

Preface: I remember as a baby just walking, being taken into the country for a few weeks with my siblings during the war to visit our Grandfather. It was 1944 and although Grandpa had rented the house, to me it seemed quite large. Since then my eldest brother and I visited it many years later only to discover it was a small double story brick cottage! So I let my imagination rip and all this is, purely that, a story. I hope you enjoy!

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CHAPTER ONE. BEGINNINGS.

My earliest recollections of the district, that ultimately became my childhood home, was when I became two. It was my birthday, so my mother has since told me. My parents had driven me up in the trap to visit my Grandpapa, who resided at the Castle. I remember much of the trip as we passed though the high green hedges that stood sentinel along the grey macadam road. Though I was clasped securely in Mother's arms I could still see those tall hedgerows slipping by as I listened to the clip clop of Daisy's hooves. I remember turning my head to see her majestic stern wobbling ahead of the trap, her long tail swishing left and right across her ample buttocks. My father, sitting ramrod straight in the driving seat, clicking his tongue to encourage her to a smooth trot. I'm sure we had a car at the time in one of the old out-houses, at least Beth our eldest had told me so. It appears Grandpapa did not approve of the clouds of exhaust smoke smudging his driveway and cars were banned though he himself smoked like a chimney.

We arrived at Longbury Castle with a sudden lurch and a sharp crunch of gravel. A footman quickly arrived to hold the reins as my father gingerly stepped down. Then calling for me, he lifted me aloft and we climbed the long steps to the doors, with me about to cry out at losing my mothers comforting arms. I remember distinctly welling up inside ready to give a full blast at this state of affairs, until thankfully Grandma Tourney plucked me from the air, and my fathers grip, to hold me tightly, snuggled against her shoulder with velvet and lace to bury my already wet eyes in. A gentle pat and a few soft words settled me down. There followed a swaying clipping walk with echoing staccato on the marble floor as my parents followed Grandma and I into Grandpapa's study.

The room seemed to me, through my baby eyes, as big as a house with a distinctive smell. My grandfather was a keen smoker of Chuchillian sized

cigars and, so I'm told, was never seen without one. Except when he gardened.

I became to love that study more and more as I grew in age. It became the centre for many of our trials and tribulations over the forthcoming years, but it also was a place we children could scurry to when chased by irate maids or mothers. Here we could find sanctuary under Grandfather's desk, with him busy with his papers bubbling over in good humour. If you were twelve or under you were allowed in without recrimination. But if an adult, a polite knock was mandatory, and more than likely a 'Get Out' would erupt from Grandpapa, unless he had particularly wanted to see the person. Grandma had a secret knock, which had Grandpapa rising from his seat, cane in hand he would amble over to open the door for her. She would then call us either to go home, or come and have some tea, or take a walk with her. We would then crawl out of our hiding place our cloths smelling of cigar smoke and group ourselves around her swirling skirts to be taken out. We would formally turn and bow to Grandpapa at the doorway in thanks for his protection. Occasionally we could be punished when we arrived home, having done some wrong we had evaded punishment by then rushing for sanctuary into the Castle's study.

But these memories were to come later, and as I write this, my brother Arthur is Earl of Tournay having succeeded my grandfather, my uncle and my father to the title and estate. He kindly asked me which room I should like and I chose this study. It will probably evoke my memories and perhaps make them clearer and refreshed. But I do admit to it having the grandest bow window of the castle, which some astute relative had built in, giving a glorious view over the Downs and river. The broad sweep of the lawn comes right up to this window. I have an Albetine Rambler growing just below outside, and if I open the window a breath of that perfume comes in. My brother Arthur has a similar view, for he has the upstairs room, right above me, with a balcony over my bow window. We are training the rose to climb higher up to him so he too can enjoy the scent of the summer blooms as he works.

I digress. Various memories may come flooding in, sparked by a name I've written, or a place. Hopefully the reader will forgive my leaping around, but the very memory should be caught as I write, the scene expands, the colour, texture and noise of the moment fills my mind, I am there in spirit. I feel it should be grasped and written in, lest it diminishes and vanishes

altogether. In my early years I wrote not at all, but an aged aunt sent me a leather notebook engraved with our arms. 'For writing in only, not doodling' she wrote on the inside flysheet. Thus at the age of five I started to enter a few words and date them. So I will use these to aid me later in my tale. Now back to my pre-note book days and my first remembrance's.

As a two-year-old, upon entering this enormous wood panelled room I was faced by an inquiring head with a large white beard and twinkling eyes, thus I was hoisted upon my grandfather's desk. The loss of my grandmother's warm shoulder must have started my eyes to brim with tears, but Grandpapa swept me back up and marched me over to the bay window, holding me up as my father had done. Grandpapa said 'Look, its so beautiful.' I remember looking straight at Daisy and thought her a most elegant horse, but Grandpapa lifted me higher onto his shoulders and I saw the hills and valleys dappled in the sunlight. He turned slowly so I could see the whole breadth of this view. I saw the village in the distance with the church and its stubby tower stabbing into the blue sky with puffs of creamy white clouds tumbling by.

Grandpapa noticed that I was looking at the church, but in fact it was now the flag that had caught my young eyes, for it curled and flapped vigorously like a live animal caught on a pole. 'We will all end up there one day my grandson, then we will all be as one together.'

Those words meant nothing to me then, adults somehow expect their children to understand the subtleties of adult speech. What intrigued me, were the rolling clouds that had now come quickly over the Downs, grey and fierce, forcing the creamy ones to flee. The wildly twisting flag predicted a coming storm. Grandpapa noticed it too. 'He is a boy of the wild, he will love this place. Take him home Margaret before it rains'. I was given bristly kiss and handed to Mother.

I remember my father and mother walking quickly along the wooden corridor, then across the marble hall and out into the wind to the trap. A footman lifting its hood, and from the window a fond farewell wave. We turned and crunched away only to meet the first heavy drops as we came through the great iron gates onto the valley road. By the time we reached Longbury Manor farm we were quite soaked, as the faster Father went along the lane the more the rain came in. There would have been a high tea and a cake with candles, but of this I have no memory to draw upon, I'm sure my sisters and brothers enjoyed it more than I. Certainly I would have been fast asleep by the time the festivities ended.

As a child I had no thoughts of the costs of these anniversaries, for my parents had seven children, and were expected to make the farm pay as well as support the Castle's upkeep. A present was also given to any of the village children whose birthday fell upon the same day as any of ours. When the day arrived, the child whose birthday it was, went to deliver, in person, these packages to our fellow birthday children. Mother had devised this practice to ensure we got to know the people of our own age, and it continued until we had reached sixteen. Father would drive us around and it gave him an opportunity to also talk to the village folk and listen to their gripes and grumbles. In a way he became a conduit between them and his father, who after all owned much of the land the village stood on.

Of course there were twenty or thirty children whose birthday did not fall on ours. Grandpapa having heard of Mother's scheme, which she had set up shortly after Arthur's birth, rectified this with a small trust fund he had set up, to provide for those others. Miss Preston our schoolmistress distributed these extra packages on Grandpapa's own birthday. I remember that the first war had caused considerable losses in the male population and many of the gifts bought on behalf of my grandfather, came from the nimble fingers of the spinsters in the parish. The girls received dolls and shawls, whilst the lads had gloves and scarves.

As I grew up through my third, and fourth years, the sights sounds and smells of our own home at the Manor Farm became embedded in my child's mind. The horses were huge, as were Stumps and Bowls our labourers from the tied cottages who drove the tractor and worked the land producing the various crops. Wheat and barley were our favourites, for we were allowed to help with the hay and building the ricks. Mother served cider with a basket lunch for each family at midday, and she would drive the trap across the fields to where we all worked. Father had a friend in Somerset and the flagons would arrive in July, and be returned by him in September with a gift of wheat, some beef or pork. Stumps would pass along his cider flagon so we boys could taste the honey coloured slightly sour liquid when our parents weren't looking. I would often fall asleep safely curled up under a hedge out of the hot late summer sun, after a sip or two from that flagon.

Father would pretend to admonish me for not working during the afternoon, but a mornings work was considered sufficient for my age, and Mother

would remonstrate with him. I'm sure he knew about Stumps generosity, because one evening we all had a lecture on the evils of too much drink of the alcoholic type. Mother would bring along a flask of raspberry vinegar and also began to suspect when the flask was returned only half empty. Somewhat cleverer than father, she put Stumps in charge of making us drink it all, needless to say his passing the cider flagon abruptly stopped. That is until we were much older.

Our sisters helped Mother and Cook to prepare and serve these lunch baskets. Gerry was two years older than me, and somewhat of a tease to the unwary. Earlier one day she had put a small frog into Stumps lunch basket and with face aglow handed his flagon and basket to him. Then standing back she watched him carefully open his lunch. Expecting a shout of surprise, she clasped her ears but to her annoyance he picked young froggie up and swallowed it followed by a gulp of cider. 'Smashing, summut for the frog to swim in.' he said. She aghast stepped back into a horse's pile and ran back to the trap shaking the mess off her shoes. Later by coincidence I saw a young frog swimming in the horse trough, but Stumps would not be drawn on how it had got there.

Those days were long and tiring, but so full of laughter and sweat and cuts especially when brambling. One night we boys crept out after dark and slept in the ricks standing in the fields. Listening to the night animals and tucked up together deep in the straw. Mother's maid who had just gone in after courting in the lane and had heard us, and told our mother. Father said it would do us no harm, and he let one of the ricks lie outside for a week whilst the others were lodged in the barn. Mother made us special suppers and we slept in our work cloths. The adventure lasted until we were scratched all over by wheat stalks, then Father insisted we bring in that final rick by ourselves using only the Shire horses and cart. I remember I had the easiest of jobs as usual, feeding Mick and Mack the young Shire horses an occasional lump of sugar. Being the youngest had its bright moments, especially when you were four years old and could suck the odd sugar cube.

I expect my parents could have afforded a governess for us all. But Great Grandpapa had erected a proper school for all children to attend, in the village, with a professional teacher to boot. Grandpapa had added rooms to it and expanded the staff by two more teachers, so he expected his grandchildren to use this expensive facility. When I turned five and after my

birthday visit to Grandpapa, I was handed a smart new leather case and smock, followed by a husky exhortation, 'To do well at school and pass all your tests.'

Not quite knowing what a test was, I merely nodded and thanked Grandpapa for his gift. The old man smiled and shooed me out of the study. Grandma accompanied me to the steps. 'Use it wisely my little one.' and she smiled as she waved me into their trap to take me home.

I was a bit nonplussed by my grandparent's gift, but on opening my new bag I discovered a gold fountain pen and pencil with my name etched clearly on each. I was ready to face school. At least so I thought. I told mother about the gold pen set but she took them from me and replaced them with some cheaper ones. 'These are Tommy's old ones and for school you should not use Grandpapa's as it puts temptation in other children's way.' My eyes brimmed up as I looked at Tommy's old stained pen and pencil set. 'But you can use Grandpapa's on your leather notebook, so leave them in your room for now.' My eyes stopped brimming. Mother filled both pens with ink and showed me how to both dip them into the bottle and work the lever.

I then rushed up to my room with bag, smock and pens. I fetched out my leather embossed notebook and flipped over to the third page. Regardless of Aunt Agatha's command not to doodle, pages one and two had coloured crayon impressions of farmyard animals by myself at three years old. Proudly in red was written my name, albeit a little wobbly. And so I unscrewed my own gold pen and wrote 'This is my first writing using Grandpapa's pen and it writes very smoothly even if the letters are rather large'. Then I continued 'I thank Mother and Beth and Rose our maid for spending time with me on my letters'. I recapped the pen and took the pencil in my hand. Quite by chance I had drawn a swan I had seen in the river.

CHAPTER TWO School, tribulations and a four legged friend.

I should give a clearer picture of my family before I start since many of them were to have an influence on future escapades. My Grandpapa and Grandma had an elder daughter Agatha, she of the notebook gift. My aunt had married a Duke and lived much of the time in London with her husband. I can just remember my cousins as little children, as indeed I was. Grandpapa saw very little of them as the Duke's own family seemed to take precedence for holiday visits. In missing them he tended to dote more on the grandchildren around him. Then came Uncle Arthur and my Father George. Uncle Arthur had rooms in the castle and looked after Grandpapa's investments. He later married Aunt Emily and had two children about Eddie's age. The cousins were Cecil and Celia. My Father and mother had Beth, Jane, Arthur, Tommy, Eddie, Gerry and me. Initially the castle cousins were somewhat withdrawn and slightly superior toward we lower mortal's, but Grandma managed to bring us all onto level terms by buying us water pistols one summer and allowing us the free run of the castle.

By the time of my fifth birthday Beth was recently returned from finishing school in France, and Aunt Agatha had asked for her to be sent as a companion to her. Thus to have a chance to meet society and perhaps a match. Father prevaricated but eventually agreed. Jane meanwhile was set to go to France and later she became my Grandmother's companion when Beth married. Arthur was at Boarding school and soon to go onto University. Tommy was with him in a class lower. Eddie, Gerry and I still lived at home. Eddie was in top school in the village whilst Gerry and I were in lower or junior.

Thus it was that Rose our maid took me in hand and walked along her courting lane to school in Ambleford. She introduced me to Miss Preston, and she in turn walked me into Miss Dirbridge's class where Gerry was already sitting and making faces at an already nervous five-year-old. 'You may sit next door to your sister' Miss Dirbridge said after a formal introduction to the class had been made. 'No thanks she pinches' said I resolutely. That was my first mistake for I was then sat next to Spite Donovan. Least I called him Spite in fact his name was Steven. You'll learn later why to both the mistake and the name change. My first day was both long and short. Long in trying to find Tommy's pen that I suspected Spite had stolen from my bag, and short in that the day past so quickly so many interesting subjects did we cover. I followed close behind Eddie and Gerry when we left for home and I being close to tears at the loss of Tommy's pen. I edged closer to my brother who noticed my

discomfort. 'What's wrong, wasn't too bad old chap.' he asked. I shook my shoulders and eventually owned up to losing the pen. 'I'll see if I can get it back.' Was all Eddie would say. I learnt later that Stumps had gone to the Donovan's house and took possession of Tommy's old pen. Anyhow it was back in my bag by the morning and I idolised Eddie from that day on. 'Keep them in your pocket when at school', was all he said when I stuttered my thanks.

There were three ways to school from the Manor Farm, the first was the lane Rose had taken me along, the second was the pathway over the water meadows next to the river canals, and the third was along the main trunk road in the west. The quickest was certainly via the lane, but I discovered the water meadow both the more beautiful and hazardous. It happened that the following week at school Gerry and I had a disagreement and she said I might not walk down the lane with her and Eddie. Somewhat confused by this tactic of my sister I hoisted by bag and smock upon my back and set off via the riverbank towards the weir and home. A journey I had often done with my elder brothers when they went fishing. I had dawdled by the bridge over the river to watch two swans dipping their long white necks into the river weed. It was quite fast flowing and I was amazed at the swan's ability to stay on station as the water streamed past them. They were mute swans with their orange beaks dipping and scraping on the riverbed. I felt a slice of cake in my bag and broke it into bits and threw it to them. They moved warily towards it but eventually they gobbled it up much to my delight.

I moved upstream towards the weir and they followed. I called to them and they came closer. I found two crusts of Cook's brown bread and these I split up in my hands and threw them. This time the swans gulped them down, and I remember clapping my hands in excitement. That was when I felt a blow to my back and I fell into the river. I managed to grasp the overhanging grass to pull me around and up. Spite Donovan's head appeared besides his brother Sid. 'That will teach you to nark on us.' Spite spat out. Sid's boot landed hard on my hand but I held firm, my fear of being swept away temporarily overcoming the pain. But Spite picked up a short tree branch and cracked it over my damaged hand. I slid back into the water and the current swept me along, my leather bag floating behind me, my smock luckily snagged a broken willow branch and I grabbed it and held on for dear life. I strained and pulled myself up out of the water still fearful of another beating. As I threw my bag onto the bank and crawled painfully up I saw the two swans about me. The larger opened its wings and both running and flying it shot pass me up the bank with a terrible hissing sound.

It struck both the Donovan's hard with its wings and they turned and ran. I remember Bowls saying 'Keep away from the swans they can break a man's arm if you annoy them. Especially at nesting time.' Another thought came to me as I crawled up onto the path, and I turned to the male swan that stood not three paces from me. 'Thank you Pa swan.' was all I could gasp, drenched and cold as I was.

Though I was somewhat reluctant to move away from my new friends and unsure whether I would also be attacked, I decided to move backwards as we were taught when meeting adders or badgers. But as I did I felt feathers touch my leg, it was the female and she seemed quite at ease. I suppose I was mesmerised and still in shock, but for a moment I really did feel protected. Eventually both birds waddled back down into the water. I carried on up the river path and crossed over the Weir Bridge.

I told my mother that I had spotted some fish and in my excitement had slipped down the bank.

Naturally she was both worried and furious, however Eddie and Gerry shared some of the blame. I later told them about my adventure. Eddie did not believe me so the following day they both came with me across the water meadows. The swans were there dipping their heads into the river. Even though they knew I was there they made no attempt to come near me. Father had seen us and had come across on his hunter Forester. Eddie held the bridle as Father stepped down to join us. 'Call them over' he said to me. I called them and they rode sedately over the river current to join me by the bank. 'Don't feed them, just walk towards home.' my Father requested quietly. The swans followed. Father touched me on the shoulder and pretended to push me in. The swans turned in unison and hissed. He then held me tight, 'From now on you shall be the keeper of the swans, I'll ask Grandpapa to organise it'. He then climbed upon Forester and left us to ride on over to the Peter Smedly's piggery. I think that from that day on Gerry viewed me in a different light. Often we would take this long way home together, as for the Donovan's; I had little trouble from them. Afraid of the swans to be sure, but I feel it was because I did not 'nark' on them, that they left me alone, at least for a few more years.

And that name Peter Smedly has bought another vision into my mind. It was or could have been as frightening as the swan saga, but it was over so quickly it left me little time for fear more for astonishment. It happened one Saturday that Stumps, Bowls and I were giving our farm bull Old Ben a good scrub down and general wash. As he stood placidly chewing a carrot Gerry had just given him, I was on my hands and knees cleaning and oiling

his front hooves. I had crept halfway beneath his enormous ribs, better to get at the rear of his front hooves with my brush. A loud wailing cry came to us, and I'll tell this from Cook's viewpoint as she was sitting on the steps mixing a cake. Around the side of the Manor roared a charging Gob the Smedly boar. Black as a thundercloud and twice as dangerous, some idiot had let him out. Gob smashed aside a cart, as he came roaring on, apparently heading for me lying between Bens front feet. Cook said she was transfixed, as the boar swerved to realign his charge. I had in fact started to oil Old Ben's hooves. Suddenly I saw his head lower and my vision was blacked out temporary until his neck pushed me back well behind him. I remember rolling aside to view the charging pig and I remember shaking with intrepidity and then hearing a great crunch in front of me, as Old Ben with his lowered massive head heaved up with his horns and smacked the charging Gob fully four foot into the air. Cook had gathered her senses and had turned and run into the kitchen, she even thought to lock it behind her. Meanwhile Stumps had pulled me out and loaded me up onto Old Ben's back whilst he Bows and a freshly arrived Peter Smedly roped the unconscious Gob and set him on sacking to be hauled away by Mick and Mack, back to his sty. I remember leaning forward to Ben's neck and giving it a clasping cuddle. He just stood stock still awaiting for me to return to oiling his hoofs. He gave a sort of loud snort to encourage me to get down and to work.

Why Gob had it in for a small five-year-old I'll never know, but he became the most chastened of the swine and never gave anybody any trouble in the future. The sight of any cow left the poor creature cowering. Many a dairy cow would pay his sty a visit and moo plaintively, I thought it was only humans and cats that teased. The reason he lived so close to our farm was that the Smedly's were partners with Grandpapa and Father in the piggery. Mother wanted the defeated animal slaughtered but Stumps and Father talked her out of it. Gob was a prize boar and that was that.

I always thought that Old Ben gained an extra swagger as he made his way up the lane to visit the dairy herd. There will be more to tell about this old character. I never did get my own horse, but had always rode on Ben's huge back since I was three. Bows got a roasting from Rose when she first saw me alone on his back walking around the stables. But she simmered down when Henry the stable lad told her Ben and I was safe as houses. 'Its not the little one I'm worried about' said Rose, 'Tiz the big fat one with horns'. But she was sweet on Henry so she let it go at that. Later I would

ride the Shire horses with hooves as big as dinner plates. They were higher than Ben but a shade less wide in the girth.

The only time I was tumbled off by Ben was when he found a cow in season in a field with the gate open. He reared up with me sliding slowly off his huge back. He took not the slightest notice except for a gentle pushing kick to roll me out the way. But I was six at the time and should have known better. I went off to see Ma and Pa swan and to check on the cygnets in the stream. Later after his exertions, Ben padded down to the weir to take me back home, and back to his pasture field just past our garden. I later found out from Bows it wasn't one of our cows in the field. Father was cross not because the gate had been left open to allow the cow in, but that his prize bull had been rustled away from his own herd, with a subsequent loss of vigour.

Three weeks into my first school term, Mr. Hazel, Eddie's teacher came to the junior class. He was a recent graduate and was doing a thesis on child wages and payments. He asked us we could tell him how much pocket money we received each week from our parents. Gerry and I looked surprised. 'You don't have to tell me if you prefer to keep it a secret', he had said to we two after everyone else had called out various amounts of money. We still looked bemused. 'Excuse me Mr. Hazel, what do you mean by pocket money, what we have in our pockets right now?' Gerry queried quietly. 'No, I mean what your parents give you as an allowance.' Mr. Hazel poised is pencil. 'Nothing.' said I. Mr. Hazel shook his head in disbelief, 'That's what your brother Edward said.'

Naturally I raised the question with my Father, I could not quite understand how the Wills's, Bailey's and Donovan's all received some recompense for jobs done. And we born with a proverbial silver spoon in our mouths received nothing. Father's answer was precisely that. We had no need of extra money, our Church received a subsidy each year, our sweets came out of Cook's pantry, everything was paid for as a family. There was one exception, when the four eldest went away to school or university they received an allowance to cover their personal needs. Gerry and I tried to provoke a longer debate but Mother intervened. 'There are many others who do not have the same advantages as you children, now Eddie has accepted our decision.' Gerry came back with 'How can we learn about saving, investing and generally making good and sensible use of our own money?'

Father had the answer to that, 'employ a good accountant.'

The matter was closed though I inwardly thought Gerry's last question had roused Father to a rather flippant remark and she had won the debate if not the battle. It raised further questions in my mind as to why we siblings never bought one another presents. One day I drew up my courage and asked father, whilst I was sitting atop Old Ben. I knew I was reasonably safe and Father could remonstrate at me with dire consequences to his person. Father thought long and hard and glanced at Old Ben. 'If you got off Ben I might tell you,' and he smiled his lovely laughing smile. I shook my head. 'Then its because on your birthday you get precisely what you want within reason of course,' he took off his hat and scratched his head, 'Think how sad some people are made by the unfortunate choices of others, often creating tension between the two.' Then he asked me a question, 'Had I ever been hurt when receiving his and mother's presents'. I had to say 'no, they were always what I wanted, however I should have liked to have bought my parents something that I had chosen.'

'You do that already when all you children sit around the table and discuss what to buy Mother or myself, and as its a joint decision from all of us, we give from all of us.'

'The money we earn from the Manor and Home Farms support ourselves, our relatives, and most of the people in the village. If we use it efficiently it will go further and last longer. Now come off Ben and let us go home. Next Saturday when I visit Uncle Arthur, I may take Eddie, you and Gerry and you shall attend the Farm Management meeting.' At first I pondered the safety of leaving Ben's back as I had never interrogated my Father before, but I spied a twinkle in his sky blue eyes and I dismounted with a grin. Ben turned his head for a pat. 'You know that you children are our gift both to ourselves and to the Castle.' He closed the gate and climbed up on Forester, leaning down he pulled me behind him and we cantered back to the Manor. It had been one those growing up days, still so vivid in my mind.

As I look through the bay window I see its grown dark outside and Ambleford is twinkling in the dark. I will walk over to the bay seat for I can just make out the lights in the Manor Farm below. Eddie is in residence there at present. Perhaps my brother Tommy up at the Home farm to the north of us is also talking around the table to his children, maybe even the subjects we used to discuss. How the wheel turns and turns again. I often wonder if in fact we are different people, or are we merely refined and

returned to our old haunts to relive life in Ambleford again. That begs the question of whom I might have been and I do not wish to hear shouts of a citizen of Atlantis. Arthur knows how much the Manor farm meant to us and he has each of us take it on in turns for three years. I think Gerry makes the best manager. Certainly Arthur and Tommy have kept the two farms and the castle together in spite of duties and taxes. They are now held in trust for financial reasons, thus is the way the times are now.

CHAPTER THREE. CYGNETS AND SAILORS

I recall talking about the Cygnets. Swans are particularly good parents and Pa and Ma had built a rough rush and grass nest on some high ground in the meadow. I had brought the news to Bowl's, having discovered Ma sitting on her raised platform. Pa had not moved to be with me and I left them to their own devices presuming that eggs would not be long in coming if indeed they were not already laid. Bowl's said I was not to go near the

nest. So it was that I would check upon Grandpapa's other swans in the district. It became a regular habit of mine to walk several miles of canal and riverbank each Sunday. Often I would take Mother's Labrador Spats for company. Man made the canals many years ago. They stretched from the main river channel into the meadow and in late winter, after heavy rain, the canals were opened and the meadows flooded via a series of ditches and small weirs. The idea according to Grandpapa was to allow the water to both bring nutrients to the soil and to warm it up for earlier planting. Thus I would also walk the minor channels, some dry and others close to full, keeping an eye on my charges. I would note for Father any wooden planks that needed attention on the small bridges that spanned the canals. Spats and I would occasionally sit on one and spot the trout below in the safety of the shadow.

It happened the year I was six, four ungainly cygnets were spotted sailing behind Ma on my way back from school one summer afternoon. I sat down on a willow over hanging branch and waited. I admit I held my breath and wondered whether I should be introduced to the new arrivals, and to my joy Ma brought them under the branch for me to have a closer look. Pa came around and waddled up the bank beside me. Christening time I said to Ma. Tig, Tag, Toe, and Tail. There it had been done. I slid gently back along the branch, picked up my bag, bowed to Pa and strolled on my way. I would have much preferred to stay there watching these little grey things learn to dip and dive. But they were going to school to learn their own ways. Besides Beth was due to visit and it was salmon for tea tonight.

Alas my joy was short lived, for just one week later there were only three cygnets swimming behind Ma. I looked everywhere for the fourth, I was not even sure which one had gone missing, they had all been so alike. I searched for an hour before returning to the farm. Instinctively I knew the worst, but Henry agreed to accompany Stumps and I to do a proper search. We spent another hour and Henry found some grey down along a slight trail in the grass. 'Fox' he said. 'Swans protect their own,' said I 'Not if the little fellow dives away on his own, makes sense for the adults to stay close to the main bunch, don't you think?' I nodded, and somewhat crestfallen we returned to the farm.

In bed that night I selected Tail as the one most likely lost. My sadness soon turned to anger at Tail running off and getting taken. I was caught up in a mix of emotions, but Ma and Pa seemed indifferent and so perhaps should I be. Stumps had said that nature was a fearsome thing, but

ultimately the good side prevailed. I eventually slept.

My visit to the castle, without Eddie and Gerry, Mother had insisted they stay and do home work for the farm meeting turned out to be somewhat of a long and dreary session. Uncle Arthur gave an account of debits and credits that he had gathered, whilst Father gave his predictions for the crops and cattle. Occasionally Grandpapa would nod off only to suddenly awaken at the mention of a loss. At this he would 'tut tut', blow his nose and resume a semi-recumbent position. I came to the conclusion they were boring me on purpose, put out somewhat by such a youthful presence as myself.

'Well what do think of the meeting so far,' Grandpapa raised an eye in my direction. 'I was wondering when you would eventually slide off your chair Grandpapa,' said I. 'That boring is it, well I haven't and I won't now, just to annoy you. Off to Grandmama with you now, and come back in ten years.' He waved me to the door. I heard a burst of laughter as I sheepishly closed the door and went down the corridor.

I found Mr. Twerton, the head gardener sitting in the hall and I bade him a good evening. He looked somewhat dejected and I sat down next to him and asked him what the matter was. He scratched his head, 'Frost got at the orange and lemon tubs last night, your Grandpa 'ull kill us.'

'Nonsense' said I 'He gave up killing things years ago, all he does is order people about and nod off to sleep. Grandma says he's quite docile these days.'

I looked up as Mr. Twerton had quickly risen to his feet and saw my Grandpapa sifting his beard in his hands as he leaned against the wall.

'Well Harold Twerton I heard my grandson's reply but to what question may I ask?' 'Orange and lemon tubs got frosted last night, forgot to take 'em in m'Lord.'

'Bad, very bad, what might my nosy grandson do may I ask?' he turned and pointed his stick at me.

'Grandma says overhearing other peoples conversations is impolite.'

'True' said my Grandpapa, 'but involving ourselves in other peoples business is just as bad. Now answer Mr. Twerton on the oranges'.

'Henry's steaming compost heap keeps the frost off Mothers garden patch.'

'Well there we have it Twerton, out of the mouth of babes. Instead off having to hump those heavy tubs into the Orangery every night, we'll use steam or smoke instead and find another use for the building.'

'A bowling alley.' I suggested meekly. Grandpapa snorted, but a twinkle had appeared, so Mr. Twerton was safe. I scampered off to see Grandma to have a story read for me.

Soon after this incident Mother drove me up to the castle in the trap. Rose had dressed me in my best deep blue velvet suit, the one I only wore on special occasions. I managed to evade her attention for a minute and took Tonks my field mouse out of his cage and placed him into my pocket. Special occasions need all the friends you can get. Father had disappeared in the car on an errand for Grandpapa. There seemed some air of mystery, which even a naive six-year-old like myself could smell a mile off. Still I was gathered up by Stumps and deftly carried to the trap so as not to muddy the suit. We arrived at the great iron gates and were saluted, saluted mark you, by Sergeant Smithers himself. Once at the castle there seemed to be extra shiny polished floors and even the marble statues in the hall seemed cleaner. Grandma came out to greet us. I had noticed on my way up the steps, that Father's car lay slap-bang in the middle of the drive. Father himself was chatting to a very tall dignified man. I feared for Father's safety violating the no car rule. Grandma held my hands and said, 'Grandpapa has had an old sailor friend who has come to visit him and they both wish to see you.'

She and Mother led me to the study door, gave an ordinary knock, not her special one. I waited for a 'GET OUT' roar, but instead came a pleasant 'Come'.

So I entered and Grandpapa indicated the large leather chair next to his friend. Ever curious to get to the bottom of this meeting, I began to talk immediately, 'I believe you and Grandpapa were sailors together.' 'Indeed we were, in fact shipmates both on shore and at sea.' said Grandpapa's friend. Grandpapa 'UH'md' but his friend waved his hand. 'May I call you Midshipman Tourney? Your Grandfather and I were both ones at different times, and it would be pleasant to have another shipmate come aboard.' I was somewhat disconcerted by this, however I nodded my agreement, though it was not my real name. I thought Midshipman was indeed too long a name and I said so. Grandpapa's friend stifled a laugh, 'Then let it be Midship, for you alone'.

I had not heard him correctly, for I said I had bought my mouse with me, for support as I mistrusted special occasions with best suits.

This time both men roared with laughter so I lifted Tonks out of the pocket so he would not be frightened by the noise.

Grandpapa's friend had a short grey beard, which tended to wag as he spoke. 'That's a fine animal Midship, and he surely has a name?' 'Tonks,' said I, 'would you care to hold him, but please don't squeeze too tightly.' Tonks was transferred safely to the sailor's hand and sat sniffing up in the air and then on the coat sleeve. Grandpapa scraped his chair to get a better view, and Tonks fled up the sailor's sleeve. There were yells of pleasure as both endeavoured to encourage Tonks out but eventually Grandpapa's friend had to carefully take his tweed coat off and gently tap the sleeve until Tonks slid down and gained Grandpapa's desk safely. He then dashed over to me and I scooped him up and pocketed him.

'Takes me back a few years' said the sailor and both men had tears in their eyes. For a moment I thought they both looked wistful.

'The reason you are here is that Um ..Har.' Grandpapa began.

'I have come down from London to deliver a scroll to you Midship.' Carried on the other as he picked up a card tube and tapped it on the table. Carefully he pulled the scroll out. 'Can you read?' he inquired gently and I nodded my head.

He handed me the scroll and I opened it wide and read aloud.

'This order is to cover all rivers and waterways within the boundaries of East Wiltshire. That the aforesaid is designated my Swan Officer and Protector for the area stated above. Signed George Rex. It was printed in several pastel colours were various swans and river birds, and in the middle was my name beautifully inscribed in full. Except it was spelt incorrectly.

'Well what do you have to say?' said my Grandpapa.

'Thank you very much sir,' I said turning to the sailor, 'please thank the King, but alas he has spelt Tournay without the e in it, and I do believe the signature appears to be printed.' There was a brief silence from both, until their eyes met and a roar of laughter bubbled up from them both. I felt uncomfortable until the sailor called for Grandpapa's pen. He placed a small upward arrow between the n and the y, then wrote a capital E. He then signed the scroll in Grandpapa's purple ink. George V Rex. He added as an afterthought 'and Emperor'. He rolled it up and handed it back to me and I thanked him again for coming so far to deliver it to me.

I acknowledged it was rude to complain but in return, but I said I would not write to the King to say a sailor had forged his signature. I left after he shook my hand and said he was pleased it would be kept so, as we were all shipmates.

I bowed to Grandpapa, and they both stood and bowed to me, I was somewhat taken aback by this action, Grandpapa had never risen before

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