

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 two

The Clipping

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 CLIPPING

Andrew John, like many other countrymen, always maintained that healthy animals stretched themselves fully every morning as dawn came in or if not when they got up. And it was a belief that he himself followed when he arose with the cock's crow.

This morning it was no different and later as he contemplated the forthcoming day of toil he briefly dwelt on his encounter with Mary and his impetuous invitation to 'come to the clipping'.

After thirty years of doing for himself he was amazed that he had an unrealistic urge to see more of the young widow Mary than he had believed possible. He was after all, he told himself, now over fifty and should know better, while she could be no more than in her mid thirties.

Out of doors the weather was fine and dry with a very light southerly breeze, ideal for the sheep when they lost their winter-thick wool, Andrew John mused as he gave Ben a quick lick of milk and the remainder of his porridge before the dog ventured out for his ablutions.

The shepherd knew that as a working dog Ben should not be fed, even lightly before rounding up his charges but the dog's daily appeal at breakfast time was always rewarded, even if only slightly.

Clipping in the glen was considered a social event by the residents and crofters cum shepherds alike, along with their wives they all contributed, one way or another, towards a successful day. The laird's factor could be guaranteed to bring at least two bottles of the 'water of life' along with a drop of French Brandy for the ladies. Then again Andrew John was liable to tote along a forty ounce of Usquebae just to make sure that the workers were suitably warmed up before relieving the woolly black faced terrors of their fleeces.

Lower down on the ling, as the shepherd hauled his accoutrements towards the sheep fank, a cock lapwing tumbled around in the air, cart wheeling only the way that these birds are able to do when the mood takes them. Andrew John squinted against the sun's rays and nodded to himself as he recognised the old cock bird that had nested almost in the same spot for the last three years.

Earlier in the season he had witnessed the courtship, mating and the laying that culminated in four mottled green eggs deposited in a scrape on the ground, sparsely lined with shards of dried grass and straw. Now the young peewits had fledged and were venturing into longer flights on a daily basis, emulating their parents agility in the air.

Sound travels far in the Highland atmosphere and soon the sound of a Fergi tractor assaulted Andrew John's ear as he readied the food and drink bench tying it securely against the off side of the fank. Can't have a stray sheep upset the applear, he thought as he finished the knots and began to lay out numerous tumblers along with a lesser number of brandy glasses for the ladies. I wonder if Mary likes a brandy? The straying thoughts of Mary and his uncertainty of whether she would appear was a distraction that he told himself he could well do without at the clipping, yet it still persisted.

Standing stiff legged against the uneven movement of Hamish's bogey towed behind the ageing Fergi, Glen wagged his tail as he recognised his brother Ben at ease sitting and looking as though they, and not the absent Alan and Jennifer Day, were the Lairds of the glen.

Hamish cut the ignition to the spark plugs and suddenly silence descended on the surrounding landscape but not for long as Andrew John hurried forward to welcome the first clipper.

‘I see you have your new fangled electric shears aw rigged up’, Hamish spoke enviously as he jumped down from the tractor’s platform.

‘I have that and sure its yourself that will be getting a shottie of it today,’ the shepherd replied.

‘Grand man grand, I’ll look forward to that, I hear they’re looking for a barber doon at the village.’ Hamish laughed before casting a knowledgeable eye over the penned Black Facers then offering, ‘they look fine and ready for the shears’.

Soon a variety of transport began to appear on the road all heading to the clipping. Andrew John was wont to cast anxious glances towards the north side of the Falachany Glen but as yet there was no sign of Mary.

‘Ah well’ he cautioned himself it was too much to expect.

Newsing together and supping a warming tippie the glen folk were catching up with the latest gossip. Some wives were already setting out gas stoves and the like with the intent that everything would be handy when the first half yoking came up and everybody expected to be fed.

‘Am I too late?’ a voice interrupted the banter and as Andrew John whirled round in a flash, some of the precious Usquebae spilt from his glass.

‘Why, you did come then?’

Mary was uncertain whether it was a statement he was making or was asking a question.

‘Oh yes,’ she replied, ‘your invitation to the clipping could not be ignored so I cycled here over the hill track.’

Mary was well acquainted with most of the glen folk and although some were still a little awkward in her presence over her bereavement, they made a great fuss of her never the less.

Robbie, the estate handyman, was the first to recover and ask whether Mary would like a dram or a brandy?

‘No thanks for the moment but a sip of the water from the burn would just be great.’

Andrew John had recovered enough by this time to tip a mug full of water from the pitcher that was holding the water for the tea.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have a crystal decanter at the clipping’, he joked. ‘And if I can say it’s a good job you have trousers on instead of a skirt, as your job today will be helping Megan pack the fleeces.’

‘Well then lets get started,’ Suggested Agnes, ‘or we will be here till dark.’

The three shearers took their places and as the first call of ‘sheep’ echoed against the hill one after the other of the catchers dragged out a struggling animal before upending it into place before his clipper.

Andrew John signalled his fleece roller to give the mobile generator a turn and as it burst into life the electric shears whirred happily, stripping away the wool at an amazing rate.

Not much more was said as everybody got down to their allotted task.

Megan and Mary walked over to where what appeared to be a gallows was rigged up. A huge Hessian sack was attached to the cross member of the 'gallows' its mouth gaping open. Soon after, the first rolled fleeces were delivered by hand on to a platform beside the contraption.

'Right now Mary up you get on the platform, I'll take the first turn in the sack'. Megan said, as she clambered up onto the structure before hauling herself up to the mouth of the bag and disappearing from sight.

'Don't be alarmed I'll reappear in a wee while just as soon as I get some rolled fleeces under my feet. You throw up each roll into the mouth of the sack and mind ye dinna miss, or you'll no be popular.' She yelled.

After the first two dozen or so fleeces Mary's arms were beginning to tire, yet she was getting mental satisfaction from being part of a team, 'down on the croft.' So to speak, she told herself.

Gradually as Megan began to reappear her cheery smile said it all.

'Its nice to get into the fresh air again,' she gasped, 'you know city folks pay huge prices for lanolin, here you get it for free.' She said as she wiped her oily hands down her trouser legs.

At last the sack was filled to capacity and a halt to proceeding was called for, as it was lowered from the beam and stitched up as another sack tied in its place.

Andrew John hid his concern over the knowledge that Mary was going to take her spell at stamping the wool tightly into the sack when work restarted, but he hid it well. The glen folk would 'cotton on' quickly if any feeling were expressed in front of them, he knew that was how country folk were, albeit it in a kindly manner.

When work began again and Mary was hidden at the bottom sack but she was determined that she would stick it out, after all her legs were so much stronger than her arms due the walking and cycling she had been doing these past months, and her pride was not going to let her chicken out in front of all the friendly people.

The two women took turn about stamping the fleeces, until the half yoking was called. Called it seemed to Mary, so that another dram or two could be enjoyed along with tea and loads of home baking. Mary was enjoying herself but she did notice that Andrew John seemed to be avoiding her, but there again she told herself it could be her imagination.

'Here's the factor', Hamish said, 'look at him haring up the road in his jeep, better leave a mouthful of tea for him, we all know he does not care for a dram.' The rest of the squad laughed at the joke for it was a well known fact the factor enjoyed his tippie when the occasion arose, like at a spot of shearing on a good day.

'Well now I wonder what he has brought today, malt or milk do you think?' The shepherd addressed his question generally to the rest of the gathering. Just as the factor drew up behind the fank.

'Good morning George,' Andrew John said as he welcomed his boss.

'Morning all.' He replied, 'I see I am just in time, haven't had any breakfast yet.

'Ah we'll soon sort that,' one of the ladies replied, as she thrust a warming glass towards him. Laughingly he accepted it and raised it in tribute to the day.

'I had a letter yesterday from our laird and his good lady, it seems she is progressing, although it is not certain that she will make a complete recovery but they are both hopeful and intend to travel north soon.' The factor spoke to the assembly.

Mary who had never met the Lairds, Alan and Jennifer Day, resolved to ask Megan what was wrong with Mrs Day as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

'Have you met our latest glen resident?' Andrew John asked as he singled Mary out to the factor.

Mary felt herself colouring slightly.

'I have indeed, down at the vet's', George responded.

'Have you got a dog?' Andrew John asked Mary rather surprised.

Mary laughed melodiously as she replied, 'No not a dog, a job. I help out at the surgery two or three days a week, Trevor's wife is due to go into hospital any day now to give birth, so I offered to help.'

Andrew John with his wry wit retorted, 'You never got the chance of offering here, I am sorry.'

'Well I'll tell you this,' while Mary spoke it was as though the factor did not exist, 'I'm glad you did for I am really enjoying every minute of it, Lanolin and all.'

Shaking his head the shepherd turned aside but his audience clearly heard him say to himself, 'there's no understanding women.'

Pausing in mid stride he asked, 'Have the Day's given you a date?'

'Nothing is definite Andrew John but I'll let you know.'

The fank was almost empty by noon and as the sheep had more room, they tended to career up and down the length and breadth of the space. The two dogs were peching from their attempts to keep control of the last few remaining black faced animals.

'Here Hamish have a go with my new clippers while I go into the cottage and get a chair,' Andrew John said as he winked wickedly to the bystanders.

For a wee while Hamish never cottoned on what the shepherd intended, but as he got the hang of the new fangled contraption the realisation that his mentor was up to the usual leg pulling he was renowned for came to him.

'Here now, who will be first for a clip by the glen's newest barber?' Andrew John called. The whole squad, factor included, had a good laugh at Hamish's expense as he called Buist for the last time that day.

Just as though the two dogs could understand the banter they loped off and flopped in the burn's cool water.

After all the food and most of the drink was consumed and as evidence of the day's industry was tidied away folk began to drift home. Only the factor, Mary and Andrew John remained, seated on a convenient mound they breathed in the atmosphere and country sounds, that surrounded them.

No one was inclined to break the tranquillity of the afternoon, each engrossed in private thoughts.

Finally Mary sighed and said to the two men, 'I'd better gather myself together and head for the cottage, that is if my legs can turn the pedals.'

'Just you wait a minute or two,' the factor responded, 'if Andrew John will lift your bike into the back of my Land Rover I'll take you to the top of the brae then all you will have to do is sit on the seat and freewheel the rest of the way.'

Mary was more than grateful and as she got to her feet Andrew John detected a slight wobble in her equilibrium, but said nothing other than, 'If you had a basket on that bike you could have had some fresh free range eggs home with you, but I can drop some off at the vet's when I'm passing.'

Mary realised that such an offer could be a turning point, not only in their new friendship, but possibly in her whole life, was she ready for that she wondered as she framed her reply?

'Well I won't be there tomorrow, Trevor is TB testing on the Mains farm,' she looked directly at the shepherd.

'Just as well for I'll be putting the sheep back down to the foreshore after breakfast.' he responded.

'What time will that be?'

'A bitty after ten I should think.'

'When you're down there Andrew John have a look at the river banks, we want everything spic and span if the Days come up to fish.' The factor instructed.

With that the trio split up, but not before the shepherd hoisted Mary's bicycle into the jeep then whistling Ben to heel, made his way home, while the old cock Peewit was still cavorting over the ling.