

Tommy

**Roll of Honour**

**ASS39**

It's an east coast thing, the haar; our town's penance for enjoying, by Scottish standards, a dryish climate. The Royal Burgh, I should call it by rights, spreads along a low spit stretching out into the firth. The mountains to the west shelter us from most of the rain. But the downside is that in summer, a cold, coast-hugging mist will creep in from the North Sea.

So it was that day. Bright early, but by noon the haar set in with a vengeance.

I spent the morning organising the garage. Lots to do in my new home, recently left me by Uncle Jack—the last survivor of that generation. Next door to my cottage lived Calum and Johan: he was the retired Town Clerk, and she the Postmistress. Between them they knew pretty much everything about everybody hereabouts.

“You say you're of the McBains,” he said to me over the garden wall.

“That's right. You might have heard of my grandfather. Dad said he was quite a famous golfer.”

“Oh yes, *James* McBain. One of the best. Before the Great War, like. A bit of a champ.”

“That's the family story anyway.”

“Oh, it's right enough,” said Calum stabbing at an invading dandelion between his neat rows of carrots. “Do you play, yourself?”

“No, too pricey back in Surrey. I hope to become a member here next spring.”

“I came across a mention of your grandfather the other day; he was a fine golfer. I'm writing a history of the club. Johan says I'll go blind rooting around in the club archives. I'm off there now.”

Tommy

He took off his gardening gloves, then paused, and turned to face me. “Any family would be proud of your grandfather’s record: three times winner of the Ross Shield.”

“That’s nice to hear. I’m keen to learn more about him.”

“Come by the clubhouse sometime and I’ll show you around. ”

I went into the house, made a coffee and turned on the TV in the conservatory. I must have dozed off, and when I woke the grey hair was swirling around the garden’s lone rowan tree, coating its leaves with tiny beads of moisture. A walk before lunch would blow away the cobwebs. My way lay out the rustic garden gate, and up past the War Memorial. The squat granite obelisk is topped by the bronze statue of a Highland soldier gazing out across the firth. But today all I could see of him were his boots and stockings, up to the hem of his kilt. The rest was lost in the fog. Carved on the stone, sure enough, around the mid- point of a list of fifty or so poor lads, you could make out: *Pte James McBain, Fifth Seaforths, 4th April 1915.*

I followed the black tarmac road as it crossed the fourth fairway. The fourth (a par three according to the tee-sign) runs down towards the dunes and from there, if you follow the skein of paths through the coarse bent grass, you’ll come out at the beach.

There was no sign of the sun on this damp grey afternoon. Even the sea seemed subdued and under wraps; there was little or no wind and the waves blended together. Instead of the familiar steady beat as they broke on the beach, they slid across the sand with a desolate hiss. Minute droplets of mist clung to my specs, making the world a fuzzy blur. I walked on, the rhythm of my steps lulling me into a sort of trance.

I heard them first just below the eighth green, invisible in the mirk. Young men, by the sound of their voices. They seemed to be only a few yards from me, but all I could see was grey, grey and more grey.

Tommy

Then, *thwack!* A ball being driven off the fourth tee. I'm not an experienced golfer, but there was something unusual in that sound. Mostly, I've noticed clubs make a kind of 'ping' when they strike the ball, but this had a different timbre.

How could anyone play in this? You couldn't see thirty yards. Then there was the rattle and clack of clubs being thrown back into a golf bag, and the clatter of the bag being slung over a shoulder. No buggy, then? Old school.

I had to take a look. I was nearing the top of the slope from the beach onto the links when there was a puff of wind. The mist swirled around, as it can, revealing the sun over the distant mountains. Thirty yards up the fairway, plumb in the middle of a ring of white-sanded bunkers stood two golfers. They wore plus-fours and patterned sweaters. The shorter of the two sported an oversized tweed bunnet; the other bareheaded. I don't pretend to keep up with the fashions these days, but it all looked very retro.

The fellow closest to me, the taller of the two, with a luxuriant dark beard, landed a perfect approach-shot two feet short of the hole. His partner grasped the pin as the tall one lined up his putt.

"Super stroke, Seamus!" the pin-holder said as the ball found the hole with a satisfying plop.

He (Seamus, I now knew) raised his putter in acknowledgment. Then, becoming aware of my presence said, "Grand day, sir." He would be early twenties, just over six feet tall, with a frank open face. There was something familiar about him. A local 'look', I thought—you often find that in small communities.

"Well I suppose, it is," I said politely, as the gloom seemed to intensify. "Maybe it'll clear up later."

Tommy

“Och, we’ve played in a lot worse,” he said, looking over at his chum with a pleasant smile. “Have we not, Alec?”

“Just say it, Seumas!” replied the man with the bunnet, replacing the pin.

“Are you staying long in the town, sir?” Seamus asked me.

His tone- formal, almost deferential- threw me off balance. “I’m here for a while,” I replied, with a strange feeling that I shouldn’t over-explain.

“Well, I hope you enjoy your stay,” he said.

“That’s you leading by three,” Alec called over waving his scorecard. “Looks like it could be your year, Seamus.”

“It’s my turn, right enough,” came the reply. “It’s an *odd* year, remember? *Fifteen*.”

Looking over at me, Seamus said, “Alec here is superstitious, sir. We’ve each won The Shield turn-about for the last few years. He reckons fate decrees this as *his* year. Not if I’ve anything to do with it, I say!”

I followed them to the next tee. Alec hooked into the rough near the burn.

“Aye, Alec, man,” said Seamus, “in trouble again. I expect this will be my hole too.”

They laughed, as old friends do, and moved off in the direction of the green. I followed, at a discreet distance. But, just then, the wind gave a gentle sigh, and the mist enveloped them once more. There was the rattle of shafts, this time *behind* me as though they were playing the fifteenth out of the proper order. Were *they* lost, or was I? Now, I’m not an impressionable person, my career as an actuary was entirely fact-based. There’s always a reasonable explanation. But on this occasion? I was flummoxed. I wandered around for a

Tommy

while, totally disorientated, until, somewhat forlorn, I retreated to the clubhouse. I entered the welcome warmth of the wood-panelled lobby and spotted my neighbour Calum.

“Ah, you decided to drop in? That’s grand,” he said, ushering me to a comfy armchair in the lounge

“Not a great day for a walk,” he said looking out the picture window at the wall of grey. “Should’ve been the Ross Shield competition today. First Saturday in August since nineteen-o- five. Only the third time in a hundred-odd years the Shield’s been cancelled.”

“Oh really? I saw a pair playing out there just a few minutes ago.”

“That’s funny. Nobody could play in *that*.”

“ Pleasant young chaps- locals by the sound of them. They disappeared into the mist.”

“Well, I can tell you there was no-one with a tee-time this morning,” said Calum with a hint of irritation. “Most likely a couple of lads sneaking in a free round. Cheeky sods.”

“I expect you’re right,” I said.

“Now,” he said, “leaning forward, elbows on knees. “I’ve been doing a bit of sleuthing about your grandfather. I uncovered some articles from the club newsletter. It seems that James had a great rival, a *friendly* rival, Alec Cowie. Alec worked on the railway, and was a fine player too. The pair of them monopolised the Shield for years before the Great War. If it wasn’t James, it was Alec. The former was the victor ...” Calum put on his reading glasses, and squinted at a notebook he took from his blazer pocket... “in nineteen o-nine, eleven, and thirteen...”

“...and James enlisted in fourteen.”

Tommy

“That’s right, gave his notice at the distillery and signed up. Alec won that year, according to the pattern. Matchday fell the week before James enlisted. Alec was exempt from service on health grounds. Oh, and I found this photo of James too,” Calum said, pulling a tiny sepia photograph from his notebook.

I had a look: two young men, arm in arm, wearing traditional golfing outfits. I couldn’t really make out their features but it was clear they were in good humour; broad smiles across their open faces. The taller of the two, maybe had a beard, though it could have been just a shadow. I turned the photo over and read, in a neat copperplate hand: *To Alec, congratulations on winning the Ross Shield, August 1914. Warmest regards, Seamus.*

“I thought you said this was Grandfather James,” I said, to Calum, confused.

“Oh, you don’t have the Gaelic, obviously. His pals called him Seamus- Gaelic for James.” Calum glanced back at his notes. “He left a widow, of course.”

“Yes. Grannie Fiona, pregnant with my father. James never got to see his son.”

“And did Alec go on to rule the roost as winner of The Shield in nineteen fifteen, and beyond?”

“Sadly not. *He* died that Easter too. A freak accident on the railway.”

Calum cleared his throat and said in a strangely small voice: “‘Death by misadventure’ the coroner concluded. I can scan you a copy of the photo, if you’d like. There’s something else that might interest you,” he added, in a brighter tone, and led me back to the lobby. He pointed to a large wooden board high on the wall. The legend: *Winners of the Ross Shield*’ arched above in gothic gold lettering. In the dim light I could just make out rows and rows of numbers and letters.

Tommy

“I’ll turn on the spots,” said Calum, feeling his way along the wainscoting. “Once I find this darn light switch, you’ll see.” He groped around in the dark corner and spoke over his shoulder. “Look at the left-hand column. You can see the last time James won the shield: 1913. And on the line below, Alec, in 1914.”

“And in fifteen?” I asked.

“Oh, some fellow McTavish. Funnily enough, that was a hundred years ago today. Ah, here’s the light switch!”

A harsh light flared across the varnished mahogany and the gold letters, dazzling me for a few seconds.

“Would you credit it? It’s happened again.” Calum removed his glasses and rubbed them with his handkerchief. Replacing them, he stared at the board and shook his head.

“Something wrong?”

“I’ve asked the steward to fix the blind, but that damn sunlight bleaches the lettering - always on the same spot.”

The winner’s name for nineteen fifteen, the gilt letters *McTa...* flaking. Just visible underneath was another name. There it was, faded, but clearly legible: winner of the 1915 competition—five months after his death in Flanders—was my grandfather, *James (Seamus) McBain*.

