth of another remarkable promise which says: "Before they call, I will hear, and while they are yet speaking, I will answer."

During the rest of her life she was never again in such desperate need. Sometimes, of course, she was rather hard up, and at such times my father would want her to sell the house and use the money to live on. But she would not consent to this, saying: "The money would not last

long and then we would be worse off than we are now. At least we have a roof over our heads, and while we can pay our taxes they can't take that from us, and while we have tenants that pay their rents, we will always manage to pay the taxes, and a house with no rent and tax free is something to be thankful for and not to be lightly thrown away." Then to cheer him up she would laugh and sing "When the hoose rins round aboot, it's time enough tae flit, for we've aye been provided for, and sae will we yet." He would chide her for being silly; then they would join in a good laugh at the idea and so relieve the tension. For the last eleven years of his life my father was an invalid. The doctor said there was no organic disease present but just the breaking up of nature due to age. He lived to be ninety-five years all but four months. And after thirty years a widow, my mother died aged ninety-eight years.

My mother's father, Thomas Slater, was the son of Robert Slater from Sanday, and his wife, Christine Tulloch, from North Ronaldsay, who came to live in Kirkwall about the beginning of the nineteenth century. Robert had been a piper in the regular army as a young man and was so strong physically that he became known as the strongest man in Orkney. Many stories were told of his feats of strength and endurance. He was often challenged to prove his strength in various ways, in weight-lifting, load carrying, and so on. When meeting a challenge, he used to give his shoulders a peculiar shrug called in Orcadian speech "a reult", and so earned for himself the nickname of Riddlan' Robbie.

Robert was a devoutly religious man. At this time the Reverend Dr. Robert Paterson was minister of the U. P. Kirk (now Paterson Church) in Kirkwall, and so great was his influence in the islands that he was popularly referred to as "The Bishop of Orkney". By his interest in the outlying districts and islands (from which many of the 1,400 members on the communicants' roll of his church came) he was instrumental, as moving spirit and adviser, in establishing U. P. Kirks in several of the Mainland parishes and in the Islands. He was a powerful and earnest preacher, who held the interest of his listeners so well that many of them could repeat his sermons point by point on the homeward way, as they walked home in small companies after the afternoon service was over at 4 p.m. Robert was very good at this feat of attention and memory, and was regarded as a good "Sermon Taster", meaning that he recognised a good sermon when he heard it.

One Sunday, when Robert was in his accustomed seat in church, listening very intently to the sermon, the church officer tip-toed down the passage to where he was sitting and slipped a piece of paper over the seat into his hand. Not wishing to be interrupted, Robert was silently putting the paper into his pocket for future attention, when the church officer whispered, "Read it now for there are two men at the church door waiting for an answer." Greatly wondering, he took out the bit of paper, opened it out, and read: "You are requested to come to Sanday without delay, where your services are immediately required."

Getting up out of his seat, he accompanied the officer as quietly as possible to the entrance door. There stood two hefty men, evidently waiting for him, and expecting him to come with them. This Robert said he would not do unless they told him why he was wanted and who wanted him. They replied by seizing hold of his arms and marching him off between them towards the pier. They said their boat was waiting to take him to Sanday as quickly as possible, but who wanted him and why, they did not know. They had been paid to take him there and that they intended to do. The three duly arrived in Sanday, where Robert was delivered to a man who was waiting for him. Again without an explanation being given, this man conducted Robert up to the house where a Captain Jerome Dennison lived. They entered a room where Robert saw a mahogany table, on which two drawn swords were placed conspicuously.

Robert wondered apprehensively what these weapons could portend, but he was not left long in doubt, for in strode Captain Dennison, who said, "I have heard many stories about your great strength, but I do not believe them, so I have brought you here to prove whether they are true or false. Here are two swords, choose which you prefer and I will take the other, and I challenge you to fight for your life."

Robert by this time was roused to anger but he began quietly enough. "I have never used a sword in my life, and I don't mean to begin now, but to think you have brought me all the way out here from a church service merely to try my strength. If that's all you want, here goes." And, raising his clenched fist high above his head, he brought it down with such force on the centre of the table that its top was smashed to smithereens and the two swords were sent spinning to the floor. Quietly wondering what his reaction to this would be, Robert was surprised to see the Captain approaching with outstretched hand and beaming face and declaring, "I believe all the stories I have heard about you now, and I want to shake hands with you." When the hand-shaking was over, the Captain escorted Robert to another room where a sumptuous dinner had been laid on to celebrate the occasion. Of all the true stories told of his feats of strength, Robert was particularly fond of relating that one. I am too.

He died when my mother was still a young child, but she had a vivid recollection of seeing him marching up and down the pavement in front of their house every Old New Year's Day at five o'clock in the morning, dressed in full regimentals, kilt swinging in time to the music of the bagpipes, as he played all the tunes he had learned in the army. That was his way of stirring them up, so that he could get into the house to wish them all a Happy New Year.

Robert's son, Thomas Slater, my mother's father, was also a soldier in his young manhood. His scarlet tunic and feathered busby enhanced his natural good looks and pleasant manner to no small degree. Two sisters fell in love with him, the elder one very beautiful; but he preferred the younger, very plain one, so Ann Flett became his wife. The story is told that on one occasion they had gone to see the Queen (Victoria) on one of her visits to Edinburgh. My grandmother was very disappointed to find that Queen Victoria did not come up to her expectations, and told my grandfather she thought the Queen could not lay claim to being beautiful. My grandfather, with a chuckle, said, "Oh Ann, haad thee tongue, for she is hoo (very) like theesel."

Many years later, when I saw Queen Victoria on her last visit to Edinburgh, I could see quite plainly the resemblance in their aged faces. Both were about the same age. My grandmother died in Edinburgh in 1900, aged eighty-two years.

When my grandmother was a child the family lived on the farm of Skeetquoy in Tankerness, and when I was a child she lived next door to us, all by herself, having been a widow for many years. Her husband died as the result of an accident, when a workman's platform on which he was standing collapsed, and he fell with it from the top of King Street Church. My grandmother's family came to Skeetquoy from Shapinsay, and when she lived in Kirkwall I visited her often to do my homework for school. She encouraged and enjoyed my visits. I was a good listener, and she loved to tell me stories of her younger days.

One of her stories explained how her ancestors came to be in Shapinsay. Two young boys, John and Robert, who were brothers, were the only survivors from a Dutch ship which had been wrecked somewhere off Shapinsay. They were found in half-dead condition by a man in Shapinsay called William Flett. He took them home and brought them up as his own sons. Their Dutch surname of "Van Fleet" he changed to his own surname of Flett. (Some years ago a cousin of mine who was named Ann Flett, after her grandmother, wrote to me from her home in

Arizona U.S.A., telling me that grandmother had also told her this story. She went on to say that she had herself come across several people in the States whose surname was Van Fleet, and she sometimes wondered if perhaps any of them could have been related to those shipwrecked lads.) One of the boys, John, my grandmother's grandfather, remained in Orkney, but the other went to the United States to seek his fortune. In this he succeeded, and when he died he left a large estate to his brother. John got a communication to this effect from Robert's overseers on the estate, advising him to come out and claim it.

In those days this was no easy thing to do. But John finally decided to make the attempt. Money being far from plentiful, the only thing he could do was to work his passage out on a trading ship to Boston, and from there cover the six hundred miles inland on foot. This he ultimately succeeded in doing. When he presented himself to his late brother's manager to make his claim, and to prove that he was the right claimant, the manager surveyed him for a moment and then said, "I don't need to see any papers to prove you are Robert Flett's brother, for you are his spitting image." He was made welcome, and conducted all over the estate, which appeared to be in a thriving condition, and of considerable extent.

When it became clear that John had no intention of staying with the estate, but was determined to sell it and go back home to Orkney, the manager offered to buy it at an agreed price. This seemed a fortune to John, and he accepted ten golden guineas as the earnest of future payments to follow, took his leave, and started on his long homeward trek. Those ten guineas were the last he ever got of his large inheritance. On the way home, the ship which was loaded with wood, ran into a terrific storm which so crippled her that she became waterlogged for the greater part of the voyage. Food became short, and for lack of a proper diet scurvy attacked and enfeebled the crew. Their state of exhaustion by the time they reached port was pitiable, but they were still alive and thankful to reach land. When John finally got back to Orkney, he had lost all interest in his brother's legacy, and never did anything more about it. He was by then an invalid and only survived for a year or two.

Another fortune, but much smaller, was lost to my mother, when her name-mother, my grandmother's sister Jessie, died. This was the beautiful sister my grandfather had passed over in favour of her plainer sister Ann, my mother's mother. Jessie was a good business woman, and she employed women to collect eggs for her over the Mainland. She hired other women to wash, pack, and export dozens of boxes of eggs by the southbound boats from Kirkwall every week during the peak season. In winter she did some trade in poultry, supplying butchers and private individuals in the south.

When my mother was a child her Aunt Jessie often had her to stay with her. She had no children of her own, and used to tell little Jessie (my mother) that she was to be her heir. But she died of a heart attack rather early in life. The doctor who certified her death said she must have had a great disappointment or sorrow in life, for her heart was twice the normal size, so she scarcely had room to breathe, and must have had much pain that she kept to herself. When she died, she had £70 in the bank in the joint names of her husband, Andrew Wilson, and herself. When Andrew tried to withdraw this money, he was told at the bank that it could not be withdrawn without both signatures, which was now impossible. When my grandmother then tried to claim it on behalf of my mother, as her promised heir, she was told at the bank that it would cost more money to take it out than it was worth; so no-one could get it, except evidently the bank itself.

The foregoing two episodes in the life of my grandmother's family took place after they left Skeetquoy and came to live in Kirkwall. The following two events occurred while Ann was still a child at School in Tankerness.

It was before the Repeal of the Corn Laws, and there was a great scarcity of food. At one time Ann's mother had nothing to give Ann to take as a "dinner piece" except a handful of raw kail shanks, the cabbage blades themselves having been cooked and eaten for breakfast. Her father went in to Kirkwall to see if he could get any food, but though he tried every shop, he had to go back home empty-handed. There was not a loaf of bread or even a biscuit, and no flour, bere, or oatmeal to be had. All were sold out. It was a near famine, and but for their well stocked kail-yard they would have starved. Somehow they survived until the harvest was ready. After that food was a little more plentiful, but it was not until the Corn Laws were repealed that the fear of a like situation was removed.

When Ann was about ten years old the Press Gang came to Orkney. Only Robert was old enough to be taken along with his father, which would have left the family without means of support, so they hid all day in a cave at the shore, called "Papley's Hole", if I remember correctly. This could only be entered at low tide as the entrance was completely under water at other times, but the floor of the cave shelved upwards towards the inner end, so that they were quite dry and well above high water level.

Though only ten years old, Ann set out bravely every night, when it was too dark for her to be seen by any watcher, to carry bread her mother had baked and the other food she had prepared, and to leave it at a pre-determined place, where they could get it when the tide was suitable for them to come and go unseen. Ann did her duty faithfully all the time the Press Gang was in the neighbourhood, sometimes with quaking heart and trembling limbs, especially when she had reason to believe she was being followed in the dark and might be accosted, but she never met or saw anyone during her midnight visits to the place.

Ann's brother Robert Flett (to whom I have referred) became a cabinetmaker, with his own business in Kirkwall. By the artistry of his designs and good workmanship, he built up a good business. I have been told that he was good at making carvings to ornament the furniture he made, especially the light-legged Edinburgh style mahogany armchairs and single chairs then fashionable in dining-room suites.

When Dr. Duguid married he placed an order for one of these suites, which included two armchairs and one dozen single chairs. They were made with horsehair-padded seats, resting on strong broad upholsterer's webbing, criss-crossed from back to front and side to side, with a cover in black material woven from horse hair. The legs of the chairs were slightly curved outwards, but otherwise thin and quite plain. The arms and backs were beautifully styled, with rows of grooving, and the cross-bar at the centre back was ornamented by hand carved oak leaves, extending to either side from a raised central whorl of several rings, which could have been meant to represent an acorn.

I can describe these chairs so well because, when Dr. Duguid died, his furniture was sold; and as her Uncle Robert had made them and she liked them, my mother bought the whole suite. From where I am writing now I can see one single chair, and one armchair, all that is left of the beautiful mahogany suite which my mother bought nearly one hundred years ago.

They could have been still as good as ever, if my mother had not agreed to take four country youths to live with us, while they attended classes at Kirkwall School. They did not seem to know that mahogany chairs were never meant to be used in attack and defence, so, by the time they were ready to leave, the chairs were all in a sorry plight, with broken legs and backs and

badly sagging seats. They were doctored up and lasted for a time, but their beauty was marred beyond repair.

At the same sale my mother bought a carved mahogany "Tent Bed" with long slender supports, beautifully carved in a long-leaf design which carried a covering of Egyptian linen of heavy weight. This completely covered the bed top and sides. When the curtains were drawn across the front it was enclosed completely. After iron beds became fashionable I broke up our lovely carved wooden beds and a plain box bed to make firewood for lighting the fire. This is now looked upon as vandalism.

Robert Flett's two brothers, Gilbert and Samuel, were joint owners of the old tide meal mill on Ayre Road, before the steam mill was built, and their sister Ann's husband, Thomas Slater, was operator for several years until the brothers sold the mill to Messrs. James and John Williamson, and decided to emigrate to Canada. Their sister, Ann, my grandmother had become an adept with her needle by this time, and cut and made complete outfits for both her brothers to take with them. All that was heard of them was one letter to say they could not stay where they were because of the very severe and oft repeated thunderstorms to which they had been unaccustomed in Orkney, and they were going to try their luck somewhere else.

Another brother, James, who had emigrated to Canada and had not been heard of since he had left home, was traced by Dr. Paterson, when on a visit to Canada. He had his home in Montreal, and the Doctor paid him a visit. On his return home, Dr. Paterson told my grandmother that her brother was comfortably well to do in circumstances and in health. He had a wife and family. He had changed his name from Flett to the original Fleet, but without the "van".

CHAPTER FIVE

Incorrigible Jessie

Some years after my grandmother's mother died, her father married again, a Christine Sutherland, and they had one son, a celebrated Kirkwall diver, popularly called "Pilot John," because of his often requested services to pilot vessels through the String to Kirkwall Pier.

He was working as a diver (in the employ of his half-brother William Firth, who was a building contractor, and had a contract to lengthen and widen Kirkwall Pier), when he met with his death owing to something which caused an entanglement of the air supply tube and consequent stoppage of air. This William Firth built, among other places, the row of houses on Junction Road to the south of the Phoenix Cinema, Firth's Square, which takes its name from him.

I said earlier, my grandmother fell in love with my grandfather's pink tunic, busby and good looks, but she soon became aware that there was something more than skin-deep good looks, or superficiality, about his attractive personality. There was a deep sincerity and wholesome godliness that pervaded his whole attitude to life. He had been honourably discharged from the army (invalided out). Although he suffered from tuberculosis, he lived to be sixty-one years of age. Like his father, he was a great and faithful admirer of Dr. Paterson and never missed a chance to listen to his sound doctrines. He attended the doctor's Adult Bible Class for men, as well as the Weekly Prayer Meeting, where he was reputed to be "an able man in prayer". As such, he was often asked to lead the devotions. He set a good example in his own house, and saw to it that his children knew their Bible well. My mother used to say that no matter which verse in the Old or New Testaments any of them would begin, her father could finish it correctly. She even went so far as to say that she thought if the Bible had gone out of print, he would have been able to quote it perfectly, long lists of names and all, without a mistake.

He had a wonderful way with his family of ten daughters, nine of whom grew up and married, each one in the order in which she had been born, and all at the age of from twenty to twenty-two.

My mother was five years old before she could walk. She had very weak ankles due to rickets, and when she did begin to walk her ankles were almost touching the ground. She was a great favourite with her father because of this, and she simply adored him.

He was a builder and slater to trade and worked on buildings all summer; but in the winter, when all building stopped, he took to tailoring, making mostly white moleskin trousers, for the making of which he was paid 2/6d per pair. These had to be delivered to the store at the top of the double stone stairway, still to be seen in Harbour Street.

When my grandfather had as much work in a parish or island as would last a long time, he would rent a house there and take the family with him to stay while the work lasted, sometimes several years. That was how they came to be in Evie when my mother and father were married.

Once my mother went up a ladder to the top of a three-storey house where her father was working. When she started to come down, she lost her balance and fell from the top of the ladder to the ground. Her father came around the building just in time to see her falling, but was too late to do anything to save her. The family lived almost next house, so he lifted her up and carried her home to her mother, thinking she was dead. Her mother took her in her lap and sat down at the bottom of the stairs opposite the open outer door to get fresh air, in the hope that it would help to

take her out of what appeared to be a deep faint; but it was hours before she opened her eyes. She closed them again almost immediately, but the doctor who had been summoned, and who was very worried about the length of the unconsciousness, was relieved and told her mother to put her to bed and keep her warm and let her sleep as long as possible.

When she finally recovered the doctor gave her mother a grave warning that she had on no account to strike her, no matter how badly she might behave and need to be corrected. He said she might fall down in a dead faint if corrected, and perhaps never come out of it. Jessie soon began to take advantage of her immunity from punishment and as grandmother said, became so naughty that one day she raised her hand and gave her a good sound slap, because she could not stand her behaviour any longer. To her consternation, and true to the doctor's warning, Jessie fell down in a dead faint. It took so long for her to come out of it that her mother thought she was really gone. When at last she revived, her mother resolved that no matter what Jessie might do, she would never lift her hand to her again.

One Sunday Jessie and Mary were left at home to have the dinner ready when the others returned home from church. Prowling round the kitchen, Jessie found her father's pipe all packed and ready to light after dinner. Having observed how much her father seemed to enjoy an after-dinner smoke, she thought she would like to try it too, so she lighted the pipe and sat down to puff as nearly as she could in imitation of her father till the pipe was empty. But oh! It was not nice at all, for she soon became very sick. When the parents arrived home from church they were greatly distressed to see poor Jessie so very ill, until her father found his empty pipe, and they realised there was a strong smell of tobacco with Jessie. Then sympathy vanished, and there was a severe reprimand for the culprit from her mother.

One Saturday Jessie was hard up for some buttons to play her favourite Saturday game with the girls in the street, so she solved the problem by cutting all the buttons off her father's Sunday trousers, and had a most enjoyable time. But when she heard her father say to her mother, "Be aboot me, Annie, there's no' a button in me breeks," she realised the enormity of her crime and awaited her telling-off with some trepidation. To stay home from church, unless too ill to go, was just as unthinkable as to sew on the buttons on Sunday. Leaving enquiries till later, the good man dressed himself in his white moleskin trousers (lying clean and ironed ready to put on to go to work on Monday morning), his morning coat and tile hat, and set off, followed by a bevy of daughters, who were torn between a desire to laugh at the picture he presented, and admiration for his courage in going to church dressed so incongruously. They could never afterwards talk about it without going off into peals of laughter. To go back a little, I should say that when her family came to Kirkwall, my grandmother, Ann, went to school there. After a couple of years her teacher wrote to Ann's mother to tell her she did not need to send Ann to school any longer, for she had taught her all she knew, and Ann was as well educated now as she herself was. So she left school. Very shortly afterwards her mother died, and Ann, the youngest of the family, undertook the task of keeping house and doing all her mother had been wont to do for the family. By the time she met her grandfather she was a competent and skilled housewife, and her father's second marriage left her free to marry the man whom she loved, and had admired from the moment they first met.

Their first home was on Pollockson's Walk at the entry to the Mount Road (now Cromwell Road); but as their family increased in numbers, they moved to Main Street where they had three front rooms on the first floor up in the "Old Castle of Kirkwall". Here my mother was born and spent her early days.

We always made a joke of the fact that our mother was born and brought up in a castle. This was to counter-balance my father's mother's claim that my father was descended from a Prussian Earl.

My mother went to Kirkwall school with bare feet, and was so very conscious of the fact that one day she determined she would have boots like the other children. She took a strange way to do this. She found a deep pool of mud, and walked backwards and forwards through it until her feet and legs as far up as the top of a pair of boots were all well and truly black with "iper". In the school the teacher began sniffing until she traced the offensive odour to Jessie. She made her go out to the school pump and wash her feet in cold water and dared her to come in until her feet were rid of the noisome odour.

Jessie had been strictly forbidden to help in driving the cattle home from the farm of Grain, owned then by the Heddle family from Gaitnip, whose house was entered from a gate in the wall in Wellington Street. However, Jessie loved to do this and managed to get away with it without being found out. If the tide in the Peedie Sea was out, it just mean driving the cattle from the fields of Grain around the shore of the Peedie Sea, past Pickaquoy and the old Slaughter House, through the "Crafty," and up "the sands" to the gate on the wall in the field below the house. This entrance is still there almost opposite to Union Street, but there was no Junction Road then, only "the sands" where the road is now. If, however, the Peedie Sea was in, and the tide high, the cattle had to be driven along Ayre Road and Harbour Street, through Bridge Street, Albert Street, Broad Street, Victoria Street and Main Street to the house gate, which opened off Wellington Street, and down past the house to the byres. This made a very long and arduous journey with perhaps as many as twenty cows to get home for milking time. After an exciting adventure like that, my mother was always afraid that when she got home she would be met with the searching question, "And where have you been, my lady?" When their mother "spoke proper" they all knew she was angry and they could expect punishment unless they could give a good account of where they had been.

It was when my mother was a child that the last epidemic of smallpox occurred in Kirkwall. A foreign ship called at Kirkwall pier to put a sick man ashore. He was taken to the old Balfour Hospital in Main Street, where it was soon discovered that he had smallpox. At that time the disease was no uncommon occurrence in Orkney, but was greatly dreaded as a killer in most instances. Those who recovered were pock-marked severely for the rest of their lives. One such case I remember vividly – the Reverend Irvine Pirie.

He was a powerful preacher and although I was quite a young child at the time, his scarred face and earnest manner, combined with the joy and happiness he could put into his sermon, made a very deep and lasting impression on my childish mind, and made being a Christian sound such a worthwhile life, that he set me on the way to seek till I found it for myself.

Well, the sick seaman to whom I referred became delirious in the height of the disease, and jumped out through a window in his ward that had been left open for fresh air. Several young children were playing in front of the hospital, running up and down the steps as was usual, and he landed right among them beside my mother's younger sister, Mary. She ran home to her mother in a great state of fear and flung herself into her mother's arms, crying out: "Oh, Mam, I'm teen the pox, for such a smell wis wi' that man."

Grandmother knew a lot about this dreaded disease, had recovered from it herself, and had also helped to nurse patients who had it. In her shock she did not wait to choose her words,

but burst out with, “Oh, wheesht, ye leean cutty,” but it was all too true, for it soon became evident that Mary had got the smallpox.

The infection spread until there were nineteen cases in that one building, six of them daughters of my grandmother. My mother, Jessie, was with her Aunt Jessie when Mary was playing among the other children that day, and hoping that Jessie at least would not get smallpox, my grandmother had all Jessie’s clothes disinfected with sulphur fumes and sent down to Aunt Jessie, asking her to keep Jessie beside her and telling her the reason. But she had not reckoned with Jessie, for Jessie had heard that her sisters were getting boiled sweets to eat, an unusual treat, and Jessie wanted to share it with them.

One day when she knew her mother would be out, Jessie went home, got into the bed between two of her sisters, and actually took and ate a boiled sweet from the mouth of one of them. But she was caught that time, for her mother came back sooner than expected – just in time to meet Jessie coming out through the door of the room where her sisters were lying.

All the power seemed to go out of my grandmother. As she sank down on the nearest chair, all she could say was, “Oh, Jessie!” But she managed to disinfect the child and her clothes thoroughly, and sent her back to her aunt with strict injunctions not to come home again until she was sent for.

Her precautions were useless, for a day or two later Jessie also had contracted smallpox, and she was sent home to her mother to make the sixth case in the household. My grandmother did not call in the doctor or a nurse, but did all that needed to be done herself. When the doctor was visiting the other thirteen patients in the building, he heard from the neighbour that Mrs. Slater’s six children were also down with smallpox. He knocked at her door, but when he tried to come in, she stopped him, saying: “When I require your services, I will send for you.” He was quite taken aback and started to tell her it was his duty to look after the patients, but she would not so much as let him set a foot inside her door. She was quite capable of looking after her own sick children herself. So he had to go away without seeing them, and never again tried to force his way in.

Notwithstanding her high-handed treatment of the doctor, let it be recorded here that all six of her daughters made a good recovery, and not one bore a single pock-mark, with the exception of the youngest child, about one year old, who had a tiny mark at one side of her cheek near her mouth, which was almost invisible. The epidemic did not spread any further, as every precaution was taken to keep the building isolated. This is how my grandmother treated her patients. As soon as it became evident by the presence of one or two spots that one had smallpox, she had all hair shaved off from head and body. With a home-made ointment compounded by mixing hog’s lard with whisky, she rubbed every bit of the child with this mixture till she was well covered. The whisky reduced the desire to scratch, by reducing the itch that caused it, and the ointment prevented the blisters from bursting and running into one huge mass, which was what caused the unsightly permanent marks. As an extra precaution she either wrapped clean white bandages around the child’s hands, or put on cotton gloves, to prevent its nails from scratching and breaking blisters.

After this, she got her older daughters who were working away from home to search the field around the town for fresh sheep’s droppings (pirls) and leave them in a certain place where she could go and get them. These “pirls” she washed clean, boiled them in milk, and gave the invalids the strained milk to drink. This was to keep up their strength to enable them to throw off the fever, as no solid food could be taken. It also had a medicinal value.

Continuing the treatment, my grandmother boiled or stewed rhubarb stalks, cut up in cubes, to extract the juice, which she gave in small quantities. This served the double purpose of reducing the fever and preventing the boiled milk from causing constipation. Day and night she had a constant job in keeping the children covered up to prevent them from catching cold, which could so easily develop into pneumonia. In their delirium they were throwing off the blankets and covers, so it was a never-ending vigilance just to keep them warm.

To prevent nausea, and give a good taste in their mouths, she gave them boiled sweets to suck. The inside of their mouths were covered with spots as well as their bodies, so that the breath became offensive and the discharge caused the nausea. The sweets helped to counteract that, and gave the patients something they could do to help themselves get well.

My mother used to tell us she did not find it was so nice as she expected. Most of the time she felt as if she were a side of bacon rolled round and round tightly with twine and hung up in the roof to “reest”. Her sister Ann, the eldest of the six, would be talking quite naturally and sensibly one minute, and the next be quite delirious. They were amused at her delirium, for she always did and said the same things. In the middle of a sensible sentence she would suddenly throw off the bed-clothes, sit up, wave her arms above her head and shout at the pitch of her voice: “Tilly-illy-arum – grunty, grunty.” This never failed to make the others burst out laughing, even when their mother assured them that poor Ann had no knowledge of what she was saying or doing.

My grandmother never having been out from home to earn a wage for herself like the others, was, when she married a poor discharged soldier, looked upon as the poor relation in the family, the others being in quite comfortable circumstances. When she came to have a large family of daughters, always poorly paid at the best, and not one son to help raise the family status, it meant that they all had to try to earn something towards their own livelihood. The girls old enough to do straw plaiting had their “stent” to do every evening except Sunday. Working till bed-time and through the long dark winter evenings their only light came from a cruisie lamp. To keep this burning they scoured the countryside for bunches of rashes which the younger ones peeled. They could do this when still too young to understand the intricacies of straw-plaiting, which became ever more intricate and broad as the girls advanced in age, from three straws to as many as seven, if not more. To get oil for the rash wicks of their lamps, they kept the livers of the fish they sometimes had for food and “breathed” the oil from them in an old iron three-toed pot kept especially for this purpose.

While my grandfather was away for months at a time in Rousay, my grandmother took on outdoor jobs and left her two eldest daughters at home to look after the house and prepare meals for the family. Those outdoor jobs of my grandmother, when not needing to gather rashes, might be singling turnips, taking out and raising peats, making hay, or working in the harvest field, according to the season of the year. Being skilled in doctoring and nursing, her services were often in request for this too. She was a beautiful white-seam sewer and a first-class knitter. She was never idle from morning to night, and lived a happy and useful life.

The prices paid in those days for hand-work are worth noting. For a bed-cover, made with a centre of strong good quality cotton on which were neatly hemmed appliquéés in various shapes and colours, many of which were real works of art, she was paid 5/-. For knitting a pair of men’s long woollen drawers to the ankle she was paid 2/6, with the wool supplied. As soon as she had finished knitting her second half-a-cut of wool, she would say she had finished her “stent” for that day, and lay it away till the morrow. In that way she could keep going without overdoing things.

She remembered the only recorded year in Orkney when not a drop of rain was known to fall between the time the seed was sown and the crop was harvested. She was one of the sixty people, most of them men, who, armed with sickles (hooks) cut the crop on the field next to the Crafty, the stems of which were only six to eight inches long, below the heaviest heads of grain ever lifted off an Orkney farm. The yield in grain has never been so good, but the yield in straw was practically nil.

Like my grandfather, my grandmother was a devout Christian and never missed a Sunday at church if she was able to go. But one Sunday especially stood out in her memory. There was a "half-silly" (mental defective) woman who earned her nickname of "Catty Maggie" because of the number of stray cats she collected, fed and housed. She made periodical rounds of the countryside and practically lived on the proceeds of her travels. Every year she got from one or other of the farms she frequented the last little piglet of a litter. This she nursed with a bottle and brought up to marketing size, when she sold it and used the proceeds to keep herself and her numerous cats in food over the winter. While the piglet was young, "Catty Maggie" took it with her every Sunday to church, which she too attended regularly. The little pig was safely hidden under her large plaid shawl, which covered all deficiencies. On this particular Sunday, Maggie must have been paying more attention to the sermon than to the pig, for it slid down from her lap to the floor and started to run towards the gallery door, which was standing open to let in some air to the crowded church. As it ran it cried "gruff, gruff," and Maggie, brought back to reality by this sound, ran along the passage after it calling "putt-putt," and caught up with it just as it reached the top of the stairs. She lifted it up despite its protests, carried it back, and sat down in her seat, just as if nothing unusual had happened.

The congregation did give vent to a titter here and there, but Dr. Paterson went on preaching gravely without a smile, although some declared that they could see an unusual twinkle in his eye.

CHAPTER SIX

Jessie Leaves Home

My mother was ten years old on the 8th day of December, 1856, and on Candlemas Day next February her school life ended and she had to go out to earn her own living. There was only one way for her to do this. She had to go to the country to herd cattle. Her father had been working in Rousay just before, and heard that a couple who lived at the farm of Breck (Uncle and Auntie o' Breck as they were locally called) wanted a girl to take their cattle to the hill in the morning, stay and look after them all day, and bring them home in the evening for milking time. He thought this would be a good start for Jessie, and it was accordingly agreed that she would come to Rousay on Candlemas Day.

When Jessie arrived at Kirkwall pier she found there was a cow already in the boat, tied by her legs to the seats to prevent her from lurching and upsetting the boat. It was a local rowing boat, and when they approached the point of Crossiecrown, Jessie asked one of the men if this was Rousay noo? To this all he could do was to shake his head and say rather pityingly, "Oh Buddo! Buddo!" it was very cold that February morning, and after sitting for hours on a hard wooden seat in a rowing boat with a good breeze blowing, Jessie was feeling very cold, hungry and homesick. She was extremely glad to get ashore and into her bed.

Next morning she was roused at five o'clock. After her breakfast of porridge and milk, she was given half a bere bannock, and a bottle of milk was strapped to her back. Thus fortified, she was sent on her way, with a strong stick to use only when really necessary to drive the cattle to the hill.

On that very first morning one of the neighbouring herd girls, bent on the same errand as herself, threw her stick at Jessie. It landed right on her bottle, broke it in pieces, and spilt all her milk. From that day onwards she was never given another bottle, nor another drop of milk to take to the hill, because she had broken her bottle. She would be so hungry sometimes that she would have nearly all her half bere bannock eaten before she reached the top of the hill. She used to dig up roots of Burr and chew the cheesy ends of the leaves, and would even try to eat the tips of the heather. On her way to the hill she had to pass the house where a Corsie family lived, and sometimes Mr. Corsie would give her a partan to take with her. That was always a red-letter day for her. She dug out the very last bits of meat from the very smallest toes and thought it a wonderful treat.

When she got back with the cattle in the evening her supper of porridge would be standing on the yard dyke, nearly always cold because it had been standing there so long. One very thick foggy day Jessie arrived home with the kye at four o'clock in the afternoon, only to receive a bitter scolding for coming home so soon. Auntie was all for sending her back again but Uncle intervened, and she was allowed to stay home. Jessie said the kye themselves had started to go home, and she had followed them, as she did not know what time it was and thought it was getting dark. But the next time a thick fog came down Jessie was so afraid to go home too soon that it was midnight before she put in her kye. This, of course, was also the occasion of an angry scolding. One day the kye had got a good bit in advance and Mr. Corsie cried to her to ask how she had let them get so far ahead – why could she not walk as fast as them. "Why," said Jessie, "they have got four legs and I only have two."

Sometimes she got very homesick and wished she could get a day or two off to go to see her mother. She managed at last to get three days to take a trip home. On her way back again, she

was in a small sailing boat that was having to beat up against the wind. Jessie was greatly puzzled by this zigzagging way of sailing, so she asked one of the men why they didn't sail straight on instead of going first away to this side and then away to that side. Would it not be much quicker just to keep right on? To this, as on the former occasion, all the man could do was to shake his head and say, "Oh Buddo! Buddo!"

Jessie had a sister Jean, who had spent two years at Breck before Jessie went there, and who had been a servant at a neighbour house during Jessie's first six months at Breck, but was now a servant in Egilsay. Having been home, and having seen all her own people, Jessie thought she would like to see Jean as well, so instead of going off at Rousay, she stayed on the boat and came off at Egilsay, to the great embarrassment of her sister, who, after all, was only a servant lass at the house, with no permission to entertain relatives. However, they were kind people, who allowed Jean to keep her little sister beside her for a week till the next boat came. What was said to Jessie when she finally arrived back at Breck, for taking a whole week longer than she was allowed, is perhaps best left unquoted.

Jessie had great affection for Jean because she was so good to her while they were both in Rousay. If they were together when they came to a place thick with thistles, Jean would take Jessie on her back and carry her over the thistles to prevent her from getting thorns in her feet. Jessie would never forget this, especially as Jean was only two years older than she was herself. So when Jean left Rousay to go to Egilsay Jessie felt she would die of loneliness. The boatmen had been warned that Jessie might want them to take her over to Egilsay to see her sister, so none of them would let her come with them. One day Jessie determined that if no-one would take her, she would go by herself. She could row now, so seizing a likely opportunity when no one was seen to be around, Jessie got into a small rowing boat and pushed off. But the owner was not far away. When he saw his boat being put off he thought it would likely be Jessie, so he ran down to the beach, crying to her to come back or else she would be drowned. He had been warned, like the others; and just to make sure she could not go far, he had taken the nile-plug out. By the time he came, the boat was nearly half full of water, which did give Jessie a bit of a shock, but only to make her very angry at him for playing so mean a trick. She never attempted, however, to go on her own again.

On lovely sunny days during the long light weather, Jessie would take off all her clothes, wash them in the loch and spread them out on the heather to dry, while she washed and bathed in the warm loch water. In the Springtime she got three halfpence for every pair of lambs she found and brought home. With this extra money she bought a crochet hook and a reel of fine cotton thread and spent many a pleasant hour designing and working yards of fine crochet lace to trim her underclothes instead of buying lace, which she could not afford. On one trip to Kirkwall she bought a summer hat and blue ribbons to trim it with. When she came in sight of Breck she sat down and trimmed her hat ready to wear on Sunday before going on to the house.

Jessie never really got over her homesickness during the two years she spent on the hills of Rousay. On lovely long days with the sun shining brightly hour after hour, she felt sure her mother would see her from Kirkwall if she waved to attract her attention, which she often did, but never got a sign that she had been seen. Or, again, when the sun was shining and the sky quite clear on the hilltop where Jessie was, there was sometimes a thick blanket of fog below in the valley, and Jessie would try to walk home to Kirkwall on the top of the fog, but even as she tried to reach a place to put her foot on, the fog receded from her, although she ran as fast as she could to catch up with it.

Yet she had her moments of excitement and humour as well. She was very amused by a story she heard while in Rousay, and often told afterwards, about a girl who went to the local shoemaker and had her measurements taken for a pair of new shoes. At the same time she took a message from her mother with the required measurements to make a lid to fit a certain size of pot. When the shoes were finished they did not fit at all, so the girl took them back to the shoemaker. He looked intently at the shoes for a few minutes, then said very sorrowfully, "I doot a'm need a misglam, for a'm need thee shöen tae the measure o' the pot lid."

Jessie had not lost all her fondness for humour of her own making either. On special occasions, when the family had a fowl for dinner, Jessie got hold of the breast bone and sent them all off into peals of laughter – all but one, who could not understand what the others found to laugh at every time her back was turned to them. This girl was a servant at Breck. She was most kind to Jessie and would wash her hair on a Saturday evening, and see that she was dressed nicely to go to church when she could get leave. But – and here was the cause of the laughter – although otherwise this girl was nice-looking, her nose was the very shape of the breast bone of a fowl; and when her back was turned to the company, Jessie would produce her hidden replica of it and set it on her own nose. She knew it was naughty of her, but the temptation to have a little bit of fun was too great to resist.

One day when the boat arrived at Rousay a strange sound was heard, and a neighbour who happened to be there at the time said to Jessie, "Lass, does thoo hear that sound? That's an 'eum' bull coming tae thee tae luck efter." Jessie felt her heart sink to her boots, and her knees go all wobbly, for sure enough the sound drew nearer, and was plainly coming in her direction.

After the bull had been safely tied up in the byre, Uncle said to Jessie, "Noo Chesso, thoo must tak' this baste tae the hill wi' the kye next morning, bit never be thoo faird for him till he starts lookin' at thee, and pawing the grund wi' his fore-feet, then thoo must be ready, for he will be coming for thee as soon as he lifts his tail straight up behind him. but don't run, for that is the worst thing thoo could do, as he would soon overtak' thee, and toss thee, and maybe trample thee tae daeth. Here's a strong stick, and just thoo stand thee grund, and when he comes near enough for thee tae hit him, give him all thoo kin draw with the stick on the point o' his nose, whar the ring is, and if he comes again, just thoo meet him the same way, and mak' it good and hard. It's the only way tae meet an eum baste like him."

For the first two or three days the bull paid no attention to Jessie, but one day she saw him pawing the ground and looking straight at her. Then he raised his tail in the air and came straight towards her. Remembering Uncle's advice, Jessie waited for him to come and hit him on the nose as hard as she could. He stood as if dazed for a minute or two, then came on again. With increased confidence, Jessie stood her ground, and gave him all she could draw right on the point of his nose where it was sore after ringing. He just stood still, moving his head from side to side, making a loud 'sushing' sound. Jessie said that the blood and 'worsham' poured from his nose on to the ground. He had, however, got more than he had bargained for, and he never again attempted to attack.

All things have an ending, so Jessie's herding days passed. But she never forgot afterwards the long, lovely sunny days she spent on the hills of Rousay. One of her most persistent hopes was to take me with her to Rousay one day and show me all the places she had known then – Mitchim and Blotchneyfiold, Frotoft, Sourin and Waster, the Muckle Water, the caves and so on, but her dream never came true.

When Jessie ceased to be a herd at Breck, she did not leave Rousay, but went to be a servant at Saviskail. The house stood near the shore, with a beautiful stretch of sandy beach. The

sand being so near and plentiful, it was used to sprinkle all over the floors of the house and steading every morning after the previous day's sand and accumulated filth had been swept up. Jessie thought that it was a fine way to keep the farm house and out-houses clean without too much work being involved, but she never saw it used anywhere else. She enjoyed the time at Saviskail, but she wanted to be back in Kirkwall where she belonged, so that she could go home in her off-time.

When she finally left Rousay, she came to Kirkwall to be a servant at a house in Albert Square. She was happy there, but found one snag that made her think about looking for somewhere else to go. The burn from Papdale ran all the way down the lane called "The Burn", and down Albert Lane to the Peerie Sea, which then came up to the lower end of Albert Lane. It was open all the way, and the slops from the houses were emptied into it, so that in summer when there was little water to carry the refuse away, the smell was so abominable that it made Jessie feel sick and ill.

Without much trouble she got a place in a boarding house. One Sunday, when it was Jessie's turn to stay home from church to make the Sunday dinner, she found she needed some parsley to put into the soup, so she ran out down the lane to the garden to get it, and in her hurry left the back door open. She ran back just in time to see a large black dog coming out through the door with the Sunday beef in his mouth, and turning up Albert Street. She ran to look after him, but he was already loping along past the "Big Tree", so she went sadly back into the house wondering what to do about it. She made the soup with the cereal and the vegetables and enriched it with some beef dripping, of which they always had a good supply. After their first shock of having no meat for dinner, the boarders tucked into the soup and found nothing to complain about.

The mention of roast beef dripping reminds me that her mistress always had a supply of candles made every summer to last the household over the winter. They cut lengths of stout string, dipped these into the melted fat, and laid them out in rows to harden. They did this time after time until the candles were about half an inch thick, then they were stored in a cool cupboard ready for winter use.

The candles were rather ragged in appearance and the name given them by Jessie's mistress was "Ruffles". There was one student boarder, while Jessie was there, who was studying every evening to pass an examination. He was given his share of ruffles, but when he found he needed more, he went and helped himself. When winter came and the mistress went to the cupboard, she found, like old Mrs. Hubbard, that the cupboard was bare, for the boarder had used up her whole winter supply sitting up till all hours studying by the light of her precious ruffles.

At this place, for the first time in her life, Jessie had mashed potatoes and fried mutton chops for dinner. She thought it was the best food she had ever tasted, and often spoke about how good it was. The kind of rushed, hurried life in a boarding house, notwithstanding many advantages, left Jessie feeling as if she had no time to breathe, so she went to a house in King Street, that seemed by contrast as quiet as the grave. Jessie used to say that it was the only house she had been in that kept the Sabbath as it was meant to be kept. There was no work done that day; everything that could be done in preparation was done on Saturday. In the early morning the washing pot was put on and the washing done, the woollen things hung up to dry, and the white things spread out on the grass in the back garden to bleach over Sunday. As soon as the wash pot came off, the soup pot was put on and a huge pot of soup made about a large cut of beef that had been bought the previous Saturday. It was placed on an ashet, well salted, and turned every day,

then it was washed and put into cold water and boiled in the soup, usually barley-broth. On Sunday at dinner-time, Jessie had to take jugs of this soup to several poor people in whom her new mistress was interested.

Often, while working in the town, Jessie began to long for the freedom and fresh air of the country life she had left behind. So it came about that she was engaged to go to Smoogro House as house tablemaid to Mrs. Still. When Alex Groundwater's eldest daughter, Mary, saw Jessie, she said, "She won't be long there. She's too bonnie, and will soon be snapped up," little thinking that Jessie was destined to become her stepmother.

Jessie's younger sister, Mary, was invited out for a week by Mrs. Still, because she thought Jessie might be lonesome coming to the country and leaving her home in Kirkwall. Dr. Still was very fond of fishing and while Mary was there he proudly brought home a good-sized trout. Mary was allowed to learn to wait at the table and one day Jessie had forgot to put down the beetroot, so Mrs. Still asked Mary to go and get it. Mary had never heard of beetroot, and when she came to Jessie she said, "The mistress wanted the Big Troot." Greatly puzzled to know what she could want with a big raw trout in the middle of her dinner, Jessie put the trout on an ashet and gave it to Mary, who took it into the dining-room and presented it to Mrs. Still. The lady looked a bit astonished at first, but then said it was not the big trout, but the beetroot she had asked her to bring. Very crestfallen, Mary brought back the trout and got the beetroot.

Jessie had not been long at Smoogro before she married Alex. And here my story comes round, full-circle, to its end; for I have already told the story of their life together. All I have written I heard from their lips, mainly from my mother. It is a simple story, but I hope it will give Orcadians of today some idea of what life was like at a time when conditions were much harder than they are now, but when the virtues of courage and fortitude overcame an inheritance of poverty and oppression.