**Heading for the Hill**

Shonagh’s mother called upstairs and awaited the tired response that usually accompanied her cries for Shonagh to rise, but, surprisingly, this morning the answer came from the kitchen.

‘I’ve been up an about for mair than half an hour,’ explained Shonagh. ‘You and Dad were still snoring when I got out o my bed. I even made the tea, if you’d like a cup.’

Shonagh’s mother, Liz, smiled and gave her daughter a knowing look, ‘Well! You are keen this morning. Would this be because we’re gan tae Bennachie or is it that Andrew is coming with us? I’ll need tae tell Sheila tae look out or you’ll be running off with her laddie!’

Shonagh’s face began to redden at what she felt was an intrusion into her private feelings. ‘Shonagh Leslie,’ she said to herself, ‘don’t let them succeed in embarrassing you.’ She was only thirteen, well nearly fourteen, and she’d known Andrew, who *was* fourteen since she was a baby. He was the son of her Mum’s best friend, Sheila, and they’d always gone on holiday together. Often the two families went on picnics or visits to local castles, fairs or markets together. Andrew lived in Keith and that was about thirty miles from the small farm where Shonagh lived with her parents.

They weren’t really farmers because her father was a teacher, and the farm, a croft really, was more of a hobby than anything else for her father. The large farm house was what had attracted her mother and father to the place. They kept a few cattle for fattening, a couple of milk cows for butter and cheese and most of the work was done by Airchie who was the cattleman as well as being a general odd-job man or ‘orraman’ as her father called him. Airchie liked to call himself a ‘baillie’ which is what cattlemen used to be called and nobody cared to argue with him - Airchie was too valuable to upset because there was little he didn’t know about farming in general and cattle in particular and he didn’t seem to worry about the hours he worked.

Shonagh picked up a mug of tea and breezed through the kitchen door into the farm yard. ‘I’ll go and gie Airchie a cup o tea, Mum.’ Shonagh didn’t like it when her mother started quizzing her about Andrew, although, truth to tell, she was very fond of him and really looked forward to the times they spent together. They were real pals. Nature study was something they were both keen on and both liked outdoor pursuits like hill walking and rambling. Andrew never treated her as if being a girl made her different and her opinions not worth listening to; he listened to what she said and was quite willing to go along with any suggestions she made if he thought her ideas were more worthwhile than his. Not many boys she’d met were like that! In fact she couldn’t think of any!

Airchie was sharpening a scythe and looked, to Shonagh, like a drawing she’d seen once of Father Time. The scythe blade gleamed as Airchie pulled the stone across it and you’d no need to ask if Airchie liked the scythe, it was obviously his pride and joy. He’d no need to use it to cut the grass, there was a perfectly good motor-mower in the garage, but he said - ‘A heuk was gweed enough for my faither and it’ll be gweed enough for me!’ Shonagh knew that a ‘heuk’ was a sickle, but said nothing.

‘Here’s a cup o tea for you, Airchie. Are you gan tae be cutting grass?’

‘Aye. I thought a might clear some o the weeds frae the bank alangside the burn. They’ll be choking it up before lang and the kye like the grass frae beside the water. It’s just that wee bittie sweeter. You’re aff tae the Hill the day then? It’s time I was gan back up there mysel.’ Airchie, like many folk in the North-East of Scotland, regarded Bennachie as something very special and held it in enough regard to dismiss any idea that *The Hill* could be any other than Bennachie. Bennachie had been outgrown by many other mountains in the area, but none held the strange fascination for the local folk that Bennachie did. It *was* special. ‘Andy Grange and his wife’ll be coming in bye tae gan with you the day, will they?’ asked Airchie, the stone continuing its unhurried, patient, but accurate, passage along the scythe blade.

‘Aye, and Andrew as well,’ Shonagh said before she could stop herself.

‘Well, I some doubt you wouldna be gan withoot him being there,’ said Airchie in that slow, canny but knowing way he had of devining the truth of a situation. ‘You’ll need tae look oot for Jock o Bennachie, mind.’

‘Who’s Jock o Bennachie?’ asked Shonagh knowing that Airchie would tell her and prepared to enjoy yet another of the many folk stories that Airchie was so fond of telling and Shonagh was so fond of listening to.

‘Well,’ said Airchie, laying aside the sharpening stone, ‘Jock o Bennachie was a giant that lived on the mountain and had some rare aul battles with Jock o Noth who lived at the hill called the Tap o Noth. Jock was accused o throwing steens at the priest of Kemnay. That didna please folk, but it was a lassie that did for him in the end. This lass with golden hair came tae him and Jock was that bewitched that he followed her intae a cave. Once he was in the cave a door was slammed and locked and the giant Jock o Bennachie was trapped forever on the mountain.’

‘And are you telling me that he’s never been released?’ asked Shonagh, eager to know the outcome.

‘No, he’s still up there on the hill,’

‘Can he never be released, then?’ queried Shonagh.

‘Aye, there’s an aul rhyme that says:

*A wife’s ae sin wi ae e’e*

*Sall fin the key o Bennachie*

But you’re nae a laddie an you hae both o your eyes sae it’ll nae be you that lets him loose!’

‘You mean only a laddie with one eye can let the giant oot? That’s typical! Never a lassie that gets tae do anything like that!’

Airchie laughed, ‘Well, at least you’ll be safe frae Jock, for I’ve heard tell that he’s 600 feet high an that’s gey big even for a giant!’

‘You ken this, Airchie, your stories get worse an worse.’ And Shonagh joined in the laughter.

Her father appeared in the yard, ‘What’s Airchie been tellin you noo? Nae another one o his stories? Airchie you’ll hae her head full o the daftest ferlies! And she’s enough rubbish in there already with her pop music an fancy fashions!’

Shonagh put on a mock grimace, ‘Och, Dad, your just too aul tae appreciate the younger point o view!’

Airchie interrupted before the family dispute got too serious. ‘Is there onything in particular you’ll be needing me tae do, Stewart?’

Shonagh’s father, Stewart, paused before he answered, ‘Och, I think everything’s done that needs doing, as they say, an you ken mair about the beasts than me! Are you thinking on cutting some grass?’

‘Aye, I’ll clear the grass doon by the burn. The kye like it and it’ll stop the burn choking up.’

Shonagh, having heard this already decided she should encourage her Dad to remember what they were going to do themselves, ‘Picnic gear all in the car, Dad?’

Her father nodded, ‘Yep, just waiting for Andy and Sheila to arrive and we’ll be on our way tae the wilds o Bennachie and the aul hill men.’

Shonagh smiled, ‘Dinna tell me you’ve got a story about giants on Bennachie as well!’

Her father returned her smile. ‘Not me. I leave that tae Airchie. I was just speaking about the folk who spend their spare time climbing the hill an the Baillies who look after it.’

‘Are there baillies that look after Bennachie like Airchie looks after oor kye?’

Her father gave an emphatic nod, ‘Oh, aye. You dinna think a hill can look after itself do you? If the hill’s tae be kept at its best and make it worthwhile visiting then somebody has tae look after it and that’s what the Baillies o Bennachie do.’

‘I’ve never heard tell o that on other hills,’ said Shonagh with a frown.

‘Maybe no,’ said Airchie joining in the discussion, ‘but other mountains are nae near as important as Bennachie.’

‘But, why is Bennachie so important?’ asked Shonagh.

Airchie gave her the look of a man who understood the question but couldn’t for the life of him think why anyone could ask it. ‘Because it’s the Hill that aa folk think o fan they think aboot the North-East. It’s their hill and they just hae the feeling that maybe that’s where their ain folk came frae. It’s a queer thing, but even folk that hae moved intae the area soon come tae see Bennachie as being special. You’ll find mony a stranger on the braes o Bennachie and they come tae hae the same feeling for the hill as the hame folk.’

‘You mean they think that maybe that’s where oor ancestors came from? I mean thousands o years ago.’

‘Aye, I suppose that’s what some folk think. They might be wrang, but there’s nae use fancy professors saying different because folk hae made their minds up an nae chiel frae ony university’s gan tae change that.’

Shonagh laughed, ‘Weel, Airchie, if we meet any o the aul folk from the Hill the day I’ll ask them what they think an then we’ll all know.’

Stewart interrupted, ‘That’s enough o the History lesson for now. The Grange family will be here soon an I want tae get away as soon as they arrive.’

Airchie nodded in the general direction of the farm road. ‘That would be them coming up the road noo. It look likes Andy Grange the way he’s driving.’

Stewart smiled, ‘Since he gave up running at the games he’s been driving his car like he’s still sprinting. Head down and deil tak the hinmaist.’ Shonagh looked hard down the road concentrating on the speeding car. A look of mild anxiety marked her face.

‘Don’t worry,’ said her father, ‘Andy’s a good driver an nae near as dangerous as he makes it look.’Shonagh’s face remained unaltered. ‘And don’t worry about Andrew. His mother’ll look after him and see that Andy does nothing daft!’

In spite of her efforts and a brave attempt at smiling indifference Shonagh’s face began to take on the hue of a rosy sunset. All she managed was, ‘Och, Dad!’ and then ran to meet the oncoming car.

Unlike Shonagh, Andrew made no pretence about showing his feelings. He liked Shonagh and didn’t see why he shouldn’t show it; liking people without prejudice was as natural as breathing to Andrew. After all, whose business was it but his, and as far as he was concerned Shonagh was everything you’d ever want in a friend. His greeting echoed his enthusiasm. ‘Shonagh! Magic! This is gan tae be just great. You’ve got new hillwalkin boots as well. You’ve broken them in, though, haven’t you?’

Initially, Shonagh always felt a little awkward and embarrassed at Andrew’s obvious enthusiasm but, as usual, it cleared immediately he spoke. His natural verve soon infected her. She was now in a world where the adults were mere background. Andrew and she would acknowledge their presence but all important communication took place between themselves. Shonagh’s response to Andrew was as enthusiastic as his had been to her. ‘Brand new boots, but I’ve been wearing them around the place for a couple o weeks just tae get them used tae my feet. They’re great now. How about yours?’

‘Snap,’ replied Andrew. ‘We’ll gie them a real good go on the rocks the day just tae prove how good they are. Is that a new shirt as well?’

‘Not really. I got a gift token from my Grannie for Christmas an I bought some new gear. I just thought that I’d christen this shirt on Bennachie.’

‘Looks great!’ said Andrew admiringly, ‘Yellow suits you. I think I’m a brown person mysel. Nearly all my gear is brown or blue. Strange thing about colours: how some colours suit some folk an nae others, isn’t it? Are you coming in our car or in your Dad’s Landrover?’

Shonagh looked round and called to her mother. ‘Mam, can I go in Andy’s car with Andrew?’

Shonagh’s mother redirected the question, ‘Sheila, have you got room for Shonagh or is your *hound* taking up too much room?’

Sheila nodded and smiled at their private little joke. The *hound* was a wee mongrel terrier called Danny that took up hardly any room at all and was usually stretched out along the rear window-sill of the car. He only really came to life when he was out in the open and liked nothing better than to chase any rabbits that crossed his path, but what Danny would have done if he’d ever caught one no one knew, for he had never succeeded in getting close enough to a rabbit to find out. The look of stunned surprise that crossed Danny’s face when his intended prey disappeared down a burrow or into a well-heathered piece of shrub land, was a regular source of amusement to the families. Yet, in spite of his continual failure to run down his prey, Danny never passed up the chance to join the chase. Andy suspected that the rabbits of the area knew they’d never be caught by Danny and used him as an excuse to get some exercise.

Stewart was just about to get into the Landrover when Andy interrupted him. ‘Are we starting at Rowantree Car Park and leaving everything there for the picnic?’

‘Suits me,’ said Stewart.

‘Do you think you could drop us at the Donview Centre car park,’ asked Andrew, ‘We’d like to try walking right over by Scare Hill, Millstone and right up ower the Mither Tap and doon the other side. That should keep us out of your hair for a while,’ he added as a means of encouraging the response he wanted.

‘That’s a pretty long walk. Sure you’re up to it? Mind you, I’m sure Shonagh is all in favour. The weather is great the day so I suppose it’ll be all right. What do you think, Andy?’

‘Let them get on with it. They’re both sensible enough nae to do anything daft.’

‘Great!’ said Andrew, ‘This’ll really make a day of it and we’ll be ready for our sandwiches when we get over the top.’

‘You’d better take a couple of bars o chocolate with you, just in case,’ said Sheila. ‘You might get held up for some reason and I’ll nae hae you starving. And mind and take care. It can be very steep on some of the rocks and I dinna want you getting intae any trouble.’

‘Och, Mum,’ said Shonagh, sticking a few chocolate biscuits and a carton of orange juice into her anorak pocket, ‘We’ve been on Bennachie heaps o times. What can possible happen to anyone on Bennachie. We’ll just come right on over the top and if we see Jock the giant we’ll bide well clear o him!’

Everybody laughed, little realising that Andrew and Shonagh, with a wee bit of help from Danny, were about to undertake an adventure they would never forget.