

The **Blight** of the
Wethering
Black-hearted
Bloodbeast
of **Blag**

by David Rogers

*A Fairy Tale
of Torver Folk*

Illustrated by Kai

The Tale Begins

The Prologue: In a Dungeon Dark and Dank and Dingy

Far beyond the sleepy valley twixt lake and fell, where trains once trundled and the tiny village of Torver dreams away the days; beyond even Ambleslime and Windersmear, where wise men never go and fools can rarely find their way, there lies the great city of Krakendal. It is a dark and dismal place where foul and wretched creatures stalk the gloomy yards and alleyways, the Woolpack and Old Shambles; All Hallows down to Dowker Lane. A dank fog of crowded, fetid breath lies thick upon the Yards, and the crook-backed, grim-faced urban dwellers drag their bony knuckles along the cobbled streets, slaving and grunting as they pick pieces of discarded detritus and fly-blown food from the municipal rubbish bins, and snarl through black, decaying teeth at any who might dare to challenge for a morsel of shrivelled cabbage or rotting meat. But the nightlife's pretty good and they do a very nice sausage, egg and chips at the Morrison's cafeteria.

On the western edge of Krakendal, in Poxenholme Road, there stands the Great Castle of Murkey Moss, towering over the city like a... like a towering castle, dark and dangerous, dank and deadly, demonic and... dangerous. Local folk lower their gaze as they pass the iron gates, occasionally walking into pillar boxes and bollards because they're not looking where they are going. Terrifying, agonised screams resound from within its daunting, grey walls, and sometimes from the surrounding pillar boxes and bollards.

The Great Castle of Murkey Moss is the headquarters of a secret organisation that strikes terror into the hearts of all good Cumberfolk - the Lake District National Park Authority. Everyone knows that it exists, but it is secret because nobody knows what they actually do, and there are those who speculate that they don't do anything useful at all, but just 'are'. There, within those cold grey walls, dreadful deeds are planned and dark doings done. Darker doings no man has done than are the doings done therein.

And deep within the rumbling bowels of Murkey Moss, in a dungeon, dank and dingy, an old, old man sits at a high oaken desk writing by the dim light of a flickering candle. He mutters quietly to himself, the only sound bar the scratching of his quill on faded parchment, although there be none to hear it. The ancient dust on the bare wooden floor still bears tiny footprints along by the wainscot, the last visible sign of the half-starved mice that departed a decade since in search of a kinder habitat, and maybe a crust to gnaw upon. For this is the dark domain of LorD NaPpA, the evil, twisted genius who, back at the dawn of time, created

the LDNPA in his wicked quest to rid the Lake District of every village and humble hamlet. His Lordship could have been designed by the devil for the frightening of children at bedtime; a black frockcoat hung on a skeletal frame 'neath a pallid face cracked and riven by age and bitterness. Thin grey hair draped ragged and greasy like threadbare curtains, roughly parted to reveal eyes too small, a nose too long and a hard, thin mouth twisted by hatred. In the divine allocation of facial features, even the baboon was better served. And I'm not thinking of its face.

Our tale begins here one cold February evening. High above the dungeon the rest of the castle is deserted, the staff having long returned to their homes. The wind howls through the battlements piling snow upon snow against the walls and windows. The clock chimes eight and LorD NaPpA still toils at his desk.

"Scratchit... SCRATCHIT! Where the devil are you, Scratchit?"

In a tiny outer office LorD NaPpA's humble clerk sat, his threadbare jacket buttoned to his throat against the bitter cold for he could afford no coat, warming his hands around a guttering tallow dip. The embers of a mean fire flickered bravely in the grate as the small lump of coal, this weeks allowance, eked out it's final faltering rays of warmth. And it was only Tuesday. Bob Scratchit clambered down from his desk and wrung his hands as he hurried to answer his master's call. "I'm here, My Lord. I was just adding up the ledgers, Sir."

"Never mind that, Scratchit. I'll take tea. Fetch it now."

"I'm afraid we're out of milk, my Lord. Shall I pop to the all-night shop and purchase a jug, Sir?"

LorD NaPpA shuddered and turned a fearsome glare upon his shivering clerk. "How much is it?"

"It'll be tuppence, Sir." Bob backed away a pace, flinching slightly in expectation of his Lordship's response.

"TUPPENCE!" LorD NaPpA pulled some coins from his pocket, examining them closely. "No milk!"

"And I believe we are out of tea as well, Sir."

"How much is that?"

Bob backed off another pace. "Four pence three farthings, Sir."

His Lordship's face assumed a scowl, the pock-marked, grey skin reddening to crimson. "No tea!"

"So that'll be hot water, will it, Sir?"

"Yes. Hot water. Fetch it now. Not too hot if you value your position, Scratchit."

The clerk backed away through the door, bobbing slightly as he went.

"And cheese! Bring me cheese."

In the little scullery at the back of the office Bob took a small lump of rock-hard cheddar from the cupboard and set to with a sharp knife, cutting the green mould away and prying

out the maggots to make it a little more presentable. The gentle tap, tap, tap of wood on stone broke the silence and the back door opened slowly to reveal a small boy dressed in well patched ragged clothes and an overlarge cap that covered his ears.

“Tom, Tom. You should not have come out on such a night. Bless you my child, you’ll catch your death...” And the clerk stopped suddenly in confusion, deeply regretting those last words.

“I came to meet you, Father. Are you to come home soon?”

“Very soon, Tom. You just go through to my cubicle and sit by the fire while I take his Lordship his supper. We shall be away home very soon, I’m sure.”

Bob poured water from the kettle into an enamel mug, placed the cheese on a plate and returned to the main office.

“And how is the villages project coming along, Sir?”

“THE WHAT!” shouted NaPpA, almost choking on a mouthful of fetid cheese.

“I do beg your pardon, my lord. I meant, of course, the Open Spaces project.”

“Splendidly, Scratchit. Not many to go now.” A strange, self-satisfied smile almost creased the corners of his tight, shrivelled mouth. “The bulldozers are moving into Water Yeat tomorrow and by the weekend Woodend will be a car park and visitor centre. It won’t be long now, Scratchit.”

The clerk pulled an envelope from his pocket, looking very nervous as he offered it to his master. “My Lord, I have a letter here. It’s... it’s from Torver - from the Parish Council.”

“TORVER! TORVER! How dare you mention that pox-ridden dung-heap to me! How dare they defy the great master plan. I hate them. I HATE THEM ALL!”

“Not going well in Torver then, Sir?” Bob was tempting a horrible fate, but it was only these small and rare rebellions that made his life in NaPpA’s service even remotely bearable.

“Are you trying to be facetious, Scratchit?”

“Heaven forefend, Sir. I was merely curious...”

LorD NaPpA glared hard and long at his clerk, seeking the slightest sign of insincerity, and Bob looked back with an expression of the purest innocence, an art born of long practice in the service of the tyrant. NaPpA snatched the letter and read it to himself, muttering inaudibly as his eyes scanned down the page. Suddenly he let out such a shriek that the very walls of stone seemed to recoil in terror. Even the clerk flinched very slightly although the years of torment had moulded him of sterner stuff than mere granite.

“DAMN THEM ALL! Now they say they insist on staying a village for the future of their children. CHILDREN!”

“Well, Sir, the little ones...”

“DAMN THEIR LITTLE ONES, SCRATCHIT! Damn their future. They have no future.” LorD NaPpA returned to his furious muttering and a trail of spittle crept slowly from the corner of his mouth to run down his chin. Bob Scratchit watched in silent fascination until it dropped with an equally silent ‘plop’ onto the remains of the cheese. He

was brought out of his reverie by a question from his master. “I suppose you have *little ones*, Scratchit?”

“Children? Oh yes, Sir.”

“How many?” asked NaPpA, the old sneer returning to his face.

Bob counted on his fingers, starting again several times. “I’ll have to get back to you on that one, Sir. I’ll do an inventory when I get home.”

“And they’re all healthy are they, Scratchit?”

“Well, all but the littlest one, Sir. Our Tiddley Tom. He’s a poor little crippled boy, Sir.”

“Tiddley Tom?”

“Yes, Tiddley Tom, Sir. In fact, he’s here, Sir, if you’d like to meet him.”

“Here! You brought the brat here? Well, don’t just stand there. Fetch it in. Let’s have a look at it.”

The clerk walked to the door of his cubicle and summoned the boy into the great man’s presence. Tom’s poor twisted right leg hung limp, the toe of his little boot, turned inward, lightly scuffing the floor as his wooden crutch tap, tapped across the flagstones. Bob was about to introduce him when the master pre-empted him.

“So you’re Tiddley Tom, are you?”

“Yes, Sir.” said Tom, who was very frightened, but well brought up and aware of his manners. “I’m very happy to meet you, Sir.”

“Happy?” barked NaPpA. “What right have you to be happy, boy?”

“Oh, he’s always happy, Sir,” said Bob, anxious to spare the boy further interrogation. “Always ready with a smile and a song to gladden the hearts of those around him.”

“Bah. Humbug!” growled NaPpA, expertly combining a scowl and a sneer in a set of features perfectly designed for both. “So what can you do, boy? Can you fetch and carry? Can you run errands?”

“I cannot run at all, Sir.” said Tom. “I am but a poor crippled boy.”

“Then what use are you?” He turned to Bob. “Should have strangled him at birth and relieved the burden on the Parish.”

“Yes Sir.” Bob had enjoyed (or, perhaps, not exactly enjoyed...) long experience of Lord NaPpA’s foul moods and knew when to hold his tongue, but he managed to contrive the barest hint of a wink in Tom’s direction without his master detecting it.

“Happy indeed. Next you’ll all be wanting plumbing and inside toilets and extensions and glass in your windows. How can you run a proper planning system when people keep demanding outrageous luxuries to make them happy? Answer me that, Scratchit!”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Sir.” Bob recognised an old sign. His Lordship had returned to his favourite subject and would trouble Tom no more. The boy was, in NaPpA’s warped judgment, of no worth and therefore of little interest. It might even be confidently speculated that in the old man’s mind Tom had ceased to exist at all.

“Happy? Poppycock! You mark my words, Scratchit. Torver will fall. TORVER WILL

FALL!”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Yes, Sir... yes, sir... What do you know about it, Scratchit?”

“Nothing, Sir.”

“Nothing, Sir... nothing, Sir. Well, I know, Scratchit, because I have a plan for Torver. They won’t have any future without their precious children, will they, Scratchit. Not without their ‘little ones’... Ha ha ha ha... Oh, and Scratchit...”

“Yes, my Lord?”

“I want you to run a little errand for me.”

“Of course, my lord.”

LorD NaPpA actually glanced around as though fearful of being overheard. That his gaze passed through Tom apparently without recognition of his presence was of no surprise to the clerk in the least.

“I want you to visit every chemist shop in the whole of Cumbria and buy up all their stocks of Gaviscon. You can have all the people you need for the task. You can start tomorrow.”

“Having trouble with your tummy, my lord?” It was an odd request, but ‘odd’ was a way of life in the service of his Lordship.

“Never you mind, Scratchit. Just do it, and bring it all to me. Ha ha ha ha ha” The laugh was of the demonic kind traditionally expected of mad tyrants and NaPpA had practiced it to perfection. He climbed down from his high desk and took his overcoat from the hook by the door. “I’m going home, Scratchit. Be sure you lock all the doors and windows before you go.” Turning to leave he once again noticed Tom. “And watch that thieving boy. I shall know if anything’s missing in the morning.”

“Goodnight, my Lord,” said Bob as NaPpA left without reciprocating the wish.

“I wonder what he meant, Father. I mean about the children,” said Tom.

“I don’t know, Tom. Children... Gaviscon... You mark my words, it’ll be something foul and evil.”

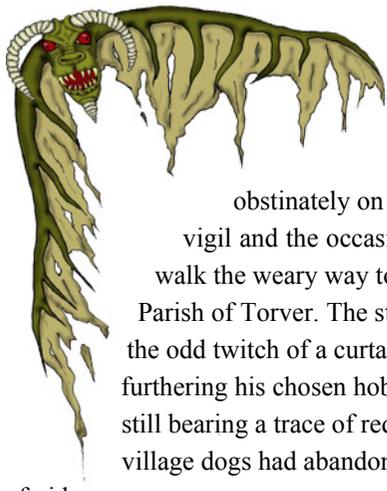
“He’s very unhappy, isn’t he, Father?”

“I don’t think unhappy’s quite the word, Tom. How about mean-spirited, tight-fisted, miserable old skinflint?”

“I think that’s a little unkind, don’t you, Father? I’m sure he didn’t mean all those nasty things he said.”

“Well, Tom. That’s because you’re such a kind boy, always thinking the very best of folk. Either that or you’re a blithering idiot.”

“I expect you’re right, Father.” said Tom as they prepared to walk home through the snow.



Chapter 1. The Taking of Willy Wotsit

February slowly melted into spring. Not a bright, sunny, gambolling sort of spring but at least the precipitation soaked into the ground rather than lying obstinately on top of it. Torver was awakening from the long winter vigil and the occasional villager ventured out to see to his sheep or to walk the weary way to one of the local hostelrys. But all was not well in the Parish of Torver. The streets were mostly deserted and little stirred apart from the odd twitch of a curtain or the aforementioned scurrying drunkard bent upon furthering his chosen hobby, or, in some cases, profession. A half chewed bone, still bearing a trace of red meat, lay mouldering on the village green; even the village dogs had abandoned their scavenging. And no birds sang. Torver was afraid.

In the access road at the back of Green Cottages a small boy sat on log-pile, his hat beside him and a finger-mucky copy of the Beano stretched between his hands. He would, and should, have been in the house, but the bustle of housework and the scream of the vacuum cleaner had driven him to seek quiet solace outside those protective walls. He was lost in the sane world of the Bash Street Kids, Lord Snooty, Minnie and Dennis. ‘You stay close to the house,’ his mother had shouted above the drone of the infernal sucking machine, so he sat on the log-pile, leaning against the outhouse wall, whilst Plug and Smiffy...

Mrs Wendy Wotsit went wigi... rigid. She looked hard at the Hoover seeking the source of the sound; that other sound that didn’t quite fit. Was it something - a plastic toy or an abandoned jam tart - stuck in the pipe? No, it was different... sort of... not mechanical. Sort of... animal. Reaching down she switched off the machine and stood, half bent, listening. But there was silence. No, more than silence. Deeper. It was the intense silence of forbidden sound, sound that had been driven out... suppressed... obliterated! She crossed quickly to the back door and peered outside.

“Willy... WILLY!... Where are you, Willy? I told you to stay...” She saw the little cap lying headless on the log-pile, and the comic in the road, its pages flapping gently in the breeze. “Oh, No! Not my little Willy! Help, help, My little Willy’s gorne!”

Her cries alerted Captain Hummers (Hubert Whinstone Hummers, Capt. R.A. Pay Corp – ret’d), the retired Headmaster of St Cuthbert’s School for Boys. Capt. Hummers was searching for something beneath the geometrically pruned privet in his garden opposite (probably, given his several retirements, for a purpose in life), and he hurried across to investigate. “Whatever’s the matter, Mrs Wotsit?”

“It’s my little Willy, he’s gorne!”

“Gorne?”

“Yes, gorne! Look, there’s his hat and comic.”

Several other residents of ‘The Cottages’ were beginning to gather, emerging from their back doors and looking nervously up and down the lane before joining the Head and the distraught Mrs Wotsit. Mrs Emeline Hall, a kindly woman of independent means, accompanied as always by her daughter, Hazel, hurried from the higher numbers to offer comfort to her unhappy neighbour, and Ezekiel Undercrag, the farmer, emerged from the lower end with his trusty twelve-bore ready to shoot anything that might need shooting. Fortunately for Mrs Wotsit, Emeline arrived first.

“What’s going on, Mother?” asked Hazel, standing in her proper place to the rear and just a little to the right of the matriarchal presence.

“Do be quiet, Hazel.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“And don’t fidget.”

“No, Mother.”

“Now, what is the matter Wendy? What’s happened?”

The Captain intervened, intent upon taking control in his usual authoritative manner as Wendy Wotsit wept. “It’s little Willy Wotsit; she says he’s gone!”

“Gorne?” chorused the fast assembling company, glancing right and left as though Capt. Hummers might be lying to them.

“Gorne where?” asked Ezekiel, as usual not quite grasping the situation and, as usual, being ignored.

“Yes, Gorne,” said the Captain. “Look, there’s his hat and comic.”

The evidence was undeniable. The little cap, unsupported by an infant head, and the comic blowing in the wind clearly indicated an absence of Willy, and anyone still beset by doubts on the matter could simply have examined the cap to read the label therein. It was but proof of Mrs Wendy Wotsit’s and the Captain’s reputations for honesty that no-one troubled to do so.

“Gorne, gorne. Oh Willy, Willy, where have you gone?”

“I already asked that!” said Ezekiel, and was ignored again.

Poor Mrs Wotsit was now beside herself, a formidable prospect in such a well-fed woman. Several of the local ladies were gathered around her now, each one offering words of comfort and, doubtless, advice on the proper way to deal with the discovery of a missing child. Someone (there is always someone) suggested tea, and several heads nodded in wise agreement. Mrs Hall stayed, defending her position as Comforter-in-Chief with almost patriotic zeal, whilst a lesser person was dispatched *post haste* to put the kettle on.

“What’s going on, Captain?” Hubert Hummers visibly quaked under Mrs Hall’s harsh stare as though he had been accused of personally abducting the hapless child. Maybe she thought he had, the concept of innocence presumed prior to conviction being one to which Mrs Hall would not have subscribed.

“It looks like the beastie’s got ‘im. That’ll be... what... the seventh since Valentine’s

Day?”

“What on earth has Val...”

“Gorne to the beastie, gorne, gorne...”

“Yes, thank you, Wendy. Just get a grip on yourself, girl, and be quiet for a moment, there’s a dear.” Mrs Hall was not one to be interrupted, particularly by unnecessary emotional outbursts. “What has Saint Valentine’s Day got to do with it, Mr Hummers?”

“Well, nothing. It’s just that it...”

“Then kindly refrain from introducing irrelevancies. I’m quite sure we have enough to concern us without inappropriate references to religious festivals.” Mrs Hall was the Parochial Church Council. There were others serving on it, but no-one that mattered. “Now, Wendy, dear. Are you sure your Willy’s gorne... er... gone? He could just be hiding somewhere, you know.”

“Gorne, gorne. Where has my Willy go...?”

“Yes, yes, that’s quite enough of that, Dear. Now when did you last...?”

“It’s really so annoying. I’ve just paid for his new school uniform.” Mrs Wotsit explored the faces of the ladies, appealing for understanding, and they nodded knowingly at her sad plight. “Do you think they’ll refund if I can find the receipt?”

“Oh, I expect so, Wendy, Don’t you fret yourself now.” said Mrs Ashgill from Number 9.

“Wet meself?”

“No, FRET YOURSELF, dear. Ah, bless her. She’s a bit confused. It must be awful for her, and he was such a nice little lad.”

“No he wasn’t!” said a voice at the back which was, quite properly, ignored. It was probably Ezekiel.

But Wendy Wotsit ploughed on as the full implications of the tragedy began to flood into her mind. “Oh dear, oh dear. If I’d known the Beastie was going to eat him I wouldn’t have bothered giving him his tea. I do hate wasting good food. And then there’s his appointment at the dentist’s tomorrow morning. I expect I shall have to cancel it now.”

“There, there, Mrs Wotsit. He was a grand wee laddie, but I expect you’ll have another one before you know it.” This from the Captain anxious not to let his authority slip away completely.

“But my poor Willy! Gorne, gorne...”

“Yes, dear. We know...”

“... and never called me mother!”

“Oh, I’m sure he must have done, Mrs Doubleyew. I expect you’re confused.”

“Oh no, not really. He usually called me a silly old wassock!”

Sympathy for Willy Wotsit was rising by the minute.

Mrs Hall, Hazel in tow, and the Green Cottage Ladies hauled the distraught Wendy

Wotsit away for tea and sympathy at Number 7. Capt. Hubert was, of course, excluded from the gathering, he being a man and therefore not qualified to assist in any matter pertaining to women's needs, or indeed any other apart from earning money and carrying out the rubbish. Fully nine minutes had passed since Willy's absence had been discovered, of which four had sufficed for the mystical Torver Telegraph to relay the news throughout the village, and the remaining five had undoubtedly set tongues a-wagging in most of the surrounding conurbations. Tractors and Landrovers were arriving from all directions and booted feet pounded the tarmac as Ralph and Roy (Hollis and Cragg respectively) arrived hotfoot from the pub. And Nobby on his bike, of course.

"What's up, Cap'n?" This from Nobby Nibthwaite, farm worker and, in the view of many, village idiot, who would never presume to address so illustrious a figure as the Captain by his Christian name.

"It's the beastie again, I'm afraid. Looks like it's got young Willy Wotsit."

"What, little Willy Wotsit, Wendy Wotsits boy?"

"Yes, that's the one, Nobby," the Captain replied with his usual patience when dealing with the mentally sub-normal (otherwise known as schoolboys). "Willy Wotsit, son of Walter and Wendy Wotsit. I expect you worked it out from the names; you know, Willy and Wotsit, making Willy Wotsit."

"Well, that'll deferably be 'im then."

"Well done, Nobby."

A young lady joining the throng was immediately noticed by Nobby and added a weakness in his knees to that in his head. This was Patty Foulds, milkmaid, daughter of a local farming family and pretty in a lost, Bambi-ish sort of way. She was also a femme fatale in the very limited range that encompassed Nobby Nibthwaite who, in her presence, was deprived of that small degree of wit endowed upon him by the Good Lord in a moment of divine charity (or absent mindedness) some eighteen years before. Nobby was in love.

"Hello, Patty."

It was at this moment that another appeared. It could not be said that he arrived because that would have involved some sort of movement towards, as from somewhere else. It was more that he was suddenly there, on the edge of the crowd having... well... appeared. A flash of light or a puff of smoke might have eased his arrival into the group, but there was none such, and the only sense of anything remotely magical lay in the sudden transfixion of Patty Foulds with the vision of loveliness that, in her eyes, was the visitor.

"Hello, Nobby," she replied, though her heart clearly wasn't in it.

"I brought you these," said Nobby, producing a bunch of small blooms from behind his back. He had picked them early in the morning from somebody's garden and carried them around all day in the ever expectant hope of bumping into his true love. That he and his posy had met several people through the morning without arousing a single comment was simply a testament to the kindly, understanding nature of Torver folk. A balloon on a stick would

have been greeted with the same blessed tolerance. Certainly with more understanding.

“Thank you, Nobby.” Patty accepted the gift and, absent mindedly, tossed it over her shoulder, her eyes still fixed on the mystical stranger. Others noticed the exchange and attention generally was drawn to the new arrival; or, with Patty and Nobby in mind, simply ‘rival’ might be more to the point.

The stranger was... strange. He (for there was a certain he-ness in his stance and posture) was not exactly all that one might expect a ‘he’ to be. He was tall and slim in a distinctly... shapely sort of way, rather more in and out than strictly up and down. The legs were doing something quite wonderful with a pair of green tights rising out of tall, brown leather, thigh-length boots with buckles across the feet. A red tunic strained slightly against a row of brass buttons giving the impression of something markedly more interesting than a manly chest, and short hair supported a green hat, pointy at the front in a rather Robiny Hoodish way with an enormous red feather exploding several feet to the rear. Given what has already been described, Dear Reader, you will now not be surprised to hear that he wore a sword in a jewel-encrusted scabbard at his well-rounded hip. If a single word were required to describe him, ‘handsome’ would fall several degrees short of the mark, whereas ‘gorgeous’, though coming naturally to the mind, might be a little difficult for most men to utter in bar-room company.

The other men present gawped awestruck at the stranger, each man taking great care with his features so as not to display any sign that might suggest any possible deviation from a manly disposition.

“So, who might you be?” asked Hubert Hummers, employing a markedly deeper vocal register than was his usual habit.

“I’m Jack!” said the stranger, raising his right leg and slapping his thigh in a manner which caused a united flinch from the assembled company.

“Are you sure?” said Hubert, looking him up and down.

“Certainly am!” Another slap and corresponding mass flinch. “I’m Jack the Giant Killer.”

“Really?” said Roy, also looking him up and down. “On’y you don’t look that big to me.”

The newcomer looked at Roy with lofty disdain. “I kill giants,” he said.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” said Roy, trying not to smirk. “It’s just that when you said... I thought... sorry.”

“Yes, Jack the Giant Killer, here to save the day, and I hear you guys are having trouble with a beastie.”

“Beastie...” repeated Patty, moonily, moving a little closer to the apparition.

Jack, noting the female interest, brought his hands to his hips, assumed a stance reminiscent of the cheaper kind of comic-book superhero and gazed off into nowhere, presenting Patty with a noble profile. He held the pose for a brief moment before placing a foot on the log-pile, leaning an elbow on his knee and addressing the gathering: “So why don’t one of you chaps tell me what this beastie is all about then, eh?”

“So, is there a lot of call for giant-killing these days?” asked the Captain, trying to suppress a grin.

“You’d be surprised, Matey!” said Jack.

“I expect we all would.” said Hubert.

“Never mind all that,” said Jack, “it’s this beastie I want to hear about.”

“Hear about...” repeated Patty, her eyes glazing over.

“Well,” said Nobby, moving purposefully between Jack and Patty, “It all started a couple of months back when the village children started to disappear every Tuesday at teatime and people kept hearing roaring and growling and that sort of stuff and it’s Tuesday today and it’s teatime and little Willy Wotsit’s just disappeared and we reckon it’s the beastie what’s got him like all the others and...”

“Ah ha! Just as I thought.” said Jack, not forgetting to add another slap to his beautifully proportioned thigh. “A child eating beastie. A job for me, I think!”

“But I thought you said you did giants!” said Ralph, who did things to moles that are not discussed in polite company.

“It’s prob’ly just a normal size beastie, not what you’d call giant as such.” said Roy, who did things to sheep that city folk simply don’t understand.

“Makes no difference to us Jacks. Size doesn’t matter.”

There was an audible sigh of relief from the men as Jack continued.

“Giants, beasties, dragons, we slay ‘em all. You just lead me to it and I’ll have his head on a platter before you can say ‘Jack the Giant Killer.’”

“Killer...”

“Please be quiet, Patty. So, are there a lot of you, then?”

“Of us what?” asked Jack.

Hubert looked him up and down again. “Well, you... er... Jacks, I suppose... whatever you are?”

“Oh, yes. Hundreds of us. It’s a profession, you see. My father was a Jack and his father before him. We’ve been slaying giants and dragons for generations.”

“Generations...”

“Yup! Jack’s the name, slaying’s the game,” and another slap echoed off the beautiful thigh.

“Look, would you mind awfully not doing that!” said Hubert, recovering from this latest flinch.

“Sorry, (*Slap*) Goes with the job, Sir.”

“Job Sir...”

“That’s right, Missy. All part of the job” said Jack, noting the growing interest from the besotted Patty Foulds. “Heh, Honeybun, I don’t think you’re getting my best side.” He stepped away a pace, turned and assumed ‘the stance’, presenting the other cheek, although his motives may have been other than strictly Christian.

“Never mind your *best* side,” said Nobby, now standing to Jack’s rear. “I bet she’d give a years wages to have your backside!”

Jack turned, his hand reaching for the hilt of the sword, whilst Nobby’s came up in a single fingered gesture of greeting. Patty moved to intervene, much to the disappointment of the company who were united in confusion over this strange stranger, probably over whether to hit him or hug him. The Captain, a man of more sober temperament (at least, when he was sober) grabbed Nobby and hustled him away before turning to the giant killer.

“OK... er...” (*another glance at the legs*) er... Jack. Why don’t you... er... toddle off and we’ll call you just as soon as we’ve located this beastie thing, and then you can come and do... er... whatever it is you do. OK?” Taking Jack by the elbow he propelled him gently along the road intent upon releasing him once a sufficient momentum had been achieved to ensure a continuing ‘away’ motion. But then a thought occurred to him. “Look, Jack. old fellow. Do you mind if I ask you a question”

“Ask away, Sir. I expect you want to know how a chap such as I can face giants and dragons, and beasties of course, with such determination and fearless resolve.”

“Well, not exactly. No, I was more wondering... sort of... well, not to put too fine a point on it... er...”

“Yes, I’m listening. Spit it out, man.”

“Well, what I wanted to ask was... Are you in fact... all things considered, and all that... a boy?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, you know. How can I put it? Are you really a boy, in the sort of... up here and down there sense of the meaning of the thing?”

“Oh, I see what you’re asking. Well, in principle, yes!”

“In principle... Yes, I see.” Hubert Hummers didn’t actually ‘see’ at all, but he did feel that to pursue the enquiry any further might lead him into a realm of difficulty for which he was not best equipped. As to what Jack was best equipped for he was perhaps better off not knowing.

“Well, off you go then... er... Jack.”

Jack strode off in a dignified huff, presenting a departing rear that held the attention of every man present until it disappeared around the corner, following which every man present pretended he hadn’t noticed.

“What the hell was that?” asked Nobby, mincing a few paces with his hand on his hip.

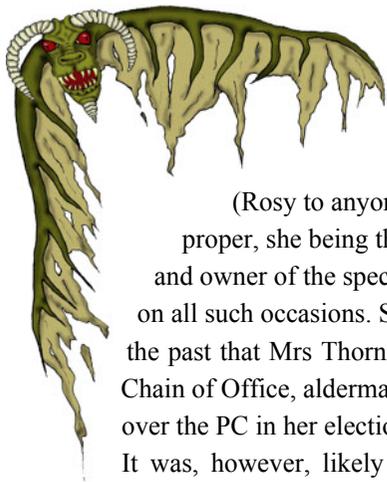
“Jack...” said Patty, even more lost than usual.

“I don’t know.” said Hubert, “I think it was one of those confused people you hear about. You know, the sort that likes play-acting... pretending to be what they’re not.”

“You mean a thespian!” said Ralph, thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Hubert. “I expect that’s what I mean.”

Chapter 2. The Name of the Beast



Poor Willy Wotsit had hardly been digested when the villagers of Torver gathered in the Schoolroom for an emergency meeting. Mrs Rosetta Lea Thorne

(Rosy to anyone who dared) was in the chair as was only right and proper, she being the perennial Chairperson of the Torver Parish Council and owner of the special, high-backed, red leather and oak chair deployed on all such occasions. Some unkind and scurrilous knaves have suggested in the past that Mrs Thorne's donation of the Chair, along with the Mayoral Chain of Office, alderman's cloak and tricorn hat, had exerted some influence over the PC in her election to the chairpersonship, but this is arrant nonsense. It was, however, likely that were Mrs Thorne ever to be deposed as Chairperson she would take the chair, chain, hat and cloak home, and that would never do.

Emeline Hall was there with the rest of the Parochial Church ladies corralled in a corner to await her leadership in the forthcoming fray. Nobby Nibthwaite held the back-left corner, casting longing glances towards Patty Foulds who studiously ignored him. In fact most of the village had turned out, mostly in expectation of a decent spread being prepared in the kitchen by those special ladies who were raised by their mothers to a lifetime of delicate sandwich making. Every village has them. Wendy Wotsit stayed away, overcome by grief, and was spending the evening on the computer listing toys for sale on eBay to take her mind off things. And Walter Wotsit was in the Church House Inn drowning his sorrows, not that this was any change from his normal routine, but old Walter was known to be a man with a permanent world of sorrows to drown. Jack the Giant Killer was nowhere to be seen.

"Order, order." Mrs Thorne banged her gavel rigorously (she had donated that too) and fifty chairs scraped another layer of varnish off the floor as the meeting got underway. "As many of you will know by now, Little Willy Wotsit was taken by the beastie this afternoon at teatime and..."

"There's been another one!"

"What! Who said that?"

Ezekiel Undercrag, the local farmer, rose slowly to his feet to address the company. "Tant just young Willy Wotsit. There's been another takin' up by Crook."

There was a general hubbub as neighbour enquired of neighbour the identity of the latest poor lost child.

"Tant nothin' to worrit about. This'n's a tourists brat from t'caravan site. Not one o't ours."

An audible sigh of relief swept the hall along with comments of, “Thank goodness for that,” and “Hope it was a nice fat one.” Tourists were not considered by locals to be important people, and caravaners hardly people at all, just a useful source of revenue for the pubs in the summer.

“Thank you, Zeke. Now, if we can get back to business, something needs to be done about this beastie or we won’t have any kids left for the Christmas Party this year. And I needn’t remind you all that we bought a new Santa outfit for last year’s and it’s hardly been worn. (*general murmurs of agreement*). So, I think it’s about time we set to and deal with this beastie before...”

“On a point of order, Madam Chairperson...” But before Amelia Hall could elucidate her point of order the door burst open and Hubert Hummers bounded in clutching an armful of tattered parchments and manuscripts.

“Listen, everybody. I’ve just been going through...”

“Order... ORDER!” The wooded gavel hammered the desk mercilessly as the meeting erupted in unseemly and cacophonous disorder. “Kindly address the chair, Mr Hummers”

“Sorry, Madam Chair. But I’ve just come from your house and...”

“From my house! What, if I may make so bold as to ask, were you doing at my house?”

“I’m sorry Mrs Thorne, but there was no-one home and it was rather urgent so I let myself in with the key you keep on a nail just inside your garden shed.”

“Oh, well done, Mr Hummers. Just tell everyone where I keep the key why don’t you.”

“Well, it was on the left where it always is, just above that old collections of magazines about...”

“Yes, thank you Mr Hummers. I’ll move the nail tomorrow,” said Mrs T in a voice that could shrink steel. “But that still doesn’t explain what...”

“Ah, well, I needed to have a rummage in your drawers where...”

“I beg you pardon...?”

There was a titter, quickly silenced by a bang from the gavel.

“...where you keep the old Parish archives. And I found it,” said Hubert, holding up his precious bundle of documents. “It’s all in here.”

“Pray, what is all in where, Mr Hummers? I must say you are trying the patience of the Chair.” When it came to righteous indignation Mrs Thorne could deliver it double-barrelled.

“The Beastie,” cried Hubert with a level of excitement hardly becoming a Headmaster. “It’s all in the Tomes.”

The ensuing silence amply complimented the blank look spread across fifty dumb faces and even the Chairperson was lost for words. Mrs Amelia Hall opened her mouth to speak, but another bang from the gavel closed it again.

“The Tomes of Torver!” insisted Hubert, but still no sign of recognition amongst the throng.

“The Tomes of Torver?” they chorused in commendable unison.

“Yes, the Tomes of Torver!”

“What’s that when it’s at ‘ome?” from little Sonny Banks, hidden deep in the crowd, was followed by more tittering and more furious gaveling until it was silenced.

Hubert Hummers continued with a patience born of thirty years teaching in comprehensives. “The Tomes of Torver is the old folk lore written in ancient runes in olden days by the early Cumberfolk who roamed the fells in ragged trousers, way back before the Romans.”

“So then the Romans took over the roamin’, did they?” More tittering.

The gavel left the Chairpersons hand like a guided missile, flashed passed the astonished faces of several flinching villagers and bounced off the noggin of a small, pimply youth at the back of the hall before impaling itself, handle first, in the notice board on the back wall.

“BLOODY OUCH!” cried the pimply youth.

“And we’ll have less of the language, Army Rigg!” said the Chairperson in her best ‘she-who-must-be-obeyed voice.’ “I shall be speaking to your father in the morning. Now, fetch that gavel back here and keep your gob shut from now on.” Army obeyed, retrieving the weapon and sheepishly creeping through the crowd to the front. He placed the gavel on the table just out of Mrs T’s reach and scurried back with his hands protectively clasped behind his head. Unfortunately, the hands did not save him from a brutal clip round the ear from Mrs Hall as he passed. Or from a kick up the backside from Zeke Undercrag.

The gavel inflicted further damage to the official table as the Chairperson called the meeting to order once again. “I am of course familiar with the Tomes of Torver...” she lied, never having even glanced at the village archives which had gathered dust in her old chest of drawers since being dumped there by gaslight some time before the Peasant’s Revolt, “... but I will ask Mr Hummers to continue since he has raised the matter. We will speak later on the matter of his inappropriate rummaging.”

“Well, as I said,” said Hubert, never afraid of a bit of repetition when he had an audience to enthral, “it’s all in the Tomes.

“So, what does it say?” someone asked.

“You might well ask.”

“Yes, I just did. So, WHAT DOES IT SAY?”

“Well, it says lots of things, but the important thing is that I think I now know what yon beastie is.”

A loud murmuring from the back of the hall interrupted the proceedings as Nobby Nibthwaite and Army Rigg conducted a conversation of their own. Precisely who said what is unimportant in respect of two people who boasted the combined IQ of a banana.

“Yeah, but does he really know or does he just think he knows?”

“I don’t know!”

“I know you don’t know, but does he know?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either.”

“I know, why don’t you ask him?”

“Well, if you know, I don’t need to ask him!”

“But, I don’t know.”

By this time all eyes were directed aft as the gavel began a furious tattoo on the table top and Mrs Thorne exploded in a blast of Anglo-Saxon that could not possibly be assigned to the printed page for fear of making the edges curl. The miscreants fell silent melting from view at the back of the crowd and Mrs T returned to the business at hand.

“Please continue, Captain Hummers.”

“Ah, well, it says in the Tomes that yon beastie is a Graak Kradak Karak Dak.”

“Well, you can’t say fairer than that, can you?” someone said.

“I can’t say it at all, not without gobbin’ all down me shirt front.” said Nobby, still smarting from his dressing down and prepared to risk all for his dignity. He was ignored by the Chair.

“Yes, well, it’s in ancient runes, see,” continued Hubert, “but being a scholar I have been able to translate the runes.”

“SO, WHAT IS IT?”

“Its... It’s...”

“Monty Python’s Flying Circus!”

“NOBBY NIBTHWAITE! If I have to speak to you again...” BANG! BANG! BANG! BA... The gavel head snapped clean off its handle, described an arc of Pythagorean splendour through the rafters and disappeared into the back of the crowd, as did the face of old Mr Rosehill who had not been alert enough to see it coming. Several villagers rushed to render first aid, ignored by the important people at the front who turned their attention back to Mr Hummers, whilst the Chairperson stared at what remained in her hand, an item which, without the qualifying appendage of its business end, could only be described as a short stick.

“It’s the Blethering Black-hearted Bloodbeast of Blea.”

A frisson of panic swept the assembly with several weaker souls dropping to their knees in horror at the revelation and clasping their hands in prayer, until someone had the wit to realise that none of them knew what the hell the Headmaster was talking about.

“The WHAT?”

“The Blethering Black-hearted Bloodbeast of Blea,” repeated Bill.

“Blimey!”

“Blast!”

“Bloody hell!”

“Blugger!”

The final contributor to the oath-fest received a few withering looks.

“So what is this Blinking Bluthery Blob thing?”

“The Blothering Blincky Bled Blost of Bloo. No, hang on a minute. The Blathering Bled Bluck Blist... No, that’s not it. I had it a minute ago. The Bl...”

“Sounds like a load of illegibly illiterate illogical alliteration to me,” said Mrs Hall, who was educated.

“A what?” said Ralph, who wasn’t.

“Oh no, it’s worse than that,” said Bill. “The Blothering Blick... whatever is a monster from the beginning of creation, forged in the fiery pits of hell; the most fearsome, ferocious, blood-curdling beastie that ever roamed the earth.”

“Ere, don’t ‘old back, Bill. Just tell it like it is!”

“You could think of it as the Beast of Beelzebub. You don’t wanna meet him on a dark night, I can tell you.”

“So, where’s this Blithery Blim Blam Beelzeblob thing sprung from, that’s what I’d like to know?”

“Well,” Hubert continued, “according to the Tomes, it used to roam around the Lake District adding superfluous letters into people’s spellings just to confuse folk. There was a time when it stuck an extra WI into the old village of Blath down by the lake so as nobody knows how to pronounce it anymore, so all the women of the county rose up, formed a mighty organisation out of the new letters, and pelted the Bloodbeast with jars of home-made jam and chutney. They drove him down into the dark caverns below Bleathwaite where he slept for a thousand years in the back row of a Commoners meeting.”

“Well, it can’t be that frightening if a bunch of womenfolk drove it away.” This from Roy.

“Ah, bless him.” said Ralph. “He’s obviously never sat in on a WI meeting.”

“You watch your mouth!” Mrs Thorne, chairperson of the TPC, the WI, the Ladies League, Women Against Profanity, practically every other organisation that boasted a ‘Chair’, and the current meeting, was seldom inclined to tolerate criticism. Seldom in the sense of NEVER!

Inappropriate nods and mutterings of ‘jam’, ‘Jerusalem’, ‘God help us’ etc. ceased immediately.

Ralph rushed in to change the subject. “If this thing has been asleep for yonks how come it’s suddenly roaming around here eating our nippers?”

With a sense of timing only usually found in Hollywood movies and the cheaper kind of fiction, Bob Scratchit chose this moment to make his entrance.

“Bob! Good to see you. How’s that old scroat, NaPpA?”

Bob paused for several minutes to catch his breath whilst he unwound about eight yards

of scarf from his neck, dropping it neatly into a pile on the floor. “Worse than usual, but listen. I just got back from work and I reckon His Lordship’s up to something. I think he’s behind this business of the children disappearing. And it’s got something to do with Gaviscon.”

“Yeah, I know that one,” shouted Nobby from the back. “Gaviscon, oh Gaviscon. I hear your sea winds blowing...”

Mrs T grabbed her gavel and banged the desk in fury... and complete silence, forgetting that the head was still lost somewhere amongst a hundred milling feet. A fist of iron took over the assault and Nobby melted back into the distant abyss of bodies.

“Gaviscon you say? Beats me,” said Roy, “although his bloody Lordship certainly gives me the belly-ache.”

“LorD NaPpA the Nasty, eh? I think that answers your question, Ralph.”

“Er, what question was that?” asked Ralph who’s attention span could be measured in nano-seconds.

“About who’s behind it all. That dastardly old dung-heap’s got the doing of this. He must have found the ‘awakening’ spell.”

“What awakening spell would that be?” asked Ralph.

“The one that awakens the Blethering Black-hearted Bloodbeast of Blea from his thousand ye...”

“Oh, well done, Huby. You got it right!” said Roy.

“Order, order,” shouted the Chairperson.

“Pint of Guinness!” shouted Nobby from the back.

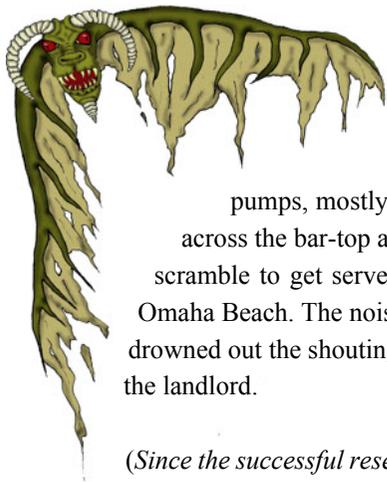
“Good idea, Nobby,” said Roy before Mrs T could intervene. “I suggest we all adjourn to the Kirk’us and continue this discussion over a pint o’ the Old Peculiar.”

“Order, order,” cried the Chair again, her plea drowned out by the scraping of chairs in the general rush towards the door.

The Schoolroom emptied in less than a minute leaving just the Chairperson and Mrs Hall at the head of her small flock of ladies.

“Oh, what’s the point?” The ladies filed out in good order and Rosy Lea Thorne went in search of the head of her gavel, found it, tried to jamb it back on the handle, failed, dropped both pieces in the waste paper basket and followed the throng to the Kirkus for a stiffener.

As the door closed behind her, Mrs Syke emerged from the kitchen wearing a housecoat and a headscarf rolled tight over pink and blue curlers. “Are we ready for sandwi...? Oh!”



Chapter 3. A Dastardly Plan is Devised

The Torver bar of the Kirk'us Inn throbbed with activity as folk jostled at the bar or crowded round the wobbly tables. Beer flowed in torrents from the pumps, mostly into the glasses, but with a fair gallonage slopping across the bar-top and washing back and forth across the floor, giving the scramble to get served the dramatic look of the Normandy landings on Omaha Beach. The noise was horrendous as the babble of conversation almost drowned out the shouting of orders and the irate responses from Tiberius Pratt, the landlord.

(Since the successful resetting of Nobby Nibthwaite's nose some years before the humorous implications of Mr Pratt's Christian name had mysteriously evaporated from the minds of his customers.)

Emeline Hall (with Hazel attached) and her small flock were safely seated in the Snug next door being served by a member of the bar staff especially assigned to the role. With the Public bar heaving with potentially drunken humanity it was a less than efficient distribution of labour, but his experience of Mrs Hall's expectations had long since persuaded Tiberius of the wisdom of this special service. Emeline Hall did not queue!

Back at the business end of the tavern Rosy Lea Thorne cradled a large glass of red wine as she tried in vain to call the meeting to order. Nobody took a blind bit of notice until Zeke Undercrag fired his trusty twelve-bore into the ceiling, and even then it took the second barrel to invade the consciousness of the Nibthwaite/Rigg gang around the dart board.

"I've got guests in room one!" said Tiberius, staring up through the smoking blast hole, his face a mask of mild concern.

"Tourists?" asked Ralph.

"Yes."

"Thank God for that!" said Ralph, and the company joined him in a sigh of relief.

"Now then, everybody," said Hubert Hummers as Mrs T slid quietly under a table, her authority drowning in flower vase of Chateau House Plonk. "What we need here is a brilliant plan to deal with the beastie, so let's have your ideas."

"Well, Sir," offered Nobby through a bubbling haze of Guinness froth, "I was thinking that we could get the Smithy to make Roy a gigormous mole trap, and then we can all go up the fell and find the beastie hole and Roy can put his mole trap down..." He ground to an dribbling halt under the merciless stares of the whole bar.

"Yes. So does anyone have a sensible suggestion?"

"What's going on?" came the distant screech of Mrs Hall from the Posh. "We cannot

hear. Can you all speak up please?"

"Why don't you ladies come through and join us?" yelled Hubert through the service arch.

"Don't be vulgar!" cried Mrs H who regarded the Public bar as a den of vice and debauchery and certainly not a fit place for ladies of delicacy. Even a smart table in the Posh was a considerable condescension for one of such high moral standing. And besides, Hazel was a delicate flower who could not possibly be subjected to the company of course men.

"Who's she calling vulgar?" asked Nobby with Guinness froth dripping off his chin.

"I can't imagine," said Hubert. "Now, can we get on please? The question is, how much time do we have to play with. How many children have we got left?"

A quick tally of the village offspring revealed that several juicy morsels had thus far survived the predations of the Bloodbeast.

"Ere, why don't we lace a nipper with arsenic and..."

The speaker was cuffed into silence as wiser heads took up the debate.

"We can't just keep feeding our children to the Blithery Blibbity Blobbity Bleast. We won't have any left at this rate!"

"I've got it!" said Ralph, grinning from ear to ear. "Why don't we contact all the Scouting organisations and offer them campsites up on the fell. You know, outward bound courses with orienteering and stuff?"

"Yeah," said Army Rigg, "and we could do special camps for fat kids so they can lose weight, you know, like, one at a time. And if they're really fat we wouldn't need so many of them."

"Yeah," agreed Nobby, "and we might even get a government grant. They're really hot on obesity at the moment."

"Like it," said Hubert. "And if we charge their parents twenty pound a head we could make a bob or two while we're about it."

"But that's horrible!"

Everybody stared around looking for the source of that small voice until the forest of legs parted to reveal a little girl in a gingham dress and plats tied with pink ribbons who went by the name of Grace – not the ribbons, the little girl.

"No, no, no. That's enterprise, my Dear," said Hubert to the child.

"You're all horrible," said Grace, a bold child despite her lack of years, and a particularly observant, one some might think.

"She's right, you know!"

Everyone stared at Jack in astonishment. It wasn't what he had just said, but that he had been there to say it, standing amidst the crowd in a place where everyone would have sworn he had not stood a moment before. That a typical villager in Barber coat and green wellies might have occupied that or any other spot in the crowd unnoticed for half an hour, provided he bathed regularly of course, might not have aroused comment, but a refugee from Dick Whittington in red coat and green tights placed a considerable strain on the rules of

credulity. Even the red cap feather broadcast its presence in a vast spray of eiderdown, tickling the faces of at least eight people who had hitherto been unaware of its existence. Nobody did comment, of course. It wouldn't have been polite.

"Oh Jack!" said Patty, who had been hiding somewhere in a corner.

"Patty!" said Nobby, who still fostered fond hopes of one day conjugating his affections.

"Oh blimey," said Hubert Hummers, "it's legs eleven. What do you want?"

"Here to sort out your little beastie problem for you." (*slap*) (*flinch*) "Jack's the name..." (*slap*) (*flinch*) "...slaying's the game. You just show me where he's hiding and I'll have him slayed before you can say 'he's behind you.'" (*slap*) (*flinch*). "Not that he would ever get behind me, of course. Not with my lightning reflexes and intuitive genius." (*slap*) (*flinch*).

"Genius..." said Patty with a sigh.

"Patty...?" said Nobby, pleading.

"Yuck!" said Ralph with the general approval of the company.

Hubert ignored them and tried to concentrate on the apparition. "Yes, thank you... er... Jack, but we don't want you laddering your tights, do we, Sonny Jim. Do you mind?" With a gentle but determined push he sent the dragon-slayer away into the corner and resumed his officiating of the proceedings. "What we need here is a sensible, sustainable plan, based on common sense and meticulous planning. For let us be in no doubt, ladies and gentlemen, the task before us is a formidable one. But I see a window of opportunity here if we are prepared to bite the bullet, take up the challenge and face the future with a steady hand and grim determination. Only then can we hope to go head to head with our destiny in a positive spirit of strength and unity. We must raise the blood-stained battle flag of defiance lest all that we have fought for in the past is cast down and rent asunder in the dark chaos of iniquity. Let it never be said that we, in our hour of peril, did shirk from our responsibilities or that we allowed the dreaded beasts of fear and foreboding to diminish our resolve in the..."

"Here, here!" the people shouted. "Here, here! Here, here! Harrumph, harrumph. Rhubarb, rhubarb." The raucous sound of agreement rose to a mighty crescendo and continued until the headmaster's speech was drowned out and he was reduced to blessed silence.

"So, what's to do then?" asked Roy once the tumult had subsided.

"What I propose," said Hubert, "is that we evacuate the village immediately; send all the women and children away whilst the rest of us hole up on the Kirk's Inn, barricade the doors and form a village battalion to defend all that we hold most dear..."

"Now you're talking," Nobby cut in quickly before the Head got back into his stride. "I'll guard the cellar and Roy here can keep watch over the pumps."

"Yes, and I'll defend the optics against all-comers." added another voice. "Can you wash the glasses, Army?"

"No problem, but we'll need someone to organise the catering and keep the chip pan bubbling."

“Good work, men,” said Hubert, “and I’ll set up a perimeter cordon to protect the entrance so the dray-wagons can get in and out.”

“Sir?” came the still small voice.

“Not now, Grace, love. Ralph, can you handle the tactical deployment of tables and ashtrays? And Zeke, I’ll leave you to arrange the audio entertainment and draw up a rota for the dartboard. OK?”

“But, Sir?” Little Grace Stones was now tugging gently on the corner of the headmaster’s jacket.

“This is grown-up talk, Sweetie. You just run along, there’s a good girl.”

“But, Sir. Why don’t we ask the village Fairy Godmother to help us?”

“Ah bless!” chorused the company in that wonderfully patronising manner all adults adopt when dealing with children.

“Fairy? said Nobby, glancing over towards Jack. “I think we’ve already got one of them.”

“Not a fairy,” Grace insisted from the security of her innocence, “the Fairy Godmother.”

Hubert took pity on the child and gently steered her away to the side. “That would be a jolly good idea in a fairy tale, sweetheart, but, you know, in the real world there aren’t actually any Fairy Godmothers, are there?”

“But there is a Fairy Godmother. She comes and talks to me in the night time when I’m frightened of the dark.”

“Yes, of course she does, Pet.” said Hubert with commendable patience. “But she only lives in your head, you see. She’s not really real, is she?” He turned to a lady who stood by the door. “Mrs Stones, perhaps you could .. er...”

“But she is real,” Grace insisted. “I just close my eyes and wiggle my toes and she comes to me and chases all the nasty demons away. Shall I show you?”

The aforementioned commendable patience and a right clip round the ear fought for Hubert’s attention as Grace tugged even harder with tiny tears welling in her eyes.

“Well now, I think you might be a bit disappointed if you wiggle your wotsits and your Fairy Godmother doesn’t show up, won’t you Sweetheart? Ha ha ha. Why don’t you just play with your doll and leave us grown-ups to deal with it, eh? Mrs Stones!”

Mum tried to coax her away but Grace was not so easily dismissed. She fought her way back to the centre where she sat down on the floor and proceeded to remove her shoes and socks whilst the assembled company looked on in embarrassed silence “It’s really very easy. Look!”



She wiggled her toes.

In the dark recess of a distant corner, half hidden by a wooden pillar, something stirred. Something small and round beneath an enormous black hat ornamented with fruit, little flowers and foliage. Tiny caterpillars dined on the foliage, bees buzzed amongst the flowers and a swarm of smaller insects rose in a swirling, columnar haze almost to the ceiling. As to what might have been burrowing through the fruit, we will not, dear reader, hazard a conjecture. The figure rose from the seat to its full height of four foot six and shuddered violently, shaking off sleep as it struggled to comprehend its whereabouts. "Oh, bloody 'ell!" it said. "Can't a body be left in peace for a moment without somebody wiggling something?" It moved across the bar to where Grace still sat on the floor feeling rather uncomfortable as the spilt slops of the evening soaked through to her knickers. "Oh, Grace. You're not seeing demons in the daytime now, are you?"

"Oh no, Miss. it's all these people who need your help this time."

"What, this lot? Not a chance! I only do children, Dear. Can't go wasting good Godmothering on grown up children. They don't believe in it, see, Dear. Too clever by half, all of 'em." She cast a sneering eye around the assembly as she hauled a bed-sheet sized handkerchief from the depths of her capacious bosom, blew a Trumpet Voluntary into it, closely examined the contents, wrapped them carefully, and then stuffed it all back into that deep, dark domain where mortal man dast not delve.

"Who are you, Madam?" asked Hubert Hummers, flapping an ineffectual hand at the flies.

"I beg your pardon!" the woman responded in high dudgeon. "Don't you go calling me a madam or I'll turn you into something nasty and brutish and stupid."

"I am the Headmaster." said Hubert, rather pompously. He was particularly good at pomposity.

"Funny, I don't remember doing that. Have we met before?"

"If we had I believe I would have remembered," he said, forcing his nose even higher.

"I doubt it at your age. Senile dimensions if ever I saw 'em. So, since I'm here, what terrible misconstrubulation draws the dregs of Torver society into this house of ill-repute of a fine spring evening? Young Grace here seems to think you need my help."

"I believe, Madam, that we have yet to establish who you are. I hope you are not asking us to believe that you are some sort of Fairy Godmother," Mr Hummers chortled, chortling being the usual accompaniment to pomposity and another art of which the Headmaster was an accomplished exponent.

"Well, not so much a Fairy Godmother as you might say," the old lady replied, "more of a Fairy Godelpus. It's sort of an official title."

"Godelpus? Why Godelpus?"

"You call me a madam again and you'll find out, Sunshine! Madam indeed! Now, I'm hungry after me nap an' I ain't got all day to stand around 'ere not eating a fish-paste sandwich so what do you buffoons want?" She turned to the child. "What do they want,

Dear?"

"They want you to stop the Blethering Black-hearted Bloodbeast of Blea from eating the children." said Grace very quietly.

Godelpus took a smart step backwards raising her hands, palms outwards, in a gesture of horror that would have done credit to Rudolf Valentino on discovering the wicked Sultan with his scimitar whipped out. "The Blithery Blinky Blonky Blimp of Bloo? How on earth did you all get mixed up with that nasty piece of pulsating pustulence? Anyway, I thought he fell asleep during one of Zeke Undercrag's boring speeches at a Commoner's Meeting. Don't tell me some idiot's woken him up!"

"LorD NaPpA!" said Ralph.

"LorD Na... I might have guest it! Disgusting child... runny nose... always snivelling. Obviously hasn't improved with age. OK. I'll deal with him. And you'd better leave Tarquin to me as well. I expect I'll come up with something."

There was a stunned silence, which in a community with a combined IQ of... who couldn't even spell IQ, the effect was not too far removed from the norm.

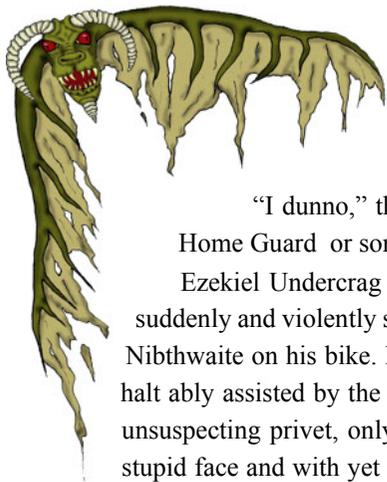
"Who's Tarquin?" asked Ralph.

"The Bluthery Blonky Blinky Blump. I can't be goin' through all that performance every time he pops up." She started to shoulder her way through the crowd in the general direction of the corner from which she had emerged. "Well, if there ain't any warts what need whipping off or verucas to victimise I'll be orf 'ome." She disappeared into the throng which closed behind her in a milling fog of humanity.

"Ere, wait a minute!" said Hubert, elbowing people aside in her wake. "You can't just waltz in here and start..." But when he reached the corner it was to find only the happily inebriated Mrs Thorne emerging from beneath the table with an empty wine glass waving dangerously in her hand.

"ORDER! ORDER!" she bawled before her eyes crossed and she slipped peacefully down again, disappearing into sweet, anaesthetised oblivion.

Chapter 4. The Torver Militia



What are we s'posed to be 'ere for?" asked Roy as he and Ralph arrived at the Captain's gate from opposite directions.

"I dunno," the other replied. "Something to do with re-formin' the Home Guard or some such. I think the Cap'n's goin' to war."

Ezekiel Undercrag and a few others arrived in a small crowd which was suddenly and violently scattered right and left by the rearward assault of Nobby Nibthwaite on his bike. Having dispersed the enemy he careered to a brakeless halt ably assisted by the garden fence over which he pitched head-first into the unsuspecting privet, only to arise a moment later bearing an inane grin on his stupid face and with yet another posy of limp flowers still firmly clasped in his hand. Ezekiel walked over and dealt with both of these abominations by grabbing the posy and rubbing it vigorously in the face until neither was easily recognisable as either. Nobby's misfortunes were then increased by the arrival of his true love and intended recipient of the floral love token, Patty Foulds. The path of true love never... Well, certainly not in Nobby's case. In fact, far from running smooth, it usually ran away.

"I bin wantin' t'talk wi' you, Patty" said Nobby to his intended, although quite who was doing the intending was far from clear. It certainly didn't seem to be Patty. "A'though you can't come t' this meetin' what we're 'avin' on account o' you bein' a girl an' thissen bein' for menfolk ony."

"I'm not interested in your silly meeting Nobby Nibthwaite. I'm meeting Jack at the Wilson Arms on account of we're walking out, if you must know."

"I thought you was walkin' out wi' me. I've spoke t'yer father an' everythin'. I bet 'e don't know you're consortin' wi' strangers."

"I ain't been doin' no consortin' nor any other such, so you watch your mouth. And I don't know what it's any of your business what he don't know and what I know and you don't, so there!"

"You what?"

"Don't you 'you what' me, Nobby Nibthwaite. I'm entitled to know what I want to know and to not have you a'knowing of it if I don't want you to, if you know what I mean. And I know one thing; what my father knows is for me to know and not for you to go poking your big nose into. So now you know!"

Nobby's lips moved, but more as a physical aid to the workings of his brain than as a prelude to any forthcoming utterance. That no utterance was, in fact, forthcoming was simply a testament to the failure of his brain, even supported by his lips, to think of anything to say.

“Well, I’ll be off then,” said Patty. “Mustn’t keep my Jack waiting, must I?”

Poor Nobby could manage no more than a half-hearted wave at her departing rear as his intellect, still grappling with mystery of who knew what, struggled to find a few spare brain cells to deal with his motor functions. Still so struggling, he turned towards the house, mentally called for forward motion, and fell flat on his face.

“He’s in love,” said Ralph, with a small degree of sympathy.

“‘E’s in a ‘eap of ‘orse manure,” said Zeke, with none whatsoever.

Captain Hummers made his appearance at the front door. “We will gather in the back garden if you don’t mind, gentlemen. I’d like to invite you all inside, but we have carpets.” With that he turned smartly to the right and marched around the house, the newly assembled company falling considerably out of step behind him, and Nobby bringing up the rear as he transferred equine poo from the front of his jacket onto his sleeve and thence to the back of his trousers. Once on the patio the Captain assumed a military posture slightly resembling ‘at ease’, with his back to the lawn, and rocked to and fro on his feet with his hands clasped most precisely over his bottom. This sent the intended signal to the troops who formed (involuntarily) a line with their backs to the wall, some of them even coming to a semblance of attention. All that is except Zeke who’s natural contrariness directed him to sit on the step. An observer might have deduced that two of the expected company had failed to arrive, but this was an illusion created by the yard of space left either side of Nobby for olfactory reasons.

“Now then, peasants,” began the Captain, after noting Zeke’s act of insubordination and making a mental note for later disciplinary action, “I’ve called you all here because it’s no good us relying on that daft Fairy Godelpus character to sort things out. I mean, what does she think she looks like? Silly old bat. And anyway, chaps, she’s only a woman and this is men’s work.”

“Quite right, Sir,” said Ralph, the ‘Sir’ coming perfectly naturally to a man of genetic ‘other ranks’ mentality. “They womenfolk’s all right when it comes to the washin’ and the ironin’ and the cuddlin’, but when it’s heroic deeds what needs the doin’ of it’s better left to us. They’s not built for it, you see, Sir. Far to squidgy if you knows what I mean.”

“Yes... er... whatever your name is. And that’s another thing. I think it’s about time we all got better acquainted. We don’t know each other very well, do we? That’s because I’m a Captain, albeit retired, and a headmaster, albeit also retired, and I don’t usually mix with your sort, you being the hoi polloi.”

“Hoi poll who, Sir?”

“Not Hoi Polloo, Hoi polloi.”

“Ah, no, Sir. That’s not him, Sir. That’s me, Sir.”

“What is?”

“I is... I mean, are. Roy Polloi, the village mole strangler, Sir.”

“Good God! Do you really strangle moles?” said the Captain, momentarily diverted from his thread.

“That’s right, Sir. The clue’s in the title, you see, Sir.”

“And is there much call for this... er... mole strangling?”

“Oh yes, Sir. I’m out every day, up the fell, Sir, dawn till dusk. Roy made a strangling gesture with his hands to demonstrate his craft and the Captain mimicked it involuntarily for a moment before returning abruptly to the ‘at ease’.

“So, how many moles have you strangled during your... er... career?”

“Well, I’ve been at it all my life, Sir. Let me see now... er... None, Sir.”

“None?”

“Well, Sir. They’s nippy little fellows, they moles. I gets meself sat by a molehill, Sir, and no sooner have I set up me mole bag and flexed me fingers, but they’re gone, Sir. Whooosh, just like that.”

“Whooooosh?”

“No, more a whooosh, Sir. You was a bit ‘eavy on the ooo’s, if you don’t mind me sayin’, Sir.”

The Captain gave Roy a look of regimental disdain. “Ye...s. Well, anyway. The point is that you’re riff raff...”

“Oh no, Sir. Not me, Sir. He’s Riffraff, Sir.”

“Who is?”

“I am, Sir,” said Ralph. “Ralph Riffraff, Sir.”

“You’re Ralph Riffraff?”

“That’s right, Sir. Ramblin’ Ralph Riffraff, itinerant folk singer and sheep naggler, Sir.”

“Sheep naggler?”

“Oh yes, Sir. It was my father’s trade, Sir. Famous naggler he was. Did you know him, Sir?”

“I sincerely hope not! And how the devil do you naggle a sheep?”

“Well, Sir. You get your leg over it, then grab it by the thrussocks and shove your left hand...”

“Yes, well, we’ll leave it there, shall we? Anyway, you’re obviously a pillock! No! Don’t tell me. You’re Riffraff, he’s Pillock.” The Captain turned to Nobby, recoiling slightly at his odious... no, odorous presence. “So, what is it then? Peter Pillock is it? Percival Pillock? No, no no. I’ve got it. Pathological Pillock, the village axe murderer!”

“Me, Sir. Oh no, Sir. I’m Nobby Nibthwaite. And I think it’s very unkind of you to infer that I’m an axe murderer. I’ve never murdered an axe in my life, Sir.”

“Oh, right! so what do you do, Nobby Nibthwaite?”

“I’m a Bovine Scatological Sanitation Operative, Sir.”

“A what?”

“A Bovine Scatological Sanitation Operative. You see, Sir, unlike these other fellows, I went to aggericultural college up at Newton Riggs and got an eddication. I got papers!”

“I know I’m going to regret this,” Captain Hummers mumbled to himself. “So what does a bovine scatterbrained whatsisname do?”

“That’s scatological, Sir. Well, Sir. I walks behind the cows with me shovel and I shovels up anything what they leaves behind, Sir.”

“You shovel sh…”

“That’s right, Sir, I shovel the ‘scat’ as we call it in the profession. But decent folks usually calls it manure, Sir, if you don’t mind me saying. Begging your pardon, Sir.”

The Captain accepted the admonition without comment, probably more out of despair than any finer feeling for the idiot who had delivered it. “I see from the state of your apparel, Mr Nobthwaite, that you have come here straight from work.”

“Oh no, Sir,” replied Nobby as he vigorously brushed lumps of green matter onto the patio, “this ain’t working scat. This is some what I picked up in the lane on the way ‘ere, Sir. An’ just to put you straight on a couple o’ things, its ‘orse, not cow, an’ its Nib not Nob.”

“Is it? Good. Well, I’m sure you know your business best.”

“Yeah, and me name, Sir, beggin yer pardon.”

Captain Hummers opted for a tactical retreat, returning to the matter in hand.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll get to know all you fine fellows in the days and weeks to come so let us get straight to the reason I have gathered you all here today. The point is, men, that the beastie up the fell has to be dealt with and it’s up to us to deal with it. I therefore propose to form the Torver Militia. You fellows will be the troops and I, of course, will be your captain.”

“Quite right, Sir, you having a military bent as it were, Sir,” said Roy

“Oh, he does that all right.” added Ralph. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody so militarily bent as what he is. Straight up! In fact, he’s that bent he could almost be a colonel. Militarily speaking, so to speak.”

Captain Hummers felt the ground tremble beneath his authority as the grin on Ralph’s face stretched all along the line, whilst Ezekiel, still reclining on the step, just laughed out loud and slapped his knees. Desperate to retain some hold on his dignity, he decided to dispense with the speech he had been working on all morning and bring the meeting to a close. There is undoubtedly a time for ‘once more-ing into the breach’, but this clearly was not it.

“Right then, troop. We will assemble outside the Wilson Arms at twenty two hundred hours in full kit and properly armed, from whence we will proceed along Carr Lane and onto the High Common to deal with the Bloodbeast. Any questions?”

“Twenty two what, Sir?”

“Ten o’clock! Anything else?”

“When you say ‘full kit’, Sir, would that be...”

“Yes! No more questions? Good. SQUAD, SHUN! DISMISS.”

Captain Hummers came smartly to attention, saluted, stamped his feet in a military fashion and marched off through the back door, closing it firmly behind him.

“Mad as a mongoose,” said Zeke, getting up and brushing the dust from his nethers. “So how long has your last name been Riffraff, Ralph Hollis?”

“Since just after Roy’s ‘ere became Polloi. About five minutes I reckon.”

“Right!” said Zeke. “Pity about Nobby though. I shall always think of ‘im as Pathological Pillock from now on.”

“We’re all gonna die,” said Ralph.

“Not if ‘e gets to the blinkin’ blethery blood blister first an’ we all stay well aback of ‘im.” Zeke may not have been much cop at strategic planning but a talent for not being eaten alive was one that came quite naturally to him.

“But s’pose ‘e don’t wanna lead from the front?”

“Don’t you worrit about that,” said Zeke with a small smile. “I’ll be bringin’ up the rear an’ I reckon a loaded twelve-bore up ‘is backside ‘ll do wonders for ‘is moral fibre.”

“I reckon it might at that,” said Nobby, grinning from ear to ear.

“An’ a ‘ot bath before tonight wouldn’t do yours any ‘arm,” said Zeke as he disappeared round the side of the house with the rest of the Torver Militia in his wake.

Captain Hubert Hummers stood smartly ‘at ease’ on the forecourt of the Wilson Arms. He was dressed in full belted battle fatigues from his glistening black boots to his officer cap, the peak of which he would tap with his swagger stick in salute to the bemused diners as they headed for the door. He had been standing thus for nearly twenty minutes, occasionally hauling out and tut-tutting at his pocket watch, and completely unaware of the grinning faces of the Torver Militia downing pints inside at the bar.

“How long are we gonna let ‘im stand there?” asked Nobby of his comrades in arms.

“I dunno,” said Zeke. “Who’s round is it?”

A young woman in a light summer dress, the neckline of which was rather lower than was strictly necessary for the usual interplay of social intercourse, approached the group from behind intent upon addressing the bar steward. The gentlemen parted to allow her access, honourably failing to notice the broad depth of cleavage on display (yeah, right!) and crowded around her to offer protection from any possible danger that might lurk close by.

“Excuse me!” she said as the barman raised his gaze to meet hers. “There’s a gentleman in a uniform standing outside saluting people. He seems a little disturbed. Is he all right?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about ‘im,” said Nobby. “Tha’s just the Cap’n doin’ ‘is dooty.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Tha’s roight, Miss,” added Ralph. “E’s a veteran, see. From the big one; you know, the War?. Never got over it. Affected ‘is mind, see? ‘E could never accept it was all over.”

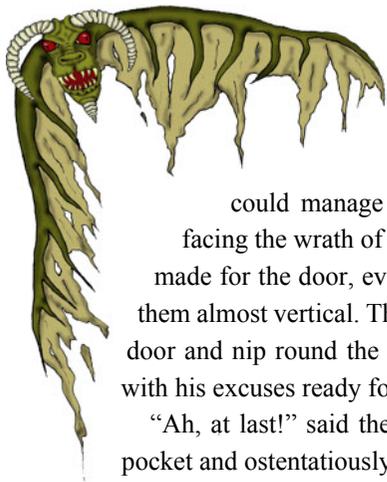
“That’s awful,” said the young woman, glancing through the front window. “Can’t anything be done for him, poor man?”

“Nothin’ at all,” said Zeke, shaking his head in sadness. “They tried everythin’. After they disbanded the Torver Home Guard th’ ole Cap’n went on fightin’ for nigh on five year. Guerrilla fightin’ up in t’ fells, till ‘e wiped out a whole flock o’ sheep in a night attack an’ they brought ‘im down strapped to a stretcher. Mad as a Mongoose, bless ‘im.”

The young woman stared into Zeke’s kindly eyes and backed away, smiling and nodding. She grabbed her partner roughly by the arm and retreated with him through the front door before backing into the Captain, still on duty outside. The scream of terror that ensued caused every face in the pub to turn as she ran to her car and drove away, never to be seen again.

“That young woman’s a bit unstable if you ask me,” said Zeke, turning back to his glass and signalling the barman for another round. “‘S all this violence on the telly I reckon. They lose touch wi’ reality, see?”

Chapter 5. The Battle of Bannishead



The Captain still stood to regulation ‘at ease’ outside the Wilson Arms wondering where his Militia had got to. The Torver Militia, meanwhile, stood as best they could manage inside the Wilson Arms draining a final pint before facing the wrath of their commander and the battle ahead. Eventually they made for the door, every man-jack of them ready to do battle and several of them almost vertical. They were sufficiently *compos mentis* to exit via the back door and nip round the building to approach the Captain from the front, each with his excuses ready for his ‘unavoidable’ late arrival.

“Ah, at last!” said the Captain, tugging his imitation Hunter from his tunic pocket and ostentatiously studying its face. “I believe I said twenty two hundred hours, did I not?”

“Tha’s roight, Sir,” said Roy, glancing at his wristwatch. “I got five to ten. What’s yours say, Zeke?”

“Never carry one,” said Zeke. He stared at the sky and studied the horizon for a moment. “But tha’s a mite afore ten if I’m any judge an’ I b’ain’t never bin far wrong yet.”

The others all looked at their wrists and nodded agreement, a ploy which the Captain would have seen through in a moment had he noticed that Nobby was studying an arm completely devoid of any chronological device whatsoever. Zeke, however, did notice and fetched him a sharp clip side o’ the ear to bring him to order.

“Right, gentlemen. Are you armed?”

“Armed? Oh yes, Sir. Armed and legged, Sir. Two of each.” said Ralph, smirking like a schoolboy and risking a spell on jankers.

“Idiot!” the Captain expostulated. Anyone else would simply have *said* ‘idiot’ and it took a man of the Captain’s superior military authority to carry off an expostulation with decent aplomb. “I mean have you got a decent weapon?”

“Well, I’ve not had no complaints!” said Ralph, still smirking.

“No, no no. A weapon!” The Captain swished his arm about in the air in a series of fine swashbuckling gestures that induced a few barely audible sniggers from his gallant regiment.

“Oh, I see what you mean, Sir. Bag of jelly babies and a knobbly stick, Sir.”

“Bag of Jel... And what do you plan to do with them, pray?”

“Well, Sir. I’ll lure the Beastie close with a trail of jelly babies; sort of lull him into a false sense of security, Sir. Then I’ll bop him on the noggin with my knobbly stick. See, Sir?”

“Yes... Well done, Mr Riffraff. And what about you, Nobby?”

“Ah! No weapons as such, Sir. But listen... ‘*Call yourself a bloodbeast? Huh! I’ve seen more blood in an orange!*’”

“And what’s that meant to be for heaven’s sake?”

“Ridicule, Sir.”

“Ridicule?”

“That’s right, Sir. Ridicule and mockery, Sir.”

“Are you taking this seriously, Nobthwaite?”

“Absolutely, Sir. and it’s Nib, not Nob, Sir.”

“I have a sword, Sir.” said Roy, the epitome of seriousness, although he wouldn’t have known what an epitome was if it fell on his foot.

“That’s more like it, Polloi. But it’s bent!”

“Oh yes, Sir. It’s very old you see, Sir. Used to belong to a gay Cavalier. Gay as a nine bob note he was, Sir.”

“May God preserve us! Well, it’ll have to do I suppose. Now! We’ll take Carr Lane and follow the old cart track up to the quarry where I’ll issue you with your instructions for the operation. Given the rugged terrain we will break step and proceed in open formation with Privates Undercrag and Nobthwaite in the van and Riffraff and Polloi guarding the rear...”

“I’ll guard the rear.” said Zeke.

“No, I want you in the v...”

“I’ll guard the rear.” said Zeke again, fingering his fowling piece.

“Excellent,” said the Captain, the point having been taken, “and Polloi and Riffraff can lead. That’s settled then. Good. Lead on, Riffraff.”

Zeke grabbed the Captain by the elbow and steered him away from the group for a word in his shell-like protuberance. Much muttering ensued as he patiently explained the Captain’s error in the matter of troop nomenclature before they returned.

“Ah,” said the Captain, completely confused and struggling. “So it’s Ralph whasisit? Hollis? And you’re Roy Cragg, I’m told. Excellent. Yes. Glad we’ve sorted that out. Hmm.”

He turned to Nobby. “Well, at least I have your name right, Nobthwaite.”

“It’s Nibthwaite, Sir! Nib, not Nob. Nibthwaite as in... Nibthwaite. Got it?”

“Quite right, Nobthwaite. Now, about time we made a move. Squad...”

But before they could get underway, or even the command to do so could get out, Jack and Patty appeared from the dining room of the Wilson Arms, arm-in-arm and deep in conversation.

“Oh yes,” Jack was saying as Patty hung on every word. “We Jacks go way back, you know. There was my great, great grandfather who had a most unfortunate accident whilst collecting water from the well up the hill. He fell apparently; severe head injury. They applied some ‘old wives’ remedy involving brown paper poultices, but he died from vinegar poisoning.”

“Yes, Jack.”

“Then there was Great uncle Jack who went into market gardening and poultry. Famous for his beans, so they say. Broke his gold tooth on a hard boiled egg – or was it broke his... No matter. Very sad.”

“Yes, Jack.”

“And not forgetting great Uncle Jack Horner who burnt his thumb and then choked to death on a plum stone.”

“Yes Jack.”

“But old Uncle Jack Spratt; he actually died in his bed.”

“That’s nice, Jack.”

“Well, no, not really. It seems his wife rolled over on him in the night and he died of suffocation. Very big woman, Mrs Spratt. Some sort of dietary complaint.”

“Yes, Jack.”

Spotting the Militia Jack stopped and assumed the stance, as was his wont, while his inamorata clung to his side, staring up into his elegant profile.

“Hello, Patty,” said Nobby, clearly downcast.

“Hello, Nobby,” said Patty, clearly not.

“So, what you doing here then?” said Nobby.

“Jack’s going after the Bladdering Bed Post, aren’t you, Jack?” said Patty.

“That’s right, Sweetcheeks. Seems there’s man’s work to be done here and I’m the man to do it.”

“*And I’m the man to do it,*” imitated Nobby, poncing about with his hand on his hip.

“You watch your lip, young Nobby,” said Patty, who was actually younger than Nobby but was playing to the gallery. “Jack’s a real hero, not like you and your daft friends.”

“You just leave this beastie fellow to me, Honeybuns, and we’ll be having beastie burgers for supper tomorrow night.” (*Slap*) (*flinch*).

“You just mind you don’t ladder your tights, Honeybuns,” said Nobby. “And you get away home, Patty. This ain’t no night for a young woman to be out.”

“Don’t you go worrying about me, Nobby Nibthwaite. I got my Jack to look after me.”

“Yeah, and he can probably help you with your make-up, too.”

This exchange continued for several more minutes whilst the Torver Militia looked on in fascination, their eyes switching between the contestants in a fair imitation of the Centre Court crowd at Wimbledon. Even the Captain was loathe to intervene, enjoying the entertainment, until Jack and Patty eventually strode off together up Carr Lane and the spell was broken forever.

The night was dark and dank and dreary, as one might expect at that stage in the tale when brave men sally forth onto the fell intent upon dangerous deeds. It’d be no fun otherwise. The Torver Militia tramped northwards on their mission as the cold mist closed around them and the myriad sounds of nature crept in upon their consciousness. “Whoo, whoo,” went the owl, as her eyes pierced the darkness in search of prey. “Ribbick, ribbick,” croaked the frogs along the banks of the beck and in the grass-lined pools. “Grnaak, grnaak,” went the... well, we don’t know what went grnaak, grnaak but it certainly put the wind up Nobby

whatever it was and kept him ever close to the protection of Zeke's double-barrelled comfort blanket.

Onward they marched up the old quarry road twixt Hare Crag and Torver Beck, climbing ever higher into the gloom of the Cumbrian night. Unseen creatures scampered from their path and an owl hooted from the darkness (*it might have been the same one*). Rising higher past the old Climbing Hut between Eddy Scale and the Little Arrow Intake they pressed on towards Bannishead, suppressing fears suddenly awakened by the shriek of a vixen in the night. The freezing mist that clung to the fell laid her sullen moistness upon the spiders' webs that stroked the faces of the intrepid warriors. Cold, clawing strands of bracken clung to their legs as they climbed and the cold hand of death clutched at brave hearts as they struggled deeper and deeper into the barren wastes of the high fell. An occasional rustle in the undergrowth hinted of ravenous wolves and other savage creatures of the night that dogged our heroes' footsteps, forcing the line into tighter formation and sending shivers down manly spines.

Author's note: You must understand, Dear Reader, that all this is described from the imagination as a more accurate description would have required after-dark field research and this author is not quite that dedicated. OK, so scrub the ravenous wolves!

Through the old quarry workings and the mountainous walls of slag to the crumbling edge of Bannishead Quarry where the waterfall from Torver Beck plummets a thousand feet (*give or take*) into the deep, dark waters of that fearsome chasm. What terrible aquatic creatures waited in that dark and dismal domain to greet a plunging meal from a misplaced foot on the cliff edge high above? Several brown trout, certainly.

With his doughty warriors gathered about him Captain Hummers began to outline his campaign strategy.

"Right then Private Undercrag, I want you to remain here with me and the rest of you will spread out to search for the Beastie. Your job will be to attract its attention – wave your torches about, make a lot of noise, that sort of thing – and when you've drawn him out of his lair you're to lead him this way so that Undercrag and I can deliver the *coup de grace*. Is that understood?"

"And what's a coodeegrar when it's at home?" Nobby's grasp of French was restricted to mustard, knickers and letters.

"It means that we'll shoot it" replied the Captain with his usual infinite patience.

"It don't take two of yer to fire a twelve-bore, does it? So what're you gonna do, Cap'n?"

The Captain treated them all to the sort of self-satisfied smirk that mothers warn their children against as he reached inside his tunic. The hand, when it reappeared, swept wide

across his body, an expansive gesture that had the whole squad diving for the ground in an instant, largely due to the ancient, rust-ridden revolver grasped within it. Several ripe expletives and blasphemies were expressed during the descent and Nobby managed the Lord's Prayer right up to 'Thy Kingdom Come' before he hit terra firma where all his extremities disappeared beneath his upturned posterior.

"What the 'ell d'yer call that?" asked Zeke who, unlike his fellows, had remained upright and unfazed by the incident. Some would have commended him for his unflappable stoicism in the face of adversity. Others, however, were aware of his complete lack of imagination.

"This, Gentlemen, is the .445 Webley VI Service Revolver, the very piece that my father carried to victory in the Great War and which served me equally well through that other little contretemps twenty years later. It'll serve us well tonight, I think."

The squad scrambled to their feet, still very shaken and ever poised to repeat the descent should the occasion arise. *It will.*

"Have you ever actually fired that thing?" asked Ralph, unable to take his eyes off it lest it show any malicious intent.

"Have I ever fired it?" repeated the Captain in mocking tone. "I'll have you know, young Riffraff... sorry, Hollis, that this little fellow and I shared many a hairy moment when the old Bosch were getting uppity. Have I ever fired it, indeed!"

"Met a lot of Bosch in the Pay Corp, did you, Cap'n?" asked Roy.

"Ah... Ah... Little do you know... er... Cragg," said Captain Hubert, brandishing the weapon in a fierce representation of past glories, real or imagined. "Little do you know. Eh? Yes indeed. Hmmm. Yes. Absolutely." "BANG!"

Every face disappeared again, turf-bound, as Zeke leapt on the Captain, wrestling him to the ground and wrenching the gun from his grasp. Nobby completed the Lord's Prayer at lightning speed and the rest contented themselves with calling upon the Son of God (by his various names) for their deliverance. A minute later, with some semblance of calm restored, Zeke carefully emptied the cylinder of bullets whilst the Captain sat on the grass contemplating the ragged, and mostly missing, end of his right boot before peering in the hole to run an anxious inventory of his toes. His schoolmasterly ability to count, at least up to five, served to reassure him, to his great relief, that all his pedal privates were present and correct.

"You wassock!" said Zeke.

"You are addressing a superior officer, Mr Undercrag!" said the Captain having regained, if not his dignity, then the better part of his indignation.

"I am addressing a WASSOCK!, Mr superior bloody officer, SIR!" With that he crouched slightly, spun a half-turn and released the .445 Webley VI Service Revolver sending it spinning into the night in the direction of nowhere in particular."

"But that was my father's revolver!" said the Captain in a definite and explosive expostulation.

“Then he should ha’ bluidywell shot you with it!” replied Zeke whose own mastery of the expostulation was coming on a rare treat.

“But... but...”

“You can go ‘unt fer it in the mornin’, an’ I ‘ope it takes you the rest o’ your miserable life, ya’ wassock!”

You may be forgiven, dear reader, for surmising that all military discipline had completely broken down at this point, but this would be to ignore certain salient facts: the supreme (if misplaced) self-confidence of Captain Hummers, the lack of any suitable candidate to replace him, and the almost complete absence of any discipline in the first place. If any small dignity can be salvaged from this debacle it would be that it merely follows that great tradition of British military incompetence that has sustained the Empire (or what’s left of it) to the present day. If military ineptitude had not ended a number of senior army careers in the late 18th century, Arthur Wellesley might not have gained his promotion to general, he might not have won his glorious victory over the Marathas in the Battle of Assaye in 1803, might not have become Lord Wellington, and we would probably have lost the Battle of Waterloo. We must just be thankful that in a long and brilliant military career the Great Peer never managed to inadvertently shoot himself in the foot. It is just a pity our bold Captain Hummers was not nearly so fortunate or who knows what he might have achieved?

I digress – where was I?

The Torver Militia went into action. At least they went, fanning out into the darkness in pursuit of their quarry, all of them frighteningly aware that the quarry might well be fostering ‘pursuit’ intentions of its own. It was at this point in the operation that the mist, which had hitherto swirled inconveniently around them, thickened to ‘pea-soup’ intensity leaving each man isolated in complete ignorance of his own whereabouts or anyone else’s.

“Ralph! RALPH!”

“Is that you, Roy, or are you just clearing your throat?”

“It’s me. Where are you?”

“I’m over here.”

“Where’s ‘over here’?”

“Well, from wherever you are it’ll be over there.”

“Where’s over there?”

“Over here!”

As may be observed from this exchange the level of confusion was by now complete – confusion of objective, of geography, and most of all, of mind. The fog may be blamed for the first two but the last was probably genetic.

“Ralph! Is that you?”

“Well, it’s either me or Roy. I’m a bit confused. Are you lost, Nobby?”

“No. I know exactly where I am. I’m here. It’s everywhere else I’m not sure about.

“Where are you?”

“I’m over here and Roy’s over there.”

“No I’m not. I’m over here.”

“Have you moved?”

“Only my bowels so far. Have you seen the beastie?”

“Never mind the beastie, I can’t see my hand in front of my face.”

“Maybe it’s not in front of your face.”

“Er... right you are. It’s in my pocket. SHHHHH!”

It is a strange fact that people who are lost in fog, or in the dark, will always walk backwards so as to stare into the blackness they are moving away from. This may be because the ground already crossed is known to be free of obstacles and therefore a more comfortable area for perusal. Or it may be just stupidity. Surely a worthwhile subject for psychological study.

Anyway, thus it was that our intrepid Hunters of the Snark eventually converged, with tender tread, onto a single location from diverse directions, none of them realising the proximity of the others until flesh met trembling flesh.

“Oh gor blimey. You rotters! You frit me half to death.”

“You! What about me? I’ve suddenly got a ‘orrible damp feeling in me trusssocks.”

“Well, stand down wind.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a touch of that too!”

“‘Ere, hang on a minute. Where’s the Captain?”

“I thought he was over there.”

“Over where?”

“Oh, don’t start that again. Maybe the beastie’s got him!”

“Oh ‘eck! Wait a minute. Listen...”

The sounds of furious battle came suddenly from deep within the fog with a correlation of thumps and groans that indicated some success on at least one side of the fight. They heard the ring of steel on stone and the ripping of cloth, punctuated by gasps and cries of pain. Closer it came and closer, and the fearless warriors of the Torver Militia huddled together the better to consolidate their fearlessness. Suddenly a dark shape loomed up out of the fog-bound darkness and a body crashed into the group, bowling them down like skittles. Nobby was the first to recognise the invader as it had landed on top of him.

“Cap’n! Cap’n! Are you all right? Was it the beastie?”

“Oh my God, it was ‘orrible. It was all green and slavering with great rippling haunches and big lumps sticking out the front; thrashing about and hitting me from right and left. And it had a strange sort of smell like... like... like the village hall after the line dancing night.

And it had feathers sticking out of its head and its mouth was all red like... like blood!”

The company stared out into the wall of night, lives flashed before eyes and laundry discovered an urgent need to be done. A scream rent the night as another shape began to form in the mist, a dreadful apparition in green and red, approaching nearer and nearer to the recoiling band of not-quite men.

“That’s it!” screamed the Captain, scrabbling to back away. “Don’t let it get me!”

“Well, that’s shown yon beastie a thing or two. It got away in the dark this time but it won’t be too keen to face Jack the Dragon Slayer again I can tell you.”

“What the f...”

“Jack, Jack, where are you Jack?”

“Over here, Sweetcheeks. It’s all over. Beastie’s gone off mortally wounded and your friends are all here safe and sound. Good job I was around, eh?” (*slap*) (*flinch*).

“Oh Jack, Jack. You’re so brave. You’re not hurt, are you, Jack.”

“Just a few scratches, Cuddlybumps. It’ll take more than that pathetic creature to get the better of Jack the Destroyer.” (*slap*) (*flinch*)

“Oh, Jack!” said Patty.

“Patty!” said Nobby.

“Buggrin’ ‘ell” said Zeke.

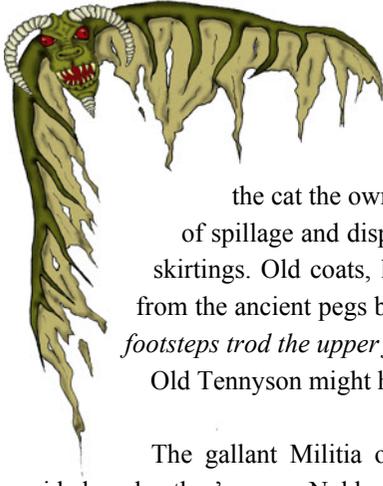
“Anyone for a pint?” said Ralph

“They’ll be shut,” said Roy

“Not after I’ve kicked the door in,” said Zeke.

And the Torver Militia stood down for the night.

Chapter 6. Tiddley Tom



A weary gloom hung over the corner table in the Torver bar of the Kirk ‘us Inn. In the corner by the spittoon the pub’s bull mastiff vigorously debated with the cat the ownership of a dead rat. Old sawdust, hardened by months of spillage and displaced by a thousand boots piled up against the bar and skirtings. Old coats, long forgotten by their owners, hung limp and forlorn from the ancient pegs by the door. *Old faces glimmer’d thro’ the doors / Old footsteps trod the upper floors / Old voices called her from without...*

Old Tennyson might have felt at home in this dreary place.

The gallant Militia of the night before supped their lunchtime pints and avoided each other’s eyes. Nobby squeezed a bag of salt’n’vinegar until the top burst, spraying crisps over the assembled company, but nobody seemed to notice. Roy took a swig of his ale and an errant slice of deep fried potato jammed in his windpipe sending him spluttering to the floor gasping for breath. Nobody seemed to notice that either. Except poor Roy of course.

“It was a disaster,” said Ralph.

“It was a tactical retreat,” said Captain Hubert.

“It were a reet bluidy cock-up,” said Zeke.

“Urgh, gurgh, ghh!” said Roy.

Tiberius Pratt, the landlord, strolled out from behind the bar, polishing a beer glass with dirt-grey rag.

“Woss matter wi’ ‘im?”

The company stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending, until he pointed towards the floor and their collective gaze followed his finger. They all stared at the dying man for several seconds before losing interest and returning to their previous gloom. Tiberius gave the writhing torso a nudge with his foot, then returned to the bar and to the magazine he’d been reading.

“We gotta do summat, Cap’n,” said Ralph. “Womenfolk’s gettin’ a mite agitated an’ if we lose any more kids they’ll be wantin’ to call in the police an’ tha’s the last thing we need.”

A collective shudder went round the group.

“Start gettin’ the plod round ‘ere an’ we’ll be ‘avin’ reglar closin’ times an’ all sorts o’ nonsense,” said Nobby. “Who knows where it’ll all end.”

Roy managed to dislodge the obstruction in his trachea and drag himself back into his seat, his eyes still streaming as the bluey tinge faded from his cheeks.

“Someone will have to go up there and deal with this beastie thing once and for all,” said the Captain. “Someone fearless and fearsome and..”

“Stoopid?”

“Yes, thank you, Nobby. That’s not very constructive.”

“I think you’ll be wantin’ someone de-structive. What about that ponce feller what’s interferin’ wi’ my Patty. At least he’s expandable.”

“Expendable.”

“Yeah that an’ all.”

“Can’t you do it, Zeke?” said Ralph, getting his oar in before attention turned his way.
“You got that shotgun o’ your’n.”

“I got more bluidy sense too.”

“If you please, Sir, I’d like to help.”

“Who said that?” asked Nobby, gazing around in a semi-drunken stupour and seeing nothing.

All eyes eventually focussed on Tiddley Tom Scratchit who, despite the remorseless tap of his little crutch, had approached unheard and unseen from wither they knew not whence.

“What?” said the Captain.

“I’d like to help.” said Tom again, he being a considerate child, ever conscious of and patient with the hearing problems of older people.

“You’d like to help?”

“Yes, Sir. If I may, Sir.” Such politeness in so small an infant.

“And what, might I ask, do you think you can do?”

“I really don’t know, Sir. I am but a poor crippled boy, but I am deeply saddened by the loss of my dear friends and I will do whatever I can to bring cheer and hope to the hearts of good men.”

The company exchanged embarrassed glances and Archie stilled the first trace of a snigger from Nobby by delivering a timely admonition to the back of his head.

“I’d like to help too!”

Captain Bill recoiled at the still, small voice as Grace Stones’ little face appeared from behind Tiddley Tom.

“Oh God! I mean... Oh, fine. You too, Grace. Good.”

“I could wiggle my toes again and ask the Fair...”

“No, no, no, please don’t do that. I’m sure she’s far too busy with her pumpkins to be bothered right now. Why don’t you run along and... er... and run along. Eh?”

Zeke pulled the Captain closer for a conspiratorial whisper in his ear. “Kids think it’s just a game. Don’t be too ‘ard on ‘em.” Turning to Tom he put in his best ‘Uncle Zeke’ voice and set about patronising the boy into submission. “Well, tha’s very brave of you, young Tom. I tell ee what! Why don’t you take little Gracy an’ go keep an eye round the village in case that beastie comes a-callin’. Then, if’n you sees ‘im, you come right back ‘ere an’ let us know so’s we can come an’ give him what for. Eh?”

“Yeah! an’ just in case ee sneaks up on yer,” added Nobby, miraculously realising what

Zeke was doing and grabbing the iron poker from beside the fireplace, “take this ‘ere with yer for a bit o’ protection. What about that?”

“‘Ere,” said Ralph, catching the mood. “You ‘ang on a minute.” With that he disappeared into the cellar and started rummaging about, returning just as Nobby shot out the back door with a grin on his face. “‘Ere’s somethin’ else.” He draped an old sack round Tom’s shoulders, tying the corners in a knot under his chin. “A super-hero’s gotta have a proper cloak, ain’t he?”

“An’ a shield!” added Nobby, retuning to the bar with the least dented of the dustbin lids from the rubbish bay. “An’ what about this an’ all?” He reached up to the beam above to unhook an old German WWII helmet that Tiberius had sworn he took from the man he killed on a Normandy beach but which had a mysterious label inside which read 3/6d. “Gotta have a helmet!” He placed it on Tom’s small head, setting it back onto his shoulders so that he could still almost see from beneath the brim, and fastening the strap under his chin.

“There you go, young Tom,” said the Captain, patting the poor lad on the back, “and a proper hero you look, too. Off you go then and if you meet that nasty monster you just bop him on the noggin with your sword and I expect we’ll hear no more about him ever again. Off you go,” he repeated, steering the baffled infant towards the door.

Tom looked back at them a moment and smiled weakly, wondering, perhaps, if they had all gone completely round the bend.

“Thank you, Sirs. I will do my best.”

And he left, his wooden crutch tap, tap, tapping across the yard and with Grace skip, skip, skipping happily along behind.

Chapter 7. The Summoning



On a rustic wooden bench outside the Wilson Arms an enormous black hat surmounted a pile of ragged, black material. The hat was ornamented with fruit, little flowers and foliage. Tiny caterpillars dined on the foliage, bees buzzed amongst the flowers and a swarm of smaller insects rose in a swirling, columnar haze almost to the sky.

On the table in front of the hat stood three pints of Guinness, a large plate of mixed grill sandwiches, mustard, tomato ketchup, a bowl of pickled onions, another of pickled cabbage, three pork pies and a packet of pork scratchings. Oh, and a short, knobbly wooden stick.

The brim of the hat rose, the black material parted, and a small, round face appeared, closely followed by two pudgy hands. The hands reached for the sandwiches and began stuffing them into a large hole in the front of the face. They were followed in their turn by selections from the other delicacies, all washed down with glugalugs from those glasses of the black stuff. When it was done, the plates and bowls cleaned, the Fairy Godelpus belched a long and satisfying belch that reverberated around the forecourt and caused a raucous rising of birds from the trees across the road.

Once sated and saturated she picked up the knobbly wooden stick and waved it, almost nonchalantly, about her head before settling back into the ragged, black clothes and disappearing once more beneath the ecologically prolific black hat.

The first scattering of villagers began to arrive about five minutes later, each looking slightly bemused and glancing around as though meeting someone who had not yet arrived. Another five minutes and Zeke's Landrover rolled in hauling his biggest trailer. No-one seemed to notice the bundle of rags on the rustic bench and conversations began within the fast expanding crowd.

"What's up, Zeke?" asked Ralph, hurrying in from the direction of Brackenbarrow.

"I don't know. I got this message an' come straight here."

"Who from?"

Zeke thought hard for a moment. "Now ya come to mention it I don't know. Somebody phoned I think. Who the hell was it now?"

"I got a phone call too. No, hang on a minute. I was in the field so I couldn't ha' done. It was... er..."

The conversation was going nowhere fast, which was fine because it was brutally interrupted by Nobby going (or coming) extremely fast from the Cottages on his velocipede. The crowd leaned outward in the nick of time from the projected line of his approach as the old bone-shaker raced through at break-neck speed and hit the kerb at Lane End. Nobby left

the saddle, somersaulted forward and hit the wall hard, back first and vertically up-side-down. The bike continued until it too hit the wall but was saved from any serious damage by the intervention of the softer parts of Nobby who hung there screaming for what seemed a very long moment before sliding down, with bike, into a crumpled heap on the ground. The crowd showed its appreciation with a hearty round of applause, it being just the lighter moments such as this that make country life worth living.

“... And I almost forgot Jack the Artisan. Had his hand in all the trades, did Jack, but he never did any of them particularly well.”

“No, Jack.”

“Oh, and One Eyed Jack of Hertfordshire – bit of a card he was. Always ran with the pack.”

“Yes, Jack.”

“Then there was Jack the Rip...”

“Who invited ‘im?” Zeke cut in, fingering both his barrels in a meaningful manner.

The knobby stick tapped on a table top and all conversation ceased.

“So what ‘ave you lot bin a-doing’ of since I bin away?”

“What!”

“What!!”

“What!!!”

There were rather a lot of *whats*, all punctuationally exclaimed to various degrees as villagers peered about for the source of the intervention, and it would be cumbersome to mention them all. The Fairy Godelpus rose slowly out of the heap of rags and climbed up onto the table, bringing her eye-to-eye with all those villagers of average height.

“Come on, somebody. I ain’t got all day!”

Little Grace Stones elbowed her way through the crowd and peered up into the small, round face. “They sent Tom to fight the beastie,” she said, frowning her immense disapproval as only a small child can.

“Now hang on a minute,” Captain Hummers expostulated (that superior ability for which he was so much admired). “that’s hardly fair. We didn’t send him to...”

“Oh yes you did!”

“Oh no I didn’t!”

“OH YES YOU DID!” The whole crowd joined Grace in the traditional spirit of community, comradeship and sheer bloody-mindedness.

“OH NO I DIDN’T!” yelled the Captain, determined not to be outdone. “He volunteered!”

“Volunteered!” Godelpus cut in, retaking control. “Poor little scrap hardly stands bum high to a bogwart, drags his poor little foot aback of him and you let him volunteer to go fight the Beastie? What on earth were you a-thinking of?”

Cries of “shame”, “disgraceful”, “well I never” echoed through the crowd, loudly and indignantly led by the Captain’s fellow conspirators from the Kirkus Inn, each suddenly

overcome by affection for the high principles of democracy.

“But!”

But Captain Hubert’s butts availed him nought as the mocking throng howled him to silence. The noise rose to a crescendo until it was drowned out and eventually stilled by the sound of a needle pointed, black boot tap, tap, tapping on the table top.

“Now you lot listen t’ me. Never you mind about Tiddley Tom, I know all about ‘im. Why don’t you all tell me about Billy Brocklebank? When did you all last see ‘im?”

“Billy Brocklebank? From up Crook Farm?” This from Nobby Nibthwaite. “Oh he disappeared weeks ago. Got hisself a job down south, so they say.”

“Did ‘e now? And would that be about the time the Beastie come a’callin’?”

“Well, now you come to mention it...”

“That’s what I thought. Right! I think it’s about time we took a look at this Bletherin’ Black’earited Bloody whatever it is. We’ll have ‘im down here and see what ‘es got t’say for ‘isself, shall we?”

Godelpus raised her short, knobbly stick and the colour drained from several dozen faces. Knees began to tremble and underwear dampened as the whole crowd cringed in mortal fear.

“Blood of newt and bladder of toad, Blethering Bloodbeast, you be blowed; Bleak and blighted, black and... er... blartish...”

“BLARTISH?”

“Get your arse down here, and sharpish! Well, it was the best I could come up with at short notice.”

It was just a light breeze at first, a stirring of the air and a rustling in the trees. Dark clouds rolled in across the sky, obliterating the sun and billowing menacingly over the cowering crowd. Strong men cried out and women wept as the cold hand of winter returned with icy vengeance to gip their souls with terror, and the wind rose up to howl about their heads, the black hands of wingéd demons ripping hats from cringing brows and casting them high into the gathering, thrashing storm. The clouds burst and torrential rain lashed down upon the terrified assembly, driving racked bodies to the ground in mortal terror. Then the wind dropped, the rain stopped, the clouds parted and the sun shone down.

“Bugger!” said the Fairy Godelpus.

“What the ‘ell was that all about then?” shouted Nobby, wringing a gallon or two of mortal terror from his trousers.

“Never mind that,” said the Fairy. “I know what I’m a’doin’. And while we’re about it...” She turned away, closed her eyes and raised the knobbly stick in a few gentle, mystical wavings above her head, ending the display with small leap and a shriek.

“What was that then?” asked Captain Hubert.

“That? Oh that was a summonin’, Mr ‘ummers. Like what brought you lot here today. He won’t wanna come, but he’ll come neverthenonetheless.”

“Who will?” asked Hubert.

The mad Fairy gave him a look that threatened to loosen his bowels, ending it in the nick of time. “He will,” she said, quietly, before turning back to the crowd.

“Now, I want everybody up at Crook, and mark me well for I speak as one what knows the ways of the darker dominions... tread soft upon this dreadful task for there be dangers lurkin’ what ye wot not of, and demons dark and dastardly await beyond...”

“What *is* she on about?”

“Silly old faggot.”

“Daft as a doughnut.”

“I’ll give ‘er dark and dastardly...”

“All right, all right!” Godelpus stamped her foot furiously, and even fierouser... ly, until a timber cracked and the tapping foot, with leg attached, shot down to the tarmac like a mighty bolt of blue-veined thunder, leaving the rest of the unfortunate Fairy securely fixed to the table top amid an explosive display of very sensible knickers. There was a moment’s calm, a pregnant pause in the time/space continuum as a stunned silence engulfed the crowd, before the trapped, bedraggled and distraught entity suddenly flew into a mighty rage that sent chips and splinters of erstwhile worldly table into a netherworld of chaos and kindling.

“It’s not easy being a fairy Godmother, you know! It ain’t all pumpkins and royal balls and glass bloody slippers! That it ain’t. You people, you don’t know the ‘alf of it. Up all hours draggin’ monsters out from under beds cos some kid starts wigglin’ ‘er wotnots, and tarting up kitchen skivvies for their princes, and never a word of thanks. I don’t know why I bother sometimes, really I don’t.”

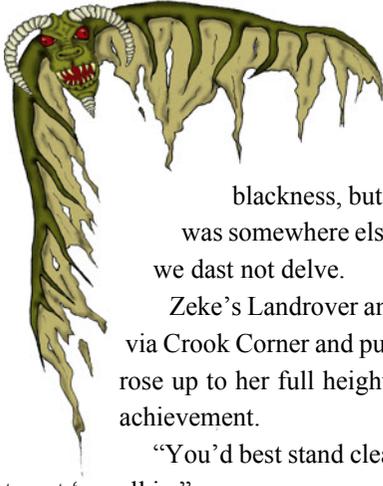
The crowd cringed away as she made a hurried job of adjusting her wearwithalls and salvaging a little dignity from the ruins of her indignation.

“Right! You... Zeke Underpants. Load ‘em up and take ‘em up t’ Crook. And don’t hang about. I’ll be waitin’.”

With that the Fairy Godelpus strode away around the side of the Wilson’s towards Carr Lane. Or not exactly strode as she fukled around beneath the voluminous acres of her black skirt extracting and casting aside the lingering remains of the table from those dark and derriere’d regions, where mortal man dast not delve.

(From that last phrase, dear reader, you may think you recall that we have been there before in an earlier chapter of this saga. Having created, from imagination, the region referred to I can assure you most certainly that we haven’t. At least I sure as hell haven’t)

Chapter 8. The Chase



The Fairy Godelpus was sitting quietly beneath the hat. All anyone could actually see was the hat, perched on the top of a ragged and voluminous pile of blackness, but she had to be under there somewhere. Either that or she was somewhere else, naked, and that, dear reader, is another realm in which we dast not delve.

Zeke's Landrover and trailer lurched into view having taken the longer route via Crook Corner and pulled up at the front of Crook Farm. The Fairy stirred and rose up to her full height, a movement hardly notable in the annals of personal achievement.

"You'd best stand clear while I open t' trailer," said Zeke. I 'ad t' use me boot to get 'em all in."

He went round to the back and began hitting the catches with a ball hammer before leaping to the side as the rear ramp crashed down and a mass of gasping humanity exploded out onto the road. The complete population of Torver eventually righted itself, sucking in great lungfuls of fresh air and half a dozen distraught women rushed straight at Ralph who hardly had time to raise his arms in defence before a rain of slaps turned his face to bloody crimson.

"What was all that about?" asked Zeke.

Ralph turned a pain-free smile towards the enquirer as he struggled manfully to uncross his eyes. "Just a bit of a misunderstandin'," said Ralph.

"So, what's to do?" asked Zeke while the crowd gathered at his back. He expertly slipped two cartridges into their barrels and straightened the weapon in instant readiness, just in case.

"Yes, what's to do?" added Captain Hubert, not wanting to be left out of the decision making process.

"There en't no-one 'ere, you know. Billy en't been around for weeks," said Zeke.

"No, not for weeks," said Hubert (ditto).

"Oh he's 'ere, Mr Underfoot." said the Fairy. "He's 'ere all right. My nose tells me he's 'ere." She tapped the long, warty appendage on the front of her face with a fat finger, a useful aid to normal folk who had never before encountered such a profoundly prodigious proboscis.

"So what do we want with Billy Brocklebank?"

"That is what we are all here to find out, Mr Underwear."

Suddenly there was an almighty crash from the rear of the house and a scream so loud that Zeke's trusty twelve-bore discharged vertically downward and the massed ranks of

Torver citizenry leaped vertically upward in terror.

“Round the back,” shouted the Fairy, “Don’t let it get away.”

“Don’t let what get away?” asked Ralph, now more or less recovered.”

“The Blithery, Blackity, Blibberty, Blobberty Blobbleobol...” she shouted back as (*sorry*) she shouted back as she disappeared round the side of the house.

The crowd set off in her wake – most of the crowd, that is, with the exception of all those who had heard and understood what she said. Yes, the ‘not completely stupid’ and ‘not deaf’ ones. The doors of the rear barn lay back limply on their hinges, still smouldering and smoking from whatever fearsome, fiery, phantom... *oh God, I do hate alliteration...* phantom had emerged from within.

“Thar she blows” hollered the Fairy, racing past the barn.

“Where away?” Shouted some nautical twit in the crowd.

The whole crowd emerged from the shelter of the farm buildings and stopped dead as the Fairy Godelpus sped off in pursuit of... of... The Beastie! It was huge and green and ghastly, it’s great tattered wings stretched out to either side, flapping wildly in an apparent attempt to defy the ground. The enormous head swayed from side to side as though in pain, growling and snarling, and plumes of smoke billowed from somewhere below its long, spiny tail as it tore across the field on its wheels.

“WHEELS?”

“It’s got BLOODY WHEELS!”

“How can it have WHEELS?”

“It can’t have WHEELS!”

“Well it has. Three of ‘em.”

A flash of red and green, feathery, manly (ish) loveliness burst through the throng and raced off after the Beastie and the Fairy, in hot pursuit, shouting something about doing and dying and nevering in the field of human something-or-other and what he’s going to do on the beaches when he got his hands on somebody.

“Jack... Jack... wait for meeeeeeee,” and Patty Foulds streaked across the ground in even hotter pursuit, her long, spindly arms flailing wildly in a girly sort of way, very much in imitation of her long, spindly legs.

“Pattyyyyyy” And there went Nobby on his bike, riding heroically to the rescue, one handed, the obligatory posy of stolen flowers tightly grasped in the other.

“Ay up,” said Army Rigg. “Looks like a good’n.” And off he shot with the rest of Torver at his heels, tearing over the ground like the eager shoppers in the January sales, while Zeke emptied both barrels in a forwardly direction, fortunately with a bit of unintentional ‘upwardly’ as well and merely parting several mops of hair. Then, showing a little more presence of mind than the rest, he raced back round the building for the Landrover.

The Black-hearted quarry raced south through the trees until it crashed through a hedge and landed on the road. Turning a sharp right it rocketed of again towards High Torver Park

and Carr Lane, snorting and roaring amid a wild wagging of wagged wings (or ragged rings – or whatever) as the vanguard of the Torver mob, led by Supercrone Fairy Godelpus charged after in single file. It's a very narrow track.

Emerging from the hole in the hedge, Captain Hubert and the Torver Militia paused a moment to reconnoitre the situation.

“We'll go left, men, by Crook Corner and intercept the Beastie at the bottom of Carr Lane. Follow me.”

“Yeah,” shouted Nobby, still on his bike. “We'll head ‘im off at the pass!”

A stout stick caught Nobby a swift one side the ear, lifting him bodily over the handle bars and planting his face in the gravel road, as the warriors sallied forth over his prostrate form in close pursuit of their brave captain. Half way down the lane the Landrover caught them up in a high speed, hell-for-leather manner of approach which resulted in a fountain-like spray of bodies to right and left as Zeke careered through the pack.

Meanwhile, back at the chase, the Blethering Black-hearted Bloodbeast of Blea wasn't having too good a time of it. Having flown... *that's 'flown' in a very horizontal, ground-hugging sense...* past the old ruined alehouse below High Torver Park, through a track barely wide enough for its body to pass, its wings were now reduced to embarrassing stumps. The rest of the Beastie seemed to be on fire, as were most of the surrounding trees; this the result of a frantic, at-the-run, knobbly stick induced, incandescent, magical, projectile bombardment from the mad Fairy behind. (*That's 'behind' as in the sense of following – not... You know what I mean!*).

On down Carr Lane with the Fairy Godelpus neck-and-neck with Jack the Giant killer and the mad, screaming peasantry of Torver in close pursuit.

Meanwhile, back on the main road, Zeke was approaching the Wilson Arms at over eighty, a feat achieved by having lost the trailer in the Schoolroom car park which, regrettably, no longer had a front wall. The Militia were still rounding Crook Corner as Zeke stood on his brakes and took the right into the Wilson Arms car park on nearside wheels only. Foot back on the gas, he flew past the pub and reached the entrance to Carr Lane just as the Bloodbeast emerged with a scream of dragonian defiance, belching fire and smoke from its rear end. Zeke swerved right and the Beastie left, over the grass verge, and onto the main road, heading back towards Crook and the advancing Torver Militia.

“There it is!” shouted the Captain. “It's ours.”

“It's yours, more like,” said Roy as he rose from the ground in a leap over the cemetery railings. The Militia scattered to right and left a moment before Nobby, on his velocipede, sped through the departing throng and raced on alone into the face of the advancing Bloodbeast. Impact seemed certain... unavoidable... inevitable... but the Beastie swerved right into the Kirk'us car park and Nobby shot past the entrance staring furiously after his quarry, completely failing to notice Zeke's Landrover coming the other way. The bicycle disintegrated on the Landie's front bumper and Nobby achieved that of which Icarus had

once dreamed and Nureyev would have been proud. He flew with the grace of an angel, arms outstretched, body arched and head thrown back in a final scream of impending doom. Fortunately for Nobby his arrival at a point in the road twenty yards to the rear of the Landrover coincided with that of the Fairy Godelpus who's well-fed rotundity provided just the sort of impact cushioning that a flying idiot would be bound to welcome at such a crucial moment of his life, i.e. - the imminent ending of it. And that's magic.

The people gathered. All the people. The whole of Torver was there in the Kirk'us car park, all milling about and wondering what would happen next. Or what to do. Or where they were. Mrs Rosy Lea Thorne strode purposely out in front of the crowd shouting, "Order... Order..." but nobody took any notice. Without her gavel she just didn't have that aura of authority any more - a conspicuous lack of gravitas, although nought but the bravest soul would dare alert her to the deficiency. Emeline Hall (and Hazel, of course) shepherded the Ladies of The League and the Parochial Church Council into a discreet corner well away from the Den of Iniquity, and the Torver Militia formed up behind Captain Hummers as close to the said Den as they could manage. Jack the Giant Killer took 'The Stance' as close to the centre as he could contrive with Patty Fould's emaciated loveliness hanging as decorously as she was able on his arm like a lightly padded wire coat-hanger. The Fairy Godelpus strode in from the road holding the trembling Nobby Nibthwaite by the one ear whilst vigorously belting seven bells out of the other, and the rest of the village just sort of... gathered.

It took little Grace Stones to think of something sensible to say.

"But where's the Beastie?"

"Beg pardon, Dear?" said Captain Hubert, bending slightly in the proper attitude of condescension towards a mere child.

"Where's the Beastie? It's not here."

"That's a point," said Hubert, staring around, having completely forgotten why he was there. "Who's got the Beastie?"

Everybody gazed around until the Fairy Godelpus stepped forward to take command.

"Oh, he won't be far. I reckon he was better at the goin' than at the stoppin', which should, if I've reckoned right, put him somewhere in the caravan park over there." She began to walk through the car park and the crowd followed, a little hesitantly.

In the field beyond a family of four stood in a tight group, Mum and Dad holding their small children tightly as they silently surveyed the remains of their 'dream of a lifetime' luxury caravan. Protruding from its side was the Blethering Blackhearted Bloodbeast of Blea, or what was left of it. Most of it was lying scattered in a wide circle, blackened and charred with wisps of smoke still rising from the ruin. What remained of the wings were

folded over the body and the head was lost to view completely, tucked somewhere between the *fully equipped kitchen with gas hob oven & grill* and the *side washroom with separate shower cubicle (no need to walk through it to toilet), cassette toilet & wash basin*. - now slightly modified.

Godelpus stood quietly, her hands crossed on her abdomen, surveying the wreckage. She winced as a cry rose at her back.

“At last, the Beast. Fear not, good people, for I am here. I, Jack the Giant Killer, will slay this Beast and free this humble hamlet from its evil predations. Stand back and leave this to me.”

The sword slid from its scabbard, as Jack gently shoved Patty from his side with such considerate force that she appeared to cartwheel before collapsing into something akin to a heap of knotted string. He raised the weapon high above his head and began his run. Faster and faster he ran, yelling the battle cry of the Jacks, “Arrghhhhh,” on and on into mortal danger, fearlessly flying over the ground toward his sworn enemy, the Blethering Blackhearted Bloodbeast of Blea. Closer, and yet closer, into the fray, unto death, over the Fairy foot, and down head-first into the most perfectly placed stretch of mud and cowpat that providence and this humble author could devise.

Godelpus strode forward, planting her foot in the middle of Jack the Giantkiller’s back to cross the festering puddle. “Much obliged,” she said quietly.

She approached the little family who all stared at her with that nobody-at-home expression common to the terminally shocked and some of the more gullible religious sects. “Excuse me,” she said, and strolled over to the smoking wreckage of carcass and caravanning dream.

“Right! Billy Brocklebank...” She rapped on the side of the Beastie with her gnarled stick. “Come on, Billy. Come out here and show yourself.”

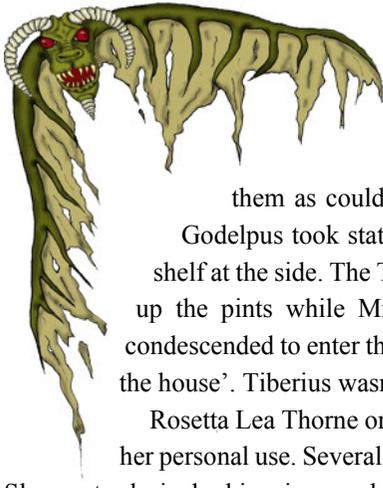
A minute passed, the foot began to tap and the gathering crowd began to tremble. “If I have to ask you again, Billy Brocklebank...”

The side of the Beastie began to shake and rattle, bit’s of skin dropping onto the grass. Then a frantic thumping from inside resulted in a little door flying open. Two booted feet appeared, followed closely by a pair of ragged jeans, and then the rest of Billy, black as soot and still smouldering. His hair – what was left of his hair – was tinged brown with charring and his eyebrows were gone completely. Seated on the grass he smiled nervously up into not-very-kindly eyes.

“So glad you could join us,” said Godelpus.

The crowd just stared as Godelpus seized Billy by the ear and thus helped him gently to his feet. She led him through the throng of community gawp to the back gate of the Kirk’s Inn, up the garden path and in through the rear door, the good folk of Torver following obediently behind.

Chapter 9. The Reckoning



Within the dark and dank domain of Tiberius Pratt, the heavily built (and therefore unmocked) landlord of the Kirk'us Inn, the company assembled, or as many of them as could fight their way through to the Torver Bar. The Fairy Godelpus took station by the fire placing Billy Brocklebank on the stone shelf at the side. The Torver Militia made straight for the bar and began lining up the pints while Mrs Emeline Hall, Hazel Hall and the Ladies League condescended to enter the snug where small sheries were instantly provided 'on the house'. Tiberius wasn't that tough.

Rosetta Lea Thorne ordered her usual vase of red wine and a table vacated for her personal use. Several eyes and puzzled expressions turned as Jack the Dragon Slayer strode in looking immaculate with not a trace of his earlier bovine scatological mishap apparent on his beautiful scarlet tunic or thigh-hugging green tights. Patty Foulds clung to his arm with a grip like death and the pair stepped forward to decorate a corner of the bar. And most of the rest of Torver milled about to fill the spaces in between. Godelpus tapped her foot and there was silence as she turned an inquisitive eye on the hapless (and hairless) Billy Brocklebank.

"I couldn't help it. He made me do it."

"Come on, Billy-boy. Out with it. Who made you do what? And we'll have the where, when, why and how while you're about it."

"It was LorD NaPpA. 'E made me do it."

"Yes, Billy. So you said. Now if your evil plan is to get out of this by dying horribly in a twisted, mangled sort of heap of assorted nastiness you're going the right way about it. MADE YOU DO WHAT?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Well, you know how my mum brought me up on baked beans and brussel sprouts and how I've always had this trouble, like with my tummy an' that..."

"Funny you should mention that," said Roy, waving a hand in front of his face. "It's no better then?"

"No, well that's the point, see. I couldn't get me Gaviscon from the chemists because they'd all run out, but LorD NaPpA, well, he had crates of it, and he wouldn't let me have any unless I did what he said."

"Which was?" The Fairy glowered, tapping her knobby stick gently against Billy's charred noggin.

"Yeah, well, He wanted me to make this monster with wings an' a big 'ead an' breathin' fire and all that an go around frightenin' people with it an' I made it out of that old Reliant Robin what I got last year an' put a gas bottle in it an' my dad's old flame thrower what 'e used for gettin' rid o' the weeds an'... an'..."

“Yes, Billy,” interrupted Godelpus. “And what about the children. What did he tell you to do with the children, Billy?”

Billy was shaking now and backed closer to the wall. “The children, yeah, I was supposed to, like, get ‘em, an... an... get ‘em an...”

“And kill them!”

The voice came from a way off and the words dripped with venom. *And kill them.* A happy voice that revelled in the foul, blood-drenched horror of the words. *And kill them.* A voice that rejoiced in the thought and dreamed of the ways; gloried in the rabid destruction of tender innocence. *And kill them.* Really not a very nice voice at all.

“But I didn’t. No. NO! I didn’t... Honest, I didn’t...” Poor Billy was terrified, backing further away, towards the fire, his hands scrabbling at the wall and his body, touched by madness, moving dangerously closer to the flames.

The Fairy’s hands reached out for Billy, pulling him back and wrestling him gently back to his seat. “Be calm, boy. He can’t hurt you now.”

“It’s him! He’s here.”

“Yes, Billy. But he’s here to see me this time, not you.”

The Fairy Godelpus turned to face the door and the villagers parted to make way for...

“LorD NaPpA, I believe,” she said, removing the great hat in a sweeping gesture and bowing before the newcomer. “So good of you to grace us with your eminent presence, my lord.”

A dark spectre stood in the doorway, cloaked in black and staring about through a parted curtain of lank, greasy hair. He seemed confused, unsure of his whereabouts, but the arrogance of years quickly reasserted itself.

“Why am I here? Who summoned me?”

“Ah, that would be me, my lord,” said the Fairy. “I’d like a word if your grace can spare a moment.”

“How did I get here? Who are you, old hag?”

“Old hag, is it? Dear me. And I was so looking forward to a pleasant exchange of views. Perhaps a few moments to reflect?”

The knobbly stick twitched and His Lordship’s lips began to move with all the outward, visible appearance of speaking, but with none of the concomitant audible annoyance.

“I called. You came. How very kind,” she said, with the smallest of smiles.

“Now look here you, fairly codswallop, or whatever you call yourself,” Captain Hummers cut in. “Who is this person, and how did you know about Billy dressing up and all that, and what is going on? That’s what I’d like to know?”

Rhubarb grunted around the bar in a general murmur of agreement.

“So many questions. So much ignorance. And so little to drink. Barman! A pint of that Irish black stuff if you would be so kind. Or even if you won’t, just pour it. He’ll pay.” She indicated the Captain with her knobbly stick and he reached for his wallet with a willingness

that he would later seriously question, no doubt along with his sanity.

“I popped up to Bleathwaite and had a peek down the Commoner’s Hole while you lot were tramping over the fell frightening sheep...”

“E frightened all of us,” said Roy

“That’s what I meant,” said the Fairy.

“Ere! What’re you...”

“Be quite.”

“Yes, Mm.”

“The real Tarquin was fast asleep like he’s bin for a thousand years. Course there was a meeting goin’ on with some fool farmer prattling about grazing rights and single farm payments so I’m surprised anyone was awake. So, ‘membering what come out about LorD NaPpA in ‘ere the other night I popped along to Murky Moss to ‘ave a little firkle about, and guess who I saw sneakin’ out the back door in his big boots an’ looking very furtive in a ferretty sort o’ way.”

She glared across at Billy Brocklebank who gibbered quietly and dribbled.

“It were you, Billy, weren’t it?”

LorD NaPpA began another set of facial contortions, gesticulating furiously at his inability to utter.

“Oh, I do beg yer pudd’n” said the Fairy, giving another twitch of her knobbly stick.

“... and a curse on all... Oh.” He spluttered in confusion making grunting noises to further test his vocal chords.

“Something to say, My Lord?”

“Err... Yes, it was Billy you saw, old hag. And a good boy he’s been, haven’t you, Billy. Put all the disgusting, smelly children down a deep hole, didn’t you Billy? A dark, dank hole deep under Dow Crag and left them there to starve to death, didn’t you, Billy Boy? A good boy is my Billy.

“No, no, I didn’t. Look, Mrs Fairy Thingy, I ain’t...”

“Do be quiet, Billy. I’m speakin’ with his Lordship. Now then, Armageddon. She was a card, your old mum, weren’t she? You don’t mind if I call you Armageddon, do you, only this ‘my lord’ business is gettin’ right up my ‘ooter, so to speak. Or would you prefer Barmy Army? Or what was it they used to call you at school? Niffy Nipper NaPpA, wasn’t it? On account of you bein’ so small and smelly?”

His Lordship was once again speechless, but this time due to an imminent explosion of red-faced fury rather than any knobbly stick twitching by his tormentor.

“Now then, perhaps we can have some brave volunteer to arrest this dirty little creep and deliver him to Constable Mines.” (‘Copper’ to his friends)

“They won’t dare touch me, you old hag! And you haven’t beaten me yet. I still have the planning laws and a whole committee full of bloody-minded bigots to help me destroy this lousy little village and wipe it off the map.” He turned on the assembled company, lashing

them with his foul tongue as spittle drooled down his chin. “Arrest me? You won’t arrest me, any of you. I’ll see you all damned and your filthy hamlet burned to the ground if any man dares to lay a hand on me. Hamlet? It’s not even a hamlet, it’s just an Open Space, a place for tourists to pass through on their way to somewhere else. A tiny mark on the map and I’m going to rub it out. Rub you all out, you and your Torver. You’re all doomed!”

By the end of the speech the old man was bent almost double and twisted, his hands twitching and clawing as he peered up into the terrified faces around him. Had he gone on to appeal for a couple of horses and pledged his kingdom in exchange he would undoubtedly have received a round of applause and a unanimous standing ovation.

The Fairy Godelpus stood with hands clasped staring patiently until the rant was over. “Good heavens,” she said before turning back to the congregation. “No volunteer? Well I never. Expect I’ll have to look elsewhere for a real man.”

Jack the Giant Killer, ever one to seize a passing moment of destiny, strode forward and took ‘the stance’. “A real man, you say? A job for me I think!” (*Slap, flinch*)

Godelpus spun round to face the gloriously psychedelic spectacle that now held the centre stage. “Who is she?” she asked of no-one in particular.

“I think you’ll find she be a he.” said Captain Hubert.

“You don’t say!” Godelpus looked the apparition up and down, lingering momentarily at various points of gender reference for confirmation of Hubert’s opinion. And finding none.

“Jack the Giant Killer at your service, old woman. So, this is the villain of the piece, is it. Stand back everybody. Just leave this to me!” The sword rasped from its scabbard, parting several heads of hair as it swept an arc round the bar.

“Oh, put that silly thing away before you hurt yourself.” She shoved Jack back into the throng, carefully removing the weapon from his hand, tossing it behind the bar and clouting him a severe one alongside the ear for good measure. “There’s only one hero around here who’s up to this job, and if everything’s worked out accordin’ to plan he should be arrivin’ about...” She looked at her left wrist, found nothing but skin and tried the right. “About...” More skin. There then ensued a short period of unseemly rummaging in those aforementioned deep, dark places where mortal man dast not delve until a hand emerged bearing a bedside alarm clock complete with two large bells and a cartoon mouse on the front. “About... now!”

And in walked Tiddley Tom.

The crowd drew back in shocked amazement. A small titter tittered, and grew, evolved into a giggle, and then erupted into a guffaw, until the Fairy Godelpus twitched her knobly stick and the pubful of people inexplicably raised their glasses and poured their drinks over their own heads. All, that is, except Bob Scratchit who rushed forward through the dripping throng to hug is long lost son.

Godelpus gently parted the pair and lifted the boy onto the bartop. “Tom. Well done, lad. Now what about the children?”

“They’re all outside, Ma’am.”

“WHAT!” This from the whole company, several of whom made a rush for the door with Wendy Wotsit in the lead. Walter Wotsit would have washed... rushed but his hand was inextricably anchored to a large whisky on the bar and he couldn’t seem to loosen his grip.

“They’re all safe?” Godelpus asked as the stampede faded into the outdoors.

“Oh yes,” said Tom. “They were all where you said, down at the Priestley Centre at Hoathwaite. To be honest, Ma’am, they didn’t want to come back but I told them they really ought or you would clip them all around the earhole like you said to tell them, although I do think that would have been a little unkind, Ma’am.”

“Do you, Tom. Well that’s because you’re such a kind boy and rather lacking in common... common... Come an’ have a glass of lemonade while we sort all this mess out, eh, Tom?”

Mums were dragging their long lost children back into the bar amid the myriad sounds of happy greeting, sobbing joy and ears being clouted according to the various levels familial affection. Once the bustle had settled the Fairy Godelpus silenced the crowd with a look and addressed Tiddley Tom once more.

“Now, I don’t s’pose you’ve met this little creep. He’s LorD NaPpA the Nasty and he wants to destroy Torver and turn it into an Open Space. Does he frighten you, Tom?”

“Oh, I have met His Lordship before, and he looks more sad than frightening, Ma’am.”

“I’m not sad, boy,” shouted NaPpA. “I’m happy because your poxy little village is going to be bulldozed away and I’m going to turn it all into a car park with a visitor’s centre and thousands of caravans and...”

“But why do you hate us so? We only want to be happy.”

“Happy! What right have you got to be happy. You’re just a cripple.”

There were several gasps and a few threatening movements towards NaPpA, but Godelpus waved the crowd to silence and let the boy continue.

“Yes, I know. I think I make my mummy and daddy unhappy when they see me limping. They cry sometimes. But other times I shut my eyes and in my mind I run and dance over the fells with the other boys and girls, and sometimes I just stretch out my arms and I fly over the mountain with the eagles. Then I’m really happy.”

Wise heads nodded in agreement, although not many. Two or three maybe. Well, not even that really. These were country folk. Oh sod it – back to the plot.

“But how can you be happy in this Torver? It’s too small to be happy. There’s no shop, no school, no bank, no anything... It’s worse than nothing!”

“Perhaps that’s why it’s such a happy place. We just have each other. We care for each other.”

Hankies were raised to tearful eyes (female) and heads were turned away to hide embarrassment (male).

“But I lived in a village once, Boy, and when my father lost his job in the quarry we

couldn't afford to live there any more. We had to go away. They drove us away and I hated them."

"That must have been a very sad village. But why don't you come and live in Torver. We never turn anyone away, do we?" This last to the crowd who backed away in horror and raised crossed fingers to ward off evil.

"Well, that's as maybe," ventured Zeke Undercrag, but this'n's LorD NaPpA the Nasty we're talkin' about. Niffy Nipper NaPpA what stole my crayons an' did 'orrible things with 'is bogeys."

"Yes, but he could be LorD NaPpA the Nice and help us all to get planning permission to build houses for the children when they grow up. You could do that, couldn't you Mr NaPpA?"

"Me? you want me to live in Torver?"

"Well now, 'ang on a minute. Let's not be too 'asty 'ere," said Ralph." I don't know as I want 'im as a neighbour. Not now as I know about the bogeys an' all."

"Oh, but I'm sure he doesn't do that any more, Mr Ralph. I expect he has hankies like every one else. And if he hasn't I am sure we could all club together and buy him some."

"Hankies! Bogeys!" Captain Hummers felt he ought to intervene. "I really don't think bogeys come into it. What about my extension that he vetoed? Just because we had a bat. And even after I shot it they still wouldn't listen to reason."

Patty Foulds exploded. "You shot a bat!" You shot one of God's creatures. Ooooh, how could you?"

"Well, when I say 'shot', it was more..."

"Can we get back t' the point at 'and," said Zeke, not known for his passive nature and still nursing his twelve-bore. "Do we want this pillock living here in Torver?"

"Don't see why not," said Roy, "as long as he stops being nasty and upsetting folk. And pickin' his nose. There's that cottage back of my place. Needs a lick of paint and a couple of windows put in but there's plenty of us can help out if he fancies it."

"You'd do that for me?"

At this point, dear reader, the plot, in complete defiance of human nature and all commonsense, has taken an unfortunate turn for the bluddy ridiculous. There will therefore be a short intermission while the Torver Militia drag the evil LorD NaPpA outside to the carpark and Zeke blows his brains out with the twelve-bore. It could have been done better, I know, with graphic description and pathos, but they're already throwing up back in the pub from that last outburst from Tiddley Tom so for the sake of common decency...

"Has 'e gone?" asked the Fairy Godelpus as the militia re-entered the bar.

"Gone? I'll say he's go... OW!"

"Sorry, Nobby," said Zeke. "Gone? Oh yes. Urgent appointment with a higher authority."

“Oh... Right. Well then. Probably for the best. Only I thought I heard... Car backfiring, was it? Yes. Sounded like a car... backfir... Yes. Good. Now, what else needs sortin’ out round ‘ere while I’ve got me... *Car backfired*. Yes. While I’ve got me knobbly stick in me ‘and.”

The stick twitched.

“That’s your belly sorted out, Billy, and do be’ave yourself in future.”

And twitched again.

“And one crippled leg uncrippled. Off you go, Tom, and I’m sorry I can’t help you any more. Don’t have the spell for that I’m afraid.”

“But I can walk now, Ma’am. Thank you, Ma’am. What more could I possibly need?”

“Well, Tom. When you get home you just dig out the old dictionary and you look up ‘suffering’ so’s you’ll know what you won’t be doin’ no more. And when you’ve done that, look up ‘insufferable’. Now. Anything else? Oh yes, Nobby. I believe you’ve got a bit of a problem in the ‘eart department.”

Godelpus turned to the children. “Here, Kids. Come and meet brave Jack the Credibility Killer. He came here to save all your lives today, not that you needed it as it turned out, but no matter. So you go and show Jack how much you appreciate his kindness.” And all the children ran to Jack, throwing their arms around his waist and grabbing for his hands.

“Urgh! Get off, you filthy beasts. I don’t want your dirty fingers all over my beautiful tunic! Get them off me. Yuck.”

Jack flailed about in panic sending children flying in all directions and cuffing a fair few in the process.

“Oi! Don’t you go hittin’ our kids, you great poncy tart!” shouted Nobby, flying across the bar.

“Push off, thicko!” replied Jack, reaching down for his trusty sword... which was still lying on the floor behind the bar... bugger! Nobby, taking advantage of the momentary distraction, tripped over a barstool, completely fumbled a left hook and missed his enemy’s chin by about half a yard. Jack brought his left fist up into Nobby’s solar plexis, forcing his head down just in time to meet Jack’s knee coming up. There being not much in the way of fair structural comparity between a knee and a nose, the crack was heard right across the bar as Nobby flew backwards spraying blood in all directions.

“Nobby... Nobby...”

Patty entered the fray, a demon streak of rabid feminine fury. Thin, yes, but wiry, adrenalin charged and a little emotional, she caught Jack a clip across the back of his ear that attracted his attention nicely, bringing him round at lightning speed... straight into a beautifully delivered right hook. The left to the gut was timed to perfection sending a pearly white double set south for the winter and preparing the descending Killer visage for a right upper cut that rearranged the nose, crossed the eyes, brought out the stars and almost certainly ended a promising career. Even his hat fell off.

The Fairy Godelpus smiled. Some magic just needed a little nudge.

Nobby lay, bleeding profusely, in his true love's arms and his own little heaven, drowning ecstatically in a mixture of his blood and her saliva sprayed through a rain of kisses. Patty stroked his hair with gentle fingers, moved slowly down to close his eyelids, then descended to his broken nose... which she straightened with a jerk and a crack that reverberated around the bar causing at least three men to wretch horribly into their beer and several more to faint clean away. Nobby just smiled, nestling closer to a bosom which, though inadequate by any normal standard held all that he had ever desired.

Jack the Giant Killer was gone. Nobody saw him go and he was never seen or mentioned again. And if you were to ask the good people of Torver about him they would smile and bless you for a funny old thing.

The good villagers of Torver did what they did best and the landlord was happy to oblige.

The Fairy Godelpus, her work complete, retired to a corner of the bar, drank her Irish stout, pulled the black hat down over her eyes and was never seen again. Except by the occasional child who wiggled toes in time of need.

And when Tiddley Tom turned his angelic face toward the good villagers of Torver and uttered that immortal line, "*God Bless us, Everyone*"... Well, some say you could hear the slap all the way to Coniston.

The End.