



**Northcombe
Part 03**

Sam Armitage

Complex Conversations

In Which Talking clears some things up, and complicates others.

It was a couple of mornings later that, over breakfast in the caravan (the Lodge was still cold in the early mornings, too cold for a comfortable and restful meal), I heard something at the front door.

I went to see who it was, and found myself faced with Mibbi Happeley.

“Hello,” she said. “I know we don’t really know each other, but I need some help.”

I restrained myself from comment (“Some help ??!! Only some ?? Or would that be a small pantehnicon-load ?”) and let her in.

“Madelaine, is it ?”

She nodded.

“So how can I help ?” I swept some papers off a chair for her to sit down, and poured an extra cup of tea, before replenishing the pot (I suspected I would need at least one more cup myself to get through this).

“People are saying horrid things about me,” Mibbi half-sobbed. “And no-one will listen to my side of it.”

“I’m not sure what my listening will do,” I said: “For one thing, as I understand it, your problems arise from college. Where I have no influence ... ” I paused, to let her have a word (mostly to see how coherent she was).

“I’ve made some mistakes,” she said, in a semi-strangled voice, sipping tea and keeping her eyes down. “I can’t undo them, but I thought I could maybe make some amends.”

“I’m sorry – you’ll have to explain some more.”

“They’re saying I slept with a lecturer, for grades,” she sobbed. “But I loved him – and he said he loved me – ”

Not for the first time in my life, I wished for a hidden tape recorder: this had the clear potential to go badly wrong.

“ – and they want me to leave college, but that would be admitting that I did what they say I did, and I didn’t, and you have to believe me – ”

Suddenly, without warning, she lunged at me, almost knocking my tea mug from my hand, threw her arms round me and clamped on.

“You have to help me !!!” she groaned into my sweater.

“How ? And why ?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, slightly slackening her grip: “But you’re Mary-Sue – you can do anything !!!”

I noticed that her upturned face was now mere millimetres from my lips, and decided that things had gone far enough. I summoned my strength and dislodged her and she slipped, or skidded, to the floor of the caravan, with a slightly hollow sound.

“I’m sorry – ” I started to say, but Mibbi interrupted me, from her tangled crouch at my feet.

“They told me that Mary Sue was wonderful, and that no-one compared to her ! I believed – and now you’re going to send me away !!”

She reached out for my ankles, but I stepped back.

“Yes, I am – the Plantation is my responsibility, and I can’t take the risk that your activities haven’t already damaged it. Now, you have to leave – ”

“I need you to help me !” She was getting up, but she was also fixing her eyes on me, and adopting a really strange expression, half plaintive, half predatory.

The moment was broken, when, from nowhere, my tortoiseshell cat friend appeared, jumping into the middle of the floor. It looked coldly at Mibbi and then hissed at her. Mibbi shrank back, and I reached beyond the cat and opened the caravan door. Another hiss sent Mibbi through it and out, and I closed the door and reached for the telephone.

It wasn't that I thought there was anything actually criminal going on, but I wanted to make Hugh Smallbone aware of the position, just in case Mibbi decided to misrepresent what had occurred.

After that, I walked across to the Lodge and rang Region, to let them know about my early-morning visitor.

And as soon as I got in, Jimmy was there – “Did Mibbi Happeley find you ?” he asked: “She said that it was important. I wasn't sure, but ...”

“Yes, she did,” I told him. “She seemed to think that I could sort things out for her.”

“Oh.” There was a pause. “She ... implied ... that it was very important she talk to you.”

“It probably was,” I told him: “To her. Put the word out, please, that while it's up to individuals whether they talk to her, I'd like to be kept informed of anything that bears on the Plantation or our work. And let Sammi know, today. She will want to check her project area, in case it's been ... contaminated.”

Both Roger and Ian made time to come and speak with me. I didn't press them for any untoward details but they kind-of admitted “inappropriate” behaviour with Mibbi, on the Plantation and “possibly during working hours, in one instance”. They also promised me that there would be no more, and that they would report any sighting of Mibbi on the Plantation, and would decline to socialise with her off-duty. I thanked them, and assured them that I would treat their admissions as confidential and that I looked forward to carrying on working with them.

Even so, it was uncomfortable to think how much Mibbi had affected my demesne in the short time she'd been on attachment.

Peculiarly, however, her misadventures redounded to my benefit when Finch-Kevington rang me up. Whatever he might have wanted to say about the missing boy shrivelled away when I politely asked whether he had any contacts, possibly through St. Wilfred's, who could assist me on a matter of dealing with academic misbehaviour. Whether he had all the details about Mibbi or whether I had just hit a sensitive spot, he cut the conversation short, and I simply said that I wouldn't feel it right to discuss Gary Sendevers' case until the police had concluded their enquiries.

Which seemed to be enough to shut him up (for the present, at least).

I was going to go back to the caravan for a reheated meal of cauliflower cheese, but on my way out of the office, I found myself ambushed by Emma and the two Maggies and taken away for a girls' evening, with Andrea joining us later. So it was late when I finally drove back to Lovatt Lodge, and parked the Land Rover.

I wouldn't have gone into the Lodge, but I wasn't sure whether I'd left my good propelling pencil there when I'd rung Region about Mibbi Happeley's visit. I was just about to leave, by the kitchen door, when I noticed a strange glow coming from the door to the hall. I followed it, to investigate, and found that there was light coming out of a doorway that, in all honesty and Platonian geometry, ought not to have been there, insofar as it would have led into the middle of the room I had selected for larger meetings, a room that already had two doorways into it. Moreover, I was sure that the door hadn't been there before.

But, as I watched, the door closed, shutting the light off, and when I switched the electric light on, there was only blank, wooden panelling, which was what ought to have been there all along.

I didn't have time, I persuaded myself, for mysteries or for hallucinations, and went back to the caravan and to bed.

"Behind Door Three ..."

In Which Options (and a doorway) are Investigated

I woke feeling refreshed.

Then I remembered and suddenly I felt utterly shattered again. As good days went, frankly, these weren't any of them. I was knee-deep in problems, and I had no idea how I was going to sort any of them out.

But first, there was breakfast.

And then I drove down to the Plantation office, to see what needed doing.

The fax machine had been busy, and I made a cup of tea, and then started in.

London had sent more details about the West Keymer Thickets integration – and said there would be more coming by mail. I put that aside to take to the Lodge.

Then there was a sheaf of stuff from Hugh Smallbone at Cellingbury. It wasn't actually a resolution of the business of Gary Sendevers, but it offered a plausible explanation, suitably edited for credibility, which, so long as we all stuck to the script, would probably suffice.

Mind you, it was also clear, to me, that Hugh had absolutely no idea what Hob's Hurst was about, or what it led to, but then again, that it didn't care, so long as things got sorted out, one way or another.

I took those, folded them up, and stuck them in my pocket – later on, I'd work out what to tell Finch-Kevington.

And the college had faxed through the formal notice that Ms. Happeley was being withdrawn from the student intern project. Mercifully with no detail that I would have to acknowledge that I knew about – it was just two sheets that I could leave for Andrea to note, and pass on in due course.

And, as I finished my tea, she turned up, so I passed them over.

"I'm going to do a walk-round, Andy – this will want dealing with – maybe Jimmy ... no, he's off today, isn't he ? ... Okay, put it on the agenda for tomorrow morning's meeting. Just fill out whatever forms are necessary today, and I'll sign them when I come back."

"Okay, M-S – do you want a ah, had one already ? Okay – have good walk-round. I'll tell Tom that's where you are. Oh, and don't forget, you've a meeting with Sammi and Emma this afternoon."

The Plantation was thankfully peaceful and the Middle Walk proved a succour to my

soul (even if I did spot a couple of trees that looked like they could do with attention). My head slowly cleared and got back to where, I decided, it ought to have been all along. Which was concentrating on immediate problems and letting the longer-term ones handle themselves for now.

I walked down to the lakeshore and along it, heading for the parking area, and found myself inexorably drawn to wondering what the Lake in Esh Arvid was looking like. Which was all very well, but I had work to get on with.

One thing which my being away at Stowe Head had achieved was an increase in the team's independence and therefore a commensurate reduction in the amount of direct supervision I needed to do as Verderer. So, when I got back, there was no need for me to run the morning briefing – Tom Colquhoun had already done that, and gone off on the work he'd apportioned to himself – and I had the luxury of another cup of tea and attending to Andy's small pile of dockets-to-be-signed at my own pace and before it had got too large.

And Henry Foremason rang, to check that I had got the fax from the college, and to discuss a replacement for Mibbi. Or, rather, two.

"They're a brother and sister – twins – from Geirhampton Agricultural ... not our usual catchment, I know, but they're highly recommended."

"Which raises the question of why they need a placement so late in the academic year," I replied.

"That's easy," he told me: "Their first internship was over in the Marches, and –"

"And has been terminated due to the bird-flu flap," I said. "All right – so long as they're certified as non-contagious, send the paperwork up, and I'll interview them."

"Thank you, Mary-Sue – you'll be getting London out of a spot if you can do this."

I went back to the Lodge for the meeting with Sammi and Emma: it seemed appropriate, since a lot of it was to do with the northern extension. The cat was there and, in a feline way, deigned to join us.

It turned out to be one of the most useful meetings I could remember: we all three of us seemed to be on exactly the same wavelength, and we ran through point after

point. Better still, Emma was in one of her manic moods, and was able, as well as discussing things, to take a detailed note of what we decided, and why, which Andy could easily type up to be sent to Region and to London.

With the news of Mibbi's departure from our midst, the other two felt safer in discussing what they knew, and it seemed to Ms. Happeley had been quite liberal in her affections, using Plantation time to ... entertain ... a wide variety of young men in a number of hideaways, but always managing to keep her activities out of the direct sight of anyone in authority. I was given two more sites that might repay investigation (one of them over on Bellewether, which might have worried me, had I thought Mibbi could have entered Esh Arvid), and a short list of names of boys who might come looking for her.

When they'd gone, I thanked whatever lucky stars or guardian angels had been responsible for uncovering Mibbi's activities before we had been badly compromised. And, for that matter, for the reassurance that Sammi had been able to give, that Mibbi had stayed well away from the experimental areas.

"Too afraid of being seen, if you ask me—after all, you guys do an great job of keeping my patch under watch when I'm not here."

I shared a mug of tea with the cat before letting it out to roam. Then I went back to tidy up the papers the three of us had spread out.

Which was when I noticed the scent – of fresh air and of flowers.

I followed my nose, out of the meeting room, and into the hall. And, once again, the phantom doorway had appeared – leading, logically, back into the room from which I had just come. Except that I knew it didn't lead there.

I approached it, gingerly, and saw sunlight and vegetation. And the Lake – I would be in Esh Arvid, if i stepped through. But how would I get back ? The only way to find out was to try it, and I stepped through, finding myself in a small stone pavilion ... which I abruptly recognised as the one I'd see on the Esh Arvid lakeshore, the one with the disconcertingly-complicated design shallow-carved into the floor – the very floor on which I was now standing.

But the back of the pavilion was an arched doorway which led back into the hall of

Lovatt Lodge. And the image of the hallway was starting to shimmer.

Quick as a flash I darted back through, even as the sunlight faded and the doorway reverted to being panelling. All in all, I decided that it had been a very frustrating experience – did Fate mean me to be able to get back into the other world, or merely to show me tantalising glances and no more ?