

Butterfly
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Cover photo of Peacock butterfly taken by T.C.

CHAPTER ONE

Resplendently dressed in the full MacInnes tartan, a heavily-built man strides to the mahogany counter of an old-fashioned shop in a back-street of Edinburgh. He heaves himself to an impressive height and fixes the young assistant with a forceful gaze.

"Hoots mon!" he cries.

The young man steps back, with raised eyebrow. The customer leans across, confidentially.

"Twill be a braw bricht moonlicht nicht, tonicht!"

"Pardon?" replies the other, in a conspicuously foreign accent.

"You'rre not Scots, arre you!" The deep voice carries strong echoes of the far South – of England, that is, not Dumfries and Galloway. "Why arren't Scots serrving here? What's this place called?"

"Walter's Tartan Treasure Trove."

"Exactly. I wish to speak to Walterr."

"That would be difficult, sir. Sir Walter Scott 'as been dead some years." He smiles. "But you are right; I am not a Scot. I am French, studying at your splendid university."

The customer growls. "I'm a Scot. My grandfatherr was born in Ackerrackle." A titter behind him is quickly suppressed.

"I believe you mean Acharacle," responds the Frenchman patiently; he stresses the second syllable and aspirates the 'ch' like a true West Highlander. "I 'oliday there," he explains. "But I must ask you what you would like. There's a bit of a queue building and my boss is at lunch."

The customer peers behind, to field a volley of smirks and scowls. He turns back quickly.

"I was told this is the only place wherr I can buy a thirrteen foot by ten foot saltire. You know, Scottish flag. St Andrew's Cross."

The Frenchman sighs, just perceptibly. "I'm aware of that, sir. Yes, I'll get one from the back; if you could just wait a wee while, Mr...er..."

"Pfortner."

Eyes sparkle. "But I believe you said your grandfather was a Scot..."

“On my motherr’s side. My fatherr’s grandfatherr came over from Gerrmany before the Warr. But this is getting very perrsonal.” His voice is rising.

“I apologize, sir. I’ll get the flag.”

He struggles back a few minutes later under a massive bundle, which he compresses hazardously into a very large polythene carrier bag.

“One saltire, four metres by three, sir.”

“Humph!” barks Pförtner, clearly offended by the metrication, but he hands over the money readily enough, stuffs the flag into a voluminous rucksack, shredding the bag in the process, and exits the shop, muttering. Laughter follows him even before the door has closed.

* * * * *

But he was used to this. Pförtner had cultivated grumpy misfit even while living at home with his parents. With the essential aid of his mother’s patience and his father’s detachment, this miracle of concord had lasted something over thirty years. Then, three months before, he decided it was time for change, to get back to his roots. With no gift for languages, he could not access his German ones: Scottish they had to be.

So after breakfast one morning, before leaving for work, he sat his mother down in her favourite chair. He stood, legs apart, towering above her though with hands clenched nervously together behind his back.

“Motherr,” he began. “I know this will come as a terrible shock to you. And you must not take it as even the slightest show of ingratitude for the wonderrful way you have both looked afterr me all these...”

“Get on with it!” laughed Mrs Pförtner.

“I...I am going to leave home.”

If his mother struggled to resist the temptation to leap up, ask him when he was going and could she help him pack, her face betrayed nothing. Instead, she remained quietly seated and nodded her head sagely.

“Well! We shall miss you very much, of course, Johnny. You will write, won’t you? And phone. And isn’t there something called Skype, so we can see you?”

“I’ll do all those when I can,” replied Johnny quietly. His voice quavered with obvious relief, and just a little fret at how calmly his mother took this bombshell. “I haven’t decided wherre to settle yet, but I’ll tell you when I know, of course.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard for a carpenter like you to find work. So I’m not going to get worried. Perhaps this is a good time for you.” She stood up and they hugged briefly.

His mother was absolutely right. Languages might have been his Achilles’ Heel, but J. Pförtner, carpenter, had been in continual demand by builders and specialist construction firms ever since he discovered his talents in his mid-teens. Scattered around the area, new buildings and historic reconstructions alike were graced by his impeccable joinery and he could have worked a 16-hour day or more, such was the popularity of his skill. But he had a project, which brought him home promptly at 5:30 every day.

This Project was housed in a massive shed in the garden, itself built by Johnny. His father was a gifted linguist and in his twenties had learned a modicum of Scots Dialect and even Gaelic to impress and entertain his prospective parents-in-law. But in practical matters, had he employed his feet rather than his hands the result would

have been the same. He could hold one end of a plank while his son fitted the other, but that was his limit.

This shed was not The Project. Inside, built up on a trailer, was a boat. It was seven metres long and modelled on the James Caird, the converted whaler which Shackleton used for his near-miraculous voyage through mountainous seas to South Georgia. It was entirely handmade, lovingly, painstakingly over a period of some fifteen years. Oars or sail should have powered it, but with no friends willing to share the burden of rowing nor any knowledge himself of sailing, he had made one concession to modernity in the form of an outboard motor.

The magnificent vessel's completion was the spur for him to leave home and head North. But first he had tested himself and his boat for a few weeks in the February mid-tidal rips of the Western Solent, before he declared himself ready for even more challenging seas. Though he drew the line at the Corryvreckan whirlpool.

His work had been well-paid and his spending limited, so he had more than enough savings for a year or so without employment. This was to be his 'gap year', and he would spend at least the Summer part on a Scottish island, well to the west of Acharacle. Indeed, after much study, he settled on a place well to the west of almost anywhere. He would be nearly the first Scotsman travellers across the Atlantic would see, had they cared to look, as he would set up on Mingulay, at the southern tip of the Outer Hebrides. St Kilda was further west but sometimes inhabited; Rockall was way beyond, of course, but even he would struggle on a bare granite lump washed clean by stormy seas.

So Mingulay it was to be. He had spent a careful couple of hours with Google Earth and established there was a beach on the sheltered side and a ruined house or two, which his skill should make habitable within a month. Plenty of wind for his generator, fish in the sea once he'd learned how to catch them, Barra and the Castlebay shops 10 miles or so away for a visit every couple of weeks when sea conditions permitted. For an unsociable character like himself, what more could be asked?

The National Trust for Scotland owned Mingulay, but they were intrigued by his proposal and decided to humour him, on an experimental basis. They set some stringent conditions, but as Johnny had no interest in setting up a caravan site or fairground, or in drilling for oil, these would not prove too onerous.

He set off in early March, the boat towed behind his decrepit Land Rover, and by mid-April was fully established, in security if not yet in comfort. A wind generator charged his mobile phone, drove his laptop, and fuelled mundane pursuits like cooking. And with all his skills, luxuries were well within reach.

But there was something more urgent. He was a Scot, to all intents and purposes, and he wanted everyone to know. He conceived the design of a massive flagpole, to sit on the top of Carnan, Mingulay's peak, and to carry a huge saltire. An earlier walk around the island had revealed a telegraph pole, beached at the foot of the hills in the south; presumably fallen from a boat or washed across from some coastal road. When he later uncovered raised beds made from old railway sleepers, he was made. With rocks from around the coast, and a few lengths of four-by-four timber purchased from Barra, he would be ready. A handcart rescued from near the raised beds brought everything to the top of Carnan, though it took a week and he regretted that the NTS had forbidden him a quad-bike.

A further few days passed while he designed the structure on his computer, then he put on his best clothes and travelled to Edinburgh for the saltire. Towards the end of the third week he carted it up to the magnificent mast, now held rock-steady,

indeed steadied by rocks, on Mingulay's highest point. He attached the flag carefully to the rope, though not without a struggle. The wind refused to decide where it was going, nor where it was coming from, and certainly not how hard to blow. But after twenty minutes his flag was high and visible for miles. At that same moment the wind settled into a firm but steady breeze to the South-East.

Johnny Pförtner, Scot, felt happier than he could remember. He wheeled his cart joyously down the hill, glancing back frequently to see his saltire guide him, so it seemed, back to his new home. He planned not to leave Mingulay for a week or two. He had plenty of provisions and anyway the weather forecast was unfriendly.

Next day a storm blew up. He anticipated its coming partly from the shipping forecast, partly from his increased knowledge of the sky. Acquaintances in Castlebay gave him the usual island story that if he could see Berneray it would rain soon, if not it was raining already. He laughed, dismissed it and taught himself to read the clouds on the Western horizon. So he was prepared.

But at the storm's height, above the howl of the wind around his cottage came a rumbling and roaring which he realized with horror was his flag, drumming with the vortices it shed in a sixty-knot gale. Johnny raced up the hill to where the flagpole rocked like a metronome on Speed. More seriously, he watched the trailing edge of the saltire and saw that a few more storms of that vehemence would tear it to shreds. With a tremendous effort, he hauled it down and furled it into a box he had fixed securely among the rocks. He would need to do this whenever a gale was threatened. It mattered not, as few people would then be around to see it, and they would have other things on their mind.

Next morning, the storm abated and the sky cleared. He mounted Carnan and hoisted the flag once more. Again the wind eddied and swirled and buffeted him as he arrived but fixed in strength and direction once the flag was up. But this did not detain him: curiosity was not one of his strengths. Later in the day he noticed dark clouds away to the South-East but the sun shone, and indeed set on Mingulay, exactly as in the song.

He listened to the forecast and left his flag for two more days, before another gale was promised and he took it down for the duration. He kept up this pattern for several weeks, totally unaware of a very different storm brewing on the mainland.

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An extremely worried chief forecaster studied the reports and maps for the past month. The day's newspaper rested on the chair where he had thrown it, its headline screaming for his resignation. Central Scotland had experienced more rain than in any previous four-week period. Ever. That would have been notable, but the fact they had forecast it wrong time after time was scandalous.

Earlier in the day he had chaired a bad-tempered meeting with the computing and data collection departments; he suspected it would be the last such meeting, at least where he was concerned. Janice MacLeod, head of computing, had offered to resign but was told to sort the problem first. She claimed the model was unchanged from that which had predicted successfully for the last three years and therefore there must be faults in the data collection. In the ensuing outcry, sheet upon sheet of printout proved that all the sensors were working and data processing was unchanged, so it must be the computer model.

Eventually, the chief forecaster was able to bring about some calm and suggest that perhaps a virus had got into the programme. Janice agreed, pointing out that the

algorithms were so complex that a small change, hidden in the darker recesses of calculation, could generate a chaotic state and make forecasting unpredictable. The classic butterfly effect, in fact.

“But it’s not been unpredictable,” commented the chief quietly. “It’s been wrong every time fine weather was forecast.” The point was conceded and a promise made to look for an unauthorized change in the model. “It could take some weeks,” was Janice’s final contribution, though she was aware that the head of department probably did not have that leeway. And conceivably nor did she.

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A few days after this meeting, though of course blissfully ignorant of it, Johnny decided he ought to visit home for a couple of weeks. Mobile phone contact was patchy, so his parents were very keen to see him again and to catch up on news. Next morning he walked up the hill, furlled the saltire into its box, looked West to check that the weather would be fine for at least an hour or so, then came down to throw a few things into his boat and set off for Castlebay, there to pick up the Land Rover and catch the ferry to Oban. It was a sixteen-hour journey all told, so he would stop over at a motorway services near Glasgow and get home towards the end of the following afternoon. As always, he gave his parents only a couple of hours’ warning and was annoyed to find they were going out for the evening.

Shattered after the drive, he retired early and conversation had to wait till breakfast next morning. After the usual exchange of family and village news, his father asked:

“What have you been up to? How on earth have you coped with the Scottish weather?”

“It’s not been that bad. Half a dozen storms and a few dreary wet days. Otherwise pretty sunny.”

“Really? I thought it rained every day.”

“Not wherr I am.”

“But don’t you ever listen to the news? Oh no, of course, just 70s music,” he grinned.

“So? What’s been happening then?”

His father sighed. “Only the worst month of weather forecasting for decades, possibly ever. In Scotland, anyway.” Johnny looked blank. His mother continued.

“The regional head of forecasting’s resigned. Couldn’t explain why it’s all gone so wrong. But how come it hasn’t affected you?”

“I’m well to the West. Only forty miles from Tiree - highest sunshine record in the country. The rain waits to get to the mainland before it drops. So I only listen to the shipping forecast.” He shrugged.

“Anyway, how long are you home for? It will be lovely to have you back here again.”

“A couple of weeks.” He smiled. “I take it there’s a few repairs to do?”

He did stay for the time he said, dividing it between jobs around the house and garden in the evenings and work for his former employers during the day. Towards the end of the period he looked at his earnings and realized that if he came back every couple of months and worked for a fortnight, he could afford to stay on Mingulay indefinitely.

He now listened to the ordinary weather forecasts, only to discover that they were more or less correct, or no more wrong than usual. The new head of forecasting in

Scotland was jubilant and took all the credit, though unseen by the outside world
Janice MacLeod was completely mystified. They had changed nothing in the model. It
just suddenly began to work again.