

Fankle

For several weeks the weather had been unseasonably foul with gales carrying sleet and heavy rain from the northeast. Then, in mid-July, as if someone had thrown a switch, the weather improved overnight, bringing dry and sunny days with warmer breezes from the south, swirling largish waves onto Chanonry Point, a world-famous place for dolphin spotting.

With this better weather, the recent retirees Ruby and Samuel were back into their established routine, following the tide tables closely. By arriving early, the elderly couple had claimed their usual spot, in front of the iconic Stephenson Lighthouse. From 'their' picnic table the couple had a clear view over the Moray Firth to Fort George with Culloden and Inverness Airport in the background.

Ruby reckoned there were now around fifty dolphin watchers plus a few dogs and a handful of children. Samuel had been round to check on his regulars with Ruby's Tupperware box of home-made cheese scones. Most of these locals were dedicated wildlife photographers with long lenses and expensive cameras, all hoping to catch an iconic image of leaping dolphins, the sort that make good postcards or framed prints to be sold in local gift shops. Other wanted winning images to submit as competition entries to their photography clubs.

Caused by the stiff breeze, the waters were choppy with white tops creaming the waves. The dolphins swimming nearest to the shore were subdued and sluggish, swimming lazily, rising and blowing in twos and threes. Further out, a more dispersed group approached, heralded by one adult leaping well clear of the water and landing with a spectacular splash, causing much "oo-ing" and "ah-ing" and yips of delight, creating a noisy buzz of conversation from the excited onlookers. However, the general reaction from the serious photographers was one of frustration and disappointment at missing what they regarded might be 'the shot of the day'.

Back beside Ruby and with a mug of coffee in hand, Samuel called up his son Denholm using their securely paired walkie-talkies:

'Aye, Denny, how goes it wi' yees? Where are yees? Have yees spotted any dolphies yet, eh?'

'No, no' yet, Faither. Ah'm round passed the Fort it the South sidey but we're thinking o' heading ower tae the Souters at Cromarty for a wee keek, eh?'

'Aye, if yees like but maybe yees should come back doon here Denny, eh? We've go-aat aboot two dozen dolphies here, mainly mithers wi' calves, rollicking just off the Point, lazy-like, eh? That wee breeze is making white taps, keeping them doon, eh?'

Fankle

'Aye, yer right Faither. There's a fair wee blow getting up here noo. Ah'll just heed on doon tae yees the noo, eh?'

'Aye, an' Denny, mind tae watch oot fur they missing sleepers, eh? They yins the coastguaart telt us fell aff they tugs tayin' out they rotur blades tae they wind farms, eh? Hit wan o' them sleepers and ye'll pit a hole intae yer hull or ye might smack yer prop oan yin, eh? So, Denny lad, just taak it easy an' keep yer speed doon, eh?'

'Okaydokayly, Faither, message received loud and clear, eh? Ower an' Oot!'

After twenty-five years building up their business, Samuel and Ruby had passed on the *Sea Quest* to their son Denny and his wife Izzy. Harboured at the nearby village of Avoch (known to locals as "Auch"), the converted fishing boat was licensed to operate in inshore waters, carrying up to twenty passengers hoping to get close to bottlenose dolphins, harbour porpoises and the various species of seals who made their home in the Moray Firth and surrounding coast.

For the twitchers among them there was always a wealth of seabirds to photograph and tick off in their lists. And, if they were very lucky, there was a chance they might spot the pod of orcas which ranged along Scotland's east coast from St Abbs Head to the south of Edinburgh all the way north to John O' Groats, the Pentland Firth and as far out as the Orkney and Shetland Isles. This most northerly pod of orcas in the world were occasional visitors to the Moray Firth and Chanonry Point, led by its dominant matriarch named 'Mousa' and her daughter 'Tide'.

Chanonry Point was a dolphin hotspot, where the Moray Firth pod came to feed on salmon and sea trout which tracked around the spit of land jutting out into the Moray Firth. Scientific tagging and tracking had confirmed both species followed the sweep of Rosemarkie Bay, heading upstream to their spawning grounds in the rivers which drained into the Beaully Firth, the wide inland estuary beyond. The nominal dividing line between these two bodies of water is the Keppoch Bridge which links the city of Inverness to the fertile outcrop of agricultural land known as The Black Isle, the area bounded by the Beaully and Moray Firths to the south and the Cromarty Firth to the north.

The numbers of dolphin watchers began to increase steadily. Standing apart from the general group, were Max and Deirdre with their gaggle of noisy miniature toy poodles, all females, captained by Pingo, their pedigree stud dog. The couple were regulars at Chanonry Point, there to show off their dogs to the visitors, Max handing out contact cards to anyone interested in buying a pedigree pup.

The sixties-something couple lived in the nearby village of Munlochy, on a small steading with kennels. Ruby knew them only at second hand. They were well-off, money inherited from Max's parents, who had died years ago, leaving him a huge mansion in Edinburgh. Dierdre had taught Denholm at Avoch Primary and had been a wonderful infant mistress,

Fankle

loved by all her pupils. When Max was forced into early retirement by bank closures, she had also retired. It was then her love for dogs had expanded into dog grooming and breeding.

Ruby began to tune out when Max started spouting his familiar spiel:

'Pingo is four years old and was Champion in his class at The Black Isle Dog Show this year. We're hoping to get him to Crufts next year. Of course, he is the result of twenty years of very careful breeding, our life's work, actually. Pingo was also Winner of the Agility Event at the Inverness Show, his second time as winner. He is a very smart and clever dog. Of course, that's just a bit of fun, really, a mere sideshow. But he is amazingly quick and a fantastic jumper. If there was a long jump event for dogs, I'm sure he would win it.'

Ruby turned her attention to his wife. Despite her withered left arm with its tiny claw-like hand, Dierdre's dogs were beautifully groomed, as always. Each dog was wearing matching harness jackets, pale yellow for the girls and pale blue for Pingo. The rumour was that these were new jackets which had been bought to show support for Ukraine. The dogs were attached to a master grab ring by individual long running leads of stout cord clipped to each dog's harness, an arrangement designed to allow them maximum freedom.

Ruby, who had struggled to become pregnant with Denholm, had heard on the local grapevine that because of her withered arm, Deirdre had been reluctant to have children of her own, fearing her defect might be inherited, despite what the specialist doctors had told her. Everyone agreed Deirdre's tribe of dogs provided her with surrogates for the children she would have liked to have had.

From the direction of the caravan site a new couple arrived with their excitable miniature short haired Dachshund, a yappy female.

Dierdre's dogs reacted, working themselves into a frenzy, rushing in a tumbling pack towards the new arrival, with Pingo taking the lead to protect his harem, growling and running back and forth towards the newcomer in mock attacks.

The tiny Dachshund, spooked by seeing so many dogs together in a pack turned tail and raced back towards the caravan park, barking fiercely.

Tugging on the retractable lead, the lady owner screeched, 'Slinky! **Slinky!** Come here **at once!**' adding, 'she's a lockdown dog and because of Covid she did not get a chance to socialise with other dogs.' The Dachshund's owner lifted her puppy into her arms and the couple retreated into the crowd, out of sight.

Fankle

The cords of the poodles' running leads were now in a complete fankle. Holding the grab ring, Max retreated a few steps to stretch out the tangled lines. Dierdre knelt among her dogs to calm them while unhooking each dog in turn, keeping the thumb of her claw hand in the harness ring while sorting out its lead from the bunched cords before re-securing the clip onto its harness.

The last to be released was Pingo. At her command "UP!", he stood as if posed for the judging ring, the star of the show, looking spectacular, with his curly silver-grey coat glistening in the sun, the hair on his head forming a tall, stiff, upright crown, his torso and legs trimmed to perfection and his long, thin tail held upright in a stiff bow with tiny spikes of silver tufts.

Standing nearby was a small, chubby girl wearing red-rimmed Harry Potter spectacles and a tall, black Witch's hat with a long white feather sticking out from its top. She was engulfed in an oversized red cape with a black hood which hung down her back, trailing on the ground. Draped around her neck there was a wide, golden yellow scarf with the word "Hermione" embroidered in large red lettering.

In her outstretched hand was a long, thin Magic Wand, ivory black with a tiny red lamp at its tip, the lamp pulsing slowly, hypnotically. Pointing her wand at Pingo while making mesmerising circles, the girl repeated her incantation in a shrill, sing-song voice:

'Veritus Mundus Excalpulatootus Dolphinious - with my Magic Wand I turn you into a Dolphin.'

With his head cocked, Pingo's eyes followed the pulsing lamp but he refused to become a dolphin.

Eventually Hermione gave up in disgust and turned away to look at the dolphins.

A few seconds later she screamed:

'Look, Mummy, a crocodile! Mummy, Mummy, a crocodile is going to eat that baby Dolphin, look!'

As Samuel ran forward, Ruby stood to get a better view and saw that the 'crocodile' was a semi-submerged railway sleeper, long, narrow and dark brown. From the way the dolphins were acting, it seemed to Ruby they had 'adopted' it, taking it for an ailing pod member, acting as nursemaids, shepherding it away from the shore to deeper water.

Hermione threw her Magic Wand which bounced off the 'crocodile'. Pingo could not resist the challenge. Racing passed the child and her mother, he leapt into the sea to fetch the 'stick'. Landing just short of the sleeper, he rose to the surface with the Magic Wand in

Fankle

his mouth, then before anyone could react or focus their cameras, a mother dolphin swam under the dog, eased him closer to the sleeper with her snout and helped him scrabble aboard.

Max was first to react, issuing a loud, firm command:

'Pingo, LIE DOWN!'

With the dog lying safely near the centre of the sleeper as a passenger and clinging on for dear life, the mother dolphin nudged her 'patient' further from the shore where breeze and tide carried the sleeper and dog further out, into deeper water.

Then, inexplicably, the dolphins disappeared.

Hermione shouted again:

'Look Mummy, sharks are coming to eat the crocodile and the doggy.'

A dozen or so huge fast moving dorsal fins announced the ominous arrival of Mousa and her pod. Curious and uncertain over what they had discovered, the orcas circled the dog lying on the sleeper, swimming under and aggressively alongside it, as if trying to provoke it.

Instinctively, the group of watchers on the narrow spit moved back several paces from the edge of the water, wary in case an orca mistook a dog or child for a beached seal.

Cameras focussed and captured the developing drama while Max kept up a steady litany:

'Pingo, STAY! Pingo, LIE DOWN! Pingo, STAY! Pingo, LIE DOWN! Good Boy!'

Samuel was immediately on his radio telling Denny what had occurred.

The *Sea Quest* was soon on the scene. Coming slowly alongside, Denny snagged the sleeper with his boathook then Izzy lifted the bedraggled dog into the boat and wrapped him in an old towel.

Throughout this rescue, Mousa and her pod continued to circle warily.

Denny lassoed the sleeper and with the help of another passenger, hauled it into the boat.

With the mystery object removed from their domain, the orcas grouped up again and swam towards the open sea.

Fankle

Throughout the entire drama, the dolphin watchers at Chanonry Point clicked and videoed, some posting their images with comments to social media. Using her mobile phone, Ruby sent her report and pictures to *Moray Firth Radio* where her nephew Rory worked as a journalist.

The following day a team from *Reporting Scotland* filmed and interviewed Pingo and his owners on *Sea Quest* while sailing past Chanonry Point. A small spoiler clip was aired as a 'tailpiece' on the preceding *BBC News at Six* programme with a fuller report later in the Scottish news.

As the piece was being filmed, Chanonry Point and the adjacent coastline was crowded with hundreds of dolphin watchers requiring the Coastguard to be on duty to manage the situation. In parallel police were attempting to control the log jam of traffic on the narrow approach road and the sort out the chaos in the car park beside the lighthouse.

The news spread far and wide, attracting thousands of additional visitors in the weeks to come.

Postcards of Pingo with Hermione and her Magic Wand are widely available for sale in local gift shops and on board the *Sea Quest*, with fifty percent of the proceeds from sales donated to the *Scottish Dolphin Centre* charity.