

## Rule Britannia

The coastal town of Peacehaven was enjoying another Indian summer, balmy breezes and an azure sky. The 'Albion' retirement home was a large brick building set on a hill overlooking the town and the sea. It was surrounded by beautifully manicured gardens in the traditional English style. The bees and butterflies were gently making their way through the flower borders, sunbeams highlighting their iridescent colours as they flitted about. There was a gentle buzz surrounding the home.

Inside the building, the twenty residents were looking forward to the evening. Their annual 'Last Night of the Proms' party. The bunting was being put up and the handheld Union Jacks would be freely distributed as the guests arrived. Those residents who had family and friends locally would invite them along for the evening. Everyone was quietly going about the crucial business of choosing their patriotic outfits for the evening, some quietly humming Rule Britannia and Land of Hope and Glory to themselves as they did so.

They would watch the concert on the TV in the communal room and Marianne, the home manager, had worked out how to get the sound onto the stereo system. A traditional but always popular buffet supper would be served. Leo the head cook always made a special effort to get the menu right. He would ask the residents what they would consider appropriate. This usually meant pork pies, sausage rolls, crisps, cheese and pickle sandwiches and jelly and ice cream. The residents decided that on this occasion, Doctors orders could be forgotten and the staff turned a kindly blind eye.

Grace, one of the longest 'serving' residents, was the main driver behind the event. She was a petite lady, with a ready smile for everyone. Blue eyes looked at you with great intensity from a face remarkably free of lines for a lady of her age. She put this down to the religious application of suntan lotion, the wearing of a broad brimmed straw hat and getting plenty of beauty sleep.

She was a huge fan of the concert; she particularly loved the finale with everyone singing the sea shanties, and of course the glorious rendition of Rule Britannia. She had very fond memories of the event. It was at the concert at the Royal Albert Hall that she had met her darling husband Fred, now dead, and she sorely missed him. This evening would be bitter sweet as always and she was grateful to have company. It was extremely important to her that the evening was a great success. It usually was and she secretly enjoyed the compliments she received every year.

Marianne had printed out the lyrics for Rule Britannia ready to be handed out to those who wanted them. In her experience, most people only really knew the chorus. Marianne was originally from La Rochelle in Brittany. She found the English, or was it British, love of Rule Britannia and the 'Last Night of the Proms' somewhat endearing. When she was searching for the words of Rule Britannia on-line she had come across the history of the song.

This she found rather intriguing. A poem, written by a Scot and set to music for an opera about Alfred the Great. So English and Scottish, even if Britannia herself was a goddess created by the Romans and then forgotten until the poem was written in 1745. The thing she found most amusing was that the opera was written for a German prince who just happened to be the heir to the throne of England, Scotland and Ireland. But then the British had always been good at ignoring, or selectively forgetting that they had been ruled by the French for several hundred years, and more recently by the Germans.

As the sun started to set, cerise hues filled the sky and the temperature started to fall. This prompted 'Liberty', the home's resident cat to saunter back into the building and take her place in the bay window to observe proceedings. As usual she sat in a very upright, statuesque pose, languidly washing her pure white fur.

The guests started arriving and the residents were there to meet them and take them through to the communal room. The concert had already started and was playing quietly in the background. The first half was always a mixed bag in the view of many of the residents.

What they were all really waiting for was the final patriotic section. Friends and family mingled happily with residents and staff alike.

Grace was so pleased to see so many people, this was really her event she felt and she had put so much energy into making sure it happened every year and was a success.

She had made a special effort this year for her outfit. Britney, one of the younger members of staff had shown her all the fancy dress costumes available on the internet. Grace had spent many happy hours 'surfing' she believed it was called, to find just the right thing.

Grace decided that now was the right time to go and change as the interval was approaching. She quietly left and made her way up the stairs to her room. She had kept her room firmly closed and locked this year. Unlike last year, when that irritating cat had got in and proceeded to play and lie all over the large Union Jack that Grace had purchased for the occasion. She had planned to wear the flag as a shawl but it was completely ruined by that obnoxious cat.

Grace had been bitterly disappointed and even more frustrated with Marianne's reaction. Grace had remonstrated with Marianne, saying that the cat really wasn't appropriate as a pet for the home and simply caused too much disruption and damage. She was particularly adept at digging up the garden. It seemed to Grace that she had taken the side of that stupid cat. It was clear that she was not going to deal with the issue. So Grace had decided she would manage the situation herself.

That was all last year and now she was focussed on the here and now. She got out her costume and proceeded to lay it out on the bed. She realised as she did so that she had better take her drugs, the blood thinners, with all the excitement of the day she had forgotten. She got out the packet and took the warfarin, smiling to herself as she did so.

A few minutes later Grace left her room and proceeded towards the stairs. There was a large mirror at the top and she stopped to check her appearance. It was so important to look

the part. Now she had to play the part. She readjusted her toga and the Centurion helmet. The shield and trident were a little awkward as she began her decent down the stairs. It was just as well she had decided against the soft toy lion to complete the outfit. That would have been too much. She couldn't wait to see the faces of the other guests as she made her entrance!

As she reached the final few stairs, she heard the music start, she had clearly been longer than she thought as they were the opening cords of Rule Britannia, she had missed the sea shanties completely!

She quickened her pace. As she did so, Liberty the cat streaked across the hall and up the stairs. Grace was momentarily distracted and the next thing she knew she was falling and then there was a searing pain in her head as she collided with the banister before landing in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. She tried to move but couldn't she let out a little whimper of pain and then a louder, demanding cry for help.

Marianne got to her first. She immediately assessed the situation as serious and told Britney to call for an ambulance. The other guests gathered nervously at the door, looking at Grace with concern and curiosity.

What is the matter with those ridiculous people thought Grace. That bloody cat caused this. Liberty reappeared at the head of the stairs and proceeded to gracefully walk down. She stopped where Grace lay briefly, looked her in the eye and then walked out through the door with her tail in the air.

Grace tried to move but could only follow her with her eyes. Darkness was surrounding her. Strange to see that cat again, I'm sure I buried her in the garden last year after I gave her the warfarin in her food. The others had never got to the bottom of her disappearance. With that thought Grace closed her eyes and followed the ghost of Liberty from the building.