

Acres of Memory

BY D.A. CAMPBELL

Angus carried on a mixed farming operation - he kept a little of everything but didn't make much money on anything. When I first knew him, I hadn't the sense to keep my mouth shut, and often put my spoke into his farming business when it was not wanted. I was to learn by bitter experience, that Angus never talked much to people he did not respect. At that time, he had little or no respect for me!

"You stick to the out'ouse news", he told me sarcastically, "an when you've made yer first million, yer can tell me 'ow ter farm!"

It would be wrong to give the impression that I was entirely ignorant as regards animal husbandry, especially sheep. My knowledge of course, was derived from books - I was long on academics and short on experience. Naturally, I looked forward to lambing time at the "Hungrey Hundred".

When the little "woolies" started to arrive, I made a cautious survey from the barn door, and tested the mood of Angus before entering. Gradually, I edged my way in, until I stood beside the makeshift lambing pens.

What I saw, had never been described in any of the books I had read. The sheep were not properly prepared for this most important event and hygiene was absent from the operations. "Fools step in where angels fear to tread;" in spite of the consequences, this know-it-all Limey just had to open his big mouth.

"Do you think we should clean them up a bit, Angus? Perhaps clip them a little around the rear end?"

Angus grasped one of the rickety boards of the pen and painfully raised himself off his knees. There were bits of chaff sticking to the stubble on his face and sheep noodles clinging to his tattered overalls. I sensed he was about to explode! He limped a pace towards me and shook a filthy fist within an inch of my nose.

"Another word out 'o you, an' I'll clip your rear end - wi' mi boot. Git ter hell out 'o here!"

The next night, when I saw the lights still burning in the barn, I had the stupidity to try again. Would I ever learn that I was just not wanted? Unable to shake off my curiosity, I advanced stealthily towards the lambing pens. To my surprise, Angus watched me approach without one word of protest.

There was a ewe in difficulty and we stood and

looked at the suffering animal in silence. I was determined to keep my trap shut this time. It was Angus who spoke.

"Tried ter git the Vet," he said. "Sonnaawilch - 'e's away - won't be back till tomorrer - gotta do somethin'." For the first time, it almost appeared as if he was asking ME for advice!

I looked at his hands. They were large and crooked with arthritis - hands like that were not instruments for delivering lambs. What could I say? Reading about lamb delivery and actually doing it were two different things.

"Do you want me to try?" I asked, doubting my capability.

Angus thought for a moment, and deep down inside him, I know he hated to admit defeat, especially to me. His face twisted into a combination of scorn and gratitude. He shrugged his shoulders in helpless abandon.

"Guess yer can," was all he could murmur.

I ran back to the house and raided my wife's first-aid box. There was iodine, an antiseptic called Dettol and a jar of vaseline. After scrubbing my hands, I returned to the barn.

Where eyes cannot see, a delicate touch is essential. How does an amateur determine what is a nose, a knee joint or a tiny hoof? There is no substitute for experience and although I have delivered countless lambs since that time, I am still learning. Thankfully, Angus did not embarrass me in my ignorance, but left me alone with my task.

After a while I diagnosed the trouble - the front legs were doubled back. One at a time, I carefully straightened them. Holding both together, I gently pulled the little body forward with every natural birth movement of the ewe.

Soon the lamb was expelled and I removed mucus from around its nostrils and placed the new arrival by the head of the mother. As she cleaned her offspring, the lamb's twitching and kicking became more frequent. It was not long before it uttered its first plaintive cry, and after several unsuccessful attempts, was able to stand on its wobbly legs. Instinctively, it began looking for the place to feed.

I have never ceased to feel joy at the birth of any living creature and the exultation I felt at that moment was indescribable.

Later that night, as I tried to relax after a long day, I was pondering on the strange character of Angus, when I heard his voice calling me from the cellar of the house.

"Don!", he shouted in his high pitched voice. "Gimme a hand down here."

I was getting tired of his hard ungrateful manner. Tired of being treated like an ignorant lackey. This time I was determined to give him a piece of my mind!

Descending into the dank atmosphere, I found Angus standing by a pile of old potato sacks and grinning like a Cheshire cat! There had to be something seriously wrong with him, smiling like that. It was contrary to his normal attitude - maybe his mainspring had broken and he had flipped his lid!

Reaching into the pile of sacks, he withdrew a bottle of whisky from its hiding place. "ere," he said, all nice and buddy like, "ve a drink."

More from surprise than pleasure, I took a small swig and handed him back the bottle. He didn't drink himself but just stared at me for a few moments, wanting to speak but unable to find the words.

"I clipped the sheep like yer said."

"Is that right?" I answered in a matter-of-fact tone, and was about to blast him when he spoke again.

"Guess I been 'ard on yer Don - didn't really mean ter. I'll make it up to yer - so I will."

My anger melted away. This was as close as Angus would ever get to a sincere apology! ☺

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