

Excerpt from *Shadowed Valley*, by John J. Graham

Up on the hillsides along the upper Weisdale valley lies a string of old ruined croft houses. It is not unusual to see ruins like this in Shetland, but these Weisdale houses did not fall empty because the people in them had died, or just decided to move house. They were evicted - turned out - in the nineteenth century by their landlord, who took over the crofts in order to rear more sheep. This happened in several places in Shetland, and in many areas on the mainland of Scotland too.

*Shadowed Valley* is a novel about a fictional family and their neighbours, but it is set in Weisdale, and was written to show what the experience of eviction must have been like for many people.

This episode happens early in the story.

*Hakki Hunter is 14, and lives with his mother and younger brothers at the croft of Scarpigert in Weisdale. His father Seemon is away at the Greenland whaling. Seemon never knows how much money he will earn there, as it all depends how much they catch. Hakki's mother, like her neighbours, relies on the food the family can grow for themselves, and depends very much on their cows for milk.*

*Hakki has just heard that he is going to get a job as a beach boy at Nesbister in Whiteness, where the fishing boats come in. This means he will be able to earn the first wages he has ever had. He is delighted.*

Hakki went round his various jobs on the croft that morning, mind spinning with thoughts of this new turn to his life. He drove Sholma out to the hill and tethered Flecky and Blacky with her young calf on the toonmals. Out in the open Flecky looked even more gaunt and scraggy than ever, her hocks stained with the scour the new grass had given her. Hakki drove in with a

stone the wooden stake of Blacky's tether. As he rose he stiffened, for there coming up the slope of the hill from Graven was a man on horseback. The only local people ever seen on a horse were Jeemson and Jacobson, the two shopkeepers, and occasionally the minister. But it wasn't any of them. Hakki felt somehow threatened as the stranger drew steadily up towards Scarpigert. He instinctively wanted to run for the house to warn his mother, but held back, watching, waiting. At the south gable of the house the stranger dismounted and moved along to the door. In a place where folk never knocked on a neighbour's door the three sharp knocks seemed to assault the stillness of the hillside. Hakki began to approach the house warily. He couldn't hear the stranger's opening remarks but he heard his mother say:

'No, he's awa at Greenland eenoo.'

'Yes, I thought he might be,' came the reply. 'I'm Mr Ogilvy's factor and, let me see...' He brought out a small notebook and turned the pages. 'Yes, here we are. Simon Hunter, Scarpigert. He's due £12.15/- for rent.' He closed the book and looked at Hakki's mother gravely as though he had just uncovered a serious transgression.

She raised her left hand to her chin — a habit of hers when agitated.

'I ken wir ahint wi wir rent but I dunna hae a penny i da hoose. Seemon'll be hame noo ida Hairst an he'll pay Mr Ogilvy what he can manage fae his whale-money.'

'Yes, Mrs Hunter,' the factor said wearily, 'but you have been behind with your rent for a number of years. After all, your annual rent is only £3.3/- — and your husband paid a mere 30/- last year.'

'But', she pleaded, 'dat wis aa he could manage. He only settled up fae Greenland wi £6 an we tried ta pay aff as muckle debt as we could.'

'Mrs Hunter' — the voice was harder — 'you must realise that Mr Ogilvy also has creditors looking for payment. He just cannot lie out of his money any longer. I have instructions to collect money or its value in stock from the tenants.'

He looked down towards the kye. 'That young cow there with her calf, I'd like to have a look at her.'

'But you canna...' was all that she got out as he strode away from her along the briggistanes and down towards Blacky. Hakki followed him at a distance, appalled at the thought of losing peerie Blacky. The factor ran his hand along her back, stooped and felt her udder. He stood back appraising,

then went into his pocket and withdrew a small object. Hakki watched in disbelief as he opened what seemed to be a knife and proceeded to carve something on Blacky's horn.

By this time Hakki's mother had come down and stood beside him.

'He canna tak Blacky, Mam,' Hakkie whispered in sheer incredulity.

As if in answer, the factor turned, closed his knife and returned it to his pocket: 'The animal is a bit on the thin side, Mrs Hunter, but I'll value her at £2 which will come off your rent arrears.'

'But she's da only coo we hae ta depend on for a coarn o milk. Da aald coo gies very little nooadays, If you hae ta tak ony, can you no tak her?'

'What! You don't expect anybody to buy that bag of old bones? No, the black cow is the one I want and, I'll tell you, Mrs Hunter, I'll take the calf as well and call it £2.5/-. Someone will be out later this week to collect them. Good day, Mrs Hunter.'

They stood in outraged silence as he walked back up to the pony, mounted and set off for Nort Scarpigert, presumably on a similar errand.

Hakki stepped over to Blacky, stroked her back and neck. He looked at her right horn and there on the smooth curve was the ragged outline of the letter O. He was standing stroking her head, muttering over and over again 'Poor peerie Blacky' when he was aware of his mother at his side. Her face was white, her lips set. 'Da deevils!' she said, the words compressed in anger. 'Dey wid tak da very maet fae your mooth.'

Hakki's own anger flickered before the intensity of his mother's. He had never seen her like this before. Usually she accepted what came as inevitable; that she and her family were just as helpless before the tide of events as the ebbstones before the crash of waves on the shore. But this seemed different. Someone, identifiable, had come to her door and had put his mark on something she knew was her own, something she and her family had reared and needed for their survival. She put out her hand and stroked Blacky's neck, shaking her head in incomprehension. 'Hoo dey lippen folk ta live when dey come an tak awa da very animals aff o da rigs!'

'Can we no, Mam, pit her an da calf ta da hill an Ogilvy's men'll never fin dem?'

She looked at him for a time almost savouring the naivete of a mind still unencumbered with reality, then shook her head. 'Na, my bairn, der nae wye we can pit dem at'll keep dem safe fae da greed o yun kind.' The old resignation had returned. She drew a deep breath.

'So come dee wis. Der little we can dö.'

She turned and made for the house, hands folded behind her back. Hakki followed and as his eyes fell on the figure ahead in whose shadow he had lived as long as he could remember, he suddenly seemed to step outside their closeness and see her as herself, a woman who had struggled and suffered, whose tiredness showed in every step she took, whose goodness was being battered by alien forces. He couldn't understand why this had to be. He was confused but through the confusion came an overpowering desire to help her. He hurried and came up alongside her. 'Mam', he said, 'you can git aa da money I earn at da beach ta help ta git anidder coo.'

She looked at him and then turned her face away to hide the tears that came. 'Yis, joy, dy money'll aye be a help. As lang as du's weel dat's aa I care.' Somehow the pain of losing Blacky had eased, if only slightly.