

**2009 First National Republican Short Story Competition**

**Awarded First Prize**

**Rook Feast**

By Kel Robertson

Outside, the sign read “Ministry of Defence Research Establishment: No Public Entry”. We swept past the saluting guards at full tilt as the gates closed behind us.

The driver parked the armour plated Land Rover one hundred metres inside the high stone wall, halfway along the granite carriageway that continued for a further 500 metres up to the entrance to the house. To both the left and right were vast expanses of lawn – garden-party perfect – across which any attackers would risk exposure in order to take the building.

I was not to be dissuaded from picking my way through the garden bed and walking, unaccompanied, up the slope to the terrace. I’d taken too little exercise for too long, the fit of my uniform jacket bordered on uncomfortable and, frankly, no excuse was needed, for it was a perfect English spring day. Besides, if there was something I’d learned from my grandparents, it was the importance of a good entrance.

It was only in private spaces like this that I’d ever been free of the paparazzi and the gawping public. For my grandchildren, though, it would be different. England was taking unsteady, yet determined steps to a different future and this time there would be no turning back.

He saw me, as I knew he would, as soon as I stepped into the open, but it wasn’t until I was close enough to recognize that he put down his book, reached for

his jacket and strode to the French windows. At that point a minder must have turned him back; he swivelled and started for the western end of the terrace, clearly hoping to make his escape around the side of the house. However, another minder appeared there, before he'd taken even three steps. He about-faced to the east, only to sight yet another figure in khaki.

“I'm afraid there's no avoiding me,” I called.

He shrugged and returned to the table, knowing at last that there was no escape. I'd expected it all to end very differently – angry demonstrations outside the palace, melees in the Strand and petrol bombs at the parading of the colours. However, the days of dragging the household cavalry from their horses in front of Japanese tourists were long gone, like the tourists themselves.

But don't be mistaken, global warming and the end of international airline travel had played a more than significant early part in the drama – not because the absence of snap-happy foreigners had made the citizenry think twice about their relationship with the Royal family but because, put crudely, English taxpayers didn't want to foot the bill for a costly tourist lure in a post-tourism age. In the end it was, like so many watershed moments in English history, about money and the House of Common's refusal to provide it. Not the civil list, you understand; it had been phased out years before. And not the cost of maintaining the yacht, train or jet; they'd also been flogged off in favour of “integrated transport”. It wasn't even the cost of maintaining the last remaining residence. No, it was the security – the hidden cost of it – as much as 200 million pounds a year – that finally precipitated the crisis.

“I have nothing to say to you,” he replied, adjusting the position of his chair so that he looked over the lawn, rather than at me.

I removed my hat and gloves, loosened my tie and propped my swagger stick up against the side of the vacant seat. I placed my pistol on the table and wiped a handkerchief over my forehead. I was a lot less fit than I'd thought and concluded that there was no good reason to forego deadly pleasures. I lit a cigarette and watched a pair of amorous stoats race across the green expanse into the privacy of the low shrubs of the garden bed beyond my car.

"Did you enjoy any alfresco congress when you were young? I asked him.

"I've already said I have nothing to say to you."

"I suppose the opportunities would have been Scottish and I can well understand why a tumble in the thistles wouldn't have piqued your interest."

He picked up his book – I couldn't make out the title – and pretended to read.

"You'd want your kilt to end well below your knees if you were thinking about the traditional approach."

He continued to ignore me but I knew he would respond, eventually.

"Then again, if both parties removed their clobber and put it on the heather, you could probably avoid spiking anything you prized."

He sighed, put the book down and put away his glasses.

"What do you want?"

I looked around for something in which to extinguish the last of my cigarette. In the absence of a pot plant I dropped it on to the paving and ground it to harmless shreds with the heel of my boot.

"We have to talk about your future."

"I'm surprised to learn that I have one," he said, wiping a tiny piece of blossom from his lapel.

It was probably the only time I'd seen him looking anything less than immaculate in the 30 years since school. I'd made arrangements for him to have casual clothes but he'd refused them. Instead, he'd worn the same suit – 3 pieces, probably Grieves and Hawkes or maybe Dege – for the last month. I suppose it was as much about impressing his status upon the staff as it was about keeping his own spirits up. But I knew a thing or two about mind games, myself, and that's why I denied him dry cleaning or a replacement. I wanted him to *know* that I knew.

“I do have one, then?” he asked.

“A future?”

“Yes.”

“Why not? It's spring: the time of new beginnings. This is no Berkeley or Pontefract and, if you hadn't noticed, we're a long way from the Tower.”

“I'm especially glad it's not Berkeley,” he said, smiling slightly. He was right, of course; the least enviable of royal deaths had surely been Edward II's. “What are my options?”

Looking at him, I couldn't see as many of my own features as I had once done. Certainly, we were both blond, balding and slight, but adult life had blurred the resemblance which had once seen him thrashed in my place at school. Yet, when a housekeeper – not one of the maids – brought tea and sandwiches out to us, she looked from him to me and back to him, again, signalling with the slightest smile, recognition of our physical similarities.

“What sort of sandwiches are they?” he asked, reaching into his shirt pocket for his glasses.

“Bloody cucumber, I answered.

He shuddered. “You’ll have to take some away with you,” he mused., “if you are not to cause offence.”

I positioned the strainer and dribbled a small amount of tea into my cup, then, satisfied that it would be strong enough, poured for both of us.

Apathy, too, had played a part in the end. At most royal appearances in the previous decade, security personnel had outnumbered the media and the public combined. A royal scandal, inevitably involving the teenage princess, could still excite the media in Scotland and Wales but hadn’t the Scots always enjoyed a laugh at the expense of the English? And hadn’t politicians in both countries long used Royal misbehaviour to justify their decisions to secede from the union? In England, though, people weren’t even interested in scandal. With the majority of our citizens born elsewhere or into sub-cultures without any understanding of what it was to be English, the royals couldn’t have been anything but irrelevant to the mass.

In the end, the security expenditure issue was probably devised by the Government Whip as a distraction from the Cabinet’s failure to combat terrorism. However, it quickly spiralled out of control into a fully-fledged constitutional crisis. The government fell and, with a new set of ministers in place, there was still an opportunity for the monarch to walk away with significant property, good will and dignity, but he prevaricated and the opportunity was gone.

I passed the sugar.

“Are you Lord Protector yet?” he asked.

“Still only a Cabinet Minister”, I replied.

He put his cup and saucer on the table.

“Plenty of time for you to make your mark, I suppose.”

We waited for more stoat foreplay.

“I’ve come to make you an offer,” I finally said.

“From?”

“The Cabinet.”

He smirked.

“So, you come in the dress of Lord Protector and people call you the Minister for ...?”

He knew perfectly well which ministry I held.

“Defence.”

“That’s right: Minister for Defence but you’re actually a messenger boy.”

“I volunteered for the task,” I replied. “As for the get up, you well know we are at war.”

“It’s a proven distraction from trouble at home. I imagine the uniform will look impressive in the history books.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Providing you have the jacket let out.”

“Bitch.”

“My pleasure.”

We both surveyed the lawn.

“I suppose they’re all cucumber,” he asked, poking at the soft, white, crustless triangles with his teaspoon.

“Afraid so,” I answered. We looked, again, over the lawn.

“My future,” he began, embarrassed to be switching from confrere to supplicant. “What are my options, exactly?”

To the difficult bit, at last.

“Some of the support you attracted, before it became necessary to place you in protective custody, lost you friends.”

“I can’t be held responsible to the people who attached themselves to me,” he remarked.

“But you didn’t move to distance yourself from them.”

“What good would it have done?”

“And some of your remarks about the re-introduction of English values ...”

“You disagreed with them?”

“Not necessarily but that’s not the point, is it?”

“I was fighting for my survival,” he said.

He pitched a sandwich onto the lawn and half a dozen rooks scurried to tear it apart.

“At any rate, you have rather fewer friends than previously.”

“So you say.”

“And I’m afraid that your continued presence in England is not an option the Government can countenance.”

“So, you want me to abdicate in favour of Elizabeth?”

“No, it’s too late for that.”

“I see,” he said. “Then it really is over.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“More than 1500 years of history all the way from bloody Egdar. Over. Ended.”

“History doesn’t change,” I said. “The past is always as it was.”

“Very epigrammatic,” he snorted.

He underarmed another cucumber sandwich onto the lawn. A larger number of rooks landed and savaged it noisily.

“There’s nothing that can be done?”

“Nothing”

“You’re quite sure?”

“Quite”

I looked over the table at him. He was trying not to blub and at that moment I felt desperately sorry for him.

“Can I pour you on another cup?”

“I didn’t want to be king,” he said, “but it was my duty . . . so I did it.”

He sipped his tea, avoiding my eyes. “Was it that I didn’t work hard enough?” Because there were times, let me tell you, when I was just bloody exhausted by it.”

“No one has suggested you didn’t work hard enough,” I confirmed.

“There were times when it made me absolutely miserable.”

“No doubt.”

“Then how did it come to this?”

“The whole business,” I said, “the monarchy – it’s no longer relevant.”

“I tried *desperately* to be relevant.”

“Again, this is not about you or about how you went about your duties. The world has moved on.”

It was true. Nearly all of the world’s royal detritus now lived, ironically, in California or New York, gracing the boards of big corporations, skiing Aspen in winter and sailing Rhode Island in summer. They adore immigrant royalty in the world’s pre-eminent democracy.

“I suppose I’m off to America,” he said glumly. “How bloody.”

“Not exactly,” I replied. “In fact, the Americans have indicated – unofficially, of course – that you are not welcome.”

“Why?”

“They’re worried that your presence could inflame racial tensions.”

“Because I spoke about the heritage of the English – the legacy of our race?”

“For whatever reason.”

“So, the home of the Ku Klux Klan won’t have me.”

“Only one government has indicated a willingness to take you.”

“I’m not going to Northern Ireland,” he said.

“No, not Northern Ireland.”

“The Caribbean and Africa are too unruly.”

“Agreed.”

“Canada is just America without guns and god.”

“Not Canada.”

“And I don’t want to live with 30 million sheep.”

“Not New Zealand, either.”

“So where?”

“Australia: a much larger country with only half as many sheep.”

“Australia!”

“Yes.”

“I’ve been there, of course, but really. I know nothing about the place and nothing about the people. It’s absurd.”

“I might have said that a lack of knowledge of the place and its people didn’t prevent your predecessors from doing “happy and glorious” out there for a couple of centuries.”

“From a distance, yes, and we all knew it was a silly idea. Besides, they haven’t had a titular monarch for nearly 50 years.”

“And they’re not looking for one now.”

“I don’t follow. Do they want me to be their king or not?”

“No, not their king. Just a citizen.”

“Even more absurd,” he muttered.

“Vast numbers of Brits have migrated there over time: a good number of them at government direction and expense. Most of them seem to have been rehabilitated by the experience.”

The jest was wasted.

“What do the Australians want from me?” he said in a tone tinged with suspicion.

“Nothing except that you live quietly, refrain from politics and pay your taxes.”

“Bizarre,” he shook his head.

“I would have thought that “generous” was a more appropriate descriptor.”

He shook his head. I picked up a sandwich and hurled it as far as I could across the green expanse.

“You could do a lot worse,” I said. “The chance to grow things, read books, breed horses, drink fine wine. The chance to enjoy life.”

“The only thing you haven’t mentioned is the beach.”

“In Australia.”

“In Australia.”

“And you didn’t beg them to take me?”

“You know how these things work. They’re very forgiving people, the Australians.”

He seemed reassured by this.

“The family?”

“Welcome to go with you.”

He picked up the plate on which the last four triangles sat and underarmed the contents at the lawn. A huge number of rooks squabbled raucously over the feast.

“Would it be possible to live near the sea?”

“I gather that you’ll be able to live wherever you can afford to buy.”

“I’ll have money?”

“Of course.”

Finally the housekeeper came with more tea and, noticing the empty plate, asked whether we’d enjoyed the sandwiches.

My cousin, the last King of England, dutifully remarked that they’d been among the best he’d ever eaten.

END