

The Formidable Celebration.

Annoyingly, David had been awake most of the night due to a dog incessantly barking from midnight onwards. His wife had slept soundly throughout the endless disturbance and had not heard a thing. He guessed that the New Year's celebratory chardonnay had induced her sleep coma and he wished it had had the same effect on him. Enviously he had watched her sleep while that darn dog had not stopped on its mission to raise the dead. He wondered which of his neighbours had recently acquired a dog, he wasn't aware of anyone in the immediate vicinity owning one.

As the Director of the Lyme Regis museum, and living so near, David could come and go as he pleased. Now, just 15 hours in to the New Year, David strolled leisurely to his place of work. He knew he had left two gifted bottles of very good champagne sitting on the desk in his office and he had plans to retrieve those bottles and open them later. He had his children and grandchildren visiting that evening for a meal that his wife was currently preparing.

David unlocked the door, switched off the museum alarm, and let himself into the foyer. Something immediately unnerved him and he felt the back of his neck bristling. He opened his office door, but found no sign of the champagne bottles in his office. He knew those bottles should be on his desk where he had left them in obvious view, so that he could not possibly forget them, although he had done.

In the dimming remains of the day, and harbouring feelings of ill ease, David decided to take a look around the museum that was his pride and his domain.

On the first floor his heart rapidly sank as he found the chaotic remains of what appeared to have been a boozy celebration. A display cabinet was prised open, and on the floor lay the old hobnailed boot from the cabinet, alongside what appeared to be one of his champagne bottles. The bottle was now empty and just a few feet away was the other bottle, on its side, open, but having leaked some of its remaining contents on to the floor. The boot from the display case was soaking wet and strongly carried the smell of a vessel that had contained champagne.

David gently picked up the the sodden boot and mourned it having been used to drink from. That boot was one of his favourite exhibits.

Allegedly, and somewhat tenuously, that boot had been used to bale out sea water from a floundering rescue pinnace from the HMS Formidable, a 15,000 ton battleship that had been torpedoed mid channel in the early hours of 1st January 1915, exactly 100 years ago. It sank, taking over 500 men and a dog to a watery grave. Against the odds, 45 exhausted survivors in the pinnace had landed on the beach in Lyme Regis after 20 hours of exposure to stormy seas and harsh weather. Others still in the life craft, had not been so lucky. How the men had managed to keep the sea water baled out of the damaged wooden boat with an old boot, and had reached the shore, was nothing short of a miracle.

With a deep sigh, he cursed the ignorant and disrespectful vandals that had done this. No doubt the rest of his bank holiday would be taken up with police reports, boarding up or mending whatever way the vandals had got in, logging insurance reports and getting the obviously faulty building alarm fixed.

In a state of rising agitation and disbelief, David's glance fell on a now obvious trail of seaweed embellished bare footprints, which led away from the puddles staining the wooden floor.

He felt the hairs rise and prickle on the back of his neck again as he followed the wet footprints down the old spiral staircase where every toe mark was pronounced on the cold stone. The footprints led him to the large and still intact seaward facing 'floor to ceiling' windows at the very back of the building. The footprints did not stop here however, but continued on the other side of the untouched glass, heading towards the sea, where they appeared to be joined by what looked like wet paw prints.

Resting just in front of the sea wall was an object. In the failing light he could just make out that it was a carelessly discarded boot, a mirror image of the one upstairs, with hobnails just visible on its sole. This boot had barnacles and seaweed attached to the leather, as if it had been in the sea for some time...