

Chapter 6

'I don't know about you, but I don't like the sound of this. First, I don't really like the look of the guy, secondly I'm not going into his little hut, and thirdly, this all sounds a little too familiar, and I want to move on. Let's go and explore.'

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As they watched the boy disappear into the far distance, something caught their eye. Just beyond the hut, but in line with it, was a larger building, also wooden, but two-storey, slightly obscured by the scruffy hut in front of it.

As the light began to fade, and the bus (with all its passengers) had mysteriously disappeared, they could hear a commotion coming from inside the bigger building. They went to investigate.

This involved heading round the scruffy shack on a small path, part covered in grass, part gravel. Their feet crunched a little on the gravel, although as they got closer to the hall, they were less able to hear their steps, thanks to the general noise which was coming from the inside.

Wil, who was in front, held his arm out to one side, as Clara stepped eagerly ahead of him. Freddy was a metre or so behind.

'Stop a minute, we need to be careful here, let's just look at the facts.' Wil said, with a note of determination in his voice.

'We've pitched up here on a bus, our local bus, which we thought was taking us on a field trip. We appear to be on our own. The others on the bus have left, either going back somewhere, or else they've run off sneezing, or left in a big hurry over that hill there. Things don't look good, do they? How are we going to get back? Clara suddenly looked panicked at this point, as she realised the situation they were in. Her lower lip began to tremble just a little. She was the youngest, and although the one with the most general *joie-de-vivre*, she had less experience of these kinds of trips than the other two.

'It's going to be OK,' said Freddy, less than convincingly, ducking to avoid a chicken apparently heading for the same building, flying awkwardly and unsteadily towards the door.

'The bus brought us here. And I'm sure it will be here to take us back when we have finished.

'Finished what...?' said Clara.

'Our Mission, the one Boggy told us about'. They had almost forgotten about Boggy's promise to be there with them. Unless he had been hiding on the bus, he was not there.

'Who's Boggy?' At this point, Wil and Freddy, despite their nervousness, couldn't help a little smile, as they remembered their meeting with Boggy and the secret handshake which had preceded it. They also recalled Boggy's promise to help them understand how peat could be used as the ultimate form of water purification system.

'Come on,' said Freddy, taking Clara by the end of her braid, like a puppy out for walk. She

shook her head angrily and marched on between the two of them.

As they reached the door, they realised that a serious party was happening inside. The building itself was made out of what appeared to be sheets of corrugated metal, and it was topped off by a wonky looking chimney, out of which a sad stream of wispy smoke was emerging. The front door was wooden, but served little purpose; like the rest of the building, it was shabby and careworn.

Just as Freddy was about to push gently against the door to investigate the goings-on inside, the door swung open uncertainly on its hinges, and a mad-looking man stumbled out, brushed past Freddy, turned to Wil with his wild, popping eyes, turned away again, finally settling his gaze on Clara, at which point he stopped, completely still, stared into her eyes, and said,

‘Time is running away from us,’ then, as if it just occurred to him, ‘over there.’ His eyes moved imperceptibly upwards and to one side, indicating that somewhere behind him, there was something. Then as a seeming afterthought, he added, very quietly,

‘Trust me, I’m a Doctor’. Then he ran, stumbling again, across towards the place where the bus had been, and followed the route the boy had taken, over the scrubby heathland and towards the mountains beyond.

Wil and Freddy looked at each other again. One the one hand this crazy fool should be ignored, on the other he seemed strangely familiar, like some of the other characters who had appeared in this bizarre first week of 2006.

‘What did he say?’ Wil asked Clara. ‘He’s a what?’

‘He said he’s a Doctor, and that we should trust him, but he didn’t say Doctor who’.

Freddy reviewed the situation. ‘OK, so we have a bus that flies to this far-flung village or town, we have a boy apparently desperate to get off the bus, but we don’t know why. We have a silent lady with a sick chicken, and now we have a dodgy doctor but we don’t know who he is.’

‘I’m scared again’, Clara added, unhelpfully.

They were still standing outside the door, still a little bemused, when an even more arresting sight met their eyes.

A man emerged unsteadily into the doorway, clutching a large clear bottle, which was about a quarter full of a light brown liquid. He took a pace beyond the threshold of the doorway, staggered to where Freddy and the others were standing leaning up against the corner of the building. He only had to stagger a metre or so, but it took him several attempts.

He first tried a roundabout route, hanging on to the door frame, then sliding up against the side wall, before slipping downwards as his legs buckled, ending up flat on his backside, with the bottle now sideways on, oozing brown liquid onto his suit.

His second attempt was better. From the sitting position he found himself in, he rolled onto his knees and started to crawl towards the group, but on the way (so about half a metre into his

journey) he found something on the ground which clearly interested him, and he stared at it for fully three minutes, before suddenly standing up and taking his third attempt at bridging the metre gap. This was simpler – he just flung himself at Freddy and Wil, who had to grab an arm each to avoid him falling straight over again.

The man groaned slightly as they held him, but stood uncertainly between the three of them, muttering about ‘fire water’.

Maybe he knew something about how to make water pure?

To add to an already weird day, he started singing,

Red-head Ken

And his merry men

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The song faded away as he staggered off towards where the others had gone, swaying rhythmically to the music thumping from the party.

They were just about to go in, when the large hairy man they had seen when the bus had originally stopped appeared from around the side of the building where they were standing. The door to the hall remained closed.

‘C’mon, guys’, he said briskly, ‘let’s find the source of the purest water in the world’.

Boggy was right! Out on the moor it was cold.

The distant humming and throbbing of the music reminded them of home in a way. The party they didn’t go into felt more secure than the wild looking moor, and the gloom of the late afternoon seemed to be encroaching on them as they made their way over the scrubby bushland towards the hills to which the redhead, the small boy, and the chicken had seemed drawn.

The ground under foot was squashy, and their boots sunk a few centimetres into it with every pace. Most of the ground they were walking on was grassy, although the grass was on top of big clods of rough earth. These clods were interspersed with deep indentations in the ground, again covered with grass but a good twenty centimetres lower. Because of this, it was difficult to move quickly, and it soon became tiring, like walking in thick snow. Clara was falling behind them, so the two boys took an arm each, and half helped, half dragged her over the scrub towards the hills.

They staggered across the rolling hills, following a well-worn path. The only landmark they passed was a small river which ran close to the path on the left-hand side. The path ran beside it for a few hundred metres. As the path was leaving the riverside to head inland again, they heard behind them a snorting sound. As they turned to look, the river was obscured by a huge plume of water spraying high into the air. All three stepped back from the path in surprise, as the wind whipped some of the spray into their faces. As the spray subsided, they caught brief sight of a long smooth dark coloured object, which slowly disappeared beneath the

surface.

Robbie, who had met them off the bus, was a hundred or so metres ahead of them, laughing hysterically at the sight of them getting soaked. He yelled something back at them, which sounded like,

‘Northern Bottlenose, don’t see many of them round here.’

Wil and Freddy looked back at the lake. Whatever had caused the spray had gone.

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They had walked for fifteen or twenty minutes when the walking started to get more arduous as the terrain rose ahead of them. Leaving Clara to pant behind them, the boys themselves were struggling now.

‘Nearly there chaps!’ It was the Doctor they had encountered back at the party. He was striding across the moor as if it was a stroll down the garden, so it was obvious he did this journey often.

‘The most wonderful filtration equipment in the world’, he said to no-one in particular, although he now had two companions, a woman he referred to as Billy, and a dog which apparently didn’t have a name, because the Doctor referred to it only as ‘canine’. Wil mused on the fact that he probably has a cat called ‘feline’ and a horse called ‘equine’. Wil never had much time for people who gave their pets (or their children) unusual names. He didn’t really like Nicholai, but because they were Freddy’s two best friends, they had to get along.

The dog was of indeterminate breed – one of those mongrel pooches with short legs and a squat, almost square body. This one was dressed in one of those tartan doggy-coats beloved of old ladies, and the one he was wearing was considerably too big for him. As Wil turned round to look at the dog, it stared back at him blankly with its big, bright, red eyes.

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They rounded the top of the third or fourth hill they had climbed that afternoon, and gazed down into a small valley. A few metres from them, several people, including the redhead, the poor chicken, and the man with the egg, were standing a deep hollow watching a small stream of water flowing from inside the earth.

‘Welcome to the home of the best peat the earth produces, and the best free filtration system’, said the Doctor.

Clara looked puzzled. ‘Filtration system?’ she turned to her cousin, as always, expecting an answer.

‘It’s a way of purifying water and liquids,’ Freddy replied. ‘Look at the water, it is totally clear’.

‘And fresh’, added Wil, putting his forearm under the little waterfall tumbling off the side of the hill, then pulling it away sharply as the cold water iced over his hand.

‘And this is what keeps it clear and fresh, my friends’. The Doctor handed Freddy a large block of brown earth, neatly cut from one of the many small overhangs cut into the ground around them. The block was thirty centimetres long and about ten centimetres square. It smelt earthy but at the same time clean and pure.

Freddy wrapped the peat in his coat.

They stayed at the peat bogs for half an hour or so, marvelling at the range of people they could see stretching off into the far distance. Most were digging or scraping the peat into bags and barrows. Some of them looked like they did this regularly (one man was driving a small mechanical digger), others appeared, like them, to be first time visitors to this strange mystical place. One group over at the far side of the valley seemed to be very well organised, and were digging in unison, singing some kind of work song as they dug. They were working harder and faster than any of the others. They also seemed to be all of a very similar height. The distance made them all look very small.

Freddy examined the thoughts that were going round his head and the confusion that swirled around him. He started to feel uncomfortable at the situation they had got themselves into. Or rather, he had got them into.

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Just then they heard a low rumbling sound. Just back up from where they were standing, was a glow coming from behind the hillock to their rear. Clara was the first to run up the small hill.

‘It’s the bus!’ she cried excitedly, turning back to Wil and Freddy who were twenty metres beneath her, ‘and the sign says *Bishop’s Bottom*’.

Wil pretended not to be bothered by this news, but as he turned his head insouciantly away from her, inside he breathed a heavy sigh of relief. They had apparently found what they were looking for, the trip was over, they had been scared, interested, and they may have learnt something about how water can be purified. And now the bus was waiting to take them back to their home in Bishop’s Bottom.

They jumped on and took their places as before.

‘Anyone want to buy an egg?’ they heard a man cry. His voice faded as the doors shut and they cruised away.

‘Atishoo’, said a small voice.

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