

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER SIX

HADRIAN'S CHINESE WALL

Inside the Cloud, Joe sat surrounded by the swirling white mist and wondered where he should think about going. He also realised that although Hadrian had said he would help by thinking about where the cloud should go, neither of them had decided where it should head for before he had sat himself down in it. Now he wondered what to do next. Perhaps he should not think about anything and hope Hadrian sent him somewhere useful? However, that didn't sound a terribly good idea. Knowing Hadrian he could wind up anywhere! Or should he think about somewhere for himself - and is if so, where? Who was the best person to ask for help? The Chief Guard? The Khan? Thunder Head or perhaps Aunt Fifi? But then he realised that the cloud was moving perfectly well by itself, so he decided that the best thing to do was let it get on with it and he would see where he landed.

It didn't take long; the cloud stopped moving and the white mist began to clear. Joe found himself in a dark tent, the only light coming through some partly open hangings from a lamp in another part of the tent. He looked around as his eyes grew slowly used to the dark; wherever he was, it seemed to be a fairly grand person's tent. The hangings appeared to be rich, the sheen of silk was visible as well as the occasional glint of gold thread. In the corner was a bed, covered with rugs and animal skins and under them a sleeping form, snoring gently. Joe realised that it was the Khan himself. He tiptoed over to the bed and gently pushed the sleeping Khan, whispering, "Please, Great Khan, wake up! We need help!"

He was rather alarmed when the Khan suddenly jumped up and grabbed a sword, yelling, "Guards! Robbers! Murderers!" and swung the sword round his head wildly.

A guard ran into the sleeping chamber, fully armed. Behind him others tramped in, spears and swords at the ready. One of them had brought a lamp with him and Joe saw that it was the Captain himself. They all surrounded Joe and pointed their weapons at him.

"It's all right," he squeaked, "It's me, Joe! I need your help. I'm not going to harm anyone!"

"Oh, it's you!" said the Khan, greatly relieved. "You did startle me! I always sleep with that sword by my side now - there have been so many attempts on my life. What on earth are you doing here? And how did you get past my guards? Have you been asleep!" he said severely to the Captain of the Guards, who went red.

"No, he hasn't," said Joe. "Please listen! It would take too long to explain but I've come here for help - the Shaman has captured my friends and he's plotting to poison you and most of the other chiefs and blame the Captain here. He wants to make another chief Great Khan and then declare war on China!"

The Khan and the Captain of the Guards looked at each other in amazement.

“Do you think he’s telling the truth?” asked the Khan.

The Captain looked hard at Joe, who was trembling and frightened, desperate that the Khan should believe him.

“Yes,” he said at last. “I am sure he is. He is a truthful boy. I’ve never trusted the Shaman - we must rescue his friends.”

Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

“Right!” said the Khan, decidedly. “We’ll rescue them and then sort all this about the Shaman out later. Perhaps it’s been a misunderstanding. Now, where are your friends being held?”

“I don’t know,” said Joe. “They’re in a tent, somewhere. We were taken from the guest tent after we were put to sleep in some way - we could have been taken anywhere. We woke up in a cage and the Shaman was talking to two other men - I think one of them is the chief he wants to put in your place. The Shaman has poisoned the tea you’re going to drink tomorrow - only his friend won’t drink and will survive.”

“They were probably taken to the Shaman’s camp,” said the Captain. “I know the chief the Shaman is friendly with. It is also possible that they could be in his camp. We must send men to search them both!”

“See to it!” ordered the Khan. He turned to Joe, “I think you had better stay here. I will summon more guards and we will be safe. You can explain to me how it was that you managed to escape and then get in here.”

“Could I please go with your guards to see if my friends are safe?” asked Joe - he thought that, although it might be dangerous, an expedition to rescue his friends might be easier than explaining everything to the Khan.

The Captain smiled. “Brave boy!” he said. “If the Great Khan agrees, you may come with me!”

“Very well,” said the Khan, “and later, we will talk!”

More guards had arrived already and the Captain stationed them around the tent to guard the Khan closely. Then he ordered another large group to raid the camp of the Shaman’s friend while he lead a smaller party to the Shaman’s camp. Each group mounted their horses and galloped off into the night, several of the riders carrying flaring torches. Once again, Joe was hoisted up on to the saddle bow of a warrior, the same one who had carried him before. He found it was really exciting, galloping through the night, first down the lanes of tents, with white faces staring out of the tent flaps at the sudden commotion, and then through the dark countryside outside, the hooves pounding on the ground, the harnesses jangling, the light of the torches flaring and glinting off the armour and weapons of the warriors.

“Once again, you ride with the warriors of the Steppes,” said the man holding him. “If you stay with us, I will teach you to ride your own horse!”

“I’d love that!” said Joe. “But I’m ever so worried about my friends. If the Shaman hears us coming, he might hurt them.”

“You will see,” said the warrior. “We are riders of the winds - and the wind can be silent but still blow!”

After they had travelled a short way the Captain held up his hand and the warriors stopped. Then they dismounted and with great interest Joe saw them take some cloth from their saddle bags

and bind up the horses hooves so they were thickly padded. They bound pieces of the thick cloth around themselves so it muffled their armour and stopped it rattling and tied up their weapons so they didn't jingle. Then they remounted.

"You understand?" said the warrior holding Joe. "Now we are quieter. You will see, we will surprise them!"

The torches were put out, and only the light of the stars and the half moon in the sky lit up the plain over which they now rode, surprisingly quietly. Joe was relieved to see that the sky was also quiet tonight, with none of the lights and strange sights that he had seen before. Then, in the distance he saw low black mounds like little hills in the plain. He realised that these were the tents of the Shaman's camp; he felt the warrior holding him tense and saw the Captain signal to his men. They spread out, and the warrior holding Joe dropped back a little; the warriors in front of them separated into two lines, the first with spears and the second with swords. They stood as still as statues. Then the Captain signalled with his hand and the first line suddenly galloped forward, silently. When the first line had reached the tents the Captain signalled again and this time the second line galloped forward, yelling, whooping and shouting. This line had their swords out, and waved them wildly in the air.

Joe noticed with great interest that the first line had galloped forward, the men hunched low over their saddles, with spears levelled, and he wondered what they were aiming at - and then he realised that they were aiming at the pegs that held the ropes that actually kept the tents up. Even in the dim light of a half moon and the stars, they could see their targets! Their spears hit the tent pegs and lifted them straight out the ground. Down came the tents! The second line of whooping warriors cut at any tent ropes that were still holding anything up.

They had taken the Shaman's camp completely by surprise. A few men had run out of the tents as the first warriors had charged, holding bows, swords and spears. Those with bows fired wildly and missed their targets, the sword and spearmen swung at the Khan's warriors on horseback who dropped sideways on their horses so that the weapons met thin air. The second line of warriors surrounded the few defenders and made it clear to them that if they resisted they would soon be cut into more pieces than a sliced loaf. They threw down their spears, swords and bows and stood, heads bowed, miserable. The Khan's guards dismounted and pulled the collapsed tents apart. They had lit their torches again now, from the torches and lamps still alight in the Shaman's camp, and by their light Joe saw various startled people emerge from under the folds of the tents. Most seemed to be servants or guards, bleary-eyed and wondering what was happening - but as the Khan's warriors pulled one tent apart he saw a cage of wood revealed and inside it, also rather startled and wondering what was going on, Sarah and Hadrian! Joe shouted to them and the warrior holding him let him down to the ground, dismounted himself and strode over to the cage. He told the captives to stand back and took his sword out of its scabbard; it was a wide, curved sword, and glinted in the torchlight. With one blow, the warrior shattered the bars of the cage, cutting through them as if they were paper. The guard returned the sword to its scabbard and bowed before Hadrian and Sarah.

"Very impressive," said Hadrian, "I'm glad you're on our side!"

"I agree," said Sarah. "Well done, Joe. How did you do it?"

Joe told them all about it. "Did you send me to the Khan?" he asked Hadrian.

"No," came the reply, "I couldn't think where to send you. I left it to you in the end."

“Well, I didn’t know where to go either,” said Joe, “it must have been the cloud thinking on its own!”

“Whatever it was, it’s worked,” said Sarah in relief. “Where’s the Shaman?”

That was a good question. They looked around and the Captain barked orders. All the prisoners were tied up and questioned and the tents thoroughly searched. Dawn was now breaking, and its light began to fill the horizon. Joe saw that some of the warriors were inspecting the ground around the camp carefully and asked his friend why.

“Tracks!” said the warrior. “Some of us are good trackers and can tell if an animal or a man has been walking on the ground and even how long ago and how old he is!”

That sounded a good skill but the men returned to the Captain and shook their heads. The men questioning the prisoners also reported back and the Captain came over to Joe, Sarah and Hadrian.

“The Shaman is not here,” he said, “they all say he left some time ago. They think he went back to the main camp or perhaps to the camp of the chief he wants to replace the Khan. We will return now and see what the Khan wishes us to do.”

They set off with Sarah now riding in front of a warrior like Joe. This time Hadrian was given his own pony which he rode rather gingerly, holding on for dear life while the warriors laughed to see him swaying and struggling to stay on. The Shaman’s people were all roped together in a long line and were ordered to walk back under the guard of a few warriors while the Captain and those holding Sarah and Joe returned more quickly, carrying with them the bags that Joe and Sarah had been given by the Mandarin. They suddenly set off at the gallop, hooves now free of the padding, and one of them slapped Hadrian’s pony on its backside so that it set off like an arrow with Hadrian holding on for dear life and calling on all the gods of Rome for help. Again Joe felt the exhilaration of a gallop through the steppes, now lit by the early light of dawn with everything looking fresh and rose-coloured, the warriors racing each other for the Khan’s camp, whooping and yelling, urging each other on and taking the time occasionally to slap Hadrian’s pony and urge it on faster, laughing at Hadrian’s desperate attempts to stay in the saddle.

As it was, Hadrian won the race, his pony reaching the lanes of tents first, stopping suddenly and throwing Hadrian off over its ears so that he landed on his head. He sat up, looked groggily at the laughing warriors who rode up; through his dazed eyes they went slowly round and round.

“Stay in one place,” he said, “you’re making me dizzy. I didn’t enjoy that at all.”

“We are in one place - it’s your head that’s going round,” laughed the Captain. “And you won! You were the first back. Well done, Roman!”

That perked Hadrian up and he staggered to his feet, arranged his toga around him as best he could and rather shakily, set off with as much dignity as he could muster through the lanes of tents, the pony following him and unknown to Hadrian eating stray bits of his toga. People came out of their tents to see the procession, headed by the sight of Hadrian in his steadily diminishing toga, then the pony, contentedly munching, and finally the warriors of the Khan’s guard, grinning from ear to ear, as they rode along the lane that lead to the tent of the Great Khan.

They arrived at the big blue tent and the guards dismounted. The children and Hadrian were escorted into the presence of the Khan and the Captain made his report.

“Well done!” said the Khan. “A very good operation indeed and I’m glad to see that you’re safe,” he said to Sarah and Hadrian. “However, the other party I sent out has reported back and they say that the Shaman was not in the other camp either so I don’t know where he is. I’ve got the other chief locked up under heavy guard. Now, all the rest of the chiefs are going to meet in about an hour. It’s possible that the Shaman has gone somewhere else and doesn’t know yet that his little plot has been discovered, so I’m going to suggest that you hide in a chamber just off this one until the chiefs are gathered together and we see what the Shaman has to say, if he turns up. It’s a pity that there won’t be any tea.”

“But we’ve got a big red box of it,” said Joe. “I was going to tell you yesterday but it was so late and we were so tired. It was sent by the Mandarin as a gift for you - it’s with our things outside.”

“How thoughtful,” said the Khan, adding nervously. “Suppose that Shaman has poisoned it as well? I tell you what, I’ll give the taster a cup now and we’ll see what happens.”

“The Shaman hasn’t opened it. He doesn’t know what’s in this box,” said Joe. “The seal is still in place. Tell you what, I’ll have a cup as well. But I’ve an idea if the Shaman does actually show up.”

He explained his idea while he and Sarah set up the little stove and teapot and made up a pot from the red box, after breaking the seal. The taster was called in and he and the children all had a cup and found it was the very best tea from the Mandarin’s own gardens. After watching them for some time, the Khan had a cup himself and so did the Captain of the Guards - but it was a bit cold by then and the taster had a second cup, he liked it so much. The Khan gave them all breakfast too - some very tasty bread and a delicious cheese. The Captain whispered to the children that it was a very great honour to be given breakfast in the presence of the Khan. He was evidently very grateful to the children to be so favoured by the Khan.

Some time later the Great Council of Chiefs gathered in the golden chamber of the Great Khan’s tent, and the children and Hadrian hid in a little curtained-off room and watched. The other chiefs walked in, magnificent in their striped silk robes, wearing big fur hats with pointed tops and curved swords with richly decorated scabbards. They seated themselves on cushions arranged in a circle. The Khan was seated on a slightly raised pile of cushions with the chief guard and two of his men behind him, at attention. Then an attendant hit a gong three times and as the deep notes died away the Shaman himself made an appearance, in full regalia, mask in place, doing his little circular dance as he entered the tent, rattling his staff and bowing low before the Khan, who raised an eyebrow at his appearance. The Captain fingered his sword, unseen by the Shaman.

“Welcome to you all,” said the Khan. “And especially to our Shaman, advisor and councillor. Now, a proposal is to be made to the Great Council, but first, a treat for us. Courtesy of some guests of ours, a new drink is to be offered to us all.”

He clapped his hands and attendants brought in a stove, larger than the one sent by the Mandarin, with a brass saucepan on top to act as a kettle. The attendants lit the burner and put the big saucepan of water on top. They brought in a big brightly decorated jug with a lid to act as a teapot. Then the little brass box of tea was brought in and opened. It seemed to the children and Hadrian, watching from the shadows of the curtained-off room, that the Shaman leaned forward as the tea was spooned out the box and into the jug. Certainly the Khan watched the Shaman very carefully and all the chiefs watched in interest as the boiling water was poured on the tea and the attendants gently

stirred the liquid inside. Then they waited for a minute or two before little cups were brought in and the tea was poured out.

A cup was passed to the taster who drank with great pleasure and nodded enthusiastically. A cup was then offered to the Khan - who suddenly held up his hand.

"No!" he said, "Pass the cup to the Shaman. He is the most honoured member of this gathering, I honour him with first taste, as our advisor and guide."

The Shaman stiffened and drew back, "No," he said, "it is not fitting that I should drink before the Great Khan."

"I insist," said the Khan icily. "After all, as you can see from my taster, the tea is perfectly safe, isn't it?"

"No, it is poisoned!" said the Shaman, knocking it away. The chiefs all gasped and looked at each other and the taster turned green, but the children saw the Captain of the Guards nudge him and wink. The taster raised his eyebrows and looked relieved but puzzled, however the Shaman noticed none of this; he was far too agitated.

"Is it?" said the Khan, innocently. "How do you know?"

"My powers tell me," said the Shaman. "The poison was meant to kill you and all the chiefs - it is slow to act. Those children and that Roman are guilty."

"Are they?" said the Khan calmly, while all the chiefs were looking both uneasy and angry. "Well, I really am surprised. I wonder why they wanted to poison us. I tell you what, let's ask them."

He clapped his hands and to the Shaman's huge surprise, the children and Hadrian emerged from the curtained room and bowed to the chiefs.

"My Shaman, says that you are trying to poison us all," said the Khan, and the chiefs all growled and fingered their swords as they frowned at the children.

"Not true," your excellencies," said Sarah in a clear strong voice - although inside she had butterflies all over the place, "and to prove it, we'll all have a cup. Then you can watch us for as long as you like, but we'll be fine."

The attendants passed a cup each to Joe, Sarah and Hadrian, who all drank with considerable appreciation of the excellent taste. Joe winked at the taster who now realised that all was well and he came forward and had another cup too.

"Now," said the Khan. "They have all drunk a cup - my taster has had two cups, no less. They all look fine. Now it is your turn."

Rather wondering what was going on, the Shaman came forward to receive a cup - but then the Khan clapped his hands and an attendant brought in another brass box - almost identical to the one that the attendants had used to make tea for the taster, and the children. With horror the Shaman realised that he had failed to notice that the brass boxes were very slightly different - and this one that the attendant now held was the one he had poisoned - the one that the Mandarin had sent with the children.

"This tea is nearly cold. We will have the attendants make a fresh pot especially for you," said the Khan, quietly. The brass pot was still on the burner and there was still water simmering in it. A second jug was brought in and a pot of tea made from the Mandarin's brass box. The tent went deathly quiet as the attendants carefully stirred the brew, left it for a minute and then poured it out

into a cup. An attendant politely offered it to the Shaman, who backed away. The Khan stood up and pointed to the cup.

“Drink, Shaman!” he ordered, angrily.

The Shaman hissed and backed away. The attendant continued to advance on him with the cup and still the Shaman backed away, then he lunged with his staff to smash the cup and ran for the door. But two guards blocked his way with swords drawn.

“Shaman, I accuse you of trying to poison me and all the chiefs here,” the Khan cried, then he turned to address the chiefs. “He put a slow poison in the tea in this box, intending to kill all of us and blame these children and their friend. Thanks to these children, the plot failed. He would have blamed the Captain here too, my most loyal soldier.” He turned to the Shaman again and said, “These chiefs would have been dead if your plot had worked and then you would have put your own creatures in charge of the tribes of the steppes and launched a terrible war across the Great Fence. Death and destruction would have been visited upon the tribes and upon the Chinese. What have you to say before I order the Captain of my Guard here to remove your mask and your head along with it!”

“Fool!” hissed the Shaman. “You think you have won? You will never take me!”

He raised his arms and suddenly the tent filled with swirling red mist, like the cloud Hadrian had used but thicker and arriving much more quickly. Everyone gasped and flapped their hands about in front of their faces to try and see but the cloud cleared almost immediately, and the Shaman had gone!

“He’s able to use a cloud as well,” said Hadrian. “He’s pretty good, too. I wonder where he’s gone?”

“Far away if he’s any sense,” said the Khan. He turned to the chiefs, who were very agitated, with some of them standing up and fingering their swords, and said, “Now, everybody, this tea is really quite safe. As you can see, my taster is fine and so are our visitors. I’m going to have a cup - I’m really looking forward to it. If any of you would like to join us, you are all welcome.”

The attendants removed the brass box and the tea-pot with the poison in it and brought in the big red box full of the Mandarin’s finest tea. They made a fresh jug-full of tea and the chiefs watched, muttering to themselves at the strange turn of events. They observed carefully as the Khan had a cup of this new drink and then saw the Captain also have a cup at the Khan’s invitation. One by one they tried it and all were very pleasantly surprised.

“Could I make a suggestion?” asked Joe shyly, and the Khan agreed. “Well,” said Joe, clearing his throat and addressing the chiefs, “You’ve all been fighting the Chinese for years. I expect everyone has forgotten who started it, but if you stop, you could trade your excellent yoghurt for this tea. I’m sure the Chinese would like it. “

“Especially if you added fruit to it,” put in Sarah. “There’ll be other things you could trade too. Your hangings and carpets in these tents are beautiful and the Chinese do a very nice line in carpets and embroidered wall hangings themselves.”

“And if you stop fighting,” said Hadrian, “I could design you a really good wall, all made in brick, and I can supervise its construction, so that if you and the Chinese ever fall out again, you can stop them raiding into your lands.”

The chiefs all looked at each other and muttered. The Khan sat back and let them get on with it. Then the chiefs all began nodding their heads as Sarah poured them another cup of tea.

“That’s decided then,” said the Khan. “The only problem is telling the Chinese to stop their attacks.”

“That’s where we come in,” said Hadrian. “Give me lots of jars of your yoghurt and a tent. We’ll sort it out with the Chinese.”

“How will you get all the yoghurts there?” asked the Khan. “Or is it connected with the way you travelled to me in my tent?” he asked Joe, with a wink of his eye. “I think you share a secret with the Shaman. Still, I won’t pry too much. Take some yoghurts, use the guest tent and do your best.”

They did; sometime later Hadrian summoned a cloud up that took a large quantity of yoghurt along with the children and himself to the presence of the Mandarin, who was just sitting down to supper. He was most surprised at the safe return of Joe, Sarah and Hadrian - and at the arrival of another course for his dinner. He liked it very much too. Of course, the law that said he had to execute any visitor from the other side of the fence was still in operation, but as he pointed out to Hadrian, this couldn’t apply to ambassadors from another court.

“I think you have diplomatic immunity,” he said. Well, neither Joe nor Sarah understood what that meant and to be honest neither did Hadrian but he wasn’t going to admit it. If it meant that they were safe they weren’t going to argue. The yoghurts went down very well with the Mandarin and his guards, and Joe made the same suggestion of trade he had made to the Khan - and Hadrian made the same suggestion that he had made to the Khan, that he would design and supervise the building of a great wall in case they ever fell out and meanwhile, they should trade.

All seemed well. They travelled back by cloud to report on their success and the building of the great wall began. Because Hadrian was in charge of building it, employed by both the Chinese and the Khan, each of them thought he was building it for just for them alone, so he was paid twice, and of course each side thought that the wall belonged to them. Hadrian hired the labourers and the guards from both sides, and each side built a different bit of wall, so they never met.

It was now that Joe and Sarah began to feel rather left out - and very homesick. They had been away for quite a long time now and Hadrian seemed no longer interested in going home. Both sides were paying him a lot of money and he was busy with plans for the wall - and also for a great big house for himself. The Khan was very considerate and so was the Captain of his Guards but of course they couldn’t send the children home; they made them as welcome as possible and the Captain and the warrior who Joe had ridden with, who was called Jagtai, both gave the children lessons in riding, along with a friend of Jagtai’s who had carried Sarah on his horse. They also kept on visiting Hadrian to try and persuade him to call up the cloud again but he always put them off - but Joe and Sarah both noticed that the wall wasn’t progressing quite as intended. They were walking back to the tents one day, both rather downcast about not going home when suddenly wisps of cloud began to float around them. Sarah looked up.

“Joe!” she gasped, “Look, the cloud! Did you call it up?”

“Not me,” replied Joe, “I wish I could. But you’re right. It’s here!”

It was; thicker and thicker it grew until they were enveloped in it. They felt it moving and two figures moved through the mist towards them; one was small and slight, the other very tall and seemed to have a huge head.

“Oh no, it’s the Shaman!” began Joe.

“No it isn’t!” boomed a deep voice. “It not old wooden head! It me! Chief Thunder Head. Sorry if I startle you!”

He emerged from the mist, a most impressive figure, six and a half feet tall, wearing a huge feathered headdress that reached right down his back, fringed trousers of some form of animal skin all embroidered with coloured beads, his chest bare and covered with lots of lots of strings of beads and shells. He had rather a long, hooked nose and high cheekbones and his skin was red-brown from the sun. By his side was Aunt Fifi and Sarah ran to her and clung to her, so glad to see her again.

“I never thought we would get home again,” said Sarah. “We’ve been stuck here for ages.”

“We’ve been trying to reach you for a while,” said Aunt Fifi, “but something’s been stopping us. The chief here has tried everything. Where’s that daft Roman?”

“Building a wall,” said Joe. “He wants to stay so he can make a lot of money.”

“Him heap big clot!” said the chief. “He couldn’t build garden shed! Anything he builds is rotten!”

“I think he’ll be joining us soon enough,” said Sarah. “We took a good look at the wall today. He’s got it wrong again.”

“Yes,” agreed Joe, “you know he put in lots of gates by accident on the Scottish wall - they should have been little windows but the workmen built them as doors and he didn’t notice? Well, this time it’s the other way around. The Chinese and the Khan wanted lots of gates so they could trade yoghurts and tea but all the gates have been built as little windows. I think they are going to notice soon.”

“He’ll be back on the Other Side soon, all right,” chuckled the Chief.

Later they sat in Aunt Fifi’s room in the sun while she gave them more drinks and biscuits. Chief Thunder Head joined them - drinking lemonade on Aunt Fifi’s insistence, and looking rather morosely at the glass - and they told her all about their adventures. They were amazed to find that it had only been an hour since they had left, according to Aunt Fifi’s clock.

“I wonder where the Shaman went?” said Joe. The Chief looked puzzled.

“Me never see him on the Other Side,” he said. “Also much going wrong at the moment. I lost you in Cloud when I summon up the Roman for you. I went home and tell my squaw (“That’s his wife,” whispered Aunt Fifi) and she very angry - say I am to find you and if I drink firewater again she will hit me with a moose. She will be glad I have found you now. I still do not know what went wrong.”

“That’s right,” nodded Aunt Fifi. “He tried and tried and I helped him. We found out where you were and what you were doing just at the moment you had been captured.”

“Me use the Mystic Lake of Spotted Creek!” said the Chief grandly.

“It’s a puddle on the Other Side,” said Aunt Fifi matter-of-factly. “It’s like a window onto the Other Side but it had gone all cloudy and despite all the Chief could do, it wouldn’t clear - until he tried a dance round it, tripped over and fell in. We saw you were in trouble and were trying to summon up the Cloud. Old Hadrian wasn’t any use and we couldn’t do anything - and then one appeared. How did you do it?”

“No idea!” said Sarah. “We thought it must have been Hadrian.”

“Hmm, well, I think he was in too much of a state to summon anything up,” said Aunt Fifi, “but whoever did it, once it was there the Chief here was able to send it to the Khan.”

“So you sent me!” said Joe.

“That saved us,” said Sarah. “We really didn’t know what to do.”

“But it worked, and that’s the main thing,” said Aunt Fifi. “Are you glad to be back?”

“Not half!” said Sarah. “And it’s only been an hour, according to your clock - or is it still the same day?”

“Oh, yes,” laughed Aunt Fifi. “Time goes very strangely on the Other Side. Well, it’s time you went back for your lunch. You’ll have a lot to tell your parents.”

“No fear,” said Sarah. “Mum would never believe me and Dad would stop me coming here ever again.”

“I don’t think I’ll be telling anyone either,” sighed Joe. “Thank you very much for the biscuits.”

“You’re welcome,” said Aunt Fifi. “Hope I see you again.”

“You will,” said the Chief, quietly. Joe looked at him and he smiled and winked. “Goodbye,” he added, “I also go, to join Great Spirit in the Prairies of the Sky. And to have dinner.”

He folded his arms, closed his eyes and was gone in a puff of white cloud.

“He’ll be back,” sighed Aunt Fifi. “I hope he gives me a bit of notice next time.”

She got up and showed the children out. They waved to her as they walked down the path and along the little road until they reached Sheridan Avenue. Then Joe and Sarah looked at each other.

“I better go,” said Joe. “It’s been very interesting. I still don’t understand it all.”

“Neither do I,” said Sarah. “I’ve got to take my little brother to the park tomorrow morning. Mum’s going to have her hair done. Do you want to come along?”

Joe nodded; “I’d like that,” he said. They waved goodbye to each other and Joe set off home, thinking about his adventure and wondering if it had all been true or if he would wake up soon and find he had dreamt it all. He didn’t, though. He just went home and had his lunch.