

Edinburgh Cuckoos

A Bill Reyner Mystery Adventure

Wentworth M. Johnson

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This book is dedicated to
Lynn Holly Johnson

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About the Author

Wentworth M. Johnson

Wentworth Johnson was born in the town of March, Cambridgeshire, England, in 1939 and is now a naturalized Canadian. Wentworth served for twelve years with the Royal Air Force and worked with the Ghurkha regiment reclaiming Borneo after it had been invaded by Indonesia. Later, he worked as navigator with 1125 Marine Craft unit and saw action fighting pirates in the South China Sea. He spent two years in Nairobi on international communications and finally handed the small station over to the Kenyan Army.

He moved to Canada after leaving the Royal Air Force in 1967 and worked in a furniture factory for a short while. Then he spent five years working in a munitions factory and laboratory. After a disagreement with the boss he walked out and immediately got a job with a local television station and remained there for some twenty-eight years as a broadcast technology buyer, retiring in 2000. English history, from Julius Caesar to modern times has long been a passion, and writing has been a hobby since school days.

Chapter 1

Tales of the Occult

'I reckon she were witched. There ain't no other explanation, I tell yah. One minute we's all lovey-dovey, then she ups and fires me. Don't make no sense, not no how. All started when she come back from that holiday she took.'

Gran put the tea tray on the table and then addressed both men. 'Would you like anything to eat?'

The grumbling man shook his head. 'Nah!' Then he continued relating his story to his companion. 'I tell yah, it was this close.' He described the distance with finger and thumb. 'I felt like doing her in an' for ten cents I would o'. All that pretence then the boot.'

'Broads – just typical of broads,' smirked the second man.

Now there are at least two things that Gran does not like. One is people who cry in their beer, so to speak, and the other is descriptive terminology relating the fairer sex to the oxen genus. She placed her hands on her hips ready for verbal combat and glared at the offending individual.

'Sir, this is a respectable establishment. The management requires customers to adhere to the general rules of common decency. Poor language, though widespread, is not welcome here.'

'You nuts, lady?' The offending gentleman looked around as though searching for something on the walls forbidding his vein of conversation. 'Where's the bloody sign, lady?'

Grumbler leaned over and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. 'Ease up, George. We don't wanna get chucked out o' here, too. Sorry, missus,' he said, turning to Gran. 'I guess it's all my fault. I complain a lot.'

Gran smiled. 'You look like a nice gentleman. I'm most sorry you have been fired from your position, but please don't frighten my customers away with unacceptable language.'

He smiled. 'Certainly, missus. You don't need any help around here, do you?'

'What do you do?'

'I'm a ... well, I was a butler-cum-housekeeper at Donjon Towers. I can cook, serve, wash dishes, even sweep.'

Gran softened. 'Well, what sort of salary would you be looking at?'

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Grumbly shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't know. I was only fired today. I needs somewhere to stay. I was maybe gonna stay at George's place, 'till I gets sorted out.'

'Well, Mr er -?'

'Beamish. Dagwood Beamish.'

Gran grinned all over her face. I think she took a fancy to him. 'As a matter of fact, I do need help here. When could you start?'

'Anytime, missus.'

She slipped into the chair at the side of the table. 'Why were you fired?'

He coloured and fidgeted with his fingers. 'We was getting married, see, but then she ups and fires me.'

'Why?'

He shrugged. 'Dunno. She goes on holiday, comes back all sick-like and fires me. No reason, no excuse. Tosses me out on the street.'

Gran eyed him up and down. He was a lot younger than her, around forty, with solid dark hair, which was more than she had. A wise, all-knowing, sad face – he sort of reminds me of an undertaker.

'And no papers, no reference given?' she asked.

'No. I was tellin' George, here. I reckon she were witched.'

Gran smiled sweetly. 'Was,' she corrected. 'Very well. Let's say start tomorrow, anytime in the morning. We can have a nice little talk and discuss your recompense.'

Gran's a funny old girl; you see, she started this sort of plush tearoom with Mr Spadafora – that's ex-Detective Inspector Spadafora. It was all her money, of course. See, last year our house got burned to the ground – a really nice present for the new millennium. We did make a profit on it, though. There was almost a million dollars in reward money for the killers of those girls, but that is all still in the hands of our lawyer.

North – well, his full name is North East. I kid him on it was a mistake in the registry office, like they accidentally put his address where his name should have gone. North's a good lad who prefers to be called Newf. Gran and I sort of adopted him last year – poor kid's an orphan. He is slightly taller than me, and slightly older, twice as stupid and nowhere near as heavy. I've got some muscles larger than his whole body. We all live in the new house, in the same place as the old one. Mr Spadafora is moving down permanently this summer. I guess he's got a lot of stuff to settle up in Parry Sound. No more detective work for us. The last case was really dangerous. As usual, I got shot and Newf, that's North, well, he almost died. No way – detective work is permanently off my list of things to do.

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This summer we intended to spend a leisurely time just fun-loving, soaking up the rays.

In case you didn't know, Gran's a wonderful cook. That's why she opened the tearoom. She doesn't need the money, it's just a hobby, something to keep her mind active. It was all Spadafora's idea. Anyhow, I'd just got in with a van load of supplies and was unloading them when this guy turns up.

'Excuse me, son,' he said. 'I'm looking for the lady proprietor.'

'Who, Gran?'

He shrugged. 'The lady who runs this place.'

'Just take a seat; she's in the back putting supplies away.' I walked round to the back and told her this chap had arrived.

'Oh, good; he can help you with the deliveries, William. Then we'll all have a nice chat.'

Mornings were always a slack time, evenings was when things hotted up a bit. After we'd put away all the stuff, the three of us sat at one of the tables for a biscuit and a cup of tea.

'This is Dagwood Beamish, William. He's our new handyman,' Gran announced proudly.

'Hi,' I said with disinterest.

'Now, Mr Beamish, before I hand you this job and arrange your salary, I would like to know why you were fired from your last position. Then William can investigate it for us.'

He sipped his tea and then stared into the cup. 'Well,' he began slowly. 'Cloe MacAlister's her name. She inherited Donjon Towers from her dad. An only child, you see. I started work there five years ago, sort of general handyman and butler. There ain't no other servants. She was easy to care for and didn't ask for much.' He stopped and stared around the room, his eyes searching for inspiration. 'Well, yah see, I got to know her quite well. She said it were unfair that I looks after her and livin' in her house an' all. So we sets the date to get married. Even had the vicar to supper an' everything.'

'But, you quarrelled,' Gran hinted.

'Nah! 't weren't nothing like that. See, she gets this letter in the mail. Sort of an advert for this place in Scotland. Some kind of holiday resort or something.'

'And did you both go?' Gran asked.

'Nah! She decided it would be a good idea if I looked after the Towers for her and she would take a short vacation in this Scotch place. So I stays at the Towers and she goes off on this last jaunt afore we marries, see,' he paused. I think I could see a tear in his eye.

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‘Then what?’ I encouraged.

He pouted his lips and then chewed the bottom one. After a moment he began again. ‘Well, she comes home, wearing a veil all like a widow and everything. Ignores me as if I ain’t there. Goes to her room and stays there. I gets written orders, o’couse she says she lost her voice, cuz of a cold up in the Highlands. She smelled different, too. Then she gives me written notice, see.’ He pulled out a fancy piece of letterhead paper and handed it to Gran.

She took out her glasses and balanced them on her nose. I could tell by the expression on her face something was amiss. She folded it carefully and handed it back.

‘I am rather shocked,’ she said softly. ‘Is there any truth to the allegation?’

Dagwood shook his head. ‘I’m forty-seven, Mrs Hubert. I don’t have any aspirations in that direction – none at all.’

‘I believe you, Mr Beamish. Do you intend to prosecute the woman?’

‘No. It’s a closed book. I would rather not have anything to do with her. I thought I should show you the letter, so’s we’re fully open and honest.’

Gran nodded her approval. ‘No more shall be mentioned. It is history. Welcome to your new position. My partner, Mr Spadafora, will be returning in a few days. You will be my right-hand man.’

‘I thought I was, Gran?’

‘William, you never work in the tea garden.’

She was almost right. I had given up detective work, too. Dishes and guns just go against the grain. As soon as school ends I intended to go to England and find Priscilla. Since I’d got out of hospital I’d bought me a new car; well, one for the business, actually. Priscilla said a gentleman drives a sedate vehicle, not a racing car. ‘A man’s personality shows in his choice of women, horses and motor vehicles,’ that’s what she said, so goodbye Jaguar and hello SUV. Besides, making deliveries in a sports job just isn’t kosher.

Gran’s a wonderful cook; I guess that’s why she opened the tea garden on the old 99 highway a couple of kilometres out of Dundas and it gives the old girl a chance to meet new people. My calendar was kind of full: school ended Friday so, in order, I had to teach Newf how to drive, clean up my room and visit England. Newf didn’t finish school for another week. Gran’s having him educated – doesn’t like the way he speaks, though personally I think it’s a waste of good money.

It was at supper on Friday night when Gran threw a screw into the works. We were all seated for the meal in the new Dundas house and then,

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in her usual way, she looked at me and smiled. ‘William, I have a little job for you.’

I sighed, to show my contempt for what I thought might be coming next. ‘Yes, Gran?’

‘That new man, Dagwood Beamish.’ She poured the tea. ‘Did you hear his peculiar story?’

I shook my head and rolled my eyes at Newf.

‘Well, he claims his employer, who was of a mood to marry him, suddenly took a holiday in Scotland.’

‘I know that, Gran.’

‘Did you hear the bit how she changed?’

‘Sure.’

‘What do you think then, William?’

‘I don’t like him or trust him. I figure the tale was for your benefit. He probably had aspirations beyond his station and she fired the twit.’

‘Well!’ she gasped. ‘I’m shocked at your attitude, young man.’

‘Sorry, Gran. I’m only thinking of you. When does Mr Spadafora get back?’

‘Next week.’

‘Good. Until then, I’ll stay close; just to make sure you’re safe.’

She smiled sweetly. ‘Anyhow, to cut to the chase, I would like you to investigate Mrs MacAlister.’

‘That’s a Scottish name isn’t it, Gran?’

‘Quite possibly so. I would like you to meet the lady.’

‘And what exactly should I ask her?’

‘We could freten ’er,’ Newf added gleefully.

‘I don’t think that would serve any purpose,’ Gran growled. ‘And I thought you were learning English. That’s threaten, with a “TH” not an “F”, and her is with an “H”.’

‘Yes, Missus H.’

‘Then will you do as I ask, William?’

‘Sure, Gran. I’ll do it when Mr Spadafora gets back and North has finished school for the summer. I would like to know exactly what I’m looking for. I’ve quit on the detective stuff. I don’t want any more dangerous cases. In fact, I don’t want any cases at all.’

‘I completely agree, William. This is just a simple little inquiry. No guns, no one dies, not even any fighting.’

‘Is that a promise, Gran?’

‘Certainly. I think all I really want to know is why she fired Dagwood – it is a little strange. You could pretend to be a prospective employer and ask her for references. That should be simple enough.’

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The following day, Newf went to school and I took a trip out to the tearoom or, as Gran calls it, the tea garden, though why one has a garden indoors I can't imagine. I wanted to interview this Mr Dagwood Beamish myself and preferably without Gran's interference. It wasn't difficult. I think Gran knew what I was doing. I found Dagwood cleaning in the kitchen and Gran left us alone. I guess she went to tidy up in the seating area.

'Mr Beamish,' I said authoritatively. 'I would like to ask you a few questions.'

'Of course,' he said softly. 'Anything you like.'

'Okay. Stop with the cleaning and tell me why you were fired from your last job.'

He smiled. 'You don't believe my story.'

I nodded in the affirmative.

'Well, Mr Reyner, I'm not in the habit of lying. I started work for Cloe MacAlister almost ten years ago. You see, I answered an advertisement in the local newspaper. Miss Cloe was a young and energetic woman at that time. She has a tendency to ... to be very private and so had only one servant, namely myself.'

'So who did the laundry?'

'Farmed out to a professional company. They called twice weekly. Groceries, bread and milk, too, were delivered. Mr Edwards the grocer would spend time with Cloe and arrange to deliver the week's supplies.'

'So what did you do?'

'I, sir, made Miss Cloe comfortable, anything she required. It was because of this she suggested we marry. I think her reasoning was that she could gain tax deductions for a dependent.'

'So there was no sex or anything?'

'Good heavens, sir. No, absolutely not. Madam is not that kind of person.'

'Alright, I'll buy all this, but how come you got fired, then?'

His expression changed; you could see the distance in his eyes. 'One day, she read this advertisement in a magazine or something. She told me the idea had come to her to take a vacation. I wasn't invited.' A tear trickled down his face as he recalled the incident. 'I was against it right from the start but, well, what could I do. My post was to care for the house, while Miss Cloe visited the old country. I rue the day. I knew something was terribly wrong when I met her on the homecoming. Faithfully, I awaited Cloe in the airport. She wore black.'

'That's significant?'

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‘Madam never wore black. Black is the colour of death. Miss Cloe always wore sombre colours, never black. Besides, she wore a veil and madam never wore any form of head covering. When I spoke to her, she didn’t react as though she knew me and replied only in writing.’

‘In writing?’

‘Yes, she used a notepad, explaining that due to a severe cold she had lost her voice.’

‘If what you say is true, it sounds obvious that the lady who came back to Canada is an impostor. Someone impersonating Cloe MacAlister.’

‘I had considered that possibility.’

‘And?’

‘I think not.’

‘Why?’

‘Madam had knowledge that only madam would know.’

I sighed. ‘Like what?’

‘She knew her social insurance number; she knew the correct number to open the safe combination. In fact, there was nothing she didn’t know. It was when I complained about the lack of ability to speak she fired me. I’m certain witchcraft come into it. Somehow, they have stolen her soul.’

I shrugged and walked away – poor guy was a simpleton. I told Gran I thought Dagwood too stupid to be harmful. At that moment a crowd of old ladies came in for their morning tea, so I had to let Gran and company do their thing. Convinced that Dagwood was more or less harmless, I drove back to the house in Dundas. I had a couple of important things to do. Somehow, I missed Newf’s company; since Gran had sent him to school, we just didn’t seem to have any time together.

The house was also a disappointment. Loving craftsmen had built Gran’s old house, which stood on the same spot as the new one. The new house had been thrown together in a few months. Lath-and-plaster walls replaced with wallboard and 2-inch-thick solid wood floors replaced with plywood. The new windows are okay, but it’s a definite step down. Lying on my bed staring at the ceiling just wasn’t the same any more.

I picked Newf up from Mohawk College at noon on Friday for the end of term. Why I like that goof I can’t imagine. Watching him approach the car made thoughts scuttle through my head. He looked a tall, skinny, silly looking beanpole with bright gingery blond hair. Poor Newf was a few centimetres taller than me and about half my weight.

‘Hi! Bill. Fanks for picking me up.’ His eyes sparkled with delight.

‘Get in.’

‘I bin lookin’ forward to this summer, Bill. Do you fink I should get a job?’

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‘No. We’re going to England. I’m going to find Priscilla.’

‘Cor, neat! You reckon she’s worf it?’

I drove downtown, parked the car in the parkade and then we walked. There were a couple of toys I thought we might need. First, we went to the Bell Centre, where I bought both of us a new mobile phone. The girl promised me they would work internationally, all over Britain, the US and Canada. Next, we went to a chandlers – I figured they’d have what I wanted – and I bought a hand-held GPS.

The weekend passed lazily and slowly and, I may add, it was the last worry-free weekend for quite a while. Gran said I had to teach Newf how to drive before I left for England. She wanted him independent for the next school term. As we had nothing better to do, I figured we could put six or seven hours a day into it. Monday, we began the hair-raising experience of teaching an idiot to drive in Gran’s car.

McMaster University has a giant parking area in the backwoods of Westdale. There being no school, I figured this would be a place where Newf was least likely to run over anybody or anything. I put him in the control seat and explained the workings of a modern automobile. With his eyes wild and excited, he put the thing into gear and we shot off like a rocket.

‘Stop!’ I yelled.

Jesus! He slammed on the brakes and almost sent me through the windshield.

‘ow’s ’at, Bill?’

‘Yeah, great. Now, can we try it again very slowly and don’t forget to turn left before we reach the end. Okay?’

‘Sure, Bill.’

The second experience was little better than the first. After half an hour my nerves were shot. I could see this was leading to a nervous breakdown – mine. Even if the car could take the punishment, I couldn’t. Facing Fiend’s ghost or even the mass murderers at the TOD were a mere breeze compared to teaching Newf to drive. I had to stop him before I became incapacitated, incensed or just delirious. I sure as hell hoped he never wanted to learn to fly an airplane.

A brilliant idea flashed through my mind – rather like the proverbial straw passing a drowning man. With an ironic smile, I told Newf to stop and turn the engine off. Poor kid, the sweat was pouring off his face in little rivers.

‘ow’m I doin’, Bill?’

‘Not to worry, Newf. Here, let me drive; we’ll have a little fun.’

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We swapped positions. I figured Gran's little car was just too much for him. He needed something easier to drive, something heavier. As we drove off, I explained how things were done and why one would do certain things to make the vehicle perform to its peak.

'Where' we goin', Bill?'

'You need something easier to drive and I've got the very thing.'

In a few minutes we were downtown. I drove down Barton Street in an easterly direction and then crossed to Cannon Street and headed back towards the town centre. After a few seconds I found what I had been looking for. Pulling into the British Car Importers, I parked in the front lot.

'Come on, Newf. Let's go get a car you can drive.'

His eyes lit up like a navigation beacon. 'Get a car? You gonna buy a car, Bill?'

'Sure. We need something new around the house.'

I walked boldly into the posh showroom and stood staring around. I figured it wouldn't take too long before someone either threw us out or tried to sell us a car.

'Can I help you, sir?' said this overweight, pompous git in a light blue suit.

'Sure, I'm looking for a car.'

He eyed me up a down with suspicion. 'Where did sir leave it?'

'Very funny. How about that one over there?'

The tub-o-lard coughed as though something had stuck in his throat. 'That, sir, is a Rolls-Royce.'

'Well, if you've nothing better, I'll take a look at it.'

'I'm sorry, sir, I think you'll find something more to your standing at Rent-a-wreck, across town.'

I pulled out my wallet. 'Looks like a well-used demo. What yah want for it?'

He raised one hand above his head and snapped his fingers and one of his minions came running over.

'I think this gentleman and his companion are leaving, Mr Osgood. Would you kindly show them where the exit is?'

'If you throw me out, I'll buy this place and fire you. Now show me that car.'

He turned a neat shade of scarlet. I thought something was about to explode. I tore off a cheque and walked over to his desk on the sales floor. Both Tub-o-lard and Osgood followed me.

'If you do not leave peaceably, sir, I shall have to call the police and have you removed.'

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I made the cheque out for \$250,000 and signed it and then handed it to Tub-o-lard. He stopped quacking and read it. Before he could say anything I snatched it back and wrote VOID across it. Then I handed it back to him again.

‘The name of my bank is on the cheque. I think it would be in your interest to give them a call.’

Indignantly, he snatched the cheque from me and walked to his office. Osgood stood and glared at me.

‘Please don’t start any trouble, sir,’ he said softly. ‘I’m in bad books with the boss as it is.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr Osgood, you’re in good hands. Come on, Newf; let’s take a look at our new motor.’

After a while, Tub-o-lard came waddling back. With his size and speed, he reminded me of Stephenson’s Puffing Billy. Talk about grovel; it’s enough to make a skunk sick. He fair bubbled over with obsequiousness.

‘I do apologize for our earlier misunderstanding, Mr Reyner, sir,’ he said, bowing and scraping. ‘Which car would sir like to see?’

‘The blue one.’ I’d taken a fancy to the steel blue Rolls. It spoke to me and just looked like it needed a new owner.

Tub-o-lard hovered around and bubbled on about the merits of a real car. I sat there in the height of luxury. This car had more widgets than a tinker’s bench. Suddenly, some really pointed words drifted into my earhole. ‘Would sir like to have a nice little test drive?’

‘Yes, sir would.’

‘Excellent. Mr Osgood will give you all the help you need.’

Moments later, Osgood purred into the courtyard and stepped out, leaving the engine running. ‘It’s all yours, sir.’

Eagerly, I eased into the captain’s seat and slid everything into a comfortable position. Newf’s eyes remained like saucers as he climbed in beside me. The only sound I could hear as I drove away was Newf’s breathing and my heart beating.

‘You just pinched the most expensive car in Canada,’ Newf hissed softly.

‘Not quite. Just sit back and relax. When we get out into the country I’ll let you drive. This one’s easy; all you gotta do is steer it.’

After Gran’s old rattletrap, man! this one felt like a dream. I just had to show Gran, I knew she’d love it. She was busy with customers when we entered the tearoom. The one moment I needed to show off and she was too busy. Newf remained in the car admiring the luxury and smelling the upholstery. After a few minutes I saw my opportunity.

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‘Gran, Gran, come and see what I’ve got.’

She glared at me. ‘William, this is a place of business. You can show me your new car after hours.’

‘Gees, Gran. Come and take a quick look at it.’

‘Where’s my car?’

‘It’s safe. Come on, Gran, humour me.’

With a shrug, she walked to the front door. ‘It’s very pretty, how much?’

‘Don’t know; I just got it on a test drive. Come on, Gran, you’ll love it. There’s an automatic everything; even remembers your size and favourite driving position.’

‘I really would rather see it after work.’

Talk about disappointing. I leaned against the mechanical marvel as she walked back to the tearoom. Suddenly, she turned to face me. ‘William, there is one thing you could do for me.’

I could see the glint in her eyes even from that distance. ‘What is it, Gran?’

‘Why don’t you let North drive our new vehicle and you can kill two birds with one stone.’

‘Like what?’

‘A simple little bit of detective work.’

‘We agreed, Gran. I’ve given up PI’ing, it’s too dangerous.’

‘This is not dangerous or even difficult. Drive over to Donjon Towers and interview Miss MacAlister.’

Chapter 2

The Towers

Our new Rolls quickly adapted to Newf's style of driving – now that's a smart car. They got on very well together. I recognized some of his characteristics, as he had a tendency to drive just like Priscilla. He seemed to think the accelerator peddle was an on-off switch. First, we went downtown Dundas to the army-navy store, where I bought Newf a captain's hat.

'Okay, James, drive us to Donjon Towers.'

'Which way's that, Bill?'

'Up the number eight and head for Cambridge.'

He was doing well; even with all that power there was no squealing of tyres and he gave it a nice smooth pull off. I figured he'd drive better if I kept my mouth shut, though I kept an eagle eye on things. The GPS kept me amused, albeit I hadn't fully figured it out yet. Gran's navigation left a little to be desired and though she had given us the address, a rural route wasn't much to go on.

Pulling my new cell-phone out, I dialled Gran's establishment. After a few seconds, the very person I needed answered.

'Hello, Dundas Tea Gardens.'

'Hi, Dagwood. This is William Reyner. What did you say the grocer's name was who serviced Mrs MacAlister?'

'Eddie's Corner Store. Mr Edwards runs it. Is there a problem?'

'No, not at all. What street is it on?'

He thought for a moment. 'Well, it's the other side of the river, north. I think it's called Doon Road.'

'Great, thanks, Daggy; see you later.' I folded the phone and put it in the holster. 'We'll have to go right downtown Galt. Okay?'

'Sure, Bill.' Newf looked at ease; he was a real quick learner.

After getting lost once ... well, not lost – I had the GPS. We weren't sure where the rest of the town was, though we knew where we were. Eventually, I found the store, which wasn't exactly what I had expected. One would imagine it to be a grocery store, or a supermarket, but instead it turned out to be a junk shop.

'I think this is the wrong one, Newf. Still, never mind, stop over there and we'll have a look inside.'

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An old-fashioned open bell on a spring announced our opening of the front door. The place smelled musty and had an unfinished wooden floor. A tall dark brown counter lined one wall and on the other side were piles of boxes. A man in a dirty pinafore came running from a back curtained-off area.

‘Yes, sirs. What can I do for you today?’ He was short and bald, with a friendly smile and a jovial voice.

‘Hi, I’m Bill Reyner. I wonder if you know Cloe MacAlister?’

His eyes lit up. ‘Certainly. Does she need anything today?’

‘No. I’d just like to ask you a couple of questions, if I may.’

He shrugged. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘No problem. I thought you ran a grocer’s outfit.’

‘Oh, no. I do general deliveries, anything, anywhere, anytime. If it’s broke, I’ll fix it, if it ain’t fixable, I’ll replace it.’

‘You sound like the man my Gran should meet. You know Mr Beamish, then?’

‘Dagwood, sure. Though I haven’t done any business lately. Since she’s bin abroad she don’t call me no more.’

‘So how does she get her food and stuff now?’

He shrugged. ‘Dunno.’

He gave me a quick description of how to get to the Towers and we left for the last leg of the search.

‘What do you think, Newf?’ I asked as we walked back to the car.

‘I fink the Rolls is the best car in the whole world.’

‘Not that, you nitwit. Miss or Mrs MacAlister?’

‘Dunno.’

Before allowing Newf to drive us on the last lap of our journey, I fiddled with the GPS. Eventually, I figured it out enough to mark our location; I called it EDS, short for Edwards. Next time, the GPS would be able to tell me how to get here.

‘Okay, James, drive on.’

‘James?’

‘You, Newf.’

‘I ain’t James.’

‘Drive, for heaven’s sake, drive.’

While he concentrated on controlling the car I pointed the way. Eventually, we entered an area I sort of recognized. We were in the Beverley Swamp area – narrow roads, woods and wetlands.

‘Stop!’ I yelled as we sailed past a mailbox with the name MacAlister painted on its side.

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Newf stopped and then backed slowly down the road until we could make a turn into the driveway. I tell you, forwards he's almost okay, but backwards – look out. A tree-lined, single-lane road curved round to the left and we cautiously proceeded along the narrow lane. On the right was swamp with tree stumps poking through the green water. Just over the next rise the house came into view. I don't think I've ever seen such an ugly house. It had been constructed from red brick and where visible, the roof looked like blue slate. The house sat on a man-made grassy rise, giving the appearance of a castle on an elephant's back. At three stories high, it had a square tower on every corner of the box-like design. In the centre of the roof stood this really ugly, circular tower, taller than all the others. Whoever designed this place, if it was designed, must have had a thing about mosques. At a quick glance, it looked like a really cheap imitation of a genuine Middle Eastern religious structure.

The driveway ran up alongside the house with a small footpath leading to the front door and there didn't seem to be anywhere to park. We stopped opposite the path and got out. The front door was huge; talk about *Alice in Wonderland*. The knocker reminded me of something used on a demolition site. After using it, I expected some monster of two and a half metres tall with a bolt through its neck to open the door.

After a very short interval the huge door rattled and creaked. A matronly, middle-aged woman in a black dress sporting a long, pointed nose growled, 'What is it?'

'I'd like to see Miss MacAlister, please.'

'The mistress isn't receiving guests today. Goodbye.'

Easing my foot into the doorway, I said, 'I've come a long way to see her and I'm not leaving 'till I do.'

'You can't park that car there. Put it in the compound round the back. And servants cannot come in this way.'

'I'm not a servant.'

'That one is,' she said, pointing to Newf.

'Put the car in the compound,' I said, turning to my newly elected chauffeur.

'Me? All by myself?'

'Yes.'

He smiled and ran back to the car. The lady hustled me in and pointing to a room, she said, 'Wait in there.'

Nothing seemed to be as I had expected. The room had a plain wooden floor with one single carpet in the centre. Everything looked austere or totally utilitarian. The table that stood in the centre of the carpet had no paint or polish, but it did match the sideboard, which looked like an

antique from Mennonite country. All six chairs were comb-back and of plain, knotty pine. I sat and looked out of the non-curtained window and the view inspired me less than the room.

A short, shrew-like woman in her early forties marched into the room. Her black hair, though short and straight, shone like coal. 'What?' she snapped.

'What?' I echoed and stood up. 'I'm William Reyner, Miss MacAlister?'

'And what would you want here?' she said with a slight Scottish lilt.

Somehow, she made me feel uncomfortable. Her gaze penetrated like a pair of fifty-watt lasers.

'Do you know Dagwood Beamish?' I asked.

She turned away from me and stood with her hands behind her back, like a sergeant major inspecting the troops. Concentrating on her imaginary soldiers in the field beside the house, she replied, 'And what would Mr Beamish want with me?'

'I ... er, well, that is, he came to me for a job. He has no references.'

She turned and smiled, her pointy little nose twitching like a cat smelling a mouse. 'Are you a personage of substance?' Her eyes flashed as she anticipated the answer.

'Yes, I guess.'

'Please, come into the parlour, Mr Reyner.' She led the way back into the hall and then into a room across the way. Opening the door, Miss MacAlister smiled kindly and said, 'One cannot be too careful, a woman alone. Please, take a seat. I'll call for tea, unless you would like a wee dram?'

'Tea's great, thanks.'

The room was a completely different world. Very heavy velvet drapes, thick carpet – wall-to-wall – and weighty Victorian, french-polished furniture. The instant I walked into the room it reminded me of a fortune-teller's place. You'd even expect to see a crystal ball on the table. Although there were lots of pictures on the walls, none of them were of people.

'Please, make yourself comfortable,' she said, indicating a leather divan near the fireplace.

'Thanks.'

After pulling an ornate rope near the very tall mantelpiece, she sat opposite me and drew a flamboyant-looking coffee table in front of us. 'What is it that you wish to know?'

'Well, did you actually employ Mr Beamish?'

The door woman came into the room. 'What?' she growled in an unpleasant tone of voice.

'Tea, Gladys, tea for two.'

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Miss MacAlister smiled coyly at me again. 'Yes, Mr Beamish worked for me. He's lazy and he has desires above his natural position. I sacked him for that reason. If you employ him I would recommend you watch him, especially if there's loose change lying about.'

'Are you saying he's dishonest?'

She smiled and didn't answer. 'I suppose you are here for your parents?'

'No. I'm independent, except for my Gran.'

'Just the two of you in a wee little house?'

'No, just three of us. Gran, North, he's my driver, and myself, in a very big house, actually.'

'I suppose your wealth comes from your father?'

'No, my uncle. I'm the last of the Reyners.'

'Very interesting.' She walked over to the sideboard and extracted a pamphlet. 'I'm sure you'll find this very interesting.'

I took it and had a quick read. 'A holiday lodge?'

'Yes. I went there. It made a new woman of me. Magnificent scenery I strongly recommend it.'

'How did you hear of this place?'

She smiled. 'I have a friend who recommended it. Now, are you here to interrogate me or to learn about Mr Beamish?'

'Yeah. So you don't think I should employ this Beamish fellow?'

'No, He's a nasty little man.'

'What about Edwards?'

'Edwards?'

'Yeah, the guy who used to deliver your groceries.'

She scowled for a few moments and then brightened up. 'Oh, you mean that fool with the van. I have a real grocer now.'

Gladys burst into the room with a tray in her hands. Noisily, she slammed it on the small table. 'Yer tea.' She turned and marched out like a Nazi storm trooper.

'It's very difficult to get good servants these days,' Miss MacAlister said as she began preparing our drinks. 'Milk or cream?'

'Yeah, I know what you mean. Cream.'

'I think you and your grandmother would really enjoy a nice holiday in Scotland. It's very peaceful and beautiful. Cromlet Castle is amazing. I do suppose you can afford it?'

I nodded. There was nothing suspicious about this woman or her strange house. Dagwood Beamish was obviously the bad guy, a liar and possibly a cheat. I should get back to Gran and get her to fire this guy before we regretted it.

A Bill Reyner Mystery Adventure

‘Can I keep this pamphlet?’

‘Oh, certainly. You should seriously consider going. Think of the adventure, the excitement, the lovely lassies.’

‘I’m going to England this summer.’

‘Then you should make it a special point to go up into the Highlands to see Cromlet. I could give you a letter of introduction, if you like.’

‘Nah, that’s okay. I really think I should be going now.’ I downed the lukewarm tea.

‘Very well. We’ll leave via the compound. Your servant is in the scullery.’ She led the way back into the hall and then towards the back of the house and into a drab room with plain wooden furniture. Newf was sitting at the table looking bored while Gladys was bending his ear. They both jumped to their feet as we walked in.

‘We’re going now, North,’ I said authoritatively.

The car had been parked in a walled-off compound, sort of a backyard with a 3 metre high brick wall on two sides, the house on one side and a slew of sheds or garages at the back. Newf had difficulty turning the car round. It was the first time he’d had to do close manoeuvring. Eventually, we made it and headed back to Dundas.

‘So what do you think of the MacAlisters, Newf?’

With his eyes glued to the road ahead he said, ‘She’s an impostor. The real Mrs MacAlister’s dead and gone.’

I laughed. ‘Where did you get a notion like that?’

‘Cuz Gladys said so. She said Beamish is all part of the plan. There’s a room in the basement filled with dead people.’

How he could drive and spout such amusing stuff at the same time mystified me. ‘You daft sod,’ I said. ‘If there was a room full of dead folk – who killed them, why and how? And if Cloe MacAlister is an impostor, what would be the reason? You just don’t use your brain, Newf. It’ll give Gran a good laugh.’

‘You fink so. Well I don’t. Mrs MacAlister fools rich people into finking she’s their friend then she bumps them off and takes their money. That’s why the basement’s full of corpses.’

‘Alright, how’s Beamish involved?’

‘Gees, Bill, sometimes you’re real fick. Beamish is already wheedling ’is way into your Gran’s life right at this moment. When ’ee bumps ’er off, ’ee takes ’er money. Use your finker.’

I shook my head in disgust. Poor Newf just didn’t have the brainpower to see how stupid the whole idea was. I pulled the pamphlet of Cromlet Castle out and gave it a good read. It sounded good, with this beautiful sixteenth-century feudal castle nestled in the hills by a small loch.

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The picture was great, too. The place offered a challenging experience and excitement, something new, adventure.

‘What about her visit to Scotland, then?’ I said, looking up from the brochure.

Newf snickered. ‘All fake, she ain’t never bin nowhere. Beamish is the one we gotta wheedle out. ’e’s the one who’s going to knock off your Gran.’

‘Doesn’t make sense, Newf. I’m there. If anything happens to Gran, I inherit.’

‘ave you seen ’er will?’

‘No.’

‘Then ’ow do you know? I bet she’ll leave it all to Beamish. That’s ’ow they gets all their money.’

‘Well this time they’ve bit off more than they can chew. Gran would never fall for that kind of crap. She’s too smart.’

‘She’s old and gullible. Beamish is a sweet-talker.’

‘I can’t swallow that crap, Newf, but I’ll see to it that Mr Beamish finds himself other employment. What did you think of the house, Donjon Towers?’

‘It’s a ugly pile of rocks. I fink it needs a bulldozer froo it.’

‘Pull over, Newf. Let me drive. I’ll have to take this car back. What do you think of it?’

Carefully, he brought the car to a halt at the roadside. He certainly learned fast and he felt comfortable in a Rolls.

‘You want the ’at?’

‘No, you can keep the hat.’ We swapped sides and I pressed the comfort set button and the seat, steering wheel and pedals all aligned themselves to my position. ‘You want me to buy it?’

‘Cor! Yeah, sure. I’d love it. I’ll do all the drivin’ if you like.’

‘When’s your driving test?’

‘I ain’t applied for it yet.’

‘Let’s get back to the dealers and then we’ll think about it.’

I drove the Rolls back and parked it beside Gran’s old wreck. Tub-o-lard came running out with a sickly grin on his puss.

‘Ah! Mr Reyner, sir. How was your drive?’

‘Okay.’ I didn’t want to sound too enthusiastic. ‘What extras are there?’

‘Extras?’ He looked puzzled.

‘You know, fancy shit to bump up the price.’

‘Oh! sir. There are no extras on a Rolls-Royce.’

‘You telling me it’s got everything?’

A Bill Reyner Mystery Advenure

‘Every car is custom built for its owner; there are no extras, unless you count fuel.’

‘Mercedes have a dual braking system,’ I said as if complaining.

‘For what purpose, sir?’

‘Well, if the main system fails, you still got brakes.’

‘There, sir. You said it yourself. The word fail does not enter into it. A Rolls-Royce needs no backup system.’ He coughed surreptitiously into his hand. ‘One has heard the term “jerry-built”, sir?’

‘Alright, when can I take it?’

‘Take it, sir?’

‘The car. When can I have it?’

‘As soon as it’s built, sir.’

‘Built? Don’t you have any in stock?’

His eyes opened like two Aldus lamps. ‘Stock, sir. A Rolls is not a stock car, sir.’

‘Well I want one now.’

‘Oh, of course, sir. We can’t let you ride away from here in *that*,’ he said, pointing to Gran’s heap. ‘It wouldn’t be fitting. If sir would go with Mr Osgood and sign the contract, we will assure your complete satisfaction.’

‘Contract. I don’t want any contract, I’ll pay cash.’

‘We prefer to call it a contract, sir. The term sale is rather demeaning.’

‘Oh!’

A bunch of gutless turds; I always believe in calling a spade a spade. Osgood asked me a thousand questions and made careful note of the answers. No one ever mentioned money. When at last it was all over, Mr Osgood was pleased and he said I could take the vehicle we’d been using all day. They would bring our new car to the house as soon as it arrived, in about six weeks.

‘What about the price?’ I asked.

‘Oh, it’s generally impolite to mention earthly things like that, sir. Mr Evandale will send you the bill and you can make arrangements with your bank to settle it at your leisure, sir.’

I figured Evandale must be Tub-o-lard. ‘What about insurance and a vehicle licence?’

‘We’ll take care of everything, sir. Even the number plate. You said you would prefer the letters PI-1, if available?’

‘Sure.’

It felt kind of funny buying a car without haggling the price, not to mention that they were going to personally deliver it. We climbed in and I

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drove back to Dundas. I would have been happy to keep the demo model and Newf was ecstatic either way.

‘What about Mrs H’s old car?’ Newf asked.

‘They said they’d find a good home for it.’

‘Won’t she kinda get upset?’

‘She’s got the SUV and I’ll let her use our new car anytime she wants.’

‘What we gonna do about Mr Beamish, then?’

Back at our house, I made myself comfortable while Newf polished the car. What, indeed, was I going to do about Mr Beamish? I had to think for a moment. Gran’s new business had its disadvantages, like no lovely smell of cooking in this house and no meals ready when you got home. Then there was this Beamish twit. Somehow, I had to get Gran to fire the man as soon as possible. At that moment I heard the front door close. Moments later, ex-inspector Spadafora walked in as bold as brass.

‘Hi,’ I said, standing to greet him. ‘You’re back then?’

He smiled his usual “I suspect you of something” smile. ‘Zelda will be home soon; she’s bringing supper with her.’ He looked taller and sterner than ever.

‘Oh.’ I sat down. ‘Have you met Beamish?’

‘Sure.’

‘What d’yah think of him?’

Spadafora sat, leaned back and crossed his legs. ‘A crumb, creep, nefarious underdog. Apart from that, I don’t like him.’

‘I think we should fire him. I’ve been to Donjon Towers. Can’t figure it out. The woman Mrs MacAlister has a Scottish accent and her house servant is really rude. There’s no reason I can find for her to fire Beamish, unless Newf is right.’

North walked into the room with a huge grin on his face. ‘Bleeding great car, ain’t it?’

‘What’s your theory, North?’ Spadafora asked.

‘They gets into uver people’s lives and then knock ’em off.’

‘For what purpose?’

‘Gladys says they does it for the money. See, Beamish will get Mrs H to change ’er will in ’is favour then they’ll knock ’er off, see.’

Spadafora chuckled. ‘I wouldn’t worry about that, lads. Zelda is the smartest woman I know. If Beamish and co. intended that, she would have read his mind the day she met him. No, don’t worry about Zelda. I understand you’re going to England this year, William?’

‘Yeah, I gotta teach Newf to drive first. Then I’m going to try to find Priscilla.’

A Bill Reyner Mystery Advenure

‘Good. Your grandmother wants to investigate this MacAlister woman. I think she has plans for you and North.’

‘No detective work, I told her; no detective work. Every time I look into something it turns out to be a real rat’s nest. No way. I don’t want to get shot again. I’m already in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most perforated man.’

Spadafora chuckled. ‘This one’s a simple bit of snouting around. No guns, no dead people.’

‘So what’s the object?’

‘Zelda says her nose tells her there’s skulduggery afoot and Zelda’s nose is never wrong.’

‘Gladys said there were ’undreds of dead bodies in the basement. All the poor suckers they’d bilked.’

Shaking his head, Spadafora said, ‘Then we’ll have to find out who all these dead people are, won’t we, North?’

‘He’s nuts,’ I snapped. ‘There’s no dead bodies in the basement. That Gladys is just winding you up, Newf.’

‘Just to be safe, I’ll check the missing person’s reports over the last few years.’

‘I thought you were retired, no longer a cop?’

‘True, but I do have friends.’

Gran dropped a bombshell when she came home. Oh, there was nothing wrong with the meal. Can’t complain on that front. Just as we finished eating and with her eyes sparkling in that special Gran sparkle way, she said, ‘William, you’ll be working in the tea room next week. I would like time off to investigate our Mrs MacAlister.’