

The Shieling of the One Night

Adapted from Norman MacLean's telling by Morag Wells

Many years ago, an old man called MacPhee lived in Nunton, Benbecula. I believe that he had three sons, and one night they planned to travel to Roshinish, on the East side of the island, in order to check on their sheep grazing there. They hadn't got very far before they came across a small bothy shieling close to the hill Rueval. So they thought they'd have a look inside, seeing as the weather was starting to turn for the worse.

Indeed it began to get very foggy, and they could no longer see the path that they should have been following. So they decided to stay – they built a fire, made tea, maybe some porridge. They began to get a bit lonely, and started to think about the pretty girls who worked at Nunton House, the seat of the Chief of Clan Ranald. One of the young men said, “Wouldn't it be good if the girls from Nunton were here just now!”

And one of the other young men said, “That would be fine indeed.”

As soon as he said that, there came a knock to the door, and who walked in but four tall, beautiful women, wearing gorgeous silk gowns. They said nothing, but three of the four went with MacPhee's boys to the room at the back of the bothy. The fourth woman stayed with the old man. They chatted back and forth, about the weather and how foggy it was, and the old man asked, “Where did you come from?”

The woman replied simply with, “We were rowing for a very long time.”

MacPhee was looking closely at the woman, and he noticed that her skin was quite dark, so it was unlikely that she was from Uist. As he continued to stare at her, it struck him that there was something wrong with her nose – it was stretched out very long, with a hook at the end. He realised that this was not natural at all and got up, saying “Excuse me madam, I must go outside to do my business.”

She replied, “Don't be long, and I'll be holding onto the back of your jacket if you try to run away.”

Out MacPhee went, but as he left he had a clever idea to trick the woman. He carefully took off his coat, while taking out his pocket knife, and he stuck the knife through his coat and into the side wall of the shieling. And so the woman held onto the coat with a death-like grip, not realising that MacPhee had outwitted her as he ran off down the machair with his dog Bastiga close behind.

He had run about three hundred yards away from the bothy when the strange woman who had appeared from the machair understood that he had played a trick on her. She came out shrieking, and the old man shouted to his dog, 'Bastiga, Bastiga – if you've never run for me before, you'll run for me now!' MacPhee took to his heels and made for Nunton. Bastiga the dog held back the woman.

The old man passed the big house at Nunton, and eventually arrived home. The first thing he did was to put a big bucket of water outside the door for the dog, and then he went upstairs to his bed. He was completely exhausted.

When MacPhee awoke the next morning, it took him a second or two to remember the disturbing occurrences of the night before. He made his way downstairs with an ominous feeling, and there he found poor Bastiga stretched out on a flagstone, dead. And the strangest part was that the dog had not a single hair on his body.

The following day, MacPhee went up to the shieling close to Rueval, and in the back room were his three sons lying dead in pools of blood. And it was those strange women who killed them.

Nobody knows what happened to the women, whether they went to South Uist after that, or if they had their own boat to sail away on, or horse, or whether they returned to whatever foreign country they may have come from – it remains a mystery. But what we do know is that, since then, nobody has ever stayed the night in the shieling after what happened. It's for that reason that it's known as The Shieling of the One Night.

And so if you're ever near Rueval, and prepared to be in some danger, why don't you go and have a look at the shieling, and maybe those women might pay you a visit too. It's strange. No animal – horse, cow or sheep will ever graze close to the One Night Shieling.