

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 Four

The Courting cont.

Tomorrow.....Another Time

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.

After Mary left and without bidding Ben approached his master thrusting a cold nose into his right hand.

Andrew John idly scratched the dog's ear and whispered, 'I know old fellow, you like Mary about as much as I do, what are we going to do?'

Ben wagged his tail in response and casually scratched an ear.

The clucking of a hen nearby reminded him that he had promised to deliver some fresh eggs to Mary when she was working and as he mused over their next meeting his mood lightened and he began to look into the more distant future.

Meantime Mary had reached the hill top on her bicycle and paused for a breather looking back down the glen where Andrew John's cottage was just visible.

'Am I really doing the right thing?' She questioned herself, 'Or am I on the rebound, should I be more cautious before becoming involved with another man?'

'Would she really like to stay on a croft, after a city life just how could a woman take to the privations that rural living had provision for?'

But there again if they were man and wife, time was still on their side for starting the family that he sadly missed, he told himself.

'What if we were married?' Mary addressed herself as she freewheeled down the brae, 'does he want a family as much as I?'

'Perhaps,' she thought, 'the best thing we could do would be to have a real heart to heart talk about what would be best for both of us, but there again he is so shy that he just might take fright.' Mary laughed outright at the thought of the shepherd 'taking fright'.

Later that day Mary sat down and with a paper and pen jotted down all the Pros and Cons that a life in the glen with Andrew John might entail.

About the same time Andrew John decided that he would inspect the sheep and lambs on the hill, just to settle himself, he chided.

After changing into his hill walking boots with their upturned toes he stuffed a packet of biscuits into his tweed jacket inner pocket and whistling a melody he was learning on the Pibroch, along with the ever ready Ben set forth.

'It's a grand afternoon,' he told Ben, 'for walking the hill.'

After about two hours of trekking the ascent began to become steeper, yet his gait barely differed from that on the croft as he keenly viewed the animals among the heather on the upper reaches of the hill. His trained eyes were looking for any signs of sickness or infirmity among the ewes and their offspring.

'We'll be taking them down in a fortnight,' he told Ben, 'they are beginning to shed their wool already.' But Ben was not listening in a classic pointing pose twenty yards or so to his left he held Grouse by eye only.

'Come away in here man, how many times have I told you, you are a sheepdog not a pointer?'

But Ben never turned a hair, stationery as a statue. "Oh go on then". The shepherd urged.

Almost daintily Ben set one paw in front of the other as he edged forward towards the crouching birds. With a whirr of wings and numerous alarm calls two adult Grouse along with a squad of youngsters took to their wings and flew low across the ling towards safety over the brae top.

‘I’m sure Mary would have loved to witness that display,’ he said to the dog, ‘perhaps you can go Grouse shooting with the laird on the twelfth’, the shepherd chuckled, ‘and we could be beaters’.

On the way back Andrew John zig zagged down the steepest inclines until he reached a wee water fall where he stopped before extracting the now somewhat decrepit packet of biscuits then he divided them between himself and the dog.

Ben wagged his tail furiously, he had been aware of the treat since leaving the croft, yet he knew it was only when the job in hand was done that his master would stop to eat. Washing the biscuits down with a slurp of icy water Andrew John turned resolutely towards the distant croft and hopefully to some degree of rest, in body at least, as his mind was still seething with the thought of Mary and their possible future.

At the other end of Glen Falachany, Mary was equally restless and promising herself that unless both herself and Andrew John jointly resolved their future she would have to return to her job in the city and all that it entailed, including memories from her former life.

‘Do I want to do that?’ She quizzed herself, ‘tomorrow will tell’.

Next morning as the sun cleared the tops and filled the glen with warming light Andrew John was already breakfasted and settling into the day’s chores as he practiced his forthcoming spiel to Mary. In the background Falachany Glen was echoing with sounds from the wildlife, both feathered and otherwise who were resident nearly all of the year.

“Dash me,” Andrew spoke aloud, “I forgot to look at my mail.”

Thumbing through the envelopes Andrew John was pleasantly surprised to see the familiar handwriting belonging to his friend Jean Darling. Carefully the shepherd slit the letter open using his pocket knife’s sharpened blade.

As he scanned the first few sentences a frown settled on his brow and by the time he had read the last page his attitude was that of shock.

His immediate thought was ‘I’ll have to speak to someone.’ in the past, in times of duress he would have confided his worries to the estate factor, but instinctively he felt advice from a female would be of more value on this occasion. His thoughts turned unsurprisingly towards Mary.

‘Come away Ben, we’re going to the village to call on the vet.’ Jumping into the estate pickup over the tailgate the dog cocked his ears as Andrew John started the engine and turned onto the narrow road. It took no time at all to travel the several miles and as the surgery came into sight Ben became a wee bit agitated.

“No its not for you this time,” his master said with a grin. “Its me that should be nervous.”

There was no other customer apparent and as the shepherd nudged the door open Gavin looked up from the paper he was reading.

“Why Andrew John I wasn’t expecting to see you today, is there anything wrong?”

“You could say that,” the shepherd replied. “Is Mary in?”

“She is that and she is making some tea, will you have a cup?”

Gavin raised his voice and called, “Mary we have a visitor bring through an extra cup.”

When Mary appeared with a tray and three cups of tea and saw who was conversing with the vet, she almost spilt the brew.

“Good morning Andrew John,” she said with a smile. “What brings you here?”

Andrew John looked somewhat bashful as he stated his reason for the visit while Gavin’s keen perception to vibes, gleaned from his years of treating dumb animals, detected the rapport between the two and he thought quietly, wonderful.

Without more ado the shepherd thrust Jean’s letter towards Mary and said nothing as she quietly read the epistle from start to finish. As Mary looked up with concern Andrew John indicated that she should pass it across to Gavin.

“Well now, what are your plans?” The vet asked when he had digested its contents.

“For sure I must get the whole family up with the caravan as soon as they can make it and definitely before the Falachany sheepdog trials.”

Both Mary and Gavin nodded in agreement.

“Then that’s settled,” Andrew John said as he prepared to leave.

“Oh I’m going for a run on my bicycle this evening if it stays fair, so if you are at home I can stop by and find out what the next part of the plan is.” Mary shyly said.

“Fine, fine,” Andrew John replied. “And see you remember to take a basket for the eggs I have forgotten.” With a final farewell he strode out of the door and as the pickup turned away Gavin said, “He’s a fine man that, what a pity he does not have a wife. Mary turned away as she felt her face beginning to turn red.

As the morning grew and the shepherd composed a difficult letter, some several hundred miles to the south the same sun was lighting up the countryside and in one country garden an impatient youngster was longing for different things.

JOHNNIE'S HOLIDAY

Like most youngsters of his age Johnnie longed to grow up, to leave school and earn his living using his hands working on the land like a farmer perhaps, or a gardener, or better still, a shepherd.

Watching his mother on her knees weeding the flower bed and his father striding behind the motor mower with its blades whirring round shaving the grass to an even green sward, caused Johnnie to shout a greeting in delight. His mother waved a gloved hand holding a weeding fork while his father smiled as his machine putted past, while at that moment the sadness in his heart was forgotten.

Johnnie's fair tousled hair was envied by his sisters, Clara and June. Both girls adored their 'baby' brother, it was Johnnie this and Johnnie that. The girls chattered almost non-stop and all three of the family bantered each other making the household come alive with summer gladness.

Roger's strong hands holding the mower dead steady, cut each swathe straight as a die, though in his mind he pondered over the question, time and again, 'Why does it have to happen to us?' And as the mower came to rest his mind wandered back over the past year.

Johnnie had been recalled to the local hospital where Dr Gordon had quietly explained to the family that progress on Johnnie's recovery after the chemo was less than what had been anticipated.

'You know we can't give him any more, so I am sorry to say that his recovery now could be in doubt.'

'But surely there is something you can do?' Jean had asked.

Dr Gordon had gone on to explain whilst it was not unheard of that children with his type of cancer, or possibly worse than what Johnnie had, do get well again, but that was the exception rather than the rule.

Positive mental as well as physical attitudes play a great part, especially among youngsters, the doctor went on to explain, so as a loving family, you will have to try to treat him as a normal schoolboy and pray for the best.'

Now nearby, oblivious to all the goings on a nesting Blackbird tugged determinedly at a partly exposed worm in the lawn before triumphantly securing a tasty feed for at least one chick, brought Roger back to the present.

Jean paused in her labours and glanced across at her husband knowing full well the torment that he was going through. She knew that both of them had to keep smiling and hide the pain in their hearts and plan a positive future for their family, even if it was an uncertain one.

Sighing quietly to herself Jean decided to call a halt to gardening for the day and joined the children in the kitchen for a coffee break. Roger followed soon after.

Standing arm in arm looking out of the picture window the pair could clearly see the trees that they had planted, one at the birth of each of their children. Jean recalled just how excited Roger was when she told him that the scan showed she was carrying twins. The girls arrived relatively easy and when the initial excitement died down, name choosing was the order of the day. Finally they settled for the first born to be named June after the birth month and the younger sibling, Clara, in celebration of their Irish honeymoon. When Johnnie came along four years later Roger's world was complete. Now she realised that their world was under threat.

They had planted, two Flowering Cherries for the girls, but when son Johnnie was born Roger insisted a more

manly tree be used, so they had settled for a fine Larch, Roger had explained that Larch had a long life and was used for all sorts of things from boat building to fencing.

Jean had laughed and said 'that it would be a long time before their tree could be used for manufacture'.

Shrugging aside her worries she announced that work for the day was over and it was time for a wee picnic under the shade of the canvas canopy. Getting it together took but a short time and soon the family was tucking in to sandwiches and home made cake, excitedly talking over each other, while questioning just where they would go on holiday when school closed for the summer break.

Roger winked at his wife and said, 'Who would like to go back to visit Andrew John in Scotland, I hear he has bought a loch boat, for fishing but does not have a name for it yet?'

Yells of excitement followed his question with each of the children vying for the right to claim a suitable name for the craft.

'Wait a minute,' father said, 'perhaps Andrew John would like to choose the name himself.'

That announcement brought a semblance of chastisement to the excitement.

'Lets settle first things first, lets take a vote, who wants to go to Scotland?'

As all hands shot aloft Jean announced 'No contest.'

When a day later Andrew John's letter arrived it was both a comfort and a seal for their plans.

Two weeks later with their camper van packed to the gunnels and five excited holidaymakers they set off from Corner Stone without apparent worry.

'I spoke to Andrew John last night by phone,' Roger confided to his spouse as they turned on to the motorway.

'Did he have any news and did you explain about Johnnie's set back?' Jean wanted to know.

'Oh aye,' Roger responded, 'quite surprising news, if you ask me.'

'Well I'm asking.'

"Best if I let him tell you himself when we get there."

"You men and your secrets." Jean retorted.

Eventually the mighty motorway gave way to the more humble Highland roads and when the camper pulled into a lay-by for a bite of food and the chance to stretch cramped legs, all Johnnie Darling wanted to know was how far and how soon would they reach Andrew John's cottage? Not yet a while, Roger informed them all and continued, 'Remember we will be on single track roads before we reach our journey's end.'

When Jean climbed into the driver's seat to take over the driving for a bit she was ribbed, not only by the children but so too by Roger, who after winking at Jean turned to the family and said, 'I'm not sure if mum is licensed to drive this thing.'

Once underway they all forgot about Jean's alleged lack of capabilities as they absorbed the wonderful heather clad hills and the pine forests that greeted their eyes round every bend and soon familiar landmarks were identified as they neared the turnoff for Andrew John's in the Glen of Falachany.

The Glen was totally unspoiled and still had smatterings of the Old Caledonian Forrest Fir Trees gracing its lower slopes and as the cottage appeared in the distance a loud cheering and laughter rang out from five throats.

'Look, look', shouted Johnnie there's Ben even before Jean had got the engine switched of.

The pleasure and excitement filled the air as each member was hugged and warmly welcomed by Andrew John.

'Whisht a minute man,' Andrew John remonstrated with the youngest Darling, 'If you think Ben is special just wait till you see what I have in the byre.'

Johnnie's chastisement did not last much more than a minute before he was plaguing the shepherd to let them all see what was in the cowshed.

'All in good time, all in good time,' responded his hero, first we must have a wee bite to eat, I am sure mum and dad needs a rest, so lets leave the surprises till later and I have all your news first.'

Andrew John ushered them into his cottage and immediately Jean noticed there was now a feminine touch around the place. The previous year when they were here although the abode was spotlessly clean it still lacked something. Now she knew what it was but said nothing.

June and Clara were soon back on the familiar terms with their host as only youngsters can be and were swapping yarns back and forth. Play us a tune on your bagpipes Andrew John...pleeeese they cried in chorus.

'Will you listen to them', Andrew John directed speech towards Roger and Jean, 'perhaps you are going back tonight?' He questioned with a sly wink to the parents.

'Oh there is no hope of that shepherd,' Roger used a complimentary Highland title, 'In fact if we could we would spend the rest of our lives in this tranquillity.'

'Aye Glen Falachany has that effect on people.' He responded. 'But unless I give the youngsters a conducted tour it won't be the Glen of Tranquillity for much longer.'

'Come away bye Ben and bring the 'flock' with you.'

The juniors needed no further bidding as the girls clutched a calloused hand each and Johnnie danced along at the heels of the Collie.

First, as it proved to be the most popular by demand, they approached the byre with its door ajar and some strange sounds emanating from within.

Andrew John was quite amused as all the former youthful effervesce evaporated by the thought of the unknown.

‘Any ideas?’ He asked.

Nobody offered to comment.

‘Well let me tell you a wee story, it was about six weeks ago that I had to take one of the wedders to the vet as it had a very bad hoof infection, and try as I might I could not cure it. While I was there Mary the young lady who helps at times mentioned that they were looking for a home for a wee West Highland Terrier.

‘So here she is in my byre with three pups, all waiting to meet you lot.’

Shouts of excitement from the juniors echoed around the glen as they all clamoured for Andrew John to open the byre door.

‘Now remember, she is not used to children so don’t get too close for a start especially as her pups are just a month old and she is quite protective.’ Andrew John warned them before taking the latch of the door and pushing it open.

The adoring eyes searched out Andrew John and a faint tail wagging ensued as the bitch edged forward.

The shepherd bent down and gently caressed her ears while all the time talking to her in his native language.

‘Stop there a minute or two,’ he instructed his guests, ‘let her get used to your smell, can you see the wee devils?’ ‘They’ll be up and about in no time, I shouldn’t wonder if they won’t be barking in a week or two.

To be continued.