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an extract from "In Tune"

The Quarterly Newsletter from the Oxford Welsh Male Voice Choir

A short story

I could be in danger on turning "In Tune" into *Readers Digest* but I thought you might want a tale to read over the Christmas period; maybe whilst sitting in front of a log fire with a glass of malt. I wrote this a little while ago for a competition run by a certain whisky distillery. The ending should tell you which one.



For the Love of Malt.

Allan hung up the phone having finalised the last of the arrangements. He was feeling rather excited and, if he were truthful, somewhat pleased with himself. Others might have said "smug".

He'd booked the hotel – that was the easy part. He popped next door to Nellie's and politely accepted a *nice piece of cake*, while he made his request for a "Cat sitter". Nellie loved Fliss and was more than willing to visit twice a day to fill her bowl and generally give her some t.l.c. Allan had no trouble getting leave from work; they'd often begged him to take a few days off through fear that he might die in the office through sheer exhaustion! Lastly the call he was not looking forward to! He managed to speak to Angie's boss – a feat in itself – so persuading her to let his wife have a few days off was quite an accomplishment. When he asked her not to discuss it with Angie, she seemed dubious, and for a brief moment Allan imagined all his careful planning flying out the window. Once he'd explained his idea though, Mrs Menzie's demeanour changed as a flick of a switch. "After all", she had said, "who am I to stand in front of someone's education?" She'd said it in a voice too similar to the way Molly Weir might have sounded for Allan's liking. Still, this was an undiscovered side of Margaret Menzie – the Irn Bru lady – as she was known to her subordinates in the office.

All this surreptitious scheming, he told himself, would be a nice break for Angie and a good chance for her to share in his discovery. It was also a good excuse to go back to complete something he'd started almost 6 months ago. It was last April that serendipity had smiled on Allan. He'd found himself having to break with routine, which made him a little uncomfortable.

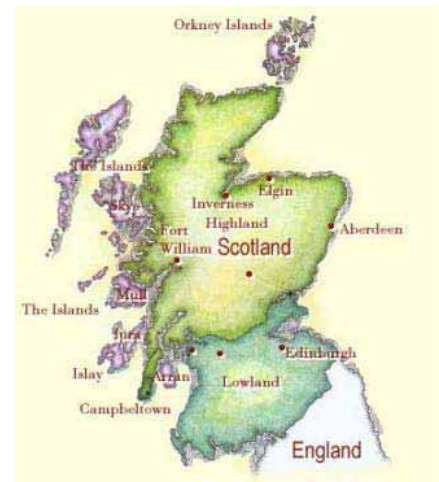
Allan Crouch was a man of habit. His business trips were made every other week. If he went abroad, he flew KLM and stayed in Holiday Inns. In the UK (predominantly England except for the odd trips to Cardiff), it was always the same cities and always the same Travel Inns. Consistency and predictability were his watchwords. Then last April a potential new client had called from Inverness. Being the "New Business" executive for the Anderson Advertising Agency, Allan Crouch was the man despatched. Little did he know this was the start of a new phase in his life...

"I'm sorry but we're fully booked next week" was the reply he got from all of the national hotel chains Allan knew. It seemed there was a major golf tournament in Kingussie and everyone and everyone's wife would be in the area. (But not necessarily everyone with their own wife!) It was a lucky conversation with the new client's receptionist that led him to the Murray House Hotel, a few miles north east of Inverness and way off the beaten track.

As Allan followed the directions near the end of his journey, a feeling of foreboding began to descend. The lane he'd just turned down didn't look like it could conceivably lead to a "wonderful place with a smashing restaurant", as he'd been promised. Resignedly, he realised there was little he could do about it till morning and drove on. It was just another mile up the road and he was certainly glad to arrive. One thing he'd been looking forward to for the last 40 miles or so was a good drink and something to eat, in that order!

"Large scotch 'n soda please – with plenty ice." The response he got wasn't the one he expected. "Not a chance Sir!" came the calm considered reply. The barman was also the owner and the two of them had just had a very different exchange of greetings whilst Allan signed the register. What, he wondered, had happened to the large genial man who'd welcomed him in reception? The man who'd introduced himself as Iain Stuart: chief cook and bottle washer. The man spoke again, this time to explain. "I'm sorry but when it comes to the *water of life* I get rather protective. What you've just asked for would be sacrilege!" Mr Stuart was serious and yet still amicable.

This was the key moment, the turning point for Allan Crouch. Since the hotel was small and tucked away down the lanes, there were few other guests to disturb them. Iain Stuart began his subtle and progressively successful tutorial. The only single malt whisky Allan had previously sampled was that ubiquitous Glen-something. His mate at the golf club had insisted that the *proper* way to drink whisky was "down in one". The somewhat predictable result of this was revulsion for any kind of whisky unless it was drowned in mixer. Iain started from this tricky start went in the only possible direction; onwards and upwards. He started with Lowland, added just a touch of water to break him in gently, and told Allan to sip slowly. The instruction went on, each time sampling a dram with very different characteristics from the previous, breaking only for a short repast of trout, asparagus and new potatoes.



The bar of the Murray House was well stocked. Malt whisky was Iain Stuart's love; next to his wife of course, who had a similar love with the restaurant. There was a long row of bottles along the back of the bar, three deep in places. It was ordered by region, in six groups, and there was more than one bottling for certain distilleries. Even the uneducated could tell this was a valuable collection, in more sense than one. Even Allan could tell there was obviously something he'd been missing. They went on to try an Orkney (very smooth thought Allan), followed by a couple of highlanders. Throughout this rapid edification of his palate, Iain complemented each tasting with his encyclopaedic knowledge. Not an onslaught of self-aggrandisement, but a carefully structured selection to tutor Allan in the lore of Malt Whisky.

He didn't find his bed until after midnight. He was glad he'd had the foresight to fix tomorrow's meeting for late morning – thinking he'd be tired just from the long journey from London. The next morning Allan was feeling a lot better than he'd imagined he would. Quite refreshed and totally relaxed from an unusually good sleep. The meeting with the potential client went very well. Once he'd listened to their needs and offered some ideas, he was invited to meet more and more senior personnel. His original plan had been for a day's meeting, a second night in the hotel and then the long journey home the following morning. However, things seemed to be going rather well with this negotiation and he felt he could almost clinch the deal. It just needed a little bit more time. The idea struck him and with a wry smile he suggested a round of golf with the Financial Director and Chairman for the following day. The smile was not brought on by the smell of another deal however. It was because he'd very quickly realised he would now be able to justify a third night in the hotel. It only meant one phone call to the office to explain and change a couple of arrangements.

The second evening in the hotel was spent much like the first. Iain continued to impart his wisdom on Allan and Allan continued to soak it up – in all senses. They tried another Island whisky; from Jura, and Iain asked him if he noticed a similarity to any they'd tried the day before. He then had a Mull and Allan gleefully made the connection again. Before each tasting, Iain insisted Allan smelt it first – a *nosing*, as he put it. They identified certain hues and aromas and Iain explained how each region had its own characteristics. Allan was invited to make his own assessment of the next one. Smooth and silky, with an undertone of sherry, but could he guess where it was from. Iain joked the name should be familiar and Allan remembered seeing the bottle on the bar the day before. This was definitely his favourite so far. It was a Speyside, and Iain suggested they spend the entire last evening on this region alone. They'd leave Islay whiskies for another time. "They're not for the faint-hearted". He'd said.



The following day after dressing, Allan went down to breakfast with far more energy than was healthy for a man of his age. He bounded down the stairs and almost bowled over Isla Stuart on her way to the Kitchen. She wasn't at all flustered by this and calmly asked if he'd be taking the full breakfast this morning. He did indeed, for he anticipated along walk zig-zagging up the fairways. His golf wasn't that spectacular but he was prepared to embarrass himself for a chance to continue his classes. Besides, it doesn't do to win against a new client anyway. He soon cleaned his plate and unhurriedly went to meet his opponents for a mid-morning tee-off

In actual fact his driving proved to be a lot better than he'd expected. However, his short game let him down. It got worse as they went on. Probably because he found himself thinking more and more about his new found love, and less and less on the game in hand. He was reviewing all the key characteristics Iain had explained the night before. Re-living the mental image; firstly the aroma and then the taste. This was definitely a new interest he'd be continuing, thought Allan.

They had a good lunch together, then went back to the office to finalise a few details before saying their goodbyes. It was late afternoon by the time Allan got back to the hotel. He went for a walk along the riverbank and enjoyed the rest of the warm spring day. When he'd freshened up and come down from his room, Allan found his host had prepared a small test as a way of learning the dense collection of distilleries that is Speyside. He made a good student. Attentive to the information being divulged and keen to display his new found knowledge. After each sample, Allan noted down his thoughts and passed them to Iain for review. They finished the evening with the same silky smooth malt Allan had loved the previous day. As Iain handed him the glass, he gave him a piece of paper with the other hand. It was a certificate. "In recognition of your graduation to the first level of Malt Whisky Connoisseur". Allan was already looking forward to trying for second level!

As Allan picked up his case and headed towards the door the following morning, Iain called after him, "You've forgotten your mac, Allan!" A knowing grin spread across Allan's face, and whilst taking his coat from Iain, he said, "no, that's definitely one I will remember".

Philip Gibbs

