

Toy Soldiers

By Peter Neville

Chapter Fourteen

Early the following Wednesday morning, the ever cheerful post woman arrived at Little Lavrean Farm to deliver a letter. Cycling as far as the farm's five bar gate, she dismounted, propped her bike up on its stand, delved a hand into the half empty canvas sack of Royal Mail that lay in the bike's metal carrier and took from it the topmost letter. Checking the address on the envelope, she then opened the gate and, carefully skirting some fresh and steaming horse buns and wet cow platters, walked down the slope to the back door of the farm house where the top half was wide open. Knocking loudly, she sang out, "Hello! Is anyone home?"

"Yes. I'm coming," shouted Florence, who was alone except for Jack who was still up in his room.

"Morning, m'dear. Got a letter for you today," said the post-woman handing Florence a small white envelope.

Florence said, "Thank you," and taking the envelope she saw that a postmarked King George V1, two and a half penny blue postage stamp was stuck at a rakish angle at the top of the right hand corner, and that the address was neat and obviously carefully written. The letter had to be from her good friend and neighbour Harriet Brooks, because Harriet Brooks was the only person she knew who always stuck postage stamps onto envelopes at such a lopsided angle. Florence's first thoughts were, did the letter contain bad news? Was Toody all right? Could there be bad news about the Congdon family? Thanking the post-woman again, she carried the letter into the kitchen and impatiently opened it with a sharp paring knife. Inside was just the one sheet of paper, written on both sides in Harriet's small, neat handwriting. Harriet excelled at penmanship.

Anxiously Florence began to read:

Dear Flo:

Many thanks for your very welcomed letter. I was so relieved to receive word from you and to know that you and the boys had arrived safely at your sister's farm. I miss you all so much, but thank God you are in a safe place away from this awful nightly bombing. Will the Jerries never run out of bombs? Two nights ago one of their planes that was shot down crashed

just a hundred yards beyond our cul-de-sac's hedge. It must have carried a lot of bombs because the explosion shook not only the whole of Pomphlett Gardens but also Honcray. Nothing much was left of the Jerry plane but it made a whopping great hole among the allotments, much to the dismay of our local gardeners; almost at harvest festival time, too.

You need have no worry about Toody, and will be pleased to know that she is recuperating as well as can be expected. She does not seem to miss the one eye and her hair has started to grow back over much of her body. Her front leg appears to have healed and mended by itself, but she still walks with a limp. Thankfully she is getting stronger daily and already fusses to go out when she needs to go to the potty. She is such a clean pussycat. Her appetite is remarkable. She eats whatever I give her, and even likes raw dough when I'm baking and boiled cabbage with gravy over it. Father says she'll eat us out of house and home.

As I mentioned in my previous letter, the Congdon's Anderson air raid shelter received a direct hit by a high explosive bomb that demolished the shelter and left a sizable hole in the corner of their garden. But, not to be deterred, Mr. Congdon has since built a brick and concrete shelter covered by a huge mound of soil on the spot where the bomb hit, claiming that, like lightning, bombs never strikes the same place twice. I pray that he is right. He has worked very hard getting the shelter ready so quickly, even adding a thick concrete blast wall at its entrance, and inside he's built tiered bunks for his whole family. Generously he offered my father and I the use of the shelter whenever we feel the need, but it's hard to get father out of the house, what with his arthritis, so, come what may, we prefer to stay at home and sleep in our own beds at night. To Hell with the Jerries!

And how are you and the boys? Getting used to farming life by now, I expect. I bet you are finding country life very quiet and peaceful after living so close to the city. I must end here as I promised father I'd make him a rhubarb and apple tart for tea, so must get busy and make the pastry. Please write again soon and let me know all your happenings.

Affectionately,
Harriet Brooks.

Smiling now and very relieved, Florence reread the letter and then returned the one sheet of paper to the envelope. It was time to fire up the Primus, boil up some water and make herself a cup of tea.

A few minutes later Albert and Dove returned home. With his sister working in the front

garden, he had enjoyed much of the afternoon's peace and quietness sitting on the rough wooden bench in his hideaway at the far corner of the meadow, where he had meditated whilst partaking of a carefree smoke of his pipe. During the afternoon he had potted around a bit carefully trimming leaves from the lowly, shrub-like mugwort plant that grew wild in his secluded retreat. Also, he gathered several bigger leaves from tall plants that he called his 'weed' and had mixed the two varieties of leaves together and set these out to dry in the sun, in a shallow pan he kept for this very purpose. Hopefully, in a few days time the leaves would be dry and ready to be finely chopped. After this he would add a dash of honey from Beat's cupboard; just enough to dampen the mixture, and then store the mixture, his homemade tobacco, in a tin that he kept hidden among the big granite stones that made up the bulwarks of the high hedge overlooking his seat. To Beatrice smoking and drinking alcohol were pleasures of the Devil, so woe-be-tide Albert if she caught him smoking his pipe or a hand-rolled cigarette. Thus, his sanctuary in the far corner of the meadow was where he often hid from her prying eyes and her occasional sharp tongue, and where he could smoke in peace.

Often, on returning from school, his four nephews would visit him in his quiet retreat, where they would talk with him and play together. At times they would hold contests with Dennis's catapult, their target usually being an old tin can; their Uncle Albert having taught them well for they never aimed at anything living, whether plant, bird or animal. Patrick and Dennis liked to play at rolling cigarettes for Albert in his hand-rolling machine using his special cigarette papers, and all the boys had indulged at least once in experimentally smoking Albert's homemade 'baccy'. This they had tried either in cigarette form, in clay pipes or in pipes that Albert had shown them how to make out of acorns and hollow reeds. But that was after much pleading by them, especially by young Reggie, who coughed and spluttered during his first and only attempt at smoking a cigarette. Tossing the offensively tasting lit and smoking cigarette onto the ground, one of the ducks, thinking food had come its way, had hurried over and snapped up the burning morsel. Wagging its tail in triumph, it waddled away with the lighted cigarette clasped tightly in its beak, much to the amusement of the four boys. Even Albert had chuckled at the sight of a duck smoking a cigarette. His nephews were fun to have around, and he trusted them implicitly not to snitch on him; but of course, that was something they would never do.

Today, Albert was going to keep his promise. Tom, the young Gypsy boy, had been absent from school on Monday and Tuesday, and now it was Wednesday. If he had not shown up at school today, he had promised Dennis that he would walk with him to the Gypsy

encampment and there enquire about his friend's health, and why wasn't he in school.

A little after four-thirty the four brothers returned from school and met Albert at the farmyard gate.

Dennis's first words to him were, "Tom didn't come again today, Uncle. Will you take me to see him, please?"

"Aize. I said I would, so I shall. Have something to drink and then we'll be on our way. Are you other boys coming too?"

"Yes," said Walter eagerly. "We've never seen a Gypsy camp."

Reggie, with a concerned look on his face asked, "They won't offer us hedgehog pie to eat, will they?"

Their uncle laughed. "I don't think so. They keep that delicious dish for special occasions," he jokingly said.

The boys dashed into the house shouting, "Mam, we're home," to their mother, who was alone in the kitchen. They hung their gas masks on a hook behind the front door. Those would not be needed, for as Reggie had once remarked, "What Jerry would waste gas bombs by dropping them on the moors?"

Through the dirty kitchen window, Jack could be seen looking down from his bedroom window, idly watching his mother, who was using a long-handled fork as she laboriously dug up potatoes from the heavy soil in the garden below him.

"Mam, we're going to walk down the road a bit with Uncle Albert," said Dennis.

"Well don't be late back. Your aunty's making chips tonight from the teddies she's digging up out there. And there'll be boiled ham, too."

"Scrumptious," said Reggie.

"Oh, boy, that does sound yummy. We won't be late. We can't miss Aunty's chips. They're the best," said Walter.

In fact all four boys loved their aunty's mouth-watering chips. Straight from the ground, their aunty always washed the huge kidney-shaped, showpiece new potatoes in a bucket of well water, and then, without skinning them, quickly and skillfully she would slice the potatoes into long, slender chips, some as long as six inches. Over her red-hot stove, in a big iron pot, she would then deep fry the potato chips in pork fat. Served piping hot with a dash of salt, aunty's chips were unbeatable.

"No. We won't be late," promised Patrick. "I'm sure we'll all be starving hungry by the time we get home."

Minutes later, Albert, accompanied by the four excited boys and an equally excited Dove, were just a short distance from the farm's gate when two furry-tailed animals with large black eyes and rounded ears scampered about the road beneath where the hazel nut tree was shedding its nuts. Stuffing nuts into their bulging cheeks, they scolded the approaching intruders before leaping into the hedgerow and out of sight. Moments later the two furry little animals reappeared, gave those watching them a good scolding, and then again began to stuff their cheeks with hazel nuts.

"What are those funny little animals, Uncle?" cried out Dennis.

"They're just squirrels," said Reggie.

"But look! They're taking all the nuts!"

"They can't eat much," said Reggie. "Look how small they are." In fact both squirrels were no more than twelve inches long, and that included their fluffy tails. Reddish fur covered their backs, but a line of dark fur separated the red from the white fur on their under-parts.

Albert said, "Those be red squirrels, they be. Not many reds left around yer these days; mostly grays. And don't fret Dennis, the nuts be their winter food."

"Will they leave us some?" asked Dennis in a concerned voice.

"Aize. There'll be plenty for the squirrels and plenty for you, too," Albert reassured his young nephew.

Busily the squirrels scampered around the road, picking up nuts with their tiny claws and popping them into their already bulging cheeks. They had already lost their fear of the intruders; that is except for Dove, who was overly eager to run over and play with them. But the squirrels kept wary eyes on him, and their distance. Finally, unable to store another nut into their cheeks, they again scampered away to their hideaway in the hedgerow.

"We'll pick up some on our way back. Come on," said Albert.

Soon they were passing the entrance to the lane that led up to Mr. Ford's farm. Continuing along the narrow road, they eventually arrived at a five bar gate on their left through which they could see the gypsy encampment of six gaudily painted caravans and several tents spread out over the entire five acres of the roadside field. At least a dozen black and white horses and about the same number of black and white ponies roamed free, grazing on the short grass sprouting up from what was a recently cut hay field. Only two men were visible, seated on the doorsteps of the nearest caravan, smoking long-stemmed clay pipes as they lazily enjoyed the warmth of the late afternoon. There were no children visible. However, several women could be seen, two of them busily washing clothes in large enamel basins, whilst a third woman hung

already washed clothes out to dry on a makeshift line. A group of older women were preparing vegetables at a collapsible table, whilst three younger women attended to a large open fire over which three whole hens and several large pieces of meat were being cooked on revolving, manually operated spits. Nearby, a large steaming cauldron hung from a tripod over a much smaller fire. An appetizing aroma of cooked meats and spicy condiments filled the air, blowing in the direction of the onlookers.

Albert was about to open the gate when an attractive looking gypsy woman left the open fire where the meat was being cooked and hurried toward them. About thirty years old, she was not more than five foot four tall, had wavy dark shiny hair, large brown eyes and swarthy features in a round face. Golden hoop earrings hung from the lobes of her ears, and several gold bangles dangled from a slim wrist. Wearing an embroidered black top brightly braided in colourful beads, and a long blood-red skirt that reached all the way down to her ankles, she was fully dressed except that she was bare-footed. Her facial features immediately caught the attention of the visitors, for without a doubt they resembled those of Dennis's young friend Tom and she was obviously his mother.

Doffing his cap to the young woman, Albert said, "G'afternoon, M'am."

"Good afternoon," the young woman replied cheerfully. She then greeted the boys by saying, "Well, hello! Have you come to visit my son, Tom?" And then studying the smallest and obviously the youngest of the four boys, she nodded her head toward him and with a big smile on her beautiful face, said, "You must be Dennis!"

Shyly Dennis nodded his head. And then plucking up courage, he announced, "We've come to see why Tom has not been coming to school. Can he come out and play with us?"

The woman shook her head. "No. I wish he could," she said. "But Tom is in quarantine. He's sick with the measles."

"Oh!" said Dennis, his young face plainly showing his disappointment. Then his curiosity got the better of him. "Where's quarantine?" he asked.

Reggie began to laugh.

Tom's mother chuckled and said, "He's in bed, in his tent. He's not allowed visitors."

"Oh! Why not?" asked Dennis. "

"Because he has measles," said Patrick. "Mam said I had measles once, when you were a baby. So they had to keep you away from me because I was all covered in spots and they didn't want you to catch them."

"That's true," said Tom's mother. "When the spots disappear from Tom's body, he'll return

to school. And then you can come here and play with him. He told me you're his best friend, Dennis."

"He's my best friend in all the wide world," said Dennis. "He's my only friend at school."

Touched by the sincerity of the little boy's remark, Tom's mother said, "I'm so happy that he has you for a friend. He needs a good friend here and at school."

"We all need friends," Albert said. "These are my four nephews, and they're my best friends, too."

The young woman smiled, and with the five-bar gate between them, she and Albert conversed amiably for several minutes until an older woman tending the main fire shouted to Tom's mother, "Juliana, you must come and help baste the meat before it burns."

"I'm coming," Tom's mother called back. Then, turning to those at the gate, she said, "I must go. But thank you all for coming. I know Tom will be disappointed not to see you, but happy to know that you are thinking of him. I hope you'll come again soon."

"We will, won't we, Uncle?" said Dennis.

"Aize. We will Dennis." Then, "G'bye, M'am," he said to the young woman.

"Good-bye, Mister. Good-bye, boys," Tom's mother said, and turning, she walked back to where the various meats smoked and sputtered on the spit as they sizzled over red-hot charcoal made out of burned furze bushes.

"Good bye," the boys sang out to her.

Walter then turned to his uncle. "Don't you think it's a bit too early to go back home, Uncle," he said. "Can we go a bit farther along the road? We've never been this way before."

"Aize. We can go a bit farther. We'll go as far as the smithy. 'Tis just up the road yonder from yer," said Albert.

"You mean Barney's place? That's a smashing idea," said an enthused Reggie.

"Yes, Uncle Albert, take us there, please," chirped up Dennis. He had liked the giant of a blacksmith once he had gotten to know him. Now, the disappointment at not seeing his friend Tom was already forgotten.

"Come on, then," said their uncle.

As usual the narrow road was completely devoid of motor traffic, but a young lady on horseback sang out, "Hello," and saluted them with her crop as she clip-clopped by in the centre of the road. Minutes later a bald-headed old man riding a squeaky bicycle called out a greeting to Albert and the boys as he peddled slowly past them.

"That be old farmer Gosling. His farm be up yonder a bit," said Albert. "Don't keep any

animals, just horticultural stuff. He grows cucumbers and tomatoes in greenhouses. His peas, cabbages and other vegetables he grows outdoors.”

“You know everybody, don’t you, Uncle?” said Patrick.

“Aize, I knows most folk round these yer parts.”

On their right, they were now passing a bleak-looking granite stone farmhouse of about the same vintage as their aunty’s when Reggie shouted excitedly, “Hey! Look! There’s a horse-chestnut tree,” and pointed to a huge, spreading tree that overhung the road ahead of them. “We’ll soon be able to play conkers.”

But when they reached the tree and examined the fallen prickly casings, some open, others closed, they were disappointed at discovering the nuts inside were not yet ripe, their skins neither shiny nor hard enough for them to be played with as conkers.

“Another week or two and they’ll be ready,” assured Albert. “We’ll come back then and pick up some. Come on. The smithy is just around the corner.”

A rabbit hopped out of the hedgerow, but on seeing the intruders it quickly hopped across the road and disappeared among a cluster of furze bushes. Dove, as usual, gave a short ‘whoof’, wagged his tail, but otherwise ignored the furry little animal.

Reaching the corner, the loud clang, clang, clang of metal striking metal could be distinctly heard coming from a lone building that stood on the edge of the moors. Very old and constructed of granite rocks, the building had a huge square granite chimney at its far end, and just one moss-covered, grey slate roof that sloped toward the rear. A tall hedge of Michaelmas daisies, a common autumn flower in that part of the country, screened the entrance to the smithy. But for all its size and beauty the hedge did not hide the many old and rusty pieces of discarded and broken farming equipment that made the rear of the building look like a scrap metal heap. Out in full bloom, the flowers of the Michaelmas daisies were a dazzling display of yellows, reddish purples and blues, the blossoms made even more colourful by busy, buzzing yellow and black bumblebees that flew from flower to flower, their furry legs coated and heavy with yellow pollen. The loud clanging of metal against metal coming from the smithy did not seem to bother the bumblebees as, solely intent on collecting their own harvest, they buzzed uninterrupted among the perfume laden blossoms. Being curious the boys stopped to observe the bees.

“Do they sting, Uncle?” asked Dennis, warily keeping his distance.

“Aize, bumblebees can sting, and can sting many times. Not like other kinds of bees that sting only once and then die. But like most everything in the country, they won’t hurt you unless

they think you're going to hurt them. Watch me," he said, and extended a hand close to and just above one of the daisies. Immediately a bumblebee flew over his hand and landed on his wrist. "It won't sting me, because it knows I'm not going to do it harm."

"Gosh! You're brave," said Reggie.

Once again astonished by their uncle's simple way with nature, the boys crowded around him and studied more closely the big, black and yellow bumblebee that had a body coated in fine, thick hair. In turn, the bumblebee seemed perfectly content to remain on Albert's wrist, its big eyes seemingly studying the spectators just as intently as they were studying it.

"He's a beautiful bee," said Dennis, bravely coming closer.

"Do you know where its hive is, Uncle?" asked Walter.

"Bumblebees don't live in hives. They live with other bees in colonies," answered Albert. "This yer one be a worker, and all workers are males. Their job is to hunt for nectar and pollen and to take the food back to the nest for the colony to use."

"But there must be a queen," said Patrick, who had read about bees in books.

"Aize. There be queens, right enough, but they mostly stay in the nest laying more eggs."

"Where is their nest?" came from an as always inquisitive Patrick.

"More often than not in tufts of grass on the ground or in shallow holes in the ground, often in a field where there's clover or vetch growing."

"What's vetch?" asked Dennis. "Do bumblebees eat it?"

"No, Dennis, bees doesn't eat clover or vetch," explained Albert. "And vetch is a type of wild pea used for feeding cattle and for making soil more fertile. You see, Dennis, bumblebees are good friends of farmers because they help pollinate so many different kinds of plants. Whoops! There he goes."

Obviously the bumblebee had had enough of fraternizing with big people. Loudly buzzing, it took off from Albert's wrist, landed on a nearby honeysuckle vine, and was already busily using its long tongue to reach the plant's nectar deep within the trumpet-shaped yellow flower.

"He was a nice bumblebee," said Dennis. "I'll never hurt bumblebees."

"That's good, Dennis," said Albert. "We shouldn't hurt any bees. They are all very helpful to nature. Come on."

Once past the tall hedge of daisies, Albert and the boys arrived at a wide and high open doorway of aged and blackened wooden beams, above which was nailed a large horseshoe and a black painted sign of bold letters that read, YE OLDE FORGE. Obviously ancient, the whole structure looked much used and dirty, and without a doubt had to have been built at least

a couple of hundred years ago.

With both curiosity and excitement welling up within them, the brothers entered into what seemed to be another world, a world that could well be Hades, for there stood the devil himself; black bearded Barney, naked from the waist up except for a heavy leather apron, sweating profusely as he worked in front of a roaring fire burning in a white-hot forge. Fascinated, the boys watched from just inside the doorway as Barney operated huge bellows with one foot which kept the fire roaring, and at the same time held a pair of heavy iron tongs with which he gripped a length of metal that he had thrust into the forge. White hot now and ready to be beaten into the desired shape, Barney withdrew the piece of metal from the forge, placed it on a nearby anvil, held it steady with the tongs, and then, with biceps bulging, he began to beat upon it with a heavy hammer. Sparks flew, and then more sparks with every blow of the hammer, the tongs holding the still red hot metal in place as Barney carefully turned the piece to face the next oncoming blow. So absorbed was he in his hot and precision-skilled work, Barney appeared to be completely unaware that he had such a fascinated audience.

Dennis, unable to control himself any longer, yelled out, "Hello, Barney."

Startled by the young voice, Barney looked up from his work and turning, faced the crowd of spectators standing in the doorway. "Well, well, well! Bless my soul if it's not Albert and his four nephews. Come on in, me 'earties," he bellowed, a big broad grin appearing on his florid, perspiring, black bearded face.

"We've been watching you, Barney," said Walter. "What are you making?"

"Oh! This yer? 'Tis a part for a farmer's hay wagon, a break-shoe I be making, or 'twill be when 'tis finished."

"When will that be?" asked Reggie.

"In a jiffy or two. Stay and watch if you want to see 'ow ol' Barney the blacksmith earns 'is pennies."

Selecting a long-handled pair of heavy duty iron pincers from a row of blacksmith's tools standing against the granite wall nearest the stone forge, he grasped the piece of now darkened but still very hot metal firmly between the pincers jaws.

"Watch this," he shouted to the boys who had moved closer. Pumping on the bellows with his foot, the fire in the forge began to roar again and turn white hot, the heat becoming awesome. Now the forge was ready to heat the metal again so that when it became red hot, it could be pounded into the desired shape. Thrusting the piece into the roaring fire, he held it thus in the firm grip of the pincers jaws until the metal turned red. Then, quickly withdrawing it, he

placed the metal on the anvil, used the pincers to hold it steady, and then used the heavy hammer to shape the piece. When satisfied, he quickly plunged the already cooling metal into a stone sink of cold water, where, just for a moment, the metal hissed and steamed, and then turned cold and black.

Barney said, "That's done. Now all I must do is to file the new brake-shoe down a bit and drill a couple of holes in it, and then 'tis ready to be fitted to the hay wagon. But now you're 'ere, I'll finish the job later."

His admirers, now crowding around him, asked a barrage of questions.

"Can you really make horseshoes?" asked Reggie eagerly.

"And nail them onto horses' feet?" asked Patrick.

"And without them kicking you?" asked Dennis.

"Aize. 'tis rare that a horse kicks when being shod. And, aize, I can make horseshoes and shoe horses. I used to shoe lots of 'em a few years ago, but not many these yer days with most everything now mechanical."

"I wish I could be a blacksmith," said Reggie, pumping on the bellows with his foot causing the fire to roar and sparks to fly.

Dennis suddenly began to squirm and shake a foot. "I've got something in my boot," he moaned.

"Course you have. Your foot's in it," Reggie joked.

"That's not funny," said Dennis. "It feels like a stone. And it's hurting."

"Well, take it off and shake it out," said Patrick.

"I expect that piece of cardboard I put over the hole yesterday has already worn out," said Walter. "Let's have a look."

With Walter mentioning his blocking of a hole in Dennis's boot with cardboard, Barney suddenly remembered how, during the day spent harvesting Mr. Ford's corn, he had noticed that all the boys boots were sorely worn and in dire need of repair. Barney pulled an ancient looking wooden chair from the corner of his smithy and bade Dennis to, "Sit yourself down yer, young un, and take off yer boots."

Dennis looked enquiringly at Walter, as if asking, 'Should I?'

"Go on. Sit down," said Patrick. "I'll unlace your boots for you."

"I can unlace them myself," said Dennis indignantly, sitting down on the chair and pulling at the many knots in the well-worn laces. Eventually, though, with the knots winning, he gave up. "You do it, then," he said to Patrick.

“Here! Let me take a look,” said Barney. Stooping down, he broke the laces and pulled the boots off Dennis’s small feet. “Don’t fret. I got more boot laces ‘ere someplace.” Looking at the sorely worn sole on each boot, he saw that both had a sizeable hole in them. Then he shook out broken pieces of cardboard from each boot.

“I cut the cardboard and fitted it into them yesterday,” explained Walter. “We’ve all got cardboard in our boots because they’ve got holes in them. Uncle Albert helps us to cut out the cardboard.”

“We really need someone to mend them properly,” said Patrick.

“Well, Patrick, my boy, around these yer parts there be no village cobbler. He died years ago, and the one in Bugle, he’s been called up,” said Barney.

“So it looks like you’ll have to make do until the war be over,” said Albert sadly to Dennis.

“How long will that be?” asked Patrick.

“As soon as we beat the Jerries,” said Albert. Then to Barney, he said, “I’d try tapping them myself but I have no leather and no boot last.”

“Well, these need tapping badly,” said Barney. “The boy shouldn’t go walking around with big holes in his boots.”

“What’s to be done, then?” asked Albert.

“I’ll try a bit of repair work on ‘em myself, if that’s alright with you,” said Barney.

“Aize. ‘tis fine with me. If you think you can fix ‘em, then by all means fix ‘em.”

“You won’t mess up my boots, will you?” asked a suddenly worried Dennis. “Mammy will be very angry if you do.”

The mention of Dennis’s mother made Barney smile as he remembered Beatrice’s stock of wine, which the children had spoken about when at Mr. Ford’s farm. “I think I’ll make your mammy very happy, not angry,” he said. Then chuckling and thinking of the bargaining of wine for boot and shoe repairing that he might be able to accomplish, he carried on, “And I’m hoping I can make your aunty a very happy aunty, too. Wait ‘ere.”

Barney strode out of his smithy and returned moments later carrying a worn, discarded car tyre. Laying it on a bench, he reached up to where a wooden block held a collection of sharp, specialized knives. Selecting one, he tested its blade, and as if dissatisfied with the knife’s sharpness, he carefully honed it on a wet pumice stone, first the rough side and then the smooth side of the stone. Next, he took the tyre in one of his huge hands and with the other cut an oval shaped piece of rubber from the worn tread and laid this over the sole of the boot. Skillfully he carved the surplus rubber away from the edge of the sole, and when satisfied, he

repeated the action with the other boot.

Without a word between them, Albert and the boys watched intently. Meanwhile Dove lay down, put his nose between his paws and decided to have a nap in the warmth of the forge.

Replacing the knife in its holder, Barney reached for a pot from a high shelf and placed this on the bench beside the boots.

“That be my special home-made glue,” he explained to those watching his every move.

Taking a metal rasp, he rubbed this lightly to and fro over the sole of a boot until the sole was not only clean but also had a rough surface over which he brushed a light layer of his home-made glue. Then, taking a small, flat trowel-like iron tool, he heated its blade until it was almost red hot, then applied the blade to the newly cut rubber sole which sizzled and smoked and gave off an offensive stench of burnt rubber. And that’s when Barney slapped the hot and still bubbling rubber sole onto the boot and then quickly placed the boot carefully between the jaws of a vice and tightened the jaws just enough to hold the boot in position while the rubber cooled and stuck solidly to the glue on the sole of the boot. Grinning at those watching him, Barney said, “That hot rubber and my glue will stick ‘til kingdom come. We’ll wait a few minutes for it to cool down and dry.”

The second boot received the same treatment as the first. Both now had new, solid rubber soles with tire treads on them. But Barney had by no means completed his boot-repairing job.

“Now where’s that boot iron?” he muttered, meaning the iron last over which he would secure a boot in order to work on it further. “Ah! Here ‘tis. And now I need a few nails.” He bustled around the smithy, hunting through wooden cabinets and deep drawers until he found what he sought, an old wooden shoeshine box that had a wooden footrest as its handle. “I knew I had a boot repair kit ‘ere someplace,” he said. “Last used this kit ages ago when I repaired me boots with leather.” Rummaging through the box he eventually found a packet of steel shoe nails and two sets of steel heel and toe plates. Placing a boot over the last, he took a light hammer and carefully tapped a nail through the rubber sole near the outer edge of the boot. Then, taking the boot off the last, he stuck his big fingers inside it and carefully felt for any penetrating sharp points. There were none.

“So far, so good,” he muttered, and continued to tap the short nails all the way around the outer edge of the sole. And when he had finished, he again checked inside the boot for sharp points, but again found none. His beaming smile showed his satisfaction. The heel and toe plates were next. Lining up a toe plate, he carefully tapped this onto the boot, followed by a heel plate. “There! That’s one done,” he said. “‘ere, Dennis, try it on. Don’t fret now, for there be

plenty of laces in me shoe-shine box.” Then, with an air of satisfaction on his bearded, sweaty face he watched as Walter helped Dennis on with his boot.

“It feels smashing,” said Dennis, pressing and stamping his booted foot up and down on the stone floor.

“Just like new,” said Reggie.

“Good. Now I’ll finish t’other,” said Barney.

Within minutes he had tapped the second boot, and Dennis tried it on. Again, no nails had penetrated inside the boot. Satisfied, Barney took both boots off Dennis, and said, “Now we’ll give them a birthday.” Once again hunting through the shoe-shine box, he found a tin of Cherry Blossom black shoe polish. “There be brushes in ‘ere too, someplace,” he muttered. “Ah! Yer they be,” he exclaimed, producing two shoe brushes, a coarse haired one for applying the polish and a soft haired brush for shining the shoes. Soon, a liberal amount of polish covered both boots, and when finished Barney grinned at Dennis and said, “Now, young un, watch this!” Vigorously buffing the boots with the soft haired brush, it was not long before he held up what appeared to be a pair of almost new boots. “All they need now are laces,” he said. “I know there be some in this ‘yer box someplace. Ah! ‘ere they be,” and he took from the shoe-shine box a new pair of black bootlaces still in their wrapper. Lacing up the boots, Barney helped Dennis put them on, who promptly and proudly paraded around the smithy, saying, “Barney, fank you very much! Mammy will be happy. I’ll never need cardboard in them ever again.”

Whilst watching Barney work on Dennis’s boots, his brothers had said hardly a word. But now that he had finished, the brothers seemed to be outdoing each other in what they wanted to say to Barney.

“You’re a wizard!” exclaimed Patrick.

“I think so, too. Please Barney, can you mend mine like you’ve mended his?” asked Walter. “They need doing badly.”

“Mine does, too. Both mine have holes in them,” lamented Patrick.

“Mine’s the worst. The bottom’s coming off this one,” said Reggie, lifting his boot for all to see. “Could you fix that, Barney?” he asked.

“Really, all of us need our boots repaired,” said Patrick. “Would you mend them for us, please?”

“Aize. When you come ‘ere next time,” said Barney.

“Would tomorrow be too soon?” asked Walter.

“All your boots need tapping as soon as possible,” said Barney. And then, with a wicked

gleam in his eye, he asked, "Do you know if your aunty has any shoes that need repairing?"

"She has one special pair that's very old," said Walter. "Those are worn down at the heels, and I know that one of them has a hole in it that she fixes with cardboard. That's how we knew how to do it with our boots."

With visions of several bottles of Beatrice's home-made wine coming his way, Barney said, "Well, bless my soul. This may well be her lucky day, and mine, too. I'll walk you back to the farm."

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