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SUTHERLAND *Life*

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SIX BLACK HENS

By Sally Orr

Moving out to the country took lots of trips with the old Fordie Van. Although only a distance of some ten miles it was a whole new way of life for us. Leaving pavements, street lights and milk delivered to the door, even if it was by horse and cart. We became part of the crofting community of the Eastern seaboard. Although not a croft, the small cottage had a fair sized garden, a burn, a field, some sheds, and a bit of railway track.

Husband went off to work, leaving a pregnant wife, a small daughter, a sea of mud, huge numbers of boxes of what appeared to be junk and a mongrel dog whose only ambition at the time was to hunt, chase and destroy any hen within a three mile radius. Not a particularly good entry into this community.

The burn now swollen with November rains rushed down the side of the house and disappeared with loud gurglings under the road. Half a mile away it flew over the cliffs into the ever pounding North Sea. This whole phenomena thrilled my daughter, who flung anything that came to hand into this swirling brown water, even if the next stop was the ocean.

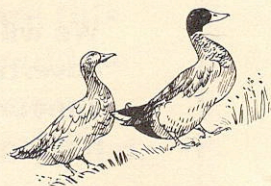
Many years later when I was shut up in a tiny flat in Govan I remembered that sea, the gentle slopes of arable land leading down to the two hundred feet high cliffs. The moon at night, crofts etched against the ever changing silver sea, the winter gales and tearing clouds like some gigantic living painting. Rain, snow and sun rushed past our windows. Rare birds hunted in the rushes on the railway track. Huge purple orchids came up each summer. I felt only envy for the people living in our old house.

Somehow the mud round the house was transformed into a nice lawn, boxes were unpacked and things became quite civilized, apart from the field mice that lived in the larder in the winter. Soon fine strong son was born. Neighbours called with lovingly knitted garments, an elderly community was glad to welcome a new life into the district.

The dog still continued a relentless battle against the hens in the area, various suggestions were put forward. "Tie a dead hen round her neck".

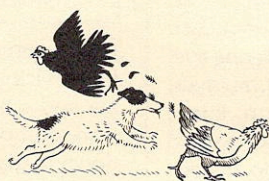
This seemed to me to be a bit hard on the rest of us, as we had to share our living quarters. "Get hens of your own". "Keep her tied up". "Give her away". Getting hens of our own, seemed the most attractive proposition, and I tentatively asked if any one knew where I could get Black hens. These taking my fancy, after some daft poem I had learnt as a child. On returning home from our weekly shopping trip I discovered six black ladies, perched precariously in the tool shed. Our life of animal husbandry had begun.

The hens were quickly followed by ducks which nearly disappeared for ever down the burn but somehow they always came home for their tea at night. The long light summer evenings found them still miles away searching out snails in some rushy field. Generally if we bellowed "Duck, duck, duck," they would raise



there long elegant necks, and come waddling home across the fields. They laid eggs all over the place, the baby ducks were stunningly beautiful, but ducks are notoriously bad Mothers, and many little ducks perished. However we did manage to produce "The best duck in the Parish".

Every July the parish had its own local Agricultural show, in some way or other nearly every member of the community was involved. The rivalry in the baking tent became more devious than the tension between Washington and Moscow. Neighbours often called at odd hours wanting duck eggs, these being supposedly better for producing a lighter sponge than hens eggs. There was tremendous grooming of cattle, clipping of sheep, washing of bantams. Young girls cleaned tack, polished boots and oiled hoofs till they were asleep on their feet. Wild flowers were gathered and thrust in jam jars, paintings were pasted on bits of card, dogs were groomed, pet rabbits were squeezed



into boxes, dark suits were pressed and new outfits were purchased. The show committee wore red badges and rushed about the field with a great air of importance.

If, as it often was, a wet day, nearly every one disappeared into the beer tent, dogs babies and all. Glasses could only be handed back over peoples heads, how anything ever got paid for I could never work out. The heat and

the squash was unbelievable, young men got starry eyed and young women made promises they would never keep.


The "Rural" tent on the other hand was always in perfect order, manned by an army of splendid ladies, no one was allowed to touch the tablet although at the end of the day there was never as much on display as at the start. There was generally a very heated argument about the quality of the judges skill, and no one, had even cut Annies cake, although every one agreed it should have won first prize.

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Sports trophies were won or lost, well groomed dogs, dreadful scruffy dogs, fighting dogs all were entered for the dog show. It was generally a lady from Ross-shire who performed the judging with lots of gold bangles, red nails and false eyelashes. We were all spellbound.

Prize animals were paraded round the ring, generally someone's heifer got a bit frisky, which caused loud cheers from the crowd, the poultry was judged, handsome bantam cocks, their cages festooned with rosettes shook their combs, and peered at the crowd with one eye. The day began to draw to an end, animals, children and men were rounded up, things were put back in boxes, sheep were hearded onto floats, cows were shoved into trailers. Sticky, tired and triumphant we returned home, our Drake had won first prize, somehow we managed to raise the energy to bath babies, light fires and prepare a meal.

There were regular annual events which decked our calendar, the arrival of the herring to the coast. John from up the hill, a crofting fisherman, came round with his battered

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purple van selling silver darlings to every one in the vicinity. For a couple of quid, a cup of tea and a bit of news, these gleaming bodies were dumped in the sink, either to be salted down in plastic buckets or split and put in the freezer. The house glistened with fish scales, the hens pecked the heads and the sea gulls came down to eat the guts, we felt secure at least we would not go hungry for a bit anyway.

The other great occasion was when Alan's cow went to Jimmie's bull. We all had to stand at our respective road ends, while Alan, dog and bellowing black cow came down the hill to Jimmies on the A.9. The bull bellowed encouragement pressed his massive weight against the rusty fence. How not to let the eager bull out, while letting the cow in, always caused a bit of bother. More neighbours appeared with dogs and sticks, quite a crowd had gathered a couple of tourists capturing the quaint local customs on polaroid. This was all too much for the bride, who rolled her eyes, put her ears back and belted back up the hill to her nice byre. Old men ran, dogs barked, the whole process was repeated, finally after a lot of puffing and blowing on everyones part the happy couple were united. We all watched spellbound while the marriage was consummated, this somehow had to be part of the deal. Finally the entertainment over we all went home, Allan stopped to have a dram with Jimmie settle his account.

Snow and drifts caused not so much hardship as comradeship, we trudged through drifts to see Jessie and were welcomed in to sit by the roaring fire, we were served cups of tea, scones

and pancakes, given all the latest news, then we went our way back down the hill. Our wellies full of snow we returned home. John came down the road with the tractor to clear away the snow for the Postie and much to the childrens dismay the school bus. The type of weather that distressed us most were the February gales, they could blow from the sea for weeks on end, any vegetables left in the garden were blown out by the roots, the hens desperate to find shelter huddled under the dike and laid no eggs in protest, the oil stove continuously went out and the lino in the kitchen rose up as if it had a life of its own. The wind coming under the front door was like a frozen knife, salt spray ran down the windows, and the sea roared against the cliffs like some demented wild animal.

Suddenly when every one felt they could stand it no longer, the wind dropped and a wonderful calmness took over, we repaired the damage and got on with life.

The other great event was the Christmas party, this was organised by the ladies of the W.R.I. in the now closed village school, every person in the community from nothing to a hundred years old attended and once more dark suits were pressed, little girls would put on their best frocks, boys would be polished and scrubbed and glow like bright red apples. We sat round the walls of the old school room, the stove at the far end glowed red, we were issued with cups and a plate and the ladies of the Rural went round with mountains of sandwiches, homemade cakes and steaming tea pots, the men in dark suits got hotter, hankerchiefs were taken out and brows mopped.

There was an expectant hush, a banging at the front door, lights were put out, a clumping of hugh wellies. Then there was Santa with a hugh sack over his shoulder, and a storm lantern, unrecognizable behind beard and hood. Shrieks of excitement were heard as each child was called by name and given a small parcel, the boys shook hands and the girls gave Santa a hurried peck. Mothers looked proud and Fathers discussed the price of cattle at last

weeks sale. Four rousing cheers for Santa - "Hip hip hurrah, hip hip hurrah, hip hip hurrah". Santa waved at the assembled crowd saying he must hurry as he knew that the reindeer were eating all Alex's sweets. Roars of laughter and clapping followed then Santa was sent out in the frozen night. Nearly every one who was able made some contribution to the entertainment. Thomas's granddaughter did a fine rendering of "I am going to be a County Girl again". Games were played and prizes won, some of the bigger boys cheated at musical chairs, the band arrived and couples who had stared at each other all evening began to dance. A hugh dust rose from the ancient floor boards when the entire population did the Hokie Kokie and the small children began to fall asleep on everyones lap. People began to drift home, it had been a grand night. Was Santa Jimmy or that new man who had come to the Bank?

Spring or at least Summer did come, the larks began to sing and the snippe drum so high you could never see them. Lambs were born and grew big and the summer visitors arrived in droves to eat all the herring and crab and drink all the homemade wine. They could never understand how we passed the time and said we must stay with them next year. We longed for the dark evenings, the fire and the telly. The children got bigger and went to school, coming home with little green jotters and thumbled reading books, sometimes in tears and sometimes in triumph.

The days rushed into years the children grew up and circumstances changed. One day, I had to leave. I left in a cattle float with all my worldly goods, a very old dog and six black hens, the great great grand daughters of our original ladies.

