

Chapter 1. The renewal.

I was sitting up in bed in my lofty perch with a frozen nose, a box of hankies and hot water bottle close to my toes. In short I had an obnoxious cold and speaking honestly I was fed up to the teeth, well fed up to the ones I had left at least, so I have decided to recount what my father had told me after that terrific bomb strike all those years ago. So Dulcie bought me one of those battery operated voice recorders, a neat little thing that fitted very nicely in my hand. But frankly it does not feel entirely right just talking to myself. So I waited until I had company, then Maise swept in with a hot cup of broth then swept out again before I had a chance to ask her to stay, but then a shy knock on my door and my prompt 'come' revealed a dishevelled grand nephew holding a broken flower pot.

"Was in my way Uncle, and I tripped trying to jump over it."

'What happened to the plant then?'

"No plant the pot was empty down by the bottom step, I think my great aunt was planting a rose and she probably left it on the step and forgot it."

'So along you came and decided to play hop scotch on the step instead of taking in to your great aunt Dulcie.'

The dark head of hair nodded.

'Well for that you can leave the shards on my table over there, and plonk yourself in that chair with the cushion and listen to a story, that is of course if you have nothing better to do like jumping down my steps in a disorderly fashion.' A shake of that dark hair and a measured jump into the chair, then a hand held out for sweet, a humbug with those yellow stripes was offered and accepted with alacrity.

'So this was told to me by my father and concerns the new fire place which you already know about.'

"A bomb through the roof and several floors punched through."

'Indeed,' said I, 'now don't interrupt as I've turned this infernal machine on.'

"What does it do Uncle?"

'It has a clever genie inside that records my voice and at the same time pulls out a strap and belts boys who interrupt.'

"But you are a boy Uncle and if you speak you might get belted!"

'That's true but I've adjusted it down to ten years and younger.' A muffled exclamation came from the chair, peace at last restored, I began. Well I took a breath and Robroy's face appeared around the open door after the lightest of knocks, he then spotted Fig on the chair and no doubt the sucking of the sweet. I wondered if he guessed the type?

"Grandpa can I have a humbug as well please?"

'Yes if I had any left, which I don't, Fig had the last one, but you are welcome to a pear drop if you can reach them and pull over that chair and sit quietly.'

When all was quite again after the chair was dragged across the room so I began.

'As you know a bomb was dropped on the house right smack in the middle of the four turrets and it carved its passage down to the basement and beyond, I'm led to believe. Apparently they filled in the hole it had made then after the war we got reparation

damage settlement and that's when everything was rebuilt and the large room fire installed with all its pipe works. But my father in his wisdom decided not to enclose the roof in lead but to cover the opening with a glass and metal structure and this became known as the bell window in our family.'

"But grandpa I've never seen it, you've never shown me."

'Presumably you both want to see it now?'

Yes came the reply from them both so I grabbed a handful of tissues and directed the boys to follow me closely. We came down those stone steps until we reached Dulcie's bedroom then took a right along a passage way till we reached a large timber door. I opened it and we swept through into a beautifully furnished room, fully lit by the high domed glass octagonal window. Fig gasped in delight and Robroy danced into the middle of the room, it had a round brick feature jutting into the room,

'The chimney.' I explained.

They looked up though the window at the stonework holding the two chimney pots.

"Whose room was this its quite the most beautiful in the whole house, has it ever been used. I know its close to Grandma's room it must be hers!"

'No it was my fathers space, when my mother died it was here that he fled to, and no one was allowed in. They rang a bell if they needed him but rarely was he ever disturbed. It was his study, his sitting room and sometimes his bedroom. We children were never allowed in here and it still makes me nervous coming! Still a new generation has arrived so please come when you wish and tell your cousins, but let me ask you all not to move anything, just enjoy this inner sanctum of your great grandfather.'

I left them both there sitting on the long couch admiring the room and enjoying the peace that emanated from that glass dome above. Yes I had enjoyed that and having both boys with me soothed my nervous fears of entering my fathers domain. I closed the door and went along to Dulcie's bedroom and told her where I had left the boys in case their parents were worried. Back to bed so I scurried back to that box of tissues whilst those I had already taken flew out of my pocket to leave a trail of my passing. It then occurred to me I had not used one at all in Fathers room.

Chapter Two. Pew.

Well I understand from Maise that my old fathers special room has become a debating chamber for all the young ones and she said the debates were getting more and more heated as they discussed the tree house on the island, the stables and carts. Apparently she never stopped to listen but would walk in with her tray of lemonade and cookies and they never stopped, but my Robroy at least said a kind thank you to her before she left. That boy taking his ducal training seriously!

Just then Finlay announced a Mr. Pew, when I was ensconced in my favourite chair by the bay window.

'A mister Pew?' said I in surprise having never heard of him.

"Mister Pew, from the Historic Society, his card your Grace."

'Better show him into the study then if he seems to be official Finlay.'

So off he went, still with Pew's card clutched in his hand. I finished my cup of tea and plodded after my butler who had kindly left the door open so I would not forget we had a visitor to attend to. I entered the study and left the door ajar, something I and Finlay had agreed upon so he could hear outside and ride to my rescue if need be. I presume

He would have called Tom to help him, Tom being so much larger in frame. I don't think Finlay could have handled an aged crone by himself. Oh yes we do get some of those visiting and mostly complaining about my estate workers on a dozen problems mainly to do with rent and damp. Now where was I going with this? Mr. Pew of the Histrionics.

'Yes Pew what can I help you with?'

"Apparently you have changed the roof line of the castle without permission from the relevant authority."

'Really!'

"Yes your Grace really and the roof line was changed without approval or consent."

'Well you will have take that up with my dear departed father, so start digging.'

"I beg your pardon."

'He's dead.'

"That may be so but as the current owner it remains your duty to provide an explanation and ultimately the execution of any demands from the relevant authority of which I am a representative."

I looked again at his business card but out of the corner of my eye I saw the door move slightly and the tip of Tom's size eleven boot edge closer.

'Well Mr Pew you see that window was approved as war damage and the reparation committee signed off it years ago. Secondly I do not like being told what I can or can't do with my own property so kindly leave.'

"But your Grace I have not finished, that tree house up on that registered oak in the lake has no planning permission and in fact is in contravention of the Council register."

'Well its not in the lake or you would have me arrested for polluting the water, its on a little island in the lake and its my grandsons play house, built by him and his cousins so you best have it out with him.'

'Tom have Robroy come in please.' Tom stepped in and loomed over the Pew man who immediately shank into his chair.

"Excuse me your Grace but master Nicholas is still at school."

'Then its not your lucky day Mr. Pew so perhaps Tom you would call Finlay to show our unwelcome visitor out, and isn't time to let Bismark out for his run.'

"Bismark?" said Pew.

"Our pet Lion Mr. Pew." This from Finlay as he guided Pew Histrionics out the door. Tom smiled and followed them out just to make sure he left. But just then the children arrived back home and Finlay called for Robroy as he had a visitor but the visitor literately sped out down those hated stairs of mine, fell at the bottom, picked

himself up and dived for the car leaving and left at breakneck speed. I went back to my comfortable seat only to see the children run off to the stables to do their duty to Lord and Lady and the foal. Well that's if my boys did not have them over at home farm.

Chapter three, Pew returns with support.

It was a Wednesday as I remember and three cars arrived in beneath my front steps, one was a government vehicle, I saw a large crest emblazoned on the door panel. I was looking out of my bay window with great interest and I saw Scotty Norman alight from that same government car. Scotty Norman, yes we called him Snotty Foreman at school, bit of a sneak always prying into peoples affairs and I doubt if he had changed. Then I saw Pew and one of our local councillors join him and start up those enormous stone steps. I wished I had an button to unroll the dam things but at last I heard the bell ring and Finlay's welcoming voice showing them into the house. Now as it happened I knew my young Robroy was not at school he had bruised his back the day before at football and had been given a day off to recover. I knew he would be in or around the kitchen with Cook and Maise so I rang for Tom to find him and bring him here to me.

Finlay was taking off the visitors coats and in his usual way would not be hurried so Robroy was soon with me.

'I'm not feeling too well myself Robroy so I wonder if you would mind attending to the gentlemen newly arrived in the study. I'm sure they are the bulling type and I suggest you have Tom with you when you interview them.'

"Presumably one or all you don't care to meet I take it Grand papa!"

'Well The one with red hair I knew at school and he did not leave a favourable impression being a bit of a sneak. Anyhow it will be a bit of managerial experience for you.' With that Tom and my grandson left for the study and when Finlay came in to announce the visitors I told him I had the flu and that Robroy would see them in the study. Of course I was dying to hear what they wanted and more so to see how my twelve year old grandson made out. So when Finlay left I waited a few moments and carrying an empty glass I quickly hiked over to the waiting room next to my study, drew a chair close to the wall and pressing the glass against the wall listened intently to what was being said.

"His Grace unfortunately has the flu, his boys are busy on the farm so he has asked Master Nicholas his grandson to take his place." This from Finlay.

"Well what can I do for you gentlemen?" Robroy.

"We had hoped to see his Grace however a mere boy in his place is not acceptable to us."

"Oh good then I will ask Finlay to show you out and further I will inform our gatekeeper to refuse you entry in future, good day gentlemen." Robroy straight to the point.

"Very well young Nicholas you will hear us out." This was Pew.

"You will address me as Sir if you would, my grandfather specifically asked me to take his place."

"He was always a weasel at school as I remember." This from Snotty, "I represent the Government on this issue."

"And I represent my grandfather and you are in his house and at my command you can be ejected, You came with no warrant therefore if I desire I am in my rights to have you thrown out preferably on the compost heap."

I called Finlay in and said I wanted some estate workers outside just in case.

"Already organised your Grace if you would care to leave your glass and peak out the window." I did and seven stout men were sitting on the steps.

"Well gentlemen tell me what you have called for please?" Robroy in consolatory tone.

"It's the window installed in the centre of the roof, it's a blight on the castle."

"Now if you look carefully you cannot see it from the ground." Robroy.

"But from the air you can." Pew quick to gain an advantage.

"But let me ask the man from the government surely there is a rule about low flying aircraft and especially these modern drones, surely illegal?" Robroy. Pew turned to Snotty I presume because all I could hear was silence.

"Well yes Sir you are correct."

"Well then there is no problem I suggest next time a formal request be made allowing the Dukes solicitors to investigate the case. As far as I am concerned the window was approved under war reparation and if you wish to counter that your best avenue is with the board that approved it. So good day gentlemen Tom will show you out." He must have looked out of the window to see the substantial support. "You of course will be allowed to leave unhindered and have a safe journey and I think Mr. Councillor a visit to his Grace when he is better might be warranted." I heard chairs scrapping back and footsteps leaving the study so I put down my glass and grinned.

Chapter four. A gross example of theft.

Gideon came over from Home farm at lunchtime, he and Nick had been counting out sheep and injecting them at the same time, or maybe it was the other way around but still they had bad news.

"Father we've lost five sheep and Hereford one of our Rams."

'Lost?'

"Gone." This from my brother Eustace who had been helping much to my amazement. Eustace only helped himself most of the time, still four sheep and a crusty old ram was a bit much for him to steal.

"Robin is up there on the pens looking for evidence, but you and I could guess who it might be."

'You mean the Anderton twins from Swain-cote?'

"Yep those reprobates Tom Anderton and his elder brother Will, we had trouble with them last summer."

'Yes Nick, I do remember, they fired up one of Robin's haystacks made a God awful mess of the trailer you boys left by it. Johnson saw them running towards the main road but his evidence was not given any credence since he was involved in that fight with them on festival night. Case closed, lets hope Robin finds something, if its foot prints tell him to cover them then ring the police and get them over there.' Eustace and my son went back out presumably to join Robin in his search. I had an idea and called for my Tom, the ever faithful Tom, and asked him to take a trip down to the local pub in the village then go on the the Smelly Boots pub in Swain-cote and have a quite word with both landlords. A big hefty ram is quite a hard animal to hide. I waited until Robroy came home from his Grammar school, he being later than the others who still attended the our village school, then I called him into the study and told him the latest events.

"Presumably you have called the police?"

'Indeed your Uncles have done that already, I presume you might make a nuisance of yourself and go up there.' I had know sooner said this and the young scoundrel dashed out dropped his school bag in the hall and was out down the steps heading for the stables. Shortly after, Robroy clinging to Lords reins galloped past the house bareback. I called Finlay to ring my son to tell him his son was on the way and to be prepared for the arrival of a whirlwind.

Apparently when he got past the Home farm and up to the top field he was shoved away so he took Lord through the lane gate and down to where the rams were kept in a little field of their own. Later he recounted his adventure over dinner much to my and Dulcie's amusement and no doubt to impress his cousins with Fig being totally mesmerised. So here below is what that scoundrel grandchild of mine discovered. Having parked Lord by his reins by the posts up the lane he quietly scoured the sides for any tyre tracks and eventually found some. They weren't ours as we rarely used the lane except when the time came to release the rams to the sheep. Then he clambered under the wire into the pen and gently stepped closer to the rams gate where he spotted boot prints. Stepping back he reversed and climbed back under the fence and raced for Lord releasing the reins and scrambling up via a convenient post onto Lords broad back and then galloping back to the adults in the sheep field. Well you have guessed the rest and indeed the policemen followed him back and took plaster prints of what he had found.

Some days days later my Tom received a message that the Swain-cote pub was to hold a meat raffle on the Saturday so naturally we wondered what animal it might be. Then I had an idea and decided to rope Robroy into it.

'You know Mr. Johnson had an affray with those Anderton rascals and I wondered if he wanted to get his own back on them?'

"Totally illegal Grand papa, best leave it to the authorities." said he.

'Fine and what do they care about a few stolen sheep and our best ram.'

"What best ram?" asked he.

'Hereford'.

"Hereford our finest!"

'Indeed, and what if he was the prize in the meat raffle.' A look of concern crossed his face and he nodded, the brilliance of the Grandfather grandson team were united.

"First we find out what the meat is, we ask Mr Johnson to make enquires. Then we ascertain whose tracks and boots were by the pen, our Sergeant might help. Thirdly we ask him how far the investigation has gone." Robroy all official now.

'And if the investigation has stalled?'

"We ask Mr Johnson and our estate workers to carry out on their own, and we don't know for certain that the Anderton's are guilty so we must be sure of the thieves. Isn't there a phrase that to catch a thief you use another thief?"

'Fine Robroy then lets say the Anderton's are the thieves and if Johnson finds different, we ask Tom and Will Anderton to find the real thief.'

"Thieves."

'Pardon.'

"It took more than one to handle Hereford, you know how Bolshie he can become with those massive horns."

So I called Johnson in and asked him to make enquiries amongst his friends and any associates he had in that Smelly Boots pub. And sure enough he found out that the pub indeed had two sides of mutton to raffle, apparently they were coming from the abattoir in town. My Tom took the car with my son Nick and went down to the abattoir and found our poor Hereford all alone and not in a particularly pleasant mood so they rang Gideon to come down with our local Sergeant and horse trailer and if possible photo's of the suspects. But at first the abattoir management refused all cooperation until the sergeant pointed out the receiving of stolen goods was an offence, plus the Duke was keen to seek legal damages. Then the photo's were shown and the Manager shook his head.

"Twern't them, much older, drooping beard smelt like horse and other two same age dark hair same smell, to be honest looked like gypsies, not local though."

"How would you know that?" Gideon who had just finished loading Hereford in the trailer.

"I'm Romany myself, we be like tribes, now I want you blokes to sign a receipt. And no I can't help you with t'other blokes I don't get involved."

With that and still five sheep missing Gideon returned to the police station where the sergeant reported the abattoir visit. The investigators had no idea who the thieves were so it lay to Robroy and I to carry out plan B. Johnson was called into the Castle again much to Nicks annoyance who had a schedule of work for him to do. I asked Johnson to speak to the Anderton boys to see if they could help and we would forget the haystack incident. He agreed but said it might be best for me to request their help. So two days later two scruffy individuals climbed those darn steps and were shown into my study. I stood to be as imposing as possible but both looked scared so I sat down and motioned them into their chairs, Then just as I was about to start in rushed Robroy, sat himself down beside me and commenced describing the turn of events that led them to be called in to help me. Basically he asked these artful dodgers to

help locate the gypsy thieves but only find them and our estate workers would do the rest with the support of our local sergeant.

"Never worked with a copper before." said Tom the younger.

"Would be quite out of character for us to become involved." said Will.

'Then alas we will have a witch burning ceremony, now that you are here.' said I with a smile. Both got the message, surprising intelligence for two louts. Then they left rather quickly I felt and two steaming cups of tea not drunk which Maise had bought in, so Robroy and I pulled them across the desktop and added sugar.

A day later Finlay received a telephone call from the two reprobates asking to see me in the afternoon. Finlay came into the sitting room where I was ensconced in my favourite chair by the bay window. He gave me the message and I asked my son Nicholas to attend me when they came. I wondered all though lunch what they might require and was fully prepared to part with a little cash if required. But when they strode up those beastly stairs and were ushered into my study imagine my surprise when they asked to speak to Nick and not me.

'Do you want me to go?' I asked politely.

"No please your Grace, please stay we merely want to ask your son if he could spare Mr. Johnson and a few others tomorrow early." I looked at Nick hopeful that he would carry this conversation forward.

"Why?" Nick in response.

"We have located the sheep in question at least four of them marked in blue over their heads."

"Yes we marked them thus after the injection, but their were five lost."

"Indeed but we think the travellers have already disposed of the filth, there was a strong smell of mutton in the air when we came across them."

"How many men do you require?"

"Seven including your honour and big Tom and someone used to the sheep, to coral them, and we will need the trailer to carry them away."

'So what punishment do we give to these thieves.'

"That depends on what weapons your men have."

'This is not Wind in the Willows, you can get arrested for that.'

"Bring a tape recorder as well."

'Why my Tom?'

"Knowing their ways the leader will opt to fit one of ours, its their tradition, we keep big Tom out of sight until the fight and meanwhile record all the voices."

And so it was at eleven at night seven trusty stalwart men assembled on the steps together with the two crafty loafers climbed aboard the tractors trailer. Then I spotted the figure of Robroy being hauled up with a portable tape recorder grasped in his hands. Then Tom arrived, but before I could shout to Nicholas the tractor had moved away. So I returned to my padded seat at the bay window to watch and wait. It was over two hours when eventually the tractor returned lugging the sheep trailer and cart behind it but all I could see was Gideon Nick and Robroy plus the two Anderton crooks. Robroy jumped down and the others started off towards Home farm. Robroy had spotted me in the window and came directly inside.

'Well?'

"All accomplished Grand papa."

'And where is my Tom?'

"In the Smelly Boots pub celebrating."

'Celebrating what and with whom?'

"Our lot, it was a successful Grand papa, you never told me Tom was county Champion."

'Well how else am I to get to my feet when I fall over, your Grand-mama's not a bit of good in the lifting department. Anyhow I saw the sheep, your Father and uncle Gideon but also those two scoundrels going up to the farm.'

"I'm off to bed now, goodnight grand papa."

'No you don't, tell me, I feel it in my bones.'

"The Anderton's said the gypsies would come again for revenge a sort of tit for tat so they have volunteered their services."

'Yes, let me guess they'll both want a job after this.'

"Could be useful, they seem to know every crook in the county, might be very useful. Goodnight."

So I to went to bed climbing up those cold stone steps grumbling to myself about the nights foray. But in the morning, a Saturday, in ran both Fig and Robroy jumping on my bed, their faces flushed with excitement.

"We beat them, Will and Tom smashed them all up with our cricket bats we lent them and we hear the enemy have pulled up stumps and left."

'Well tell me how many turned up?'

"Two." said Fig.

"But Father has offered the Anderton's a job to help on the farm." Robroy with new heroes to worship.

'Oh well', what more could I say imprisoned under my sheets by two hefty lads..

Chapter five, A horrible cold and a missing visitor.

All this excitement and the opening of our visitor day must have had a deliberative affect on my health because I woke up the following day with a tremendous cold and a heavy headache, so bad that Tom called down to Dulcie that he thought I was dying.

"Nonsense Tom, his Grace has a habit, one which I strongly disprove of, a reason to stay in bed for a day and coincidently be served hand and foot by us all, well especially by you and Maise, I'm coming up." Dulcie, and indeed she did come up and I'm pleased to say she finally realised my true state for now my nose was streaming and my face was flushed.

"A hot sweet lemon drink and no visitors Tom please." Then turning to me.

"Absolutely no Nicolas Robin or Fig so I'm taking the lolly jar away so there will no

temptation to come up and visit!"

'They come to see me to hear my tales and not for the sweets Madam!'

"Don't you Madam me with your nose streaming muck, you need to clean yourself up my man. So where did you collect this infamous cold, in truth Heir I've never seen you in such bad state, so you stay in bed, I'll get a bottle and Maise will bring you up a large glass of hot lemon."

Before I could answer she had swept from the room so Tom held out a wad of tissues with which I could dry myself.

'I prefer cotton handkerchiefs Tom if you don't mind.' As I snorted into them and placed them in the paper bag he had laid on the bed.

Then I remember one of the visitors yesterday, a grey bearded oaf short in stature sidled up beside me and asked me in a quavering voice who the bloody duke was, worst of all he had snot in both his nasal passages. I replied.

'He be not here probably counting all his pennies. You know dukes have a propensity to hide their wealth, sneaky bee's the lot of them. How much did you pay to get into here?'

"A fiver."

'Bloody hell that was cheap.' Said I, 'Still I expects he's hunched over his desk counting that fiver as we speak.'

"It were only a single note I gave."

'Well he's probably counting it over and over again, amazing how they make it last.'

"You work here?"

'Sometimes'.

"What you do?"

'Lounge about mostly and chuck people out who have unhealthy dispositions.'

"Like what?"

'That nose of yours.' I think he got the point but not before the oaf coughed all over my second best tweed. I heard a polite cough behind me, must have been Finlay admonishing me, after all, nose or not, the man was a paying guest. It was then that I decided to ask Robroy to draw up a notice forbidding entry into the house for those obviously suffering from colds or flu. Too late for me now as I drank Maise's glass of sweet lemon with definitely a taste of honey.

Some hours the doctor called up.

"What might be the problem your Grace?"

'Your bedside manner and your inability to remember my wife's comments, she did ring I presume?'

"Indeed, my we are a bit testy this morning." I glowered.

'So I have a vicious cold so what do you propose?'

"Lemon and honey and solid rest in bed."

'Already done that, so why it not working?'

"Give it a day or two and be patient, take an aspirin and a glass of sherry to improve your temper."

'Tom throw him out please. Then find me the aspirin.' Exit flushed Doctor.

Later the boys came up via the kitchen stairs so avoiding Dulcie and Tom, by the time they all scrambled in, the room was full of concerned little faces.

"Thought you were dying Uncle?" Jarvis the elder Aussie lad.

"Yes heard Cook say you was croaking like a cane toad." Brigan the brother.

'Were, and toads don't croak.'

Then Robroy came between them.

"Not one of your better days then Grand-papa, those hankies are sodden I'll get you some fresh."

'Thank you but use those plastic gloves and take them over to the sink and open up the hot tap then leave them. You children are rather naughty, her Grace explicitly told me none of you were allowed here. What I've got is very catching.'

"But Mother has received a letter to say your Aunt Vi is coming." This from Tommy. Aunt Vi was Tommy's grandmother, why the Aunt word?

"Tommy and you Jess, have you fallen out with your grandmother?"

"No Mother has." This from Jess.

So here am I bed ridden and another family problem arising. Then I heard Toms heavy footsteps approaching.

'Away you lot, quickly back you go.' I had pointed to the back stairs and they all vanished. The last was Robroy's hand in a waving motion as the door closed and my bedroom one opened.

Tom was not to be fooled, he had that knowing look over his face. But he did not say a word. Tom has become an important friend since I employed him as a valet, as previously written I had had others who were either indolent or plain nasty so Tom was a refreshing change. He and Maise I would defend with my life. I always wished they would both hit it off so to speak, but alas as yet they were merely friends in the service to an old grumpy Duke now snivelling into a monstrous handkerchief and ready to have another blasted sneeze. Ten o'clock and gates opening time for more visitors hopefully without colds. So I lay back and snuggled into my bed under the counterpane and then began to sweat, I suppose that was the whole idea of Dulcie's hot bottle, bless her.

I must have slept for two or three hours and no I did not feel any better but that hacking cough had stopped so I raised myself up and decided to venture to the window. Over on the far right I could just see the new car park my two boys had installed with a fair number already there, cars I mean. To my extreme left I saw some of my great nephews playing cricket on the lawn, then in the distance lay the Cafe and tea rooms. I wondered what my twelve year old grandson was doing when all a sudden he was there with his young sister in a pram munching on a bun and guiding her along the path to the castle. Then they began to run at first hesitantly but gradually increasing their pace until they reached the steps and Robroy lifted his sister in his arms and carried her up those blasted stairs. I returned back to bed and I presumed they were heading up to my bedroom. They burst into the room a few minutes later.

"Cash stolen from the safe!"

'Now take a few deep breaths Robroy and you did not carry your sister up my

bedroom stairs, they are difficult to walk the best of times.' Sharp cough from me and a shake of his head from him now almost recovered from his run.

'What cash?'

"Cafe's cash the strong box opened like a tin can!"

I'm not surprised I suggested to Mr and Mrs Evans to buy a proper safe but the female of this partnership said her old orange coloured metal bread bin with attached latch would do nicely thank you. Well apparently it did very nicely to the thief.

'Any ideas who?' he indistinctly knew I was thinking of the Anderton lads but he shook his head.

"They've changed their ways but I'll ask them to help me, it's my grandparents livelihood!"

'I doubt that, but I guess you could try, Leave the baby in the pram with your mother then off you go and carry out your investigation, but I suggest you ask your grandparents to ring the police sergeant in the village before you subject the box to minute inspection.'

"How did you know I was going to look at the box Grand-papa?" I just nodded but thankfully Tom came is just in time to gather the baby whose name I had quite forgotten, must ask Edith again. Robroy shot out downstairs relieved of his little sister.

He was back within the hour.

'And.' said I dragging myself up against the bed head.

"Seems it was a broken catch in the kitchen, and some spilt flour by cook gave a fair impression of the thief. Apparently a child's foot size."

Naturally the Anderton's were clear but there was more to follow.

"The Sergeant acknowledged a Leslie Thomas might be the culprit."

'He knows all the shoe sizes of every child?'

"Not him but Tom Anderton ventured a name and the sergeant just nodded."

'Poor lad caught by his own reputation.'

"What Grand-papa?"

'Never mind, hung drawn and quartered before a trial.'

"Well I expect the sergeant will visit his parents first, he being only nine."

'Nine!'

"Yes grand-papa the kitchen window was one of those narrow ones at the top of the main one."

'And I suppose you deducted....'

"Indeed." said the boy wonder. Anyhow some days later the money was recovered, the boy's backside was whacked by his embarrassed father, and the Evans bought a strong safe which they had screwed into the concrete floor. I admit to a brief thought passing my mind, had it been one of our children in a lark, so I was relieved when the truth came out and Robroy got a double pear drop for his service though I suspect he did even better from his grandparents in the Cafe, though he did not let on to me, just accepted his sweets as perfect recompense for a job well done.

Chapter six. Rubbish and more rubbish and a ring.

'Rubbish.' I shouted and the children squirmed.

"Now Heir don't take out on the children please, after all they are reporting what they saw on their ramble." Dulcie, but I was not cross with the children just angry that some scum had misused my bridle path with their rubbish dumping. All the children had decided to go for a walk around the estate boundary, something like tramping the boundaries or some such, no doubt instigated by my Robroy eager to show his prowess at estate management to his cousins, and poor Fig looked quite worn out.

"I shall ask the Anderton boys to help me determine and catch the culprits Grand-papa." Robroy assuming the mantle of Chief of the Clan.

'You will do no such thing Robroy you will let your father and uncle investigate, and incidentally, did you find all in order whilst you beat my boundaries, excepting for the rubbish dump?'

"Two"

"Two what?"

"Tips of rubbish, the one over by the barley field behind the sheep pens, and the one down by the river crossing near Farriers lane. And it was a long hike!"

'I can see that by the state of poor little Fig.'

"Well he also fell into the river searching for something."

'Fig come here and tell me what you were searching for?'

Just then Aunt Vi just happened to enter the study as little Fig stepped forward.

"He," said Aunt Vi pointing at the little bedraggled figure, "Was hunting for a ring I lost in the river years ago, obvious one of my grandchildren let it out, I shall deal with them later."

'Well now I am particularly fond of Fig and I suspect his good nature intended to find it and return it to you Aunt Vi, perhaps we may learn the full story here and now so do sit down and someone find a towel to wrap around Fig, thank you and do start Aunt Vi.'

"It was a long time ago so I doubt they would be interested." Aunt Vi was interrupted by Maise bring in a tray of steaming cocoa and biscuits which she settled down on the carpet for the children to help themselves. She apologised for interrupting and left closing the door behind her. Some extra percetery sense I'm sure made her do that.

'Well Aunt we are all ears about this missing ring!'

"Well if you insist Heir, you are so like your father, once you catch something you will not let it go."

'Yes and colds are the worst type so please help yourself to cocoa or perhaps a glass of sherry might help.' I had an inkling this might be a sad tale.

"Do you remember Jimmy Stiles?"

'I remember a man who used to steal cycles by that name and sell them up in Oxford to the students, heard that he would go back up there and steal them back, a real growth enterprise. My father, your brother, told me when I was Robroy's age.'

"I met him before all that, his family ran the mill by the river and I came upon him whilst riding Heidi."

'Your old pony.'

"Listen Heir and don't interrupt its hard enough for me to relate, remember I was eighteen and I knew Heidi was on her last legs, but we did so enjoy trotting together along that river path. Well we were close to the mill and something spooked my pony, she bucked me off and fell herself, she died there and then. Jim Stiles heard me shout and raced out of the mill and checked the pony carefully then came across and lifted me up, to my mind any man who would care for the animal first before a girl in distress was worth falling in love. Of course I did not recognise that until father blew his top about Jim helping me up. You see, it was a Millers son actually touching a Dukes daughter that infuriated him. I believe and that what actually turned me away from the family and eventually into Jimmy's broad arms. We courted secretly and eventually Jimmy proposed, with a diamond ring that must have cost him a fortune on his meager wages, and naturally I was swept off my feet and accepted. I couldn't wait to tell mother and Father and fully expected to be sent out the country so I hurried home and met old Ben Sherman, do you remember he used to prune the apples and pears?"

'Vaguely, tall string like never talked, died when I was five, always found an apple for me to eat though, did not guess where he got them hidden.'

"Stop interrupting."

'Well you asked a question!'

"Ben stopped me as I raced through the orchard. "Where be an angel like you be racing though my trees, You trip and fall and I be in big trouble with the Duke."

"I just got engaged, oh dear Ben I am in love."

"And who the lucky gentleman be then Miss Violet?"

"My Jimmy my Jimmy Stiles." I yelled with out load but there was a pregnant silence from dear old Ben. I asked what was the matter why was he not pleased for me, but the head bowed and he shook it forlornly. "Ah," he said, "the village jockey no less, well he's caught a fine one. Be the ring a little blue and small diamonds? They won't be real that young Doris down the veggie shop couldn't believe her luck but her Mum went and got it tested. It were low quality it were, and she being the third that was caught that way. Jimmy got a beating from all three dads who'd had enough of the millers boy going on."

"I did not wait to hear any more but retraced my steps, saw Jimmy on his deck near the water wheel and shouted Doris at him then threw the ring as far as I could into the river, I was so angry but I didn't want another girl to be fooled like Doris and I had been. Well you know the rest, his Dad kicked him out and he went in thieving. So young Fig thank you very much it was truly thoughtful but the ring must remain lost for always.

Well you will never guess that young Fig pulled from his shorts pocket a little blue and white ring and handed it to Aunt Vi, she did not know whether to strike at him then and there or burst into tears, but instead she gathered him up in her arms and hugged him for a long long time. All the children remained quite and I was a loss until the word rubbish crept into my mind.

'Well that was tale and a half Aunt Vi and bravely told, but we wouldn't have had dear

cousin Jasmine or Tommy or Jess. But you lot what about this rubbish?"

"Well thank you very much you insensitive nephew Heir." So she dropped Fig down on the carpet and swept off to her rooms.

"I agree with Nicholas Robin, he should bring the Anderton's into the investigation." This from Jasmines daughter Jess. Hang on which one of Jasmines children told Fig about the ring? Well I noticed Jess changed the subject pretty neatly but we'll never know for sure sort of shutting them up in the dungeons!

The rubbish, alas posed a greater problem as you will see. My sons took the Anderton's up to the top field where the rubbish had been dumped. Robroy and myself used the old Land Rover to follow and I made sure I had bought five sets of cooks rubber washing gloves, me I was going to sit in the vehicle, I had no intention of getting close to that stinking heap. Well thats until they used the hay forks to turn the mess of cans, splintered wood and an old tarpaulin over to discover the body of a young woman which obviously was the reason for the stench. Robroy blanched at the sight and ran back into the Land Rover. I told my sons to cover the body and stay whilst I fetched the police. The Anderton boys were just as eager to follow Robroy into the vehicle, but the mention of police seemed to be the reason. As I drove down the bridleway I asked them if they knew the girl but both nodded their heads.

"She were local Boss." They said in unison.

I got Finlay to ring the police and asked him to explain the reason for the haste, then Robroy asked the boys to do some investigating and would I drive them into the village.

'They can drive themselves if they have a licence but you stay here Robroy the police will want you to make a statement, no we won't involve the Anderton's.'

"We both can drive Boss." And both lads produced their licences, so Robroy and I got out and left them to it.

'Mind you bring back the land Rover in one piece and you can park next to the old wool store where you both are staying.' With that they started off the long drive down to the village.

'Wonder who they will see there?' Said I to Robroy as he helped me up those darn steps.

"Not adults just the kids, Tom Anderton told me once that the village kids know more what is going on in their district than any adult. For one, their eyesight is better and second they are more in tune with the environment." That from Robroy, but all I could do was nod as we reached that huge oak door and a waiting Finlay ushered me in. I grabbed Robroy who tried to slip away and we both went into the lounge to wait for further events. Again I had that sneaking feeling that what Robroy saw had affected him to the marrow, as I had remembered he had gone a ghostly shade of white, just then Dulcie came into the room and swept over to give her grandson a long hug. Dulcie may not be the sharpest knife in the box but she had that gift of foreknowledge.

'When you tried to slip away was it to have private cry, you recognised the girl at the dump didn't you?' He nodded slowly.

"Come over here and sit by my side on Grand-papa's chair and tell me whom she

was.' He quietly moved over and sat beside me, then the chin trembled and a burst of sorrowful sobbing rent the air and in between gulps he spluttered out her name.

"Twer Jenny Wren."

'Was she close to you at school?'

"Two class's above but she was kind to we juniors, I guess she would, out of us all, be Miss Frobisher's favourite, you see we all liked her."

'Perhaps loved be closer?'

"No Grand-papa, not loved as in the adult way, but a girl to look up to, someone to respect and like." By now his sobs had retreated so he took some deep breaths." You won't tell the others just yet or you'll have a house full of misery."

'No of course, presumably you all came across her at one time at school but you will need to tell the police when they come to interview us.'

"Of course and now if you don't mind I want to go up to Mum."

Finlay announced the Inspector in an hour later, they had taped the scene and removed the body down to the mortuary.

"Sorry your Grace but you cannot move that rubbish until we have searched every piece and I understand there is another site where rubbish was dumped and I would be obliged if one of the children who discovered it would show us it in case it has connections to what has been found already. I understand Master Nicholas Robin saw the lifting of the tarpaulin and I wonder if I could interview him?" I called Finlay to ask Robroy to come down to us and a few minutes my red eyed grandson came though the door and raced over to sit beside me. He then answered all the questions asked of him and eventually told the name of the unfortunate girl.

The Inspector then asked if Master Nicholas could show them where the second dump was and Robroy nodded. I was against him having any further involvement and said so but he turned to me and whispered he needed to help.

By the time the first dump had been though ally checked they turned their attention to the lower one by the river that Robroy had shown. Eventually this was turned over carefully and a long bloody kitchen knife was revealed. All through this my Robroy and one or two others stood guard over the second heap as the forensic team searched and it was Jarvis the eldest Australian child who noticed the steel glint and raised the alarm. Several forensic officers tried to move the children away but they remained close all the same. Robroy said haltingly they would stay and arrange for the estate workers to protect them, and the village Sergeant advised forensics not to provoke the children as a confrontation would lead to several battered heads. Peace was restored until that knife was found, bagged and taken away. By then the children had grown tired and returned home. I wondered what instinct had kept them there day after day until the weapon had been discovered.

In his own way he and I visited Frob to tell her the awful truth about Jenny and she in her turn visited our village sergeant with some information she had on the matter. Our village is small but soon the Anderton lads came back to my son Nicolas and gave him a similar piece of information which he told the Inspector and Robroy but not

me!

I am being carefully avoided in this matter and I am very cross. However I later discovered that there was a connection between one of our retired staff members, our old Factor's grandson had been involved with the girl and jealousy and anger resulted in her death. He pleaded guilty, was hated for what he had done, and an apologetic letter from our old factor eventually reached my desk. I showed it to my sons and Robroy and asked them all to respect his privacy, I expect he was as devastated as we all were. Eventually the rubbish from both sites was cleared away by the council after a war of words, it being on my land. So we agreed I would take the vegetation and they the wood and tins and goodness knows what. I suspect most of it had come from their dump in the first place, Old Factor Roberts grandson being an employee at their yard.

So ended a very eventful month and it all began with a ring! But the house remained unusually quiet, gone was the carefree laughter and racing around the corridors, the only thing I could see were the children's regular visits to Lord and Lady on mucking out duties and I suspect a gentle nuzzle from these wonderful beasts. I wondered how long the peace and serenity would last?

Chapter 7. A time to reflect and a time to explore our 'Deep' in our home.

We all attended Jenny's funeral, including over half the village, and I supposed this small action on our part continued to absorb us all for several weeks more. It was Nicholas wife, my ex secretary Edith, that suggested a means to make the castle alive again. Yes the daily visits of the public continued and the measured lectures on its history given, but I only attended infrequently and locked myself into my room. The children in the main used my fathers old den, many reading or playing their computer games. Once we had a scare when young Fig went missing, but he was found later deep in the underground vaults which few of us entertained visiting as dark tales had been told by previous generations in the Victorian era, and thus the stories carried on to the current generation. Someone had told Fig some of the more gruesome and he being of independent mind set out to investigate the truth. Even my Robroy was nervous of entering the deep as we called it and it was only when one of our visitors asked about ghosts that Ruth had this idea that we should do a dig in the deep to exposes the real facts, if indeed they truly existed.

So we discussed the venture over a late dinner and all agreed to taking part in the excavation. It was to be done room by room, then Robroy, an avid TV documentary watcher suggested instead of digging flagstones and tons of dirt, perhaps we could hire the university people who had the ground radar system. This last months visitor receipts had been particularly substantial so there was adequate money available to fund the exercise, and it was decided to make Fig the project leader since his

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