

Chapter 20

An eventful month

November is always a gloomy month. It has the dubious honour of signifying the end of autumn with its soft blaze of golden browns as the trees and shrubs withdraw their energies for winter and the beginning of the short days and long nights of the dark, cold side of the year. I love the meaning of Christmas and the day itself, but I dislike the build up to it. Last year I had been in the middle of chemotherapy and hadn't really become too involved in the Christmas Spirit but I had no excuse this year. Fortunately for our family Rosalynde is a true traditionalist and loves Christmas despite my grumbling and moaning. I determined not to do that this year and set out to give her all the support I could offer.

The long dark nights also heralded the usual spate of burglaries and Westerhope was no exception. When I returned from the cottage, our neighbours told us that there had been two burglaries on our street while we had been away.

During our twenty years of living in Westerhope we have experienced several attempts to break into our home and have installed a sophisticated burglar alarm system. With this recent spate, we decided to make the house even more secure by having security lights attached to the outside walls.

"It's a far cry from your early attempts to protect the house against burglars," said Rosalynde with a twinkle in her eye, after they were installed.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my memory failing me for the moment.

"Don't you remember when you scared the living daylight out of John Wagget?"

I chuckled as the recollection of it came flooding back. It happened after we had left our house keys with John before setting off for a few days' break. Just before leaving, and as I was about to take the keys over to the Waggets, I had had a brilliant idea.

Among my bits and pieces of Victoriana, I have a rocking chair and upon it I created a dummy 'old lady' from the top part of Rosalynde's dressmaker's dummy. On this I balanced her wig holder which is shaped like a head, and on that I placed the wig. A shawl and a blanket added the finishing touch and when I stepped back to look at her on the rocking chair I was most impressed. Anyone glancing through the windows would have thought a very real old lady was sitting there in front of the fireplace. We had a timeswitch which put on a couple of side lights during the evening which added another touch of realism. I placed an open book on her lap as an extra stroke of genius, then we locked up, took the keys over to the Waggets, but as they were out, I scribbled a hasty note and shoved that and the keys through the letter box.

When we returned a week later, I was met at the door of John's house by John himself who immediately said, "You gormless idiot, why on earth didn't you

tell me you had left a body in your living room, you nearly scared the living day-lights out of me.”

“Oh my God, John, I’m sorry,” I exclaimed, when I realised what had happened and that I’d forgotten to mention it in my note, “I never gave it a thought.”

It had turned out that about halfway through the week, John had decided that it would be a good idea to check the house, while we were away. He checked the front and side but, as he couldn’t get into our back garden because the gate was locked, he decided to go through the house. His own words went something like this:

“I opened the front door and entered your hall. I glanced briefly upstairs and into your study room and then walked down the hall to your lounge door. I opened the door and stepped into the dining area and was about to cross over to your kitchen door when for some unknown reason my hair began to rise at the back of my neck. I took a few steps forward then something to the right of me caught my eye. I stopped and turned. The house was absolutely quiet and it was turning dusk so you can imagine what it was like. As I turned, my heart nearly stopped with fright when I saw what looked like an old lady sitting in your rocking chair with her back to me. I stopped and my mouth went dry, my mind was racing and I stupidly thought, what was your mother doing here when you were away, then I croaked out “Hello”. There was no reply so I said “Hello, I’m John Wagget, George’s neighbour”. Still no reply, so I walked over to the rocking chair and put my hand on it. Then it happened. Its bloody head fell off and I jumped back in horror. I’ve never been so scared in all my life. To cap it all the bloody light came on by itself. When I recovered from my fright and managed not to run out of the house, I had a closer look and you can imagine what I thought when I saw the bits and pieces. If you had come in at that moment I would have cheerfully throttled you. Don’t you ever end up on my operating table because I cannot guarantee you’ll recover!” After my profound apologies we all had a good laugh.

Towards the end of November a message from Tony and Sarah Lord arrived. It was about the Cancer Group and its attempts to find new premises. At the last meeting held at Stocksfield, we had all sat around a table and discussed the future of the Group. The uncertainty every week of where the Group meetings were to be held was causing confusion among the members and it appeared that many were dropping away. It was not possible to move the large stock of books and tapes to each new meeting place either and this was cutting out an important service. Joan Ridley’s health was not improving and it looked as though her home as a meeting place was now definitely out of the question. Tony Lord and Ken Harrison had come up with a place at Hexham called the Gate House Centre and we had decided to give it a try. I had written a letter to all the members about it, asking them to attend a full general meeting there on Monday 20th November, which would also enable them to see the place and decide on whether it was suitable for the needs of the Group.

The meeting was well attended and the Centre turned out to be another of those strange little coincidences, which occur from time to time. It was based on a

Middle School in Hexham which had in fact been the original Queen Elizabeth I Grammar School for the Hexham Area. It was the school Rosalynde and I had attended as teenagers and, as we discovered that night, Sarah Lord, too. The building itself was a house, which stood at the main entrance. The upstairs had been the caretaker's flat and the downstairs had been a large school kitchen with the girls' dining room on one side and the boys' dining room on the other; "never the twain shall meet" was the Education Authority's motto in those days. We had the use of the downstairs area, which had been converted into an Adult Education Centre with Craft areas and a social/meeting room.

Everyone was delighted to see Joan Ridley turn up that night but her announcement at the beginning of the meeting was devastating. She stood up and welcomed us all and then said,

"I've just had my results from the hospital. The treatment hasn't worked and there's nothing more they can do for me. I only have a few weeks left." There was a second's hesitation in her voice at that moment and the room was deathly still. "They actually offered to give me more chemotherapy but told me it would only delay matters, so I've decided not to take it. I hope the Group will continue to go from strength to strength in our fight against this terrible disease."

She sat down and there was a stunned silence. Tony Lord, who was acting chairman of the meeting, immediately broke the silence and said what we were all thinking.

"Joan, we are all very sorry and shocked to hear what you've just told us, but remember where there's life there's hope. You have been the inspiration to all of us in our hour of need and we just want you to know that you are not on your own in this. You've got all of us rooting for you and praying for you and we'll do our very best to help you pull through this."

There was an immediate response to his words. Everyone clapped and stood up. Those nearest Joan gave her the sort of hug she gave us all when we arrived at her house to meet her for the first time. She was a very courageous and caring lady and I hoped I would have her sort of courage if things ever became really bad for me.

The Group continued to meet at the Gatehouse Centre for a further few weeks but it became increasingly obvious that it wasn't the right place. Our new venue, still in Hexham, is in an Adult Training Centre for mentally handicapped people. It was decided to open there in the second week of the New Year.

We managed to form a committee with Tony Lord as chairman and I was elected as minutes secretary to make sure everything we did was recorded and members informed.

Next day, I reported to the John Hall Ward at the RVI for, hopefully, my last operation. It was rather like coming home. The only thing that had changed was most of the patients, whom I didn't recognise. The nurses and doctors were the same and greeted me with smiles, telling me how well I looked and what they thought of my new hair style, which at this stage was a really smart American crew cut. My beard was growing back thicker too. I had brought my album of photographs taken during the transplant and everyone crowded around to see

them. I also brought in a pile of LP records, which Ben had given me to distribute. They were copies of his folk record with Bill Crofut, the American banjo player and folk singer, and was titled *Simple Gifts*. It seemed a very appropriate record to give them.

It was a straightforward operation without the usual preliminaries apart from the injection, which put me to sleep. I was wheeled down to surgery at 4 p.m. and woke up back in the ward at about 5.30. Rosalynde came in the car and picked me up at about seven o'clock, minus the Hickman Line this time. I had plasters over the stomach area and at the top of my right leg where, according to the nurse they had put in three stitches. I could remove the plasters in about a week and the stitching was the soluble type which would disappear within that week.

It felt as though the last leg of a long journey had been completed and I wondered what else the future had in store for me. As far as good health was concerned it was up to me from now on, and I determined to keep on with everything worthwhile which I had learned from my cancer experiences.

November ended with a weekend at the cottage where we were joined by Dave Belcher and Cathie Mains. The weather was crisp and frosty. I walked to church on my own and was joined by Rosalynde and our guests, who arrived by car. We had a long walk afterwards finishing with a pint at the Red Lion pub at Milfield. Dave and Cathie left for Newcastle before darkness fell and Ros and I stayed on till the Monday. It had been a really busy month.