



**Northcombe  
Part 02**

**Sam Armitage**

## **Pulling in Opposite Directions.**

In Which it becomes clear that things are complicated

It was all beginning to feel a little familiar. I'd booked time to talk to Mibbi, and she had called it off, on account of feeling ill. Then, the next time, it had just happened to coincide with a college meeting. Given that Jimmy was still unrepentantly scathing about the quality of her work, I was being all too pointedly reminded of Lee Gelderd, and the fiasco that had been his student period on the Plantation.

I rang the college, but could find no-one who would speak to me, so I went back to Henry Foremason at Region, and asked him to look at "Miss Happeley's" academic transcript, in case there was anything I needed to know. He rang me back after half an hour.

"I see what you mean, Miss Montfitchet – this may be another ... difficulty. The young lady has excellent theoretical grades, but a somewhat mixed record on the practical side. And a slightly coloured medical history."

"How does she come to be here?" I asked.

"A good point: how would you feel if I said that Mr. Foster had been asked to take her on, after other placements fell away?"

"In other words, we were a dumping ground?"

He didn't reply: not in words, anyway.

"And what would the position be if I found her to be unsuited to working here?"

"There could be some ... resistance," he admitted: "You'd have to show good cause."

I nodded to myself, and made a note to talk to Jimmy.

"All right," I told Foremason: "I'll see how things go. I would comment, however, that her attendance is already looking somewhat irregular."

Talking with Tom and Ben confirmed that they, too, found Mibbi the least effective of the students.

“I’m never sure that her mind’s on what we’re doing,” Tom said: “I’ve taken to checking anything I ask her to do, just in case.”

“I get a strange vibe off her,” Ben confided in me: “It’s almost as though she’s trying to work out whether it’s worth dragging me into some bushes for improper purposes. I think I now know what effect I was having on Sammi.”

And both of the Maggies had trenchant comments, especially Maggie G, who reckoned that Mibbi was little more than a “walking slut-bomb waiting to go off – multiple times”.

With that in mind, I postponed talking to either Ian or Roger for the immediate future, since I wanted to get Mibbi’s point-of-view clear in my mind.

And since she wasn’t there, I went back to the Lodge, to start sorting out what rooms we would need to use and what equipment we would need bringing in.

And, when I got there, I was a little surprised by what I saw, in the shape of the tortoiseshell cat, nonchalantly perched on a sunny windowsill. As I arrived, it jumped down and came to meet me, making “feed me” noises.

“Hello,” I said to it: “What are you doing here ? And how did you know I was here ? Or is this where you lived, when there were people here ?”

There wasn’t any reply, apart from more “feed me”s, but at least I’d asked the questions. So, I took her in and let her have most of the chicken sandwich I still hadn’t finished from lunch.

I left her in a pool of sunlight in one room, while I checked the rest of the Lodge out. There was one room between the hallway and the kitchen, and I decided that that would be where I would “set up shop” as it were. One of the bigger rooms on the other side would do very well to set up the survey results, and a room off that we would keep from private conferences and small meetings, and use the bigger room for larger meetings and so on.

I didn’t see any merit in using anything upstairs yet – for one thing, I didn’t see us

needing the space and for another it was colder up there. If summer was baking hot, then we'd see where was best for taking shelter.

I was just thinking about my evening meal when the phones went, both the Lodge's, and my own mobile. Confused, I reached for the mobile, while heading through towards the front door, where I was sure there was a handset (albeit one about twenty years out-of-date).

"Montfitchet – can you give me a moment: I have another – "

"It's me," Andrea said, and the house phone stopped.

"Hugh Smallbone is trying to find you. He rang here – he said something about a missing child."

"It's a boy, aged about seven," DS Smallbone told me, when we were in touch. "Once he heard the details, my Inspector insisted that I check with you."

"Why ?" I asked. "Was he on the Plantation ?" My mind was already going over contingency plans we had in place, adapting them to fit in with a search for a child, while wondering why, if that were the case, Jimmy or Tom hadn't already put them into action.

"No," Hugh S replied: "But there was mention of Hob's Hurst."

I met him, in the twilight, in a little village about twenty miles away. There were people, with torches, moving about in a purposeful manner, and uniformed officers coordinating searches, while farmers brought dogs, and women hugged one another.

"He was with his grandfather," Hugh explained. I saw a little crumpled figure in a tweed jacket talking to two plain-clothes officers. "They'd gone out for a walk, then suddenly Gary – Gary Sendevers – said something, and ran off ahead, and when the grandfather tried to follow him ... "

"The road had disappeared ?" I hazarded.

"Yes."

I looked again at the old man, and he saw me looking, and suddenly he pulled himself up, coming to attention, and I saw the years flicker and a younger man, in uniform, standing ready to serve Queen and Country.

“It was over there,” he was explaining, as I walked over to him. “A narrow road, with a sign that said it led to Hob’s Hurst. Gary had never heard of the place and wanted to go look see. But there isn’t a road now.”

I looked where he indicated: there was a hedgerow between two bungalows – second homes for city-dwellers, from the look of them, dark and silent on the mid-week night – but no road.

“Does any of this look familiar ?” Hugh Smallbone asked, and I had to shake my head. Then I caught a scent of something – of warmth and spring flowers – and belief crystallised in my mind.

But it wasn’t something I could do anything about then and there.

“No,” I told him. “I’m sorry, but there’s nothing here that looks in any way familiar. I’ll do some thinking and if I come up with anything, I’ll call you.”

He looked disappointed (as well he might) but I could feel a call welling up inside me, and I had to be somewhere else, and as quickly as I could.

## Searching Questions

In Which the troops are rallied to a Cause

I'm sure Kate Harker thought I was mad – demanding to take Fudge out in the night-time. But I couldn't explain – not so that it would have made sense – and the horse didn't mind.

I rose straight for Bellewether, using my key to let me in through the locked gate, and from there rode down into Esh Arvid, into daylight and springtime. I headed straight for the Tower, and my friends.

Ouenna ran out to see me, and then must have seen my expression, because she fell back a step.

"I need your help," I told her, and she relaxed and came closer.

"I think someone has crossed from my world into this one – a child, a little boy – and I need to find him and to get him home again."

She ran to get the others, and I drew breath.

"Did you say someone else had come through from your world?" Malclira asked, from behind me. I whirled around, taken in shock, and nodded.

"You need one of the –" Whatever word she used made no sense, but Ouenna was back by then, and, biting her lip, whispered "Tobias."

"Can we find him?" I asked. Malclira transformed, assuming her wings, and launched herself into the sky. "Meet me at the Ledatic," she called as she climbed into the sky.

"I have to go," I said to Ouenna. "I had to find this boy." The other "mouselings" had appeared, and Ouenna briskly instructed them to start to search, and left Lizbel to organise that.

"I'll come with you," she said, and I couldn't think of the argument to prevent her. We both piled on to poor Fudge, and I set her on the lake-side route to the Ledatic.

It seemed to take only about a quarter hour, but even so, I was aware that the atmosphere was electric. Three times I thought I saw Malclira in the sky, but each time something, some indefinable quality, told me that it wasn't her – and in turn said that other winged people were coming and going.

We reached the Ledatic and Malclira was there, with Tobias. As quickly as I could, I explained to him what had happened.

"I will do what I can," he replied, "But you should go inside."

"I will stay here," Ouenna said. Tobias crouched and placed both his palms on the earth, and closed his eyes in concentration. But Malclira was already leading me into the Ledatic, and in there I found the woman I had met before, Tobias' Mistress of the House of Books. Malclira had obviously explained some of the matter to her: she summoned up the image of Esh Arvid and then had me concentrate on the missing boy – something which wasn't easy, since all that I really knew was his name, and his age.

The image swam and whirled, but then Tobias and Ouenna came in.

He reached out and touched the Mistress's hand, and at once the image steadied, and focussed.

"There," he said.

"I go !" declared Malclira, and she ran out. And in the overall image a miniature avatar of her appeared.

"Come on – we can go too !" Ouenna urged, tugging at my sleeve. I turned to the Mistress but her eyes gave me the permission I sought and absolved me of not thanking her directly. *Do what you must* she was saying to me.

Tobias came too, and together the three of us, and Fudge, headed out into the woodland behind the Ledatic. At first Tobias kept pausing, to maintain his bearings, but then the three swan-maidens – Elana, Magda and Tremone – flew down, all of them in a sort-of halfway shape between girl and swan.

"This way !" one of them said, and the other two took to the air again, to lead us.

Eventually we came to a clearing – Lizbel and one of the others were there, and Malclira, and a little boy, who looked at the same time both terrified and engrossed.

“Hi,” I said, pulling Fudge along behind me: “I’m Mary and this is Fudge, my friend. Are you Gary ?”

He nodded and I pressed on: “Do you know that your granddad is looking for you ?”

Gary shook his head and I said: “Well, he is – shall we go and find him ?”

When there wasn’t an immediate response, I sweetened the pot: “I’m sure Ouenna would come some of the way with us.” I would have offered him a pony-ride, but I wasn’t sure how Fudge would take it.

“Bird-lady,” he suddenly said, pointing to Malclira.

“I -- ” Suddenly she didn’t say any more. Elana, Magda and Tremone took up positions behind her and silently transformed into swans and took off stately and serene, and Malclira, taking her cue, manifested her wings again, and followed them into the air and away.

“Shall we go home ?” I asked Gary, and he nodded.

I showed him to Fudge and I think I got grudging consent for her to carry him. Then I turned to say farewell to Tobias and to Ouenna, and Lizbel and the others.

“I’ll come back when I can. Thank you for your help.”

Ouenna nodded and Tobias said “You should take him home.”

“I know.” Then it hit me: if I took Gary back the way I had come, through Bellewether, I’d look as though I had abducted him. What I needed to do was to find a way to take him back to the village he lived in.

“Don’t you know where to go ?” the boy said, with that penetrating force that children can put behind embarrassing questions.

Tobias stepped forward – “About a quarter mile that way: you’ll know it.”

And I did – at the quarter-mile mark we came to the pond, and from there it was downhill to the run-down cottage and beyond that a gap in a hedgerow.

I had no idea what time it was, and at first I didn't see anyone to ask, and then a uniformed policeman came round a corner, and I led Fudge in that direction.

“I think this is the young man that you've been looking for,” I said. Gary sat on Fudge's back while the policeman asked him a series of questions, and reported in, and the next thing I knew the grandfather was there and there was happiness all around.

And I could see the gap in the hedge, between the cottages, and it occurred to me that I needed to get Fudge – and myself – home again.

But before I could succumb to the temptation, the hedge healed itself up and I was left, with a horse, over twenty miles out of my way.

Eventually, when it was explained, and before I fell asleep on my feet, a police horsebox was found (they'd brought in some mounted officers, but they'd been stood down till daylight – it was apparently about three a.m. in the Real World) and Fudge and I were transported most of the way back to Kate Harker's.

Of course, there were going to be questions that would want answering, but I was keener on getting rest, for Fudge, and for myself.

I drove back to the Lodge, and forced some milk down my throat, in an attempt to assuage a sudden stab of hunger. Then I phoned the Plantation office and left a message on the answer-phone that I'd be in late. After that, I headed for my caravan, and bed.

## **Turns and Twists**

In Which some harsh truths come to light

“We were lucky,” Jimmy told me: “Thankfully it was Tom who was doing the drive-around this morning, and he noticed that the gate had been unlocked and left open. We don’t know who did it, or why, but there doesn’t look to have been any damage.”

I had been on the point of admitting that it had been I who had opened the gate, when he went on: “I can’t prove it, but it might have been one of the students trying to get in to recover underwear or something – here – ”

He held out a fax, which I read quickly. Madelaine Branwen Happeley had been suspended from the college after allegations that she had been involved in an improper relationship with another student and one of the lecturers. We were asked to keep the matter in confidence, but she would not be returning to the Plantation for the moment.

“So we’re one down again,” Jimmy pointed out.

“Ring Region,” I said. “But in a little while, when there’s someone in. They might not know about her, and they probably need to, and they may know if there’s anyone at one of the other sites who’d like to move to here.”

Unsurprisingly the other students all knew about Mibbi’s proclivities and weren’t backward at coming forward with details – several of which were a little too detailed for my liking (the one about the gymnasium equipment, for example). But as to the lecturer, having a mattress in the back of your estate car, and being found using it, with a young female student, on a Friday night, in the college car-park, for sexual purposes, was pretty damning. And when items of underclothing belonging to another female student (Mibbi) were also found in the vehicle, and she admitted not only the affair but also to occasional (possibly regular) threesomes at a variety of locations, in return for good grades, the indictment looked pretty firm.

And both Roger and Ian had the grace to look a little sheepish when speculation began as to whether Mibbi’s unabashed appetites might have carried her even more broadly.

I managed to get them to abandon that line of enquiry, however, when I pointed out that Mibbi’s work now needed to be divvied up among all of them, and put Maggie Q in charge of sorting that out.

As I’d anticipated, I was the recipient of a visit from Hugh Smallbone, eager for details as to how I’d known where to look for Gary.

I told him that I'd found a way to get to Hob's Hurst, but that it had closed up again.

"Gary keeps talking about girls with wings," he said.

I shrugged – "Who can say what children imagine ? He was very tired and totally alone, in a strange place."

"Well, he seems well enough," Hugh allowed. "So exactly how did you get to a place that doesn't exist ?"

"I followed my instincts," I said. "But where I was, where he was, and how I got there and back, I'm not certain. I think that the road's closed again. Incidentally, you might ask the grandfather if there was anything unusual about how and when Gary found the road – you never know, but that you might be able to find out what triggers it."

It was a poor distraction, but it worked: Hugh went off to make enquiries, and I took myself into the Plantation, to see first hand how things were going.

I was down by the Brook, when Ben came to find me.

"I just want you to know that I didn't do anything," he said. "I mean, she was flaunting herself all over, but ... "

"That's all right," I said: "And I believe you. And I'm not asking you to break confidences, but is there anything I need to know about whatever flaunting it was she was doing ?"

Ben had obviously been keeping an eye on Mibbi – he led me to three little hides on the Plantation, all within ten minutes' walk of a gate, where she had apparently been went to ... entertain ... intimate friends. We recovered two items of clothing from one, and demolished all three. Ben also confirmed Andy's warning, that it might be as well to talk to Roger and Ian about Mibbi.

"I'll handle that," I told him. "I'll also mention what we've found to Region – I don't think we want Mibbi back, even if she's cleared of all allegations."

I rang in to the office, to tell them that I was going over to the Lodge, and then headed that way, out of one of our gates, and in though a locked access on the other

side of the road.

From the Lodge I rang Henry Foremason, and gave him the news, leaving names out of it.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate for her to come back,” I said, “especially with the implication that she may have been inviting people onto the Plantation for immoral purposes.”

“I’d agree there, but can you link her to these ... constructions ?”

“Would a pair of ... underwear ... with her name stitched into the label help ?”

“All right, Ms. Montfitchet – I’ll notify the College that you won’t accept her back.”

“Could we perhaps leave that until they’ve decided if they want to offer her back ?” I asked, keeping my eye on the possibility of getting someone in as a substitute.

He agreed to discuss it with his manager, and we left it at that.

And Sammi dropped in to see me.

“I thought I should formally report in, since you’re moving me here – for which many many thanks: I’ve really come to love the Plantation, and the chance – the opportunity – to work on expanding it, into a new area — ”

I managed to get her calmed down, and we got on to discussing how she could coordinate her existing project with working on the Northern extension.

And the disquiet I’d felt, over Mibbi, faded away as I got down to some serious planning.

“We’d best get this written down – or written up – ” I said at the end, “and then sent to Region and to London. I suspect I can foresee a planning meeting on the horizon, with everyone very keen to tell us how they know a lot more about it than we do, given that we’re actually doing the job, here, while they’re in offices miles away.”

She smiled: it was, we both of us knew, ever thus.

Sammi even gave me a lift back to the office, on her way home, so that I could pick up my Land Rover, and touch base with Jimmy.

In retrospect I probably would have done better not to, for my blood pressure at the least. Finch-Kevington had been in touch again, demanding to see me, to “clear up” my involvement with young Gary. I rang Hugh Smallbone, got his DC, a chap called Billing, and checked that F-K wasn’t in any way officially involved in their investigations, then rang Region and managed to get Eulalie Potter just before she went off for the night.

“He isn’t acting officially, Mary-Sue,” she said: “But he can probably make trouble if you don’t give him a few minutes.”

“I guessed as much,” I told her. “I did nothing wrong, but I suspect ... ”

“Some people seem to enjoy roasted scapegoat.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Well, do what you feel is right, Mary-Sue. As I say, it is officially nothing to do with us.”

“Thank you,” I said, and put the phone down.

I wanted to go home and lie down, but first I had the day’s paperwork to attend to, which included Maggie’s proposals for how Mibbi’s work was going to be split up among the other students. I was secretly amused to find that Roger and Ian had volunteered for the greater part – perhaps remorse had smitten them. And I was impressed that Maggie Q had taken into account the fact that Mibbi wouldn’t need supervising any longer, and had suggested ways in which Tom and Ben’s time not doing that could be usefully redeployed to cover our operational shortfalls.

It looked as if my candidate for long-term recruitee out of that year’s students had nominated herself in good time.

I finished up and went home.