

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER NINE

A MONSTER FROM THE DEEP

The children certainly slept well in their hammocks, rocked to and fro by the motion of the ship, but they had a sudden and rude awakening next morning. There was a mighty thump and the ship stopped dead. Joe and Sarah were almost thrown out of their hammocks - as it was, they forgot they weren't in their nice, warm, comfortable beds and fell out in a rush, landing in an untidy heap on a pile of nets and sails at the front of the foc'sle which broke their fall.

They raced out onto the deck to find the rest of the crew staggering out of the hatches, bleary eyed and wondering what had happened. Sakowa was dancing around, singing at the top of his voice and laughing.

"Looks like he's caught what I've got," said old Ben.

"No I haven't, dear boy," said Sakowa, in perfect English, spoken with a very educated accent. "It's just that we've arrived. I'm home! Welcome to Japan!"

"Japan!" gasped Sarah. "It can't be!"

They all looked over the side. The ship had fetched up against a wooden jetty that ran out into the sea from a small sandy beach. Beyond the beach was a village of low houses with roofs covered with either straw or tiles. The walls of the houses were made of bamboo and white panels, and visible a bit beyond the village was a larger building with curved eaves; it had a veranda which was held up by pillars of bright shiny red, rather like the Chinese temples they had seen. A crowd of people ran down to the ship from the village, curious to see what had banged into their jetty. They looked very much like Sakowa and they gathered a short distance away, chattering and pointing, a bit afraid to come any closer.

"Well, it certainly doesn't look like the West Indies or America," said Joe. "Unless that stuff I read about America was all wrong!"

"I assure you that this is Japan," said Sakowa. "We are not far from my home, either. Leif has done a very good job."

"Why didn't you speak English before?" asked Joe.

"Oh, well, you see, I knew where Leif was going to end up but I wasn't going to tell him that his voyage was a wild goose chase," answered Sakowa. "If I had mentioned it to someone else they might have given the game away so I pretended I didn't speak any of the crew's languages. After all, if he found out that he'd got it all wrong, I would never have got my trip home, would I?"

"So you knew you were heading for Japan all along," said Sarah. "But where is America? We shouldn't have arrived here. There's a lot of land in the way somewhere. How did we get round it?"

Sakowa looked blank. “America?” he said. “Another lot of land? Not as far as I know. I never heard of any land between Europe and here. I must admit that last night I had a nasty feeling that Leif might be right and we were going to sail off into the void when we saw that display in the sky, but then this morning, here we are. Home.”

“How on earth did you get to Europe anyway?” asked Joe. “Did you sail this ocean the other way?”

“Oh no. I left Japan to travel many years ago,” said Sakowa. “I eventually fetched up in London and had a good time and learned English. I worked in a theatre there - old Ben’s nephew was also working in it, writing plays and acting, and he told me about the voyage being planned to prove the earth was flat and said that his uncle was going on it. Well, I decided I was feeling homesick and fancied coming back here. I didn’t fancy the walk home - what with wars, robbers, deserts and camel-train fares being so high, I decided I’d sign on for the voyage. We’re not too far from what I think is old Bomkoff’s home either, really. I’ll put him on a boat for Siberia later, if he wants to go.”

Joe noticed that Sarah had gone rather thoughtful and he asked her if anything was the matter.

“It’s something Sakowa said,” she replied. “I must look something up when we get home.”

“If we get home,” added Joe. “Mind you, it’s certainly been an interesting trip, but I’m not sure everyone’s as happy as Sakowa to be here.”

Indeed some of the crew looked as if they would have been a lot happier to have sailed off the edge of the world. Dockland Doris’ rejects were looking decidedly down in the mouth and Leif was absolutely devastated. Some of the others were enjoying themselves, though. Old Ben was capering about in glee and soon made friends with the local children. Deaf Charlie seemed quite at home, nodding and bowing to the locals politely. Bomkoff sat and fished happily off the end of the jetty as if this was his only reason for sailing all this way. Short John shrugged his shoulders and went back to the galley to start cooking a huge pie for dinner. Sakowa introduced everyone to the locals and then went off to contact the local lord of the village. He soon arrived back with a rather large man dressed in bright silk robes, with two huge curved swords stuck in his cummerbund and with two attendants in tow. His hair was all tied up in a knot on the top of his head. The crew assembled on board to welcome him and everyone bowed. The lord, who was called Asahi, made them all welcome to the village and invited them to a feast that night.

For the rest of the morning the morose Leif and the disappointed fiancés tidied up the ship and made repairs where they were needed. Joe and Sarah first helped John with his cooking and when he had finished, they explored the village and the surrounding area; Sarah had the idea that it just might be America after all but there were no signs of Red Indians, buffalo or anything else that she vaguely thought of as being American - as Joe pointed out, it wasn’t much use looking for hotdogs, hamburgers, skyscrapers and cowboys yet, and how Sarah explained away a Japanese village on the American coast even she wasn’t sure. Then they gave it all up and had a great afternoon playing in the sand and swimming in the sea. They were ready for the feast in the evening.

The feast turned out to be a splendid party in the open air, with everyone dancing, singing - in all sorts of languages - and eating a variety of odd and tasty foods, mostly based on types of fish. Short John contributed some pasties and a stew which the locals enjoyed very much. In the trees around the village brightly coloured paper lanterns hung with candles inside them and there were more lanterns

on the ground, that looked like little houses on pillars, with light coming through the windows. It was a warm, fine night, and the village looked quite magical in the light of the lanterns. Some of the villagers played on strange stringed instruments and sang beautiful, haunting songs. The sailors sang sea shanties in return and Dockland Doris's former fiancés sang laments that tugged at the heart strings. Ben Bun and Short John duetted on a comic song, Ben in a high falsetto and Short John in a deep bass and they had the locals rolling about the floor with laughter even though they couldn't understand a word. Bomkoff then sang a song in an even deeper bass voice that echoed around the village. Again, no-one understood a word but it sounded wonderful and everyone clapped. Bomkoff beamed, stood up and said, "Bishty nokblot! Skidubry bokpoddle!" and sat down to applause.

Short John had also made some fairy cakes which went down very well with the locals. Leif still seemed dazed and rather disappointed that he hadn't sailed into oblivion but Dockland Doris's cast-off prospective husbands seemed to cheer up with the thought that they could perhaps make a new life far away from home.

Joe and Sarah sat to one side of the party still trying to make it all out.

"How on earth can we have missed America?" asked Sarah. "This is daft! What's Columbus going to find when he sails across the Atlantic? India? That's where he thought he was going to end up. It looks as though he may be right."

"History can't be that wrong," said Joe. "America exists - or at least it does where we come from. Is this the real past? It's all a bit odd, if it is."

Sakowa came over to them. "You seem a bit left out of it all," he said kindly. "Is there anything wrong? Don't you like the food?"

"It's delicious," said Joe. "No, it's not that - it's a bit hard to explain, really."

"It's a very pretty place," said Sarah. "We like the party, too. Even Leif's cheering up a bit and Dockland Doris's rejects are starting to enjoy themselves."

"Yes, so I see," said Sakowa. "It's good to be home. I wonder if the crew will stay. There's always a need for good sailors here. By the way, you're invited to stay in the lord's house tonight. He especially asked if you would like to because he thought you might be more comfortable than on board ship. It's the house at the end of the village with the pillars. I'll take you there when you are ready."

The children were feeling tired and so they suggested that they go now and then Sakowa could come back and enjoy the party. So they set off, with the villagers and the crew waving good night. It was a cheerful, happy scene, with a little breeze stirring the paper lanterns and making odd coloured patterns on the houses, the sound of singing and the tinkling of little bells that hung outside many of the houses made everything appear quite magical as they walked up the street to the grand house, which looked even prettier in the light of the lanterns. It's curved, tiled roof had coloured glazed pottery animals on the corners and they seemed to move as the light caught them. Sakowa led them inside the house into the dark hall where only dim shapes could be made out in the gloom, of lacquered chests and porcelain jars.

"The guest rooms are at the back of the house," said Sakowa. "The beds are made up although whether you will find our beds comfortable, I don't know," he laughed. He opened a door and frowned. "That's odd," he said. "Lord Asahi said he would be here to meet us before he joined the party. There's no sign of him or of his servants. It's dark, too. Come on in, I'll see if I can strike a

light. I've got my tinder box here." They went into the dark room and suddenly Sakowa fell over something on the floor. "Someone's asleep already," he said. "Must be one of the lazy servants. I say! Wake up! Oh dear."

"What's wrong," asked Sarah, hearing the sudden concern in Sakowa's voice.

"He's not asleep," said a worried Sakowa. "I don't know who it is but I think he's unconscious."

Light suddenly filled the room. They turned to see where it was coming from and for a moment were blinded by the glare from a lantern.

"No, he's not asleep," came an echoing, hissing voice that was vaguely familiar. "He is indeed unconscious, or worse. And if you don't want to join him you better stay where you are!"

The glare from the lantern was still in their eyes but they could make out the figure holding it. He was in full armour made of laminated metal plates that flashed iridescent blue in the lantern light and in his other hand he held a long, wickedly curved sword. As the lantern was turned slightly they could make out the figure better and Sarah screamed! Above the armour was a terrible leering, hideous metallic face under a helmet with wide brim. Joe's mouth fell open and Sakowa staggered back in fear before he realised what it was.

"It's not real - it's a mask!" he said. "He's wearing full Samurai armour! Who are you and what do you want?"

The figure put the lantern on a table, reached up and removed the helmet - revealing the thin, pinched features of the Shaman!

"They know who I am," he hissed. "And I want them!" He turned to Sarah and Joe and pointed, advancing on them slowly. "They are the key to another world! They will turn that key and open the door for me! I shall enter their time and space and conquer all!"

He waved the sword menacingly as he slowly advanced and Joe and Sarah backed away.

"I don't know what you mean," croaked Joe in a dry voice. "How on earth can we do that?"

Sakowa put himself in the way between the children and the Shaman and gestured to the figure on the floor - who the children now saw was Asahi, the Lord of the Village, his face very pale in the lantern light.

"What have you done to him?" demanded Sakowa. "Why did you hurt him? Leave these children alone, what harm have they done to you?"

The Shaman waved the sword under Sakowa's nose and hissed, "Be silent or I will hurt you next! I must go now - my men are even now securing the village. You will help me," he said, turning to the children, "or you will watch as the villagers and your friends suffer tomorrow!"

He grinned an evil grin, replaced his helmet, picked up the lantern and left, locking the door behind him.

They were in darkness again. Sakowa was busy with something he had pulled from his pocket. "What on earth was he on about?" he asked, as he struck what sounded like two stones together. Sparks flew and something caught fire - Joe and Sarah saw that Sakowa had been striking a piece of flint against some metal and the spark had caught a bit of dry material in a box that he had. Now Sakowa found a lantern and lit it, then blew out the flame in his box and closed the lid. He turned to the village lord on the floor, helped by Sarah and Joe.

"I'm not sure I understand what he meant at all," said Joe. "How is Lord Asahi?"

Asahi groaned a little and as Sakowa turned the lantern light on to the man's head Sarah noticed that he had a big, nasty-looking bruise on his forehead. She looked around and saw a basin of water in a corner. Dipping her handkerchief in it she dabbed it gently on to the bruise. The man winced and groaned again, then opened his eyes and looked up at her and smiled. He said some thing in a weak voice.

"He says that you are a good nurse," translated Sakowa. "He thanks you."

Sarah blushed. The man continued speaking, in a low voice, able now to sit up and hold the damp cloth to his head.

"He asks what is going on," said Sakowa, who spoke rapidly to the man in their language.

Sakowa turned to Joe and Sarah and said, "I have told him a little - the little that I know. He tells me that he returned here to make arrangements for you and someone hit him as he entered the room here. I have told him that we are locked in." Sakowa chuckled and so did Lord Asahi; Sarah and Joe were puzzled by this.

"I see that neither you nor that man know much about Japanese houses!" said Sakowa. "Look!"

He pushed at a wall panel, which gave a little. He pulled out a little penknife and showed the children that the wall panel was actually made of thick paper. Carefully he cut an opening large enough for them all to go through. Lord Asahi had recovered enough now to stand, leaning on Joe and Sarah as he did so. He followed them all out of the opening Sakowa had made.

On the other side of the wall was another room of the house. The Lord motioned to Sakowa to mask the light and Sakowa pulled a little lever that almost completely closed a door in the lantern; only a chink in the door let a little light through, enough for them to see what the Lord was doing. He opened a door very quietly and looked through, closing it again immediately and putting his finger to his lips. He spoke in a low voice to Sakowa who then whispered to the children, "He says that there are two armed men in the hall, both strangers. We will leave the house at the back - be as quiet as mice."

The Lord led them to a small door in the opposite wall of the room and opened it quietly, checked that there was no-one on the other side, and then led them all out, creeping down the steps in the shadows at the back of the house and then going along the back of the houses in the village street, again keeping to the shadows. There were no sounds of singing or merriment now, only shouting, curses and crying. Looking out from the shadows near the bottom of the village street they saw what was going on and the Lord of the Village drew a sharp breath at the sight that met their eyes while Sakowa looked aghast.

Strange men in blue and black stripped robes, clutching bows, swords and spears, had surrounded the villagers and the crew of the Nemesis and were herding them down the street towards the jetty.

"What are they going to do?" hissed Sarah. She was afraid that the strangers were going to throw their captives into the sea but then she saw that they were all being herded onto Leif's ship. Directing the strangers was the Shaman, in his armour.

"He's imprisoning them on the ship," whispered Sakowa. "Who are they and where are they from?"

Joe and Sarah recognised a man standing with the Shaman - it was the chief who had plotted with the Shaman to kill the Khan - the one who would have become the new Khan had the

Shaman's plot worked. The other men seemed to be his followers. Sakowa and the Lord Asahi whispered rapidly to each other and when they had finished Sakowa translated for the children.

"Lord Asahi says that the armour the leader is wearing is his - stolen from his house. There are no other weapons in the village - we are defenceless - but there may yet be a way to help the people. Can you swim?"

The children nodded - Joe didn't like to say that he didn't actually swim very well and the water had to be calm, but he wasn't going to show himself up in front of Sarah.

"Then we will go a little further along the shore," continued Sakowa. "There we will swim to the ship, untie her and sail down the coast for help. Let's hope the plan works."

It was turning into quite a night! Creeping in the shadows of the trees and bushes at the top of the beach, the children and the two grown-ups reached a little inlet without being seen by the Shaman's men, now searching the village for anyone they had missed. Taking off their shoes and any heavy clothing, the children, Sakowa and Asahi let themselves into the water - it was cold! Joe's teeth began to chatter and he put his hand up to his mouth to stop them. Sarah thought that she must have gone blue! With Sakowa leading, they swam as quietly as possible to the ship. Joe found the going fairly easy - it was very calm, fortunately and they didn't have to swim too far. Even so, he lagged behind the others. The lapping of the gentle waves on the shore, the shouts of the Shaman's men and the crying of some of the villagers drowned out any noise they made. They reached the ship on the opposite side to the village and climbed as quietly as possible up the wooden steps in the side of the vessel that were used to climb into the rowing boat when it was launched from the ship.

Sakowa peeked over the side and ducked down again and signalled that there were two guards on board. Lord Asahi made a strange sign to Sakowa, who grinned and nodded. Silently, the two of them climbed over the side and dropped down to the deck. Joe and Sarah peeped over the side to see what was happening. The guards were relaxed, looking towards the village and the two Japanese crept up behind them and politely tapped them on their shoulders. The guards swung round in surprise with weapons at the ready and Sakowa and Lord Asahi grabbed an arm of each of them and with deft movements fell backwards, pulling the startled guards with them, but pushing them upwards with their feet at the same time. The guards described graceful arcs in the air as they flew over the side of the ship and splashed into the water.

"Nice one!" said Joe. "How did they do that?"

"I think it's called judo," said Sarah. "They're both very good at it, aren't they?"

Joe nodded. The pair of them jumped over onto the deck and helped Sakowa and the Lord Asahi to cut the ropes that held the ship to the jetty, using the swords the guards had dropped. The ship began to drift away from the village into the darkness. Shouting from the shore showed that the Shaman's men had realised what was happening. Joe and Sarah also opened the hatches to let the prisoners out from the hold, and the crew and villagers came up onto the deck, although some arrows hissed through the air as the Shaman's men fired into the darkness and the crew made the villagers keep well out of sight as they got the ship under weigh under Lief's direction. He steered it into open water away from any rocks and anchored a good way off shore until daylight. The crew then made the villagers as comfortable as possible in cabins, the hold and on the deck, and Short John made lots of hot drinks while Lief, the Lord Asahi and Sakowa held a council of war to decide where to go the next day for help. They decided that they would sail down to the next village, land the women and

children and then sail back with reinforcements and weapons to deal with the Shaman and his followers. The crew were angry too, at the way the poor villagers had been treated and showed the Lord that they had weapons on board.

“I don’t want them to fight,” said a worried Sarah. “Someone is going to get hurt and it’s all because of us.”

“Not a lot we can do about it,” said Joe. “At least, I can’t think of anything.”

“Perhaps we can!” boomed a familiar voice behind them. They turned in surprise to see Chief Thunder Head in all his feathered glory standing on the deck, and beside him was Aunt Fifi in her glittering swimsuit and long blond wig. Joe and Sarah rushed to greet them while the crew and villagers looked on, stunned at their sudden appearance. Joe and Sarah introduced them to everyone - although the explanations probably didn’t make a lot of sense, except to one of the company.

“I’m supposed to have a spirit guide,” said Leif. “Some witless Roman architect who can’t even find his way down a garden path. I don’t see much of him.”

“We finally got through,” said Aunt Fifi. “We have been keeping an eye on you but then we lost you when the sky opened up. Looks like you’ve had an adventure again!”

“Just a bit,” said Sarah, and explained what had happened. Short John brought the Chief and Aunt Fifi a hot drink and his eyes were shining as he grinned from ear to ear.

“You be the mermaid I saw!” he said. “Arr, you be a sight for sore eyes indeed ma’am, if you’ll pardon me saying so. Short John Gold is at your service!”

“Pieces of eight! What a cracker!” squawked Cap’n Mint.

“I’m very pleased to meet you,” replied Aunt Fifi, curtsying (difficult in a swimming costume and long blond wig but Aunt Fifi managed it very gracefully). “It’s not often I meet such a handsome sailor or such a beautiful parrot!”

Short John blushed deepest red and Ben Bun capered up to the Chief.

“I like your hat!” he said. “I tried wearing a chicken on my head once but it kept flying off!” and he somersaulted away.

“Him crackers!” said the Chief. “Are you two all right? Bit wet, by the look of you. Should we go now?”

“We’ve been swimming,” replied Joe. “Yes, we’re both all right, but we can’t go yet - we can’t leave the villagers and the crew. They’re going to fight the Shaman and his men. Can’t we help them and stop anyone getting hurt?”

The Chief frowned. “Difficult!” he said. “We only just able to get through to you now. Best we go as soon as possible. Much is going wrong at present.” Sarah and Joe looked so downcast at this that he relented. “All right. Me tell you what. We wait till tomorrow and see what happens. Me do my best but can’t promise anything.”

Sarah and Joe perked up at this but Aunt Fifi decided that it was very late and that they should all get some rest before the next day. They decided to sleep out under the stars on the poop deck - the rest of the ship was fully occupied. Although it had been a warm night, there a was a bit of a chill in the air now and Sarah and Joe were still damp - and Aunt Fifi was feeling none too warm in her swimming costume. The deck looked a bit hard too, even with a few bits of sail to lie on. Fortunately the Chief was able to rustle up some buffalo robes and blankets.

“Squaw send them,” he said. “Leaping Elk see that you will be cold.”

The children felt much warmer snuggled up in the buffalo robes and blankets and they were comfortable enough to lie down on the hard deck. Aunt Fifi wrapped herself up in a robe too and was soon fast asleep. A few feet away, Short John had settled down for the night and he looked over to see Aunt Fifi, all wrapped up snug, her blond wig peeping out from the top of the buffalo robe. "Arr!" he said to Cap'n Mint, quietly, "it were worth coming all this way just to see her. What a beauty!"

At first light they saw that were some way off the shore. The crew hoisted the sails and they set off for the next village along the coast to put the first part of their plan into action.

It was a fine morning, with just a little mist hanging here and there on a sea that was as calm as a millpond. They sailed into one of these banks of mist and suddenly the sea seemed to boil in front of them. The villagers on deck screamed as from the centre of the boiling mass of water rose a great greeny-blue horned head, followed by a very long scaly neck. The head opened wicked red eyes and a huge mouth lined with very sharp white pointed teeth. More coils of the creature emerged all round the ship, swirling so that the current they created carried the ship in circles on the wild sea - and then Sarah yelled and pointed. Joe and the others looked in the direction of her pointing finger, to see, sat in between the horns on the creature's head, the Shaman! Arms upraised he seemed to be controlling the monster, whose head now bent down, mouth wide, to take chunks out of the boat and all aboard it. The head descended low towards Aunt Fifi and the children standing on the stern of the Nemesis.

"It's the Water Dragon!" shouted Sakowa. "There's an old legend about it but it hasn't been seen for hundreds of years!"

"Do something!" shouted Aunt Fifi to Thunder Head, clutching the buffalo robe around her swimsuit.

Despite having a wooden leg and having to walk with the assistance of a crutch, Short John could move quite fast and he did so now, rushing to Aunt Fifi's side, putting an arm round her and waving a large kitchen chopper in the other hand at the creature, ready to do battle to save his mermaid. The Chief seemed shocked for a minute at the sight of the sea-monster, then shouting a war cry and dancing from one foot to the other, he waved his arms. A barrel appeared on the deck in front of him and he picked it up and threw it at the creature as its head came closer still. The barrel hit the monster on the nose and burst, drenching the head with liquid. Thunder Head waved his arms again and this time a bow and arrow appeared in his hands, the tip of the arrow wrapped with material that was on fire. The Chief fired the arrow at the monster and it hit one of the huge teeth, bounced off and rolled down the scaly cheek and set the liquid on fire. The entire head - along with the Shaman - was engulfed in flames and, roaring in pain, the monster rapidly sank beneath the waves, taking the Shaman with it. The sea quietened, the boat stopped turning in circles and all was peaceful. The mist cleared and the crew and the villagers scoured the waves, but could see no sight of the Shaman or the sea-serpent.

"Heap big sacrifice!" said the Chief. "That my last barrel of fire water! I was saving it for special occasion. Hid it from my squaw - she send me bow and burning arrow. It work, too!"

"It certainly did," said Aunt Fifi. "Well done - a good shot with your bow and arrow too, if I may say so. And thank you for your protection, kind sir!" she continued, turning to Short John and flashing him a big smile. Short John bowed as low as his wooden leg would allow.

“Any time, ma’am,” he said. “I’ll be there if you needs me. And I do an excellent stew and dumplings too, as these children will testify, if you ever be in need of that!”

At Thunder Head’s suggestion, the captain turned the ship round to sail back to the village, without going for help. He said he had a good idea that there would be no problem now. The crew and villagers were rather apprehensive and after tying the boat up at the jetty they crept up the street, the Lord Asahi in the lead clutching a borrowed cutlass. The crew were armed with cutlasses, knives and big matchlock muskets and the villagers grabbed bits of wood and stones. They searched the houses on each side of the street and there wasn’t a sign of the Shaman’s men anywhere in the village. It was as if they had never been there. The samurai armour that the Shaman had stolen lay on the floor in the Lord’s house at the end of the village.

The villagers began to clear up after the party, helped by the crew, and Short John began to make a huge breakfast for everyone, with some of the villagers lending a hand. Leif had cheered up no end and was showing some of the fishermen around his boat. He looked as though he might like to stay. The Chief turned to Sarah and Joe.

“Ready to go yet?” he asked. “Madame Fifi’s cakes are ready.”

“Don’t you want to say goodbye to Short John?” Sarah said to her aunt. “He seems to like you very much.”

“Oh, he’s a lovely man,” replied her aunt. “The thing is, he thinks I’m blond and I couldn’t wear this wig for the rest of my life.” She sighed and went on, “I’ll see him again one day, I expect. Come on, I need to get into some proper clothes!”

The cloud began to gather about them. Daft Ben Bun popped his head out of a hatchway and saw Joe, Sarah Aunt Fifi and Chief Thunder Head disappear.

“They’ll never believe me if I tell them,” he said to himself. “They’ll think I’m mad! I’ll go and sing to the fish!” and off he went.

Back in Aunt Fifi’s house, with Aunt Fifi changed into her purple spangly dress, Thunder Head, Joe and Sarah had some of her cakes, made to Marie Antoinette’s own recipe.

“We came for tea,” said Sarah. “But I suppose this is breakfast really!”

“Cakes for breakfast!” said Joe. “That’s luxury! I think I’ll sleep well tonight, too. How can so much happen in such a short time?” he asked, looking at the clock. Half an hour had passed since they had set out on their adventure.

“Good question!” replied the Chief. “Me no idea. Me absolutely clueless.”

“You never said a truer word,” came the voice of leaping Elk from above, and a cake disappeared from the plate in front of them.

The Chief ignored the voice and continued, “Me also not know why everything keep going wrong.”

Aunt Fifi eyed him severely.

“Are you sure it’s nothing to do with the firewater?” she said.

The Chief looked uncomfortable. “That the last barrel,” he said. “Me keeping it for special occasion. Good job I had it, too.”

“I agree,” said Joe. “I wonder if we’ll see the Shaman again?”

“I sincerely hope not,” said Aunt Fifi.

“Well, I’m on holiday in Norfolk for a couple of weeks from next Tuesday,” said Joe, a bit regretfully, or so Aunt Fifi thought. “So I’m not likely to see him there.”

“Hope you have good weather,” said Aunt Fifi. “Send us a postcard, won’t you?”

Joe nodded and wrote down Sarah’s and Aunt Fifi’s addresses.

“Better not send me one,” said the Chief. “Postman not able to deliver to Other Side very often.”

“Very often?” thought Joe.

“I think my parents are taking us all up to Scotland,” said Sarah, and again there was a note of regret in her voice, or so Aunt Fifi thought, “so it looks as though we won’t be seeing each other for a while,” she continued.

“Oh, you never know!” said Aunt Fifi mysteriously and the Chief nodded, smiling.