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A Gentleman Adventurer

The afternoon sun shining through the lace curtains throws patterned shadows across the small, cosy living room, where an old man is sitting in a high-backed upholstered armchair, head drooping, arms resting on his knees, dozing. A voice burbles quietly from the small radio on the table by his knees.

Sound of a key opening the front door and a woman calls, 'Don't worry Mr Edge, it's only the nurse. I'll just put the key back in the keybox.'

Moments later she's closing the front door and bustling into the room all brisk efficiency, shutting the door behind her, taking off her cloak.

'Afternoon, Mr Edge. Nice and cosy in here,' as she drapes it neatly over a chair back.

The radio burbles. The old man has not moved.

'Mr Edge,' she shakes him gently. 'Mr Edge....Thomas...'

The old man rouses with a start. 'What? ... Who are you?'

'Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. I'm Nurse Turner.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Come to dress your poorly leg,' and she puts down her medical bag on the table by the radio.

'You have,' he says. 'Why? You're not my nurse. Where's Nurse Mouncey?'

'On holiday this week.' She's taking out a clip board and biro. 'She must have told you? So, you'll have to put up with me for a few days. Now, how are you today, Thomas?'

He is looking bewildered. 'What? ... You talking to me?'

'Well there's no one else here is there, Thomas.' She smiles patiently.

'You've got the wrong person,' he insists. 'You've come to the wrong house.'

She smiles indulgently. She's dealt with confused old folk before. She's an expert.

'Now then,' switching off the radio, and pulling up a chair, 'What's the problem, Thomas?'

'There's no Thomas in this house.' She pats his arm soothingly. 'Of course there is.'

He shakes her off and shouts, 'No....there.....is...*not!*'

Nurse Turner is momentarily lost for words. 'Well,' she placates. 'Just explain to me who you are.'

'Me? I'm Ralph (*pronouncing it Rafe*) Ralph Rover.'

She consults a list. Frowns. 'Well erm....do you know your address, Mr Rover?'

'What kind of a question is that?' he says crossly, thinking - I'm going to complain to Dr Hallett about this Nurse what's 'er name. - 'I live here. *This is my* address.'

She chews her lip. 'It's just that.....I'm beginning to wonder if I *am* in the right house.'

He's upset now. 'If Nurse Mouncey isn't coming, who's going to sort me out?'

'That's what *I'm* supposed to be here for.'

'But if you're in the wrong house, who's going to sort me out?'

'Don't worry, I will,' she soothes him. 'There seems to be a mix up of names, that's all. If Nurse Mouncey usually comes here I *must* be in the right house, 'cos I'm her substitute. This *is* number 29 The Grove?'

Now he's irritated. 'Well it's been that all the umpteen years I've lived here.'

'Don't worry, Ralph. Just making sure. I'm obviously in the right house and the *list* must be wrong. (*relaxing*) They're always making mistakes in the office. So,' clicking her pen and suiting the action to the word, 'Cross off Thomas Edge....and write in...Rafe Roper?'

'No, Rover R.O.V.E.R. And Ralph's spelt R.A.L.P.Haitch. . Ralph Rover.'

'Got it. Well now, I'll make you a cup of tea before I look at your leg, Mr Rover. This way to the kitchen, is it? I'll just get the kettle.'

He calls after her, 'Not *Mr* Rover. *Ralph* Rover. It's *Ralph*,

But Nurse Turner is filling the kettle and sighing. Let's hope there'll be no more hassles.

'Sorry, I can't hear you, Mr Rover.' Back in the room with the kettle and a milk bottle, 'What did you say?'

'I said it's not *Mr* Rover. It's *Ralph* Rover.'

'Oh... Right. Ralph then. And the electric point Ralph? Ah yes.' And she plugs in the kettle. 'I'll just get the tea things?'

'Where are you off to?' He points.' They're there on the sideboard.'

'You don't mean...?' She is staring at an ornate silver tea set - teapot, cream jug, sugar bowl on a large silver tray alongside some pretty flower-patterned china cups, and saucers with silver apostle spoons and a Japanese tea caddy.

'You don't mean..... you actually use them? Not every day?'

'Why not? What else? Nurse Mouncey never minds.'

'Oh, I'm not....minding. Just.....aren't you afraid of the china getting chipped or broken?'

She begins laying out the tea things. A tea strainer and, of course, loose tea leaves in the caddy and lump sugar and silver tongs in the bowl.

'The silver set was for our silver wedding. Long time ago. More'n forty years. From the children. That old caddy.....we had it at home. Mother never used tea bags. Always had proper tea. The china was my present for my Annie's fiftieth birthday. I paid for it. She chose it. Always knew what she wanted, did my Annie.'

'It's lovely. Must have cost you a lot.' She is filling the teapot. She's in control again. 'Now I'll just take your temperature while the tea is mashing.' She pops a gadget onto his finger.

'It's nice to see good china being used, not just left in a glass case. Most people use thick mugs these days. I like a china cup myself. *And* I think the tea tastes better. I'll have to take great care washing them up.'

'Set of a dozen to start with.....down to five cups, six saucers, four plates, so I'm told.....'

'Even so. Such good china. Must be worth a bit.'

.....'No doubt they'll see me out.'

'Don't say that. I'm sure you've many years to go yet, Mr..er..Ralph.' She is recording his

temperature and pulse rate.

‘Not at my age..... I know better.’

She’s pouring the tea. ‘Milk and sugar, Mr.. er Ralph?’

‘Yes please, and two lumps..... getting old – it’s no fun.’ He stirs his tea thoughtfully and sighs, ‘If I could only go down the Amazon just one more time.’

‘Down the Amazon? ... The Amazon River.....in South America?’

He nods. ‘The Great Amazing River Amazon.....’

‘You’ve been down... On a crui....?’

‘In a long dug-out canoe paddled by twelve natives.... Sliding through the green water..... The air full of cries – screeching of animals and birds deep in the steaming jungle that closes in on either bank.’ Reminiscing, he is becoming more animated, puts down his cup. ‘A huge crocodile sliding noiselessly down the bank into the water.....Suddenly a long snake untwines from an overhanging branch as we glide below.’ He leans forward, reliving the moment. ‘Its head darts downwards towards the boat, the long tongue flicking out. With a terrible cry one of the Indians drops his paddle and falls writhing into the bottom of the boat. Death has struck out of the jungle.’

Nurse Turner is shocked. ‘Dreadful!’

‘I know what to do – suck out the poison within thirty seconds. I thrust my way towards him; at that moment the canoe hits white water and is flung about like a cork on a foaming hogshead.’ He pauses, absorbed in his memories. ‘My God, will we make it? Poor blighter, will I be in time to save his life?’

She is shocked. After a short silence she says, ‘That must have been terrifying.’

He is deep in the past..... She waits. ‘Ralph?’

‘Did you save his life Ralph?’

‘Touch and go. But he lived.’ Silence.

‘Oh. Your tea, Ralph. You’re letting it go cold.’ He sips it absently.

‘My tea. Yes. Very nice thank you.’

She is regarding him with respect. ‘That Amazon adventure?....When was that?’..... ‘Have you got any photos?’

No reply. She tries again.

‘Did Mrs Rover ever go down the Amazon with you?’

‘What’s that?’

Very slowly and carefully, ‘Mrs Rover. Did she go with you down the Amazon?’

What? There’s no *Mrs* Rover.’

‘Well, I know..... I’m sorry.....but I meant all those years ago when she was still...’

‘Not a world for women. No wife. A man’s world.’

‘Oh I see...I think....too dangerous for her.’ No answer, he’s back with his thoughts.

She picks up a silver-framed photo from the sideboard. ‘Is that her?’

‘What? That’s my Annie.’

‘She looks nice.’

‘She was the best.’

‘I’d better get on and attend to your leg. You carry on with your tea.’

She gets her bag, kneels by him and gently removes the dressing. ‘Oh this has been nasty.

Must have been very painful.’ She studies the ulcer. ‘*But* it looks as if it’s on the mend.

We’ve caught it in time.’ She begins to work on it. ‘Were you an explorer then? Going up the Amazon like that.’

‘Not just the Amazon. Been all over the world – Africa, China, India, Tibet.....’

‘Well I never. And you’ve been to Tibet you say!’

‘Oh, yes. Tibet. That was a tough one. There were these monks. High up in the mountains.

Ruffians had stolen the Holy Emerald from the forehead of their Buddha. I was sent on a mission to track down the gang.'

'You were sent on a mission! Who by? Were you a secret agent or something?'

'For the British Government. And I destroyed the villains single-handed and restored their emerald, one of the largest in the world.'

Nurse Turner pauses and looks at him quizzically. 'Really! Are you sure?'

He ignores the interruption. 'The monks rewarded me with a leather pouch containing leaves from a sacred plant, and they said if I ate one it would make me invisible.....'

'Invisible! They must have been having you on?'

'That's what I thought, but those leaves came in handy in China. I nearly got killed in China. Those opium fiends were cunning. They could creep up on you quietly. No sound. Slit your throat and vanish into the night without trace. But I was a master of disguise and I tricked them all the time, till one day they had me cornered. Thought I was a gonner. Then I remembered the pouch and the leaves. I just had time to put one in my mouth – and suddenly they couldn't see me.' He chuckles. 'And so I escaped their devilish clutches.'

'Oh now. Come on Ralph, did this really happen to you?' She has finished the dressing and is putting away her bandages and lotions.

'Who else? Ralph Rover, gentleman adventurer. Lost on the Mississippi Trail. Around the Horn in a hurricane. Escape over the Andes.'

'I'm surprised you've never been on TV with all that lot.'

He shuffles in his chair. 'Better just hop along to the loo.'

Nurse Turner hurries to help him with his zimmer.

'No thanks, I can manage,' and he shuffles his way out into the hall.

'Well, well.' She watches him go. 'Wonder if he's often away with the fairies.' She

consults Nurse Mounsey's notes and shakes her head. 'Nothing.' She tidies his chair, plumping the cushions. 'Getting senile, poor old boy.'
There's a shelf of books on the wall behind the chair. A title catches her eye. *Voodoo Vengeance*, by Ralph Rover.

She takes it off the shelf. On the red cover is a design in black outline of savages wielding spears, and the words, 'Published by Milton House in the Boys' Adventure Library Series.'
All the other books on the shelf are in identical red cloth binding, all in the same series. *Death Among the Nomads*, *Tomahawks at Dusk*, *Lost on the Mississippi Trail*. All by Ralph Rover. She pounces on the title *Amazon Adventure* and opens to the title page. 'Another tale of Derring-Do from our popular writer of tales for boys.' And there is *Terror in Tibet*, alongside *The Chinese Dragon Mystery*.

Distant flushing from the loo, then the shuffling of the old man returning. She goes to meet him. 'You alright, Ralph?'

She settles him back in his chair, tucks the rug over his knees. "All these books. You wrote them?'

'Those books? Oh yes, all my books.'

'You must be very clever. How many did you write?'

'Twenty nine. That is twenty nine Ralph Rover adventures.'

'Twenty nine! Must have taken you years.' She is collecting the tea things together.

'Years. Ay. Two a year mostly. Popular they were too. In demand....'

'They must have been.'

'....The publishers used to keep at me – "another Ralph Rover adventure, Thomas," they'd say. "Keep them coming."'

'Thomas?'

'But not any more. The cheques have stopped coming.'

‘Thomas?’

‘Tried writing some different ones. Those over there.’ He points to two books on the end of the sideboard. ‘Science fiction. But they didn’t catch on.’

She goes over, picks up ‘*Robots on the Rampage*, by Thomas Edge, author of the popular Ralph Rover adventures?...Oh... Then you *are*....Thomas Edge.’

‘What?’ He looks confused. ‘I’ve told you. No one of that name here. Ralph Rover, that’s me. You’re not going to start that again. Going to ask me next where I live, are you?’

‘Of course not, Ralph. I know you live here. It’s all right. I’ll just go and wash up the tea things and then I’ll be on my way.’ And she carries the tray into the kitchen.

The old man, relaxed in his chair, is quietly reflecting. With a triumphant smile, ‘But I sucked the poison out in time...He survived. The Indians couldn’t do enough for me....Made me the chief of their tribe.’