

1962 -: **Brothers** June, Bakewell England

The late evening summer sunshine slanted through the frosted glass windows of the Bell and Ivy. The Victorian limestone building dated back to the eighteen hundreds. The building in Bakewell had been in the Kirkland family for over a hundred years, the last ninety as the local pub. The people of Bakewell had come to judge the seasons by the changing colour of the ivy that clung to the exterior of the two story building. A large brass bell hung just inside the mahogany and glass door with the etched-glass Kirkland crest. It rang out across the town to announce Kirkland births and deaths. It had been rung twice in this generation, twenty-six years ago when Robert was born and four years later for Elizabeth.

The interior of the pub with the dark wood panelling and heavy tapestry curtains had changed little over the years. The current owner and publican Padraig, or Paddy as addressed by all; had spruced up the interior with subtle wall sconced lighting and wooden oak tables with red padded seats. Else it was all as it had been a century ago.

On an evening, locals and tourists alike crowded the bar at the Bell and Ivy. The Beer and Ale were the best; the food cooked by Paddy's wife Maisie wholesome, and the atmosphere always cheery and welcoming. Paddy would be at the counter for a chat. Behind him on the back wall were the portraits of generations of champion Kirkland boxers. Paddy was always ready to show these off to tourist and local alike. The stories grew more colourful and outrageous with repeated telling as the beer flowed and the evening sped on.

The oldest boy in each generation grew up understanding that he would inherit the business and probably also be the pugilist of the town.

It seemed that the tradition would be broken this time around. For a while, as a teenager, Bob Kirkland obliged his father by taking up boxing. He was very good. However, it soon became apparent to his parents that Bob preferred spending time with his friend Anthony in the library of the Ashton manor to pulling beer at the Bell and Ivy. His scholarship to study in Cambridge had been a surprise albeit a pleasant one, but his choice of theology and decision to go into the ministry had sent his parents and all who knew the family into a tizz. Never had there been a God man in the Kirkland clan. They assumed he would be a Scottish Presbyterian like his ancestors were before they moved to Bakewell from Inverness.

The two young men were at their usual table at the Bell and Ivy this summer evening. They made an interesting pair. The golden haired twenty-one year old Anthony Ashton, son of Lord of the manor. And the rugged Robert Kirkland, five years older. Publican's pugilist son turned theology student.

Anthony ran his slim fingers through his hair, worn long and curling at the collar of his shirt. He took a deep swig of his favourite light ale. Placing the half empty pewter mug on the table he licked the froth off his upper lip. 'Why Ceylon Bob?'

Robert Kirkland leant forward in the roughhewn wooden seat and stared at his friend across the table. His beer sat untasted between them. A smile creased the broad face. It was not a handsome face. Boxing matches as a teenager had left him with a crooked nose and a scar across the forehead which twisted his right eyebrow into an expression of constant mirth. But in some strange way it was a face that arrested attention. People listened when Bob Kirkland spoke. It was a useful attribute for a potential preacher-missionary.

Bob was dressed in a pair of denim trousers and khaki shirt, clean but casual as was his style. But such was the build of the young man that it always seemed that his muscles would rip

out of his clothes. It had earned him the nickname of ‘Incredible Hulk’ while in university. The habit he had of gesturing with a closed fist when excited added to this image. He reached across the table and punched the air with his fist inches from Anthony’s face. ‘I just heard from the missionary board Anthony. They want me to start as soon as I can get my travel organised. I’ve been appointed assistant minister at the Bambalawatte Methodist Church in Colombo; chaplain to the missionary school attached; a bloody good post for someone just out of college.’

Anthony grabbed his friend’s closed fist in his. It turned into an arm wrestle. Soon there was a small group of young men and women gathered around the table. ‘Go Anthony,’ and ‘Hey, Bob be nice to the lord of the manor!’ echoed around the room. Anthony grimaced. The tendons on his neck stood out. He gritted his teeth and felt the muscles of his face tighten. Bob laughed a deep rumble from the cavern of his broad chest. Effortlessly he extended Anthony’s elbow. Soon Anthony’s arm lay flat on the table. Cheers and groans heralded the end of the competition.

Bob leapt up. “Drinks all round on the house Lizbet!” he called to his sister at the bar. Anthony stood up and massaged his right elbow. Anthony knew Bob was smarter, stronger and now seemingly spiritually higher than him. Rather have him as a friend rather than an enemy any day. Bambalawatte Methodist Church in Colombo was a long way from the Ashley-Cooper tea plantations in the hills. It was however comforting that Bob would be in Sri Lanka when Anthony got there in a couple of years.

Anthony walked over to the bar and placed a fifty pound note on the counter. “The conquered rather than the conqueror should pay,” he said, still massaging his elbow.

Lizbet raised smoky grey eyes to Anthony. She leaned over the counter. The front of her white satin blouse dipped to expose a generous cleavage. Her long curly blond hair brushed his face. She puckered her lips. “You’re welcome to conquer me anytime, Anthony,” she sighed.

“Come on girl. Stop ogling the boy and get our drinks,” one of the young men now gathered at the bar yelled. “Coming – you...,” she tossed her head and placed a glass under the pump. The beer foamed over the edge of the glass bringing a roar of laughter.

“Come on Lizbet, what’s with you girlie?” one of the sheep farmers teased as he picked up his glass. “Not your charming self these days.”

Anthony picked up his half-finished drink from the table. He and his brother William had known Lizbet or Elizabeth all their life. They had all played together on the banks of the river Wye as children. Later as teenagers, William and he had teased her mercilessly. She had taken it in good spirit, giving as well as she got. There had, however, been a subtle shift in their relationship since the boys went to university. Bob didn’t seem to notice. William had laughed scornfully when Anthony mentioned it. ‘She’s ripe for the picking, little brother,’ he had said. ‘She’s a barmaid. Take a bite, she’s a tasty morsel.’ Anthony felt sick even today at the memory of the scorn and arrogance in William’s voice when he said it.

Bob gestured to Anthony with a tilt of his head. Soon they were seated in an intimate little room attached to the main bar. It was early for dinner and they were alone.

‘You’re stalling Bob. Why go to Ceylon?’

Bob shrugged. ‘You started it Anthony.’ He sat sipping his beer.

‘Damn it man, stop patronising me. What the heck do you mean I started it?’

‘You don’t even realise it, do you Anthony? Remember when you returned from your tea plantation visit when you were fifteen? You said you hated it – the dirt, the smell, and the people. But even then you were fascinated with how the Tamils and Sinhalese were dealing with kicking us whites out as you succinctly put it.’

‘And that inspired you? Impossible.’

‘It piqued my curiosity. It was the first time I’d seen you so passionate about anything.’

Bob reached across and punched his shoulder. ‘Especially that incident with that little black haired minx as you labelled her, the one who called you a British bastard.’

Anthony rolled his eyes. Wonder where she was. What was her name? Princess she called herself. He remembered her tip tilted nose, her unruly black mane of hair. He remembered the feeling of impotent rage and something else more primitive he had felt in her presence. Wonder if her father still worked at Watakälé?

Bob’s words dragged Anthony back. ‘But it was those chats we had at university that sealed it. You, trying to make me understand postcolonial independence movements in Asia, and I trying to make you see that life without God was no life at all. You wanting freedom and a better life for the natives on the plantations and I trying to explain that what mattered was their soul salvation. That independence from the British alone would do nothing for the country. Three years at university Anthony. It changed us both. You from an arrogant little teenage aristocrat to a man with a mission, and me –’ Bob shrugged, ‘I realised where I could make a true difference.’

Anthony stretched out his legs. He looked every bit the country aristocrat, and he knew it. His beige linen trousers and pin striped body fitting linen shirt were from the best bespoke tailor in London. The blue and cream checked jacket rakish in the fashion of the day. He stared into his near empty mug. “God, Bob, the people in the plantations have good reason to hate us. My father says that they live for the day. They can do nothing else. Natives and Indians have to accept the life that we – the white raj of the empire dole out to them. The natives, mostly Tamils are proud. Poor maybe, but distinctly unbowed.”

Bobs chuckle rumbled in his chest. ‘Like the tea-maker and his delinquent little daughter?’

Anthony smiled and shrugged. He was silent for a few moments, remembering. ‘I can’t believe the white raj legend anymore.’ He shuddered. ‘You should see how the coolie labourers live, work. It’s inhuman.’

‘And you want to go back and change it.’

Anthony shrugged his right shoulder and nodded, his eyes still fixed on the residual froth in the mug.

Bobs voice was low and resonant. ‘There is a freedom more important than anything they will ever get from us British.’

Anthony shot up straight. ‘You want to evangelise the coolies? That’s a crazy task. You don’t speak their language. Anyway you’re going to Colombo.’

‘I’m learning Tamil from Manikam in the grocery store here. And Colombo is training. I have an offer of a parish in the hill city of Nuwera-Eliya starting in a couple of years.’

Anthony’s eyes lit up. He reached across the table and grasped Bob’s arm. ‘I’ll be taking over as superintendent at Watakälé at that time.’

Bob grinned. ‘I know Anthony. That’s partly why.-’

The crash of glass and Lizbet’s high pitched scream brought both men to their feet.

‘Get your tart of a daughter away from my son. How dare she accuse him?’ James Ashley-Cooper’s voice boomed through to them.

‘Father!’ Anthony jumped up. They both dashed into the lounge.

James Ashley-Cooper stood glaring at Paddy Kirkland across the bar. His hands were clenched on the wooden edge of the counter. His face suffused red and his lips quivered. Glass from a broken tumbler lay at James' feet. Lizbet was backed against the shelves of whisky and liquor, sobbing.

The other patrons in the pub were silent, watching with scarce concealed amusement the confrontation between the lord of the manor and the pugilist publican.

Anthony strode across the lounge and grasped his father's arm. 'Father, calm down, what the hell is this about?' He recoiled at the vitriol in his father's eyes.

'So this is where you are. I should have known you would be here with your holier than thou preacher friend.'

Paddy walked around the counter and clasped James by the elbow. 'Let's go aside and talk James.'

James Ashton shrugged off Paddy's hand. He strode ahead into the room where the boys had been. Anthony and Bob followed. Bob shut the door behind them. He leaned against the shut door. James Ashton stood facing Paddy, his body tensed, his face set in deep lines of fury. 'William wouldn't sleep with your slut of a daughter.'

'How dare you!' Bob's fists clenched. He drew a sharp breath and took a step towards James.

Anthony held him back. 'No Bob, let Paddy sort it out.'

Paddy tilted his head to meet James' stare. 'James,' he said. 'So the children are seeing each other. Okay, maybe sleeping together. For God sakes man – they grew up together.'

James stared back at Paddy. 'You don't know?'

Anthony kept a tight hold on Bobs arm. He felt the muscles tense. ‘No Bob,’ he muttered under his breath.

Paddy held James’ enraged eyes. ‘Know what?’

‘She’s pregnant. She told William that he’s the father. But it could belong to any one of the half dozen or so men out there at the bar.’ James prodded his finger at the closed door.

Paddy stepped back dazed.

Bob ripped his arm away from Anthony. Two strides and he stood between his father and James. ‘You may be lord of the manor,’ he stuck his face to within an inch of James’. ‘You may even consider yourself the white raj of Sri Lanka. But you are on my father’s property. And I will not have you insult my sister.’

Paddy pulled Bob away. ‘Calm down son. I am sure there is an explanation.’

James spun on his feet and strode to the door. He turned with his hand on the doorknob. ‘You,’ he glowered at Paddy, ‘I will not let it happen. An Ashley-Cooper will not be born to a barmaid. Ask her to get rid of it. Send me the bill.’ He flung open the door with a crash and was gone before the other three men had time to comprehend his parting words.

‘The bloody arrogant dobber,’ Paddy dashed his closed fist against the wooden panelling. ‘Get that Lizbet in here,’ he yelled to Maisie serving at the bar.

Anthony looked from Paddy to Bob. ‘I... I’m so sorry. I swear I had no idea they... Lizbet and William were...’

Paddy grasped Anthony’s shoulder. ‘It’s not your fault son.’

‘Dad,’ Lizbet stood just inside the door. She looked at the floor. Her hands twisted the edge of her silk blouse. Tears hovered on her eyelashes.

Paddy’s eyes were sad – tired as he stared at Lizbet. ‘Is it true girlie? You’ve got a wee bairn in the oven?’

Lizbet shook her head. ‘No.’

The three men gasped in unison.

‘You haven’t?’ Paddy tilted Lizbet’s face up. ‘Then why did you tell William you were pregnant lass?’

‘I wanted to see if he loved me... or if I were just... just another shag to him.’ A strangled sob sent Bob to her side. She burrowed her head into her brother’s broad chest. ‘I’m so ashamed. I thought he wanted to marry me. He – he talked of the tea plantation. He said there were servants. The girl he married wouldn’t have to do any work. I thought we could go clubbing and have parties. And you,’ she raised her head to Bob, ‘would be close there.’

‘Well, now you know all about his so called love, sweetheart,’ Bob hugged her trembling body and wiped her tears with a napkin off the table. ‘William ran to his father. Sir James offered to pay you off to get rid of your pretend pregnancy.’ He held her as she sobbed.

‘I love him,’ Lizbet moaned.

Anthony stood apart from the family tableau. He leant on the wall, his arms folded. His blue eyes clouded with anger. ‘Take the money.’

All three turned. ‘What?’ Bob snapped. ‘And let your father and William think she is pregnant and... and aborted the baby?’

‘I know my father – and brother.’ He glanced at Elizabeth. ‘She may be not pregnant. They’ll think it anyway.’”

He walked past them and out of the pub. No one at the bar tried to stop him.

What was it with his family? He remembered his father’s words to him at breakfast this morning. ‘The sooner you get to Watakälé the better,’ he had said. ‘You are so much your mother’s son. You need to toughen up. Learn to deal with people as they deserve.’ He had looked at his wife Elise and laughed. ‘Now William, he’s like me.’ Anthony had watched as his mother winced, then pushed her chair back and left the table.

Yes, William was so like father. Anthony sighed.

He would think he were a changeling if not for the fact that he and William were splitting images not just of each other but also of their mother.