

## The Tale of the White Pet

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THE Clearances can be defined as a time when a certain small animal which was often bottle-fed in the house and kept as a pet grew much larger and devoured its kindly master.

There's a wonderful old nursery story in the first volume of J F Campbell's "Popular Tales of the West Highlands" called *Sgeulachd a' Pheata Bhàin*, where the *Peata Bàn* of the title is an innocent little sheep. Campbell got it in 1859 from a Mrs MacTavish, widow of the minister of Kildalton in Islay.

Once upon a time, the tale begins, a farmer had a white pet, and when Christmas was coming he thought he would kill it. The white pet heard that, and decided to run away. He hadn't gone far when he met a bull who said, *Fàilte dhuitse, a pheata bhàin, càit a bheil thusa a' dol?* "Hello, white pet, where are you going?"

*Tha mi a' falbh a dh'iarraidh an fhortain. Bha iad a' dol gam mharbhadh a dh'ionnsaigh na Nollaig, agus smuaintich mi gum b' fheàrr dhomh teicheadh.* "I'm going to seek my fortune. They were going to kill me for Christmas, and I thought I had better run away."

*Is fheàrr dhòmhsa falbh leat, said the bull, oir bha iad a' dol a dhianadh a leithid eile ormsa.* "I had better go with you, for they were going to do the same to me."

*Tha mi toileach, said the white pet – mar as motha a' chuideachd, sann as fheàrr an làn aighear.* "I'm glad – the more the merrier."

They continue on their way till they meet a dog, and more or less the same conversation takes place. (I don't think we can make too much of a dog being killed for Christmas. After all, it's a children's story.) Then they meet (in turn) a cat, a cock and a goose. The same thing happens, and in the end six of them are walking along the road.

When night falls they see a light, and in the way of such stories, *ge b' fhada bhuatha cha b' fhada ga ruigheachd* – though it was a long way away they weren't long reaching it. On reaching the house they peek in and see thieves counting money. The white pet says what they must do: *Glaoidhidh na h-uile h-aon againn a ghlaodh fhéin.* "We will all cry our own cry."

It works. The noise is so horrible that the thieves think it's the devil (*an donas*) and run away. The friends go in and divide the money amongst themselves. Now it's bed-time, and the white pet asks: *Càit an caidil thus' a-nochd, a thairbh?* "Where will you sleep tonight, bull?"

"Behind the door, just as I'm used to," replies the bull, then he asks the white pet the same question, and we go through the rigmarole with the other animals. The white pet will sleep in the middle of the floor, the dog beside the fire, the cat in the press where the candles are kept (*preas nan coinnlean*), the cock on the rafter (*spàrr*) and the goose on the dung-hill (*dùnan*).

There are two more rigmaroles before we're finished. First there's what happens to the thief who creeps back into the house, then blunders in the dark from the candle-press to the fire (where the dog dips his tail in water and puts out the candle), across the middle of the floor and under the rafter to the back of the door, then out past the dung-hill, being scratched, frustrated, butted, kicked, beaten or squawked at by an animal in each place.

Finally we have the thief's answer to his cronies when they ask how he got on. "Not very well," he says. "When I went to the candle-press a man stuck ten knives in my hand. When I went to the fire to light the candle a big black man sprayed water on it and put it out. When I tried to escape there was a big man in the middle of the floor who butted me, another behind the door who pushed me out, a little squirt on the loft shouted *Cuir a-nìos an-seo e 's fòghnaidh mi fhìn dha* ('Send him up here and I'll deal with him'), and a cobbler out on the dung-hill thumped me with his apron."

After hearing that, the thieves never went back, and the six friends lived happily ever after.

This story contains excellent lessons for young people: stick together and you'll succeed; we should all do what we do best; bullies are cowards. So maybe it's no wonder if it's found in other countries. As Campbell knew well, the Grimm brothers had picked it up and published it in 1819, noting that they had also found a version dating back to 1571.

The version the Grimms got from their neighbour Dorothea Viehmann is called *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* – "The Bremen Town Musicians". The star of it is a donkey who's growing old and unfit for hauling sacks of grain to the mill. Before his master can send him to the knacker's yard, he decides it's time for a change of occupation, and sets off to join the Bremen town band. So straight away we find a concept pretty alien to the people of Islay in 1859 – a band – along with a touch of gentle satire.

The animals whom the donkey meets are a dog, a cat and a cock – making four instead of six. He persuades them all, on the strength of their vocals, of the virtues of becoming a *Stadtmusikant*. The cat's speciality, for example, is *Nachtmusik*.

When they reach the house the donkey peeks in and sees thieves sitting around a table laden with food and drink. Their entry is spectacular: the dog gets on the donkey's back, the cat on the dog's back, the cock perches on top, then they all sing their songs and topple through the window (which has glass in it).

The thieves run away, then we have the same two rigmoroles as in the Gaelic story, but without so much dialogue, except that the cock screeches *Kikeriki!* and the cowardly thief turns this into: *Bringt mir den Schelm her!* "Bring me the thief!" The story concludes with "the four musicians of Bremen" (though they never actually got there) staying put in the house.

Now I wouldn't have thought further about this, but I'm learning Portuguese, and by chance I came across a couple of Portuguese versions of the tale in a wonderful book called "Contos Tradicionais Portugueses". Would the Portuguese story be like the Gaelic one or the German one, I wondered? The answer is, the Gaelic one.

It has no special title, just *Az Vozes dos Animais*, "The Animals' Voices". But, like the Gaelic story, it begins with the sheep, and there are five other animals – cock, pig, cat, duck and turkey, compared to bull, dog, cat, cock and goose in the Gaelic one. Interestingly, the reason for the animals' journey is different: in the Gaelic and German tales they're going to be slaughtered, in the Portuguese ones they're simply poor and hungry. There's no town band – their sole aim is to find a farm where there will be something to eat.

The house sounds much more like the Islay one than the German one. It's empty when the animals arrive. It doesn't have a window (*janela*), just a hole (*buraco*). The animals sit around a pit of charcoal ash (*borralheira*), as in the Gaelic tale they sit around the fire. The Portuguese thief tries to light a candle in the *borralheira*, just as the Islay thief goes to *preas nan coinnlean* – and, as in the Gaelic tale, that's where the cat is waiting for him!

There are a couple of differences however. In Islay and Germany the thieves are just thieves, and only one of them is chased out by the hidden animals. In the short Portuguese version they are *lobos* "wolves", in the long one they are *lobos ladrões* "robber wolves"; the whole pack of them is chased out.

So let me end with my translation of the short Portuguese version. (The long one has big rigmoroles when the animals meet up and when they're choosing where to sleep. Apart from that it's very similar.)

The sheep, cock, pig, cat, duck and turkey went on a journey, and sheltered from a storm in a hovel where the window-hole gleamed. There was no one there, so the pig made for the sty, the sheep and the duck lay down behind the door, the cat crouched in the charcoal pit, and the cock and turkey made their bed on the ceiling joist.

There, later that night, came the wolves whose house it was. One wolf went to the charcoal pit to look for fire, but the cat scratched his snout. The wolf howled and the others came to help, but the pig speared one of them in the leg, the sheep butted another, the cock started to crow and the duck to quack, so the wolves ran away as fast as they could, and it was a long time before they came back. This is what they could be heard saying to each other: "Let's go and see who has taken over our house."

"I won't go myself, because there was a wool-spinner there" (the cat) "who speared me with his spun wool in my snout."

"I bumped into a blacksmith" (the sheep) "who knocked me down with an iron bolt in the shins."

"I won't go back, because the same blacksmith" (the pig with his buck teeth) "grabbed me by the leg with a pair of tongs."

"I got away from the trap myself, but I could hear one of them" (the cock) "roaring *Cacarista, cacarista, se lá vou faço tudo em cisco*. (Cock-a-doodle, cock-a-doodle, if I go there I'll reduce all to a speck.)"

"All that is true, for another one" (the turkey) "shouted *Inguli-los, Inguli-los* (Gobble them, Gobble them)."

"And something was there" (the duck) "saying: *Haja pazes! Haja pazes!* (Let there be peace!)"

The wolves decided never to go back to that house, because it's better to be safe than sorry.

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