

Cat Among the Pigeons

by Miriam Silver

They had known each other since primary school, lived next door, were good friends. That was all, to her at least. Not to him or their parents who had Expectations! They took it for granted that when she completed her university they would live happily as in-laws, with prospects.

Jennifer did not want to go to university or to replicate the life of her parents, she wanted the outdoor life, to work on a farm, an isolated one if possible.

She lived in a suburb of London and the nearest she'd been to a sheep or cow was on holiday in Wales, when together with her family they had stayed in a boarding house whose garden went right down to fields, which belonged to the farmer whose house she could see, over the hills and far away.

This was where her dream of living and working on a farm began, although finding any such employment meant going against her parents wishes who were placated when she was able to tell them she'd been accepted at an agricultural college in Wales. They only wanted her to be happy.

The college work involved outreach work, which she found she loved, being near to the animals, out in the open, so she resigned and went in search of a job.

The farm she found was not isolated and they used her more as a domestic only allowing her to muck out and sweep up after she'd cooked breakfast for the father and son.

Finding another advert in their local paper for a dairymaid/shepherd in a place that was difficult to find on the map, she left. This time sure it would be right for her.

The long journey on a single-track railway gave Jennifer an early insight into independence as no one was there to meet her as arranged by letter. Having no alternative she set off, to walk the seven miles with the stationmaster's warning ringing in her ears,

"Tis long way for young woman on 'er own, not surprised, that chap you're going to, bit funny, should have been here."

After plodding down a muddy track she found the farmer, he thought she wasn't coming, no, he'd never received a letter.

"Postie only comes when he's collected a few, not worth his while!"

"I'll show you your place, me and the wife live here, wife says you're welcome to eggs."

And that was her introduction to life in a run-down neglected shepherd's cottage, having to brave outside in all weathers. She did learn, the hard way about sheep that needed catching, shearing, mating, lambing, the necessity to milk twice a day, while living in rustic isolated conditions with only nature's, rather creepy sounds to keep her company.

Her living space was disappointing, instead of it being a pretty cottage the farmer led her to an ugly, neglected two room shepherd's house which smelt of cats.

"Last lot left a few bits, might be useful," he growled as he disappeared .

Here was isolation. There was water, a tap over a dirty looking sink, a fire under the range with a kettle sitting on top of it, so she cleaned, heated water and made a bed using her sleeping bag locating the nasty outside toilet hut.

Eating depended on the local shop couple of miles up the muddy track or on her own resources which she developed, making bread using the farm's produce.

Initially the farmer showed her the rudiments soon becoming a farm hand, milking, making butter, hosing down the dairy surrounds, collecting the sheep, using the dog, finding the stragglers and moving them to new pastures. A lengthy task in those never ending hills.

Her vegetable patch began to show promise in the Spring, the local shepherd gave her hints and tips, the farmer's wife helped her, all of which made her life easier until returning from a hard days lambing she found her carefully planted garden trampled, the only sign of culprits, the cats. She supposed they had done the damage while chasing pigeons. Better them than the chickens she supposed!

