

## A Load of Old...

I'd always wanted to be a vet. From the time I was old enough to walk, I'd followed the cats around the house, tormenting them with attempted cuddles, occupying spaces only ever meant for small, four-footed creatures, and generally disturbing their longed-for peace and quiet. And now, there I was, twenty years later, vet's bag in hand, off to my first assignment at old Mr Lock's hilltop farm. I threw the bag into the Land Rover, pushed my shoulders back, and gave a shy wave to the receptionist.

'You'll be fine, love,' she'd said earlier, as I pulled on my waterproof jacket and hat, 'the first one's always the toughest, but they all come through it in the end!'

The road up to Lock's place was steep and narrow – tight bends, with barely a passing-place, sheer rock walls to the left, steep drops to the valley floor on the right. The recent heavy rains had left the road strewn with loose scree, and in several places, engorged streams crossed the broken tarmac to suddenly disappear over the edge with a low rumble. Mercifully, I met with no traffic coming down and was able to plough on, the roar of my engine and the sudden whoosh of water thrown skywards, scattering unsuspecting sheep, complaining, in all directions.

Lock's Farm was small, and the farmyard unkempt: a pile of old slates and assorted rubble occupied one corner, a trailer, rusty and tyre-less, another, whilst mangy dogs emerged yapping from the dismal barn, before skulking back to the shadows, whence they came. Braking hard to avoid Mr Lock's prize cockerel, I juddered to a halt, and breathed a sigh of relief. The old man appeared as if from nowhere and walked to meet me.

'Mr Lock! Good morning. At least it's not raining.'

The farmer sniffed dismissively and looked me up and down.

'Boss on 'is holidays, is 'e?'

'Nope.' I shook my head. 'They're letting me loose on the local population. What seems to be the problem?'

'Enry.'

'Enry?'

'Me bull. 'E's not performin''

'Ah,' I said, 'feeling under the weather, is he?'

'Dunno. At the moment 'e don't seem to be feelin' anything.'

I gave a wry smile.

'Well, let's have a look at the old fellah, shall we?'

Lock gave my bag a doubtful look, nodded, then led the way.

I ducked beneath the lintel and let my eyes adjust to the thin light of the barn. The smell of wet straw and dung filled my nostrils - I breathed in deeply, savouring what most would pinch their noses at. There, caught in the stream of light from a high window, was Henry. He looked bored, placidly chewing at a mouthful of hay.

'Hello, Henry. Not feeling up to it?' I said, straining to see the offending article in the half-light. 'I'll just...' I indicated the small wooden door to the enclosure. Mr Lock nodded.

I crept in.

Henry stopped chewing.

'By the way, Mr...? 'Enry. 'E don't like strangers' ...

**500 words**