

The White Stag of Glen Etive



Far from here, up past Rannoch Moor and on the road to Glen Coe, there is a turn off. This road leads past the great mound of the Bucchaille and down a narrow pass to the heart of Glen Etive – the ‘wild’ Glen.

At the head of the Glen there’s a grand big house and living there is Angus, the laird. He’s not a careful sort when it comes to money and there’s a fair bit of work that’s stacking up around the place and not much cash to pay for it.

Now, Angus finds himself with a few coins in his pocket, enough to buy a few roof tiles but not enough to finish the whole roof. It looks like rain this evening and he thinks he might as well be wet inside as well as out, so he takes the money to the pub instead.

When he gets there, he props himself at the bar and gets to work on a pint of the black beer. As he’s drinking, he hears Old Tam in the corner, holding court to a mixture of tourists and local parasites. His bonnet is sat back on his heid and he’s telling his usual combination of old stories, legends and lies about the area.

Angus listens in...

“... and there on hillside, he saw it! Loomin’ oot the gloaming like a ghost! The Great White Stag of Glen Etive! And he knew, he *knew*, his fortunes would take a turn from that moment forward!”

Old Tam rolls his eyes and holds a hand out in front of him, wavin’ his fingers to show the power of the uncanny.

“Ooooooh!” says the crowd

Angus laughs – he’s heard this one a hundred times but then one of the tourists says something that makes him prick up his ears.

“Ah’d pay a pretty penny to see that Stag, meself!”

Angus has had an idea.

The next morning, he goes out into the courtyard and calls his two helpers over – Skinner & MacLean. Skinner is a big man, with fists like breezeblocks but MacLean’s small and ferrety, with a mean look in his eye.

“Right” says Angus, “I want youse to head up to the old yard and bring back Sconser”

Sconser is the oldest and most irritable donkey in the Glen. His foul temper is legendary and both Skinner and MacLean groan at the thought of fetching him down.

While they’re away, Angus busies himself in the house, gathering some essential supplies.

He arrives back in the courtyard in time to see the guys coming back with the donkey. Skinner's limping badly and MacLean is nursing a nasty-looking bite on his forearm. Both are muttering darkly under their breath.

"Right lads, get painting" Angus hands over two buckets of whitewash and two large brushes.

Then he pulls a big sack over and out of it he yanks an old leather shinty helmet. It's a bit battered and there's a couple a places where a moth's been at it but it's sound enough. Next is a pair of antlers that's been nailed to a plaque. Angus pulls the wood off and starts strapping the horns onto the helmet.

After about half an hour, all three stand back.

Sconser is now bone-white from head to hoof and has a slightly lopsided pair of antlers jutting from his forehead.

"That's not bad"

"Don't be daft Skinner, that'll fool naebody".

"Shut up the pair of ye, I know exactly what I'm doin'".

That evening, in the many inns in the area, stories circulate of a wondrous sighting in Glen Etive, visions of a creature not seen there for many years.

A group of visitors has gathered outside the big house and here's Angus, wearing an ill-fitting tweed jacket that used to be his father's and a slightly tatty flat cap.

"This way please, Ladies and Gentlemen", and he gestures with a bow to the path.

"Why've we tae come so late, then?" asks one of them.

"Ah well, the stag is a shy beast", says Angus, "and only comes out in the gloaming, the half-light between day and night".

And with that, he leads the group down the Glen to the edge of Creagh Dubh – the Black Crag. This rocky mound sits on its own in the middle of the Glen, topped by tall Scots Pines that stretch out their shadows in the dying light of the late evening. There at the foot of the crag is a rickety hut. It looks a lot like a garden shed, one that's been recently dragged there – judging by the deep grooves in the heather that lead up to it.

Angus shows them in.

"Welcome to the Glen Etive Wildlife Hide! Look through this slot now, folks and, with a wee bit of luck, we may just catch a glimpse of this legendary beast".

As he says these words, Angus quietly reaches for a piece of rope that hangs to one side.

At the signal, Skinner and MacLean start dragging on the rope at the top of the hill. On the other end is Sconser, sporting his new antlers and a very angry expression.

The people in the hide let out a gasp of awe as there, up on the hill, appearing from the shadow of the Pines, is the Great White Stag of Glen Etive!

“Look at his magnificent antlers!” they cry “and his great chest! And his magnificent, great head!”

There he stands and, in the half-light and from a distance, he doesn't look half-bad, his ghostly form seems to gleam with an uncanny luminescence – it fair makes the hackles stand up on the back of your neck.

Well, as you can imagine, all the paying guests are delighted with the show – word spreads and after a month Angus finds he can put his prices up to a ridiculous level and *still* the wee hut is filled to capacity.

All through the summer, the money is rolling in and now Angus is starting to make a little headway with the estate but true to his nature – he wastes a lot of the money on frippery and gee-gaws. And now, at the end of the season, he is leading the latest group down the Glen wearing a hand-woven Taransay Harris Tweed suit, a deerstalker hat and a silk cravat all from McLaren & Son, Gentleman's Outfitters, 23 Argyle Street, Glasgow.

Everything is progressing as usual until the critical moment when Angus surreptitiously pulls the signal rope and, at the top of Creagh Dubh... appears... nothing!

Angus pulls the rope again, and again and again! The wee yellow flag is popping up and down on top of the shed like a thing possessed but still nothing's happening on the top of the outcrop. Until, Skinner lumbers out of the gloom with a glaikit expression on his face. He holds in his hands a piece of cord with the end badly frayed. He shrugs against the skyline.

Stifling a curse, Angus bursts out of the shed and hurries up the hill to confront Skinner.

“What are you doin?” he shouts, “you're gonna ruin *everything!*”

“He's run off” says Skinner, somewhat redundantly, “ah think he went that way” and he gestures vaguely with the rope in the opposite direction from the hide.

“Well dinnae jest stand there, ya great lummock, get after him!”

And so the chase begins, Skinner, MacLean and Angus all start down the hill, spreading out to cover more ground, desperate to recapture the donkey before nightfall.

After a few minutes scrambling through the bushes, Angus finds himself emerging on the floor of the Glen. There's no sight of Skinner or MacLean but he can hear thrashing in the gorse behind him and much swearing. At that moment, he catches sight of a flash of white ahead of him, amongst the trees of Etive forest, moving up the hill away from him. He takes off in pursuit.

It's hard-going, through the trees, and Angus has to be careful that the branches don't snag his fine suit or snatch the hat from his head.

The light is failing now and in the forest it's almost dark. Again and again, Angus is on the point of despair, but each time he is about to turn back he catches another glimpse of Sconser weaving through the trees.

He is out of breath now, his heart thumping behind his silk cravat and his brogues, which were doing a fine job down in the Glen, have started to leak and his feet are sodden from the heather and the moss. He stumbles out of the woodland briefly and finds himself in a wide firebreak running up and down the hill. Looking up and across, he sees a rocky point above him with cluster of young rowan trees on top. And there, there! The white flank of the donkey among the trees, just visible by the dying light.

This is his chance! He can cut off Sconser's escape by shinning up this wee crag and catch the bugger!

With a fresh determination, Angus takes off his new hat and stuffs it in the outside pocket of his suit jacket and begins to climb. He struggles up the rock face, trying to be quick but also trying to be quiet. Finally, he reaches the top of the cliff and throws his arms around a jutting boulder, ready to pull himself onto the ledge but then... he looks up and sees a great spread of antlers above him. Two whiskery nostrils flare and from them comes a hot blast of animal breath, parting his hair for him, clean down the middle. Angus's mouth falls open as he looks up, not at a painted donkey, but at the magnificent, great head of the Great White Stag of Glen Etive.

"Bu..buh, buh..." he says.

The Great Stag says nothing but rears up to its full height and then STAMPS its prodigious hooves down to the ground with an almighty THUD!

Startled, Angus loses his grip and, with a strangled yelp, windmills his arms furiously as he falls through the air towards the ground below. His heart is in his mouth and he quails and closes his eyes at the thought of his imminent and painful death!

SCHPLATTTT!

Angus opens his eyes to find himself lying flat on his back in great bog of black mud at the foot of the cliff. Completely unhurt but lying in a perfect cut out of his shape in the mud, he rolls over and drags himself out of the sludge – in the process becoming completely bemired from head to toe in sticky muck. He spends a couple of minutes looking for his hat which must have come out of his pocket but the slough has claimed it for its own and he soon gives up.

Wearily, he trudges back up the Glen to the big house and finally into the courtyard. There stand Skinner and MacLean looking very sheepish, between them there is a rather bedraggled but strangely self-satisfied-looking Sconser, with his antlers hanging under his chin. Surrounding them is a large crowd of previous customers all with very angry expressions on their faces. Some of them are holding sticks and overall, they're lookin' downright menacing.

Angus stands there, mud dripping from his once-fine clothes and he realises that the legend has come true after all. He HAD seen the Great White Stag of Glen Etive and now his fortunes are about to take a turn, just not necessarily for the better.