

TWO AGAINST THE TWILIGHT

By Joyce Stranger

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OLD Davis leaned back against the Land Rover and looked down the field. It was the first time in weeks that he had a space to think—really think.

It had begun almost a year ago. The words of the newspaper he'd been holding had suddenly, inexplicably, blurred.

When it happened a week later, for the fifth time, he went to the doctor. And to the hospital. And to the hospital again.

They had been kind, very kind. They had sent him to Jonathan Ross, who had been blind since birth, and who taught Braille.

It did not prevent panic. Panic when the field of sheep first blurred into an indeterminate woolly mass. Panic when voices became more necessary for recognition than faces.

He had not told Boss yet. Maybe the sheep farmer wondered why the shepherd had suddenly taken to leashing the younger sheepdog, Moss, by his side. If so, he never said.

Moss had become Old Davis's lifeline. Instinctively the dog seemed to know what ailed his master. Today, walking up the lane towards the big field, in which the sheepdog trials were always held, the shepherd had misjudged the gate. The dog nudged his knee before he walked into the stone pillar beside it.

Old Davis managed to make a fair showing as he went through, head high, with the other sheepdog, Nell, behind him.

He did not need to see the scene clearly to know it. It was dearly familiar, a part of his long years in the game.

The cars, the station wagons, the Land Rovers. They were parked side by side, all round the field, facing the huge arena, so that many of the visitors could sit in comfort rather than brave the wind that niggled across the grass.

There were forty competitors today. Each anxious to carry off the elaborately ornamental shepherd's crook—and the cup—that was the most coveted honour a man and his dog could win.

The dogs ranged the field. Old Davis knew every one of them, and could still, though dimly, recognise some of them.

All-white Ruff, a freak collie with a savage streak in him. That would be him snarling a warning at a visitor's dog.

Old Davis could just make the strange dog out, a curly white poodle flaunting a jaunty tail. He saw it as it brushed his legs.

Bess from Long Willows, a queen in her day, but growing old now, along with Mr. Jones, her owner. A little slow, but still a lovely bitch, black and white and gentle and able to single a lamb from the flock and bring it in seconds.

And that giant, curly-haired creature, sniffing at the Land Rover wheel beside him, and finally honouring it, was Dick Hasty's dog, Pat.

A powerful beast that never took his work seriously. Dear knew why Dick went on trying him. The dog was a fool. But then the younger men didn't know how to teach a beast.

Old Davis remembered hours spent with his dogs, training, perfecting, rewarding. He'd a way with them. He'd a line of wins behind him to prove it, and the championship title to defend.

He put his hand down to Nell, who had won last year, easily beating the clock, and on whom his hopes were pinned.

He couldn't do it next year. By then, the last remnants of his sight would have gone and nothing a soul could do about it.

But this year.... If only he could....

He could barely see the sheep at the far end of the field now...only blurs of white, without definition. He'd have to rely on Nell.

If only she could do it. Bring off the hat trick, for this was the third year running. Then he could keep the trophy, the silver cup that stood on the judge's table, with his name on it twice.

Keep it to remember, to hold, to feel the shape under his hands. He would add the crook to those he treasured, using the best of them each year for the next event, to give him luck.

He held a handsome one now, its end intricately carved with acorns and oak leaves, and his name on it.

It was a good crook, too, easy to handle and well balanced. Made by Dai Price Richards and he was a master. Not many left.

Paddy Rourke was taking his turn now. Old Davis disapproved of Paddy. He had not even the decency to dress for the occasion. He had come, as he always did, in old grey flannels and a bright red jersey three sizes too large and with a hole in the arm.

Old Davis, and all the other shepherds and farmers, did proper respect to the occasion. They came in their Sunday suits, a mite tight and uncomfortable, but showing a proper spirit, and with brand-new caps.

Paddy whistled. He used a nose whistle, a tiny thing that fitted into his hand and, capped on his nose, sent a shrill note down the field, warning the dog of a need for action.

Old Davis thought it an affectation. Men had been given mouths and fingers. If they couldn't make the right noise with those, then Lord help them. They needed His help.

Paddy sent his dog, Lou, down the field right-handed. Old Davis could just see the speeding black back as the sheepdog streaked towards the four ewes.

They had been released at the far end of the field and were standing huddled for reassurance, lost and bewildered, needing guidance. Their tiny brains did not allow them to do a thing for themselves except flee from danger when deer, or running fox, or hurtling dog, came near.

Old Davis shook his head. The dog would lose time. Not only had Paddy sent him out the long way round, but he had omitted to study his ground.

There was a hummock, higher than a collie, blocking the dog's view. There was a line of trees to negotiate, and, furthermore, there was a cross wind, coming from the North-East. It would carry the scent of the sheep away from the dog.

Paddy's whistle was the only sound in the silent field. Men stood eagerly against the ropes, careful not to spoil the view from those in cars, commenting briefly on the skill of the man, or on his faults.

The dog had reached the sheep. He circled behind them, slowly, warily, legs half bent.

Paddy was signaling to him to go slow, slow, not to hurry or panic the sheep—keep them walking, lad, walking—that's the way then, good lad—over to me, over to me, come bye.

And just as the sheep were walking, puzzling but not alarmed, the dog crouching behind them, ears alert for the slightest signal, the white poodle frisked on to the field before his owners could stop him. He panicked the ewes so that they ran every which way, bleating in terror, as he leaped joyously at their heels.

The judge shouted. The poodle's owner appeared, apologetic, whistling and calling, but the animal would have none of it.

At last, Bob Fletcher, impatient at wasted time, gave his own collie the command, "see him off then." The dog chased the poodle out of the arena.

His owner caught him. Embarrassed and furious, railing at his wife, the man bundled the dog into the car and drove away.

"Good riddance," Old Davis thought.

Paddy was offered another chance, but knowing that his patience had gone, he shook his head.

"Number nine," the judge called.

Rod Nichols took his Sal out; Sal was Nell's rival, and her chief danger. If she'd improved...

Old Davis crouched and sat on the heavy steel bumper of the Land Rover. Down here he could savour the field from a dog's height, and see where the wind was.

You had to think like a dog to handle one. On hot days, if you lay flat in the grass, and the grass was long and the air still, it was like a steamy jungle down there, close to the ground, out of the breeze.

The poor brute could be sweating his heart out for you.

So you drove him lightly, with frequent rests, high on a knoll where the wind cooled him, and let him drink.

Today, going up the field, he'd have the wind on his side. Then, crossing to the first gate, it would be in his face, a thing he'd hate, and an icy, bitter wind it was, too, low down. Straight down the field to the pen, then it was clear going, and the wind behind him.

If only Nell could pull it off . . . his last triumph, something to savour, to remember, to talk about in the pub at night. At least he'd have conversation left.

Not to see the sheep—that would be hard. Especially the lambs, for each new-born was a personal triumph. He could ease a ewe at birth, or deliver a breech as cunningly as any vet. And savour his reward; the long-legged, jumping toy things, smudged and patched with black, tiny tails wagging deliriously as they drew life from the ewe.

Maybe Boss would still let him help. The dog would guide him. He could bring a lamb to birth, for that only needed skilful hands. No need for eyes. He could lift and carry them and give them bottles.

To be away from them—that would be unbearable. He had watched over them over sixty years now, from the day when, as a little lad, his father took him out, and began to teach him a lifetime's lore, such as you'd never find in books.

Sal was just finishing the course. This Old Davis could see. She was almost on top of him, shedding the sheep.

They had left the pen, the four bunched together, and now she must separate them in pairs. She was crouched, belly low on the ground, watching every movement.

"Seven and half minutes. Half a minute to complete," a voice, a stranger's, said behind Old Davis.

He watched. This was the tricky part, where many dogs failed.

Rod was circling behind the sheep, arms extended, the right one elongated by the crook which he held to stop them breaking away. They were manageable, this set.

Some of them were brutes. Bold, ready to challenge the dog, or almost, out of devilry it seemed, to play the fool and give him a run for his money, breaking wildly all over the field, with no chance to collect them again and drive them.

“Now.”

Sal streaked between the four sheep, cutting them neatly into two pairs, one running right, away from the crook, the second pair off to the left, the bitch at their heels.

There was a burst of applause.

“Good lass, here to me.”

She came running, stood for her reward, licking her master’s face as he praised her.

Old Davis nodded. Always could tell when a man used his dog well. The dog repaid you, too.

“Good luck, Jo.”

Rod was generous. He could afford to be. Sal, now herding the sheep into the far enclosure, had done him proud.

Old Davis and Rod had been friendly rivals over the last eight years. So far, Sal had never beaten Nell. Three years before, she’d taken the palm from his old Sue, who had died later that year, and been sincerely mourned by her master.

“Number ten. Jo Davis, from Wincey’s End.”

This was it.

As always, Old Davis found himself wondering about the odd name of the farm. It was rarely used, being more often referred to as Price-Evans, the Wincey’s. Whether Wincey had been a man or not no one knew.

The thoughts made Old Davis aware that he was nervous. More so than ever before. His hands were wet with sweat and the crook was slippery. His tongue was dry. He had a film in front of his eyes and found it harder than usual to focus at all. He frowned, screwing his eyes up, lifting his head blindly.

The farmer, from a few yards away, sighed, his suspicions confirmed. He watched as Old Davis spoke to Moss.

The dog led him to the side of the pen. Then, lead tucked into his collar, sat down and watched his master and Nell with eager eyes, as if knowing how much depended on this day.

“Now.”

Old Davis could not see the sheep at the top of the field.

They were skittish. One bounded absurdly and people laughed.

Nell had eyes only for him. He signalled her out left-handed, up the field along the little hollow that kept her out of the wind, so that she spied the sheep and dropped, without telling, behind them, stalking up like a cat, knowing she must not send them scampering.

This was the tricky bit, one part where he had to guess and pray Nell would do her job. Suddenly the answer came to him. She had done it before, so often, perhaps she could do it alone.

He sent urgent signals to her mentally, but nothing by voice or hand. Those watching who knew about dogs and men stared at each other, wondering if he was out of his mind.

Nell took the sheep down through the first gate, four in a straight row, never bunching them, never panicking them, never close enough for them to fear her.

Straight and true, then a right angle turn across the field with the wind teasing her and icy in her fur.

Moss pricked his ears and looked at his master. He should be telling Nell what to do. Instead he stood like a saint on a pillar, fierce, yet pathetic, staring towards his bitch as she trotted suddenly taking the sheep through the second gate and turning them to the pen.

Now he could see them.

Slowly, girl, slowly—gently, gently, my beauty, they're alarmed. There's something bothering them. Down girl, down.

Now, up again. No hurry.

It was hard to say, knowing the second hand of the speeding clock was ticking away, knowing that Sal had done it in record time, knowing that now, at this stage, anything could happen.

The sheep might miss the pen. A dog might run amok. Nell, over-eager, might drive them too fast and too far.

He held his breath, his only signal a soft whistle, given by mouth, not needing his fingers to augment the sound.

He had the pen gate open. Slowly, gently, not to panic the sheep. Nell, crouched low, her eyes bright, worked snakily behind them. Now!

She leaped, the sheep ran, and, in a second, were trapped before they knew, all four inside and the gate fast.

With a swift, smooth movement the dog was behind the pen, the gate was open and the four sheep outside again, heads turned puzzled. Why put them in and let them out so fast? they seemed to ask, looking from man to dog.

Now!

Nell leaped across; the deft crook parted the sheep; the two pairs were shed, so fast, so smoothly, it looked like magic and a roar went up from the crowd. A voice yelled: "Five and a half minutes by the clock. Did you ever see anything like that?"

Old Davis knew the cup was his, forever. He called Nell. She felt his triumph and leaped at his face, licking, and leaped again, until Moss, jealous, came to his master.

"You old fool," Old Davis said, as he sent Nell off to pen the sheep.

She returned in double quick time, her tail wagging itself off.

"You've won, no doubt of that," Boss said, his voice rough with pride. "Nobody like you, Jo, with the dogs."

Now was the moment.

"I'll have to leave, though, Boss. I'm going blind. Doctor says so. Nothing can be done." It was worse than he feared.

The hand that gripped his was rough and fierce with reassurance.

"Think I'm letting the best shepherd I ever had, go? Be your age, Jo Davis. Teach the youngsters for me. We need your knowledge. With Moss to guide you and Nell to herd, there's always work for you."

That night, in the pub. holding his new crook and feeling the smooth metal of the cup beneath his proud hands, listening to the men laughing and joking with him, praising Nell, who lay at his feet, and Moss, who sat by his knee, ready to see for him, Old Davis knew the first peace he'd known for months.

And he knew something more, for unlike Jonathan Ross, who had been blind from birth, he would have visions.

Visions of sky and sun on the sea, and the long-legged smudgy lambs and the soft-fleeced sheep. And he had his hands.

He put one down now, to cold muzzle and warm tongue and silky fur, and he knew himself rich.