

THE UNDERTAKING

1.

Dreich November rain did nothing for the shiny black velour of the undertaker's black lum hat.

It had been a bitterly cold day for the burial, the kind of day that only bred more funerals as the mourners, heads bared, stood by the graveside to pay their last respects. The east wind soothed round about them and made them cough sorely.

Sandy, undertaker for Craigiefield and district, arrived home well satisfied with another job expertly done. He went up the cobbled close beside his house and un-cleeked the workshop door.

As he crossed the unswept floor and made for the backroom, a fine dusting of sawdust clung to his damp boots and a twist of pine shaving hung itself on his pin striped trousers. Sandy reached up for the brown leather hat box and brought it down from the shelf before he took off his hat. He wiped the smirr of dampness of it, taking care to lay the pile all one way, then crown first, he lowered it carefully into the box lined with crimson velvet. From the lid he brought out a wee bit paper and with his joiner's triangular pencil he scored out 117 and added 118 below it.

'An it'll maybe mak 119 afore November's oot,' he mused to himself. 'Old Hughie McPhail looked gey done the day.'

Fixing the lid down firmly, he buckled the straps and put the box back on the shelf. He shifted out of the rest of his blacks and hung them up, ready to walk the next funeral procession out of Craigiefield. The shaving was knocked off and a cloth wiped over the dust on his boots.

As the parish undertaker, Sandy could not be said to get any real joy from his occupation but he got a lot of satisfaction from a well-performed service. He found, however that his work rather put the Peter on his normal social activities for he never dared to ask how anybody was. Folk always thought he was touting for business if they gave a cough and said they weren't so good.

In spite of that, the villagers trusted him, he thought as he pulled on his working shirt and moleskin breeches then tied his canvas apron over them. He smiled to himself as he remembered the cracks they thought daring to make.

'Aye, ye'll be the last yin tae let me doon, Sandy,' or else 'Ye're the only yin tae get the true measure o the folk roon aboot, Sandy.'

That reminded him. He never went anywhere without his tape measure. He crossed to his black pin stripes, dug out the tape measure and transferred it to his moleskin pocket, then wandered back through to his bench.

Tam, his young apprentice would soon be back from helping the beadle tidy up at the kirkyard but Sandy wanted to get on and plane the next box set up on the trestle. It was his method to have a few coffins ready for any emergency. However, he always had a kind of idea of the order of things locally. Why else would he have a close chat and a dram in the pub on a Saturday night with Dr Buchan?

He lit the lamps. There was still a half hour before finishing time, enough to make it worthwhile starting.

Sandy got lost in his craft. Humming away at what could be called his signature tune, *The Lord's My Shepherd*, he stopped every wee while to run his fingers over the smooth grain of the wood. Fine! And at the back of his mind he was picturing his fireside, a couple of drams and a hot pig in his bed at the end of his day. Hard work's just rewards.

A sudden knock at the door broke the dream. But it wasn't young Tam for when he opened the door a wee bit, framed in the jamb was The Jouker. Sandy looked up and half closed his eyes. He had to squint a bit to recognise the caller. The Jouker wasn't a villager proper. Neither was he a proper villager. He was one of those travelling folk who, like the migratory geese, turned up nearby at every harvest. To the local farmers both were an equal curse as robbing predators. To be fair though, many potatoes would have remained un-lifted if it weren't for the travelling folk who worked very hard. But it was the things they lifted that weren't for the lifting that was very vexatious.

Anyway, there was The Jouker, or Eekie Stewart to give him his Sunday name. A scrawny handless soul wrapped round in an old army great coat. From the collar of that, on a scraggy neck, was a thin, ratty face, none too clean and stubbled like the back end of a barley field. Brambly black eyes stared straight at Sandy from either side of a beaky nose where, since he had just come in to the workshop from the cold, a drip had begun to gather. The Jouker wiped it with his coat sleeve.

Behind him was the lantern-jawed, shivery face of Whittrick McPhee looking right shift. Both men took off their caps and wrung them into knots of cloth with their filthy hands while they gathered the courage to speak their piece.

'Ye ken us, div ye, sur?' enquired Eekie of Sandy. His yellowed teeth showed as he grinned. His buddy nodded and gave a bit smile too.

'Aye,' Sandy agreed reluctantly. He laid his plane to one side and hooked his thumbs into his armpits. 'Ah've a notion o wha ye are. Is there somethin yer efter?'

'Weel, Mr Mitchell, sur, it's oor uncle, auld Mattie. He's no verra weel, verneer doon the brae, an we'd kind like tae be ready if the warst cam tae the warst like. Ken whit Ah mean?'

'Nuh!' Sandy could be quite slow on the uptake when the notion took him. As he had no real idea of the pair of them anyway, his suspicions were aroused and he was keeping quiet till he found out a bit more.

'Weel, wi the hairst bein ower noo, we're aboot tae move oan an we wid like tae coff a deid kist fae ye, tae tak wi us. We've got this second sicht that he's gonna leave us awfu sudden like,' and The Jouker looked quite down in the mouth.

'Ah see. By ordnar Ah dinnae usually sell the kist itsel without it bein pairt o a deal fur the hale caboodle,' burred Sandy, loathe to agree too quickly to anything.

'Ah ken it's a queerlik thing tae ask but shairly ye kin wark oot the cost o the box on its lane,' coaxed Eckie.

The Whittrick nodded beside him.

'Ah suppose sae,' Saundy dithered, but as he was unlikely to let the chance of making a bob or two slip by him, he added, 'It'll be a bittie awkward tho ,fur tae get the richt length Ah usually hae tae meesure up the corp. Gin yer uncle is still in the land o the leevin, he'll nae tak kindly tae me layin the tape oot.'

'Nae fash,' butted in McPhee.

Out of his pocket he pulled a long bit of binder twine, all five feet ten inches of it.

'We tuik the precaution o getting his meesure whin he wis sleepin.'

And he handed the piece of twine to the undertaker.

Dumbfounded, Sandy took it. As if the very act of taking it had committed him, The Jouker snapped in with ',Hoo much?'

Trapped, Sandy thought a bit and stated, '£30 withoot the trappins o the hale dredgie.'

'£30!' The Jouker sucked in through his rotten teeth. 'Weel, weel, there's a bit o a problem here. We've only got £20. Is there nae road ye kin see yer wey tae a wee priggin? Hoo aboot £20, an a couple o chookies?'

Now Sandy was quite partial to a bit of fowl and the farmers round about were none too keen to part with their egg layers for the table. He was sorely tempted.

'Ah suppose Ah could leave oot the sateen lining an jist uise cheap haunles if ye like.'

'Aye, aye, fine,' agreed The Jouker. '£20 then?'

'Din. £20 an twa chookies,' cam the reminder.

So the bargain was struck. Twenty grubby single paper notes were counted out into Sandy's hand. On the delivery of two fresh chickens, likely as not still on the spar in McNab's hen house, a yellow pine coffin would be ready for the uplifting on the morrow.

Next day the deal was finished. Stewart and McPhee wheeled the five feet ten coffin back to their encampment on their two handled barrow.

Sandy Mitchell thought about them once more, that night as he and Mistress Mitchell sat down to a Sunday dinner on a Wednesday.

.....

It was the Friday morning that the tinkers' barrow rattled back into Mitchell's yard. The Jouker and McPhee tirmed again at the workshop door. Caps in hand they looked most uncomfortable as the door was opened to them

'Guid day, Sur. Dae ye mind o us?' The Jouker enquired hesitantly.

'Certes, man, o course Ah dae. It's nae a week syne. Whit's wrang? Hae ye got a complaint?' Sandy's brain was racing, trying to get to grips with this turnabout.

'Na, no at a, Mr Mitchell, Sur. In fac the verra contra. We think that Auld Mattie got wan keek at the box an took sic fricht that he gein up his dortin. Noo he's loupin aboot like a spring chookie, rarin tae get back oan the road wi the rest o us.'

This explanation was made with a wan smile.

Sandy stood, dumbstruck.

'See, we've brocht yer braw kist back,' Whittrick added, pointing through the open door to where the coffin lay, yellow and still clean, in the yard.

'So we're wonderin if ye could see yer wey tae gie us back oor £30?' Eckie carried on.

'£20!' snapped Sandy, seeing immediately what they were up to. That was their ploy was it? He'd known all along there must be a snag in it and there was no way he was going to be caught out.

'Are ye shair about that?' persisted Eckie.

'Ah'm certain shair!' Sandy held firm.

'D'ye ken, Ah dae believe he's richt, Eckie,' wheezed his pal.

'Verra weel. If ye could gie us oor £20 back' we'll be on oor wey.' The Jouker gied in.

Sighing with relief, the undertaker nodded.

'But ye cann hae the chookies! They're gaun. An ma soup's the nicht!'

"Och, that's a richt. Ye're welcome tae them fur yer trust and kindness,' and the ugly teeth flashed again.

Sandy felt, after all, he had had something for his trouble.

'Here ye are.' The same twenty paper pounds were counted out from the tin box below the bench.

The tinkers replaced their caps, touched them to Sandy and left, promising that when they were next back in the neighbourhood at the back end of the year there could maybe be another bird for the Mitchell dinner table.

Happy at that promise, Sandy nodded his cheerios and turned back to his workbench.

.....

When Tam returned from running an errand about an hour after, Sandy told him the queer story of how a brand new coffin was lying out there in the yard.

'We'd better lift it back intae the store room. Some budy will be gled o' it!' the undertaker laughed as much with relief as at his own droll joke.

But he wasn't laughing when he came to lift it.

'Whit the dam?' cursed Sandy.

The coffin lid was tied round with binder twine. When Tam loosened it, the lid fell off.

Lying there, stiff and cold and awfully, awfully dead was an older version of The Jouker...the spitting image. Auld Uncle Mattie had been left hostage to Sandy Mitchell's Christian charity.

At last, all the pieces, the whole pattern, fell into place.

'Spring chookie ma fit!' Sandy spluttered as it dawned on him just how he'd been tricked. And the thought of his cockie-leekie soup that night..well, it very nearly choked him.

.....