

The new

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Mini *Omnibus*...Issue number one 2011

Beneath the rule of men entirely great

The pen is mightier than the sword



Omnibus....Issue Number One

Story number three

The Courting

Meet shepherd Andrew John and his dog Ben, visit their lovely mythical Highland Glen, *Glen Falachany* with its river dropping into the firth. Meet his friends and neighbours and their friends.

These stories were written sometime around 1986 by me and I have only re-discovered them.

In addition to being a shepherd Andrew John is a piper and a poet, so readers can only guess just what might appear in the forthcoming stories.

Sometimes I wonder myself as I plod through the reams of pages written so many years ago, just what will turn up.

I'll keep you posted.

Euilleam.

The Courting

‘Will you listen to that bird?’ Andrew John mused to himself, ‘you would think it was nesting time all over again.’

The cock Lapwing excelled its previous day’s performance as it circled and wheeled tumbling over and over in its exuberance and the sheer joy of living, while appearing to urge his whole family to take wing.

‘I feel quite sprightly myself this morning,’ the shepherd said aloud to Ben, who he gazed up at his master with a quizzical look on his face.

Soon however the dog got the familiar command and without too much ado herded the almost brand new Blackfaced sheep towards the field gate, where Andrew John stood, hands resting on his shepherd’s crook while casting a knowing eye over every one of the disrobed animals.

A haversack slung over his shoulder contained his flask of tea, but unlike yesterday it contained not one mug but two. ‘There’s no understanding women.’ He repeated hopefully to himself as he set off behind the flock for the two mile walk to the foreshore. ‘If she meets me I wonder if she takes sugar? Now Andrew don’t go spoiling your new friendship by fanciful ideas, he regaled himself.

The journey was largely uneventful and less than an hour later as the shepherd approached the iron gate he could see that it had been opened, but he knew not when, or by whom. Lots of ramblers or even poachers used the track to reach the shore line and as often as not they were inclined to leave the gate open until their return trip.

The shepherd was disappointed as the opening approached for there was no sign of the person he most wanted to see there. Shrugging aside his high hopes the shepherd directed Ben with whistle and hand signals until all his charges were safely through and on their way down the brae.

‘You may well be a film star yet,’ a voice echoed, as Mary stepped from behind a Rhododendron bush holding a small video camera in her hand. ‘Its just as well you got it right first time else Hamish would have a field day down at the pub when I screen it.’

‘You wouldn’t do that, would you?’

‘It depends whether or not you will teach me to herd sheep with Ben.’

Andrew John’s mind was temporarily distracted from his charges as he contemplated the implications of Mary’s ultimatum.

‘Do you really mean you would like to be a shepherdess?’ Andrew John questioned.

‘Well Andrew John,’ Mary looked him straight in the eye, ‘I might spend more time in the glen especially during my holidays than I have done of late, if I had a reason to.’

‘Now I’ll guess, you want to try your luck at the Glen Falachany sheep dog trials,’ Andrew John said laughingly while returning her look.

‘If you weren’t competing I could enter in the Novice Class with Ben,’ Mary responded.

Andrew John roared with laughter and chuckled, ‘I could almost believe you had this planned, but it’s a great idea, there is however one thing, I think we must keep quiet about until the day of the trials.’

‘What would that be?’ Mary responded.

‘Well if you sent in an entry form using a bye name, care of the Post Office, it would be quite a joke when you turned up on the morning complete with Ben and one of my shepherd crooks. Just imagine the looks on the Laird and Lady’s faces, as well as all the crofters and their wives.’

‘Will they be attending?’

‘Oh yes and not only them, but also my friends from the ‘smoke’, They will be here staying on the croft in their caravan.’

‘You know Andrew John, you never cease to amaze me, have you any other hidden secrets or talents?’

‘Mary, the sheep are getting restless and after two miles of trekking I’m needing my tea, so lets get the job done and then perhaps if you are sure you want to go ahead with your idea of being a shepherdess we can do some planning, but let me tell you I am not a great teacher.’

With that the pair turned their attention to the job in hand.

‘I must be mad’, Mary spoke quietly to herself, here is a man old enough to be my father yet I find his company really uplifting.’

The shepherd had similar thoughts and all kinds of scenarios crept through his head as he automatically directed Ben to drive the sheep down the slope to the shore grass. The sward stretched for what seemed miles of uninterrupted grazing and without too much encouragement the animals quickly headed for the tasty grass of their own accord.

‘That’ll do Ben, heel.’ The shepherd spoke softly as though not to mar the magic of the moment. ‘Will you be joining me in a cup of tea?’ he questioned his companion.

Mary looked surprised by the invitation.

‘I wouldn’t want to deprive you of your refreshment,’ she retorted.

‘Now, now lassie if I didn’t want you to share it with me I would not have asked you. Lets go yonder an sit on that washed up log we can enjoy the tranquillity for a wee while. I’m afraid my half yoking is not what you will be used to but I hope that you enjoy it.’

Mary felt embarrassment but at the same time was looking forward to a mouthful or two of morning tea.

When Andrew John produced two mugs from his haversack along with a plastic box of oatcakes and crowdie she had great difficulty holding back her tears.

‘How did you know I would be on the shore this morning?’ she asked.

‘I didn’t know but I was hoping you would come.’

Not ten yards from the bank a mighty splash caused both of them to glance at its source.

‘That’ll be one for the laird when he comes, unless of course the poachers get it first,’ Andrew John prophesied.

‘Was it a salmon?’

‘Nothing less and a good one too by the sound of it.’ Andrew John spoke with authority.

‘How can you tell?’

‘Practice mostly, you see whilst the Days are here on holiday and if they go fishing on the river I am their stand in ghillie.’

‘A man of many talents I can see,’ Mary joked.

‘Am I to take that as a compliment or a criticism?’ Andrew John asked with a hint of laughter in his voice.

‘After my first lesson with Ben I’ll let you know.’

‘Fair enough, but for a start you will have to practice with a whistle, to get the commands right, then the next stage will be driving a half dozen ducks or so through some obstacles.’ Andrew John produced a well used whistle from his pocket and held it out for his companion’s inspection.

‘It looks like something a ventriloquist would use,’ was her summing up.

‘I suppose so but I have a new spare at the croft so if you are passing you can pick it up.’

‘I don’t suppose you made these oatcakes yourself?’ Mary asked between mouthfuls of crowdie and the bannock.

‘Would it surprise you to know that I made the crowdie also?’

Mary pondered before responding, ‘not really I doubt if I could be surprised by anything else, you seem to have it all wrapped up.’

Andrew John clasping his mug of tea in both hands gazed out over the gleaming firth his eyes fixed on the far shore. ‘What if I were to tell you that I think you and I are on a dangerous course after only our third meeting?’

Mary shrugged before replying. ‘We are both adults and we enjoy each other’s company, what could be wrong with that whether its our third or three hundredth meeting. After Alex’s death I realised that we are all vulnerable and life is so short that I made up my mind to live the remainder of my life in full, possibly as a tribute to him and as an example for myself. But if you feel that I am a threat in any way we can call it quits when ever you want to.’

Without a doubt Andrew John was embarrassed and for a moment he was tongue tied.

The inquisitive head of a grey seal poking its nose in their direction saved the situation and as the two simultaneously blurted ‘look at that’ the tense moment passed.

‘Right then.’ the shepherd questioned, when would you like to pick up your whistle’.

Whats wrong with today? She responded.

‘Nothing that I know of,’ Andrew John replied, ‘if you have finished your half yoking we can get started on the way back.’

A companionable silence developed as they wended their way towards the iron gate, after they and Ben were through its portals, they swung it shut, and briefly their hands touched. Neither spoke but both felt a thrill of spontaneous pleasure by the contact.

‘Where have you parked your bicycle? The shepherd asked.

‘Not too far away, but as it is not a bicycle built for two I’ll push it the way back to the cottage.’

‘Not at all, you take my crook, you’ll need all the practice you can get, the trials are only weeks away. I’ll push the bike while you try to communicate with Ben. And mind I am not going to say anything from now on to you or to the dog.’

‘Will I need your whistle?’

‘It may not be very clean nor hygienic, its been in my pocket all morning.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘Well here you go then, give it a wipe on your jeans.’

Andrew John turned aside to hide the grin that formed spontaneously on his lips.

Mary did as she was bid and rubbed the whistle down the length of her thigh, and then wondered at her own casual approach to the situation. Her mind skipped over her past aversion to even taking a sip out of a used cup without first making sure it was sterilised. I must be mad she said to herself, but I am enjoying it.

‘Which way does it go into my mouth?’

‘This end forward and this side up, and if you swallow it I’ll have to give you the kiss of life,’ Andrew John chuckled.

Picking up the fallen bicycle the shepherd stood back and motioned Mary to precede him.

Mary felt a bit self conscious as she mouthed the whistle, finding it somewhat too big to fit comfortable.

‘I don’t think I’ll be able to manage to talk a lot,’ she offered to the shepherd before finally coming to grips with the contrivance. The shepherd chortled but said nothing.

Ben cocked his ears and the expression in his intelligent eyes said it all, as he looked from one to the other adult acting like teenagers.

As soon as Mary started to walk away Andrew John gave Ben a silent hand command and without ado the dog raced forward some distance before turning round to look for more instructions. The return journey to the croft was quite hilarious, Andrew John did his best not to be too obvious with his enjoyment and Mary was content to be able to practice her whistle commands, even if they did sound more like bird calls.

Finally when Ben, who was ahead of the two, sighted the cottage he gave what sounded to be a sigh of relief and squatted on his haunches waiting for the pair to catch up.

'I better have my whistle back now,' Andrew John said holding out his hand, 'and if you have a while to pass I'll boil some duck eggs for lunch, but first I have some chores to attend to.'

'Can I help?'

'OK go down to the wee shed and let the ducks out, spread some feeding and then pick up their eggs in the bucket before you come back.'

Mary didn't really want to appear lost but she had no real idea just where to find the duck feeding or the eggs.

With an apologetic cough she asked, 'where will I find the feeding and the eggs?'

'The feeding is in that bucket over yonder by the barn door and you'll find the eggs on the floor of the wee shed hidden among the straw, they're devils for trying to hide their offerings, it must be natural for them to do it.'

Andrew John waved a hand to Ben in dismissal and the collie thankfully trotted down to the burn where he lolloped in the fast flowing water.

Not too long afterwards when the urgent jobs were attended to the shepherd suggested that it was time to put the eggs in the pan and asked his guest, 'how do you like them?'

'Did you say them?' Mary questioned, 'I really need just one.'

'I'm afraid its too late now but if you can't manage them both it no great deal. According to Edwina Currie you should not eat soft boiled duck eggs but I pay no attention to what politicians say or think, and I'm still here and hale and hearty.'

'OK I'll be guided by you,' Mary heard herself saying before silently questioning her blind acceptance of the shepherd's decisions.

While the eggs came to the boil Andrew John buttered some unusual looking bread and as he glanced up he saw his guest's questioning look.

'Its home made I'm afraid,' he apologised, 'my mother's mother was Irish you know and she taught me how to make traditional Soda Bread.'

'Did you make the butter too?' Mary asked.

'No such luck, the days of making home made butter, even on the croft, is past. It's not economic to keep a cow now-a-days, too many regulations, so you'll have to make do with stuff from New Zealand. Coffee or tea?'

Mary very nearly said that she would take whatever he was making but bit her lip in time. 'Tea for me please,' she responded.

Andrew John deftly brought the eggs out of the boiling water and placed two on each plate. 'Grab yourself some bread and cutlery and don't forget your mug, we can 'sit out' on this glorious day and savour the tranquillity.'

Nothing much was said as the pair tucked into their lunch but Mary was quietly thinking that life on a croft with Andrew John certainly was appealing, a very similar thought was carousing through the shepherd's mind as he cast furtive glances towards his protégée.

'I won't be able to take a lesson tomorrow I'm afraid, I have to report to the vet's for duty.'

'That's OK but why don't you make out a schedule, for say about one hour per day when you are free then we will plan accordingly?'

Eventually time came for Mary to reclaim her cycle and reluctantly pedal away wondering just where it was going to end and whether Andrew John was as smitten as she was?'

To be continued