



Brian McNeill

The Horseman's Word

and other stories

Songdog

Edited by Gabriele Haefs

Ian McNeill, in memoriam

ISBN 978-3-903349-03-2

1. Auflage 2020

© Songdog Verlag, Bern und Wien

Cover: Brian McNeill (Grafik)

My thanks to...

my home town of Falkirk for surrounding me
with Scotland's speech,
Douglas Gifford, for opening my eyes
to the best Scots writers,
— and Jacqueline France for Lesmahagow.

The homily which wedded me irrevocably to Scotland's vernacular speech was delivered by a curled and headscarved bus conductress to an audience of her peers at about 4 am on a wet January morning in 1968, across the cavernous locker room of the Alexander's bus garage outside my home town of Falkirk.

“Legs oan her like Betty Grable, he says! Ah'll Betty Grable him, ah'll tell yez that for nuthin! A coupon like a soor ploom an' an erse like twa eggs in a hankie!”

The resulting shrieks of laughter made me look up from the Victorian tombstone of a novel I was reading for university. For a split second the contrast confused. What, gentle reader, was this strange language? How could a person of my exquisite sensibilities have ended up among the rude mechanicals who spoke it?

And then it dawned on me that I'd known this vitality — subtle, succinct, pithy and pungent — all my life, but like many another Scot, I'd simply taken it for granted. Teachers, librarians, even my parents, had been unable to contemplate the word *dialect* without an outright scowl, a raised eyebrow or a patronising smile. As the joyous cackle of response which had just filled a

freezing bus garage died away, I donned my ticket machine and jumped on the rear platform of my double decker, a changed man.

Dialect...

To its users, as natural as breathing.

To its detractors, a perpetual challenge to *talking proper*.

In the half century since my brief career as a bus conductor, I've listened, avidly.

So, apologies to whoever (I honestly can't remember) wrote the Victorian tombstone. I'm sure it was very worthwhile, but I never did manage to chisel my way through to the other side of it.

Not least because I couldn't stop wondering, dear reader, if the heroine's backside would look like *twa eggs in a hankie*.

Brian McNeill

<i>1913 The Horseman's Word</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>1955 Take Your Partners</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>1962 Flash Gorton's Leg</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>1967 The Auld Argyll</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>1972 Shaft</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>2016 The Last Battle</i>	<i>133</i>

1913

The Horseman's Word

ON THE BROW OF the queer-shaped hill that gives Windyknowe its name there's a hollow, and if you'd been there at five in the morning, you'd have seen nothing but the faint glimmer of the kitchen's single paraffin lamp.

You'd have known the place for what it was even in the dark, though, for the night's last trick had been a brief rain which killed the wind, and the smells of a working farm gearing up for an October day would have found you on the hill-top; baking scones, the reek of the animals and their dung, the half-sweet smell of the midden's rot. And the sounds of the place would have risen through the still air as well; the whinnying and snorting of the three pairs being harnessed and bridled, the voices of the ploughmen, whispering, comforting the beasts with a word here, a snatch of song there, a muttered oath against the clumsiness of dawn fingers on buckles and feed bags. A word of two of complaint at the harshness — but only of the morning's weather, not of the morning's work, for though the place had come down in the world, Windyknowe still had its pride, and no man would have thought it right to feed himself before his Clydesdales.

As the light grew you'd have seen the rickety wooden door swing open. The squeal of its hinges was the signal for the yard's occupants to disappear. Two black and white cats retreated under the byre's cracked stone guttering and the cockerel sullenly marched his brood towards the sanctuary of



the kailyard's mud. Only Louth the collie, chamberlain of the kitchen court, stayed to welcome the three men who emerged from the stable.

The first was young, tall and muscular. He rolled up his flannel sleeves as he walked, and there was an eager spring to his step that belied his troubled eyes. The next was a small man in his middle years, balding and round-shouldered, thin to the point of emaciation. His dour stride was resentment made flesh — resentment at himself, his companions and his surroundings. Last came a man who'd never see sixty again, grey-bearded but still straight-backed, a brown tweed cap in his hand. At the yard's corner he paused to pat Louth's head, bending and rising slowly, as though too swift a movement might cause pain. The dog nuzzled his callused hand as far as the kitchen step, then crept away at the sound of the voice which guarded the door.

Arms akimbo, Windyknowe's mistress began her tirade — boots and mud, kitchen maids, sloth, waste and extravagance. It came to a head in a cold proclamation; she wisnae made o' money, they'd a wheen o' rigs tae ploo, and they'd better be quick, for it was her siller that was wastin', no' their ain. Folks said it was the lung disease which had harried John Fordyce into an early grave, God Rest His Soul, but his wife had given it a good run for its money. Fordyce had known The Word, they whispered, the legendary Horseman's Word that gave a ploughman power over woman and horse — but what good was that against a creature that was half-hag and half-shrew? In the kitchen his widow's litany went unanswered except for a defiant Grace and a clatter of chairs and plates as the men sat to their brose. Then the voice softened as she put a scarf round her son's fat neck and told him tae be sure an' no' lift the seed sacks himsel' in Falkirk,

that's what they twa lazy auld codgers at Scrimgeour's got paid for.

There were no farewells, just the creak of the cart's bad wheel, the snap of Molly the mare's reins, and the satisfied sound of young John Fordyce whistling to himself, already tasting the dram, a sly-edged smile on his lips at exchanging a morning's work for an hour's flirtation with the barmaid of the Wheatsheaf.

And once the yard was quiet again, you'd have seen Lisbeth the kitchen maid, skirt held high enough for a man to get a sight of her fine ankles, picking her way across the cobbles with a wooden bucket on her arm. She worked the pump handle, stood upright, placed a weary hand at the small of her back, and stretched. Then she brushed at her apron. At first glance you'd have thought that the action was casual, that she meant to wipe or to smooth, but then you'd have seen a clenching of her fist which fitted neither purpose — and somehow the end of the whole movement became a caress. It was as though her hand could not decide between comfort and blame.

It was over in a second, though. She shooed Louth away from her clean hem, arched her body carefully against the bucket's weight and balanced her way back through the puddles. At the door she set down her burden. A white linen cap and a handful of pins appeared from the skirt's pocket. Her brows furrowed as she jabbed the cap into place upon her black curls and pulled at the apron again, harder this time. Then she squared her shoulders, made the frown disappear, and went back into the kitchen.

...Sae help me God, if ah feel the brush o' yer hip against my airm yin mair time ah'll jist grab haud o' ye an' damn the

consequences! It's mair than flesh an' blood can staun, the closeness o' ye. Why d'ye never answer me wi' yer eyes? Why?

Is it pride? Or sport? Ah've tried tae coort ye — wi' compliments, an' fetchin' an' cairryin' an' the like, but it's mair than a month noo since ah laid yon bunch o' cornfloors at yer door, an' still ye ignore me — yet ye've a smile for auld Airchie, an' even for that soor limmer Muir at the side o' me here. The yin's auld enough tae be yer faither an' the ither's mad! The rantin' o' him last nicht in the bothy! A' for the askin' o' a question! Tellin' me ah'm in league wi' the devil if ah learn The Word. Him! A man that's torn the life frae baith wife an' horse — an' if he looks at you yon wey again ah'll kill 'im! An' yon thrawn auld bitch ower at the fire an' a', the wey she talks tae ye! Ah'd swing for them baith, sae help me. If ye'd only gie me a *sign*.

Yet ye're no' cauld tae me, either... Ye've watched, ah ken ye have, often enough. At the pump, when ah wash masel, an' last hairst, when the sarks cam' aff in the heat. Ye ken ah'm strang, an' weel-formed, an' — an' ready for ye! Sae why? Is a plooman no' guid enough? Is that it?

But the day'll come when ah am guid enough! Sooner than ye think! There's chynge comin' — a war, they say, wi' the Kaiser an' the Germans, an' that's a chance, a chance tae pit ma hauns oan mair than the shafts o' a ploo! If a man wis tae list an' dae weel, wha's tae say he couldnae come hame wi' a stripe or twa oan his airm, or mibby even a bar tae his shooder... Whit wid ye say tae a captain's hat oan the peg? Wid that fit yer pride, Lisbeth? Wid that match yer airs? There's no' a man here that's done the like — or will! No' auld Fordyce, God rest him, or his drunken mammy's boy o' a son — he'll hide ahint his mither's skirts till sheep suckle kye, that yin. No' even Airchie's done it, or —

Damn you Muir keep yer eyes frae her! Damn you!

An' yet ah cannae blame him... The man's no' been born that could ignore ye; even a blind man wid ken ye for braw! Jist the smell o' yer skin wid make him want tae reach oot an' touch. Dear God, ah'd touch ye... Aye, an' mair... Ah'd lay ye doon ahint the stooks or in the stable, kilt up yer petticoats an' spread yer thighs an' tak ye — an' sin be damned! Let the meenister ca' hell doon about ma ears, he's jist a man like the rest o' us, he'd curse me an' think tae dae the same. Wha's tae — Oh, God, when ye turn! The grace o' ye! When ah see ye reach for the bellows ah want tae come up at yer back, pu' the linen frae yer shooders an' cup ma hauns ower yer breasts. An' haud ye, press ye tae me... Mibby ah'd be the first, an' mibby ah'd no', there's stories enough, but it widnae maitter. Yince, that's a' ah'm askin'... Jist the yince, an' ah swear ye'd never hanker for anither! Ye'll no' find better than Jamie Gow tae show ye whaur the bonny black hare bides, ma lass, there's enough'll tell ye that! Ask Jenny Webster, or Sarah an' Peggy at Bothkennar, or Meg McFarlane that keeps the inn!

Aye... There's plenty kens, but they're nothin' at the side o' ye... Nothin'. Clay.

Lisbeth, Lisbeth, whit's tae be done tae win ye? Airchie, ah'll ask ye again, is there really a Word? If there is, mibby Muir's no' sae far wrang wi' his talk o' the devil, for ah'd fee on wi' Auld Nick tae ken it, richt enough. An' think it a braw bargain. Ah'd dae onythin'. Afore the altar or ahint the byre. Onythin'. If ye'd jist gie me a sign...

...It was The Lord's Will. He could nae langer countenance the barren womb o' her. Or the curses she ca'd doon oan His Holy Name! Had she but bowed her heid in prayer, He wid hae ta'en her tae His bosom, but there was nocht in her but