

CASTLE MINE 2.

1.A birthday – not mine alas. Copy-write P. Audcent 2015

Well here I am planted into my enormous bed with blankets and eiderdown under my armpits listening to the noise from below so clearly I don't need to cross over to my pipes, everything is as clear as a bell, well if you like a full orchestra with drums and trumpets in the ascendant! So I'm completely left out as usual, me the provider of a roof to all those dependants, so what has changed. My fault since I did invite the whole dam lot to come and live here, well yes my two boys are very useful about the place after all they do is look after the land and the rental of the estate housing. Then my two useless brothers Gideon came back from OZ bearing two kids and a wife and a lot of debt from his farm closure. Then brother Eustace, the lemon lad, married an Italian sort, dark hair and bloodless lips, but a figure to die for, except she bought a little lad called Fig, short for Figaro I expect. About three years old at a guess, thank goodness he left the father behind, heard she was not married but the fellow tried his hand at selling his mistress to lemon lad. The grapevine had it that the lemon grove was a straight swap for the black haired beauty! Then there is Sofia seems to have brightened up considerably with all these young ones calling her Aunt, so she holds sway over all the youth, well nearly all because my Robroy still holds out, is politeness personified but avoids any further combat with her.

Speaking of Robroy its his seventh birthday being celebrated downstairs and that child has quite forgotten his ailing Grandpa and his crop of measles no doubt caught from that little Italian urchin two weeks ago. Measles at my age, I had them when I was nine, ages ago, yet I dam well got caught again so nobody is allowed up here. Well Tom is different he seems to be impervious to any decease and I think I can hear him plodding up those stone steps which will be the death of us all eventually.

“Your Grace, a piece of Master Nicks birthday cake and a napkin to catch the crumbs.”

'Thank you Tom and how thoughtful, I presume my wife asked you to come up.'

“Actually it was young Master Nick himself, I suppose he felt a bit sorry for his old Grand-papa stuck up here all by himself.”

'No doubt Tom, and thank Master Nick, and would you know by any chance what the Doctor has told my dear wife about my condition.?’

“I heard him in the hall saying you should be now clear of the illness you having already had the decease before, I believe you were about nine your Grace.”

'Indeed I was and that ruffian, if he had checked my history properly, would not have me staying up here forlornly, I might add, I should sack him for being a fool!’

“Alas he's the only one we have in the village your Grace.”

I shoed Tom away with my hand and commenced eating a very crumbling cake with most of it going onto the napkin, and I was just about to climb out of bed and brush the crumbs out of the window when in dashed Robroy and a bellowing group of young children all jumping about and frightening the sparrows on my window ledge.

How on earth did those sparrows know they were getting the crumbs? That's one of

the many mysteries which I will have to work out later.

'Quite' said I rather loudly.

So young Master Nick jumped onto my bedside chair complete with cushion that now made him somewhat taller than me.

'Do you really need that cushion Robroy now you have grown above snail height?'

"Yes Grand papa, I like being taller than you, its makes me feel.."

'Superior!'

"No taller somehow, much taller than I am on my own legs, from here I can see the dust on your bed frame and over there on your marble washing table, and up there on your old clothes cabinet, if I stretch really hard I can see a discarded shirt, which I guess you threw up there in your haste to get to bed."

'Oh really, listen Robroy will you ask those children over there not to damage my foot soldiers on the mantel, they are there for display purposes only, not playing.'

"For showing off you mean Grand papa," then to everyone in the room he yelled

"Stop please" very loudly. The little Italian boy Fig burst into tears and all looked directly at me, then cascaded back down the stone staircase. Robroy did not move his small frame but he had that smug self satisfied look on his face, really a picture of total command, so where on the earth did he get that from?

2. An unexpected fire.

Well it happened shortly after Robroy's birthday bash. I was at last released from my own bedroom and began to take a short walk around the castle when I smelt the smoke. On turning the corner of the back turret I found Gideon's children baking sausages over a fire they had constructed close to the stone wall. Alas that part of the house was covered in Ivy some fool had planted years ago. Yes you've guessed it, the flame caught a frond and was climbing rapidly up the stems with those children entirely engrossed in their sausages on sticks, which themselves had just caught alight. Then they noticed me and turned to look upwards at the flames moving rapidly towards their own accommodation.

'Run up and warn your mother. Quickly boys ask her to pour water down from that window above.'

"But Uncle that's our bedroom!"

'So run now and call Tom to get the fire brigade!'

"But our sausages are almost cooked." This from Brigan the youngest so I clipped his ear, meanwhile his more alert sister had dashed away to warn her mother and Tom. I could here her yelling at the top of her voice. I looked around hoping to find water, a bucket anything but all there were was two worthless boys with sausage sticks waving in the air and tears starting to run down their little cheeks. They had stood as if turned to stone until Robroy came running round the corner with a flailing water hose grasped in his hands which he immediately directed upwards towards the gathering flames.

'Above the leaves Robroy spray above.' I called but just then a huge waterfall of

water drenched us both as Gideon's wife had a bucket of soapy water and threw it out of the window.

"I guess she had been washing up." Said Robroy as he peeled a small leaf of lettuce off his forehead.

"Don't like greens." That from his cousin Jarvis, the one a previous lighter of forks in trees.

'How about a severe beating, not with a leaf of lettuce but a piece of thick bamboo, I am sure I can find a piece.'

"Oh Dad never beats us, if we are bad we have to write ten lines." This from Brigán looking dolefully up at me.

Then he started to eat his sausage whilst Robroy continued to damp down the smouldering ivy. So I took his stick turned both lads around and then gave a great swipe across their backsides. Just then Gideon rushed round the corner and grasped the stick with a half eaten sausage from me.

"We never hit our boys Heir, never. Never" Gideon face full of crimson so I thumped him right on his mottled nose.

'Well Gid you'll need to find yourself another place to live, these boys of yours are only too aware of the danger of fires in the open after all they come from Australia, the land of brushfires.' I was angry and Gid knew it. That was until his wife decided to throw another bucket of water out of the window so we all got drenched again. This debacle was saved by the arrival of the brigade and larger hose pipes were unloaded.

Gideon's boys got in the way and where unceremoniously pushed away, well a great shove would be more accurate followed by streams of tears, Gideon reacted by blasting the Firies and getting a mouthful of rushing hose water until eventually it was redirected and doused out the final flicker of flame nearing the window sill over which Ruth, Gid's wife leaned menacing as she had watched her useless boys pushed away by the Firies. So the brigade chief turned the hose on her just to show what she thought of the shambles she had come across. Ruth and Gideon had moved from the stables to the rear Castle turret as Ruth had felt the need to stay in the safety of the main house. But I presumed the stable was cold in winter so she swapped with Sofia. So now Sofia was back where she started close to the Shires but with Jasmine my niece and her two actually alongside the stable. I can tell you I was dubious to allow this but for fire hungry boys would be surrounded by stone walls rather than brick and wood, so I said nothing.

'Thank you Mrs Drew for your prompt action and thank your lads, I'll ask Tom to have a word with Mine Host down at the pub. Beer all around.'

"That's kind your Grace, but mine would be a sweet sherry please" She looked up to Gid's bedraggled wife.

"She needs to give those kids a right belting, where are they from?"

Gideon heard Mrs Drew and drawing the boys close marched them around the corner and the safety of the front door. Just then Mini arrived back with towels for Robroy and myself.

'Thank you Mini, I wonder Mrs Drew if you could give Mini a ride in your Red beast

of a fire engine as a reward for her act.'

"Indeed your Grace when Tom rang he told us she was the only one who moved to ring us. Those boys were useless." And she looked straight at Robroy and his sodden cloths with the garden hose still clasped in his hands."

'Well my grandson did try with his hose when Mini yelled to him.' said I looking at my grandson somewhat hurt by the Brigades Chief stare.

"Right" she said "both of you into the engine and off we go down to the lodge and Mini you can work the horn and Nick you the bell."

So off they drove leaving me with two wet towels and a problem with what to do with Gideon and family. Time for a family conference no doubt.

3. A conference.

Finlay our butler called me down from my lofty perch as my wife Dulcie had organised the dining room into a conference centre. Tom came up to help me down those dam stone steps onto the second floor dining room. All the major players were already seated except Robroy who was playing with his cousins over at his other Grandparents Cafe, or rather my Cafe, the one they managed for the Estate. I expect lashings of free ice cream and cakes were the order there resulting no doubt in a sharp fall in our cafe's profits!

Dulcie spoke first introducing us all to this family conference in the dining room. I interjected.

'Why on earth do we have it in here and not the more comfortable lounge room with its easy chairs.'

"Because your Grace would fall asleep in your favourite laid back chair and nobody would hear though your sudden snoring!" Dulcie

"Just like a horse I'm told dear brother." That from sister Sofia.

'Well in that case I'm going for a walk, I fancy ice cream on this warm summers day, you can all conference and let me know when you all have decided, whatever you have decided upon, but I'll tell you one thing or maybe two, that vine at the rear, the one that caught fire, has got to be bought down and the mortar repaired, its well know that Ivy can damage a buildings fabric.'

"Well Father why on earth have you not already done that or rather ordered it to be done." My son Nicolas acting the great leader.

'As a matter of fact I instructed our old Factor to arrange for it to be done whilst you were chasing around that blond Bimbo in the South of France. So naturally it quite forgot my memory, to tell Roberts to arrange for the removal, and as you are all quite aware Roberts was one to be told twice before any reaction entered his skull or in fact any of his ears.' With that I stomped out raring for the company of my young folk and a multicoloured ice cream.

As luck would have it Robroy and Mini had yet to reach the Cafe and were wheeling a wheelbarrow full of weeds from the central flower bed.

“Just going to to ditch this into the compost heap, where are you off to Grand-papa?” Piped the little voice.

'Where you and my great niece are headed.'

“We'll give you a lift if you can lie down on the weeds, so please balance yourself.”

Well I did as I was told, well ordered would be a better word, and off we rolled to the compost heap where I was allowed to get off with Mini's help, then gently pushed back into the barrow when empty. Then carefully balanced as I was, both children took a handle and I was wheeled ceremoniously over to the Cafe and a welcome ice cream, and anyway blast the profits.

Once we had all finished our cones Mrs Evans came by to ask for payment.

“Well your Grace we cannot expect the Estate to pay can we but we will divide the cost between ourselves and yourself if that suits.”

'I suppose it will have to, but I did expect for once in our lives we might get a freebie, I think its called.'

“Alas Master Robin who looks at our accounts might object.”

'My younger son objecting. No Mrs Evans Master Robin will not object just bring me the till receipt if you please.'

So I wrote in a firm hand, this is to be paid by his Graces Estate and NO argument and I signed it Dad Grace.

Then we, the young ones and I all travelled back home, some to the stables and some to the Castle, and me to my dining room to face the inquisition of the problem Ivy.

'Well' said I 'Have you formulated a plan of action?'

“Well we thought you beating the boys a bit over the top.” My brother Gideon.

'Well Gideon your boys are frankly a menace and our home could have been a pile of ash and dust because of them, so how does that make you and your foolish wife feel?'

“She is not foolish, she just loves her boys to bits.”

'Yes I see, a they cannot do wrong sort of woman. But what have you decided on the ivy and mortar?'

“Well its your place Father so you decide.” Nicolas ever the leader.

'Thank you and of course you are quite right, so you will organise the gardeners tomorrow to take it all down and put it on the compost heap, after which we will get the builders in to inspect the mortar.' Then I spied two decanters of sherry and port on the table. 'Bit early to drink my Liquor isn't it? And yes I am sorry I whacked the hide off your darling boys Gideon but they must remember to be more careful with this old house, and I have not forgotten that tree we rescued from a burn out. Apparently I am forgiven by those lads, through the double helpings of ice cream we all enjoyed. Which by the way I charged to the Estate, so Robin please take note of the message I left on the Bill. Now I am tired after a wonderful day with my young family so I bid you all a good afternoon.' I filled a glass with some port and left them in stony silence.

Chapter 4 Was it a mouse or a small mite?

I had taken a well earned nap after lunch partly to get away from the ferocious argument going around the dining table, and it concerned the two shires we had bought recently. At the time I was chasing a grape tomato around my plate and had just located the tomato against the slice of ham and was ready to stab so my attention was not on the whys and wherefores of the four young protagonists debating whose turn it was to brush then ride these lovely great horses. I banged the table with my fork and the grape tomato leapt across the table and hit Dulcie on the chin. She was mortified and before she could throw it back I left for my room via the stone staircase. I reached the top then shouted down that we had a perfectly good coach unused for umpteen years and why the debate.

As I was saying, I lay on my left side on the bed blissfully asleep when I heard a noise, a slight scraping it was under the bed. A rat or mouse I turned over in alarm only to find a bottom encased in shorts and woollen socks withdrawing my bottle of pear drops. Its tiny hands then pulled the bottle to its chest and opened the lid which then fell with a clatter as its black hair and violet eyes looked up suddenly obviously warned by the creaking mattress.

'Ah its you young Tommy. And my pear drops, caught you red handed you little thief.'

"Oh cousin Uncle Heir I just wanted one, the yellow one, Nick told me you had two and I didn't think you'd mind, after all you have a whole jar full."

'Yes indeed young Tommy but if you look carefully I only have those two yellow ones and I am very partial to that colour.'

"Well Nick said he liked the red ones the best, they tasted like raspberry cordial but I said I preferred the yellows ones they reminded me of buttercups.' Before he could say any more I lifted my jar from his clutching hands and picked out a yellow one.

'Now listen my fine lad taking ones pear drops without asking is a capital offence.'

I watched his eyes follow the sweet right into my mouth and he gave a kind of a sad gasp.

"What's a capital offence Uncle?"

'Nicking something that does not belong to you. Has not Cousin Jasmine taught you anything?' I scrabbled into the jar again and found the last yellow pear drop which I deftly pulled out and inspected whilst surreptitiously watching his eyes. They were a beautiful shade of violet, and he did have a wonderful mop of black hair, in all a nice little fellow.

'Well if I hear you say a please may I have a sweet, I might give you this one or perhaps a green one as I don't like those.'

"Please Uncle I am so sorry to have grabbed your jar please may I have a pear drop, a yellow one if possible."

I thought a minute as he crouched below me.

'Well since its the very last one and my mouth is quite dry it seems a pity to waste this one on a useless thieving little boy.' I overdid it, he started to snuffle so I handed him

his prize. And a look of sheer pleasure crossed his face, so I picked a green one out and put it gently into my mouth.

“I thought Uncle Heir you did not like green ones?” Tom said while sucking away. ‘Ah but they turn yellow after a few sucks Tom.’ I eased out the yellow I had been holding in my cheek and tongued the green one in its place. The face on that boy was a sight to behold as he marvelled at the change. I went back into the jar and bought a red one and a green one out.

‘The red ones for Nick and you tell him to stop telling everybody where I hide my sweets, and the green ones for you, if it does not turn yellow you will have to learn not to steal, so remember this is my home so please treat it with respect.’

He left somewhat chastened but he did slid my jar just under the bed where I could still reach it.

It was after breakfast that Jasmine popped up in front of me with a worried expression on her face.

“Cousin Heir”, she started formally, “ I am worried about my Tom he seems disconnected somehow. He told me he had snitched your sweets and you forgave him but he is still not his old self. I had to buy more pear drops yesterday, not the yellow ones he likes but any other colour. That's a mystery to me.”

I thought a bit then realised what it might be.

‘A change in colour is what we need after my Tom has taken the children to school I will take a trip, now don't worry Jasmine, when he told what he had done you weren't really cross with him were you?’

“Well I gave his hand a smack as I was not pleased, I told him we were guests of yours and what he did was terrible.”

I called Tom my valet to drive me to the village centre after he took the children to school, but he said I could get in the front and the children could squash together in the back and share the belts, two to a belt, he would drop them off outside the gate house and they could walk the rest. Indeed that's what happened and soon I was in Miss Scrim's lolly shop.

‘Morning Miss Scrim I wonder can you help me please. Do you remember those lollies we had years ago called gob-stoppers?’

“Indeed I do your Grace I think I may have some old stock here, they stopped becoming popular when people were frightened over reports of sticking in children's throats.”

‘Yes well I was looking for a particular sweet that changed colour just the once.’

“And what colour would that be?”

‘A yellow colour.’

“Ah let me see.” She ran her finger over the large glass jars holding most of her boiled sweet stock until finally it stopped and she turned. “ Do you remember those yellow sweets with sherbet in them, well I have those in white sherbet or yellow with a pinky red outer cover.”

‘Guaranteed?’

“Oh yes do try one.” She opened the jar and fetched one out, so I sucked and sucked.

“Whilst you are sucking is there anything else I can help you with?”

'Ah I just spotted those humbugs, they will make a nice change from pear drops and are all the same colour so it won't get me into trouble again!'

So Miss Scrim weighed a small bag of humbugs and as she finished I fished in my mouth and bought out the yellow sherbet

'Perfect Miss Scrim I'll take four of those sherbet ones please.' I paid her from my leather purse then left to go back to the car.

When we returned home I sought out Jasmine and asked her to send young Tom into the study when he returned from school.

Well the day really dragged waiting for the children to return. I thought of asking my Tom to pick them up from school but Dulcie thought it a bad idea as it could be confused with showing off and the children would be teased. I disagreed but finally agreed to bide my time so I went down to the stables to the horses and spent a happy hour or two with them until the voices of the children's return beckoned me back to the castle. They came in a rush past me obviously to visit their pets but stopped when I called a halt. I looked at each one but Tommy was not amongst them.

'I'm looking for young Tom.' I said.

Robroy tapped me on the arm,

“Cousin Jasmine called him to go into your study, and Grand-papa you are not there, you are here so maybe you best be on your way.”

I nodded, well what else could I do, I checked in my pocket and the small bag was there so I turned and trundled off to those horrendous steps and my study.

Tommy was there sitting propped up on a cushion so he could see over my massive desk.

'Ah Tom just the lad I have bought these special coloured lolly from Miss Scrim for you to try, that's if you want to of course.' I handed one over and Tommy took it carefully. 'It won't explode Miss Scrim assured me.' So he popped it into his mouth. After a few minutes his small face twitched and I suspected the sherbet had broken though.

'Now Tommy put your fingers in your mouth and bring out the sweet.'

I was covered in yellow sherbet and Tommy's spit but when he looked his face opened up in a wide grin and a shout of absolute joy rent the air, then he stood and hurled his little frame right across the desk into my arms. Jasmine came across to help him still unaware of what had occurred. I bought the small bag out and gave it to him.

'For after dinner Tommy now the other children have gone to the horses so off you go.' Jasmine gave me a quite look which I took to mean homework time!

'And tell the others they have that dreaded task of homework if you have been given any!' So he leapt off the desk gave his mother a quick hug and burst out of the study to almost bowl Finlay over.

5. The Home Farm.

The children came back from school and all dived down to their pet horses and found them missing from the stables so shrill shouts rent the air which awakened me from my afternoon nap! Soon came the thudding of tiny feet up that long staircase and a belligerent Robroy stood fairly in front of me surrounded by the others.

'Its polite to knock first, there is a piece of wood in that doorway.'

“But you always leave it open during the day Grand-papa, either to listen to what goes on downstairs or welcome any busy body for a chat.” Robroy with arms folded and a scolding look on his bright little face, “And by the by what have you done with our Lord and Lady may I ask,”

'You can ask all you like grandson, we sold them this morning as they were costing a fortune and idling about or can I say kicking their heels.' The look of horror on those young faces was unbelievable except for my grandson who stood his ground arms folded.

“Wrong Grand-papa you maybe old, really old, but you are not a mean old!”

'Thanks a lot Robroy, I would hazard a guess and say my sons have got them working on ploughing the lower field.'

“But we have a tractor for that, a big shiny one that Dad and I drive when I'm allowed.”

'Well what have we got in the lower field that we have to be careful about, mark you the field where Grand-mama likes to pick her mushrooms, and what do heavy tractors do to the soil?'

“Crunch it down hard I 'suppose” came the sullen reply.

'Well I want you all to listen carefully.'

“If it takes too long can we have a humbug please.” From Mini.

'How do you know I have humbugs?'

“Miss Scrimms told us when we went into buy some lollies after school.” That from Jasmine's Jess as she surreptitious looked under my bed.

'Well maybe later when you have done some thinking, after homework I want you to get together and write out ideas for giving the horses more work. I have a few of my own but first you think up ideas. Off you go and not down to the lower field you can do your work and feed the horses on their return.'

“Grand-papa I think we ought to change their names I am sure they preferred their old ones before we bought them.” The rest nodded in unison with Robroy leader of the pack.

'What were they called then?'

“Rob and Tinkle”

'What does your fathers call them when they are with them?'

“Rob and Tinkle and and Come on now or click click gee-up!”

'Well I'm not sure about the click click gee-up but Rob and Tinkle sound find to me, but if I remember you lot chose the new names! Now out you go and yes you can have a humbug and I shall let Tommy to distribute one each.' By the time Tommy had finished dolling out my precious humbugs I had seven left!

After dinner that night we all sat around the table and the children were asked their views on how to make the horses more useful to the estate. Their main work in the past had been to give those children rides and Mini came up with the suggestion of roping them in for visitor days when with the large cart or the open coach we could take visitors from the castle over to the Cafe and vice versa, for a small charge of course. Then followed a stream of other ideas from many quarters including my sons, for instance to carry building equipment or hay.

At this point it needs me to explain why we had a home farm at all. In the past the castle had a lot of land attached to it so our predecessors commenced selling parts in order to raise revenue for repairs and maintenance. Sadly this had the effect of diminishing the size of the land and the reduction of profit from it. So my dear old Grandfather turned the whole property into a Trust with him as the main trustee and thus instead of selling pockets of land, portions were leased to able farmers and close relations and the main bit remained our Home Farm. Thus we had a mass of different agriculture and our own Home Farm to provide we, the Castle inhabitants, money from sale of stock and wheat. Robin my son repaired and extended the vegetable garden, planted fruit trees which we intended to pick and make jams and preserves, both to sell, or eat in the Cafe. In all we had six thousand acres in the home farm and ten thousand total for the estate, then we had five acres of house and gardens and the lake, so the balance was leased. Fortunately the land had always been carefully cared for in the past and was productive. Yes I have forgotten the various properties the estate owned in and around the village and much of these was rented out, including Miss Scrims lolly shop so beloved by us all.

As I am rummaging through my brain, I think it was time we did what Duke William did after he landed, he had written up all the assets in this new country he had just invaded. So I will ask my boys to list out all we have, then have Edith to type it out. This should include repairs to all buildings and if possible the timing or schedule of any repairs or rebuilding. Lastly I must admit the opening of the castle to the public has helped enormously to the estate upkeep and we have introduced and enhanced a few special rooms for the public to sit and enjoy and chat. We fortunately have several out houses both here and on the Home Farm which we can develop so my boys will be busy and maybe one of them will live at the farm! Edith and Dulcie laid out the private parts of the house so our lounge/sitting room, family kitchen and staff quarters were private plus the three turrets where we had our bedrooms and the guest turret currently with Jasmine and family in, was made open to the public to see the extent of the gardens and lake. This invariably set the visitors hot footing it downstairs to view the garden and lake more closely. We had to buy a number of video camera's set up in the ceilings so these visitors could be occasionally watched as once we had a valuable bronze stolen from under our eyes and it was only when the perpetrator dropped it from under his coat by the entrance steps that the discovery was made by Finlay. It made a chip in the stone stair edge and I was not best pleased. He tried to sue for damages to his foot, his argument was we shouldn't leave expensive items out where they could be nicked. Naturally Lanson the local Magistrate took a different view and fined him!

6. The Italian connection.

It was Sunday, early afternoon as it happens, and I was just sitting up in my bed ready for lunch. Being a 'Visitor Sunday' it was visitor day for our paying public, I could just glance out of my left hand windows and saw the car park was filling up quite nicely and that I suspect it will keep the whole family busy. Well I suspected wrongly because Maise our housekeeper bought up my tray of salad, followed by Jasmines two children.

"Its ham today your Grace, Mrs Underbridge managed to get a goodly portion of smoked ham from the butcher and she thought it might make a nice change for you from your normal smoked salmon."

'Thanks Maise just on the table by the side here, and what do you two want?' Maise left the room and left Tommy and Jess standing at the foot of my bed looking very sheepish.

"Uncle Heir" began Tom.

'I am not your uncle dear cousin Tom, we are cousins only.' I cut him short rather sharply.

"Mother told us to call you that as the other children call you Uncle, except Nick of course." Jess this time standing up for her little brother.

I looked at them both more closely, Tom with black hair and a light bronze face with violet eyes, A sweet child with a wide open visage twisting his little fingers in front of him, perhaps out of nervousness. Jess taller and similar but a proud bearing.

'Does not mean I love you less, but cousins it is.'

"I prefer to call you Uncle, we always have, even in the old days, after all we have Grand mama who is a great aunt to you." He meant Aunt Vi, my Fathers sister and both strong in temperament and physically aggressive. Aunt Vi played golf and beat any man willing to take her on. Not much was said about her husband and once I asked Jasmine but she clammed up. I later discovered he decided to leave Aunt Vi rapidly after Jasmine was born, similar to my eldest and Edith, but Nick senior came back eventually. Ultimately Jasmine met a young Italian in Rome and quickly married, I can remember Aunt Vi was not well pleased with her daughter, then the said Italian disappeared four years later in a snow slide and by my reckoning of Aunt Vi it went up a huge measure. Anyone who could arrange an avalanche by just shouting had to be pretty fantastic especially from eight hundred miles away!

'Well that's true and this is your home as much as mine so Tommy don't be so nervous, just settle in and be content!'

"No its not that Uncle, we have been asked by a members of the public that they want to meet a real live Duke, and that's you." Tom again rising up on his toes and delivering the request with a somewhat impassioned plea. "Plus our Headmistress is outside with a message." He gasped out now quite out of breath poor lad.

'I don't want to meet the public visitors, I don't like the public visitors traipsing over my home and land, that's why children I stay up here out the way. So at least I am not going to shout at them or throw plant pots at their stupid heads. I am being thoughtful don't you understand?'

Both nodded.

“But a lady said she knew you, or of you, same difference.” Jess again, all haughty. 'No its not Jess they are quite different. Well young Tommy with a surname I cannot pronounce, what do you think?'

“I would pop down and say alas my lunch is waiting and shake hands and go back up the staircase.” His hands I noticed quite settled now and his face aglow with pride, something I said but I couldn't think what. I jumped out of bed and yes I was fully dressed in my light summer suit, after all it was a gentle snooze after lunch I was after, so I followed the two children down those gross stone steps, past the second floor and down again into the hall where Finlay stood all erect and bowed as I swept past.

'Finlay you never bow on an ordinary day so why now in front of the public?'

“Very good your Grace.” was all he said then another blasted bow!

Though the open doors and down those dratted steps I went to be met by Miss Frobisher our headmistress. She bowed as well!

'Well Frob what do want?'" A titter from the nearby public and various exclamations from members of that same public who suddenly realised they had the Duke in their company and he seemed not at all well pleased.

“A calamity at school Heir.”

'What has Calamity Jane arrived at your school Frob?'

“Not a Jane with pistols firing but a decease with pustules on some of our children, so I've come to warn you to keep the children indoors for the time being, just in case.”

'I am absolutely sure all here have been duly vaccinated, right children?' I looked downwards to Tom and Jess. They nodded. Then I looked out to the gardens and lake where there were many many children at play. So I decided on instant action.

'Tom Jess off you go, please round up my family and send them to their bedrooms now.' I shoed them away and thanked the headmistress for coming all this way. I directed her to the staff kitchen to get some refreshment. Then half galloped back upstairs to enjoy my ham and salad in bed, to a chorus of 'What a rude man!' behind my back. Insufferable people and that prompt movement up those steps wrecked my right hip, bed for the day at least!

7. A chance try out a cart.

It was sometime before my poor hip recovered and Robroy came up to view the patient. He shoved the chair close to the bed and announced blithely he was going adventuring with Rob and Tinkle.

'Presumably you have asked your Father and Uncle Robin, boy wonder?'

“Of course Grand-papa I mentioned it at breakfast this morning.”

'Under your breath perhaps?'

“Well I did speak softly to be honest.”

'Well Robroy that's not what I call honest as I suspect neither of my children heard you, so pray where are you off to with my Shires?'

“If I told you that you would not let me go.”

'Well perhaps not Robroy, only a few days ago Miss Frobisher asked that all you

children be kept indoors because of the decease!

“Grand-papa I am bored out of my mind so I need to go out into the fresh air.”

'You have windows in your apartment?'

“Yes.”

'Then open them and fresh air will come in apace. Anyway where were you headed with my Shires?'

“Uncle Robin has finished the trailer and I was going to give it a try out around the lake road, just to see if it moved well.”

'Its meant to carry people on it so wouldn't you need a supply of visitors to give it a fair trial?'

“That's been arranged.”

'By whom?'

“Us.”

'Pray tell me more and don't leave out a thing!'

“Miss Frobisher has told Maise the alarm is over and the pustules were nettle rash so all are free to go outside.”

'Excuse me, surely Miss Frobisher would have told your Grand-mama or myself first of all!'

“Well she did tell Grand-mama and Maise overheard the conversation.”

'Fine that's cleared up, so who have you organised to go on the cart?'

“The whole school since they all had been shut up for days!”

'Then you will tell Uncle Robin in a clear voice what you have organised and seek his permission to overview the whole journey. And by the way you will tell whoever suggested this to ask permission first of all!'

“How do you know it was not me Grand-papa, after all it was a grand suggestion, thinking of others, I mean.”

I thought about that long and hard but I had no answer except my Robroy was not devious and certainly not given to whispering requests to his elders. He was the type to come right out with it. Anyhow I decided what a great idea it was to give Robins cart a christening and I'm sure the children would enjoy it.

'First you must see Uncle Robin, see that the paint is dry and the cart ready to ride on then contact Miss Frobisher to arrange for the children to come here. But first you and Uncle Robin will take the cart for a spin to see all is well and second I am going with you to check that you can drive the Shires correctly and gently.'

With that I shooed him out and got dressed in my oldest clothes just in case. The thought of riding in a horse drawn vehicle with Robroy in charge close to that lake filled me with some dread.

Well in short I got down those stairs unaided and through the sitting room window saw Robin and Nick senior placing the traces on the Shires and latching them to the cart. All my family of children were jumping in joy at the thought of riding in that colourful cart. Then a thought hit me, all my family of eager kids wiped out in a gigantic accident. So I stepped gently down the front stairs and called Robin over.

“Father are you coming as well?”

'Yes and presumably you have life jackets ready for all who are going?'

“No”

'Then Robin you are driving Rob and Tinkle and if Robroy complains you can sit him right at the back with me!'

“He can sit with me and his father between us, and yes we will take all our youngsters first, then the school and Frob will have more room to cram everyone on.”

'Good luck with that Robin but knowing my lot they will not want to get off!'

“Well Father, Nick and I will rely on your vocal chords to order them off!”

I looked at him squarely then remembered most of my troupe were not too sure of my temper, though I believed Robroy and now cousin Tommy were more than capable of wheedling their way around me and twisting my arm in any dispute!

“I'll have Finlay place an armchair on the back so you will be comfortable.” A well padded chair was lifted onto the rear of the cart and Nick screwed it down then roped it to the bench in front. Robin then ushered all to climb aboard and young Tom immediately sat in the chair reserved for me, I had to smile as no matter how hard Jasmine asked him to move he stayed put.

'So Tom we will sit together shall we, so move over a bit so your old uncle can get in to sit.' With the help of my sons, a ladder, the chair rope and Dulcie calling out to be careful, I sat in exquisite comfort in the soft chair Finlay had brought. Robin and Nick senior had provided bench seats with strong backs and thankfully they appeared screwed securely to the cart floor. Tom noticed that I was checking the safety of the benches.

“They slot into those brackets so the cart can be used to carry hay and things.” said Tom earnestly.

'What a great idea that Tommy.'

“Yes I watched my uncles build it, I was quite fascinated, I would creep in after school to check on progress, every day.”

Welcome to the family Tommy, I said to myself and smiled.

8. School holidays start.

Well I had quite forgotten, all I knew was, it was coming up for summer as I lounged in my comfortable Parker chair in the sitting room. Except for my tower bedroom this was my most favourite room. It had two large bay windows some ancestor had carved out of the thick stone walls. This must have happened well after our Norman people had become truly Anglicised and the population had stopped throwing spears, arrows and bricks against our solid walls. Naturally my attention was diverted to the thick walls alongside each bay, then I realised there was not a sound to be had in any part of my home. I had got up early to get a biscuit and cup of coffee from cook down in that hell-hole called the kitchen, now normally a hive of activity. But only Maise was in residence so she smiled and cut me a piece of walnut cake and made me a real coffee from a newfangled machine my boys had bought a few months previous. As I climbed the back stairs up to the hallway with my cake plate and coffee cup clenched in my hand expecting a rush of children's shoes across the hallway and down to those blasted stone steps to the waiting vehicle to take them all to school.

But not a sound, it seemed only Maise and I were awake in this enormous house, not even Finlay was about, then feeling someone's eye on me I looked up and there was Dulcie perched over the banister looking directly at me.

"School holidays so I gave the staff a lie in."

'Apparently you forgot to tell Maise!'

"Humph". Was all she said, so she hadn't quite forgiven me for making Maise our housekeeper which as you can remember I took away from Dulcie. So I placed my cake and coffee on the hall table and went back to the kitchen to give Maise the day off in reparation of missing out of a morning in bed. But she said cook had told her and she quite happy to be up and about in case one of the children had quite forgotten school had finished for the summer. So I threaded my way back to my cooling coffee and cake and retired to the sitting room where I am now talking to you lot.

I found that I had polished off the cake and drank the coffee in one fell swallow, apparently this new machine the boys bought only used micro cups! So I waited in the dining room for breakfast. And I waited and waited a bit more until Dulcie appeared briefly at the doorway, but I caught her with my eye and she stepped in.

"You can wait all you like Heir but everybody is sound asleep and so should you, its very early for you to be up my dear anyhow."

'Don't you dear me Dulcie, I got up to enjoy the early morning for a change, and what do I find, or rather did not find? So I am going out to that gong Finlay bangs for dinner and wake the whole lot up.' I rose from my dining chair only to find Dulcie pushing me down, then Findlay walked in so I yelled to him to bang the b..dy gong several times and get cook up at once. But Maise rolled a breakfast cart into the room and distributed the various containers across the table cloth on the long birch bench we used for that purpose, it acted like the Credenza which we sold two years ago to pay for doing up the Cafe for the Evans. Normal practice is to self serve at breakfast and to collect what one liked on ones plate but as Maise left to bang the gong Dulcie fetched a large plate and loaded it with hot bacon and eggs and black pudding I was partial too and she placed it in front of me just as the children arrived in various shades of dress. They stopped rushing in as they spotted me and under Dulcie's guidance each selected a plate and helping themselves then sat quietly at the table and together we all ate our meal in perfect silence. There were no adults just Dulcie and I and it felt like the old days when it was just we four.

Eventually Maise arrived with a second batch of sausages, bacon and egg followed by my two boys. After lifting every dish cover my eldest remarked about the empty black pudding dish.

'How Nick did you think it was black pudding?'

"I smelt it father, and as most of the children do not have it on their plates I presume it has only gone one way, well two ways in fact." Looking directly at my Robroy as well as me sitting side by side.

'I'll ask Maise to ask cook to make more.'" I said to mollify my eldest son.

But Maise had returned with new supplies including the missing item and slices of toast , butter and jam. What a treasure she really is and Dulcie gave me a smile of appreciation and thanked Maise for both of us. All the children clapped her in appreciation as well, and it was a very happy smiling Maise when she opened the

door and revealed a laughing cook with a tray of fruit including strawberries and cream in little glass bowls for us all. I then called Finlay and Valet Tom in and asked them all to sit and partake of this fine breakfast, but cook sped off to shortly return with more little bowls of fruit and more toast and home made jam. It was like a picnic as it was so lovely but what will it be like with everyone here for a few months. So I spoiled it all,

'Well where are you all going for your holidays?' Was all I asked. Sadly no one replied. Well except Tommy.

"Well Uncle we love it here so why go away when you love a place like this."

I just got stuck into my strawberries and wiped my face, and Robroy's who had cream all over his chin.

'Did you use a spoon with that?' I asked looking at the small bowl.

"Yes Grand-papa I did, it was delicious," turning to cook and Maise, 'thank you both for the nicest breakfast ever.'

Well I guess he will follow me eventually and he will make a perfect owner of this Castle.

9. An unwelcome visitor.

Well it always happens in the afternoon when I have just snoozed off, a galloping tribe of boots making its way up to my bedroom, a prompt bang on the door and in rushed Tommy and Jess who was waving a bright lime green paper whilst her brother held a bright green envelope in his grip. Then followed Jasmine and Dulcie both with wide bright eyes.

'Well done Jasmine you have won the lottery, only that could bring you all storming up to my rest period!'

"Now its excellent news Heir so don't be sarcastic," This from Dulcie, Jasmine had remained silent. That could mean one of two things and both bad. A husband returns to the fold or her mother, my fathers sister was coming to stay. Uninvited.

"Your Aunt Vi has written she is coming home to stay and she wants her old room please." Dulcie nearly out of breath.

'You children, can you remember your Grandma, its been so long I myself have profound difficulty, last seen was in Italy on the track of her adventurous daughter.'

"Now enough Heir please, the children are so excited, their Grandma is coming."

Dulcie in protective mood, but it was my Fathers sister, my Aunt, known to we boys as.....I could not finish my thought as Sofia had entered the room and shouted out the dreaded word 'Tarzan' to all and sundry.

'Yes Sofia, she is your Aunt as well and looks like you may have to move out, as its her old room you are in!'

"We can share, or better still Jasmine can have her with her and the children. Its obvious she has come to see her grandchildren. So what better way." Sofia getting up a temper and me desperate for a snooze.

"Don't bet on it she has barely seen them and I doubt she even has a photo of them!" Jasmine chimed in, but already accepting her mothers presence in her suite near the

stables. Meanwhile the two children entirely engrossed in this adult banter dropped the letter and envelope onto my lap. I picked them up and passed them to Jasmine but she indicated I should read the letter.

'What on earth made her choose these awful coloured paper?'

"I gave them to her for Christmas," said my cousin Jasmine forlornly. I burst out laughing then settled down to read, which took all of three seconds. {Am coming to stay, require my old bedroom, Mother}. More like a telegram or text as the children would say. No mention of me nor Jasmine or the children, in fact not one word of acknowledgement that we existed. All must be done with total obedience to Aunt Vi, her every desire and wish. Then I looked at the children still with a half hope in their eyes that Uncle Heir will not refuse this so looked forward guest.

'Jasmine you should write to your mother saying her generation has long gone and she being the last to survive should understand that there are new occupants in the castle, and yes she will be welcome to stay on those terms. But she will be asked to help like everybody else and we have no toiling servants as she had in her day, just members of the family and staff of the family. Can you arrange a bedroom for her over by your rooms and then ask my sons to acquire a bed for her. I presume there maybe a couple available at Home farm.' Jasmine nodded and the children whooped with joy young Tommy leapt from his corner of the bed and gave me a huge hug. It was then that I felt truly sorry for this little dark eyed imp, for he was yet to greet his long lost Granny. In fact although he had two granny's he had seen neither. Then I had a novel idea. It hit me as I lowered him gently to the floor.

'You and Jess can have one each Tommy.' And he reached under the bed for the sweet jar. Well my idea will have to wait until Aunt Vi arrived so I curled over and went back to my broken snooze.

Aunt Vi had just been picked up from the station and I was sitting at my desk in the library when she entered.

'Aunt Vi, welcome to my castle.' I said it with pronounced volume.

"Its used to be your fathers, my brothers and mine." she said shortly coming across to kiss me on my forehead.

'Where are your grandchildren I'm sure they went with Tom in the car to pick you up'

"Oh nuisance little children, jumping up and down and being very vexing and bothersome you would have been better to send my Jasmine to control them."

'Well we were not sure how much luggage you would bring so Jasmine felt it better you should see your darling grandchildren first, they being so very excited at your coming.'

"I have no idea what you are talking about, I don't like children, any type of child whether large or small. You know when I held Jess as a baby that one and last time she pees on me. On my best marigold dress, ungrateful child."

Well I had guessed right so my plan to change Aunt Vi view on grandchildren would have to be put into place and who better to help me but my ever helpful Robroy. So I'll think up the basis of a plan and get him to polish it up and put it into practice.

Actually Aunt Vi was quite sprightly so I would have to bring Jasmine and the children into the action. Basically it involved the good hearted Evans so Edith will

need to be told. Now its getting complicated. But first lets see what Aunt Vi can do for us here.

'Jasmine may have mentioned we are in the main self supporting. Here in the castle and out on the Estate.'

“You surely have paid workers in each!”

'Indeed Aunt they all receive a wage or salary but members of the family all work in a voluntary capacity.'

“You mean you don't get paid.”

'Pocket money only, for private expenses, clothes shoes and travel.'

“I see, so I presume you want help from me Heir?”

'Not monetary, certainly not, but general help about the house or kitchen.'

“Well I won't be living in the house I will be with Jasmine near the stables so the children tell me.”

'I do believe that made them excited, to have their own granny with them.'

“Humph” she was not over the moon at the thought but she went on,

” The children say you have started growing your own fruit so I would be pleased to help in preserving the fruit by bottling, presumably you still have the old bottles your Mother and I used in the Dairy?”

'I expect so I have not had anything thrown out, but I will ask Maise to sort them out as its plum time and we have a huge crop, then perhaps we could bottle and sell the contents as puddings in the Cafe.' There I have let it out without talking to anyone including my Robroy whom I needed to get round his other grandparents.

“Sell! Sell to the public in a Cafe! Of all the non... nonsensical ideas, I don't mind working for the family, but the public!” With that she swept from the room in search of her daughter or Dulcie, at least anyone but her stupid nephew.

I called Robroy in, sat him down on the other side of the desk. His mother Edith was typing at her desk in the corner. So I called her over then outlined my plan. At first Edith was a bit nonplussed but I asked Robroy to place his hands over his ears so he could not hear what I told her. Well I explained Aunt Vi opinion of her grandchildren and her general attitude to children whom she called rug rats! Edith nodded so she touched Robroy's hands to release them from his ears. Then I set out my plan and it needed the Evans compliance to sell our bottled fruit as puddings in dishes, for we needed the glass jars for next season.

“Well that's in young Nicks court to persuade mother and father and I am sure he will win them over. But how good is Aunt Vi at bottling it can be a very skilled practice!”

'She and my mother played at housekeeping when Maise's mum was our official housekeeper and I am sure it was she who taught the ladies of the house most kitchen things. I've noticed Dulcie often goes with Maise downstairs and I presume its happening all over again.' Edith smiled so I knew she had already noticed the goings on below stairs.

“The plumes are close to picking Grand-papa and Dad said they can be picked and ripened indoors so we could be on!”

'Well it needs you to have a gentle word with Granny and Granddad Evans, do you think you can handle that?'

“Their cook will need to be involved I would think, She makes things out of custard and cream so we will have to be careful how we broach the preserves. Of course Grand-papa you could just order everyone to do the right thing, save any misplaced argument.”

'Do you think there would be?'

“Not if it was handled the right way, I don't expect.”

'So how much will it cost me?'

“Two red and one yellow pear drops, plus three humbugs!”

'Am I feeding the total child population in this house?'

“If you please Grand-papa and in a paper bag so I don't get my hands sticky!”

Edith smiled, her son had already achieved a marked degree in negotiation.

10 Bottling and negotiations.

Well as I was sitting in my loafing chair overlooking the entrance steps when I spied baskets of fruit loaded on the tractor rear end and a bright cheerful aspect they were. It was my son Nicolas who suddenly waved as he careered around the corner towards the kitchen area at the back, and then down the back stairs and I wondered how he was going to get that tractor down those narrow steps. In the meantime Dulcie answered my querying mind.

“Robin is downstairs and will help your valet Tom and Finlay with the barrels.”

'I was worried how Nick was going to get that tractor down those narrow stairs!'

“I know you were, so don't be daft Heir, tractor stays on the back road and the boys lift the fruit off there. I believe your brother Eustace is helping sanitise the bottles which will be a great help and as Aunt Vi is already downstairs commanding everybody about I better get down there myself.” With that she was gone and as I looked out of the bay window I could just make out two figures in the distance on their way to the Cafe. Ah, Nick was waving to Edith and Robroy, not to me when he passed. Now I wonder how they will get on with the Evans. Shall I go downstairs or not, perhaps leave it to those who can bottle? I'd only get in their way and destroy the harmony I hoped was happening down there. So I continued reading in my most comfortable upholstered chair.

I suppose an hour or two passed and I felt like a cup of coffee so down I went into the kitchen where cook was cutting up some ham for luncheon. She glanced up and pointed to the Dairy.

“They're all in there making a devil of a noise your Grace, goodness only knows if they will all come out alive but I think young Maise has just restored some law and order, now what were you needing?”

'Some coffee if you please Cook and I'll check in the Dairy to see if anyone else wants one.'

“Right you are your Grace and mind you wear a hard hat when you go through.”

She grinned and put the kettle on as I left the large kitchen with its various copper

pots and pans dangling from the walls, and thus into the Dairy I went, only to be yelled at to get out. So back I retreated to claim my cup of coffee and return to my book.

Edith and young Robroy returned shortly after I had settled into my armchair. They saw me from the steps and Robroy dashed in to say they had great success then he dashed out again when I told him they were bottling the fruit downstairs. Then Edith came in and sat down in Dulcie's arm chair. I looked at her and inquired how the boy wonder went in his negotiations.

“Well Father, at first he went straight to my mother, his Granny, he told her his story as he and I had discussed then her face changed in an instant from being a dotting grandmother to a suspicious old maid where some under aged child was getting involved in something that was none of his business. So he looked to his Granddad for support whilst I rested my weary bones and just watched the spectacle unfolding. Alas Granddad showed no interest in supporting young Nicks suggestion. Nick looked across at me for motherly support and I apparently just smiled. Edith laughed a gay humorous laugh.

“It was almost his last thought Father, he asked his granny if she had any objection to calling Cook and asking her advice. Well my mother exploded and ordered him out of the Cafe. He looked so sad and withdrawn and I felt so sorry for my little lamb, just defeated by trying to help everybody with the surplus plums and the Cafe to use. But before leaving the Cafe he turned to my parents and said very quietly, my Grand-papa the Duke, would like it this way please. There was a sudden look between my parents and my mother said slowly,

“Well master Nick why did you not say that in the first place? And yes we will tell Cook to use the fruit for her puddings, we might even make jam ourselves so be kind enough to ask your mother to carry that message to the Castle for a quantity of fresh plumes.”

“So you can see that imp got what he wanted by bringing you into it! I presume you gave him permission to use that final trump card if need be?”

Well what could I say, so I just nodded and smiled and that's not telling a fib. So I suggested she ask Nick or Robin to take a a large hamper of plumes or apricots up to the Cafe to make jam.

Well some weeks later the children convinced Aunt Vi to come up to the Cafe with them. Maise explained that the bottling process had gone well and Aunt Vi was into the apricots from the greenhouse and was soon to start on the early pears so she needed to buy more bottles as she was fast running out.

'I suggest you go down to the printers and get some labels printed with the words Auntie Vi perfect produce. That should cheer her up no end. And Maise get some of the single use jars which we can sell at the Cafe as well please.'

Well back to Aunt Vi and her Cafe trip, apparently the children had saved up enough pocket money to buy her a banana split as a celebration of her cooking skills and at the same time each had a cornet with the left over money. It was Mrs Evans who told me this when she came with her accounts journal for Edith and Dulcie to approve.

She had a smile on her face and said what a great idea of mine to sell the fruit from our trees and then she placed two small pots of home made jam into my hands, one was plum and the other was Apricot.

When she had left and before tea I called Finlay to fetch young master Nick and ask Maise or Cook for some bread and two spoons on two plates. So as the sun dipped behind the orchard trees Robroy seated on the arm of my chair and I imbibed in tasting this extraordinary jam by ourselves before the rest of the family discovered us. "This will bring the customers in Grand-papa and wait till we make raspberry and strawberry jams next year."

'Not fond of raspberry jam prefer it with cream, sugar and straight raspberries young man.'

"Ah well more for me then." and he laughed and bit deeply into his bread and jam.

I was walking along to pathway through the pear trees with both Nicolas and Robroy and Nick was pointing out and feeling the pears on the low branches as we meandered past each tree. He was checking if they were ready to pick and he was telling me he had found in my Fathers fruit book that pears should be picked when not quite ripe. So I asked why not when they are ripe. And he explained that pears ripen from the inside and they would be squashy on the inside by the time they were ripe on the outside. All this was having Robroy's full attention and I watched his young face suddenly take on a frightened expression.

'What's wrong Robroy?' I asked directly.

"I was thinking about something cousin Jasmine said, about age and ripening." He turned to his father, "So Dad what happens to the fruit after they have ripened?"

"They fall off the tree and go rotten, so you see they must be picked before hand and Uncle Robin and I will need all you children's hands to stack them into the baskets when the time comes."

"Does that mean we can have a few days off from school to do the picking?"

"You still have three weeks of holidays left so I expect these will be ready in a few days, so hard luck young Nick. We adults will be on ladders and throw down for you chaps to catch and place carefully in the buckets and hazel containers." Nick carried on his way checking the fruit but Robroy looked up to me with a strained face.

'Well come on out with it?'

"I was wondering why cousin Jasmine is so much younger than you Grand-papa?"

'Well Aunt Vi and her husband had a late child pregnancy, if memory serves me correctly Aunt Vi must have been close to forty. So why do you ask?'

"When are you going to die then?"

'What!'

"Die Grand-papa!"

'Not at the moment, I feel really fit I had two Krill pills this morning and my hips have not hurt one bit with all this walking.'

"We are not walking we have stood still!"

'Now what's bought this on about my age and I presume like the pears I go rotten when I fall off the tree?'

"Great Aunt Vi mentioned she was not getting any younger and with autumn now

upon us and she would soon feel the cold so she mentioned to Grand-mama that she might take a trip to Italy with Jasmine and the children.”

'Hopefully not until my sons have been helped with the picking, they'll need all hands on deck, its a big job. But come now I thought I detected a look of fear or some such on my beloved grandson's face.'

“The thought struck me you are the pears Grand-papa a limited time before you go rotten.”

'I see, but we humans have a longer life span than fruit, that's the way we are built.'

“But you are old Grand-papa and I don't want you to leave.”

'Well you will have Grand-mama to faun over you and Dad and Mum to keep you secure and the Evans grand parents to keep you on the straight and narrow pathway of life. Of course it would also mean no lolly jar under the bed to sample.'

“Absolutely, that was not on my mind,” he lifted his reddened face up to mine. “No Grand-papa I just don't want you to leave.”

'Besides the pears what else bought this on?'

“Jasmine told her children Tom and Jess that you were close to Aunt Vi's age and if she had to go to Italy to keep warm maybe you should go as well and come back safely to us after winter!”

'Aunt Vi is in her eighties and I am but seventy two, hardly close in age, hows your Maths these days?'

“Not the point Grand-papa you still are old.”

'Now Robroy your father has inspected the trees are you ready to follow him as he is waving for us to join him.'

“I'd like to have a talk aboutabout.”

'Yes about?' I saw it in his eye, a trouble, a worry, a spasm of doubt. 'Yes we will have talk.' So I led him into the castle and my study. I looked at my son Nicolas but he smiled.

“I guess Father he wants to ask you things he asked his mother and I about dying.”

'About what!' said I in amazement. 'Right.' So I led Robroy to the chair in front of my mahogany desk, pumped a good fat cushion onto the seat and placed him on top of it all. ' Right Grandson of mine what do you want to know?'

“Its about when you die what happens next?”

'Don't they tell you that in church, I know your Mum takes you most Sunday mornings unless its visitor day, so what has that young Vicar got to say about it.'

“Almost nothing, we die we go up if we are good or down to the hot cellar if we are bad. And there are rules set up to lead us in the right direction. But Grand-papa look at all the different religions and all their different rules! What a mess! And people have been alive for centuries all changing the rules to suit themselves, I only search for the truth!”

'Right what did your mother and Father tell you?'

“Ask Grand-papa he seems to know everything that is important.”

'Oh I see your quandary. Everybody has their own opinion except Mum and Dad!'

“So what do you think?”

'About what?'

“What we have been talking about, I believe Grand-papa you have already lost your

train of thought, so let me put it straight to you, what do you think about death and after.”

'Well being frank to you, not a lot, I hope I go on for as long as I can and enjoy our conversations and debates. My dear Robroy I really do enjoy your open mind and if I expressed an opinion then you might grab hold of it and use it as yours without at first walking down different pathways and discovering the truth yourself.'

“I follow that, so one of those paths is talking to my beloved grandfather who in general is right in most cases.”

'There you go again. Who is to say I am always right, I could tell you that if I ordered all the pears to fall to the ground by themselves on the same day, they would do that, so all you would have to do is pick them up.'

“Well would you not be better ordering them to drop and fill the biscuits in one fell swoop! Thus saving the arduous task of bending and picking up!”

'You see what I mean, do you really believe I or anyone else could achieve this command?'

“No, so perhaps an indication from you of where to look and why.”

'But you must do this on your own, what I believe is truly very simple, and you will find similar thoughts out there in the ether. Now remember some stuff you will come across is rubbish, and it needs an active brain to do the sorting.'

“Right on Grand-papa almost got you there, now your private thoughts if you please!”

'I could do with a cup of coffee or better a glass of sherry followed by a humbug as I can see me being outwitted again by a young adversary.'

“I wish you would not use words I cannot understand, I am only eight and you are really old grand-papa, its not a fair debate. So please tell me what you see as the truth then I will fetch you the sherry and two humbugs for us to share!”

'Well sherry for only me and we will share the humbugs. So off you go and I will prepare my statement in my mind.'

Robroy scrambled off his chair and I heard him scamper up the stone staircase to my tower bedroom. Then shortly he raced down and placed two humbugs on my writing pad, then away to the dining room to retrieve the sherry bottle and a glass. A final jump onto his cushion and I poured my glass which I sipped in deep thought.

'You ready then?' He nodded in anticipation of some deep thought. 'Sherry's nice have to get Finlay to get a few more of these.'

“GRANDFATHER!” Came the belligerent reply.

'Well its like this, I believe people write up their own plots for their own purposes following the death of some famous person. You can protect what you say whilst being alive and kicking, but its open slaver when you are dead, unless you yourself write it down in indelible ink.

“Do we have a soul, something I have heard about.”

'Yes I believe we do and also I believe it goes on and on though various lives that we live to educate ourselves in various ways.

“Is that what is called re..relocation?”

'I thinks the Buddhists called it reincarnation which is almost similar.'

“Well its that what you personally believe in?”

'Something like that, until something better comes along.'

“Does that mean I have to watch where I put my feet in case I squash Great Uncle You-know-who who has turned into a beetle or ant.”

'Do you squash insects on purpose?'

“Richard Jensen did at school, then I told him off so he whacked me, then I got up and kicked him in the shin and he went off crying to Miss Frobisher who wasn't there only the janitor, whom you coincidentally pay his wages, so he gave Richard another whack for hitting me. Not a very pleasant time for poor Richard.”

'Ah, but does he squash insects any more?'

“Very doubtful, least-ways not in front of me or the rest of school.”

'So he learnt his lesson, and I wonder have you?' A sense of great thinking from the boy until suddenly he awakes.

“Yes thank you Grand-papa and now may I have my humbug please?”

'Certainly not, now tell me what you have learnt!'

“I'm to do my own searching if I am not happy what I'm told and not to step on any poor creature which could be me in the future.”

'Well I guess something like that.' I flicked his humbug across the desk with my finger and being warm it left a sticky trail over my polished mahogany. So I poured another sherry for myself, and it really is delicious so I will definitely get Maise to buy a carton in case they stop making it, I won't tell Finlay to get a bottle. I slurped again and the boy wonder left. Then suddenly he turned at the doorway,

“Has Dad told you he and Mum are expecting.” He ran off down the hallway.

12 Waiting for a baby.

So here am I looking out the window in mid Autumn and still not being told by my useless son. Now in my library, I call my office, Edith is stamping away on her new computer keyboard, goodness knows what she is writing so I asked.

“Its a new circular I am creating for hosting our paying visitors around the Castle Father.”

'Oh great and does it include the creation of a new grandchild by any coincidence?'

“Has not my forgetful husband told you yet!”

'No, blast his tiny mind, he has not!'

“He told my mother in law and my parents several weeks ago and they were all delighted!”

'Well Dulcie has not mentioned it to me, well not as yet but if I get the school cane in my hands it might lead to other outcomes!'

“I'm sure Father she told Nicolas it is was best coming from him to you.”

'That might be but he has not, think I'll go and shake his ladder now as he and Robin are picking pears, and by the way Edith congratulations.' With that I was off to the orchard quick smart. I picked up a hawthorn stick one of my Australian nephews had cut and carved no doubt seeking absolution for the wall fire and strode on down to the picking area. I saw young Tommy picking up the pears thrown at him and just

being five and a half his catching ability was less precise than the older ones.
'Just past me one of those pears please Tommy.' Tommy handed me a small pear and I threw it with as much force as I was able at my son Nicolas some three metres up his ladder. The pear hit on his ankle and he yelped.

'May well you yelp you young pup come and see me about a certain event after you finish here.'

"That hurt Father, what the devil did you do that for."

'You jolly well know why, just come to the lounge please when you have driven all these bags to the kitchen.' Then I noticed his brother Robin had gone a shade of pink.
"I'll come with Robin shortly, we've only got two trees to go." Nicolas rubbing his shin.

So I stumped back up to the Castle and into my most comfortable lounge chair, and with a glass of sherry settled down to a new book to read. It happened to be one of the children's geography primer but still it had words and pictures in it.

An hour later Nicolas and Robin stumped in and sat before me.

'Well, why the two of you, only takes one man to make a baby?' I said sharply I might add I was puzzled and a bit worried.

"Father, I was going to tell you the good news that Edith and I are expecting another child, but then Robin told me his great news and we both thought we would tell you when you were in a good mood, which as you may not admit is not very often."

"Pretty rare in fact." Offered the other son.

'Well Robin how come you are involved in your sister in laws baby?'

"I'm not Father we are expecting another child my girl friend and I."

'Well congratulations and I can't remember attending a wedding recently, maybe my mind is on the blink!'

"We were married in London by licence last week, we met during my jobs on the estate housing and we started to court and well things happened!'

'So it appears and have you told your Mother?'

"Her names Laura."

'I know my wife's name and its not Lawn.'

"No father Laura is my new wife and I've been skipping off from home to live with her on the Estate in the evenings after dinner."

"I asked you if your mother knows yet!'

"No, I thought I would tell you first and this is it, I was going to invite Laura over for the next family dinner."

'Ah safety in numbers, yes well that would be a sensible thing to do but you know how mothers like to attend their children's wedding, a little cry here and a new dress to go with it then the highlight of being the bride's mother, so I wish you luck in explaining it all to dear Mama. But I think you both should wed in our local church and that to give some comfort to Mama. Eh?'

"Yes father I'll pop up and see Mother at once."

Well I could not see my dear Dulcie throwing a fit or a plate at Robin and being the youngest of our two I felt he was quite safe so I shooed them both out and reread my geography book. I was tempted to choose a location to send Robin away, like people

did to their foolish youngsters years ago. For some reason I closed my eyes and pointed then opened them to see I had chosen Nigeria of all places. I sighed and crept up to my lofty perch and throwing shoes off went to bed. Sometime later I presume Dulcie came in to check on me and I thought it was she lying beside me. So I turned slowly around and saw a head of black hair snuggled onto of the eiderdown and lying against my shoulder. I looked up and saw Dulcie miming at the doorway and pointing to young Tommy. She did it twice and came to sit on the other side of me.

“He's scared Heir, he is a very frightened little boy.” She whispered.

'But why?' I looked at my watch I had barely slept two hours.

'Now Tommy are you awake your Aunt Dulcie seems so worried about you?'

Tommy just snuggled deeper in the eiderdown and my chest.

“Nick is so lucky to have Grandparents, two lots in fact.”

'Well I'm sure neither your Aunt or I like being called lots.'

“Its not funny Uncle I'm going some place I don't know or even if I want to.”

I withdrew my arm from under the bed and cuddled him close then all a sudden I knew what he was worried about. A boy of his age would be full of excitement but Tommy was quite a different little boy.

'I used to be very afraid of flying and the first time I flew with Aunt Sofia to the South of France near where you are headed. Sofia was shaking with fear and I remember not thinking any more about my own but talking to her gently and guiding her up the steps to the plane and we played happy families throughout that journey and we clasped hands tightly when we came into land. Now you have an older sister she may not have spoken but she might be a little unsure and may need a guiding hand.'

Violet eyes bored into mine.

“But Uncle she's so excited about going and she reads all the journey documents and I hear Grand-mama say to Mum our Jess was a pain in the butt!”

'Ah there you are my dear Tommy exactly what I meant to say, she is scared and putting on a brave face, so like a little girl and I suspect she is doing it for you so not to alarm you.'

“So what can I do Uncle Heir?”

'Over there in that chest of drawers in the bottom draw you will find my pack of Happy Family cards. Yes, you may borrow them but you must return them safely to me when you come back. Now your mother has told us she intends to take you and Jess to meet your Fathers parents. Your real grandparents so you will have three now including your Mothers.'

“What happened to Mum's Dad?”

I turned to Dulcie and she nodded.

“Your other grandfather died in a steeple chasing race, he hit a farm rail and over he went, only the horse was saved but it rolled right over Grand-papa and crushed him.'

“Oh I'm so glad the horse survived after all it was my granddad who was guiding him and it was his fault not the poor horse!”

I nodded, the justice of the young and their love of all animals, then I lifted him gently to the floor and led him over to the chest of drawers. Tommy bent down and

splayed his little hand then delved into the pile of rubbish I had collected. He then withdrew the pack of cards and clasped them to his chest. He kissed me a big wet splashy kiss and went out with his Aunt Dulcie to go to his own room. Dulcie gave me a wink but pointed downstairs and said now you are up dinner is downstairs ready to be served!

13. Away they go and a new secretary installed.

Yes I got up early this morning at least I was shaken awake by an urgent little hand, being my Robroy, eager to get me downstairs so he threw back my bed clothes and dragged me off my warm mattress then hand in hand hauled me off to the door.

'Now wait Robroy I have to get dressed so turn your back please. Anyhow what's the hurry has someone lit a fire in the castle, I can't smell smoke.'

“No Grand-papa Cousin Jasmine Jess and Tommy are waiting for Aunt Vi to appear and then Tom is taking them to the station.”

'Well its normally Tom my valet who helps me dress so since he is not in attendance you will have to do, so pass me my britches and shirt if you please. And don't turn round just pass them behind you as Tom does.'

“Afraid I'll see you skinny frame Grand-papa?”

'Not in the least I happen to have a fine figure for my age.' Just then Dulcie pokes her head through my bedroom door.

“Well Heir you've still got your pyjama's on for goodness sake hurry up.”

She grabbed the trousers and shirt from her grandson and helped me dress.

'Robroy will you go to top the draw and there should be one of those instamatic camera's there, and grab it please, I want to give it to young Tommy to take photos of his grandparents.'

“Grand-papa that's old hat!"

“I don't care if its a new hat, I had Tom buy that from the Chemist yesterday with young Tommy in mind.'

“No Grand-papa these days mobile phones can take pictures!"

'Well I want a proper camera photograph so off you go and find it please.'

“Will you two come on now Jasmine has just called, they are off.” Dulcie dragging me out behind her and me still buttoning up my shirt. Robroy close behind clasping the camera.

“Grand-papa the film from these camera's need to be developed.”

'Yes after the photos have been taken.'

“Where is there a place to develop them then?”

'Look on the box you have to send it away to get it developed apparently its all part of the cost, course you have to pay the postage there and back.'

Eventually we arrived in the hallway and out we scuttled to meet Aunt Vi who slapped a dry kiss onto my wrinkled forehead, shook Robroy's hair and stepped smartly down into the front seat of the car. I signalled Tommy to come over and handed over the camera and told him to use it to take photos of his Grandparents, but

he first looked at me then Robroy then both shook their shoulders in mirth I suspect, I ignored them but Tommy grabbed my hand and said a lovely thank you then sprinted into the car to join his sister and mother. Jasmine held one of those mobile things and was shaking it at me, then she stopped and held it to her eye. I ducked in case it had a bullet in it and Aunt Vi shouted lets go so off they rumbled off, cases in the boot, at least I hope so so I shouted Cases, Tom pointed to the boot whilst steering away.

Well what a palaver all this coming and going and I felt quite exhausted but Maise had already served breakfast for those going on holiday so I treated myself to some bacon and eggs and joined my sons to chomp away. Dulcie had had hers with Jasmine and family.

'We will need a new secretary you two, do you hear. When Edith has her baby that will have to be her main duty.'

"As well as looking after me and young Nick." My eldest son looking aggrieved.

'Dam it man you should be delighted with another child!'

"Yes Father but you don't have to live with a screaming little babe."

'No? Well I had two and they were a constant threat to my hearing, course you cannot remember the bath incident.'

"No, but Mother said you tipped a bucket of cold water over the two of us when we were having a warm bath." Both sons looked at one another crossly.

'Well the truth is you were both screaming blue murder at on another, it seems it was over that toy duck my Father bought for you. So he told me there was a bucket of roof water down by the staircase which he used for his pot plants so I fetched it and poured it over you both. Believe you me it stopped the noise immediately.'

"That was cruel of you and Grandpa, Mother said Grandma wouldn't speak to Grandpa for a week for giving you that information."

'True, and she gave me a horrendous whack on my backside so should I'd be suitable mollified.'

"That water was mainly ice!" Robins turn to voice an opinion.

'Well that was ages ago and it brings me great pleasure to remember my Father and his ways, but you both behaved in that bath after that.'

"That's because your Father left that bucket by the bath and bought a new enamelled one, obviously to make us think each bath time!"

'Well it worked and do you know that old zinc bucket is still up there somewhere, anyhow all this still leaves me with a secretary to find, one who can use a computer and preferably can type.'

"Wages?" From Nick.

'I suppose so, depends on whom we get.'

"I expect young Nick would grab the chance, after all he would be close to his Grand-papa and anyway he has to learn the business when he takes over." Robin ever helpful with his suggestions.

"Hang about I'm still around I won't have you changing heirs so quickly." Nick angry.

"Yes sorry about that but your son, my nephew, is as bright as a button and I believe Edith and Granny Evans show him their computers and he seems very interested."

"How about Mother?" Nick with a foolish suggestion.

'How about Robroy, Robin is right, the boy can attain knowledge of the place in no better way but we would need to ask Edith to teach him, make it a fun thing.'

“Well lets have him in now I'll get Finlay to find him and we will ask him, meanwhile I'll pop upstairs and see if Edith will agree.” Nick leaves and shouts for Finlay who is probably downstairs polishing the silver, if we had any left after our last function when we met Robins lady and her parents.

So an hour later I had acquired a new secretary in waiting as all had agreed even Dulcie who suspected she was going to be loaded with the job. Edith had over the year done a magnificent job at co-ordinating all the activities and accounting. So when it came to my first official interview with my grandson it started like this.

'Now Robroy we have to discuss payment for your services when you take over from your dear mother. So we have had a chat, we adults, and we have come up with a suggestion of a three month probation which is this.' I handed over a slip of paper showing the monthly amount, (and no I'm not going to tell you what it is that's our business.) And if you pass out as excellent or pretty good then you will receive a raise. Your Father is arranging for a bank account to allow you to keep your monies earned safe.'

“Well Grand-papa I trust you won't be shouting at me or chastising me for errors in spelling etc.”

'I don't shout at your Mother and anyway she says her computer has a spelling facility which is more that I had when I was your age Master smarty pants.'

“Fine then in future when we are at work you will address me as Master Nicolas Robin or my Secretary to outside people if you please. And I will call you your Grace not Grand-papa.”

'But I like Grand-papa!'

“That may be so but we need to put it on a more business like footing.”

This for a boy nearly nine years old, I see I and my sons will be able to retire within the year and go fishing instead and leave it all to the boy wonder.

Robin or my Secretary to outside people if you please. And I will call your Grace not Grand-papa.”

'But I like Grand-papa!'

“That may be so but we need to put it on a more business like footing.”

This for a boy nearly nine years old, I see I and my sons will be able to retire within the year and go fishing instead and leave it all to the boy wonder.

Well I'm sorry to say I am once again in my bed with two hot water bottles for company and a very cross wife who told me I deserved being locked in my room for several days with only soup and toast to eat. Well what on earth happened?

Well it was Robroy that happened that dragged me out from my comfort zone, it being my comfortable lounging chair by the bay window. He wanted me to see what the children had done to their tree house and how they had spent part of the summer holidays sprucing it up and as I was the most senior member of the household would I cut the ribbon Robroy had tied across the doorway. Thus the dragging out of the sitting room across the hall past a very amused Finlay and down to the steps where drawn up in stately fashion was a small freshly painted two wheeled cart with Rob horse tethered. So without any asking I was shoved from behind by a half dozen of small hands onto the solid wooden seat freshly varnished and thank goodness dry. My grandson then invited the assembled youngsters to join me on the bench seats one on either side whilst he clambered up the front, grabbed the reins and we were off. One of my Australian nephews fell off as the cart jerked forward and had to be manhandled from the rear panel back onto his seat I noticed that young Robroy was totally immersed in his driving and no shouting by the others in the back had moved him to stop Rob's walk. The cart by now was moving at a rate of knots and we were lucky to get the boy back on board. He had a tear in his eye!

We passed the Cafe and continued on at breakneck speed until we reached the edge of the lake to which Rob thankfully stopped and bent his head for a huge slurping drink allowing us all to disembark and gather our wits. But there was to be no rest as Robroy directed everyone into the the cutter and since I was the only adult I had to get my feet wet including my shoes and push them off. The Australia nephews had grabbed the oars and with obvious intent they dug deep into the water which rejected me from my hold on the back. At least they had the courtesy of stopping and dragging me aboard. Thankfully the island was not far so we beached the craft and I was handed a pocket knife to cut open the ribbon.

“Will you make a speech Grand-papa?”

'Under the circumstances of being half drowned by my own family I hereby open this refurbished tree house and may all those who live in it whether the crossing in that out sized cutter which I see has the name of Safety first,' It took sometime to cut the ribbon as the pen knife was not exactly sharp. I complained.

“Well Mother won't allow me a sharp blade Grand-papa in case I cut myself.”

So after returning the blunt knife to my grandson we climbed the wooden stair rods hammered into the side of the tree with galvanised nails. I felt sorry for the tree with these substantial nails thrust into its side. Still up I went not looking down because if I fell a lot of family would disappear into the undergrowth or planting which the children had diligently stolen from our front garden. I do believe I spotted a lettuce amongst the flower heads. But at last with slosh shoes and feet I was inside the wooden building and all I could say was,

'Amazing.'

“Well we all worked hard.” Brigian with a huge glow over his face.

“Yes and we have a place to stay if ever the castle falls down,” his brother Jarvis.
'Well if it ever did I would know which two were at fault.'

“Oh they did not mean that the castle would fall, it was only an expression Uncle Heir!” This from young Mini pipping up to protect her brothers.

'Humph' I said, but they really had done a great job in furnishing the place but to my horror they had a small coal or coke fire in the far corner and Robroy was standing proudly by it. So I continued,

'And I trust Robroy you don't intend ever using that thing, its only just there to make everyone think it is homely.'

“Why its for winter Grand-papa!”

'And what may I ask is this tree and its tree house made of?'

“Wood, but the tree is alive and therefore wet and the house wood is treated pine!”

'That's true and beautifully varnished no doubt with a petroleum varnish, so hopefully you had a suitable escape hatch, and I don't mean those wooden step poles outside.'

“Well we thought of that and Uncle Robin acquired a scaffold pole which he attached outside this window by the fire place.”

'A pole to slide down placed next door to the fire, what a blithering idiot son I have, so which of you was willing to use the pole in case of fire?' All hands shot out at the main doorway we had come through.

'So Robroy you will ask your father and Uncle Robin to see the pole is removed closer to this window on the other side please.' With that I was ready to leave but I did remark on the great looking tree house and furniture all hand built with nails everywhere and I imagined a heap of cushions would not go amiss to protect the skin from the pointed parts.

So now you can guess why Dulcie has sent me to bed to snuggle up to my bottles and sneeze to my hearts content. Then I heard it, the big car labouring up the driveway, almost a chug chug sound like a steam engine, then I remembered the cousins were home today. So I crept out of my warm bed and staggered over the window, the one on the right and leaned over the wall board to catch a glimpse of them all. As Tom bought the car to a halt in front of the steps Jasmine and her tribe shot out of the back door and sprinted up the steps into the house. I moved to my pipes as I could Tom following behind with some luggage. Then from the pipes came howls of disappointment and I detected they came from little Toms squeaky voice. Then I heard Jasmine saying,

“No Tommy you are not to go up to Uncle Heir, Aunt Dulcie was most insistent, he is not a well man having been foolish to get wet in the lake.” Then a stamp of a foot in a small boot no doubt so I dragged myself across the room to the door, which remarkably yielded to my turning the handle, then I yelled,

'Up here Tommy I am awake I want to hear all your news.' Followed by the stamping feet of most of the youngsters hiving up to my tower room as fast as little legs could run. By the time they had arrived I was back between my not so hot bottles with my sweet jar clasped between my knees. I had humbugs this week.

They swept in like a gale and bounced on the bed except young Tommy who with Robroy's help moved the side chair and both of them jumped onto its cushion.

Tommy had a small folder clutched in his hand and he passed it over to me.

“Photo's Uncle Heir.” He pronounced with an air of authority.

'I thought we'd agreed to post off the film when you got home?'

“I couldn't wait Uncle, I took double photo's so I could leave them with my grandparents so they wouldn't forget me, and the rest I bought home, do take them out and look please.” I did as I was asked and the first one dropped out with a plain back.

'Look Tommy nothing was recorded on this on!'

“You have it back to front Uncle, please turn it around and Nick and the others would like to look, but you gave me the camera so you get first look, well second after my Gramps and Granny.” So I turned it over and what a delightful scene met my eyes with Jasmine her children and the grandparents all grinning their faces off. But alas no Aunt Vi.

'No Grandma with you all!'

“No Grandmother had to go down to her friends, one of them was sick.” This from Jess but I had a strange feeling that Aunt Vi was a little jealous, after all she had had the grandchildren all to herself and to have to share now, bit hard to take. But frankly in the past she rarely saw them or took the effort of even seeing her own daughter. I flicked through the photo's then passed them around and Tommy and Jess prattled away about the cottage in the hills and the vegetable garden and the sunshine and then the coast with its blue water. It was so enjoyable to share in their adventure then Dulcie came up and spoilt it all by asking everyone to leave the old sick man to his slumbers. Young Tommy would not move and Robroy held out his arms for the jar then handed out a humbug to these obviously starving children.

“You are about to have a lovely tea cook has made for you!” But it was too late Dulcie, the jaws were already at work on the mints. So she herded them out until I spotted my jar just going out with Robroy.

'Jar please I would like one myself!' Dulcie grabbed it from her grandson and deposited on my lap with the words,

“For heavens sake Heir will you get some sleep now, Jasmine has to get all her cases unpacked and the children organised.” With that she slammed my door. But I hummed to myself I had really enjoyed the children crowding into my lofty perch and seeing those lovely photographs, but then I had forgotten to ask Tommy how he had got the film developed, it did say on the packet it had to be sent away to this place, after all it was part of the price we paid. Still it was nice for him to give some pictures to his newly found grandparents and how happy they all seemed together. Then I slept.

But what awakened me was the noise of the chair legs scrapping across the floor closer to my bed. I had previously turned and saw a little figure jump up onto the cushion and very slowly a face came closer to mine, I opened my eyes wider and it was little Tommy his bright dark eyes alight with expectation.

“Uncle Heir are you awake, please are you awake.”

'What is the devil of the time Tommy, I was asleep if you please!' I was indignant.

“Its a quarter past nine and I must speak with you please.” I noticed he still had his

photo packet clasped in his hand, it was hard to miss it being so close to my head. 'Well you should be in bed yourself Tommy and fast asleep, you've had a long journey and must be very tired after all the excitement at returning to your cousins.' Then a tear slide down the face followed soon after by another then his body began to shake and I placed my hands onto his free hand, the one not holding the folder. 'Now Tommy something has affected you so tell your Uncle what it is, has someone been cruel to you?' I spoke quietly and wished to heaven it was not someone from my family, but he shook his head.

"It was at Granny and Gramps place."

'Go on'

"Mother had taken Jess on the bus to go down to the village to buy food for them leaving me with my grandparents, we were all sitting on a bench feeding the chickens when a large black car drew up outside their house and a tall man with a dark moustache came striding up the pathway and greeted my Granny with a hug. Then my Gramps. Then Granny pointed to me and in a little Italian I had learnt she said "Say hello to your boy see how well he has grown, Your wife bought him too us."

'Your father came to see you how wonderful!'

"Please Uncle Heir, please please don't interrupt its hard to tell you."

'I won't say another word.' I pressed his little hand as his tears flowed down his cheek.

'Now go on Tommy.'

"The tall man looked at me fiercely and turned his back and stamped his foot, that's no son of mine, it was he that broke our bond, him and his foolish mother." He was speaking in English, he turned to Granny and said. "I am married again Mother and you have grandchildren by my new wife to enjoy, forget this one and the girl, they live elsewhere over the water. Then he turned and went back to his car and left."

Well what could I say he was now bubbling with his head deep in my shoulder and there came a knock on the door and Jasmine poked her head through, but I raised my finger to my lips and beckoned her back out.

'Well Tommy I am so glad you shared that with me, I can now fully understand, and let me say two things to you, firstly the joy of seeing your grandparents in the photographs was obvious to us all, how much they loved you and Jess, its something you cannot fake so you will not loose them, which I think you might have thought. Secondly your Father has found his own security in a new family so you should be pleased, what happened to your Mother and he in their divorce that is their business. Did I say two? Well there is a third and a forth, you and Jess are much loved here, you are a part of us and maybe one day your grandparents may come over and stay with us and see your cousins and enjoy your life here or maybe you can go over there when you are older. So all is not lost and a lot has been gained, so promise me my little one you will dry those eyes and take two carrots from Cook to give to the Shires tomorrow. They really missed you as well.'

With a brief hug to his old Uncle young Tommy leapt off the cushion and ran to join his mother and I was left too wonder how strange the world had become.

15 A time to think.

I had just negotiated a path hanging onto my mug of coffee through Dulcie's rose garden, and finding a seat which had been freshly erected by one of my boys, I sat in contemplation of the rich smells that assaulted me from the various roses that my long suffering wife had planted. Ah, I breathed in as I enjoyed my first cup of the day which was already warming up and I had quite got rid of the festering cough I had yesterday. Then I heard a call and turning round found Jasmine tramping down that same path and sat beside me.

"Well what was all that about yesterday, with my Tom."

'Men's business.' So I slurped my coffee to show my irritation at getting disturbed.

"Well I am aware you came here for some peace and quite, but Tom before he came to talk to you has been remarkably quite since we left Italy, what did he talk to you about Heir, I need to know as I am worried."

'Tell me hows Jess been these last few days?'

"Fine as I am aware, loved the holiday and her Granny."

'So Tommy has not told either of you of his problem, least-ways sadness would be a better word.'

"No, he got told off by Mother he was eating too many sweets before she left for her friends, but she's always rabbiting on at the children for something or other. So that couldn't be it, something happened whilst I and Jess left him to go shopping. My in-laws were also changed a little, so Heir what did Tom tell you."

'Well Jasmine you should ask him yourself, and yes he was quite put out I dare say his holiday had been spoilt.' Jasmine said not a word which gave me a chance to think, maybe the boy did not want to talk to his mother for fear of bringing up the divorce and all that fuss and bother, so he was only protecting his mothers feelings, so I came right out after I had gulped the rest of my drink down.

'Tell me Jasmine, Dulcie and I have never asked, but was your divorce amicable or were there words and violence so to speak.'

"Its something the in-laws discussed with my son!" She spat it out.

'Not at all speaking from a bystanders view both your children had a wonderful time.'

"Well Heir tell me please."

'Your son met his Dad.'

"And"

'Apparently your Ex refused to greet him in spite of your in-laws entreaties. In fact he totally refuted the boy as his son. Besides which I thought he was killed in a snow slide!'

"Bastard, ugly foolish man I am so pleased to be rid of him, whilst I was having Tom he was off searching for fresher meat so to speak. That was my excuse to tell the children if they ever wondered why they had no father."

'Well not only Tommy was affected I think your in-laws were as well but Tommy told me your Ex has remarried with more children.'

"Well lets hope the second wife deals with him more firmly than I ever did but my concern is with, I used to say to our children, but now it seems they are mine alone which could be a problem later on for Jess."

'Go on, you've spoilt my morning coffee so why Jess?'

“She has been keeping a diary record whatever you call it of her father. I never disclosed to either of the children anything of my marriage especially as his parents my in-laws were lovely gentle people and I can see this in the children. Alas I know Jess has filched one of my photo's of Leo, that's his name, and pasted it on the inside cover of her book. I came across it last year when I was cleaning her room.”

I gave Jasmine a horrified look but she went on.

“Well Heir it was open, lying on the floor!”

'So now you talk to both of them and you say both you and your Leo are happy to be apart and running your own lives, the avalanche story was false, the children will understand and you are right about them both, they are delightful kids even though I expect they take their dark colouring from their father!'

“You'll have me going in a minute, they take after me Heir.”

'Oh with your hazel eyes and blond mane, still off you go and what you told me is confidential but if you'd like to invite your in-laws here for a holiday I wouldn't object, but mind Aunt Vi is not here at the same time!'

“Thank you Heir that may solve a problem I would not risk going there again. If I should meet Leo, well I don't know how I would react and and.”

'Yes I can understand but when the children are older he should have the right to see them surely.'

“Maybe Heir but not here, don't you dare invite him, please.”

'You are beginning to sound like Dulcie, but know I would not in spite of the fact that you and my wife and your cousin Sofia are like three skittles together always to be close. By the way I will talk to my boys to get them to prepare more of our rooms for visitors to stay. That East wing rooms have since become dilapidated, all my father looked after were the stables for his horses. Then there is that extension building.'

“As I was told that extension was built to house the orange and lemon trees.”

'Well it did, it was called the Orangery until Father discovered how much he had to pay for new fruit trees, I do believe they moved the big pots, those over there.' I pointed to the driveway where they all stood in a line beneath the Lime avenue.

'Then they, Mother and Father, decided it would make a grand indoor tennis court and when Father grew older horses became his number one interest after Mother died. Then Sofia was born and horses overtook everything he cared about, bit like your Mother Jasmine, inconsiderate, only she lives in this world everyone else is here to serve her every whim.'

“Well they did have the same parents Heir so I wonder which of us takes after the grandparents?”

'Jasmine I think we might take a walk up and visit the Orangery and see how much damage it has sustained besides the cracked windows I know the odd tennis ball smacked.' With that and a clearing of the air we left our seat and came across the children all playing soccer between themselves on the front lawn.

'Watch out for Aunt Dulcie's roses you lot.' I yelled and they stopped playing and joined Jasmine and I.

“Where are you two off to Grand-papa?” Came an inquisitive Robroy.

'The Orangery' said I.

“Oh we children had plans for that forsaken place, we talked about it!”

16 The Orangery fight and public service.

We all trooped up to the large glassed doors that covered the whole front of the single story building. I knew it had a slate roof, but as children we were rarely allowed in it, it being reserved by adults to play tennis. Young Robroy immediately began to prise open one of the doors by holding the handle and trying to force it backwards.

'Excuse me Robroy it opens like a door they did not have sliding ones when this was built, so kindly let an old man try first.' It was no good me saying that as several small hands shot forward and pulled open the door which made an eerie squeak as it was pulled fully out. The doors were set long and high so that the gardeners could squeeze the large red clay tubs and their trees inside or out. Depending on the weather and heat.

'I was saying let the adults in our group open it in case the hinges had rusted and the whole lot cave on to us, plus it was always locked, but as usual no one listens to a word I say.'

"Quite right Grand-papa but we are stronger limbed than you or Aunt Jasmine."

"What was that you said you intolerable child." Jasmine getting upset.

'In we go and be careful of any broken glass, more than likely where the balls cracked the panes the wind could have broken through. We have not bothered with this place for years, least ways I haven't.'

"Why not?" This from Tommy.

'Well I suppose we quite forgot about it it being on the cold side of the house and all locked up.'

"But it was not locked up Grand-papa look there is no lock in the handle." Robroy and Tommy both pointed.

'Well did you ever! I will tell you I firmly believed it was always locked to keep we children from swinging on the net. I distinctly remember Father telling us this, very brusquely I might add.'

"So you never thought to check it out yourself?"

'Certainly not!'

"This will make a wonderful play room, we can play soccer in the winter." Young Tommy pipping up and joined by others intent on a large indoor play area.

'Well your mother and I are considering turning it into visitors quarters in case your grand parents want to come and visit.'

Silence is golden and some faces fell but not Jess or Tommy whose little faces were a ray of sunshine.

"I think we should have a family debate." This from Robroy incensed by my idea.

'Well Nicolas Robin I happen to be the boss around here so what I say goes a long way.'

"Perhaps as far as Grand-mama?"

'No my decision will be binding over all of you and you can take it or leave!'

They all looked around and I suspect given the coolness of my idea those children

had been here before, then I spotted one Wellington rubber boot over in the far corner so I scurried over and picked it up.

'Right you lot shoes and boots off and lets see who this fits.' There was suddenly a dive for the outside.'

"I think you will find that it one of Ruth's children I heard her complaining to Gideon that a boot was missing from one of the boys." Jasmine with a broad smile on her face. "Family debate then Heir?" she laughed and followed her two outside leaving me to check for broken glass. There in another far corner was a shattered pane neatly brushed up out of the way.

'Well at least they have good housekeeping skills, not to bad I suppose.'

Two days later we had our family debate, at first I outlined the need to have further rooms for future visitors then the debate followed. I won't bother you with the rising and falling arguments but the outcome was in Robroy's favour because we still had some unused dilapidated rooms on the East side that had been strictly off limits due to the possibility of death watch beetles So my son Nick was asked to investigate and renovate this series of rooms if found to be serviceable. Then the cost had to be taken into account, so Robroy, thrilled by his recent win, proposed that a special visitor fee be charged to question the Duke about the house. That took more time debating than what we were here for mainly because I was dead against the idea! But once again I was overturned and Edith, still my secretary was asked to create posters advertising the coming seminar with the Duke. I retired to my bedroom and locked my door for some peace and quite.

A date was fixed, it was a Sunday and the main hall was bedecked with chairs from the school the church and from our various bedrooms including I might add my boys favourite cushion chair that both Tommy and Robroy dragged down from my lofty perch. They then argued about who was going to sit on it until I strode in between them.

'Tommy of course, you Robroy will be with me doing the introductions, after all it was your idea!'

"But I could have that chair next to you behind the table?"

'We will both be sitting on the posh dining room chairs, if people are going to pay good money to hear us speak then we should do it in a manner that befits a Duke and his troublesome grandson.'

"I'm not troublesome Grand-papa, just useful and helpful, after all Dad has told me its not the beetles but some dried rot below the floor boards and he will need the extra money to buy new timber bearers."

'Excuse me boy wonder we surely have enough old trees around the estate to cut out new bearers.'

"Ah they have to be kiln dried or properly weathered then shaved flat on the floor board side."

'Why?'

"So they don't squeak or be uneven when laying the old floor back on."

Well what could I say but we have a new carpenter on the premises.

'Let me give you a word of advice when your Father brings in my estate workers to help him. You stay right out of the way, they might take umbrage at you directing their work.'

“Yes Grand-papa whatever.”

So the Sunday of the scheduled discourse arrived and I felt quite chirpy, Dulcie had said she only expected a few people would come and it would be just like a village hall gathering, so not to worry. My reply was then why don't we hold it in the village hall easier for people to get refreshment right next to the pub. But she frowned so I left it there and followed her down stairs to the library where we both had a sherry to warm us up then on down to the hall. It was packed even up to the main doorway which Finlay was endeavouring to shut whilst more people were threading in. I saw the children had bought up the benches from the kitchen and I even spied some long garden seats along the wall. I was led by the hand by my earnest grandson looking smart in his best suit. So I whispered who's taking the money Mr Accountant!

“Aunt Jasmine and Cook.”

Somewhat startled I started off.

'Welcome everyone to my home, as you know we have over the last few months opened up the Castle and grounds to the public, not to show off but to help keep the house and estate in reasonable order and the reason we have sought your help today is to renovate a portion of the house suffering from decay.' I whispered to Robroy were we taking the visitors around to have a quick look at those rooms. He shook his head but said he would go and open the doors so they could file pass but not go inside. I said why not, but he did a little shake and a sudden twist like falling down!

'So after this question and answer session you will be welcome to traipse over the castle and just pass the doorway to the rooms to be repaired. Now I must ask you not to go inside the room as the bearers are rotten so we do not need any accidents. Those of you who have paid tonight left your names and addresses with the ladies outside and you will be invited back again to view the rooms you helped renovate.' Applause, I was feeling quite good now and looked towards Robroy who had disappeared no doubt to open the door to the rooms to be repaired. Suddenly I felt quite nervous without my little helper. Tommy must have noticed and came to sit next to me, I felt immediately better.

There then continued a question and answer session with all sorts of personal requests such as what did I have breakfast, who I last whipped for sealing my fruit, what was it like being a Duke, had I met the Queen, did I serve in the war or manipulate myself out of serving, how many people did we employ on the estate, did we pay fair wages and so it went for over two hours. Then Dulcie asked me sign autographs and by the end of shaking peoples hands I was ready for a whisky and soda. The children escorted the visitors around the castle and even took them into the private parts whilst I escaped back up my tower, but even that got invaded by Robroy taking a group up those stone stairs. Yes I heard them just in time and squeezed down that wooden back staircase leading to the kitchens. Thus with whiskey in hand I sat on one of the stairs listening to all the um and ahas whilst people savoured the view from my perch. Oh how I welcomed the evening dinner and peace at last. Sadly everybody was abuzz

how well it gone so I drowned my sorrows with a brilliant Merlot and Cook had baked a Beef Wellington which cheered me up no end.

17 Off to school and a house being restored.

As usual I rolled out of bed at about eight in the morning, well my alarm radio said it was actually a half an hour later and I heard in the distance the diesel sound of the tractor and it sounded quite near so I peered out from right hand window and saw all the children lined up on the bottom step with my son Nick towing the long cart behind. He stopped in front of the stairs and all the children clambered aboard and I noticed Robroy place little Tommy in my plush chair and strapped him in safe. Why of course, it was Tommy's first day at school and now there were too many for Tom to take in the car so someone had roused Nick to bring the cart around instead. Then I saw Dulcie waving them off from the doorway as I leaned right over and opened my window. The reason they were given a lift to school was simply because the driveway to the front gatehouse was over a mile, then a further half mile to the school! 'Good luck to you all have a great day at school.' I yelled. They all looked up and some blew raspberries and some waved back, well either to me or Dulcie who stepped out of the doorway and looked upwards, signalling to me to get back and not a dam fool for leaning so far out, so I closed the window and got dressed.

Downstairs Robin was setting up two sets of rubber tyred trolleys so I stopped and asked him why.

"Nick is going to pick up the wood bearers after dropping the children at school, we had word this morning they were at the rail yard ready to be picked up."

'But why take them through the hall is there no better way, we are on the first floor and beneath the East wing are the cellars.'

"So Father how do you propose getting them into the cellar?"

'Through the kitchen and out through the Dairy.'

"Too long."

'Oh.' said I, 'So where did you get those trolleys from?'

"Came yesterday, Farmer over the on ridge, the one next to our Home Farm bought them over just now."

'Kind of him, what does he want in return?'

"You are a suspicious old coot Father without a doubt, we asked and he obliged, free gratis."

So I went on into the Dining room for breakfast, I noticed they had left me just cold toast and jam and a few grease laden dishes. So I had cornflakes, milk and a cup of coffee. Maise came in soon after and trundled the whole lot out.

"Bit late were we your Grace getting up?" She asked pleasantly.

'No, it was too early for me, probably Cook made everything early for those children, first day at school.'

"Do you want an egg or two?"

“No Maise just some fresh toast please and that new pot of strawberry jam we were given by the Evans cook.” And turning to me Dulcie added cryptically, “Luckily their cook is still talking to our new cook.” ‘Humph’ said I and continued crunching my cereal.

I had finished sometime later had and moved to my armchair in the library when a horrendous shout from outside calling everyone to help. One of the estate workers had attached the crane to the rear of the tractor after unhitching the wagon. I counted four large timbers straddling the wagon with the bench seats perched on top. Of my plush chair there was no sign so I joined the crowd of helpers as they drifted down the steps. Both Maise and cook were there!

‘How do propose getting that tractor up the steps, and where's my plush chair?’

“I drive it up in bottom gear and turn on the stone forecourt which should hold the weight. Then everyone will swing the bearers toward the doorway, we lower them gently onto the wooden stakes Robin has placed then we will have to man handle them through the door and onto the trolleys. In answer to your second query Father we had to leave the chair at the school young Tom being loath to leave the comfort of his great uncles plush chair. First day at school, a bit nervous so all the children took a vote to let him keep it!”

So that's what happened the tractor with its huge wheels backed up the stairs and Nick swung around, dropped the timber, then all helped lift each bearer in turn and take it inside. Then Nick drove down and fetched the other two. By the time they were wheeled through the house it was time to have a sit.

“No Father no time to pass around the beer just yet there are six more to pick up from the yard I will be back in a jiffy.”

To me a jiffy means a few minutes but the second load arrived in an hour so we had to go through all that lifting and carrying six times more, after it was all done cook invited all the estate workers down to the kitchen for a glass of beer and cake whilst I settled in my armchair. I had only just poured a glass of sherry when both boys called me out to view the rooms with their new bearers. They were all placed where they were to go on the stone plates, the wall side had recesses and a grinning Robin stood on one of the bearers. I noticed half the hallway down to the wing had been stacked with half metre wide oak floorboards.

‘No damage to these then?’

“No Father apparently the water seeped in via the wall so that will need new mortar joints, the edges of the boards close to the wall will need trimming and we need to buy more oak flooring to fill in what was damp. “

‘The other rooms in this wing?’

“All inspected and cleared, do you know what I think, When Grand-mama and Grand-papa had friends over they used to hold their dances in this room rather than the hall. We found marks on the boards probably done by sharp heels. Anyhow the constant bobbing up and down must have broken the mortar along that whole wall.”

‘Its at least a metre and a half thick Nick!’

“Maybe but the vibration could have travelled that far, still it won't be long before we get this wing in good repair and forbid dancing! We have one of our estate lads who

has building experience and he has started on the mortar repairs. He has already done the inside so we could lay the bearers today, tomorrow he starts on the outside.”

I nodded my approval and left for the comfort of my chair and sherry. I wonder if Maise managed to get a few more bottles in, I must remember to ask her. Now I hear you asking did I do any lifting instead of moaning. Well of course I did, I took the front ends of each bearer to make sure the idiots behind did not hit any of the plaster!

And now the children are back from school. Nick went down to pick them up in the wagon now drawn by Rob and Tinkle. He and Robin installed a metal frame and tarpaulin over the driving seat and benches to keep the children dry, mark you the poor old horses were left in the open! And they bought back my plush chair with Tommy strapped inside. The first thing I asked him did he enjoy his first day at school.

“Uncle Heir I did not know you had so many rotten children in the first class. They pinched me, called me many names I could not understand, and Miss James our teacher had no control whatsoever. I believe she is Uncle Robins lady! “

'Actually she is now married to your Uncle, Why not use their married name?'

'Well as a Teacher she is always a Miss, can I go on please? Anyhow at playground I got punched by Roland Nesbit, a good hard solid punch here.” He turned round and showed me his shoulder. “ And you know what that Miss James all she could do was to tell Roland to stop it, then the Janitor came past and whacked him on his legs!”

'With a hay scythe?'

“No a stick he was carrying.”

'Better to complain to Miss Davenport in future Tommy, I reckon that Janitor could get into trouble, first Robroy now you, what's the name of the Janitor?'

“Mr. Underbridge.”

'I've heard that name before.” I scratched my head.

“Cooks husband Grand-papa.” This from Robroy who had come to join us after hearing his name mentioned.

'What a small world we live in. But I will not be mentioning to cook less we have fried bread served with baked newts for breakfast!'

“Yuck.” From both.

'So mark me not a word to cook and you can tell Mr. Janitor Underbridge I am thankful for his help but I did not see him helping us with the bearers I had to do it all by myself.'

“Nobody helped you.” From Tommy looking up with shining eyes.

“Grand-papa you must not tease, of course he had help, look at all the dusty boot marks across the hallway Tommy!”

“Which piece did you lift and where are they now?”

Before I could answer young Tommy, his mother called him away so I just pointed down towards the East Wing. Why call it the East Wing because in fact the Castle was a square with the four round turrets as out extensions. I have no idea, but my grand parents always called it that and I suppose therefore those East rooms remained that. Nick caught my eye and I asked him if the door to the East Wing was closed?

“And locked. If they want to go and see the new bearers they can go down to the

kitchen and view them from the cellars” He said and smiled as there was a mad dash down the stairs to follow his advice.

So the day ended with a whole lamb for dinner in the dining room with all the family and the estate staff who had helped in attendance, as a thank you for the heavy lifting. Dulcie suggested the men folk should do the washing up as cook and Maisie had prepared the meal, so after saying goodnight to estate staff we boys went downstairs to take on the dreaded task. I've never seen my hands so clean!

Next morning during breakfast Dulcie brought up the subject of cook's husband, he had been charged with assault and the main witness was Robin's new wife.

'Have you spoken to Robin yet?'

“No Heir I thought I would leave it to you, I left a message at the Home farm to come and see you.”

'Well Dulcie why on earth do you want me involved, surely you could have had words with your own son if you or cook were distressed with the whole business.'

“Well Heir you know such a lot of people!”

So after my meal had settled, I made a few phone calls. The first was to Lanson the magistrate. I explained the full details of what occurred, naturally he tried to evade the issue but when I said I intended to come into his court and defend Mr Underbridge for protecting my nephew. I explained I was asking Jasmine to photograph the bruise and to get the local doctor to inspect it. Of course he tried to fob me off, quite rightly, but then he asked a pertinent question.

“I presume your Grace intends to take this further with a class action against the youngsters family.”

'Indeed Lawson. But worse, I'm afraid I will close the school as it's my property and the lease to the Education authority expires in two months. Also as the action against my nephew took place under its auspices I will sue them as well. That will certainly help toward renovations I am planning with the East Wing. Goodbye and thank you for listening.'

“I shouldn't have, it's yet to come before me, thank you your Grace.”

So he thanked me and I knew I had started the ball rolling, it wouldn't be long before Lawson did his own telephoning.

Over lunch Dulcie told me cook was getting very distressed about the whole business so I called Jasmine and asked if she had taken the photograph of Tommy's shoulder. She nodded and said Tom had agreed to drive them down to the Doctor's when school was finished. I nodded and thanked her but I thought the school finishing was hopefully for just today and not permanently! I pondered whether I should ring my solicitor about the case but decided to leave it until good sense prevailed including my own!

Two days later came the news that young Roland was also charged with causing an affray and we had a visitor, a Mr Nesbit followed by his bully son late afternoon.

“I've come to apologise your Grace.” Mr Nesbit wringing his hands behind his back and Finlay close behind ready to throw him out.

'Well it's not me your boy should apologise to, it's my cousin Tom who is twice as

small as your lad.'

"He were only mucking about."

'Perhaps but I have a photograph here to show the bruising on Tommy's shoulder and the Doctor suspects a fracture is possible so he has to have an X-ray. Now Tommy's quite put out by having to go through all this procedure which will cost.'

"I wonder if my boy could apologise for this stupid act, and perhaps it be forgotten by yourself."

'I cannot forgive you or your insufferable child, only Tom or his mother can do that so I will call them in. Finlay ask Tommy and his mother to come here if you will?'

I could see the hand of Lanson in this and when Jasmine and Tommy appeared young Roland with tears dribbling down his cheeks apologised most profusely to Tommy who took it all in amazing grace. Jasmine being his mother was less charitable and she made Roland promise never to come close to her son ever again. Next day that fox of a magistrate rang me.

"Your Grace are you happy with the outcome."

'No Lawson I'm not, I had hoped for a pile of money in compensation for all the trouble this has given us and presumably you spoke to the Education Dept., so what did they to say?'

"They are going to sack Miss James for allowing this to happen."

'But alas Miss James could not act quickly enough and it wasn't her who wielded the stick. Perhaps you could point that out, then I will renew the lease.'

"I heard that your Robin has got married to the said young lady so I expect I will sort it out to the approval of all, my what a tricky time we live in."

'Thank you Lawson I'll send Tom over with a bottle of my finest sherry.'

"I wish we could solve all our county problems in a like manor. Thank you your Grace and sleep well!"

Well why shouldn't I, at least every bodies face has been saved and we will certainly get back to having first class dinners again not to forget the black pudding that seemed to be missing from our breakfast table over the last few days!

Oh I forgot to tell you the charges were altered to a caution, in other words a smack on the hand for both janitor and child. Well we will just have to find the money to renovate the rooms in that East Wing, looks like plain off cream paint will have to do. And no, Dulcie and I will be only supervising, the thought of climbing one of those step ladders will keep in my plush chair and looking out of the bay window.

Naturally with a small glass of sherry in hand.

The End of Castle 2