

Where There's Muck....

By Ross McCallum

Jock Stewart watched the last cow slip and slide her way down the parlour walkway to join the rest of the herd in the yard beyond. Steam from their backs rose in the frost-filled air and the acrid reek of badly fermented silage assailed Jock's nostrils as he dipped the bulk tank containing the morning's milk.

“Christ, down another twa hunner litres.” he muttered. Every day for the past fortnight had been the same, and it wasn't just the silage quality to blame, poor though it was after a wet, dismal growing season. No, that was just the tip of the iceberg. First there had been the bull which had not only failed to produce calves but had introduced Bovine Viral Diarrhoea into the herd resulting in hefty vet's bills to try and recover some of the resulting lost milk production. And, as if BVD was not enough, there had been the devastating outbreak of lungworm just before the cattle were housed for the winter.

The final straw had come yesterday in the shape of a letter from his feed supplier telling Jock in no uncertain terms that his credit limit had been exceeded and threatening legal action if his outstanding bill was not settled within the next seven days.

Jock knew he had no hope of meeting these demands, nor those of other suppliers who had made similar threats in recent weeks. To put it mildly, Jock was desperate. Unshaven and gaunt faced from worry and lack of sleep, he looked older

than his 53 years. The farm had been his life and his father's and grandfather's before him. To lose it now would be unthinkable.

But what was he going to do? All last night and for many previous nights he had tossed and turned, his thoughts in turmoil as he grappled in vain to find a way out of his predicament. If only Annie, his late wife, had still been around to share his burden. But she had died many years ago giving birth to their only son Gavin who had signed up to join the army as soon as he was old enough. Now, any decisions affecting the farm were his alone and he felt the responsibility weigh heavily on his stooping shoulders.

Just then, the swish of tyres turning into the yard made him raise his head and he heard the strident hoot of a vehicle horn. He recognised it as the post van and went to collect the day's mail from old Alec Mackay, the driver. As usual the postman had a sullen scowl on his face as he struggled out from behind the wheel and opened the rear doors of the red van.

"Bloody winter," he growled "Couldnae get the effn van stertit this mornin an' noo ahm hauf an 'oor late wi ma roon'. And that," he grumbled angrily, gesticulating at a viscous slick of cow slurry oozing from the yard on to the tarmac lane, "nearly put me through the bloody dyke". He thrust a bundle of letters roughly into Jock's outstretched hands before climbing stiffly back into the van and sputtering off down the icy roadend .

Jock shook his head and made his way towards the kitchen door to prepare his habitual porridge and tea for breakfast. He glanced briefly at the envelopes in his hand before dropping them unread on the cluttered table. It was obvious that most of them were bills and he wasn't ready to face more problems this early in the day. Breakfast over and dishes piled into the sink with those he had left unwashed from supper the previous evening, he finally reached across and removed the red elastic band holding the letters together. Just as he had feared, four or five envelopes contained demands for payment of outstanding bills and these were quickly discarded. There were also the usual circulars and advertising leaflets which he added to the black stove just within arms length of where he sat.

Only one envelope remained unopened and unrecognised. It was blue and made from quality paper. Taking it between his work-roughened fingers he felt the unfamiliar material and turned it over a few times before his eye was drawn to the smudged postmark in the righthand corner. Liverpool. He peered at it closely with a puzzled frown. He didn't know anyone in Liverpool, of that he was sure. Hesitantly, he fumbled it open and withdrew a single sheet of paper made of the same quality parchment. He unfolded it and scanned the bold italic typeface at the top of the page which proclaimed:-

Charles Baxendale Ltd

Dealers in Gold and Precious Stones

Intrigued, he read on:- **Our Senior Buyer, Mr Oliver Martin-James, will be visiting your area on Tuesday 21st February when he will be pleased to offer you a free, professional valuation service and the very best price for your old jewellery no matter what condition it may be in. Cash paid on day of purchase. Call now to make an appointment`.**

Jock re-read the letter a couple of times, thinking of the few bits and pieces that had belonged to Annie. He hadn't looked at them in years, tucked away in a sideboard drawer in the front parlour. They were mostly costume and paste items of little value but there was a necklace and a couple of brooches which she had inherited from her mother which might just interest Mr Oliver Martin-James. There was certainly nothing sufficiently valuable that would resolve all his financial problems, he mused, but maybe, just maybe, they might bring in enough cash to deter one or two creditors from foreclosing on him for a few weeks. Thus resolved, he reached for the telephone half hidden on the paper-strewn table surface and dialled the number of Charles Baxendale Ltd.

A short time later, with the appointment with Mr Martin-James confirmed for 4.30pm on 21st February and his step a little lighter than before, Jock returned to the milking parlour to finish off the morning's chores. A vague plan was forming in his mind and he was in turn excited and appalled by his new train of thought.

The next few days vanished in a blur as he considered the implications of his proposed course of action. There were preparations to be made but he was confident that with a bit of luck and ingenuity his plan had a good chance of success. The leak of effluent from the slurry tank had been on his mind for a while but getting it fixed properly had been out of the question given the cost involved. Now, Jock had come to realise, there was a way he could turn the problem to his advantage and he set about his chores with renewed vigour.

The day of the valuation visit dawned at last, hoar frost clinging to the branches and a grey mist creeping in over the frozen fields. Jock followed his usual routine of milking and feeding the cows, then the calves and other young stock, conscious that the feed bin was almost empty but strangely confident that his financial problems were almost at an end. The rest of the morning seemed interminable and Jock fretted until after his midday meal. He checked and re-checked every detail in his mind, finding no flaws in his carefully structured plan.

As darkness fell, he made his way quickly towards the line of trees which sheltered the rear of the farmhouse. From here he could see the road cresting the brow of the hill just before it dipped steeply towards the farm entrance. It was icy cold and he drew his jacket more tightly to his chest as he watched and listened. Beside him lay the nozzle of a yellow, large diameter, hose which snaked up the slope behind him to the tractor-mounted pump which was used to convey slurry from the slatted cattle shed to the 40,000 gallon holding tank and was also the means by which slurry would normally be transferred out the tank again and into the spreader. In his right hand, Jock gripped two stout cords one of which was attached securely to the on/off lever

on the side of the pump and the other to the throttle lever on the tractor. At the moment, the tractor was idling gently, but Jock had calculated that one solid pull on the cords would activate the pump mechanism and the open tractor throttle would send 200 gallons of slurry a minute pulsing through the nozzle at his feet.

He squinted at his wristwatch in the growing darkness. It was nearly time. His heart was beating so hard he almost missed the sound of the car approaching the crest of the hill and it was the gleam from the headlights as it swept into view which galvanised him into frantic action. Grabbing the nozzle tightly under his left arm, he tugged sharply on the two cords with his right hand and almost immediately the hose came alive in his grasp. Bracing himself as best he could he aimed the writhing hose at the spot where the postman had almost come to grief a few days previously. Too late, the speeding driver hit the brakes as the front wheels found the lagoon of slurry which filled the dip in the road fifty metres from the farm gate. Wheels locked, the car slid sideways, clipped the embankment and flipped over the dyke into the field where it lay upside down with engine racing and steam billowing from below the twisted bonnet.

Dropping the hose as it continued to spew its foul cargo, Jock raced to switch off the pump before steeling himself to approach the still-steaming car. The driver lay inert, head twisted at a strange angle. His hands trembling, Jock swiftly checked for any signs of life. Mr Oliver Martin-James was as dead as a dodo. The roof of the car, which was now the floor, was strewn with baggage. Jock scanned the debris, his eye alighting on a large attaché case lodged behind the passenger head-rest and the rear screen. He grabbed this through the passenger door which had burst open on impact and fumbled with the catch which offered no resistance. He thrust his hands inside and withdrew a thick bundle of cash, all £50 notes. At least £5000 he reckoned exultantly and there were around a dozen more of a similar size still untouched in the case. £60,000! More than enough to secure the farm from his creditors.

Now, all that remained was to hose down the road with clean water to remove the evidence before telephoning the police to report the tragic “accident”. As he reached inside the car to check that nothing incriminating remained, the leaking fuel tank erupted with a thunderous roar as it came into contact with the still-hot engine, engulfing Jock, the money and the car in a deathly ball of flames.

About half a mile away another car, large and sleek, purred to a halt at the familiar crossroads as the young man at the wheel contemplated the circumstances which had drawn him unexpectedly back to his present location. Only a month ago, Gavin Fraser had been a lowly Corporal, almost at the end of five-year’s service in the Royal Regiment of Scotland. Then, out of the blue, had come the Lottery win and overnight he was a multi-millionaire with the world at his feet. But that could wait a little while longer.

Slipping the car back into gear he turned down the lane towards the farm of his birth, a six-figure cheque in his pocket made out that morning to his father, Mr Jock Fraser. A better homecoming could hardly be imagined, he thought happily.

1969 Words

