

Glasgow Fair Friday, 1964.

It was tea-break on the morning of the Glasgow Fair Friday¹ at Stevies². Officially the shift finished at noon but there would be no further work done that day. The Fitting-Out workshops at Sheildhall Quay were buzzing. In the Plumbers' howf³, only a few men had half bottles of whisky. Most sipped from Lanliq⁴ alongside bottles of beer and stout. Alcohol in the workplace was normally banned but overlooked on such occasions. The managers were in their offices, celebrating in their own fashion, probably with bottles of malt whisky.

Henry Raphaele, aka 'The Gentleman' because of his posh, softly spoken voice, had his ancient ceremonial grey top hat upturned to collect raffle tickets with names scrawled on them. This was supposed to make sure everyone had a fair chance of doing their turn in the Fair Friday Sing Song. By tradition, only ten 'winners' were allowed.

I had been Henry's apprentice for three months and knew he was an oddball, always dressed in made-to-measure suits which had once been smart, now scruffy. All I really knew about him was he smoked Sobranies⁵ and drank only wine, proper wine, French. He was tight-lipped about his past but inquisitive about mine.

"Now, John, I've heard you warbling away at those Boys' Brigade songs about keeping your anchor on hold but today is not the day for those. What will you sing, if selected?"

"*The Day we went to Rothesay-O.*"

"Ah, yes, most apt. Good luck. There's a prize for the winner. A half-bottle of Bells' whisky, Scotland's very own 'oosh-keh beh-ha'⁶, largesse donated by our erstwhile chargehand, 'The Helmet'."

This was a recent nickname for Jimmy Jackson - "*Mr Jackson to you, sonny boy*"- who had been given a white safety helmet and was forever cracking his head against low objects.

Big Willie the Pole was first up with an interpretation of *Gene Kelly's Singing in the Rain*. At that stage I was unaware the draw was rigged: it was always Willie the Pole first, while he was still sober.

Sid, his plumber's helper of many years, provided accompaniment on his Jew's Harp. Willie, a tall lean man in his late fifties with mad eyes and an aggressive nature, sang a

¹ Glasgow Fair Friday in July marked the start of a two-week shutdown of Glasgow factories and trade's premises.

² Stevies' shipyard, Alexander Stephen of Linthouse, Glasgow, Shipbuilders and Engineers

³ *Howf* aka workshop. Each trade had their own workshop where other trades were not normally welcomed.

⁴ Lanliq is a fortified, sweet white wine from South Africa, easy to drink and potent.

⁵ Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes, expensive in 1964 and with a distinctive odour. Smoked by Toffs.

⁶ *uisge-beatha*, Scottish Gaelic for 'the water of life'.

Glasgow Fair Friday, 1964.

mangled version of the song while tap-dancing his way around the workshop dressed in his dirty old trench coat, worn year round, hail or shine, offering his arm to swing a variety of partners with an added '**Heuch!**' before leaping up onto the bending table. This large, waist-high slab of steel was dotted with holes in various diameters to take pins around which pipes could be heated and 'adjusted' to exactly fit their location on the ship.

Now in full flight, Willie the Pole was heeling and toeing his steel-segged boots at a furious rate before leaning forward as if running a race, his arms swinging, singing off-key at the top of his range, attracting onlookers from the nearby workshops, shipwrights, joiners and painters, men crowding to peer in through the door.

After a furious few minutes, Willie ended his routine by doing the splits to screeches of derision and fake groans of pain from the onlookers.

Next up was Sid himself, a tiny, tubby, sallow skinned man, nearly bald with a remnant fringe of jet-black hair very obviously from a bottle. Sid had an encyclopaedic knowledge of jazz and stood on the edge of the table to render his offering, a high falsetto version of Peggy Lee's standard, '*Ghost Riders in the Sky*' strumming the rhythm on a tiny ukulele.

Wee Benny, another plumbers' helper, followed with a rendering of Al Jolson's *Sonny Boy*, ending with a heartrending sob and real tears. I had been warned about this: Benny's three-year-old son had been knocked down and killed by a tram on VE Day.

Other turns followed and then Henry introduced me as the final act, "Govanhill's Kenneth McKellar". Waiting nervously on the bending table, I heard a ripple of guffaws from the crowd behind me as all eyes focussed on Sid who delved into his many pockets, blowing into one mouth organ after another until he found the one in the key he was looking for. Sid played through the tune once, tapping a steady rhythm with his foot then stopped, nodded to me, played the key note and I was off.

Wan Hogmanay at the Glesga Fair. . .

At each verse my audience sang the chorus lustily.

Aping Sid after his performance, I finished with a small camp curtsy as they cheered:

"Winner. Winner by a mile! C'mon, Henry, gie the boay his prize."

The Gentleman leapt up beside me, fished into his inside pocket, took out the half bottle, of Bells' and, with a theatrical flourish, pulled out the cork. Turning his back to obscure my view, he poured a measure of whisky. Spinning, holding the brimming shot glass high for all to see, he passed it to me. I was newly seventeen and technically too young to

Glasgow Fair Friday, 1964.

drink alcohol. So far my only tippie had been a tiny sip of Lanliq and small bottle of sweetheart stout, disparagingly called 'boys' beer'. I had sniffed whisky a few times, deciding I hated its smell. Everyone was laughing, shouting encouragement.

Henry said, "Right, John, down it in one!"

A steady insistent clap and stamp of feet left me no alternative.

The glass felt quite warm. I assumed this was because it had been in Henry's pocket. I closed my eyes, screwed up my nose and lifted it to my lips.

I swallowed most of it before gagging.

It was bitter, salty with the stench of babies' nappies.

As Sid told me later:

"Polish Vodka, son. A wee-wee Fair Friday present from Willie the Pole."