

George

A GENTLEMAN OF THE ROAD

BY

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Chapter 1

I have to admit that it was a beautifully crafted one liner. A superbly delivered comeback that had the instant effect of making the recipient, look and feel like a complete fool. It wasn't rehearsed, it wasn't staged but my God, it couldn't have been scripted any better. In truth, the only downside that I could see with such a perfectly timed rebuff, was the fact that I was the one on the receiving end of it.

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15th July 2008. That's when it happened and it's a day that I certainly won't forget in a hurry. It was a day that had started out perfectly. A cloudless blue sky, a light warm breeze and a perfectly blended cappuccino sitting before me as I relaxed, al fresco, at a trendy city centre Bistro. This was my time. A couple of days off work, no pressing commitments and a copy of a new Jeffrey Archer novel to lose myself in for as long as I chose. Bliss!

And then I saw him, not more than one hundred feet from where I was sitting. Slowly but surely ambling towards me, occasionally stopping to invade the personal space of people sat outside other cafes, no doubt in the hope of a monetary gift. I shook my head and cursed under my breath knowing that this dirty looking man with unkempt grey hair, a wildly bushy beard and worn, filthy clothes would soon be standing next to me. And then, I suspected, he would give me that lost sheep look whilst holding out his grubby little hand or half eaten

polystyrene cup that he'd dragged out of a stinking litter bin, expecting me to part with my hard earned cash. Well no way Jose! It was my money and he wasn't getting any of it. What he ought to do is get a job like the rest of us and stop scrounging off the good natured people trying to enjoy their lunch on one of the few sunny days that Britain rarely got in the height of the Summer. Now sod off loser!

It was just a pity that, in reality, I wouldn't have had the heart to vocalise my thoughts or respond with a firm 'no!' and so had to think of a plan that would negate him pestering me into submission. It didn't help that I was sitting nearest to the footpath and would be within a mere two feet of Mr. Scruffy's catchment zone as he passed. So, my plan needed to show all the cunning and guile of a confidence trickster yet be subtle enough not to cause too much offence. Above all, it needed to be bloody quick as he was now less than ten feet away.

And then it came to me in a blinding flash of clarity, as if it was the most obvious and most sensible choice in the world ... use the old German! Now, when I say the old German, I don't mean that I actually had an aged native of Germany sat with me, I meant use the language, or to be more precise, the one and only phrase that I knew ... "Ich spreche kein Englisch," ... which basically translates as, "I do not speak any English!". 'Perfect,' I thought. It was polite, it was quick and if used with a small shrug of the shoulders together with a vacant expression, it would surely encourage Mr. Scruffy to move swiftly on. Ha! Foolproof!

I noticed that the first person he approached within our cordoned sanctuary, crumbled within seconds, handing over some coinage with a sympathetic smile. "Sucker," I muttered to myself as I watched the tramp move onto his next victim. The second person adopted the *totally ignore him and he'll go away* routine. This seemed a little too rude and cold for my liking but nonetheless, it worked a treat and forced him to move onto target number three.

That particular person, the one closest to me, gave in as easily as target number one and duly handed over money which I saw amounted to about two pounds. ‘*Jesus,*’ I thought with a touch of envy. ‘*He’s made about three pounds in less than a minute!*’ ... And then, it was my turn.

As he bumbled towards me, I decided not to make eye contact but keep him well within my peripheral vision whilst pretending to read, ready to deliver my well rehearsed line immediately at the point where his hand reached out in hope. For some reason I was strangely nervous as if I was about to walk the boards in the leading role of a West End play. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I quickly went over the line in my head to make sure that I could actually say it with faultless conviction and convince the man that I was indeed a confused foreigner who couldn’t speak a word of the Queen’s. And before I knew it, there he was, standing next to me, hand outstretched and mumbling something that I truly didn’t comprehend. This was it, the cue to say my piece, shrug the shoulders and watch a broken and deflated Mr. Scruffy slope off to some other unwitting candidate, thus leaving me to enjoy the rest of my day in peace. Thank you and good afternoon!

I turned slowly, looking firstly at his hand and then up towards his face which I saw had been weathered by the outdoor elements. His beard was a yellowy grey colour and matted with remnants of old food that he had no doubt foraged from bins and skips around the city’s streets. His thick hair, of similar shade and condition, seemed entwined with his facial hair and gave him the surreal appearance of a character from Lloyd Webber’s *Cats*. What struck me the most though were his incredibly blue eyes. They were kind and warm yet looked like they had been taken from the head of a much younger man and placed into the leather clad sockets of his own. For just a split second I felt myself inexplicably weaken, wanting to do away with the whole charade, reach into my pocket and give the man some money. But no, I

had to be strong and with the best German accent that I could muster, hit him with the killer line.

“Ich spreche kein Englisch,” I said firmly with a shrug of the shoulders and even added a small apologetic smile for greater effect. The deed was done. Now all that remained was for the man to accept the rejection, walk away and leave me to revel in my success. Easy!

So why, when I had clearly spoken to him in German and announced that I couldn't speak English, wasn't he leaving? And why the hell was he staring at me with those deep blue eyes and a feint smile on his lips? The reason was simple and quite frankly, enough to reduce me to about three feet in height. Holding me in his stare and speaking with a thick Scottish drawl, the man that I had pre-judged, yet clearly underestimated, merely replied. “That's ok son, neither dae Ah!”

And that was that. Point made. He gave a me a pitiful wink before sauntering off, leaving me in a wake of shame whilst he endeavoured to collect more handouts from the less tight arsed members of the public. Open mouthed, speechless and clearly feeling like an idiot, I shifted uneasily in my seat, not daring to look around at the other patrons for fear that they were looking right back at me, pointing and laughing. The man had clearly played me at my own game and won. By rights, I should have felt some antipathy for the man but as I watched him walk away, I couldn't help but feel a certain amount of respect and, if truth be known, a little humility. Here was I, sat in my own comfy world of self indulgence whilst a dishevelled looking Scot was traipsing around the city probably wondering where his next discarded box of half eaten KFC was coming from. And the more I thought about it, the more I wondered why he was living, nay existing, like he was and what had caused him to become a vagrant? Was it through unforeseen and unchangeable circumstances or was his a destiny of choice?

Ordinarily I wouldn't have cared less. The world's full of tramps, so what? But something about this man intrigued me and I found myself inexplicably wanting to know more.

The next thing I know, I had approached Mr. Scruffy and in a surreal turn of events, asked if he would consider telling me his life story. He stayed silent for a while, studying me through intensely suspicious eyes, scratching his chin beneath the thick layer of tangled beard as if in deep thought. I guessed he was thinking that I was perhaps a little mad. After all, it couldn't have been every day that he was asked to divulge his memoirs. I'd guessed wrong and for the second time that day, felt as though stupidity was my greatest virtue.

"Ah see your English has improved!" he said sardonically, raising a reproachful eyebrow.

Bloody hell! In my eagerness to find a story I'd completely forgotten that I was supposed to be a German bloke. What could I possibly say to that? As though sensing my obvious embarrassment and no doubt another victory, the man spared me my explanations as he continued.

"You're no' the Police are ye?" the word Police being pronounced as Po-lis.

"No," I snorted, a bit like a child who's denying eating all the biscuits despite having tell-tale crumbs all over their jumper. He looked at me with a little more suspicion, holding me in his stare as though considering his options ... or my intentions.

"Tell ye what," he eventually continued. "Call it fifty quid and a bottle o' single malt and ye can ask me what ye like!"

'Jesus,' I thought. '*When did the tramp become a Highway Robber. At least Dick Turpin wore a mask!*' I considered haggling for a moment but deep down, knew that it wouldn't have made the slightest bit of difference ... not with a Scot anyway! "Done," I said with overt enthusiasm, trying to make it sound like it was a bargain. I offered out my hand to

him, which was an action that I regretted the second he took hold of it with his own dirt encrusted, five digit shovel.

“Ye huv been!” he replied with a smile, whilst his vice like grip was in danger of stopping the circulation in my fingers.

“I’d have paid more!” I laughingly lied, hoping to gain the upper hand.

“And Ah’d huv taken a lot less!” he responded, sweeping the advantage from my grasp with effortless ease and a slight grin.

Surprisingly, I wanted to get down to the *interview* right there and then but in this crazy scenario, it transpired that the Scot had a prior engagement. Bizarre! What prior engagement could a tramp possibly have? Certainly not a high powered business meeting with his accountant I mused. Nevertheless, I conceded unreservedly, suggested a day and time to meet up and even agreed to pay the requested retainer of ten pounds. “Just tae cover ma expenses,” he said without flinching. I couldn’t help but laugh as I handed over the money and though any normal onlooker might have suggested that I could kiss my hard earned cash goodbye, I had absolutely no doubt that this man would be at the agreed meeting place at the agreed time. And why was I so confident about this? Well, not because I trusted him particularly but because on this rapidly growing stage of oddities, the strangely interesting Mr. Scruffy actually produced a small pocket sized diary from within his torn and dirty coat and wrote our appointment in it. I shook my head in disbelief and chuckled slightly. “What?” he asked firmly, whilst returning the diary to his coat. “Do ye no’ think Ah huv a schedule too?” I treated this as a rhetorical question as I honestly didn’t have a clue how to answer, especially as he had just scribed our engagement in a diary dated 1998. The man was either mad or genius but it wouldn’t be until a few weeks later that I would learn the answer to that question.

And so it was that we had arranged to meet the following day. Twelve noon at his *office* ... Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester ... a small area of public greenery in the midst of an otherwise concrete filled city. As he turned to walk away for a second time, a burning question suddenly popped into my head, a question that really needed answering for my own peace of mind. “By the way,” I called after him. “How did you know that I wasn’t a foreigner?” He looked at me and smiled, shaking his head slightly before revealing how his powers of observation had not failed him.

“Ah found it hard tae believe,” he replied, still smiling. “That a true citizen of Germany would be reading an English copy of a Jeffrey Archer novel!”

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Chapter 2

The day couldn't have been any more different to that of its gloriously warm predecessor less than twenty four hours earlier and I began to wonder if, on a day this inclement, the man would even turn up for our little rendezvous in Piccadilly Gardens. It was wet and cold and grey. *'Not a day that would inspire anybody to sit down and recount their bygone days to a total stranger!'* I thought sombrely, as I looked in and around the bustling lunchtime crowd trying to spot him. Ten minutes passed, followed by another ten, followed by another and still he was nowhere to be seen. When forty five minutes had slipped past our arranged meeting time, I'd lost faith that he would actually show and decided to call it a day. I couldn't help but curse myself for being so stupid and gullible enough to be taken in by some withered old git from Scotland. What was I thinking? Was I so naive to imagine that he would even remember me, let alone our appointment? I was duly vexed, I can tell you. And it cost me a tenner! Maybe I should have just ignored him in the first place, like any other normal self respecting and disgusted tax payer would have done. Or maybe I should have just gargled the contents of my coffee cup in his presence, proclaimed how utterly delicious it tasted and waved him on with a dismissive flick of the hand. Bastard!

But then, like a scene from some Biblical epic, the choppy sea of grey and sodden people suddenly parted, revealing the familiar figure of my scruffy new acquaintance, sat no

more than one hundred feet from where I was standing. Now, I must admit that I was a tad relieved to see him and actually felt a little guilty for doubting his word. In truth, I wasn't expecting it to be that hard to spot such a distinctive tramp in a relatively small area, but there again, I wasn't expecting him to be sat under a bright blue polka dot umbrella either.

"Nice broolly," I offered once I was stood by his side. "Selfridges?" I added in jest. He looked up at me with a scowl, clearly not amused by my little quip.

"There are two basic things that a man should always possess in life," he said rather sternly. "Honesty and punctuality!" I frowned as he continued. "Yesterdays performance aside, let's hope that ye are at least an honest man!"

'Hang on,' I thought. *'Is he having a go at me here or what? I think he's having a go!'* I opened my mouth wanting to protest and tell him that, actually, I was here forty five minutes earlier trying to find him but he quickly cut in as if sensing my sudden angst.

"Nae bother," he said standing up and closing his umbrella. "Yer here now, so let's forget it ever happened and start a fresh!" I was still open mouthed and slightly dumbfounded as he turned and gestured towards the far side of the gardens. "There's a wee cafe over there that does a crackin' one pound special at lunchtime!" He turned to me and asked. "Dae ye fancy it?" I could only shrug as he added. "It's on me?" No doubt his idea of a little sweetener.

"Fine," I managed, as he about turned and started to walk off in the direction of the bus station. I could hardly believe it. One minute I was quiet excited by the thought of listening to this old man's stories, the next, I was feeling like a child who had just been told off by his father. The thing was, I wasn't a child and he wasn't my dad. I'm in my forties for God's sake and he ... well ... he's just a scruffy down and out with a woman's polka dot broolly!

So why the hell did I feel so bad and why did I want to rush up to him and apologise profusely? I found myself wondering if now wouldn't be a good time to cut my losses and leave. I knew that I wasn't in the wrong and my God, how dare he speak down to me like that! On the other hand, maybe he needed telling about his attitude and you know what? That's exactly what I intended to do.

“Are ye coming or no'?” the man demanded, suddenly turning round. “It'll be closed at this rate!”

Jesus! ...There it was again ... Subtle, but another reprimand nonetheless. I stared at him for a few moments longer, mentally transmitting my annoyance in the hope that he would sense my pending wrath. I planned to put him straight on a few matters, believe me. But alas, whilst the plan of rebuking this man sounded like a real winner in my own mind, in reality, it probably would have worked better if my body and the rest of my brain were on board. As it turned out, all I could manage was to point at him like a cheesy American Game Show Host, give him a pathetic little wink and reply, “Right behind you my good man!”

Why I did this, I honestly couldn't tell you. Maybe it was just the old *respect your elders* teaching that I'd been brought up with or maybe I was harbouring some deep seated, subconscious fear that by speaking my mind, he would have actually removed his belt and tanned my backside for giving cheek. I really had no idea. But there it was, the final score in a game of emotional football. Scottish assertion one, English reproach, nil! Hurrah!!

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When I finally sat down with my subject ... in one of the worst cafes I have ever entered in my life incidentally ... I noticed something a little different about the man, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on. He still had the same grubby look as he did the day before but something had definitely changed, apart of course from the introduction of the umbrella.

And then it suddenly struck me what it was, causing me to chuckle slightly. My sudden outburst must have bemused him a little as he immediately stopped drinking his copper coloured tea mid loud slurp and looked over the rim of his oversized mug towards me, frowning. “Is there a problem?” he asked quietly as he put the cup down to reveal a tea soaked moustache.

“No, sorry!” I quickly replied. “It’s just ... No, it doesn’t matter, it’s nothing, sorry!”

“It cannae be nothing,” he added, his bright blue eyes seemingly probing my mind.

“Unless ye huv t’retts syndrome that is?”

I shifted uneasily in my chair knowing that he wasn’t going to let the matter drop, not until he had heard the excuse for my unexpected mirth. “Well,” I began a little nervously. “I can’t say that I’ve ever seen a tra ... a gentleman of the road ... wearing one of those before!” I nodded towards the area of his throat, causing him to reach up and touch the perfectly bound Windsor Knot of his tie.

“Is it no’ straight?” he asked with a slight, yet unfamiliar tone of worry in his voice.

“No, I mean, yes. It’s fine. Very smart,” I quickly added. “Just something I didn’t expect to see that’s all!”

The man nodded, though he still seemed a little tense. “But does it look ok though? Its no’ too much is it?”

Extraordinary. Here I was, sat in a greasy spoon cafe, drinking a strange tasting brown liquid from a chipped blue mug, with a bloody tramp asking me about his dress sense. Surely life doesn’t get any weirder. “It’s spot on,” I replied, the little white lie masked by my overt enthusiasm. “Red’s obviously your colour!” Too far. The slightly embarrassed look on his face and the small bow of the head, confirmed this to me and then I felt really bad. Two nil to

Scotland. He turned and gazed out of the window into a city that was benefitting from a fresh downpour of rain.

“Aye well,” he said quietly. “If a man cannae make an effort on his wedding anniversary, then when can he!”

“What?” I exclaimed with genuine surprise. “You’re married?”

“Was,” he replied softly, still watching the rain. “It would’ve been sixty years today,” he added and retouched his tie, smiling a little. After a moments silence, he suddenly turned back round to face me, frowning again. “And why are ye so surprised that Ah was married?” he asked directly, though I really didn’t have a plausible answer to give him. “Ah’ll tell ye this wee man,” he continued with a lighter tone, sparing my non existent opinion. “Ah was a hell of a catch in ma day y’know. Och aye. Ah had lassies flockin’ fae all over the place ah did!” He laughed a short but hearty laugh before picking up his mug and downing what was left of his tea.

“Do you fancy another?” I asked, sensing that neither of us wanted to go back out into the rain anytime soon.

“Would ye be treatin’ me tae wan o’ they scones too?” he asked devilishly.

“Only if you promise to tell me about your wife?” I offered, smiling. He looked at me with a half smile, half grimace and I could see that, whatever the story was behind his wife or ex wife, he was obviously harbouring a great sadness that even *his* eyes couldn’t hide. “If you want to that is?” I added, not wanting to push him and offering him a get out clause.

“Nae problem,” he replied quietly. “But it’s probably best we start at the beginning. Is that no’ what ye wanted?”

“Och aye the noo!” I replied keenly in the best Scottish accent I could muster as I stood up. The man simply shook his head and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“Jesus,” he said in dismay. “And here was Ah thinking that your German accent was as bad as it gets!”

I laughed as I went to buy the tea and scones. ‘*Afternoon tea with a tramp,*’ I suddenly thought with humorous disbelief. ‘*Maybe life does get weirder after all!*’

###

Chapter 3

George Alexander Bell (the Alexander bit being after the great physician and inventor of the telephone, apparently) was born in Glasgow on February 29th 1928. A leap year no less.

“Hang on,” I said with sudden surprise. “That would make you eighty years old!”

“Aye,” George replied with a smile. “But only twenty in leap years!”

“I have to say George, you’re looking well for eighty!” I added, genuinely. I personally would have put the man at no more than sixty years old. “It seems that street life is treating you well!”

“It has its moments,” he said, devouring his scone as if he feared it would be taken back off him. Crumbs fell indiscriminately onto his beard and into his mug of tea, the former of which he casually swept onto the floor, the latter he drank as though it were an unforeseen bonus. “Maybe ye should try it,” he added, through half masticated cake.

“Maybe I will,” I began, sarcastically. “I can’t imagine anything better than being sat in such a desirable eatery like this one after a hard days bin searching ... what joy!”

“Well yer sat here now aren’t ye?” he asked, before slurping another mouthful of tea. I frowned then recoiled my head slightly. What could I possibly say in response to that mode of strange logic?

“Anyway,” I began, quickly changing the path of conversation. “What was it like growing up in Glasgow in those days?” He sighed and sat back in his chair as if contemplating the question.

“A damn sight harder than being on the road, Ah can tell ye!” And that’s exactly what he did.

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It all started with George’s great, great grandparents, Patrick and Katherine O’Leary, who left their beloved Ireland in the Summer of 1847, to find work in Glasgow. Life had become incredibly hard in Ireland during that time, with the great potato famine seeing people lose their income, their homes and even their lives. So, the prospect of paid employment in a growing city such as Glasgow, was reason enough for the O’Leary’s to pack up what few belongings they had and head for Scotland with their one and only child ... George’s great grandma Mary, aged two.

George’s great, great grandparents begged, borrowed and stole their way to the East coast of Ireland where they were lucky enough to board an empty coal ship bound for the coast of Scotland. It seemed that rides were given for free on those dirt-ridden vessels, as the passengers acted as a human ballast, thus keeping the ship steady through rough seas.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed. “And that was classed as being lucky?”

“It was a far better option than the alternative!” George replied, leaning forward slightly and lowering his voice to a near whisper. “Coffin ships!” he added, as though the very mention of them was a sin against God. The fact that he quickly made the sign of the cross as he sat back in his chair, reinforced that this was perhaps a taboo subject, a subject that really shouldn’t have been broached as to do so could bring about a thousand woes.

I thought about the implications of pursuing the topic of *Coffin Ships* and for some strange reason, felt a little wary, like I would be eternally hexed for showing the slightest interest. ‘Probably best to leave it,’ I thought. ‘It’s obviously spooked George!’ I watched as the man loudly slurped his tea again in that ever so endearing way. Oh, what the Hell ... caution to the wind and all that!

“What were Coffin Ships George?” I asked, causing George to splutter into his tea. He removed the mug from his lips, placed it onto the table and wiped his beard with his sleeve. Class.

“Vessels of the Devil himself!” he exclaimed dramatically, waving a dismissive hand. “And no’ a subject Ah feel totally comfortable wi’!”

Now I was really intrigued. Obviously, this needed a tactful approach if I was going to get the old man to talk about it. “Ok, George. It doesn’t matter,” I falsely stated. “Maybe I can read about it on the internet later!”

“What?” he quickly replied. “An’ read a load o’ nonsense written by somebody who wisnae even there?”

Hook.

“But neither were you!”

“Aye,” he started defensively. “But at least Ah hud blood relatives who were there at that time!”

Line.

“I know, but I don’t want to bother you and it’s ...”

“What bothers me,” George interrupted. “Is that ye would believe a load o’ that internet tosh composed by some spotty twenty year old!” He paused for a moment. “Naw, naw,” he

continued. “If ye really want tae know, then it’s best ye hear it from somebody who actually knows what they’re talkin’ about!”

And sinker ... Reel him in my good man.

###

George told me about the coffin ships and how thousands of Irish men, women and children sought to board them, mainly as a result of false hope given to them by unscrupulous landlords determined to get tenants off their land at the height of the great potato famine. They were fed lies about the great opportunities awaiting them in North America and how both food and work were plentiful. Added to this, firm promises were made that any family willing to take this option, would automatically qualify to receive money and accommodation on arrival in America. Some families were even given the fare towards the cost of travel as an added incentive to leave the land. “Can ye imagine how they must’ve felt?” George asked. “One minute they wur wondering how they would feed themselves, the next they wur being told about this new and exciting life to be hud in America!”

“They must have been ecstatic,” I replied. “But surely they knew that it sounded too good to be true?”

“Maybe, maybe no’,” he replied. “But if you and yer family were starvin’ tae death and somebody offered ye this golden ticket, would ye no’ want tae believe it was true?” I couldn’t help but think that yes, I probably would. “And that,” he continued. “Was all the incentive that thousands of down-trodden, hard working Irish men and women needed to make them rush, like lemmings, to the sea ports and board the most unseaworthy, disease ridden ships known to man!” Another pause to slurp his tea. “They were crammed intae those ships like sardines in a can. Ships that hud poor sanitation, little food and water and would huv sunk faster than a lead weight if they ever hit bad weather, which happened many times, believe

me. Fever, starvation, the occasional suicide by distraught souls who had lost their whole family to any of the above and of course, murder!” He must have seen the look of surprise on my face. “Oh aye!” he confirmed. “It’s not unusual for single men to have their throats cut whilst they slept and their food rations taken by men with their own starving families to feed. It was survival, son, pure and simple. And then there was typhus, a disease that spread like wild fire and claimed the lives of countless men, women and children. All these were the norm, son, not the exception and on a journey that lasted several weeks in the most vile conditions, it was a lottery to see if you would actually reach America alive!” He paused again, shook his head and let out a sigh. “It’s said that sharks used to follow the coffin ships knowing that sooner or later, corpses would be thrown overboard in their dozens? Whether that’s true or not, I couldn’t say. But what I do know is that thirty percent of the people who boarded those ships in search of a better world, never made it across the Atlantic!”

“Thirty percent!” I repeated in amazement. “That’s a hell of a lot of people to lose their lives just by taking a boat journey!”

“Which is why they called them coffin ships, son. And here’s something else you might like to know!” He leaned forward again and lowered his voice slightly for full effect. “The ghosts of those who perished at sea during those terrible journeys, still haunt the waves of the Atlantic to this very day!”

“What?” I replied with a tone of outward cynicism. “As in real ghosts?” I gave him a disbelieving and (quite frankly) a mildly patronising look, which he met with a disapproving scowl.

“You might scoff at my ignorance,” he retorted bluntly. “But the sight of a mother wailing for her lost babies and young men crying out for help when they don’t even know they’ve passed on, is enough to chill even the hardest of souls!”

“Well, I don’t believe in ghosts,” I added dismissively. “Or old wives tales for that matter!”

“An’ Ah would agree,” he quietly concurred.

‘Right then,’ I thought. *‘So what’s with the attitude?’*

“Had Ah no’ seen them with ma own eyes!”

‘Fair enough!’

He looked out of the window and appeared to go off into a distant world of his own, whilst I sat there open mouthed, gawping at him like a fool. Did I just hear right? Did he actually say that he had seen the ghosts of some unfortunate Irish citizens that had died over one hundred and sixty years ago? Had he been privy to a haunting spectacle that I thought only existed in the writings of Stephen King? ... Bollocks! “So,” I began to quiz. “You’ve actually seen ghosts floating around the Atlantic Ocean?” He came out of his temporary daydream and looked at me with a slight frown.

“D’ ye think Ah’m lyin’ son?” he asked, as if he couldn’t believe that I had actually questioned the authenticity of his statement.

‘Hell yes!’ I wanted to shout out. *‘There’s no such things as ghosts my good man!’* “No of course not,” is what I actually replied. “But ... well ... ghosts? It’s a bit hard to take in, you know? Especially for a non believer like me!”

“Aye, that’s true enough,” he agreed. “And nothing or naebody would huv convinced me that they existed either. No’ until that day that is!” He looked down at his wrist as if wanting to check the time and then sighed as though he had only just realised that he didn’t actually own a watch! “What time is it now?” he asked, with a slight sense of urgency in his voice.

I checked, then re-checked the position of the hands on my own watch. “Jesus!” I

answered, with some surprise, “It’s quarter past four already. Where the hell has the afternoon gone?” George rose quickly from his seat. “Where are you going?” I asked hastily in some crazy parental tone reserved only for children who needed to seek permission to leave the table. The raising of a rebuttal eyebrow from the man put me back in my place. “Sorry George,” I added sincerely. “But I thought you were going to tell me about *that day*? Y’know? When you saw the ghosts?”

“Tae be honest,” he sighed. “It’s no’ a subject Ah like tae talk about too much!”

‘For fifty quid and a bottle of Scotch, you’d better get to like it George old boy!’ I thought bitterly.

“But Ah suppose yer paying me,” he added, as if reading my mind. Christ! How does he do that? “Although it will huv tae be another day,” he continued, bizarrely checking his invisible watch again. “Ah huv tae be somewhere else just now!”

‘Where the hell does a tramp have to be?’ I thought with equal bitterness. *‘This is the second time he’s done this!’* “Ok,” I quietly conceded as I rose from my chair. “When can we meet up again then?” I was very eager to hear the rest of his ghostly story.

“Call me,” he said with convincing seriousness and then began to chuckle, no doubt from the look of pure astonishment on my face as I momentarily believed that he actually owned a mobile phone.

“Very funny,” I replied sardonically, though secretly admitted that it was a little bit comical, even if the joke was at my expense ... again!

We agreed to meet at the same time, same place the following week and although I would have liked it to have been the following day, I had learnt (even in the short time I had known him) that George was not a man to compromise whatever schedule he normally adhered to. Patience isn't my strongest virtue and I really didn't relish the idea of having to

wait a full week to hear the rest of his life story. What I didn't know at that point, but can tell you now, was that his would be a story well worth waiting for.

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