

*The Secret of the
Strettonbury Blue*

M. Pickering

Chapter 1

Moving Again

Of the three homes he'd had this year Tips liked the one on Railway Terrace the best.

First, his room was upstairs. Second it was large enough to hold all his train set, including the siding sheds. Third, and the best of all, it looked right over the Strettonbury Interchange, the great junction of the Manchester, Derby and Birmingham railway lines. It was a triangular knot of steel, with three double sets of railway lines running headling into each other, crossed and criss-crossed, yet somehow managing to safely dismiss trains right and left to the vast cities. In the early autumn light the metal rails sometimes shone out vividly, golden arabesques of light curving into the blackness.

'Bit noisy' his mother remarked when they inspected the house on Friday.

'Oh please mum' pleaded Tips.

'It's cheap rent, and that's probably why' she said gloomily pointing at the train tracks below the road.

'There's an extra room downstairs, we could get a lodger'.

Tips said this cunningly. He knew his mum was keen on making more money.

'Just like your dad Mickey' she smiled indulgently 'I reckon there's a steam train chugging away inside yer. I can see the smoke sometimes coming out of your ears you know?'

They moved in, which didn't take long as they were getting quite good at it. The small Morris van came round with their pathetic pile of boxes and stuff. Fortunately, the house was furnished already in a rather tired but slightly genteel style that reminded Tips of his grandmother.

'An old lady lived here for years Mickey and now her son is renting it out'.

Francie felt like that faded embossed wallpaper, and the ancient furniture was saying something about her life. Well, she was lucky to get it, thanks to that new hairdressing job. One of the regular old ladies that came to Quick Cutz chattered about it, and Francie got out early and rushed around to the rental agency.

'You're sharp' the agent remarked 'not even on our books yet. Ah well you can

have it love for £20 a week, but the bonds £60 you know? Triple the rent’.

Francie sucked in her breath at that, but after she and Tips had a look after school, she decided to take the risk. The hair dressing job looked semi-permanent, and as Tips pointed out she could rent out the downstairs room to a lodger.

‘Now before you unpack your train set my lad, you run down to the corner shop with this postcard. It’s 50 p to put it up. See if we can get someone for that downstairs room’.

It was a big room and the toilet and kitchen were opposite. If she could get £10 a week that would really help. The old ladies at the hairdressers were good tippers to, though to look at them you wouldn’t think they had tuppence between them. Damn, she must stop thinking in the old money.

Tips ran down to the shop, picked up 50 p of sweets as well and ran back as fast as he could.

When you move house as often as Tips had you concentrate on the fundamentals. He could pack all his train set into four large cardboard boxes, and he used his clothes as padding so the trains didn’t scratch each other. The train books were a problem, they were rather heavy, but he had a suitcase that he stashed them in. When the van driver went to help Francie and pick up the suitcase he was staggered by the weight.

‘Wot you got in here luv? Can’t yer leave yer gold bricks in the bank?’

‘Mickey your going to have to cut back on these old books’.

She said this everytime, but he had an irrefutable answer.

‘I can’t throw them out mum, they’re dads’.

She just sighed, and Mickey distracted his mum (something he was very good at doing) by rushing around and sorting out the crockery boxes, lining up the cutlery, shoving the few knick-knacks that had survived the various removals, up onto mantelpieces and shelves, and making his mum a cup of tea.

‘You’re a good lad Mickey, my best mate you know’.

She gazed at him fondly as she stirred her tea wearily. One day he asked daringly.

‘Why do we move so often mum?’

She looked at him sharply, though softened a bit.

‘Twelve arn’t you now Mickey?’.

‘Twelve and a half’.

‘Be a man soon, won’t you? Well Mickey I can’t pay the rent luv. Or maybe the landlord puts it up, or I lose my job and don’t have enough money’.

‘Lots of people go to social welfare mum’.

‘Yes I know, but I’m not like that, not yet anyway. It might come to that one day but I like to pay my own way, you know, not be beholden to anyone’.

Mickey didn't really know what 'beholden' meant but he thought his mum looked old and tired then. I hope she doesn't die soon he thought, but he didn't like to think about that.

Actually Francie was only 42, and had no immediate intention of dying, but God she was tired. She looked a good deal older than her age really, with her brown hair dyed blonde, and she had lost weight recently, which should have pleased her, but it didn't really suit her at all. Her clothes had become all baggy. She felt baggy inside them.

'I just get so tired these days Mickey'.

'You put your feet up mum and I'll put away the cups'.

'Thanks Mickey'.

Tips was pretty sure Francie would have a little afternoon nap. It had been a busy day and she was exhausted, and Mickey was burning to get upstairs to his room and study the Strettonbury interchange.

They'd put a new fast express on the line between Manchester and Birmingham, the super express they called it, and he was keen to try and spot it. They had to lay new track for it, and sometimes it reached speeds of 130 miles per hour. It would be cool to see that go by. He stacked the cups quietly and heard a wee snore as his mum fell asleep on the couch.

He crept upstairs and shut his door very quietly. It creaked and he made a note to himself to put some oil on the hinges. He pulled the dirty net curtains aside, propped up his head in his hands and looked out over the railway lines. The early autumn light was golden, and spread like a creamy butter over the old industrial landscape of Strettonbury.

Immediately below him was Railway Terrace, a long dreary row of houses built for railwaymen when the railway companies did that sort of thing for their workmen. Then a sharp embankment, covered with elderberries and hawthorns, dropped down to the Manchester-Derby line, pretty busy but only a two-track. A canal also ran alongside it as well, and looked black and still in the late afternoon light. There was a pretty line of seven or eight canal boats moored here, dark coal smoke seeping out of some of the chimneys.

On Tips left the mighty four track Manchester to Birmingham line swept away in a tantalising curve, hidden by a low mound covered in trees had lost most of their leaves. A low hill occupied the middle of the interchange, a wasteland of aspens and god knows what, and it annoyed Tips, because it masked his view of the third railway line of the interchange, the Birminham to Derby link. It was only a two-track, but busy enough, since two trains had passed since he'd been watching.

The sun finally slunk away as it always does in Northern England, like a homeless man, not sure where to go next, and Tips pulled up the sash window and leaned out. The air was sharp and cold, and there would be swirling curls of ice inside his bedroom window tonight.

He looked at his watch and flicked open the Northern Railways Comprehensive Time-

table (with Additions). Assuming the train was on time, and left Manchester at 2.10 it should appear about 3.10 or thereabouts.

Tips waited, it was 3.15, a bit late for the express. Then he saw it, a gliding easily into the interchange, barely slowing down and making hardly any noise, just hissing along like a fat silver snake, stretched and gleaming along the curved railway line. It was a beautiful thing, then it was gone.

That was worth it, and he noted the time and place in his railway notebook. Tips shivered and he was just about to pull down the sash window when he noticed something he hadn't seen earlier. It was a wisp of smoke, apparently coming from out of the trees beside the low hillock. Maybe some gypsies were camped there? But how would they get there? The hillock was really like an island, completely surrounded by the railway tracks.

As Tips looked more keenly, he noticed something else, and it made him so excited, that leaning so far from of his window, he almost fell out. There was no doubt of it, his eyes hadn't been playing tricks.

The late September trees were already shedding some of their leaves, and with the sun set behind the hills, the dusky evening revealed the unmistakable black outline of an old railway carriage, sitting on the canal side of the hillock. Even at that distance Tips could see it was an old fashioned railway carriage, and there was a wisp of smoke coming from a chimney and a gleam or two of light from the curtained windows.

He was amazed. Someone was living slap bang in the middle of one of the busiest railway interchanges in England.

Chapter 2

The Mound

Sunday morning and Tips brought his mum a cup of tea in bed, and muttered quietly to her ‘just out for a walk mum’, and he was halfway down the stairs before she could say sleepily ‘what?’ Since when did her boy go walking?

‘Back at lunch mum’.

He yelled softly (if that was possible), hoping his mum wouldn’t react, then he was outside and gone like a flash of quicksilver.

He clutched an apple in one hand and his father’s Ordnance Survey map in the other. He had been studying it last night under the sheets with a torch, and today he wanted to do some real exploring and get inside the Strettonbury Interchange. He wanted to find out who was the odd person living in the railway carriage.

In many ways Tips was an ordinary boy. Growing fast, eating two breakfasts, with plenty of friends at school, and he played in the school football team as their striker. Yet after his dad’s early death (he was only six) he was more self-sufficient than most boys, and pursued the same hobbies as his father: trains and maps.

Tips could read a map like other people read books, and there were stories all through a map if you could only follow them. The map told him that the hillock in the middle of the interchange was called The Mound, and The Mound was surrounded by railway lines on three sides, and a section of the local canal on the other. There was no road leading to it, or any track. It was an island all to itself, but there had to be a way into it somehow.

Tips jogged along Railway Terrace and had a good view of the canal side of The Mound. But he couldn’t see anything like a track or road. There was a big fence as well, stopping small boys like him from getting onto the railway line. The Strettonbury canal did a little dance with the Derby-Birmingham line, as it twisted in an S-bend under three railway bridges. Just past the last bridge there were two locks as canal headed away out of Strettonbury into fields and onto the old pottery workings. It was a dead-end canal, a side-branch of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal.

The day was crisp and clean and hardly any coal smoke came out of the houses as Tips turned along Main Road, crossed the railway line and watched two local trains rumble by to Derby. He thought if he walked right around the interchange he must find some sort of road into The Mound.

He turned down Trickle-down Lane as it wandered alongside the Derby-Manchester line. He could hear the trains whoosh by but there were fields and trees in the way. No sign of any road here, and no one sensible would try to cross the two tracks of the Derby-Manchester line. Tips hurried onto Factory Road and re-crossed the line at an automatic level crossing.

The Mound was bigger from this angle and covered with trees. Tips thought he could see a stone wall or something on top, but maybe he was imagining it.

The old railway crossing man's double-storied hut was still standing, covered in graffiti for Derby United. Until ten years ago a man closed the gates manually, twenty times a day, until he was replaced by automatic gates. It would have been fun opening and closing the gates thought Tips, as he turned down Factory Road into the old industrial part of Strettonbury. Many of the factories had shut up shop, and were derelict. Strettonbury had been fading away since the potteries closed. He walked up Coal Street, and then Coke Lane, but there was no access road into The Mound from here. Both ended with empty grimy factories and lots of barbed wire.

So that left the canal, which must be the only way to get inside the interchange. His jog had only taken him 30 minutes as he turned into Bridge Lane which ran alongside the canal. A rather small, fat and round dog was scratching about beside one of the pretty moored canal boats, and came up to Tips with a friendly wag of its tail. Tips gave it a pat.

'That's my dog that is' said a voice from nowhere.

Tips looked up startled and saw a head poking out of the rear cockpit of one of the canal boats.

'Oh sorry'.

'You can pat him alright, he doesn't bite. He's called Pill. It's short for Pillock, cause my dad says he's a pretty useless guard dog'.

The head that belonged to the voice had a thick mane of ginger hair.

'You live local?' asked the head.

'Yes... on Railway Terrace'.

'I live on this canal boat, it's pretty cool. My dad is a builder and he's working in town'.

The head shook itself, satisfied that she had one-up on Tips. Then the short stocky body followed the head and she jumped out onto the towpath. She was still in her pyjamas and it was freezing, her breath froze in the air.

'Look'.

She imitated a smoker puffing on a cigarette, taking a long draw and blowing out a huge cloud of condensation. It looked amazingly real.

'You try it. No, no suck in lots of air, that's it'.

She was barely satisfied with Tips efforts and said so.

‘You need practice, what’s your name’.

Tips thought she was a bit full-on this girl, but meekly replied.

‘Michael, but my friends call me Tips’.

‘That’s a funny nickname, like a rubbish tip?’

‘Not really...’

Tips didn’t have time to explain that his nickname came from his surname ‘Tippett’, before she interrupted. She was really good at interruption.

‘Jaq is my name. I don’t go to school, cause we’re on the move all the time. I do correspondence, me mum teaches me. I’m eleven, how old are you?’

‘Twelve’.

They looked at each other. She was short and had a know-it-all look. A woman’s voice came breezily from inside the canal boat.

‘Is that you out there Jaqueline? Who’re you talking to? You must be freezing out there, are you ready yet? We’ve gotta be off soon’.

Jaq threw a ‘face’, she was good at that too.

‘That’s me mum, we’re visisting Auntie Dorrie in hospital, she’s had a turn or something. You should come and see me after school, I could show you round our boat’.

Tips thought that was rather a good offer. He’d seen the colourful boats chugging up and down the canal, sometimes even helped them through the locks, but he’d never been on board one. Jaq hopped back on the boat with a casual aplomb.

‘I was born on this boat. See yer then Tips, come on Pill’.

The dog hopped on as well and they both disappeared. The name on the canal boat was ‘Ginger Beer’, painted in lovely red and green letters with posies of flowers all around. It would be fun to live on a canal boat he thought wistfully, though the practical side of him said ‘they’d be no room for a train set’.

He walked on along the towpath and almost immediately went under the Manchester Birminham railway bridge. There were three railway bridges in a row, and a train crossed over at the same time, rattling the girders. There was a little stone road bridge on the other side, and the towpath abruptly changed sides.

Bridge Lane climbed up into Strettonbury and the canal turned away into a sort of valley formed by Railway Terrace, which was high up on the embankment, and the The Mound on the other side. The towpath went under the second railway bridge and now there was nothing between Tips and The Mound, except the black deep canal.

Of course he could swim it, but he couldn’t swim, so perhaps if he had a boat? Just after the second railway bridge there was a sort of large gloomy bay on the far side of

the canal, edged with grasses and overhanging branches, and suddenly Tips could see a way into the The Mound. But it wouldn't be easy.

The railway bridge was constructed of huge metal girders which interlinked as they bridged the canal. It would be possible for someone small and nimble to wriggle around the support girders and climb along a main girder from one side of the canal to the other. Someone like a small boy for example.

The girders looked slimy and tricky, and Tips did not like it. Perhaps there was a better way?

The towpath ducked under the third railway bridge, and there was a lock here. A lock is the way canal boats can go uphill, or downhill.

It uses two sets of gates at either end that block the canal, but can be swung open to let a boat go through. Once the low boat is between the gates, the gates are all closed, and winding handles are used to open up one set off valves and that lets the water in and the canal boat rises to the top level. Open the top gates and the boat chugs out and has climbed uphill. Quite clever, and it sounds more complicated than it really is. Sometimes you get locks of 30 or more in a row and it takes ages for a boat to climb up the 'flight'.

Tips edged across the lock gate, clutching the safety railing. He didn't want to fall into the black, oily water. On the far side there was a small brick building, with windows all boarded up. Behind it there was a huge wire fence topped with three strands of razor wire. Very nasty stuff, and the fence ran all the way alongside the railway line. Tips investigated the fence but could see no way round it, over it or under it.

Two fishermen had set up their long rods over the canal and gazed balefully into it. They did not notice him as he walked back from the lock and looked at the slimy girder again. It seemed to be the only way.

He shivered and suddenly felt hungry for breakfast, though it was almost 11 am. He scrambled up a rough short-cut track he discovered on the towpath, which lead up through the embankment hawthorn bushes up to Railway Terrace. Here he turned for his house, and there was a strange man at the doorway and his mum was chatting to him.

'Ok missus, I'll be back this afternoon. Nice room you got there, is this your boy? Tall lad eh? Ok I'm off.

'Jimmy's the name lad, Jimmy Iggulden. I'm your new lodger'.

Chapter 3

The Moth Man

At 3 o'clock on Sunday Jimmy Iggulden arrived in a large and rusty Ford Transit van and moved into the front room. The room was furnished anyway, but he had one massive steel cabinet he wanted to shift in and he got Tips to help him. Francie left them to it and went outside to hang up the washing. The cabinet was heavy.

'It's all my treasures in here lad, what's your name? Tips, yep all my treasures. Watch that corner there, easy now, that's it, right in this corner.'

They cajoled the large cabinet into a corner of the room, and when they'd finished sweat was pouring off Jimmy.

'She's a heavy beast ain't she? See, it's lockable, and fire resistant'.

He stood back and patted it affectionately. He was a tall man, almost 6ft, with a skinny, gangling frame and a tooth missing in the front row of his large teeth. It made him look comical, and he smiled readily enough. He was very chatty.

'I'm only here for a few weeks you see, I work the railway lines and the canals, at night'.

'What for Mr Iggulden?'

Tips immediately fell disingenuously into the conversational trap that Jimmy had set. He grinned toothily.

'What for eh?'

Jimmy bent down to Tips in a conspiratorial fashion, though he hardly needed to as Tips was already five foot six inches himself.

'I'm gonna show you lad. Special treat, I don't normally show 'em, but I've taken a shine to you Tips'.

Jimmy produced a key, looked around the room suspiciously and shut the outside door with a wink.

'You can't be too careful eh? Yer won't tell anyone will yer?'

Tips shook his head, not sure what he was supposed not to tell. Jimmy took a key from his pocket, attached by a long string to his trousers.

'I always keep me key on me, sleep with it I do' he said with gravity

Then opened the lock on the cabinet, and pulled out the long iron bar that stopped the trays from sliding out. For Tips, the first tray was a disappointment. Rows and rows of brown moths, pinned neatly in a row.

'Is that what you do, collect moths?' he asked curiously.

'Collect 'em, and sell em'.

'People buy moths?'

'Yeah, sure, people will buy anything, specially if it's rare'.

He pulled open another tray, displaying to Tips eyes more brown creatures stuck on pins.

'Are they always brown?'

'Mostly, moths don't need to be in colours do they, cos they fly at night'.

'So you go out at night?'

'Yeah, go down to the canals or along the railway lines, where people don't go. Or wasteland. Get some rare 'uns that way. Look at this one'.

Jimmy pointed to a nondescript looking specimen.

'That's the Worcestershire Spot Moth that, I'd get £200 for that from collectors'.

'Really?'

That impressed Tips, maybe he could go collecting to? Jimmy must have been reading Tips mind because he quashed that idea immediately.

'Not everyone can do it yer know? Takes years of skill to get the right moth. Lots of 'em look the same, and yer don't want to spend half the night getting a common moth. You want a rare one, and that's a skill. I've been doing this for twenty years now. This is my own special collection but I've sold hundreds over the years. Sold one for £400 quid. That was a good night's work'.

Tips knew most people didn't earn much more than £30 a week, so £400 sounded like a fortune to him.

'Here's my card'.

Jimmy gave it to Tips with rather an old-fashioned a flourish, for he was rather proud of his business card. Tips looked at it curiously.

'Jimmy Iggulden, Moth Man. Experienced collector of English moths, butterflies a speciality'.

'Oh you collect butterflies too?'

Jimmy looked smug.

'Too right I do, that's what I really like doing. The regular money is in moths of course, there's plenty to get you know, but the real money is in butterflies. The

collectors go mad over butterflies.’

He pulled out a tray near the top of the cabinet and it revealed dozens of brightly coloured butterflies all arranged with a fanatical precision. One was crooked, so Jimmy touched it back into place reverently.

‘Some of these are worth a fortune I’m telling yer, look at this here, the Wentworth Blue Emerald, isn’t she a beauty. £1000 I could get for her, sweet eh?’

‘Wow’.

As Tips said this, he was genuinely impressed by the financial value, and yet somewhat put off by the very stillness of the butterflies. They were like painted corpses, and hardly real anymore. Tips could not quite explain this but he sensed that the pleasure a butterfly gave was in its flight, the dash and swish of colour as it skittered through a summer afternoon. These butterflies were not going to fly again, all the life had been taken out of them.

‘That one’s worth £700 quid, the Cornwall Great Moors butterfly, she’s a beauty eh?’

Jimmy’s eyes had come alive with enthusiasm. It’s true he made his living from moths, but butterflies were his passion. He pulled out another tray, and Tips noticed there were several gaps, and these gaps were labelled.

‘Don’t you have this one here?’

Tips read the label ‘the Strettonbury Blue’.

‘Jees I wish I did lad. These gaps are the butterflies I need to make my collection complete, but they’re as rare as a tiger’s tits. The Strettonbury Blue is extinct you know, there’s only about four in museums. The local museum ‘ere as got one. Hasn’t been seen for thirty years. Bugger it (sorry shouldn’t swear before you sonny) but it’ll be worth thousands of pounds that would. Fat chance tho’ of getting that, still, I can dream can’t I?’

‘What does it look like? I might have seen one’.

Jimmy laughed at that, a sort of raw chortling noise that made him sound as if he was choking.

‘That’ll would be a good ‘un, that one would, they’re bloody extinct you know. Gone with the bloody wind, still’ he smacked his lips ‘I could retire if I got one of those’.

‘You go to the museum and ‘ave a look, they’re gorgeous they are, simply gorgeous. A deep blue, with sort of gold feathers on the edges of the wings. They say it sort of shimmers in the evening, the Strettonbury Fairy they once called it’.

‘What happened to it?’

‘Got done in I suppose, yer know, pesticides, stuff like that, but she’d be worth

thousands of pounds, thousands...'

'Wouldn't you want to keep it alive if it's so beautiful?'

Kids have a knack of asking uncomfortable questions, and this one threw Jimmy out. He looked a mite defensive.

'Well, I suppose so, to start with anyways. But you cant keep 'em alive you know. I mean what use is a live butterfly? The collectors don't want live butterflies'.

'But they're beautiful'.

'Yeah, well, but you can't sell 'em like that'.

He shut the cabinet drawers seeminly a bit offended, and then changed tack. He held open the door and whispered to Tips.

'Look you're an intelligent lad, I can see that. If see anything unusual like, moths or butterflies, let me know sonny. I'll make it worth your while. £5 if it's an unusual one'.

Tips nodded and edged out the door, but as he walked upstairs he was not sure whether he would want to help Jimmy Iggulden. The truth is, he found the Moth Man rather creepy. Still, five pounds bought a lot of train tracks.

Chapter 4

The Strettonbury Fairy

After the school bell rang at the end of the wednesday, Tips grabbed his soccer boots and went down to the playing fields. Only Davey Brown was there.

‘Where is everyone?’ asked Tips.

‘Mr Bristow is sick so there’s no practice this afternoon. Wanna kick around for a bit?’

Tips did not particularly like Davey, who played a dirty right back, but he’d nothing much else to do, since his mum wouldn’t be home anyway. She did some overtime on Wednesday afternoon at Quick Cutz. A couple of other boys turned up and they chased the ball around for an hour, till they had to go and Tips drifted down to the canal.

He didn’t have any intention to see Jaq again but found himself outside ‘Ginger Beer’ at 4 pm, sort of hoping she might be around. She was.

‘Hiya Tips, come on board, come on’.

‘Me mum’s gone shopping so there’s just me and Pill of course’.

The dog smelt Tips inquisitively and wagged his fat tail.

‘Let’s start at the cockpit. Here’s the tiller here, and the forward and backward control...’

Jaq gave Tips the whole tour and he was impressed how everything was squeezed in. Her little cabin was tiny, and crammed full of clothes and cuddly toys in a massive heap.

‘Me mums always on about me to tidy up, but I reckon it’s my cabin and I can do what I like. Bet your rooms a mess too’.

Tips nodded, but actually he kept his room straight and tidy. He liked the fact she could close the cabin door and have her own jam-packed space. The shower on the boat was tiny, and there was no room for a bath.

There was a little spare bunk ‘in case Aunt Dorrie stays, though her pins aren’t very good’ and Jaq parents cabin was completely full of a double bed. No space was wasted. Drawers were fixed under the bed, cupboards built up high, with shelves running above the windows. The kitchen was ingenious, with cups tucked behind shelves with railings, and plates snug in racks that locked down specially so they wouldn’t fall out.

‘Sometimes we hit the bank with a real bang you know, and me dad swears, and it would make a right mess, if everything wasn’t stowed away’.

To Tips the boat seemed to stretch out as they walked through it, running run on and on. Beyond the kitchen was a lounge with proper armchairs and a television which was secured with bolts to the wall. In the corner there was a small black pot-belly coal stove, round and satisfied like a big black hearth cat. The fire was on and the strip of flame looked like the cats grin.

At the far end another door lead out to the pretty painted bow, where there were seats and pot plants, and even a garden gnome.

‘This is my fav spot’ said Jaq ‘specially when we’re moving, it’s really cool. I can tell dad if there’s a boat coming, see there’s an intercom here’.

Tips was impressed by that.

‘How long is the boat?’

‘Seventy-eight feet exact. That’s about as long as you can get ‘em, otherwise you can’t get thru the locks’.

Tips nodded wisely as if he had already realised that, which he hadn’t. They sat on the bow and watched as a two ducks paddled optimistically to them.

‘Go away you, shoo. Have you got any brothers or sisters?’ she asked Tips. He shook his head.

‘Me neither, I like it that way. What are yer doing today?’

‘Nothing much’.

This wan’t strictly true, he was pondering whether to climb along the bridge girder and get to The Mound that way. But it was getting late, and anyway did he want the girl with him? She was pretty bossy. Yet despite himself and his reservations he told her of the railway carriage and The Mound. She wasn’t that excited but when he mentioned that he would have to climb along the girder she got really keen.

‘Come on, lets go, it’s not dark for a while. Me mum won’t be back for ages’.

‘I’m not sure...’ he muttered reluctantly.

‘Let’s do it’

Jaq jumped onto the towpath and practically dragged Tips along it. Pill followed excitedly.

‘Which bridge is it?’

‘No not this one, the next one’.

They walked over and under the curious stone bridge which Jaq explained loudly, and for Tips exclusive benefit, was called a ‘roving bridge’ or a ‘snake bridge’.

‘You see Tips the horses pulled the boats along and this way they didn’t have to unshackle the horses, clever ain’t it?’

The towpath went over beside the bridge and then looped back on itself, and then went under the stone bridge. It was a clever trick, and Tips needed more time to study it, but Jaq dragged him on willy-nilly.

‘It’s this bridge isn’t it?’

They were by the second railway bridge, and just then the 3.30 from Derby (arriving at Strettonbury at 4.10 as Tips surreptitiously noted on his watch) thundered over. The bridge shook quite violently.

‘Spooky eh’.

Jaq sounded a tad less confident than she had been five minutes ago. The girders dripped water and looked slimy and awkward to grip. It was a good fifteen feet from the girders down to the water.

‘So you want to get across to the winding hole?’

She pronounced ‘wind’ as in the breezy sort. It puzzled Tips but there wasn’t time to ask, for Jaq had already hauled herself up on the girder.

‘Come on’ she yelled ‘it’s easy’.

Well it wasn’t. Although the girder she had selected spanned the whole canal, there were several huge support struts coming down onto it, which meant that at each strut they would have to lean out over the canal and wriggle around to the other side. They’d have to do this five times. Jaq got her hands and grip muddled on the first strut and teetered over the black canal for one heart-stopping horrible second, before she grabbed at something and pulled herself around. Her face was hot with the effort.

‘It’s easy-peasy’ she said loudly, if not so convincingly.

Tips approach was more thoughtful. He hauled himself up onto the girder, one of six that spanned the canal, and studied the strut supports carefully. The metal was greasy with the coal smoke that came from the canal boats, and damp with moss and water that dripped from above. But here and there were dry projecting bolts, and by carefully placing his hands it was possible to hold onto these and swing around the strut. Of course he would have to do this five times to cross the canal, but the first time was the hardest.

Jaq meanwhile had no method at all and just wildly flung out her arms around the strut, and seemed to momentarily defy gravity by hugging the strut tightly, and launching herself around the edge. Tips was concentrated on his more conventional methods, but was nervously expecting a loud plop into the water if Jaq missed her grip.

Just as he got halfway across a train roared onto the bridge and the whole edifice shook

and trembled, and Tips had to grip hard onto the bolts. He was frightened of water, and knew that it would take a desperate doggy paddle if he fell into the canal.

‘Yippee’ shouted out Jaq jubilantly as she swung off the last strut and plunged into a blackberry bush. Her clothes were filthy with slime, but she didn’t seem to care at all. Tips cautiously climbed down off the bridge girder and avoided the blackberry bush.

‘Shush’ he muttered.

‘Shush yerself, we did it eh? Got across the canal. That was cool’.

There was an old overgrown pathway around the winding hole and at the top end was a jetty with a little dinghy moored there. It obviously had had very little use, and it seemed slightly odd tethered there. There was a sign too.

‘Trespassers Welcome’ it said.

Tips looked at it twice before he realised how strange it was. Didn’t signs normally say ‘Trespassers Keep Out’?

‘Yeah that’s weird, maybe he’s a child snatcher or something?’ whispered Jaq.

Her imagination was clearly moving into some sort of planetary orbit, but her exuberance had been quietened down by the dark over-hanging oaks that almost touched the still water of the winding hole. It was almost five o’clock now, and twilight was setting in.

‘Sort of spooky isn’t it?’ she whispered, some of her courage leaking away.

‘There’s a track here’ said Tips. After the harrowing bridge his courage had come back ‘let’s follow it’.

Children can walk noiselessly when they want to (which isn’t very often) and they followed the path through the trees and right up to the dark square object that Tips recognised was the railway carriage. It was definitely an old model and even in the gloomy light he could see it had red and gold painting on the side. There was smoke coming from the chimney.

They watched silently for a minute and just as Jaq was going to ask ‘what do we do now?’ when suddenly the carriage door opened and a short whiskery old man stepped out. They froze like statues, only 15 yards away from him. Even though they were in deep shadow if he turned around he was bound to see them.

But instead he lit his pipe, and from the flare of the match Tips could see he was quite an old man, with a big beard and an old fashioned waistcoat with a fob chain watch. Large puffs of smoke billowed out and Tips and Jaq could smell the rich earthy tobacco.

‘Let’s go back, we’ve got to get across the bridge before it gets too dark’ he whispered to Jaq.

She was going to protest (he sensed this) but he grabbed her hand and they crept away. At the jetty Jaq took command again.

‘I’ll go first Tips, beat you over the bridge’ and she was off.

There was a soft shimmering light playing on the waters of the winding hole, and Tips paused a minute because it was so lovely.

A movement caught his eye, a touch of blue and gold fluttered right in front of his eyes and he put out his hand to grab whatever it was. He missed of course, but he was seized with excitement. Then there was another butterfly, and a third, shimmering or so briefly in the twilight. Maybe there were five altogether. He barely glimpsed them before they flittered into the dark oaks and were gone, but they were gorgeous.

What was that butterfly that Jimmy talked about, the Strettonbury Blue? He peered into the gloom but couldn't see the butterflies again. They looked like like faeries in a garden, except fairies aren't real of course, except to small kids.

'Come on Tips' hissed Jaq from the bridge 'what are yer doing?'

'Coming' Tips muttered.

That girl was really a handful. As he looked down at the jetty as another smudge of blue caught his eye. It was a single butterfly's wing, stuck onto the wet wood. He picked it up carefully. Poor thing he thought, where was the rest of the butterfly? Eaten probably. He pulled out his railway notebook and placed the wing carefully in the dry pages. He was sure Jimmy would like to see that.

There was another hiss from the dark, and it really was quite black now. He raced along the overgrown track and hauled himself up on the girder. Jaq was waiting.

'What were you doing? Having a a pee I suppose' she affirmed graphically.

Tips didn't reply and was busy concentrating on getting around the struts, then something totally freaky happened. Jaq had negotiated the girder struts and was just about to jump down on the canal path when she froze. Someone was coming, and she could see who it was. It was the old man from the railway carriage!

She waved frantically to Tips not to make any noise and somehow he understood what she was trying to say and glued himself to the girder. They hung there like stiff bats, as the old man, still puffing his pipe but now with a jacket on, walked leisurely underneath them on the towpath.

He never looked up, never saw them. After a few seconds Jaq said hoarsely

'It was 'im wasn't it? Yer think 'e saw us? I don't think he did'.

Tips agreed, and she jumped onto the towpath. Tips lowered himself down thinking furiously. So how had the old man got there? There must be another track into The Mound and the railway carriage. But how come he hadn't found it?

'Better go or my mum will kill me' yelled out Jaq.

Tips thought he might be in trouble to.

'See yer Friday, we're having hot chestnuts an' stuff, it'll be cool'

Jaq shouted this over her shoulder as she ran off back down the towpath to her boat. He clambered up the short-cut embankment track he had discovered yesterday and

sneaked into the front door. His mum was busy clattered dishes in the kitchen.

‘Is that you Mickey?’

‘Yeah mum’.

‘You’re late?’

‘The soccer practice went on longer than usual’

He called this out hopefully and his mum swallowed this.

‘Okay, supper be ready soon. You wash your hands, and your face’.

‘Okay mum’ said Tips, relieved he had escaped more interrogation.

He really needed to wash all his clothes, for they stank of slime and hundred of years of coal smoke that the passing canal boats had thrown up into the recesses of the bridge.

‘Where’s Jimmy mum?’ he asked after supper as his mum was watching Coronation Street on the telly.

‘He’s out love, probably catching those moths he’s so keen on’.

Francie thought her tennant was a bit odd, but was happy to overlook these eccentricities because he not only paid the £10 a week straight up, but two weeks in advance as well. You can’t grumble too much with a lodger like that.

That evening after supper Tips drew a map on a big white sheet of paper, showing the railway lines, The Mound and the secret railway carriage. It was really quite a complicated map, and a challenge to draw to scale, but he enjoyed it. He used the Ordnance Survey maps to get the scale right, drawing it to 1:25,000, double the usual Ordnance size.

He coloured it in rather beautifully he thought, and after adding in details like Jaq’s boat, the jetty, and the secret short-cut path, almost as an afterthought he marked where he saw the butterflies with an ‘x’, and wrote beside it ‘blue butterflies’. After all he wasn’t sure it was the Strettonbury Blue, but Jimmy would know surely?

After his mum had gone to bed and he could hear her gentle snoring, he slipped out of bed and inserted the fragile wing into an envelope, and wrote on it ‘Found by canal, saw five flying’. Then he tip-toed down the stairs and pushed the envelope under Jimmy’s closed door. The lodger would get a real surprise.

Chapter 5

Zucchini's and Chestnuts

It was another late start, 8.30 on Friday morning. Tips grabbed his schoolbag, stuffed it full of what he approximately thought he might need for the day, rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen. His mum started on a familiar refrain.

'You've got to have breakfast Micky...' she complained,

He grabbed two pieces of bread and started to ram them in his mouth.

'And that's not what I mean, you'll make yourself sick you will'.

'Yes mum'.

Tips had heard this admonition so often it just flew between his ears, and he was quick to change the subject.

'Mum can I see Jaq this evening. They're having roast chestnuts and stuff'.

He was now stuffing cereals into his mouth at a tremendous rate to appease his mum.

'Is this the canal boat girl?'

For some reason Francie seemed very interested in Jaq, and Tips was sure she would agree to this.

'Yeah. At five o'clock'.

'Well Im going to the Winding Arms tonight Micky, with June so you be there at seven right, otherwise I will come looking for you. We'll have a bar meal there...'

'Thanks mum, bye mum'.

'Don't forget seven o'clock' she yelled after him.

He flew down the hall, flung open the door and immediately fell over a box of vegeta-

bles parked neatly and improbably on the back step.

‘Ow, what’s that?’

Francie came to the door to investigate the fuss. There was a large cardboard box full of potatoes and carrots, and some bright green zucchinis.

‘What are those green things mum?’

Francie looked embarrassed.

‘Zucchinis, must be that bloke dropped them off, he said he would’.

‘What bloke’ as Tips picked himself.

‘The one next door, on the allotment’.

‘The big fellah?’

‘Yes’ she admitted reluctantly ‘the big man’

‘That’s nice, I’m late mum see you’.

Tips flew off up the wet pavement, although he did spare a glance at the allotment as he ran past.

As Francie was picking up the heavy cardboard box, Jimmy Iggulden’s door suddenly burst open. Jimmy was unshaven, bedraggled but surprisingly excited.

‘That looks heavy that does luv’ he said helpfully, ‘is Tips here? Gone, bugger, I mean sorry miss I shouldn’t swear. I need to see him. He’s turned up trumps that kid of yours, real trumps’.

He grimaced at the vegetables then shut his door abruptly and Francie was left feeling exhausted and puzzled.

‘Only five minutes into the day and already I’m tired’ she muttered

She dumped the cardboard box on the kitchen table. What was she going to do about the vegetable man?

She wasn’t even sure of his name, Bob or something. Quick Cutz did specials for £3 quid a time for men and he had come in and she gave him a short back and sides. Well that’s what he asked for, and she thought it rather an old-fashioned request. No gel or anything like that. Anyway they got chatting, mostly on her side, and it turned out his allotment was next door to her house, and he had lots of vegetables this year.

‘You aren’t allowed.. to sell them... but if you want some?’

He wasn’t exactly a talker, but she must have said ‘yes’ and this was the result. Enough vegetables to last them for two weeks, and good looking ones to. The wet earth was still on the potatoes so he must have dug them up this morning, in the dark.

What was she to do?

II

Jimmy locked the door carefully behind him, as he always did. He wasn't being paranoid, he told himself, it was sensible precaution. Besides he needed to be a lot more watchful now, now he was onto the Big One. Lots of nosey people around, yeah you can't be too careful Jimmy he told himself, and hopped back into bed and considered what he called his Master Plan.

When he got back on Wednesday night he'd picked up the envelope under his door, looked inside it but couldn't see a thing. He must have been tired, bloody fool he was. Anyroad, Thursday was race day at Dagenham, so he spent most of the afternoon there, made two bad bets, two good ones and reckoned he came out even. Yeah, the horses had been pretty good to him, by and large. Reckoned it stayed about even over the years. So of course he didn't look at the envelope when he got back, too bloody tired. Then it was raining Thursday night which was sodding useless for moths, so he went down to the pub and came back about eleven.

Finally, he thought to look into the envelope again. Nothing, then he read the words again 'Found by canal, saw five flying', and couldn't make head or tail of it. It looked like that kids writing. Maybe a sort of schoolboy lark or something, then he shook the envelope and something blue fell out.

It fluttered briefly in the lamplight before it landed on the carpet and Jimmy was on his knees in an instant. No priest ever sent up a more fervent prayer than Jimmy Iggulden did that night.

Was it? No, surely it couldn't be? He would be the luckiest geezer in England if it was. He took out of his grimey jacket pocket a small magnifying lens, a bit like a jewellers lens, and hunched over the smudge of blue on the carpet and studied it. It was a wing, and there were the gold feathers on the edge, my God, the kid had come up trumps. It was a Strettonbury Blue... or was it? Doubt crept into his mind.

Jimmy really knew more about moths than butterflies, and he also knew that the butterfly books were stuffed full of photos of butterflies that looked damn near the same as each other. He carefully picked up the wing with tweezers and placed it in a clear plastic envelope.

Then he pored over his butterfly books for an hour or more, looking at every possibility. There were blue butterflies from Kent, grey-blue butterflies from Wales, dark blue and pale blue, but none of them had those gold feathers on the leading edge. That was the tell-tale sign.

By three o'clock in the morning Jimmy was convinced. It was a Strettonbury Blue, and it was within his grasp. This was The Big One.

His father never thought he'd come to much, and as for his wife, well she was a damn useless crone that woman. He mimicked her tone 'why do yer wanna chase butterflies for, or stupid moths for?'

Well this would show her. If he could get a Strettonbury Blue he'd be famous, and rich. Picture in the papers an' all, 'Jimmy Iggulden, world renowned butterfly collector finds extinct butterfly'. Be on the telly he wouldn't wonder, God he was on the brink of The Big One. Thirty-five years of searching and scratching, how old was he now? 52, alright 55, but he looked 52.

Jimmy slumped into bed and finally got some sort of sleep, although it was a sleep so filled with dreams of glory and fame and wealth and Master Plans that it hardly counted as a sleep at all. He heard the front door slam in his dreams, and by the time he leapt out of bed, dragged on his trousers, the boy had gone, drat it.

He needed to know, must know, Christ had to know. Where on the canal had the kid found the wing?

III

After school Tips mucked around with some of his footballs mates in the school grounds, till the caretaker chased them out. They went down to the corner shop and brought some sweets, and talked about football. Tips supported Manchester United, but then most of the boys did. Strettonbury had a local team but no one took them seriously.

As it got darker one by one the boys drifted away and so did Tips, as he walked down to the canal. He wondered if the butterflies were flying, and if Jimmy had found the envelope. He was having second thoughts about telling Jimmy, but it was too late now.

The smell of chestnuts cooking met him as he walked along the canal boats, where there were several braziers going, crackling and throwing sparks off into the air. Someone was singing a tune, and there was a tin whistle going as well. Most of the canal folk were out and Tips felt a little bit shy. He had never met Jaq's mum and dad, he didn't even know what they looked like. Jaq appeared out of nowhere, with Pill following. It was almost as if she had been waiting for him.

'Tips Tips' Jaq yelled out and dragged him over to a brazier, 'try these chestnuts, they're really, really hot'.

She gave him a plastic plate and dumped some sizzling nuts onto it, their shells popping and spitting.

'Yer need tons of butter, this is my mum'.

'Hallo Tips, we've been hearing a lot about you'.

Jaq's mum turned out to be a plump, short woman with dark hair tied up in a pony tail.

'There's me dad over there' whispered Jaq loudly

Tips could see an ordinary man with several other ordinary men standing with beer glasses in their hands beside another brazier. The women were bustling around with sandwiches and cakes. Jaq's mum took an interest in Tips, especially as he was the first boy that her daughter had ever taken notice of.

'Meg's my name Tips. We have this little party every year Tips, just the canal folk. Cause some of us will be moving on before the ice sets and shuts us in'.

'Oh, you're moving?'

'In a couple of weeks I 'spose' interrupted Jaq.

Jaq expertly turned the nuts over on top of the hot plate and drunk from a steaming glass.

'Mulled wine this is' said Meg, 'try some, but not too much. Dave's job has just about finished. We often move south before winter, lots of these folks do as well'.

'Meg' another woman interrupted 'have you got any more of that mulled wine?'

'What a question Bessie!' and Meg roared with laughter.

'You might sing us a song later Meg' someone else yelled out.

'S'pose I might, if I drunk enough of this.'

'Me mums plays the guitar and sings real nice. There's gonna be fireworks later too'.

Tips was bouncing the hot chestnuts from hand to hand, unable to even grasp them.

'I have to go at seven to the pub meet my mum'.

'Mmmm, nice mum' Jaq slurped on a mulled wine.

'Here you try this Tips, pleased to have you here. Those chestnuts are tricky aren't they, try these I've buttered them' said Meg

They were nice, and the mulled wine was hot and sweet. It was really dark by now and peoples face looked flushed like devils lit up as they stood by the braziers, and everyone talking too loudly. The towpath was full of people and even tables set up with food. Tips noticed an old man with a beard weaving his way through, and then gasped when he recognised him. He whispered urgently to Jaq who was munching a large pickled onion.

'That's the old man I saw at the railway carriage!' whispers Tips.

Jaq immediately spits out her onion and offers a dramatic plan.

'Lets follow 'im'.

The old man had ambled past the braziers and was walking under the first railway bridge, as the two children followed him.

It was totally dark, and they didn't have a torch. There was a bit of a moon scudding behind clouds, but it was scarey under the bridge and they could hear the echo of the

old man singing to himself as he strolled across the roving bridge. Pill was following on their heels. They caught a glimpse of the old man up ahead at the second railway bridge, but then they lost him and had to hurry up. Jaq tripped over a mooring bollard, and yelped and Tips told her to be quiet. They scampered under the third bridge where Tips saw the little whiskery figure disappear under it.

‘Come on, or we will lose him’.

They rushed under the third bridge and reached the first lock, but there was no one there. The old man had disappeared, vanished into thin air.

Tips ran on down the towpath for a while to the second lock but he couldn’t see any sign of the old man at all. When he retraced his steps Jaq was talking to her dog Pill saying:

‘Come on Pill, find the man, go on, find the man’.

Pill looked puzzled and ran around in a little circle, not quite grasping what Jaq wanted. Tips looked sceptical.

‘Go on find the man’;

The dog looked puzzled and then did something unexpected; he put his paws up onto one of the lock gates.

‘Did he go across here’ asked Tips, ‘come on Jaq’.

He picked Pill up and balanced himself over the lock gates to the far side. When Pill was set down he seemed to take off to the funny little brick building, and then wandered about aimlessly sniffing here and there.

‘Do you think he’s caught the scent’ asked Jaq doubtfully.

‘He’s your dog’.

‘We called him Pillock for a reason you know, still, he wanted to take us across the lock I reckon’.

Jaq found it a bit spooky by the deserted lock, particularly as the moon had disappeared behind the cloud. Could the old bloke be watching them now, laughing at them. Maybe waiting for them?

Pill sniffed around the brick building, and Tips looked at it again more carefully. He noticed that the windows were thick with cobwebs, but in contrast the door seemed clean. Tip looked at the lock, and experimentally stuck his finger into the lock mechanism, and it came out with oil on it. Strange, this door had been opened very recently.

‘Tips there’s a light’ Jaq hissed.

They instinctively dived down behind a bush. On the towpath a short wavering light was flicking from bush to bush, probing here, with an occasional flash across the canal, almost as if it were looking for something.

The children scrunched down further into the bush as the light edged along the towpath and flicked nervously around. Suddenly Tips guessed who it was.

'Its Jimmy Iggliden, our lodger',

'What's he doing?'

'He's looking for moths'

'Why is he doing that?' asked Jaq.

'He hunts 'em, and sticks pins in 'em, and sells em' Tips replied crisply.

The jiggling light carried on down the towpath and they crept out of the bush and crossed the lock gates.

'He's creepy' was Jaq's abrupt comment.

Tips did not argue with that. He was beginning to have his doubts about Jimmy too. He looked at his watch.

'Oh my god it's seven thirty'.

He ran all the way back down the towpath to the Winding Arms beside Factory Road.

IV

The Winding Arms was bursting at the seams tonight. It had always been a popular pub with workers and retired railwaymen. The Strettonbury Station was just down the road, and there was a repair workshop there as well. The boaties liked it since it was right opposite their moorings, and there would be a few sozzled boaters come along later once the braziers had gone out. The pub had a darts competition going in one corner, the telly had Pot Black playing, and there was half price on bar meals between 6 and 8. June and Francie were lucky to get a table.

Francie gasped and put a hand on her friend's June's arm.

'There he is June, over there.'

June immediately looked around, as curious as her friend.

'Who, the vegetable man?'

'Don't call him that. Yes'.

'Oh, he's tall isn't he'.

'Do you know him June?'

'Course I do, that's Robbie Blackwell that is. Quiet type, doesn't say that much'.

Robbie was beside the bar talking to another man and Francie looked at him considerately. He was tall, not bad looking really. June followed her look and she whispered.

‘You think he fancies you?’

Francie shrugged and looked away.

‘I don’t know. He keeps giving me all these veggies and stuff, great big zucchinis, you should see them’.

June laughed.

‘Oh honestly Francie, I mean really, zuchinnis eh?’

And they both burst into fits of giggles, then June got onto the serious bit.

‘Do you fancy him? He’s not bad looking?’

‘You think so?’

‘Tall and dark, got a bit of grey hair there of course.’

‘How old is he do you think?’ Francie whispered.

‘About 45 or something, I mean you could do worse Francie’.

Francie grimaced.

‘Thanks June’.

June mollified her friend when she realised that her words had been taken the wrong way.

‘No I didn’t mean it like that, you know, it’s been a long time’.

A bloody long time thought Francie to herself, and she wasn’t quite sure what to do now. It had been years since any man had taken any notice of her.

‘What if he asks me out?’ she sipped her gin and tonic.

‘Gets beyond the vegetables you mean? Well you deserve it, where’s the harm? A good night out.’

‘But what about Micky? He behaves like he’s the man of the house, you know, since his dad died. He hardly knew his dad really, so he worships him. What’s he going to say if I bring back another man?’

June had definite views about that. She was divorced with two kids, admittedly much older than Tips.

‘Look, if you take that attitude you will never find anyone. Micky has to accept it that’s all. My kids do’.

Francie wasn’t quite so sure on this point, as June’s string of boyfriends had been more or less disastrous. Robbie had shifted from the bar and was out of sight around the corner watching the darts competition.

‘Good solid bloke, that’s what you need. Another one? It’s exciting isn’t it?’

June got up and ordered two more drinks. Francie wasn’t sure if she was excited or not,

and had been thinking hard while June was away.

‘What’s he do for a living June?’

‘Robbie? Oh he’s a plumber I think’.

For some reason Francie felt a bit let down by that, but then again, plumbers earned a steady income. I mean who ever heard of a plumber out of work? You couldn’t get them half the time. Then June dropped her bombshell.

‘He’s been married you know’.

‘Oh’.

‘But his wife has re-married, down in London. I knew her a bit, but never liked her. They had two kids.’

‘Oh’.

‘It was about ten years ago now. I don’t think he’s been seeing anyone. They got a divorce and everything. My mum would know, she lives next door to ‘im’.

The pub was too loud and Francie needed time to think. Let’s face it she told herself, it was hardly likely she would attract a young single man anyway, and most men of her age were bound to have been married at least once.

‘What’s the time June. 7.30? That Micky’s late’.

‘Oh, Francie he’s coming over here’ June grabbed her friend’s arm with excitement.

Robbie Blackwell did come over, and it cost him a great deal of emotional effort to do so. He had been well aware that the women might be talking about him, but two pints of bitter had given him enough courage.

‘Evening, Mrs Tippett, did you get the vegetables...?’

‘Yes thanks, nice zucchinis’ Francie blurted out

June looked as if she would burst into hysterics of laughter. Just then Tips arrived.

‘Hi mum, sorry I’m late. I’m starving’.

‘You always are Micky, this is Mr Blackwell, who gave us his vegetables’.

‘Oh’ .

Tips saw what a big man he was, and there was one of those embarrassing pauses where nobody quite knew what to say. Francie rushed in to fill the gap

‘Where have you been Micky’.

‘Me and Jaq were eating chestnuts down by the canal, then I spotted some trains’.

Tips did not want to tell his mum about the strange old man and the darkness of the canal, or of Jimmy creeping around for that matter, it would only alarm her, and he knew from experience that his interest in train spotting was enough to quell her questions.

'You into trains?' asked Robbie unexpectedly.

'Yeah'.

'That's all he dreams of I reckon' Francie added.

'I go on Sundays to the West Stoke Steam Train Trust, we work on fixing them.... you could come... if you want'.

Robbie made his offer tentatively. Tips was very keen.

'Will he go? Is the pope a catholic' Francie said wryly, knowing how obsessed her son was with trains.

'Oh yes, that be great Mr Blackwell'.

'Robbie.'

As Francie looked between the two of them, man and boy, she experienced a strange intuitive understanding. They liked each other already, she could see that, and it removed one of the obstacles to her feelings. Yet, why oh why was it, that every man in her life, husband, son, whatever, was simply mad about trains?

Chapter 6

ER

Jimmy the lodger finally cornered Tips in the laundry as he was digging out his football boots for Saturday morning's game. Because Jimmy had had no children (his marriage had been unproductive in every way imaginable) he had no feeling for how to talk to a twelve year old boy. His method mixed intimidation and affability in a random sequence.

'Tips, got you! Hey that wing you found' he dropped his voice 'It's a beauty. Yer didn't tell anyone did yer? No, good sonny, good. Yer came up trumps' he dropped his voice to a sinister wheeze 'it's our little secret, you and me. I can trust yer can't I? Tell me lad where did yer find it eh? What part of the canal?'

Tips was generally a truthful boy, but confronted with this unshaven man, leaning over him like a huge gangly spider, he blurted out a convenient fib.

'Near the Winding Arms?'

Jimmy eagerly pressed forward even more and his breath stank too.

'What, down by Factory Road? Along the canal, just south of the pub eh?'

Jimmy seemed anxious to answer his own questions and Tips hardly needed to lie at all.

'Sort of...'

'Where was the wing lying like, on the towpath?'

Tips nodded. Francie's voice came down the hall

'You'll be late for soccer Micky?'

'You sure you saw some others, flying like?'

Tips nodded again, and managed to some how squeeze around Jimmy and got his hand on his football jersey. Jimmy's long hand suddenly caught his arm in a sudden hard grip.

'It's our secret eh sonny, you and me? There'll be a reward for you, but you

gotta keep it to yourself, don't tell yer mum. Women talk, you know'.

Jimmy laughed in a half-hearted sort of encouraging way, let go of Tips arm and headed down the hall. He turned to look back at Tips

'Don't mess with me boy and I'll see you right, I will'

Then he slipped into his door and Tips heard the door snib shut. That was one creepy guy thought Tips as he grabbed his football gear and shot out through the front door, narrowly and brilliantly side-stepping another box of vegetables.

'See you mum' he yelled out.

'See you Micky, I might have to work this afternoon as they are a bit short'

She yelled this out with no real hope he had heard. He had a front door key anyway.

They were up against the Catholic college today, big boys they were and had a reputation for playing rough. Tips had already scored three goals this season and was their star striker, but it was hard going today. The ground was sodden with rain over the last week and within minutes he was covered in mud.

The Holy Joes (as the other team was called) lived up to their rough tactics and Tips got brought down twice in the goal area. The referee must be blind! Yet amidst all this mud, slop, slurp and dodgy tackles, Tips managed to slip through the Holy Joes defence (they probably thought he was a piece of mud by now) and scored a nice little goal. The ref blew the full time whistle and that was it. One catholic boy stomped past Tips muttering.

'Bloody lucky you were'.

'Fantastic Tips' said the coach 'got 'em again'.

This was the second time their school had beaten the catholic boys. Tips went home whistling, he didn't think it was luck.

He crept carefully past Jimmy's door in case the lodger heard him, then had a shower and read the note his mum had left by his lunch 'Gone to Quick Cutz if you need me, love mum'. His lunch consisted of a big plate of bread and butter, two biscuits and suspicious piles of salad and fresh carrots. The lettuce he ignored, wolfed down the bread and butter, pocketed the biscuits and munched on the crisp carrot as he headed outside again.

The day was suddenly sparkling, with the grey morning cloud gone and a bright blue sky. He saw Robbie working in his allotment and gave him a wave, and got a wave back to. He thought Robbie made a motion of coming over for a chat, so he hurried on down to his short-cut track.

He didn't really have a plan but ended up beside 'Ginger Beer' where Mr Macintosh was scraping down some paintwork. He had never actually spoken to Jaq's dad before, so he felt a bit shy.

'Hallo, Tips isn't it? Jaq's on board somewhere'.

He seemed friendly, a rather portly man with a round face, and he turned away and tackled the loose paintwork again. Jaq's mum was also busy with hanging up washing and in the sunlight Tips noticed for the first time her rather swarthy looks. She certainly wasn't the normal northern English pale-face.

'Great day for washing Tips, I think we are going to get a St Martins summer'.

Jaq heard her mums voice and her head popped out.

'Tips, what yer doing?'

'Won at football this morning'.

She nodded vaguely, and there was pause whilst they both assessed the day.

'I thought' he glanced up at Jaq's mum in case she was listening 'we could look at that building again, by the lock'.

'Let's do it' Jaq said and leapt out onto the towpath.

'Bye mum'.

'Have you had any lunch Jaq?' her mum queried with a humourous and despairing tone.

'Got some crackers mum, bye'.

As they walked away Tips heard Meg start singing some sort of Irish tune. She had a nice voice.

'It's the sunshine sets me mum off. Sings pretty good eh?'

'What's a St Martins summer?' he asked her as they walked along the towpath with Pill sniffing beside them.

'Dunno'.

At the lock there was a canal boat going past and Jaq leapt forward and grabbed the winding handle the man passed to her, winding up the paddles with enthusiasm. The water surged into the lock. The boat man seemed to know her.

'How's yer mum Jaq?'

'Good Mr White'.

'You off down south soon?'

'Next week maybe'.

He waved as the lock filled up and Tips and Jaq leaned against the gates and swung them open. The boat chugged out and they swung the gates back, and wound down the paddles.

'Here's your handle Mr White'

'Thanks luv, say hi to your mum and dad, see ya'.

'Where are you going?' Tips asked as they watched the canal boat pull away.

‘South somewhere, Birmingham, even London. That’ll be cool’.

‘I’ve never been to London’ Tips admitted ‘are there canals there?’

‘Oh yeah’ Jaq acted all knowing ‘right through the city. You can go right past Buckingham Place you know and wave to the queen’.

‘Really?’

Jaq actually hadn’t been to London either but she wasn’t going to admit it. They crossed over to the small brick building, which stood beside the lock.

‘I wonder what it was for?’ Tips asked to himself.

Once again he noticed the cobwebbed windows and once again he noticed the door seemed clean. He stuck his finger in the lock and confirmed there was fresh oil there. He was sure someone was using this door. Jaq looked a bit bored.

‘Heh, we should climb the bridge again eh? Let’s do it’.

Tips frowned and looked carefully around the door. He noticed one brick sticking out slightly and tugged at it and it fell out into his hand, and a key tumbled to the ground.

‘Cool’ exclaimed Jaq ‘let’s try it’

She was wildly excited as Tips turned the key in the lock and the door swung open easily. It was gloomy inside the little building and stacked full of equipment and tools. Most of them covered in dust. On the far side there was another door and when Tips tried this it opened quite easily, and the sunlight poured in as it swung out into the woodland of the Mound.

It was like a secret doorway! So that’s how the old man got in and out of the Stretton-bury interchange; he walked through this little brick hut. The barbed fence fence butted up against the brick building so this was the only way through. Jaq peered through like a spy.

‘Can’t see anyone should we go on?’

‘He must be out cause the key is outside’ thought Tips aloud.

It was risky if the old man came back, still, the woodland track looked inviting.

‘We can always escape by the bridge if he traps us’.

Jaq’s imagination could already see them flying through the trees and scrambling along the girder pursued by the old hairy man and his pack of wild dogs, trained to kill of course.

Tips was thinking. Maybe if he returned the key and brick, the old man would think he had forgotten to lock the door and they could hide in the woods if he came back. The other door had no lock. The bridge would be the last resort if they got trapped. He gulped.

‘Ok’.

They shut the door behind them and sneaked quietly along the woodland path, Pill was

following them excitedly. After only thirty yards they saw the railway carriage, sitting on railway tracks in a secluded siding. Tips realised at once that that was how the carriage got here in the first place and the railway tracks must join up with the Derby-Manchester line.

‘Cool’ whispered Jaq ‘you think he’s there?’

Tips didn’t answer. It was a really old fashioned railway carriage, painted red and gold, though the paint was flaking. There were large letters painted on the side in an elaborate scroll shape, which Tips found hard to read but thought it said ‘E R’. An iron chimney was sticking out the top, but there was no smoke. Neat little steps led up to the rear door and there was a seat outside on a square of lawn, plus a vegetable path and a chicken coop with several chickens fossicking about the carriage. Tips had to grab Pill in case he ran after the chickens and scared them. The railway carriage home looked very cosy and homely, and Tips immediately had a strong desire to have a home like this one day.

It was peaceful, and they were wondering what they should do next. The sun was beaming benevolently down, and it was almost warm in the glade, and certainly not threatening, which made it all the more shocking when a voice came from only two feet behind them in a thick, loud Irish brogue.

‘Gotcha!’

They leapt out of their skins.

Chapter 7

The Deal

The small bell tinkled tiredly over the doorway as Jimmy Iggulden entered the shop. He smelt the air full of stale tobacco and wood varnish, and something else though he could not quite place it. Perhaps it was decay?

From the outside at least the Manchester shop of 'Herrenshaws Antiques, Rare Items and Collectables, also Auctioneers' was impressive. The shop sign was painted in bold, elaborate and italic gold lettering, set against a large black hoarding, and the shop window was full of impressive antique furniture and brass knick-knacks, that occasionally gleamed when the Manchester sun made a rare appearance.

But matters can be deceptive, as Jimmy knew full well. Although the inside of the shop was chock-a-block with heavy wardrobes, massive chests of drawers, ancient hat-stands, pewter baths and brass bedsteads all jostling each other for space, when you touched them you got a handful of dust. They hadn't been moved for years. The 1980's were not a good time to sell antiques, especially even the sort of pseudo antiques that Oliver Herrenshaw displayed in his shop. He would be the last person to admit it, but at the moment the trade was dead. The fashion had gone to plastics and other modern rubbish in his opinion, whilst his shop was filled to its high ceiling with the sort of stuff his grandmother and grandfather liked, which meant that at the moment, nobody liked them.

In this precarious financial position Oliver Herrenshaw had to look at other forms of income, and he dabbled in various black-market dealings, one of which was the selling of rare English moths and butterflies to European collectors. The trade was not without its risks, since some of the moths were protected species, and it was illegal to export them. However, moths and butterflies were easy to conceal, and the wealthy German and Scandanavian collectors did not ask too many questions, as long as the price was adjusted accordingly.

Even in this area trade was bad, and when the door bell tinkled Oliver Herrenshaw looked up from his newspaper, half expecting it was the rent man, or some other disagreeable person come to collect a late bill. Oliver was not exactly pleased to see Jimmy Iggulden either, but masked his disappointment with an accent straight from the Lon-

don borough of Kensington. He patted his bald head and purred.

‘Well, quite a surprise James my boy, a pleasant surprise of course’.

‘Morning Ollie. How’s business?’

‘Oh booming my dear boy, booming how can I help?’

Herrenshaw was a short man and he did not like having Jimmy Iggulden’s lanky frame over-shadowing him, so he always positioned a desk between himself and the taller man. He also particularly did not like being called ‘Ollie’ by this underling, but the two of them had done business together for many years, and Jimmy had presumed this entitlement.

Iggulden wore on his face a curious expression of triumph and smugness, and he placed down the pile of books he had under his arm, dropped his voice and whispered to Herrenshaw.

‘Ollie, this is the Big One’.

Herrenshaw looked puzzled and leaned back in his leather chair well away from Jimmy’s ripe breath.

‘Indeed, James oh boy? How big?’

‘As big as we can make it. I tell you Ollie, we can make our fortunes’.

Herrenshaw had heard this sort of talk before, but was forestalled in his reply when Iggulden took out of his top pocket a clear plastic envelope and placed it on the desk. Ever since Jimmy cornered Tips this morning he knew he had to see Oliver Herrenshaw, partly because he was bursting with the excitement of it, but mostly because he was still a little unsure of himself. He was a moth man after all, not a butterfly man. He needed a second opinion.

‘This will make your eyes pop out Ollie’.

Jimmy was enjoying this dramatic performance, and pointed to the plastic envelope in front of Herrenshaw. The dealer picked it up and looked at it.

‘Don’t crush it, it’s valuable that is Ollie. What do you think?’

‘Give me a chance old boy, give me a chance’ muttered Herrenshaw.

‘This is gold Ollie, a little piece of gold’.

The dealer held it up to the light. A butterfly’s wing, and he raised an eyebrow at Jimmy.

‘Not just any butterfly Ollie, a Strettonbury Blue’.

‘Never heard of it old boy’ remarked Herrenshaw sceptically.

He had been lead up the garden path before with Iggulden’s chatter of the Big One.

‘It’s extinct’ Jimmy said abruptly ‘now what’s that worth eh? Here look at this’.

Jimmy flipped over pages in one of the books, and pointed to it.

‘Look at that photo there’.

He opened another book, and another one. Herrenshaw took out a jewellers eyeglass and leisuredly examined the wing under it. Then he looked at the photos Jimmy had shown him. He took quite a long time as Jimmy fidgeted, because Herrenshaw was a cunning man.

Within minutes he knew that Jimmy might indeed have scored the big one. He noted the tell-tale gold filaments on the leading edge of the butterfly's wing. But Herrenshaw continued his slow inspection because he was plotting on how to deal with the Moth Man to his own advantage.

‘Hmmm, possibly Jimmy, possibly’.

Iggulden looked offended.

‘It's a cert! I tell you it is, a Strettonbury Blue, bloody extinct they are, an' worth a fortune’.

Herrenshaw needed time to strategise.

‘Isn't it rather late for butterflies old boy, I mean I always see them in summer-time?’

‘Nah, that's what everyone thinks. Old wives tales Ollie. You get lots of butterflies out in autumn, these ones are late breeders they are. It says it in this book, look, the Strettonbury Blue is really late. Up to early November they say’.

The antique dealer was satisfied.

‘James old boy, let us go down to the museum. This book says the Manchester Museum has an example of a Strettonbury Blue. Now it would not do any harm to make certain of your discovery.’

Jimmy was naturally suspicious, but he could see the sense in this, and thirty minutes later they were standing in the Natural History collection of the Manchester Museum, looking carefully through the glass at a large collection of dead butterflies lined up in a cabinet like strange multi-coloured wallpaper. Herrenshaw was beginning to imbue some of Jimmy's caution and looked around carefully to check that the room was empty.

‘Here it is Ollie’.

Jimmy pointed downwards, his grubby finger smudging the glass. He propped up the book on the cabinet and they both peered down at the Strettonbury Blue, pinned neatly to the cardboard. Jimmy surreptitiously took out his plastic envelope and placed it on the glass.

‘See’ he said excitedly ‘the size is right, and look at that colour. And the gold feathers an' all. This is it Ollie, I've been telling yer. The Big One’.

The card under the now defunct Strettonbury Blue butterfly stated that only four Strettonbury Blue's were ever collected, and were all now held in museums. The last Strettonbury Blue seen was in 1931, and the Manchester Museum specimen was bought off

a collector in 1952 for £750.

‘It’s been extinct for 50 years Ollie. Look at that price. Yer count inflation an’ all and it must be worth £3,000 quid now?’

‘Keep your voice down my boy, we do not want to catch the attention of the authorities do we?’ muttered Herrenshaw.

It was too late.

‘Excuse me sir, do you mind taking that book off the glass case? It might damage it’.

The security guard looked bored with his job.

‘Certainly my dear boy, apologies and all that, we were a bit excited by these exquisite butterflies’ replied Herrenshaw, anxious to placate the guard.

‘Hmmm’ grunted the guard.

He had spent half his life guarding dead butterflies and insects and found nothing in them to get excited about, but it takes all sorts he supposed, and he stomped away. Jimmy had jumped a mile when the guard spoke and Herrenshaw judged it best to get the excitable Jimmy out of the museum. They walked back along the damp streets to Herrenshaws shop, hardly saying a word.

He locked the door after them, an action that Jimmy took as a good omen. Herrenshaw was taking him seriously now.

‘How many did the boy say he saw?’

‘Four to five he reckons’.

‘Did he tell you where he found them?’

‘By the canal, he told me the exact spot. Course I’ve got to get them, but that’s the easy part’.

Herrenshaw pondered.

‘£3,000 pounds perhaps James my boy, maybe more if two collectors start to bid against each other. Of course it will have to be a private auction, no publicity. We don’t want to attract the attention of the authorities do we? It’s strictly illegal of course but I know a German industrialist who might pay that... of course I will take a small fee.’

Iggulden looked crafty.

‘No more than 5%’.

‘Oh that’s stiff my boy, remember I take plenty of risk too, if the police find out. And I know the contacts, 10% is fair’.

Iggulden wasn’t happy and hummed and hawed.

‘Don’t think it’s right, as I do all the work’

Herrenshaw soothed him,

‘Make it 7.5% then James, I don’t want you to feel swindled. We are business partners after all’.

Iggulden was mollified by this, and Herrenshaw sensed the advantage.

‘You will make sure the boy does not realise what he’s found’.

Herrenshaw insisted with a certain menace.

‘Corse I will. He’s just twelve, ‘ee doesn’t know about what he’s seen’.

Jimmy looked around.

‘Might be useful to ‘ave a treat for the boy like, then he can show me the exact spot. I swore him not to tell anyone, not even his mum. How’s about that model steam train there Ollie? E’s mad about ‘em’.

Herrenshaw looked doubtful at first.

‘£20 that is James, but because of my respect for you, you can give it to the boy’.

All this time, from the moment he had seen Jimmy’s wing, walking to the museum and back, Oliver Herrenshaw had been scheming. He knew that potentially a Strettonbury Blue would get much more than £3,000 pounds each, but he certainly was not going to let Jimmy know that. If Mr Iggulden was satisfied with £3,000 so be it, he, Oliver Herrenshaw, would pocket the difference.

‘Remember James, if you collect several of those Strettonbury Blues it would be fatal to release them all onto the market at once. One at a time over several years is the secret for wealth. Of course old boy I understand that you cannot afford to wait several years, so perhaps we can come to an arrangement. I will give you a lump sum, for say 4-5 butterflies, no malarkey. Of course it will take me years to recoup my expenses, but it will set you up nicely’.

Jimmy looked sly.

‘Need to think about that Ollie, what sort of sum do you ‘ave in mind?’

‘Perhaps £2,000 per butterfly, and another £1,000 once I sell it’.

Jimmy did his sums in his head, a slow business.

‘That’s only £15,000 for five Ollie, yer can’t fool me. I need more than that’.

‘You are hard James, a hard man. Well, I wish to be fair James, we have long been business partners. I tell you what, make it £4,000 straight up for each butterfly. The risk of selling is all mine. I will never tell anyone where it came from you see. The police will never know your name, so it is risk free for you. Now that’s £20,000 for five butterflies, and there may be more out there skittering in the bushes James, maybe more. Only the start you see?’

Herrenshaw knew that greed would get the better of Jimmy Iggulden’s little soul and he

was right. Jimmy nodded as if satisfied.

‘Ok Ollie, that’s a deal. I’m going to get those butterflies real soon, maybe next week. You can never tell where they are, but I know my stuff’.

‘Excellent dear boy. Absolute secrecy though, absolute. Why this is a wonderful moment, thank you James for coming to me.’

They shook hands as Herrenshaw packed the steam train model into a cardboard box, and Jimmy tucked it under his arm. Jimmy paused at the shop door.

I ‘ave to say Ollie, sometimes I’ve ‘ad me doubts about you. But I think underneath it all yer a gentleman. We can do good business together you and me’.

‘Good hunting oh boy, good hunting’.

The doorbell tinkled and Jimmy Iggulden was gone.

Herrenshaw’s face abruptly lost its amiability and he drummed his fingers on the desk for a while. Then he locked the front door and rustled through some papers on his desk.

‘Now where was that clipping?’ he muttered ‘ah, here it is’.

The newspaper clipping was three years old but it had a photo of a butterfly from Devon, the Exmoor Red Spot and it had been captured by a collector illegally. But the price was astonishing! They were rare these Red Spots, but not extinct, and the collector when interviewed by the police, said he had been offered £12,000 for one specimen. A single specimen. No wonder rare butterflies were disappearing from the hedgerows!

But this gave Herrenshaw a working price and he chewed his pencil as the sums worked out to his satisfaction. He reached under the desk and brought out a bottle and poured himself a generous sherry.

Judging from the Exmoor Red Spot a single Strettonbury Blue could easily be worth £15,000 or more, and since Jimmy would be happy with £4,000 or so, poor boy, well James never was a businessman, that left a tidy sum for himself. Of course he would have to sell them illegally, but there were one or two German buyers he was sure would be interested in such a fine specimen... and then a sudden thought occurred to Herrenshaw.

If the Strettonbury Blue was extinct was it actually protected? Would the authorities bother to legally protect an extinct creature?

If it wasn’t illegal to collect them then they could be sold on the open market. In that case the German buyers were doing nothing wrong, which meant, and Herrenshaw’s eyes watered at the prospect, that the price for each legitimate Strettonbury Blue would be much higher. You could have a public auction, with no under the table stuff. Good god! The price of each butterfly could be £60,000 or more? There was really no limit.

Herrenshaw smacked his lips, and then started a low throbbing sound which might have puzzled an onlooker for a while. It is quite rare to hear an antique dealer hum to themselves.

Chapter 8

Eddie Rich

‘Ha, ha, gotcha good, didn’t I? Spying on me wuz yer?’

The children were stunned and open mouthed. They had been caught red-handed. The old man was even shorter than they realised, no taller than Tips actually, squat and tubby like a gnome, with a thick grey beard and a red nose.

‘I saw yer go through the lock-keepers hut, ha ha, so I thought I’d sneak up on you and give you a fright. You should see your faces, boy oh boy, that was worth it, what a sight. Want to have a look at my home?’

He waved grandly at the railway carriage and almost made a little bow of introduction.

‘Eddie Rich is my name, what would yours be?’

Tips was still recovering from the surprise

‘Tips’.

‘I’m Jaq’ said Jaq ‘this is Pill’.

‘Well, come on board, see for yourself. I don’t often get visitors. The little dog will be fine, the chickens can look after themselves orright’.

Jaq seemed to recover first.

‘How long have you been here Mr Rich’ she asked politely.

‘Years me love, twenty years? Or a bit more. Come on up. Watch that step though, its cranky, a bit like me’.

They dociley followed the old man up into the railway carriage.

The first half of the carriage was completely lined with wood panelling, and full of plush seats and upholstered chairs in red and gold. There was a large drinks cabinet fixed to one wall, and a huge walnut desk, with a graceful table lamp. The windows seemed extra wide, and they had thick red curtains to close at night. The lights were all discreetly hidden behind art deco style glass bowls. It was quite sumptuous, quite something else.

‘Gosh’ said Jaq ‘its real posh, this would do for a princess!’ she exclaimed.

Eddie chuckled

‘Or a queen. Look at this luv’.

He opened up a scroll cupboard and lowered down an old fashioned writing desk, with miniature ink pots and holders for pens.

‘Made of walnut this, beautiful aint it? All the wood panels are walnut too, nice glowing wood. Not dark or heavy like oak’.

About halfway along the carriage there was a small pot-belly stove, crackling faintly.

‘I put that in, twas easy enough to drill a hole through the roof. Now through here...’

There were two doors, side by side, and he pushed one of them open.

‘This is the kitchenette, make yourself a sandwich or a proper little meal here’.

It had everything a kitchen should have, sink, stove and cutlery drawers, but all in miniature, squashed into a tiny space.

‘The cooker runs off gas bottles’.

‘This door’ Eddie opened it grandly ‘leads into the corridor. Go on have a look?’ he encouraged.

There were more doors along the corridor and the children eagerly explored them. The first was Eddie’s bedroom, all painted in tasteful white with decorative gold swirls here and there. The huge bed filled the space, but there were cupboards everywhere.

‘It’s like a canal boat’ remarked Jaq ‘but on wheels’.

Eddie thought that was funny.

‘Dead right luv, though I wouldn’t try launching it, it’ll sink like a stone. Solid steel this is. Even bullet proof they reckon’.

Tips peered into the bathroom and the lifted up a lid on what looked like a side-desk, and underneath there was a neat and tidy wash-basin with containers for soap and flannels. Underneath was cupboard for holding towells.

‘There’s a heated towel rack in there too, course it doesn’t work. I’m not connected to any power here’ Eddie added

‘What about the lights? he asked.

‘Good thinking, I’ve got a wee generator at the back which I run at night. Or I just have candles’.

Tips thought that would be fun. Another door lead into a toilet, the walls also painted in creamy white. At the end of the carriage a door opened to the outside, and they jumped down another set of steps back into the vegetable garden.

‘The khazi doesn’t work of course, not connected to anything, so I use the long drop in the trees over there’.

Eddie pointed to the little building that once used to stand behind most houses on Railway Terrace. Once they brought the toilets indoors, people used the old long drops as tool sheds.

‘The shower doesn’t work either’ he added.

‘How do you wash then?’ asked Jaq and Eddie looked at her with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Well, I’ll tell yer. I get a basin of warm water. Then I wash down as far as possible, then I wash up as far as possible. Then I wash possible’.

‘It’s pretty cool Mr Rich’ said Tips.

He would absolutely love to live in a railway carriage like this.

‘She’s not bad a wee spot? Come in for a chocolate and a biscuit. It’s cold out here’.

He bustled around the tiny kitchen whilst the children lolled around on the plush seats. Tips noticed that everything had initials on it, ‘ER’.

‘You’re the first people to rumble me for years, find out how to get through the lock-keepers hut I mean.’

‘Is that what the brick building is?’ asked Tips, and he couldn’t help but boast ‘I put my finger in the lock and it was oily’.

Eddie looked at him approvingly.

‘Now that was clever that was, you’d never get an adult to think of that, here try this’.

His chocolate was as thick as mud, and the biscuits were rather old but the children munched their way through.

‘Don’t get many visitors, pity really’.

‘We saw the sign trespassers welcome’ Jaq’ said loudly ‘we thought it was funny’.

‘Ahhh’ Eddie looked knowing ‘I saw some kids footprints, they were yours eh? But did you swim? Or use a boat?’

‘We clambered along the bridge’ Jaq stated with pride, ‘it was real scary though I wasn’t scared. Can we borrow your dinghy sometime?’ she asked boldly.

‘Gosh now that was brave, getting across that slimey bridge. More courage than me. Course you can use the dinghy. I go fishing in it, big carp there are, and rudd, maybe bream check these fish, but don’t eat the fish though. God knows what goes into that canal’.

They told him how they watched him walk right underneath them, and how they followed him along the towpath, but he disappeared. Eddie found this very funny and shook his head in admiration.

‘Smart kids, I never heard yer follow me’.

'I live on a canal boat 'Ginger Beer' by the pub there'.

Eddie's eyes opened wider in understanding.

'I thought I'd seen you before, that must be where'.

Tips was bursting to ask a question

'How did you find this railway carriage Mr Rich?'

Eddie looked knowing, slurped a generous mouthful of tea and winked at them. He dropped his voice.

'I'll tell yer, though it's a secret? You can keep secrets?'

They nodded solemnly, although Tips was wondering why adults always told children their secrets.

'I was a train driver on the railways you know, getting near retirement. They didn't have a great pension in those days then someone told me about this carriage here. Shunted onto the siding in the 1950's it was, after it was used, and then forgotten about. Trees all grown up around it, nobody was using it, so I thought, marvellous, I can live in it. Moved in about 1970 it was, of course it took a while to get things sorted out, with water and stuff, but I've good rain tanks now and there's plenty of rain in this part of the world. I like it here kids 'and his eyes glowed 'off the map I am. No bills to pay, no rent man, none of these Jehovahs bothering me, why nobody hardly knows I'm here, except maybe a few old railwaymen. My own little kingdom. Got vegetables, a hive of bees, brew me own beer, why I could run a cow here, ha ha. Even the census misses me'.

At that point a tubby ginger cat appeared and took an instant dislike to Pill, who sniffed at it eagerly. The cat was out of the window in a flash.

'That's Jekyll that is, he's got two personalities. Nice one day, stand-offish the next. Keeps the rats down tho, damn fine ratter'.

'Pill catches rats to sometimes Mr Rich'.

'Eddie, yer gonna come again? I'll give you a key, here.'

Eddie gave Tips a big old fashioned key.

'That one behind the brick is me spare key, so leave it there if you can'.

'Thanks Mr, I mean Eddie'.

'No problem kid, nice to see some company'.

They trooped outside. Tips was looking at the letters written on the side of the carriage.

'What does ER mean Eddie? It's on everything.'

The old man looked amused.

'Its named after me, Eddie Rich. ER, of course I never was rich. I was called 'Rich'

cos Ive been poor all me life, heh. Still I'm rich in this' he waved a grand hand at the woodland.

Tips wasn't entirely satisfied with this explanation.

'What about the crown?'

'Oh, that's because I'm king of 'The Mound you know' he said and puffed himself up a little ' this is my kingdom, bootiful aint it?'

'Can we come next Saturday?' asked Tips

'Anytime, give a shout when you get near the carriage in case I'm doing my ablutions or something. Anytime'.

Tips put the key into his pocket. It was a deal.

Chapter 9

A Present or a Bribe?

'I tell you the problem here, an' I've told you before. We've got nothing to show the folks. One steam train that doesn't go, a diesel loco that doesn't go, bits and pieces of carriages, not enough to make one decent one, and enough bloody spare railway parts from bogies to signal boxes to keep the whole blooming Indian rail network going!'

Archie Hardwicke was having a good 'blow', and his mates had heard it all before.

'We're waiting for you to fix Old Tommy' said Bob Parkin with a wink at his mates.

Old Tommy was their prized steam engine that blown its boiler spectacularly four months ago. They were struggling to get the thing fixed up in time for the Trust's annual fair in April. The fair was a big fund-raiser, but things were looking bleak.

'Ok, you have a laugh at my expense, but we've got six months to pull this place together you know. If we don't, then the council will pull the lease and that's us down the gurgler'.

The six men were sitting in the top storey of 1920's signal box that had been rescued from the Nottingham line. From here they had a good view of the old railway yards workshops which the Stoke Steam Train Trust had inherited three years ago. The site looked depressing as the rain set in. A vast rubbish dump. Archie waved his arm around at the huge yard.

'The potential is there mates, but how do we make a go of it?'

They drank their beers in silence. The Trust had been formed to take advantage of the Stoke railway selling off the old railway yards to the council for a nominal £1. Then the council rented it out to the Trust for £1 for three years to make a 'go' of it. But the sad truth was that the men of the Trust, like Archie Hardwicke, Bob Parkin, Bill Otter and others were mostly retired. and were frankly much better at collecting stuff than restoring it. The local councillors had watched in dismay as more old carriages and rusty parts of engines arrived at the yard, turning the Trusts yard into 'the biggest damn metal scrapheap in Stoke' as one exasperated councillor called it. The council was thinking the land should be turned into housing, and were getting impatient with the Trust.

‘Councillor Wiggins reckons that if we can’t get something going by April they won’t renew the lease’ said Bob Parkin into the gloomy silence.

‘We can get Old Tommy going...’

‘Sure we will, Bob, but we need a decent carriage to give people rides, even if its only 100 yards yer know’ replied Archie.

There were people coming up the stairs, and Archie turned around.

‘Robbie?! And you’ve brought someone? New blood I can see?’

‘This is Tips, he’s keen on trains an’ all’.

Archie was scratching his head.

‘Tips? What’s that short for?’

Tips looked a bit embarrassed and slightly overawed by all the old men staring at him.

‘Tippett, Michael, but the kids all call me Tips’.

‘There used to be a Georgie Tippett on the railways didn’t there?’

Archie asked this out loud to no one in particular. Robbie nodded, and looked at Tips.

‘Yeah, that was my dad’ said Tips quietly.

‘Well now, so you’ve got railways in yer blood, welcome home lad’ Archie threw out a hand ‘hey we should make him a member eh lads? Where’s the certificates?’

They made a great fuss of him, which embarrassed Tips but it did break the ice. They gave him an honorary certificate of membership and Bob and two of the other men took him over to see Old Tommy, their pride and joy. Up in the signal box Archie had given a funny little secret hand sign to Robbie, telling him to stay. They watched as Tips was taken across the wet yard to Tommy’s shed.

‘Should get her steaming this week, once that boiler’s sealed. Good to see you Robbie, look, its great you brought the boy but you do know the story don’t yer?’

Robbie shook his head.

‘His dad died young his mum said’.

‘Yeah’ Archie sighed ‘it was a bad business though, real tragic, you know the story? Well I’ll tell you on the quiet like’.

Robbie listened carefully.

‘You see Georgie, Tips dad was a ganger on the Nottingham line, and there were inspecting the lines right beside Norton tunnel, you know. It was a double line, standard and they had clearance an’ all. The gang was back from the tunnel about a hundred yards or so and Georgie went up to the tunnel to check the line there, and was the bloody express from Nottingham came through, on

his side! Didn't have chance. The train driver braked of course, but, well you know, yer can't stop a train that quick. The other guys on the gang dived out of the way, but poor Georgie, yeah it was a bad do. A right cock-up. They never knew the line was 'active', thought it was supposed to be clear and everything. They had an enquiry an' everything, but nothing really came of it. A real stuff-up by the signallers on that line. Shouldn't have happened'.

Teddy shook his head and Robbie grimaced.

'When was this Arch?'

'Bout six years ago I reckon, how olds the lad? Twelve, he'd have been six or seven probably. Tough eh? Only boy as well.'

'He's mad about trains...' Robbie reflected.

'Good thing you brought him, and his mum doesn't mind. It'll be good for the boy, good for us to. We need young blood'.

On the drive back to Strettonbury Tips talked excitedly about the steam train. He then told Robbie about the old man and the railway carriage, and Robbie was intrigued.

'Really? Twenty years..' he mused 'some of the old railway men might know him, what was the name?'

'Eddie Rich and he's got a cat called Jekyll, grows his own vegetables and has got bees and everything. The carriage is real plush, with red seats and curtains. Has got his initials on the side of the carriage as well, ER'.

Robbie scratched his head as if he wanted to say more, but didn't. He was thinking real hard.

'Can you take me to see him on Saturday?'

Tips thought that would be fine.

'Well see him this week, me and Jaq, and ask him, but I think it will be ok. He likes talking and people and everything'.

Robbie dropped Tips off at his door.

'I live down at number 56 Railway Terrace...'

The sentence was unfinished, like a lot of Robbies' sentences, but Tips knew what he meant.

'Thanks Robbie'.

He dashed inside to tell his mum about Old Tommy, and how they hoped to get it steaming in the next weekend or two. Francie listened and then said unexpectedly.

'There's a surprise in your room Mickey'.

Tips looked up from his bread and butter and without a word went upstairs to his room. There was a large cardboard box on his desk, and as he ripped it open he marvelled at what it held. He put in both hands and pulled out a beautiful model steam engine,

amazingly similar to the real thing he saw today.

He ran downstairs

‘Mum it’s awesome’

‘Don’t thank me’ said Francie ‘Jimmy Iggulden gave it to you, said it was his way of thanking you. Did you do something for him luv?’

‘Sort of’.

Tips didn’t feel altogether good that his present had come from the Moth Man. It gave him a queer feeling in his stomach. He hadn’t told Jimmy the truth about the butterflies, perhaps he should now? He could say that he’d seen some more in The Mound. He did not like telling lies, and besides he wasn’t very good at it.

‘Better thank him luv’ she reminded him ‘and teas almost ready’.

He knocked tentatively on Jimmy’s door, which opened immediately, and gave Tips the strange sensation that Jimmy had been waiting for him to knock.

‘Thanks Mr Iggulden it’s really a great locomotive’.

Jimmy nodded appreciatively.

‘No problem Tips, you did me a favour, an’ I did you one. That’s what mates do eh?’

He signalled Tips to come into his room and dropped his voice.

‘I’ve been lookin for those butterflies, you know, the Strettonbury Blues, but I haven’t found any of ‘em. Are you sure you saw ‘em near the pub?’

Tips nodded, not sure what to say. Should he tell the truth or not?

‘You see I’ve bin looking all today yer know and haven’t seen a sausage, strange eh?’

Jimmy was staring at him and brought his face quite close to Tips in a threatening manner. The stink of his breath was really strong. Tips retreated a step.

‘I think so Mr Iggulden’.

He felt his face go hot when he said this fib, even if it was only a little fib. Jimmy nodded, and drew Tips to his cabinet.

‘Look at this my matey, look there’s my gap for the Strettonbury Blue right here’ he pointed with pride at the gap ‘and wouldn’t it great to fill it up eh? It just needs a nice juicy specimen eh?’

Perhaps this is what decided Tips. Why would anyone want to capture such a beautiful butterfly just to kill it, and stick it in a drawer with all those other dead butterflies? He just didn’t understand the Moth Man at all.

‘So you’d swear the butterflies were down by the pub mate?’

‘Yes Mr Iggulden, at the pub or nearby’.

‘Hmmm... nearby eh?’

Just then Francie sang out.

‘Tea’s on the table Mickey...’

It was god-saving call for ‘Tips. He couldn’t wait to get out of range of Jimmy the lodgers staring eyes.

‘Thanks Mr Igglden, thanks a million, better go...’

And was gone. Jimmy shut the door thoughtfully and locked it. The kid seemed to be telling the truth.

Chapter 10

A Treasure Map

All his long life Jimmy had had his suspicions. He thought his parents had diddled him out of his inheritance (of which they never had in the first place) and gave most of it to his sister. He was sure his conniving sister was out to get his moth collection (which was probably true). He was suspicious of shops who charged him too much, and suspicious of landlords who added on extra bonds and stuff. So he skipped when he could. That was his way of getting back. He disliked government who charged him too much tax, and anyway he only ever worked in cash. That was his way of cocking a snook at them. People were out to rip him off, he knew that, so he locked his doors, especially his butterfly and moth cabinet doors, and kept his secrets to himself. He had a Master Plan, and he was getting closer to it.

The Strettonbury Blue was the key. He could get a proper house with the money, but more than that, much more than that, he could respect.

They laughed at him and his moths, or were scared of him, like that boy. Snooping around canals and railways in the dark, working at night, sleeping by day. He was different to the others and that showed them that he was onto something. Instead of laughing at him one day they would show him respect, that's Jimmy Iggulden that is, made a fortune from butterflies. Goes all over the world collecting, they pay him for it now. Flash car an' all, lucky bastard. It was just a matter of time, just a matter of finding one single blue butterfly.

Well he looked, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday he was along the canal looking, watching, scouring the hedgerows along the towpath, peering into the fields. He had his butterfly net concealed but he kept it handy in case. He walked a long way down the canal but still found nothing. The weather was god-awful, just drizzle, and more drizzle, useless for butterflies, IS THIS CONSISTENT? and for several days Jimmy blamed his bad luck on the weather. He even got a head cold, and a snivelling nose, which dripped long drops of goey stuff on the towpath. God he was miserable!

The thought that Tips might have lied to him never occurred to him until Thursday morning. He said his thoughts out loud to himself as he sat beside his one bar heater in his frigid room.

‘Come to think of it didn’t the laddie look funny when I asked him about where he’d seen the butterflies?’

‘Didn’t the sonny jim flush a little, walk backwards even?’

Jimmy was suspicious. He trusted the lad, but maybe he was put wrong.

Jimmy looked out of the window at the grey northern skies. Perhaps he should follow the boy? He was always down the canal with that girl of his. He’d seen them there couple of times, come to think of it? He burst out into loud muttering

‘Were they laughing at him? Smart arse little brat, we’ll he’d show him. Take back the steam train for a start, yeah, then bargain for some information. Actually the brat could show him the actual spot, good idea Jimmy my boy’.

Jimmy unlocked his door and looked cautiously up and down the corridor. There was hardly any need for this since Tips was at school and Francie had gone off to work. Still, he crept silently up the stairs and peered into Tips room.

It was tidily set out, the bed made and trains books on a shelf above the bed. The train set ran on the floor and took up most of the space. By the window there was desk and the model steam train was in pride of place on it. Jimmy crept over and picked it up. He felt a twinge of guilt about taking it. He put the train down and hesitated. Stealing from landlords was one thing, but stealing from a kid didn’t seem right somehow.

His eyes looked through the window over the railway line towards the canal and The Mound. Get a damn fine view from here, see eveything he murmured to himself. He picked up the train again, and resolved to take it, when his yes fell upon a large white sheet of paper. It was Tips map of The Mound.

Some inner voice told Jimmy to pick it up and look at it, so he did. Nicely drawn to, with all the roads marked, and even the short-cut track. Quite a clever little kid to get all the scale right... my God!

Jimmy saw it, two small crosses marked beisde the winding hole and in Tips careful neat hand ‘blue butterflies’.

Bingo! The useless swine of a kid! He’d been telling lies, big fat whoppers, but here it was, the site of the Strettonbury Blues. The kid had marked it for him. Jimmy drank in the details with his eyes and then put down the model steam train and shoved the map into his pocket. He’d make a copy and then replace the map.

It was a treasure map, and the treasure was within his grasp.

Chapter II

Hunter or Hunted?

But Jimmy Iggulden was so excited by the map that he forgot to make a copy, and with the map folded carefully in his jacket pocket, and his butterfly net in his duffle bag, he was down by the canal by lunchtime. Then he struck a problem. How to get across the canal to the butterflies? He could hardly swim, and he didn't fancy the look of that railway bridge with its greasy girders. Surely the kids didn't go that way?

It was so frustrating. The winding hole was just across the water from him, 15 yards away, but how did the kids get to it? For a moment Jimmy thought he saw something blue fluttering across the water, but after staring for half an hour scoffed out loud to himself.

'Bloody seeing things Jimmy, you've gotta get your eyes tested'.

Up and down the canal he went, and walked across the locks to look at the railway fence. Maybe there was a gap that the kids crawled under? He crawled alongside the fence, prising apart shrubbery, and his only reward was getting his hands scratched by the briar thorns.

'Bloody things' he swore again, but there was certainly no gap in the fence. He glanced at the lock-keepers hut, but dismissed it when he saw the cobwebs around the windows. He made the mistake, as everyone had, that the fence went around the back. Jimmy stalked back past the winding hole and continued past the moored canal boats to the pub.

'Nah, this can't be right. How did the little devil get into The Mound?'

He muttered this out loud and walked back past the canal boats again, but this time someone was watching him.

Jaqueline was supposed to be doing her maths work but everytime people walked past her cabin window she looked up. When someone walked past twice her curiosity got the better of her, and she sneaked a look out of the rear cockpit to see who it was. It was Tips lodger, that weird guy.

The canal folk had often seen Jimmy lately, walking up and down, and he made no secret he was after moths. They laughed at him, behind his back, but dismissed him as an oddball. Jaqueline could see the butterfly net sticking out of the back of his dufflebag. Her

mum had gone down to the shops and would probably gasbag to one of the other canal boat buddies, so Jaq impulsively decided to follow Jimmy along the towpath.

The Moth Man walked quickly under the railway bridges and stopped and looked long and hard across to the winding hole. Jaq studied him from behind a bridge pillar. He's looking for something, she thought to herself, maybe it's them butterflies. She saw Jimmy take out a piece of paper and unfold it. It looked like a map to Jaq, and Jimmy stared at it very hard before tucking it away again.

'Pill!

Pill had waddled out along the towpath and in his friendly way sniffed at Jimmys legs.

'Hallo doggy, cute aint yer?' said Jimmy.

Like a lot of people who lived on their own Jimmy could get quite conversational with cats and dogs, and Jaq could overhear what he was saying, and it froze her blood.

'I bet I got a nice smell. What yer like at catching butterflies eh doggie? Yeah, I can see you smiling. There's some blue beauties over there somewhere that I'd like to get my hands on, rare they are too. Yer can't smell butterflies I suppose can yer? Nah. Still, there's a way over there somehow. If kids can do it so can I. Yer can't trust kids I reckon, but you can trust dogs. Wanna come walkies with me?'

Jimmy strode off with Pill happily following. Jaq tried to wave and hiss for her dog to come back but Pill took no notice.

'Stupid dog' she muttered 'I better warm Tips. That lodger guy is up to no good'.

Tips had told her about the Strettonbury Blue butterflies, but she hadn't seen them yet. She knew they were important to him, so she looked at her watch, 2.30 pm. If she ran she could get to the school gates and catch Tips on the way out, so she ran. Passed her mum on the way gasbagging to another lady.

'Hi mum'

'Oi Jaq, you're supposed to be studying'

'Back soon mum'

Jaq yelled and whisked around the corner before her mum could call her back.

'She's a lovely kid, but wild you know Bessie. That's the trouble being on a boat, she never gets settled down. School would do her could'.

'You never went to school Meg?'

'Too much of a gypsy you know Bessie'.

Bessie smiled.

'I reckon Jaq's a chip of the old block'.

Meanwhile the chip had raced along the streets and reached the school gates just as the

school bell rang out.

It was a strange place for her to be and she stared as the tumultuous rush of boys and girls in school uniforms pouring out, talking and shrieking. They all looked the same to her. How was she going to find Tips amongst this lot?

‘Hallo darling waiting for someone?’

An older boy strolled over, with his cap on askew and with a leering sort of smile. Boys were annoying thought Jaq, so she ignored him.

‘Come on darling can’t talk eh? Who yer waiting for?’

He leaned over her in a affectionate and superior way.

‘Piss off, I’m waiting for ‘Tips’.

‘Oh Tips eh, is he the lucky one?’

‘You know him?’

‘Sure, he’s our star striker you know. Only twelve and got four goals this season. Didn’t mention any girlfriend tho, he’s a quiet one’.

‘Tell him Jaq’s like to see him’

‘What about seeing me darling?’

Jaq then delivered the hardest possible kick on the boys shins and he yelled out with pain.

‘Ahhh!’

Some other boys rushed over and were giving the first boy a hard time as hopped around on one foot. Tips suddenly appeared.

‘Put her in the football team, she’s got a kick alright’ a boy laughed and yelled out.

‘What are you doing here Jaq’ asked Tips.

He lead her away from the group, and from a teacher who was looming up.

‘Gotta see yer, its about Jimmy the Lodger. He’s after your butterflies?’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah saw him just down the canal he was, talking to himself. Heard every word’.

‘Put her in the squad Tips someone yelled out’.

They walked away from the school and Tips listened to Jaq’s story. It sounded bad.

‘Is that what he really said? If kids can do it so can I?’

‘Yeah’.

Everything Tips had felt about Jimmy Iggulden had come to the surface. He knew that

the lodger was up to no good. That locomotive model was a bribe, no mistake about it. So he was trying to get into The Mound, but how did he know the butterflies were there at all? He was puzzled by that. Jaq and Tips discussed it as they went back to the canal boat and Meg fed both of them toast and jam.

‘He was looking at a map’.

Tips stopped eating halfway, his mouth open and the toast stranded in mid air as he stared at Jaq. Surely not? Had Jimmy got his map? He explained to Jaq that he’d marked the site of the butterflies on a map he had drawn, and maybe Jimmy had stolen it? They’d better go home and look for it.

After stuffing more toast down them, they took off (her mum yelled out ‘back at five, I’m sure they are up to something those two’ she muttered) and Tips showed her the secret short-cut up the bank. He turned the key very quietly in the front door, a trick he had learned to stop his mum from waking up from her afternoon naps.

Tips knew where the squeaky bits were in the floorboards and stairs and he urged her in a low whisper to follow his steps exactly. They walked up without a sound. Jaq thought it was exciting. She’d never been into his room, and was amazed at the train set taking up the floor.

‘Cool’ she whispered ‘I can see why you are crazy about trains. You can see everything from here’ Tips, there’s our boat’ she whispered excitedly

‘Shhh’.

Tips wasn’t listening, he was looking for his map. It was gone, definitely gone.

‘It’s not here’ he whispered back.

‘Do you think ‘es in?’ she murmured.

They both listened. There seemed to be no sound coming from the lodgers room.

‘Maybe we should check the key behind the brick in case Jimmys found it?’

‘Lets do it’ she whispered, far too loud.

Tips decided that they had better leave before Jaq’s loud voice betrayed them.

As before, they crept down the stairs delicately avoiding the squeaky steps, and quietly opened the front door. No sound from anywhere. They walked quickly out onto the street, but just as they were crossing the road, Tips darted a glance behind him. He was sure he saw a quick flick of the net curtain hanging over Jimmys window.

He hustled Jaq onto their secret short-cut track and down to the canal.

‘He was there, and he saw us. I saw the curtain move?’

Tips was still whispering.

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah... wait?’

There was someone coming down the short cut track and they dashed down to the

roving bridge and peered back over the parapet. There was a movement of bushes and Jimmy Iggulden slunk out, looking up and down the canal path carefully.

‘He’s following us’ Jaq was thrilled, but Tips heart sank.

He was a big man Jimmy, not as big as Robbie Blackwell maybe, but he could cause a lot of trouble if he caught them.

For his part Jimmy cast around uncertainly, not sure which way to go. Then he headed toward the roving bridge. The kids were lightning fast and using the parapet as cover as they sprinted noiselessly (kids can really do that) and crossed the bridge and dashed under the first railway bridge. Because the canal bent a little, they could use that bridge as cover as they scurried down to the canal boats and hopped on board ‘Ginger Beer’ and bundled into Jaq’s cabin.

‘That you kids?’ yelled out Meg above the television ‘there’s some hot tarts in the oven, keep your hands off ‘em, not ready yet’.

‘Ok mum’.

Tips held up his hand and through Jaq’s window they saw Jimmy Iggulden’s tall figure stalk past. He didn’t look, or even think to look, into the canal boat.

‘That was close’ breathed Jaq ‘what do we do now?’.

‘He’s after them alright, and after us. He wants those butterflies, and will kill em and stick em in his horrible cabinet’.

Tips looked really upset. Jaq had never seen him that way, and tried to reassure him.

‘It’ll be alright wont it?’

‘Dunno, they will lay their eggs and die soon’.

Jaq was puzzled by this.

‘That’s what butterflies do you know’ he explained to her ‘they lay eggs in winter, they turn into caterpillars in spring, then pupate into their chrysalids in summer. I’ve been reading about them. They come out butterflies, then lay eggs and start all over again’.

‘Well that’s ok then’.

Jaq didn’t really understand.

‘But he’s got my map, he’s knows where the butterflies are’.

Tips could have punched himself for leaving the map so obviously on his desk. Jaq was peering out.

‘I think he went into the pub, let’s go and see Eddie?’

Tips shrugged and thought that it might help to talk to Eddie, maybe he could help them.

They inspected the empty towpath carefully then got out and walked rapidly under the first railway bridge. They also picked up Pill on the way, who had made friends with a

fisherman.

‘Hallo Mr Burke, how’s it going’. Mr Burke grunted.

Jaq obviously knew who he was, in fact she seemed to know everyone on the canal. It was her territory somehow and she felt safe on it, and Tips also felt safer as well.

‘He’s there every day, don’t matter if its pouring down. Don’t seem to catch much’.

It was lovely autumn afternoon, quite clear as the moon hung like a smile in the muted blue sky. Still warm, though there would be a frost tonight. They hurried on and crossed the lock gates carrying Pill. Tips checked that the key behind the brick, it was. Should he remove it? But Eddie might need it if he loses his key he thought, so he replaced the brick and used his own key to get into the lock-keepers hut. He locked it carefully behind him and they slipped through the other door and trotted up to the carriage.

They knocked but there was no answer.

‘Maybe he’s down the pub’ suggested Jaq ‘show me these butterflies Tips’.

They walked down the woodland trail to the winding hole and straight away a beautiful Strettonbury Blue fluttered out in front of them. It was strange, Tips almost felt they had been waiting for him and had come out to greet him. Two more came out of the dark oaks, and then another.

‘Cool aint they? said Jaq enthralled ‘and there’s gold on them too’.

Tips counted seven butterflies now, so maybe one had died already? Surely the others would too, though they looked lively enough.

‘And they are really rare Tips?’

‘They don’t exist’.

‘What?’

‘They are supposed to be extinct.’

‘What’s extinct?’

‘Don’t exist anymore, like dinosaurs. If Jimmy Iggulden has his way they wont exist at all’.

Jaq was impressed though she still did not quite grasp what extinct meant. Pill tried to snap at a butterfly but fortunately missed.

‘Don’t Pill, they’re special they are.’

She picked him him up.

‘He’s creepy alright, that lodger of yours, following us like that. Why does he what ‘em so bad’.

The Strettonbury Blues skittered about in the twilight oblivious that their fate and future prospects were being discussed. It was getting dark, so they should go home soon.

‘He can sell them for money, lots of money. We have to stop him, somehow’.

Tips did not know what to do. Once Jimmy got into The Mound there would be no stopping him.

As the Strettonbury Blues merged into the gloom of the oak trees they walked back to the railway carriage. Eddie still wasn't around so they went into the lock-keepers hut. Just as Tips was going to open the outer door, when a sixth sense inside him made him look through the cobwebbed window.

There was figure standing motionless on the other side of the lock. Then it moved and Tips could see it was Jimmy Iggulden, standing, watching, waiting, but waiting for whom?

‘Shh, its him’.

He shushed Jaq and they peered through the window as the shadowy figure rubbed its hands in the frosty autumn air.

‘It's him alright’ Jaq said unnecessarily.

‘You think he know we're here?’

Tips wasn't sure.

‘Look he's walking away, up the canal. He's not using his net at all’.

When she had seen Jimmy before he was always searching with a torch and swishing his net about. Tips knew what the Moth Man was looking for and it wasn't for butterfleis or moths, it was for children. It was for them.

They watched him as he disappeared down the canal, then silently slipped out of the lock-keepers hut, locked the door behind them and scurried across the lock gates.

‘Can't see him’ Jaq said.

‘Let's go, he'll be back’.

They separated at the secret short cut track, which wasn't a secret any more. Jaq and Pill ran home to the canal boat and Tips quickly shot up the embankment and opened his front door. There were voices in the kitchen, and he saw his mum having a cup of tea with Robbie Blackwell.

‘Mickey you there? Robbie's here, dropped in for a cuppa’.

Tips was so relieved that it wasn't Jimmy the lodger that he gave his mum a big hug.

‘Hi Robbie’ and he smiled for the big man.

‘You're going to take me to see Eddie Rich...’ he asked.

‘Sure, Saturday morning’.

‘Whose Eddie Rich?’ asked his mum.

‘He's an old railway man’.

‘These railwaymen, they're everywhere’ his mum sighed,

But Francie smiled kindly at her son and to Tips she seemed in a particularly good mood, and quite chirpy.

The front door opened and from the kitchen Tips could see Jimmy Iggulden come in and glance his way. It wasn't a friendly look, and it sent a shiver down his spine.

Chapter 12

What's Love Got To Do With It?

Tips had never felt this frightened before. Perhaps he was scared when his dad died, but he was too young to remember really. Some of the bullies at school scared him sometimes, but he had learned to fight hard and kick hard. Anyway, now he was the schools top football scorer, so he was generally left alone.

No it was different with Jimmy Iggulden. It was a menacing kind of kind of fear. It didn't help that Tips had told the lodger some lies, which he still felt bad about that, but what else could he do? Trouble was, Jimmy now knew they were lies because he had his map! One way or the other Tips was on a collision course with Jimmy Iggulden, and as a twelve year old boy he found it overwhelming.

Of course he had allies, Jaq for one. She seemed a good kicker, and perhaps Pill could be ordered to bite, although he had his doubts. Licking seemed to be more his style. Of course his mum would support him, but she needed the money from the lodger and what would happen if Jimmy told her that Tips had lied to him? And after getting the locomotive steam model? She wouldn't be happy and might take Jimmy's side. might even tell Tips that he had to show the nice lodger where the butterflies were!?

All Friday at school issues like this crowded Tips mind until he could hardly think. He went out of his way to avoid the lodger, and after school went around to Quick Cutz to see his mum. He very rarely did this and Francie was surprised, and publicly pleased.

'Hello Mickey? Come to see me, that's nice. Grab a seat love, I'm just finishing Mrs Williams hair'.

'Is that your boy Francie' asked Mrs Williams 'he's growing isn't he?'.

Francie took this as a compliment and as she trimmed Mrs Williams hair she glanced

across at her boy with his nose buried in a comic book, and their eyes met. Something was troubling him she decided. As they walked home she chattered about her customers as he seemed unusually silent. At last more than usual.

‘Good tips today Mickey, I’m really happy working there. Are you alright love? How about some sweets from the corner shop here?’

They munched on flying saucers and aeroplanes as they walked home. Maybe he was in love?

This unexpected thought cheered Francie up, because so far he had taken no notice of girls. Must be his hormones starting to kick in she thought. Come to think of it he had been looking a bit spotty lately. Although of course at twelve years (almost thirteen she reminded herself) he was far too young for this sort of thing. Still he’d never taken any notice of girls before. She had only met Jaq once and thought she was pretty loud and tomboyish, still they spent a lot of time together.

‘We could have Indian tonight love?’

‘Ok mum’ and Tips gave her an unexpected hug.

He must be in love decided Francie, and was turning the key in the front door when a large Mercedes Benz car pulled up beside them. An educated voice called out from the wound down window.

‘Does Mr James Iggulden live here madam?’

Francie had never been called a ‘madam’ in her life and was momentarily puzzled by the question until she realised that the voice was asking about her lodger.

‘Oh you mean Jimmy, yes he’s here?’

The front door suddenly flung open and Jimmy came out onto the pavement, looking more than unusually dishevelled.

‘It’s ok miss, that’s a chum of mine. Ollie, what are you doing here?’

Jimmy was surprised and a little perturbed. Oliver Herrenshaw ponderously got out of his car and introduced himself, and gave a business card to Francie.

‘Charming Mrs..?’

‘Tippett, Mr Herringshaw’.

‘Herrenshaw madam, purveyor of antiques etcetera, etcetera. Is this your boy? James here has been telling me how useful he is?’

‘Really Mr Herrenshaw, well that’s nice’

Francie was always pleased with a compliment about her Mickey. Jimmy scowled a little at this, and nervously moved about from foot to foot. He chipped in with an explanation.

‘Mr Herrenshaw gave me the steam train to give to Tips you see’.

‘Oh that’s lovely, Tips really likes it don’t know Mickey? Say something Mick-

ey?’ she prompted.

Tips managed to struggle out a ‘thank you’ and Jimmy scowled and Oliver beamed.

‘Delighted Mrs Tippett, delighted, now James a word?’

Francie and Tips went into the house and Francie hang up her coat with the remark.

‘Proper toff isn’t he? Why did he give you the model train Mickey?’

But her son had gone rapidly upstairs and had slowly prised open the sash window. He looked down on Oliver and Jimmy as they talked. At first he couldn’t hear what they were saying, but gradually their voices grew more excited and louder.

‘I was worried old boy, it has been a week and no word you see. I thought a drive in the country would be nice’.

‘Well it was that damn boy. Told me the wrong spot he did’.

‘Why James, but why?’

‘Dunno, he’s sneaky I reckon. Dunno what he’s up to but look at this Ollie’.

Jimmy looks around then pulls out a white sheet. Tips realises to to his horror that it is his map, with the butterflies marked on it.

‘The lad drew this map and see here? He’s marked the butterflies, here, clear as day. I’m gonna get up ‘em tomorrow’.

Herrenshaw peered at the map but it was rather fuzzy without his reading glasses.

‘Excellent old boy, excellent’.

Herrenshaw tried to take at the map but Jimmy snatches it away, and Tips distinctly hears Jimmy’s raised voice

‘Careful Ollie, this is my treasure map’.

‘As long as you get the treasure old boy, you know I have a buyer, he’s most anxious to see the item.’

Then his voice dropped low so Tips could not really hear him. But at one point Jimmy’s voice went up a notch.

‘£4,000 each? You’re not kidding me Ollie?’

‘No my dear boy. Keep your voice down. How many did you say? Four or five? A fortune for you...’

What Oliver Herrenshaw did not say was the continental buyer had actually offered £15,000 for a perfect specimen. of an extinct Strettonbury Blue. Another buyer was just as excited, and offered £20,000. They were queuing up they were, and Oliver was anxious to get his hands on the butterflies.

Herrenshaw and Iggulden talked more confidentially, money has that effect, and their voices dropped and they talked endlessly as the street lights flickered on, one by one. Finally they shook hands and Herrenshaw got into his large car and drove off at a sedate

pace. Jimmy looked about his suspiciously, and gave a quick glance up to Tips window, but Tips was too fast and had already ducked for cover.

The boy sat slumped against the wall. It all seemed so obvious now. What a fool he'd been. So that's why they wanted the Strettonbury Blues, gosh £4,000 for one butterfly? You could buy a car for that, maybe even a house? Tips felt his heart grow colder and colder when he remembered that Jimmy was going to 'get 'em tomorrow'. How could he stop him? Maybe if he warned Eddie, oh what was he to do?

The Indian food was great but Tips hardly touched it, he had no real appetite. Francie noticed this of course and decided her boy was definitely in love, poor thing. She gave him lots of attention tonight and tucked him up in bed and gave him a big kiss. But Tips didn't sleep for ages, his head racing with crazy ideas to stop Jimmy Iggulden. Meanwhile, down below, he heard the Moth Man pacing up and down in his, and every step sounded to Tips like a step of doom.

Chapter 13

Finders Keepers, Losers Weepers

The knock at the door was tentative, and Tips would not have heard it if he hadn't been chucking in Shredded Wheat cereals as fast as he could. There was a big distorted shadow through the glass door. Was it Jimmy? Had the lodger been out all night? Francie bustled by in her dressing gown on the way to the shower.

'Who is that Mickey? Open it up'.

The door opened to reveal Robbie Blackwell, looking awkward and holding some vegetables. This was a relief to Tips. He was getting very paranoid about the Moth Man.

'Hi Robbie' said Francie 'you caught me on the way to the shower. What you doing here so early? Oh thanks, put them on the table Mickey'.

It was actually 9 am but since she wasn't working till 10 this morning Francie had treated herself to a lie-in. Robbie looked a little shy and it was finally Tips who clicked.

'Oh yeah Robbie, I'm taking you to see Eddie arn't I?'

'If that's ok Tips...' Robbie began

'Whose Eddie?' asked Francie, forgetting she had already asked this question, and Tips suddenly grew alarmed.

They were all standing by the open front door, and Jimmy Igguldens room was just off the hallway. Tips was sure he heard Jimmy's door creak a little, as if the lodger was leaning right up against it, listening. He desperately didn't want Jimmy to overhear where they were going.

'Ok mum we're off now' he said urgently, but Robbie blabbed.

'The fellah with the railway carriage...'

He was being tugged out the door by Tips.

‘Hang on Mickey that’s rude, are you going to the pub tonight Robbie? The Winding Arms?’

He nodded and his eyes lit up.

‘Might see you there Francie’.

‘Maybe, now I better have me shower. I’m perishing in this doorway. See you Mickey. You’ve had breakfast?’

The morning was brighter than usual with a skiff of sun up there, and walking with Robbie reassured Tips immensely. Maybe he should tell him about the Strettonbury Blues. He’d be a good man to have on his side against Jimmy Iggulden. They walked down the canal to ‘Ginger Beer’ and Jaq’s mop of red hair stuck out immediately, and Pill, sensing a walk was yapping already.

‘This is Robbie Jaq’.

Tips made introductions and as Robbie exchanged pleasantries with Mrs Macintosh, he whispered to Jaq.

‘He’s ok, he’s a railwayman like my dad. I told him about Eddie and he wants to meet him’.

Jaq looked suspicious, as if someone else was interfering with their adventure.

‘What about the lodger geezer, is he around?’ she asked quickly.

‘No, we’ve given him the slip’.

Here Tips was both wrong and right. He was wrong that they’d given Jimmy the slip, but he was dead right that Jimmy had been listening at his door.

But Jimmy hadn’t quite yet grasped what the conversation was about. He scratched his unshaven jaw. He didn’t know who Eddie was anyway. His plan today was to hire a dinghy from the boat repair yard, and row across to the winding hole. Now where’s that kids map?

Jimmy looked at it, and then looked some more. On the map, inside The Mound, was marked a black square dot, and Tips had written beside it ‘Eddie’s railway carriage’. Light slowly dawned into Jimmy’s mind.

So that was it! They were going into The Mound, Jesus he’d better follow them, and Jimmy scurried about the room pulling on his trousers, grabbing his butterfly net, when he suddenly stopped in mid flight. He had just had a very clever idea.

He heard Francie singing, and moving around the kitchen. He waited some minutes and looked at his watch. It was almost 10 am, wouldn’t she be going to the hairdressers this morning? Then he heard her pulling on her coat and locking the front door and her quick steps heading up the street.

Jimmy opened the door slowly and peered out. The house should be empty.

‘Still you can’t be too careful’ he muttered aloud.

He walked up the stairs carefully but still managed to step on every creaky board, and winced as he did so. He opened Tips door and sniffed in. No one there of course, so he walked across to the window and stared out. He remembered from when he delivered the steam train model that you could just about see everything from this room, the canal, the moored boats, the tree covered mound and the surrounding Strettonbury interchange.

There was a pair of binoculars in his hand and he brought them up to his eyes. Now where were they ?

‘Got em! Beautiful’ he muttered .

He felt like a hunter latched onto his prey. In the rounded vision of the powerful binoculars he could see two children and a big man walking along the towpath. They looked close enough to touch but were over 300 yards away. There was a little dog sniffing behind them, and he’d seen that dog before somewhere.

‘That’s the little terrier that came along last night...’ he talked to himself aloud.

Then the three people disappeared under the railway bridge, popped up again and walked under the next one. He could hardly see them now, but Jimmy opened the window and by leaning right out he could pick them up again beside the lock. They crossed it, the little girl carrying the dog. Jimmy was puzzled.

‘Been there, don’t know what they’re doing there. Hold on, what’s that?’

He saw Tips hold up something to the man, then start pulling at brick or something on the small building. It was a brick that came out and Tips was showing the big man something. Jimmy gave a running commentary to himself as he watched.

‘Get out the way you big sod, oh that’s better. A key! There’s a key behind the brick! They’re going through the door? But hang on...’

Jimmy was mystified and re-focussed the powerful binoculars and suddenly saw the three of them walking along the woodland path on The Mound.

‘So that’s it! That’s the way in, you little beauty... who’s that?’

The two children had run up to an short old man with a big bushy beard, and there he was shaking hands with the big fellah.

‘He must be Eddie, he must live there’ Jimmy concluded aloud.

They went inside the carriage and Jimmy stood up and put down the binoculars with a satisfied smile. He congratulated himself on his cleverness.

‘Not so long now my blue lovelies, not so long now, and finders keepers, losers weepers eh? Cause I didn’t find them, but I’m gonna get ‘em. Showed me the way ‘ee did, useful boy that. Thought you could out smart Jimmy Iggulden didn’t yer? Well I’m gonna show you. This is the Big One Jimmy, nothing is gonna keep me from this. Nothing’.

Chapter 14

The Gang of Four

‘So how’s you doing kids?’

This was Eddie’s cheerful call out when he spotted Tips and Jaq leading Robbie Blackwell to the railway carriage. Eddie was basking in a burst of autumn sunshine and puffing his pipe, which sent clouds of impressive smoke all around the glade. Jeykll took one look at the visitors and sprinted off into the bush whilst the chickens clucked around busily, completely unperturbed by Pill’s sniffings.

‘Hi Eddie’ said Jaq as she rushed in with introductions, though she’d only met Robbie herself five minutes ago ‘this is Robbie, friend of ours’.

Robbie and Eddie shook hands warily.

‘Robbie’s keen on trains and stuff, and is a member of the Stoke Railway Steam Trust’ Tips added as an ice-breaker.

‘Ahh, I’m an old railway man myself. I’ve heard about the Trust, you got that steam loco going yet?’

‘Boiler bust, we’re just fixing it ...’ said Robbie.

‘Ahh, they do that boilers’.

He pulled another draft on his pipe and Robbie looked hard at Eddie and at the carriage. The two men had assessed each other in those opening glances and decided somehow in the inscrutable way of men that they both passed muster. The conversation could deepen.

‘You live here?’ asked Robbie.

‘Twenty years or more, huh, census hasn’t even caught up with yet. You can keep a secret can’t you? Strettonbury has an official population of 2563, but I’m the secret 64th, ha ha’.

Robbie smiled and gave a shrewd look at the carriage.

‘Tips said it was named after you Eddie?’

‘ER, yes, that’s a good story isnt?’

Robbie traced his finger over the scroll paintwork, still in extraordinarily condition.

‘Elizabeth Regina’ he suggested to the retired train driver.

‘Ha, ha, dead right, spot on, I can tell you’re a railwayman. Queens coach this is’.

‘The queens coach’ asked Jaq puzzled ‘what queen?’

‘What queen do you think girlie? Queen Elizabeth of course, that’s her formal name, Elizabeth Regina’.

‘Sounds peculiar, like a womans bits’ Jaq affirmed rudely.

‘Ha, ha, you’re a card Jaq’ laughed Eddie ‘never thought of that’.

Although Tips was anxious to rush off and see if the Strettonbury Blues were ok, he was fascinated by this revelation.

‘Really?’

‘Really! I was having you on about my name and everything, it was just that the initials are the same. My little joke. When Her Majesty got coronated (if that’s the word) she travelled up and down the country you see, so people could see her, and she travelled by train mostly. Special trains they were, all done up nicely, so she could have a nap on the way, and have a bite to eat. It had the works. Had cooks on board, servants, maids of honour I shouldn’t wonder. This was her carriage, well it was one of ‘em’.

Robbie was equally fascinated.

‘This is an original carriage?’

‘Yep, but it was a duplicate, see she had several carriages and two sleepers built. This is one of the sleepers. Don’t know if she used it or not, but they built this one as a back-up’.

‘Come on board Robbie, the kids have already seen it’.

They clambered on board and Robbies jaws dropped a little at the lavish gold and red furnishings of the seats and cushions. They were all faded but almost in perfect condition. Everything was monogrammed too. It blew him away, and the normal quiet Robbie became even more speechless as he was given a thorough tour by Eddie with the kids chipping in.

‘Now I heard’ Eddie said conspiratorially ‘that the original coach got sent to the knackers yard, in the sixties or something, melted down like, so this is the only one left.’

‘Did they just shunt it here to keep it handy?’ asked Tips

‘I reckon you’re right, an’ it was a handy spot, close to the interchange and everything. And the other thing, no one knew it was here. It was secure like,

tucked away in the trees. I reckon everyone forgot about it, till I came along'.

Robbie shook his head in amazement, but Jaq, who was getting bored with all this train stuff, jumped up.

'Can we go see the butterflies Tips, the Strettonbury Blues?'

'What are they?' asked Eddie innocently.

This surprised Tips but he realised that neither of the two men would know about the butterflies.

'Come on, we'll show you' yelled Jaq.

As they walked along the path to the winding hole Tips explained quickly about the butterflies.

'You mean they're extinct 'an all?'' asked Eddie.

'Yeah, according to the book,. Look I brought this book from the libray, its got pictures of the Strettonbury Blue. Says everything about them They were last seen in 1935'.

They stood by the winding hole as the sun percolated down through the trees. It was remarkably warm for the time of year, but there was no sign of the butterflies. Robbie read the account of the Strettonbury Blues and passed it onto Eddie who read it and kept saying such things 'well I never', and 'I'll be damned', and 'bloody extinct they are' in a voice of increasing amazement.

Suddenly they were there, flitting around the canal edge and catching the sunlight on their blue and gold wings.

'Look' said Tips excitedly.

'Well I'll be...' Eddie was lost for words and stopped sucking his pipe.

They were all entranced as one butterfly and then four started to circle over the water in the warm sunshine.

'The suns warming them up, but they must die soon?'

Eddie asked perhaps tactlessly.

'I hope so' said Tips. Robbie looked puzzled.

'Why Tips. They're are beautiful?'

'Yeah but someone wants to catch them and kill em' said Jaq dramatically.

Tips hesitated to tell Robbie the whole story, but somehow he felt he ought to. Actually this was a relief to Robbie. He had sensed the boy was a little unhappy and thought that it might have something to do with him and Francie. Boys could get pretty territorial. But as Tips explained about Jimmy the lodger, and his butterfly, Robbie suddenly grasped the situation.

'£4000 each? He said that Tips?'

Jaq couldn't believe the amount of money each butterfly was worth.

'Cor, that's £20,000 dancing in the sunlight there' remarked Eddie, 'I been here twenty years and I didn't even know about them. I'd seen 'em often enough, but they were just butterflies you know... ' he ended lamely

'That's big money...' ruminated Robbie.

He rubbed his large hand over his jaw, and pondered about the situation.

'It's the interchange that's saved them' he said thoughtfully 'no one can get across here so its protected the butterflies, like its protected the Queens carriage, and protected Eddie from the census boys'.

'It's our secret isnt it' asked Jaq anxiously as the butterflies moved into the oak trees and out of sight.

'Course it is love' Eddie affirmed 'and we'll look after them, but this Iggulden fellow, he knows about them now don't he?'

Tips explained about his map and they all considered the problem. Tips had been thinking.

'The book says that Strettonbury Blues are late autumn butterflies, This warm weather has kept them flying, but they must have laid their eggs by now and soon they will die.'

Robbie nodded in understanding.

'Now I know what you mean...'

'They'll be safe, at least till next spring' said Tips.

'We can stay up and guard 'em' said Jaq unrealistically.

She already imagined herself stalking the butterfly hunters with a totch and preferably digging concealed holes and setting man traps for them. They walked back to the railway carriage with Pill exploring the chickens and the chickens giving Pill a few sharp pecks on their own account.

'Get back Pill'.

'Come inside luv and have a biscuit' said Eddie.

Eddie and Jaq disappeared into the railway carriage which gave Tips and Robbie a chance to talk.

'This Jimmy sounds determined Tips...'

'Yeah, he scares me a bit. Stole my map too.'

He explained how Jimmy had been snooping around and Robbie's face grew concerned. This lodger sounded a mean devil if he was prepared to steal from a twelve year old.

'I told him some fibs about where the Strettonbury Blues were Robbie, now he's mad at me. Don't tell my mum, please Robbie, she'll just get all worried, you promise?'

Robbie nodded reluctantly and moved to reassure the boy.

‘You know where I live Tips, number 56 Railway Terrace, near the Main Road. Same street as you, so if this Jimmy is a problem following you, you just come and get me.’

‘Sure Robbie’.

Tips was pleased at the support, but privately didn't think he'd need any help, at least not any time soon. How wrong he proved to be.

Chapter 15

Fog and Danger

Something woke him up unexpectedly. There was a sound in his head, but perhaps it was just the sound of a dream. All night he had heard pacing footsteps, which must have been a nightmare. Was that the front door catch? He had heard it a million times already, and well knew the peculiar noise that unclicking the door latch made. Many a time he had tried to sneak out quietly without his mum hearing him, and he had also struggled to stop that loud latch click. Someone else was now trying to do the same.

Still befuddled by sleep he sat up and peered through the curtain onto the wet Sunday street. A thick fog covered the canal and enveloped The Mound. Every tree was bejewelled with droplets of water, and the street lamps looked fuzzy in the half-light. There was another sound and Tips recognised that too. The snib of the lock as the front door was being closed, very cautiously. A glance at his watch told him it was half past seven.

Then he saw Jimmy Iggulden, looking more like a ghost than a real person. He instantly recognised that lanky walk and there was butterfly net sticking out of the top of his duffle bag. Where was he off to now, and at this time of the morning? It was too late for moths, but what about butterflies? Tips dressed frantically and remembered to grab the lock-keepers hut key as he went. He already knew where Jimmy was going, and it was dead certain that the only reason Jimmy was trying to make his escape so quietly was because he didn't want to wake Tips up.

He was a long way behind Jimmy when he hit the street, but he had a stroke of luck. As Jimmy took the short cut track down to the canal he got his butterfly net tangled up in a hawthorn bush, and spent some precious minutes trying to disentangle it. He swore, softly. Things weren't going his way, but this morning but he was determined.

Jimmy had tried to get into The Mound yesterday but would you know his bad luck there was a blooming fishing competition on the canal, and two fishermen had set up right beside the lock. One of them had even dumped his gear by the hut door. Jimmy walked past several times, but could not see a chance for him to get past the fishermen without being seen. The bastards seemed glued to the spot, and they went on fishing till dark! He couldn't understand it, they threw the bloody fish back in the canal anyway.

What was the point?

Jimmy spent most of the night pacing up and down in frustration. But this day was his day, he knew it in his blood. Once the fog had cleared and the sun warmed up the trees the butterflies would fly.

‘This is the Big One Jimmy, so don’t muck it up’ he told himself loudly

There was no one to overhear him except one early blackbird and a small twelve year old boy.

Iggulden walked purposely up to the lock, got himself over the gates and went up to the lock-keepers hut. He found the loose brick, pulled it out and pulled out the key and held it to admire it. Tips was horrified. Jimmy turned the key in the lock and the door swung open and Jimmy disappeared inside. Tips crossed the lock gates like a silent moth, and listened as carefully Jimmy locked the door behind him. He put the key in his pocket and gave it a pat, very satisfied so far. That was his first mistake.

Tips heard the other door open and shut, and wondered what to do. Surely the butterflies wouldn’t be flying just yet? It would be too cold in the fog, though soon the sun would burn it off, and he could see the glow of the sun through the mist. He ran back over the lock gates, tripped, and nearly sent himself head first into the canal, recovered, and sprinted down the towpath to the moored boats.

He knew which window was Jaq’s and tapped lightly. No answer, then he tapped again. Nothing.

Then he found a nail on the towpath and screeched it against the window and that did the trick. Jaq peered out at him and mouthed ‘what?’. Tips signalled urgently with his arm that she should come out and Jaq nodded and disappeared. For a girl she was commendably fast at dressing, and in little more than two minutes she popped out onto the towpath. In fact she had just bunged on her day clothes on top of her pyjamas.

‘What’s up Tips’.

‘Shhh, Jimmy Igguldens gone into The Mound with his butterfly net. He’s after the Strettonbury Blues’.

‘Cor, let’s stop him’

She seized the momentum and was off down the towpath with Tips struggling to keep up. Fortunately Pill hadn’t seen them go and was left behind. They got to the lock in a breathless rush.

‘Slow down Jaq, there’s plenty of time. The butterflies won’t fly in this fog’.

He pulled out the spare key from his pocket.

‘How we gonna stop him Tips?’ asked Jaq, perhaps a tad nervously.

Tips had no answer to that question, and they slipped through the two doors into The Mound. It was lucky that Jimmy hadn’t left the key in the lock, for that would have stopped them going through.

The woodland was eerie in the fog. Branches struck out like claws and their feet made no sound on the sodden grass path. Tips crept forward carefully, for he thought he could smell tobacco smoke. Was Eddie already up?

He moved aside a branch and saw Jimmy Iggulden sitting on the carriage step, smoking a cigarette with an oddly smug look on his face. There was a thumping noise from inside the carriage.

‘What’s happened?’ whispered Jaq as she peered through the shrubbery ‘where’s Eddie’.

In a clairvoyant moment Tips wondered if that thumping noise was Eddie. It had stopped now.

‘Can we get round the back of the carriage?’ he muttered, and Jaq was off already.

‘Hey be careful’ he hissed,

He was fearful that Jaq would give herself away. But Jaq moved with real cunning through the trees, and Tips followed. She really was good at this sort of thing, sneaking around the trees and stepping over branches, barely making a sound. Once a branch cracked and Jimmy looked up suspiciously, but then shook his head and looked away. Tips had frozen like a statue, then relaxed as a train went whoosing by. That covered their sounds. Tips looked at his watch, the 7.30 from Birmingham, getting to Stretton-bury at 8.30. The sun was a broad big band of yellow in the eastern sky and already the fog was thinning. They’d better get a move on, as they were running out of time.

Jaq needed no urging for she had circumnavigated the glade in the trees and brought them right around to the back of Eddie’s railway carriage. There were some more thumps from inside. What was it?

‘Which ones Eddie’s room?’ asked Jaq.

Tips knew and crept up to the window, but the curtain was drawn. He tapped quietly and got a great fright as the curtain was pulled back and a red faced and angry Eddie was pushing his face hard up against the glass. He immediately recognised the children and gave the universal signal to stay quiet by putting his finger up to his lips. He pointed to a small open window at the top.

By lifting himself onto the wheel and standing on to it Tips could get his head almost up to the open window. Eddie whispered furiously.

‘Well done lad, go get Robbie. The bastard has locked me in, I can’t get out. Get Robbie, fast as you can, go now!’

Tips nodded that he understood, then dropped down to the ground and passed on the message to Jaq.

‘He’s locked in, you know where Robbie lives? 56 Railway Terrace, about 10 doors down from me?’

Jaq wasn’t so certain about her task.

‘What about you, why can’t you go?’

‘You can’t handle Jimmy on your own’.

‘Course I can’ she affirmed her courage.

Tips realised he had an argument on his hands, so he changed tack cunningly.

‘Ok, sure you can, but you can run faster than me, much faster’.

Jaq wasn’t so sure about this either, but they both saw Edie watching them wondering what the hold-up was. He pointed to Jaq and mouthed the words ‘go girl’ and that decided Jaq. She was gone in a flash.

Tips signalled to Eddie to keep calm and he crept around to the front of the railway carriage to see what Jimmy was up to. Basically it was up to him on his own to stop Jimmy now, but he didn’t really have time to feel scared.

The Moth Man had finished his fog and was pacing up and down, flashing angry glances at the sun as if it was personally responsible for the hold-up in proceedings. However the fog was vanishing before his eyes.

‘That’s better, come on my beauties’.

He grabbed his butterfly net and walked down the path to the winding hole, and kept looking at a piece of paper that Tips realised was his map. Why had he marked the spot so well?

He was torn between nipping back to the carriage to unlock Eddie, and tempted to keep following Jimmy. Maybe he could steal the map back, or better still grab the butterfly net. Jimmy would have no hope of catching butterflies without that, they were far too quick. Tips decided he must follow Jimmy. If he went back to release Eddie the Moth Man could have grabbed the butterflies by then, and anyway, would Eddie be of much use? He was just an old man.

Pearls of light were pouring through the remaining mist, and Jimmy had paused by the winding hole, almost sniffing the air, willing the butterflies to emerge. Tips crept forward, only ten yards behind Jimmy, his heart pumping and barely breathing so that his puffs of breath wouldn’t be seen. Maybe the butterflies had died already? Maybe they were safe?

Then he saw them and at the same moment Jimmy saw them too. Strettonbury Blues, five of them dancing in the sunlight. Jimmy reached his long arm out for his net.

Chapter 16

A Mad Dash

Jaq ran like the wind, though English winds rarely blow as fast as she did along Railway Terrace. The fog was lifting but she was still confused. Was is number 65 she was after? But there was no 65, and Jaq panicked as she ran back and forth, aware that time was precious and Tips was facing Jimmy the lodger on his own. Number 56 Railway Terrace looked just like all the others, but she saw some mail jutting out of the front door letterbox and she rushed down the short path and pulled it out. Mr R. Blackwell it said. She thought: was that Robbie's name? She really must learn to listen more to people.

She knocked. No answer, then knocked again, still nothing. It was 9 'o clock, he should be up, oh, but maybe he had already gone out? Looking after his allotment. She started to panic.

Jaq looked hard at the upstairs windows. The curtains were drawn, so she grabbed some light gravel from the path and threw shower at the window. She was a good thrower and the stones rattled against the glass, but to no obvious effect.

Jaq was getting desperate, and truth to tell, close to tears. How could she get Robbie up? Was it even Robbie's house? She grabbed a larger stone and threw that. It worked spectacularly well, and the shattered the glass broke with a loud crunch, and Jaq jumped back horrified. She was tempted to scarpers but there was nowhere to hide.

Within seconds the curtain was pulled apart and a shocked Robbie looked through the hole in his bedroom window.

'Robbie' she yelled 'yer gotta come down, Tips is being chased by Jimmy and he's locked Eddie in the carriage'.

There was a man walking his dog on the street and he looked at Jaq as if she were mad, then hurried on.

Robbie stood somewhat dumbfounded by this surge of announcements, but he quickly grasped the situation, and he could see the distress on Jaqs face. He nodded, and disappeared. The front door opened and Jaq rushed forward and told him over and over what was going on. Robbie shook his head and looked into the lounge.

Archie Hardwicke was buried deep in a sleeping bag on the floor. They had had a drinking session last night and this was far too early for him.

‘Get up Arch we have to go’ said Robbie matter of factly.

‘What, eh? What time is it?’

Jaq was hopping on two feet.

‘He’s in desperate trouble Robbie, we need you now?’

‘What?’

Archie looked appalled this red haired mop of anxiety jumping up and down on the floor beside him. Robbie had disappeared and managed to pull on some trousers and was now pulling his shirt over his head.

‘Please hurry up Robbie’ said Jaq.

‘Easy, we’re getting there...’

‘What’s going on Robbie?’

‘Dunno, but Eddies in trouble. Eddie Rich, you might know of him?’

‘Course I do, if its the same bloke, old train driver, yeah I knew knew him twenty years ago, but I haven’t seen him since then. Are we going somewhere?’

He struggled to his feet and gazed bleary eyed at Jaq and Robbie. Fortunately he had gone to bed pretty much dressed anyway so he only had to pull on his trousers, which he did with excruciating slowness.

‘Hurry up you two’

‘Is she a friend of yours Robbie?’

‘Sort of. You’ve still got your pyjamas on Jaq?’

Robbie had noticed Jaq’s pyjamas sticking out from under her clothes.

‘Come one or Jimmy will kill Tips’.

Jaq’s flair for the dramatic had really gotten out of hand, still it did the trick. Robbie had his shoes on.

‘Ready. You ok Arch?’

‘No’.

‘Nice shot Jaq’.

Jaq looked completely unapologetic.

‘Sorry Robbie, didn’t mean to, but the gravel didn’t wake you up. I knocked hard’.

Archie Hardwicke fumbled with his laces, then gave it up as a bad job, grabbed his jacket of the coat hook and they were out of the house and walking down the street. Jaq had already raced ahead.

‘Move your arses you two’ she yelled back at them.

‘Polite isn’t she’ said Archie as he struggled along the road pulling on bits of clothing in the mist.

Chapter 17

Man v Boy

The Strettonbury Blues were flitting over the water and then veered away from the winding hole to come closer to the bank. With a practiced swing Jimmy netted one. Then another swing and he got a second one. He carefully disentangled each butterfly from the net and inspected them carefully.

‘Almost perfect, no wing damage there at all my lovelies, in you go, home sweet home, well a funeral home anyroad’

He popped them into his collectors box. Then he saw a third one and with a quick swing instantly netted that as well, and put in into the box.

‘Not bad eh? £12,000 quid for one minutes work, ha ha’.

Jimmy chortled to himself, whilst Tips watched in agony. He knew the butterflies wouldn’t stay alive for more than an hour in Jimmys collecting box. He simply had to do something before he got the rest of them. There were still two butterflies out over the water, dancing in apparent oblivion to their companions disappearance.

Jimmy watched them for a moment, put down his butterfly net and lit a quick fag. Tips saw his chance and sprinted from his covering tree and and grabbed Jimmys net. Jimmy was astonished and his fag dropped out of his mouth.

‘You little sod, where’d you come from?’

He made a grab for Tips but the boy is too quick for him.

‘Give me back my net you little brat’.

Jimmy grabbed his box with the butterflies even more tightly.

‘We’ll you aint getting these are you?’

Suddenly Tips threw the net at Jimmy and made a spring for him, and the collector was caught by surprise. Momentarily torn between getting his net back, he took his eye of the flying boy missile and was staggered as Tips momentum and weight was enough to knock him over. They both sprawled in the mud and grass for the box. Jimmy gets a hand on the box and Tips bites down on it, hard.

‘Ahhh, you bastard’

The Moth Man was roused to a fury and a terrible fear that he might lose his butterflies just at his moment of triumph, so he punched his other fist as hard as he could at Tips. Fortunately it missed Tips face but caught him in the chest. Poor Tips was stunned by the force of the punch, and was flung back on the ground, whilst Jimmy secured his box with the butterflies and scabbled to his feet.

‘Didn’t work did it, I’ve got ‘em’.

He was sweating and angry, and even a bit scared. He looked around hastily.

‘Where’s that dratted girl, is she here too?’

Tips had rolled over and picked up the net again and stood a few yards away. Jimmy was almost twice his size and was ready for him now.

‘Thinking about another grab, well don’t boy. I’ve got ‘em and even the devil ain’t gonna make me give em up. Where’s the girl friend huh? I’ve earned these beauties, truly I have. Ha, thirty years they laughed at me, but not now’.

Jimmy’s Master Plan was on track and nothing was going to stop him.

They stand looking at each other for a few minutes. Tips hadn’t said a single word. He felt sick and winded. He couldn’t stop this man.

‘Tongue stopped working huh. I’ve got three Blues in here, enough to make my fortune eh? You want ‘em sonny? You’ll have to fight for them’.

‘You wont get out of here without a fight’ said Tips, with surprising coolness.

Jimmy shrugged, but looked about nervously. There was no doubt that if both the kids attacked him simultaneously they could steal his box. But there was no sign of the girl and so he was recovering his poise a little after the shock of struggling with the boy.

‘Brave words boy, brave words, but you aint smart enough for ol’ Jimmy. I got your map, a very nice map matey’.

Jimmy couldn’t help but rub it in as he saw Tips wince.

‘Oh yeah, and I watched you and the girl through the binoculars I did, from your own room. Watched you take the brick out, so I know where the key was then, so there’s the map, there’s the key, you gave me the lot on a plate you did. Outsmarted yer I did’.

Tips began to realise that if he could keep Jimmy talking it increased the chances of Jaq getting Robbie in time. Tips nodded.

‘I tried to put you off the track’.

‘So you did. By sending me down the wrong part of the canal, clever that was’.

Jimmy bent down carefully and picked up his fag, which was still glowing. He never took his eye off the boy though, and pulled a drag.

‘I mean what’s it to you sonny anyway eh?’

He pulled a long smoke and waved expansively around him at the glade and the butterflies.

‘These buggers are all gonna die in a week or so, maybe tommorrow. They’ve laid their eggs haven’t they? There will be plenty more in the spring for you and girl, so what’s wrong with Jimmy getting a couple. I don’t see the problem’.

Tips thought.

‘They were extinct, and I found them. You will make them extinct again’.

‘No, that’s against my interest boy. Keep ‘em alive, keep the ball rolling eh?’

Jimmy was happy to chat, getting increasingly confident as he spoke. He didn’t see the incongruity of a grown man boasting about out-smarting a twelve year old, far from it. He felt pretty good about himself. This was his moment of triumph and like the movies Jimmy saw, the hero gets his chance to show off how good he is. Jimmy was being that hero.

‘Sure you did and I thanks yer for that. We could both be famous you know, boy finds extinct butterfly. I can see the headline, pictures on the telly maybe’.

‘But they are not yours, they belong to everyone’ Tips protested quietly.

‘Nah, no one knew about them sonny, except you. Besides I’m everyone arnt I? Why can’t I get my share? I’ve worked long enough for pennies, now I’m getting the pounds’.

Tips suddenly spotted a movement in the trees close behind Jimmy, like a dark shadow. But maybe he was imagining it, hoping against hope that there might be someone there. Someone to turn the tables on Jimmy Iggulden.

Jimmy pulled an elaborate smoke ring, one of his few accomplishments. Then he leaned grandly against the trunk of tree.

‘There’s two more out there on the water, they’re yours. I’m a generous bloke aint I? Keep the net you might go hunting yourself’.

Tips threw the net at Jimmys feet.

‘Never. Take it, I don’t want your dead insects’.

Jimmy looked at him with admiration.

‘You’re smart sonny aint yer? Hoping I will bend down to pick it up, take me eye of you, then you can charge right?’.

Tips felt a bit sick, that had been his idea. But was that shadow deepening behind Jimmy? The Moth Man suddenly realised something.

‘Ere, I know you’re trying to keep me talking eh? Well it’s time to go sonny’.

Jimmy threw the cigarette into the bushes, and tucked the collecting box under his arm.

‘Don’t take it too hard boy. It’s life. You win some you lose some. Cheery’.

At the exact moment that Jimmy grinned his final triumphant smile, a pair of giant hands came out from behind the tree and grabbed the Moth Man around the neck.

Chapter 18

A Screech of Wheels

'Ugh' said Jimmy.

Behind the enormous hands came two long extended arms and Robbie's grim unsmiling face behind them. Tips gasped.

'Robbie!'

Tips rushed forward and seized the box still clasped in Jimmy's arms, and wrenched it out of his hands. Jimmy was still gasping for air with his hands flapping uselessly. Jaq suddenly appeared and Tips opened the box and they all watched as the Strettonbury Blues took flight.

'Ugh' went Jimmy again.

His despairing eyes following the free butterflies, seeing his hopes destroyed.

'Didn't think you'd need me that soon'.

Robbie made this remark calmly, maintaining his iron grip on Jimmy's throat who was starting to go purple. Then Archie came lumbering and puffing out of the wood.

'You got 'im then? You guys move quick. Where's Eddie?' he asked

'Eddie's locked up' says Jaq excitedly.

Jaq and Archie hurried back to the railway carriage and they found poor Eddie still sitting forlornly on his bed. His face lit up when they undid the lock and rushed in.

'Robbie' Tips observed 'maybe you'd better let Jimmy go. I don't think he's breathing much'.

'Oh yes, I forgot about him'.

Robbie unclenched Jimmy's throat who staggered and collapsed on the ground. He recovers quickly though, and looks around him angrily, clearly outnumbered.

'Get the cops onto you Jimmy Iggulden, locking up an old man' said Tips

boldy.

‘You do that sonny, and I’ll tell ‘em he’s living illegally on this land. They’ll clear him out’.

Jimmy gets to his feet. He is in a desperate rage, his Master Plan has gone horribly wrong and he isn’t thinking very clearly. Just lashing out with words.

‘I’ll be back. You can’t hide ‘em Blues for ever. You can’t guard the door for ever you know. I know where they are now, I’ll get ‘em’.

Jimmy grabs his collecting box from the ground and looks around at the trees, as if hoping the Strettonbury Blues might still be in reach. Then he started walking back to the railway carriage. Robbie and Tips follow cautiously, and Robbie gives Tips a friendly thump on the back as they walk behind Jimmy.

‘Thanks for coming Robbie’.

‘No worries Tips, he’s a mean bastard...’

Just then Jaq and Ted and Eddie hopped out of the carriage and met Jimmy marching along.

‘What’s wrong with catching ‘em anyway?’ he spits out to them all.

‘Should be ashamed of yourself...’ started Eddie.

‘You keep quiet you old git, or I’ll call the police. They’ll biff you off this land if open your mouth’ threatened Jimmy loudly.

Jimmy felt outnumbered and outmanouevered, and also humiliated with Eddie, Ted, Jaq, Tips and Robbie all staring at him. He just wanted to lash out, in fact he was close to crying.

‘No, you’ve not heard the first words from Jimmy Iggulden, nor the last. I’ll be back. Here give me my net. So close I was, so close, and you bastards stopped me. I’ve got a right to earn my living haven’t I? What’s wrong with putting them in cabinets, they look beautiful they do...’

In his rage Jimmy went utterly the wrong way, and started to stride off down the old railway siding tracks. Then he turned around and stared at them all with unconcealed hatred.

‘I’ll be back’.

He spat the words out, then plunged through the woods onto the main double track railway line from Manchester to Derby. Tips was puzzled.

‘He can’t get out that way. That’s the main line’.

‘That’s the wrong way...’ Eddie added ‘someone better stop him. He don’t know what he’s doing?’.

Just then Tips heard a strange sound. It was a sort of hissing, like a snake might make, though this was no ordinary snake. But a long metallic and silent line of high-speed

coaches pulled by one of the most powerful locomotives in England. He knew that hissing noise very well, and glanced down at his watch.

‘It’s the afternoon 3.10 super express from Manchester!’ he yelled out’.

change first entry to Derby train

Robbie sprang into action, and dashed into the trees towards the railway line.

‘You stay here kids, I’ll get him before he kills himself’ as he disappeared.

But it was too late. Eddie and Ted looked at each other as they heard the warning hooter of the train and then the awful sound of the brakes slammed on and the wheels grinding hard onto the railway line, metal on metal, a terrible screeching wail.

‘Oh God...’ muttered Eddie ‘he’s a gonna’.

A high speed train hitting a soft body at that speed wouldn’t really make any noise at all. They could hear the train as it shuddered and screeched to a stop, a long way down the tracks.

They all stood frozen to the ground looking at each other but not speaking.

‘Maybe it missed him?’ asked Archie hopefully.

‘Can we have a look ‘ said Jaq terrified, yet extremely excited.

She was about to dash off into the trees after Robbie when Tips grabbed hold of her.

‘You don’t want to see’ he said.

He was completely firm, and surprisingly adult. Even though Jaq struggled free, she didn’t move to run off. Tips seemed suddenly much older than she was.

‘You don’t want to know’ Tips said ‘a train killed my dad’.

Jaq’s eyes opened wide.

‘Really...’

Just as they stood undecided on what to do or say, Robbie came back through the trees and spoke bluntly.

‘Gone, he’s gone. Train hit him and carried him 200 yards down the track’.

‘Ohhh’ said Jaq.

She looked at Tips and saw his grown-up face. He wasn’t a twelve year old boy anymore, and she knew that their relationship had changed irrevocably at this moment.

‘Oh bejusus’ muttered Eddie, and he crossed himself.

They all stood silent in the sunny glade.

Chapter 19

The Secret Club

‘What do we do now?’ asked Tips quietly.

He was still wondering what a dead body hit by a train might look like, and the image in his head was horrible. They all looked at each other in silence, and even Jaq had run out of ideas and words at the terrible thought of what had happened to Jimmy the lodger. Only Robbie seemed to know what to do.

‘We don’t do anything’ he said firmly.

‘Shouldn’t we go and tell the police?’ asked Jaq.

‘I don’t think so’ Robbie replied.

He scratched his head, a common mannerism of his, and glanced around the sunny glade.

‘Let’s go on board, we’ll talk there...’

‘Good idea, I need a cuppa’ said Eddie as he came out of his shocked trance, and he bustled onto the carriage and started to make tea.

Archie Hardwicke had never been on board the carriage before and his eyes got wider and wider.

‘This is the blooming Queen’s coach Eddie, how long you’ve been living here?!’

‘Twenty years. I recognise you don’t I? Are you Archibald Hardwicke?’

‘Yeah, we used to work at the Derby workshop remember? Didn’t you used to drive trains?’

Eddie Riches looked suddenly awkward, and glanced at Robbie.

‘Yeah, me sight got bad so they put me in the workshop’.

‘Put yer hand there, good to meet you’.

They shook hands and Eddie's hand seemed to be shaking. He recovered and passed around some biscuits.

does Eddie still drive train that killed Tips father? need to insert this explanation somewhere earlier

Meanwhile Robbie had sat down, put his hand on his chin and was thinking very, very, hard.

'Amazing coach Eddie, worth a fortune you know, and no one knows about it?' Archie marvelled.

'It's my home, but after what just happened I dunno...'

He said this sadly, his words trailing off. Tips had sat down on another seat and Jaq sat beside him. She understood his state of mind. It had been a shock to all of them, but maybe a bigger shock to Tips.

'Sorry about yer dad Tips' she whispered.

He nodded.

'I was only six, I don't really remember that much'.

'Sorry anyway'.

Jaq was determined to apologise, and wondered what it would be like to lose your dad like that. In a funny way Jaq felt that she had suddenly grown up as well. It had been a scarey few hours. Eddie bustled up to Robbie and asked him kindly.

'Here's your tea Robbie, you haven't said a word? What's on your mind'.

In some fashion they all recognised the big man as their natural leader and decision maker. They would do as he said. He had saved the Strettonbury Blues and he seemed to be able to see what to do next. Oddly enough, Robbie also sensed that they were relying on him to make the important decisions, and he found it an unaccustomed weight. He sighed.

'This is the way I see it, you can tell me if you see it different'.

Robbie said this slowly and they all stopped and watched him.

'I'm not much good at speeches so here goes. Jimmy's dead, wasn't our fault, and we tried to stop him. He was in a rage and went the wrong way. The police don't know we are here, or even involved. If we call them it'll be in the papers and everything. Eddie might not be able to stay here you know, once the council finds he's squatting on their land, they are funny about that, toilets and stuff. Once it's on the telly...'

He didn't finish his extrapolation, but they understood what he meant. What Robbie didn't say was if they came forward to the police they might get the blame for Jimmie's death. Not directly maybe, but people would talk. He didn't think the kids could handle that, and wasn't so sure he could handle that.

Police inquiry, endless questions, judges, a court case with nasty lawyers, and grubby

journalists ferreting into their business. The story of the Strettonbury Blues was a sensational story, and their lives could be turned upside down.

He supped at his tea, a loud slurp.

‘Another thing. If we tell the police, everyone will know about the Strettonbury Blues. The Mound will crawling with reporters and busy-bodies who will want to come here for a look. That won’t help them, it could kill them off’.

Archie was following the argument closely.

‘Jimmy can’t talk’ he said bluntly ‘so there’s only the five of us that knows’.

‘Dead right Archie’ said Eddie, ‘and I’m not talking, I don’t want to lose me home’.

Robbie looked at Tips and Jaq.

‘What about you two? You found the Strettonbury Blues, I mean you could be famous?’

Jaq liked this idea immensely, her mum would be so proud, but she looked at Tips first. He was her leader now. Tips didn’t know what being famous meant, although he’d seen all these celebrities on the television.

‘I’d rather protect the Blues Robbie, and Eddie’s home’.

Robie looked at him appreciatively.

‘Thought you might say that...’

‘Me too ‘ said Jaq anxious not to be left out.

Robbie studied them kindly. Could they keep secrets? He knew his own children weren’t very good at keeping secrets, but this was a lot different. He looked at Tips and Jaq.

‘Don’t take it too hard, Jaq, Tips, it was nobodies fault that Jimmy died. He was wild, out of control. He could have harmed all of us if he lived. You saved those Strettonbury Blues. I don’t mean those particular ones, but next year, when the next ones emerge. You did the right thing, and I’m proud of you. The way I see it there are lots of Jimmy Iggulden’s out there. Lots of butterfly collectors, and these butterflies are worth so much, thousands of pounds. All the barbed wire in the world won’t keep those sort of people out’.

This was a long speech for Robbie Blackwell, and after it was finished Eddie chipped in.

‘Yer can’t stop people’s greed fellahs, its an unquenchable thirst some folk have’.

Archie nodded and there was silence. It was Jaq who seized on the central idea and said it loud. That girl could never stay quiet.

‘It’s our secret. If we tell the coppers then everyone will know about the Blues. This way no one knows and we can keep an eye on them. I know I talk heaps, but we’re going down south soon, so I won’t be blabbing it out to anyone...’

This made Jaq realise that she really would be heading down south soon, before the ice imprisoned them in the canal. It made her feel sad, she would miss Tips. Robbie drained his tea and made up his mind.

‘So we’re all agreed? It’s our secret? Here’s my hand’.

One by one they all reached out to his enormous paw and they gripped it, so five hands were all touching, young fresh skin and old gnarled skin. Jaq was impressed.

‘Cor, this is serious stuff’ she exclaimed

‘Aye, it is love’ said Eddie ‘you better keep your word’.

They all solemnly swore not to tell anyone about the Strettonbury Blues. It seemed like the only thing to do.

Chapter 20

Do Butterflies Say Goodbye?

What happened next is perhaps even stranger than what happened before.

At 8.00 am on Tuesday morning there was a loud impatient knock on the front door. Tips opened it up to reveal a sharp-faced woman of about forty or so. Behind her stood two removal men in their long brown dustcoats.

‘Does Jimmy Iggulden live here, or once lived here ‘ she corrected herself.

Tips stared at her, as Francie came to the door.

‘Ahh, my names Ruby Iggulden, Jimmy’s sister I am, and I’ve come to collect his things’.

‘Oh, said Francie, ‘you’d better come in, do you want a cup of tea?’

Francie offered this, thinking Ruby might need some comforting after the horrible shock and manner of Jimmy’s death..

‘Oh no thanks, time’s money you know. We’ll get Jimmy’s stuff and be gone in a jiffy. He’s got a cabinet ‘ere hasn’t he?’

‘Err, yes’

Francie was a little bemused by the no-nonsense manner of Jimmy’s sister.

‘This is his room’ she indicated.

‘Ah lovely, there’s that cabinet, you grab that men, but be careful, there’s valuable stuff in that’.

‘There’s his clothes and other bits and pieces’ Francie suggested.

Ruby considered the idea.

'I tell you what, you give 'em to the Sallies. I mean I've got no use for mens clothes have I' and she laughed in an odd way.

'Now careful there men!' and she went off to reprimand the removal man.

'She's as strange as his brother' muttered Francie 'must run in the family'.

The men were struggling with the cabinet and got in stuck in the door once, before they gave it a heave and put it into the back of their large van. Ruby watched this with great satisfaction.

'You know what's in that cabinet luv?' she confided in Tips.

'Butterflies and moths'.

'Hundreds of them, he was mad about them, and worth a bit these days you know' she remarked with unconcealed satisfaction.

Tips and his mum exchanged a silent glance at each other.

'Ok luv, all loaded' said the removal men.

'You know my address? Ok'.

'When's the funeral for Jimmy?'" asked Francie.

'Oh, err, Thursday I think, down at Birmingham, that's where I come from. It's only going to a private affair, did you know him well?' she asked.

'Not really...'

'Well, I wouldn't worry about it luv. Just family members we're having'.

She searched through her bag for her car keys, and looked up with a bright face.

'Don't fret too much dears' she said 'Jimmy was always trotting along railway lines or motorways, it was bound to happen sometime. We told 'im off manys a time, you'll get killed by a train we said, but he wouldn't listen. He was a fanatic about moths and butterflies he was, didn't do him much good in the end though did it? Ta ta'.

She was gone and Francie and Tips were left on the door step with their mouths open.

'All she wanted was the cabinet mum. What are we going to do with Jimmys clothes?' Tips asked.

Tips kept thinking and dreading that after Jimmy's death the police would come knocking at their door, and of course they did come knocking. They were rather polite actually.

After they had searched Jimmy's body by the railway line on that horrible Sunday afternoon they found his business card on him, the Moth Man, so they managed to get hold of his sister on Sunday night. They got the Railway Terrace address from Ruby and came round on Wednesday evening, just after Tips had got back from football practice at school. Francie was already chatting to a policeman.

Because of the secret agreement Tips hadn't dared tell his mum about what he knew

about Jimmy's death.

'Oh Tips, Jimmy's been killed by a train. Our lodger, you know, oh that's terrible isn't it. I wondered where he had got to, but he was always out and about. Quite secretive you know?'

Francie was genuinely upset, perhaps the only person in Strettonbury who was.

'Oh I wouldn't get too upset miss, he would have died instantly I think. Well we've told his sister and she might come sometime to pick up his things. Oh? She's been already? Sharp that one. Well thanks for your help, I better get going' said the policeman

He gave a broad wink to Tips on his way out.

'Jimmy gave a steam train model to my Mickey' Francie said sadly.

'Did he? Not a bad sort of bloke then, sorry about this Mrs Tippett but don't you fret too much. It's not your fault was it?'

After the policeman left Tips went up his room and hid the steam train model in a cupboard. He felt rotten. He knew it had been a bribe and he knew Jimmy had spied on him, and also he knew Jimmy would have killed all those Strettonbury Blue butterflies, but he still he felt rotten about his death. Maybe it was his fault after all?

There was an item in the Stoke paper about a man being hit by a train near Strettonbury, but no name was mentioned since the police hadn't released his name yet. People were getting hit by trains all the time it seemed and no one took a great deal of interest in it, except the ladies in the hairdressing saloon where Francie worked.

'Your lodger Francie, well I never. What's was he doing on the train tracks? Getting moths, oh, I heard about him?'

This was Mrs Burke, who who enjoyed a good gossip.

'My Bob fishes on the canal and often saw him swishing his net about. Creepy my Bob said he was?'

The Salvation Army were not very interested in Jimmy Iggulden's clothes and Francie didn't know what to do about them. But then Robbie came forward, and on Wednesday took away Jimmy's clothes and knick knacks. Robbie had turned out to be quite a source of strength for her. A comfort even.

II

Then another interesting thing happened...

On Thursday afternoon Tips and Jaq were sitting in 'Ginger Beer', munching on some crisps that Jaq had bought. Jaq had never kept a real secret before and was finding it a total struggle.

'Can't I even tell me mum 'Tips?' she pleaded.

Tips shook his head.

'She'd tell yer dad, who tell his mates... and one of those will realise how valuable the Strettonbury Blues are'.

'Spose so, anyway we're heading off on Sunday' she said wistfully 'it's not gonna be the same without you and all that adventure and stuff'.

Tips nodded agreement.

'Where are you going?'

'Down to Birmingham, then my dads got a job near Oxford next summer. It'll take us a week to get there he says, it'll be amazing. You should come?! We've got a spare bunk, I'll ask my mum'.

She was practically jumping up immediately to ask her mum but Tips pulled her back.

'I dunno Jaq, me mum's pretty upset about Jimmy dying, and I think I ought to stay and keep her company. I don't think she'll let me go'.

'She's got Robbie for a bit of company? she said cooly.

Tips wasn't so sure of that either. He changed the subject.

'Let's go and see Eddie'.

'Ok'.

And they sprinted along the towpath racing porky Pill, and found the key behind the brick. Eddie was digging in his garden.

'Hello kids, looking for potatoes I am'.

They tucked into Eddie's stale biscuits, of which he seemed to have an enormous supply.

'Well kids, I appreciate yer seeing me. Truth is I've got something I want to tell you, something on my mind. It's big news...'

They looked up and waited expectantly.

'It's like this. I'm getting old and me rheumatism's playing up, and getting on and off this railway carriage is bloody hard work. Nothing stays the same you

see, so I've been thinking of moving. All that stuff with Jimmy Iggulden, oh I don't know, made me think that maybe I should move'.

Tips was surprised.

'Where would you move to Eddie' asked Jaq.

Eddie sat back and looked pleased with himself.

'Well, Ive had an offer, yep an offer. It was Archie Hardwicke's idea. You know the geezer who came with Robbie, that day Jimmy... well, you know, you were there. Being locked up like that sort of scared me a bit. An old guy, I'm almost eighty you know, can't live like this for ever, though I love the place...'

Eddie's voice trailed off, but it then I picked up again as he looked ahead to a different future.

'But then Archie said me that I could live in one of their railway cottages, that they've got on the Trust site. Be a sort of caretaker like'.

'But what happens to the railway carriage, I mean it's your home?' protested Tips.

'Well here's the best part. They will take the Queen s coach into Trust, makes a lot of sense really'.

It was a bit of a shock but Tips nodded. He could see the logic in it though it was a bit sad that Eddie was leaving The Mound, Who would protect the Strettonbury Blues? Eddie continued.

'See the coach is falling apart here, out in the open in the rain and snow. The Trust would restore it and they'd have hundreds of people pay to look at it. If they ever get that steam train going then they've got this carriage to take people in. I reckon it will be big hit. Really pull in the crowds'.

'Doesn't the Queen still own it?' asked Jaq.

Eddie scratched his chin at that one.

'Well, she's got a lot of other stuff, I'm sure she won't mind if we borrow it. I've borrowed it for twenty years and she didn't ask for it back did she?'

'Gosh Mr Riches you're leaving?' wailed Jaq 'everyone's leaving'.

'I'm only going down the road you know. To the Steam Trust, you've been there Tips with Robbie? You'll come and see me won't you Tips? Course you will, and it makes me real happy you know? I'll be close to me old railway mates and they get a real gem of history, hee, after we refurbish it we might get the Queen to come up and have a look eh?'

'But who will keep an eye on the Strettonbury Blues' asked Tips.

'Well you will, and Robbie. You don't need me, I'm not much a butterfly man anyway'.

‘Have you seen any of the Blues Eddie?’ asked Jaq.

‘Can’t say I have love, I think they must have died. That frost last night might have finished ‘em of. Why don’t you have a look?’

He suggested this cunningly, to try and distract them and to diminish the shock that he saw on their faces. The children walked down to the winding hole, but there was no sign of the Strettonbury Blues.

‘It won’t be the same without Eddie?’ Jaq said cautiously ‘still, its not a bad thing is it? For the railway coach I mean?’

She wasn’t sure how Tips would feel about it, and in fact Tips wasn’t sure either. He felt everyone was leaving, Jaq, Eddie, even the Strettonbury Blues...

He didn’t want Jaq to see his emotions and pretended to study the ground, to see if there were any dead ones. It was funny thing but Tips always had a secret belief that the Strettonbury Blues came out to especially to see him, as if they knew he was their protector. Of course it was daft idea, but every time he had been to the winding hole he had seen some of them.

They waited for some time but couldn’t see any butterflies. He was disappointed that they were gone, though it was virtually winter now. Just as they turned to go, Jaq grabbed his arm and said

‘Look Tips, look!’

And there it was, a single Strettonbury Blue, maybe the last one of winter fluttering gamely along. It flew along the edge of the water and passed within a yard of them, did a tiny circle, and then was gone.

‘I reckon he was waiting for you Tips’ Jaq said.

‘Don’t be silly...’

‘I do. He was saying goodbye’.

Tips rather liked this idea but did not say anything. Do butterflies say goodbye? It was a nice farewell, and he felt better for it, and anyway with any luck they would be back in spring.

III

Something else interesting happened that week...

On Saturday morning Francie and Tips were walking down Railway Terrace to the Co-op when they passed Robbie's allotment. He called out to them and came over.

'Not much left now Robbie'.

Remarked Francie as she looked over the barren allotments.

'I've got one last zucchini from my glasshouse'.

Francie had to laugh.

'Bit of a runt that one Robbie?'

The big man laughed to. He looked down at Tips.

'You heard about Eddie and shifting the Queens coach?' he asked cautiously 'we could use your help? I'm going to the Steam Trust tomorrow'.

'Sure, Robbie I'd like to help, but not tomorrow. Jaq's leaving to go down south'.

Robbie had forgotten about that.

'Jaq's mum said I could come, but mum's not very keen'.

'It's a week off school Mickey, and I need you around'.

'It's only a week mum' he pleaded, he sensed his mum was weakening a little 'and it would be fun, going down to Oxford and opening all the locks. There's a spare bunk on the boat and everything'.

Francie did not look enthusiastic and explained to Robbie what Tips wanted to do.

'Now where's my purse?'

Francie was momentarily distracted and fossicked in her bag looking for it. At this opportune moment Robbie glanced at Tips in a way that exchanged a considerable amount of information. Tips sensed that this could be his chance.

'You won't be on your own mum, Robbie will keep an eye on you'.

Robbie blushed. Francie looked up, somewhat astonished and nonplussed at this statement.

'Really Robbie? So you are going to keep an eye on me are you?'

She asked this with a half a smile and he stood his ground.

'Aye, if you let me Mrs Tippett'.

‘You can call me Francie if you like, well I don’t know... a whole week off school?’

‘I could do Jaq’s lessons’ suggested Tips, hopping about on one foot in a desperate anxiousness.

‘At least he is going to a university town Mrs Tip... I mean Francie’.

‘Oxford! Well! So you’re on his side, have you two been scheming behind my back?’

‘I bet you’ve missed a few days of school once in a while ...’ he suggested.

‘You are on his side, oh alright. I should have guessed the pair of you were up to something, honestly’.

But she didn’t seem to really mind

‘Can I really go mum? Thanks! I must tell Jaq!’

He gave Francie a big kiss and ran off down the street, and bombed down the short-cut onto the towpath. He didn’t look back once, which was perhaps just as well. For his mum and Robbie were standing apart, but looking at each other in a new way

IV

So that’s the story of the secret of the Strettonbury Blue, and like all really good stories it’s true. Of course places of towns and names of people have been changed. But in my own eye I can see that small northern town, and see those trains rushing around The Mound. If you are sharp enough, and you are on the Manchester or Birmingham lines, you might glimpse it through a smeared railway carriage window, but I doubt that you will see it. No one else does. It stays secret and still amidst all the hustle and bustle of the world.

The Mound is deserted now. The Queen’s coach was shifted after a huge effort, the old wheels had to have the rust ground off them before they turned, but they did turn. Now it sits in its own queenly shed, in pride of place on the West Stoke Steam Trust property, and Archie was right. It is the star attraction. Eddie isn’t far away from his old home, happy in his railway cottage.

The lock-keepers hut key still sits in its secret spot behind the brick, but lays undisturbed for months at a time. I’m sure if you know where to look you would find it. Tips went down south in the summer holidays, travelling with Jaq on ‘Ginger Beer’, and no one visits The Mound at all, except Robbie Blackwell.

Last summer he spotted eighteen Strettonbury Blues dancing over the black canal water, and wrote to Tips to tell him. He said in the letter that their secret is safe from every-

one. It's just between him, Tips, Jaq Archie and Eddie, and they'll never tell. One day he might tell Francie, but not quite yet.

Of course there's one other person who knows about the Stettonbury Blues, and I think you can guess who it is. It's you, the reader, but you won't tell will you?

End Notes

Location

Strettonbury, a northern midlands town on the main railway junctions with Manchester, Birmingham and Derby.

The railway lines meet in a large triangle, in the middle of which is The Mound, a low wooded hill or copse, that is completely isolated by the railway lines.

The old Strettonbury canal (a side branch of the Stoke canal) runs alongside and underneath the railway line, with a towpath on one side and occasional roving bridges (or snake bridges) that switch the towpath from one side to another.

Strettonbury is a small northern English market town, once an important town making pottery and iron in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Now famous for nothing much at all. Population 9,245. Ernie's joke 'I'm number 246' because they forgot to count him.

Time

About late-September to mid October, need the leaves to fall but the butterflies still to be out. About three weeks

Strettonbury Blue

An extinct butterfly, last seen in the 1930's. A pale pastel blue, with a gold fringe that sparkles in the sun when it flies. Sometimes called the Strettonbury Fairy, as it appears to glimmer in evening light.

