

A Short Story

THE PINES OF RIABHACH

RICHARD BELL



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Written as an exercise in the Open University's FutureLearn
'Start Writing Fiction' course

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*“In the music of this symphony we are brought face to face with
the wild and savage scenery of [Sibelius’s] native land, the
rolling mists . . . that hover over the rocks, lakes and fir-clad
forests . . . “*

*Granville Bantock, description of his friend Sibelius’s Symphony
No. 5 in E flat major, Op. 82*

PROLOGUE

For this exercise, we were asked to write a story based on the first subject that we heard when we turned on the radio.

There was a bit of user bias in my starting point, as I knew that it was tuned to Radio 3 and that I was about on schedule for the afternoon concert. Sibelius's 5th Symphony was described by his old friend Granville Bantock as bringing the listener 'face to face with the wild and savage scenery of [Sibelius's] native land, the rolling mists . . . that hover over the rocks, lakes and fir-clad forests . . .'

Perfect!

THE PINES OF RIABHACH

LOCH RIABHACH, SCOTLAND

APRIL 1977



“A salmon from the stream, a deer from the forest, a wand from the wood.”

Gaelic proverb

Whenever I hear the closing movement of Sibelius 5, I find myself brought face to face again with the wild and savage scenery of Loch Riabhach; the rolling mists hovering over the rocks, lakes and fir-clad forests.

But on that Sunday evening it was calm and clear as I walked out along the moor road. Roe deer grazed on the grassy verge. A tawny owl turned towards me in imperious disdain. In the fading light, the white around its face and the smoke-grey of its plumage made it blend in well with the lichened birches.

I left the road and set out across the moor. The full moon appeared over Ben Corrach. As I reached the plantation on the far side, I missed a turning and came out almost opposite Bridge of Riabhach. I made my way over to the road and followed it back past the loch.

Jupiter appeared. A woodcock surprised me: a sharp grunting call as it patrolled over a stream.



Back in the common room caravan, Kevin Watson was ensconced in his usual corner. On first meeting him, you'd guess that he might be a lumberjack; tall and bearded, with longish hair the colour of sun-bleached pine bark. He wore a plain crew-neck sweater in mottled grey-green, a colour which enabled him to blend with his forest habitat as successfully as the tawny in its tree.

Although he was only a year or two older than the other volunteers, his reserved manner as he sat and watched, smoking his Sherlock-style pipe, gave the impression that he was more mature and, unlike them, that he'd settled on his path in life.

"We accept 'magnetos' but you can't have 'em'!" Ella had set herself up as referee in the evening's Scrabble session, "There's no such word!"

"If we had a dictionary here, I'd prove it to you!" moaned Josh. He might be head warden but Ella wasn't going to give him the benefit of the doubt. Before he could press home his appeal, the field telephone rang, the one connected by half a mile of cable to the Forward Hide.

Instantly, Josh transformed from amiable sparring to calm professionalism:

"They need help."

We didn't need any further explanation. We'd all been devastated when the ospreys' eggs had been stolen in a night raid the previous year.

Within minutes we were all somehow crammed into the camp car, hurtling between the pillars of pine trunks on the track to the reserve.

We'd tramped up that track with supplies on many occasions but we'd never covered the ground as urgently as we did that night.

No sign of a struggle. All seemed as normal as we reached the Forward Hide.

Josh pushed the door open, surprising the team on evening watch.

"You need help?"

They looked puzzled: "Help"? Oh no, we were ringing to say we need *milk*. Have you brought any?"

The quality of sound on our old wind-up, battery-powered field telephones had let us down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Bell is an illustrator based in West Yorkshire. For the past seven years he has written the ‘Wild Yorkshire’ nature diary for *The Dalesman* magazine.

He worked as a volunteer warden at the RSPB Loch Garten Osprey Reserve in the 1970s.

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