

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER TWO

A VISITOR FROM THE OTHER SIDE

At first Joe was feeling rather afraid at the sight of the figure looming through the swirling white cloud but as the figure stumbled around and coughed, waving his hand around in front of his face, it was fairly obvious that he was having as much trouble as the children in seeing what was going on and he seemed a good deal less frightening. Sarah and Joe were rather expecting to see a Red Indian Chief but the figure who finally stumbled into view looked nothing like it. He was dressed in a white toga edged in red, a tunic and sandals - he was a Roman, not a Red Indian at all. He was rather thin in the face, with a beaky nose and thinning hair and had a sort of perpetually worried look about him.

"Thunder Head, you great useless feathered chump! Where are you? And where am I?" the figure spluttered. "Oh, hello!" he said, catching sight of the children. "Who are you?"

"Sarah is niece of Madame Fifi and Joe is friend!" boomed an impressive, deep voice from somewhere in the cloud. "Me lost! Can't find way to join you. Thought you might like to show them a bit of the past!"

"Who is that?" asked Sarah.

"Chief Thunder Head," sighed the toga'd figure. "He asked me to go with him and see Madame Fifi - something about helping some children with their history at school - you two, I suppose."

"Well, yes," said Sarah, and Joe nodded. "But it's the holidays and we don't really need any help now."

"Typical!" said the figure in disgust. "It's the Chief; I think those feathers are getting in his ears. He was probably listening and got the wrong end of the stick. My name is Hadrian, by the way."

"Not the Emperor Hadrian who built the wall," gasped Joe.

"Er, not exactly. Yes, I built the wall, but no, I'm not the Emperor. I'm Alphonse Hadrian."

"Alphonse?" exclaimed Joe. "That's a Roman name?"

"Gaulish - I'm from Gaul; you know - it's called France now." said Alphonse Hadrian. "It's a long story," he sighed, "you might as well hear it. It will take us a while to get to the wall."

"We're going to the wall you built?" asked Sarah. "How?"

"The Cloud will take us," said Hadrian. "It's quite fast but not instantaneous. We're going to travel in time. Good isn't it?"

"And you told me Science Fiction was unbelievable," said Joe to Sarah.

"I think I'm asleep," said Sarah. "I'll wake up soon and realise all this was a dream."

“No chance,” said Hadrian cheerfully. “This is all real - in so far as anything on the Other Side can be said to be real. It’s a bit confusing, I admit. I’ve never really got used to it since I’ve been here.”

“Are you . . . dead?” asked Joe nervously.

“Good question, and I’m not really sure,” said Hadrian. “I should be after what was going to happen to me. But then I don’t feel dead at all.”

“What did happen?” asked Sarah.

“I’ll tell you the whole story,” said Hadrian, settling himself down in a chair that suddenly appeared. Joe realised that he and Sarah were both still sitting in Aunt Fifi’s comfy chairs and wondered how it was that the chairs had been transported to the Other Side (which seemed to be where they were, according to Hadrian). The cloud was now very thick, like cotton wool, and swirled all around them. It wasn’t cold and clammy, like Joe expected a cloud to be, but actually quite warm. Joe and Sarah could see each other perfectly well, and now Alphonse Hadrian was with them, he was perfectly visible too - but they could see nothing else through the dense white mass and that included Aunt Fifi, somewhat to Sarah’s alarm. It seemed that her Aunt wasn’t going to accompany them.

“You see, I was an architect in the Roman Empire and I had a nice little business. Nothing too complicated - some town houses, the odd villa.”

“His villas very odd,” boomed the voice of the Chief. “Tell them why business so small - and what happened to your houses.”

“Are you still there?” called Hadrian, in an irritated tone and muttered something under his breath.

“Take no notice,” he continued. “All right, so there might have been a few problems with my town houses collapsing - it happened all the time in Roman cities. I blame the workmen. My designs were fine.”

“He forgot the foundations,” came the distant voice. “Him rotten architect!”

“I hope you fall out the cloud on your head,” yelled Hadrian. “Mind you,” he sighed, “in some ways he’s right. I wasn’t that good but then no one had ever given me a big commission so that I could really get my teeth into it and do a good job. And I used to go off every now and then; I would sort of fall asleep in a form of trance. Everyone called it day-dreaming when I was young but I didn’t have any real control over it. I got a bit more used to it later, though; I found I could go off in a trance and relax a bit. I needed to relax later too, I had a lot of problems in my life - one big problem in particular.”

“But you ended up building the wall,” said Joe.

“Yes,” sighed Hadrian again. “So I did. My lasting monument. It all began when I met Augusta, Hadrian’s sister - or rather, when she fell on me.”

“Pardon?” asked Sarah, puzzled.

“I was walking along in the street one day when this procession came past,” said Hadrian. “It was a rich lady being taken somewhere in a palanquin or litter. Do you now what one of those is? It’s a sort of plush curtained box, all heavily decorated, slung on poles which were carried by a lot of slaves - silly way to travel but it looked impressive and rich ladies did it a lot. Of course everyone stopped and looked - that was the point. There would be a group of servants in front all dressed in splendid costumes shouting ‘Make way, Make way!’ and then along would come this litter and everyone would gawp at it to see how rich everything was and if they could get a glimpse of the person

inside. Usually the curtains were open a bit so that you could see this lady in all her finery, perhaps eating some delicacy like lark's tongues in aspic from a golden bowl."

"Urgh!" said Sarah, "that sounds terrible. Those poor larks, killed so someone could eat their tongues."

"It was," agreed Hadrian. "They tasted disgusting but rich people ate them to show how rich they were. Silly really. Give me braised dormice anytime."

Joe and Sarah looked at each other in amazement but Hadrian carried on:

"Anyway, this litter had the curtains closed - now there were only two reasons why women in litters kept the curtains closed; the first was that they had had a really good time the night before and were sleeping it off and the other one was that they were too ugly to be seen in public. I was on my way to a clients with my plans, wax tablets and stylii - the sharp-pointed things we wrote on wax tablets with. I had to carry them myself because I couldn't afford a slave. I turned to see this litter go past and must have dropped a stylus - one of the bearers trod on it in his bare feet and, of course, jumped about and dropped his bit of pole. The litter tipped and this great big thing fell out the curtains right on top of me. Now I realised why the curtains had been closed - and it wasn't because of a good time the night before."

He stopped; the memory seemed very painful.

"What happened then," asked Joe.

"Well, this big woman seized me, claimed the gods had answered her prayers and before I could protest had carried me - almost on her own - into this huge palace. Took me a while to realise where we were - it was the Imperial palace itself. I tried to struggle but the woman snapped her fingers and the next thing I was surrounded by lot of guards with swords marching me in double quick time down this marble corridor and into a huge hall. A couple of minutes later and we were in front of the Emperor himself. This woman throws herself at him, claims the gods have answered her call for a man and that it was all a sign from the gods that she fell on me. She demanded marriage! I tried to protest - but the Emperor Hadrian was very persuasive. Told me that if I didn't marry his sister I would never marry anyone else. Well that sounded fine and I was about to agree but then he told me why I would never marry anyone else - I would be dead. Looking at his sister - and hearing her too, she had a terrible screech - even this didn't sound so bad but it was when he told me that he would cut my ears off if I didn't marry her that I gave in."

"Going through life missing your ears doesn't seem so bad if she was as terrible as that," suggested Joe.

"He was going to cut my ears off so I couldn't hear myself scream while his soldiers did a few other things to me before I died - he sounded quite considerate about it and so I agreed to marry his sister. Of course she forced me to take the family name which is how I wound up as Alphonse Hadrian, stuck in the middle of some benighted damp, cold and hostile country building an oversized garden wall." He sighed yet again. "The trouble was, even with that perishing weather and that bleak, cold, dark, heather-ridden land full of barbarians trying to kill me, it was preferable to life at home with my darling wife. Being stuck in a deep dark well was preferable to being with her, so long as you had ear plugs. You could hear her from miles away. But she hated Britain and so I volunteered to go there and work as the Emperor's military engineer. Do you come from Britain?"

The children nodded.

“Terrible place - always raining and cold. How do you survive? Are there still lots of blue-painted shaggy-haired lunatics trying to take your head off with dirty great swords?”

“Not these days,” smiled Joe.

“Although it still rains a lot,” added Sarah.

“But you got the wall built?” said Joe.

“Oh yes!” replied Alphonse. “I made the job last a while - I didn’t want to go home quickly. Anyway, the soldiers building the wall were a lazy bunch. Turn your back for a minute and they were asleep, playing games or off fishing - turn your back once too often and some local painted bright blue all over would try and creep up and slice you in half. But it was a fine design. My masterpiece.”

He had become quite enthusiastic now and drew imaginary lines on the carpet, which had come with them in the cloud, to show what he had built.

“First a great line of forts in advance of the wall to allow for aggressive patrols and security, then a wide military road to allow patrols and reinforcements to travel along it, then a whopping great ditch and finally the wall itself. It was the height of military engineering!”

“But it isn’t like that,” said a puzzled Sarah. “We learned that it had the forts behind it.”

“So was the road and the ditch,” put in Joe, “We were taught it was the other way around to your plan.”

“Ah, well,” said a suddenly deflated Hadrian, “there it is. You see it was the soldiers and the workmen. I had the plans drawn up and given to them so they could get on and build it - but they must have had them upside down or something. I never noticed. Then there were all the gates . . .”

“Yes it had quite a few,” said Sarah, “To allow for trade and soldiers to put down trouble and things.”

“It wasn’t supposed to have so many,” said Hadrian gloomily. “What use is a wall with lots of gates? I put them in as little windows - to fire arrows out and keep watch and things, but the soldiers weren’t very bright and built them all as doors. I got the blame - I was supposed to be overseeing it all.”

“Weren’t you?” asked Joe,

“No,” said Hadrian, and he went misty eyed as he recalled happier days. “I had a nice little villa built overlooking the sea - very comfortable, no wife to bawl at me, plenty of servants, lots of underfloor heating to keep that terrible climate out - and of course I didn’t notice what a complete mess the soldiers and workmen were making of my plans. The Emperor did though. That’s how I wound up on the Other Side.”

“Did he execute you?” asked Joe.

“I think he wanted to,” said Hadrian, “but I don’t really know what happened. All I remember is that he came up to inspect it all, took one look, went berserk and called for me to explain it all. He was making a great tour of the Empire with all his court and had a magnificent tent all of silk and satin, lots of gold and marble furniture and carpets, bearskins, the lot. It must have been perfect for Spain or Southern France, North Africa or nice warm places like that, but of course, in the British climate the tent leaked like a sieve, the carpets were sodden, the bearskins soaked, the gold was all peeling off the furniture and he had a rotten cold, sneezing all over the place. I appeared, clutching all my plans; I spread them on this big marble table in his tent and began to explain. I don’t think I did a very good job because half way through he picked up the table - he was a big man, same sort of

build as his sister, a sort of huge wrestler size - and threw it at me. I closed my eyes but I can't remember it hitting me. Next thing I found myself on the Other Side, in a nice quiet place, warm, comfortable, and above all with no hint of a huge and horrible wife, blue lunatics with swords, mad emperors, lazy soldiers and rain. I've been there ever since, until Big Chief Thunder Head called on me to have a word with you two and take you to see my wall."

"When do we get there?" asked Joe.

"That's a good question," replied a puzzled Hadrian. "I set this cloud for Caledonia and thought it would only be a short journey but it's taking a lot longer than I intended." He called out into the swirling cloud, "Chief? Chief! Are you there?" There was no reply. "Hello, he's gone," said the puzzled Hadrian. "That's odd."

There seemed to be something different about the cloud too, now. It swirled more than it had, shot through with different colours, and somewhere in the depths of the cloud, a long way away, bright lights flashed and lightning arced overhead soundlessly.

"Anything wrong?" asked Sarah, anxiously.

Joe saw that she seemed a bit unhappy - taking trips in white clouds with Roman architects who might or might not be dead and then having the cloud going out of control seemed to worry her. Then he realised that, given all those circumstances, he was dead worried too.

Hadrian hesitated, "I don't think so," he said, but didn't sound convinced. He glanced uneasily at the lightning and the swirling colours. "I'm not too good at controlling this cloud - I don't do it very often and the Chief got it going for me this time. It's all automatic and we should arrive soon . . . I hope."

Then the cloud began to clear and with some relief the children noticed that wherever they were the sun was shining, a warm breeze was blowing the last few wisps of cloud away and they seemed to have arrived at their destination. They were in the open air and as they stood up to have a look around the armchairs and carpet disappeared.

"They'll be back later when we go home," said Hadrian. "After all, a couple of armchairs and a bit of Axminster in the middle of some Caledonian countryside might look a bit odd."

"So will we in our clothes," pointed out Sarah, but as she looked around she thought something was wrong - the countryside really didn't look like what Hadrian kept calling Caledonia at all.

"Is your Caledonia what we call Scotland?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so," answered Hadrian. "Why?"

"Because this doesn't look like Scotland at all," replied Sarah. "We went there a few years ago and I know I was very young at the time, but it wasn't at all like this."

"Nonsense!" said Hadrian. "Why it's just as I remember it; the blue heather, the damp peat bogs, the . . . oh, I see what you mean. Well, it must be summer. The sun must shine here occasionally and everything's put on a growth spurt."

Joe looked around. He had only once been to Scotland, and that had been on the train when his parents had taken him to Edinburgh, but he had looked out the windows of the train and had seen a fair amount of the countryside and this was nothing like the Scotland he had seen. Hadrian's suggestion of a growth spurt for the local vegetation didn't seem to account for the considerable differences he could see.

"I didn't know bamboo grew in Scotland," he said.

“Or rice,” said Sarah, inspecting a field more closely.

“Is that what it is?” said a surprised Hadrian. “And is that tall stuff called bamboo? No, I didn’t see any when I was here before, but then I didn’t get out much. I stayed in the villa most of the time with the heating slaves working flat out to stoke up the underfloor heating.”

“The locals didn’t wear those wide straw hats when I was in Scotland either,” said Joe, pointing to some people working in one of the rice fields, who were wearing wide, flat, slightly pointed hats that seemed vaguely familiar somehow.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Hadrian, sniffily. “All the locals I ever saw were painted bright blue and wanted to kill all the Romans they could find. What they looked like when they were at home I don’t know. Anyway,” he insisted, “this *is* Caledonia and we are here to see my wall - and it should be over there,” he went on, pointing. Excitedly he jumped up and down. “And it is, look, Hadrian’s Wall, all my own work! It’s my wall! Or rather . . . oh dear, I think something’s gone wrong!”

Something had. There was a structure all right, but it didn’t look much like a wall. For a start it was made of wood although it was certainly very long and snaked for miles over a series of hills.

“More like Hadrian’s Fence” giggled Sarah. “No wonder the Emperor was annoyed.”

“Not in very good condition, either,” said Joe. “Looks like someone’s tried to set fire to it in places or knock it down.”

A mystified Hadrian looked around open mouthed. “Those soldiers were even worse than I thought,” he said. “They haven’t even used bricks - but this is barmy. I remember inspecting bits of it every now and then - on the rare occasions it stopped raining and the sun came out. It was brick, I’m certain of it.”

“We’re not in Caledonia or whatever you call it,” said Sarah. “We can’t be. I think we’re in”

But just where she thought they were remained unsaid as a group of whooping horsemen in clattering black armour broke through the fence where it was already blackened by fire and came hurtling down on them. Sarah saw that the locals in the fields had made for the clumps of bamboo as soon as they saw the soldiers and pulling on Joe’s arm she urged him to do the same. Joe seemed mesmerised by the galloping warriors who were now firing arrows in all directions at the locals - and at them. He pulled himself together as Sarah tugged at his arm and dived after her into some handy bamboo, leaving a bemused Hadrian still standing there. They shouted to him but he didn’t seem to hear, and then an arrow whistled past his ear and he realised that he was about to be stuck with arrows like a large pincushion any minute. He followed the children, diving head first into the bamboo and taking a large bite out of the earth as he did so. It was at this point that Joe started wondering just how he had ever got himself in this position. His next thought was on the lines of how on earth they were ever going to get out of it.