**Shifting Oscar**

"Now, you've arrived just in time to help with Oscar the Outhouse," said Nelson one day. "There's a naff coming off it and I reckon it's time it was moved." I have no idea why he named it Oscar, nor indeed why it even had a name, and it never occurred to me to ask. It was an outhouse typical of those times  a square shed built on top of a pit dug deep into the sandy loam of the flood plain well away from the cottage. This one even had the traditional crescent moon hole in the upper door. Most of the lavatories I had known were of the kind referred to as a 'netty'  a dedicated brick-built little closet at the rear of the backyard behind a terraced house. They were just simple toilet seats made of wood situated over an equally simple basement. The basement was filled with debris both human and household and emptied once a week by stalwart workers from the local rural district council  midden men  but this was also my first dealing with an outhouse that was never emptied and truth be told, I was intimidated by it. The wooden planks were faded by years of sunlight and exposure to weather of all seasons. They had originally been, I think, part of packing cases or wooden crates. If you looked closely you could just make out the remains of advertising slogans for soap. In those days the country privy required attention when it got full. Moving the building and placing it over a new hole in the ground was a lot more desirable than dealing with removing excrement.

"Here's how we will do it … first we take down the shed and shift it to

one side. Then we fill in the hole. Then we put the shed on top of the new hole and bed it in good and proper. Then we're done. Any questions?" I had lots but I asked none. To me it was an adventure in the strict sense. I had no idea what to expect and even less experience. It took less than two hours and we were finished just as the skies cleared before noon. I say we, when in fact it was almost entirely carried out by Nelson. Despite my negligible contribution, it gave me a real sense of satisfaction, and the praise Nelson heaped upon me made me feel I really belonged. There were earthy outhouse jokes throughout the operation and the laughter we shared cemented my new circumstances in a way I could never have imagined.

"Now, you're new here so it will probably seem to you like it's always stood where it is now. I just hope I don't forget in the night and go to the wrong place. That's why we fill in the old hole." And we laughed again. The old hole took a good deal more soil than I had expected and filling it was what took most time and work. Nelson kicked in rocks and all manner of debris that had accumulated in the cottage yard. When it was level with the ground around it, he cut some big sod from the surrounding grass and laid it over the disturbed earth. Two weeks later it was to look like it had never been there.

"For future reference, that's a job you don't want to do in the summertime, because when that first shovelful of dirt hits the bottom of the pit the stink will knock you off your feet. And too deep into the winter the soil freezes and you can't fill it in at all. Today was the perfect time."

"How did the new hole get there?" I asked. He looked at me and smiled broadly.

"Good question," he said. "If you looked carefully you'd have seen it's lined with split pit props I got from the colliery. I put those in a week ago yesterday, but I dug the hole years back when my shovel was new and I had a day with nothing more pressing. Lucky you, hey?" I smiled too.

"Now," he continued. "There's another hole I want to show you. It's even farther away than Oscar." Intrigued, I followed him toward the place where the willow copse behind the cottage met the fields to the west. There was a slight rise in the land and a channel had been cut in the ground from one side to the centre of an opening in the trees. The channel wasn't very deep and the two ends of it were certainly not dug deep enough to be of use as an outhouse.

"Guess what goes here?" And before I could answer, he said, "Another lavvie … well, it will be our smokehouse. I've wanted one for a long time." I didn't

know what a smokehouse was, but I was excited because of the gleam that showed in his eyes. He made an inspection of the site, pulling grass sods, throwing bits of twigs and leaves out of the way, and then gestured for me to follow him back to the cottage, where he gathered tools and some keys from a nail by the side of the door.

"Now we need to scrounge another outhouse and some bits and bobs for it. But I think we need something to eat. First, we wash our hands." I looked at mine – they were filthy, but a few moments with a bar of green soap and ice-cold water had them clean again. He made up a plate of things that required no cooking, as I would find he liked to do often. A piece of white cheese, pickled beetroot and crusty bread-and-butter. A feast in fact. He kept several bottles of home made cordial, which he used to brighten up glasses of cold, cold water straight from the tap. This day we had blackcurrant.

Scrounging was the term Nelson used for what later became the legitimate and almost noble pursuit of recycling. Even if it wasn't obvious to onlookers, he constantly looked around his environs for anything that might prove useful and mentally noted its position for later collection, should immediate acquisition not be possible or prudent. Some time previously, he had spotted several lengths of terracotta drain pipe among the refuse piled up in corner of a building site in the industrial area near the town. After the cheese and pickles were eaten, we went there in a borrowed Morris van to offer pies to factory workers at lunchtime, all of which were sold and eaten within minutes of arriving. Nelson made two types: mince beef and onion, and meat and potato. The mince sold first and the tardy workers who missed out on them went for the other option with slightly sad expressions. When I asked why he didn't make more mince beef pies, Nelson told me they cost more to make and the profit was greater if he sold some with half-and-half fillings.

"I tried making pies with potato-only filling, and a bit of gravy, but they didn't go over well at all. Sometimes I make all-steak pies and they disappear very quickly." He made them at the cottage in several small batches, and it took him late into the night, but, as he often said, "I've got nowt better to do." I looked forward to helping with the next pie-night as the result looked spectacular – row upon row of shiny-crusted golden-brown pies sitting like a pastry army on the pantry shelf – and I have to admit I was sore disappointed that he sold them all and I would not get to taste one.

He seemed to be on first-names with many of the workers and they all seemed a cheery bunch to me. Many of them were curious about Nelson's 'new helper,' especially the women, and I was proud when he introduced me. "This is Ben … my lad." Before we left, he casually walked over to the refuse pile and collected the pipes.

"Should we ask?" I said.

"That's good that you're honest, but it's just rubbish they're throwing out," said Nelson, "If we ask they might take advantage and ask for money." He winked and put them into the back of the van.

"What are we going to do with it?"

"Smoker feed. We need a length of pipe to go from the fire to the smoke house. If you put the fire inside the shed it will get too hot and the food will cook instead of cure. You'll see."

When we got back, I helped with the pipes, which were glazed inside and out and smelled faintly of laundry day. They were, for me, also very heavy and the experience of doing the job taught me more than I could have learned just by having it explained, and, remarkably, helping to get it done made so much sense that I was almost confident I could build my own smokehouse should the need arise. It was simple enough  the piping was laid from the shallow pit half way up the rise to the deeper one nearer the top, perhaps ten yards at most. The pipes were made in such a way that one end was flanged so that the non-flanged end of another fit neatly into it and the short lengths could be pieced together until you had the required length. The whole lay in the trench that we had to dig more to enlarge it (again, entirely done by Nelson) and the pipeline was covered with soil until it was no longer visible.

"Now, what's left?" It was rhetorical, thank goodness, because I had no clue what was needed. "We'll want a brazier, just small so as to keep the wind off, and the other outhouse." He winked and told me he already knew where there was one just waiting for us. "But we'll need to borrow the lorry."

**Diggory's Ex-Army Lorry**

What a wondrous pool of motor vehicles we had in those days, to be sure. Other than the cart that sometimes went behind Bronwyn the pony in the early days, Nelson owned no car nor lorry of his own. But for one reason or another,

he had almost limitless access to four at any given time. Each summer, and sometimes at other parts of the year, he took a Mrs. Gaitsby to the seaside, usually Redcar, Saltburn or Marske. She lived in a grand house just outside the market town in the dale and other than daily walks with her chocolate Labrador, rarely ventured out. She owned a beautiful Morris Minor Traveller that her husband had bought just as the 1950s dawned. It was black, which made the seasoned English ash exoskeletal frame stand out even more than it did with other colours. Unfortunately, Mr. Gaitsby never made it through the year and the car was left idle as his widow could not drive. Nelson was allowed to use it on occasion as a reward for taking her and, usually, her sister on day outings to beauty spots around the region and to the occasional market. I was never invited to these excursions, but he always told me where they'd been and what they had got up to and it would make me want to visit those places all the more.

The second vehicle was a Ford Thames Trader flatbed lorry that had once been in the service of the Durham Light Infantry. Decommissioned but still camouflage-green, it had been snapped up by a local farmer called Diggory over whose head Nelson held some indiscretion he refused to share with me or anyone else. 'Terms of the lease' he called it. I often wondered what a man could have got up to in order to land himself in a pickle that required he loan out his vehicle whenever asked. Nelson was careful never to overstretch his power, but he used the lorry whenever he had to transport anything of substantial weight or dimension.

The third, my favourite but not used as much as I'd have liked, was a Wolseley 6/80 that had previously belonged to the police force. When people saw it in their rear-view mirror or over their shoulder they immediately slowed down or sometimes even pulled over. I loved that. Nelson liked that car too but rarely used it because it belonged to a fella named Dan, who described himself as a business associate when I asked once,  and who insisted it be kept impossibly prim and proper. Too much responsibility for something only required for transportation  Nelson didn't possess the vanity just to want to look good in a car  its use was restricted to days he had to 'look the part' for one reason or another. Times when he was embroiled in delicate negotiations where it was important his motor conveyed without words the message that he was a solid and successful man.

Finally, and the vehicle we used most often, was a Morris 8Z van that had once been blood-red but had faded with the years to a sombre maroon. The wheel arches were black and the seats were made of brown leather that smelled of pipe tobacco, a smell that to this day reminds me of adventurous days out in that van. An ex-post office vehicle, it was great for the rough roads we sometimes travelled and didn't use too much fuel on the days we went longer distances. It had just the two seats, but then there was rarely more than we two in it. When we did have a third traveller, I was invariably crammed into the back with whatever we were carrying. And we carried such a diversity of goods. Mostly nothing that needed to be hidden, but occasionally just sufficiently 'grey-area' that it was prudent to cover them with sacking or otherwise obscure their true nature against overly enthusiastic police and excise officers. It was kept in an open shed on an allotment garden a few miles from the cottage. I was never sure who owned it, there was never anyone present at pick up or drop off. We always left the back doors open slightly so that the smell of whatever we had in there dissipated before the next person borrowed it. Fish boxes were removed and left outside in the weather to deodorize. This day we needed the lorry.

"All right, Diggory?" asked Nelson. "This is Ben, my lad."

"Good day young man," cheerily smiling Diggory said to me, offering a huge hand that mine disappeared into when we shook. "Here for the lorry I suppose. What you up to today then?"

"I'm after picking up an outhouse from the Bankside houses."

"Ah, yes," said Diggory. "They're bulldozing those soon are they not … I might come along and see if there's anything I might be able to use." Nelson laid an arm across his shoulder.

"You can buy the petrol then," he said.

"You saw me coming there mind, Nelson. Go on then. But I'd better find something good." I liked Diggory. He had cheeks the colour of chicken livers with tiny, tiny veins running through them like vermillion spider webs. His farm was mostly shorthorn cattle bred for beef, but he had a couple of pigs and four or five milk cows. He also had a peacock that made the most extraordinary and fearful noise when it jumped up into the low branches of a larch tree to roost each evening. I had never heard it before, and I had to put my hands to my ears the first time.

"Aye, it's not the most pleasant racket, is it? I'd ring its neck but it's so old I think it won't last too much longer. Still, I've been saying that for a couple of years now."

"If you do I wouldn't mind the tail feathers," said Nelson. The tail feathers were wondrous to behold when the peacock spread his tail. It looked almost artificial  as though some Dali-esque painter had played a trick on it whilst it was unaware.

"I'll think about it," said Diggory. "Let's get off before the wife gives me another job to do." And we climbed into the cab of the lorry and Diggory ground his way through the gears as we bumped along the farm track to the road that ran to Bankside, four or five miles away. It was a warm day, hazy but windless. I mentioned how many butterflies there seemed to be, and, impressively, Nelson named them all as they came into sight. I tried to commit it all to memory, but by the time we got there I had forgotten half at least. Bankside was a short row of terraced houses built almost a hundred years earlier to house lead miners who worked at the drifts on the moorland nearby. The lead and the miners had long since gone, and the houses had been left derelict years before. The land owner had been told by the local council that they were in a dangerous state and had to be either repaired or demolished. He had chosen to do the latter without hesitation. Once the word was out, most of the floorboards had been stolen, tiles and lead from the roofs removed, and kids had smashed almost all the windows. I could not see anything that was of use, but Diggory and Nelson were animated as they wandered around the place.

"Is it all buckshee?" asked Diggory, by which he meant could we take it without having to pay the owner. Nelson said he had asked and the land owner was happy to see it become less of a job for him so basically told the world to help itself. After a while, we had loaded the lorry with the outhouse in best repair  taken apart and carefully marked in chalk as to which panel went where

several oak posts of varying dimension, some window frames from inside the houses that had not had their glass smashed, and every brass and bronze doorknob we could find. Diggory spent most of his time removing all the hinges from all the doors in all the houses that still had them. He had also earmarked numerous other items that he would return to collect later, including a couple of beautiful old cast-iron fireplaces he was sure he could sell to an antiques dealer across the Pennines in Carlisle.

Nelson had been careful to help Diggory load all his pickings first. I thought that was very kind of him, but when we got back home I saw that the reason was that things had to be unloaded in reverse order, which meant our stuff came off the lorry first and Diggory got to go back to his place and unload his swag without our help. Either it didn't occur to him or he hadn't twigged or perhaps didn't much care. Anyway, he said a cheery goodbye and left us to sort through all we had rescued from the doomed houses.

"Let's get the smokehouse put together, shall we?" Nelson was already half way up the rise with one of the walls of the newly acquired outhouse and I tried my best to drag a second one along behind him. I did quite well, considering it was far taller than me. Nelson did the same with the next two and I dragged up two sheets of corrugated tin for the roof. He had been careful to leave the gable ends intact so that when they were nailed back on the roof would be complete and without gaps. Well, the gaps were small anyway. The banging and hammering went on all the rest of the afternoon but I did not notice the time slide by. When the last hinge was screwed to the door we tipped the little shed upright and it looked for all the world that it had stood in that spots for years.

"Tomorrow we'll put in some racks and hooks and stuff," said Nelson. "Then we'll have a think about what we can smoke in it. But before anything else we need wood chips. Witton-le-Wear sawmill … follow me." I thought we might be taking Bronwyn, but the sawmill was only a mile away and we walked. Nelson loved to walk and while I struggled for the first little while, it became my favourite mode of transport too. You could see so much more walking than if you were in a van or even on the cart. I could hear the machinery screaming away in the mill long before we got there. There was a piney smell too that came wafting on the breeze. Outside the mill were piles of orange-yellow sawdust that they were happy for people to collect and haul away any time they wanted it. Mostly it went to pet stores and some butcher shops took it to spread on the floor each morning and sweep up at close of business each day. Then it went onto the fire and up the chimney. Some of it was squeezed into brick-like shapes and sold as fuel, but in the north country coal was so plentiful and cheap that not many burned wood any more. Nelson did though, and when he saw the pile he made tutting noises.

"I should have brought the cuddy," he said. "We could have had a few wood-bricks to take home. Never mind." As soon as he noticed us silhouetted in the

double doorway of the milling shed, the miller cut off the motor on the saw, removed his safety goggles and walked over to greet us.

"Mr. Greenwood," he said. "How very nice to see you. Who's this?" And I was formally introduced to Mr. Harlow who was the owner, operator and sole employee of the True Cut sawmill company. He had dark red hair that was filled with sawdust and other debris, and the only part of his face that was even slightly clean was the area around his eyes where the goggles had been. His hands were rough and very large, fingernails filled with black something or other and he had a slight stoop. Pleasantries over, Nelson asked if there might be any fruit wood going spare. Mr. Harlow took out a briar pipe and pushed some tobacco into the bowl. He lit it by switching on a grinder and holding a short length of steel rod against the wheel it until it glowed red, then he poked it into the tobacco until it took. He dropped the rod on the ground in front of the grinder, switched it off again, and nonchalantly drew on the pipe.

"I do," he said calmly, as if he had been waiting for the question. "Seasoned it is too. Been there since they took out the orchard at Crook vicarage three years back. You making tool handles?"

"I'm looking for chips to use in my smokehouse," replied Nelson. "There's sausages in it for you." And he pulled a brown paper package stuffed with sausages from a pocket in his overcoat and held it out with a magician's flourish. Mr. Harlow smiled and bit down on the stem of his pipe. I really liked the aroma coming off it.

"I do like to get paid immediately," he said quietly to me as if to keep it a secret. "But with Nelson I'm never sure what it will be … only that it's never cash!" We were offered so many limbs of applewood, which Nelson accepted without hesitation, that he had to turn around and go back for Bronwyn and the cart after all. I stayed and sat on a workbench watching the miller go about his business. He didn't turn the saw back on and I was glad about that because it made an awful racket, but after we had had a cup of fearfully strong tea, the peace was interrupted by another machine he told me was a scaler.

"You don't want bark on the wood when you are using it for smoke," he said. "That will give you an acrid taste. Acrid means bitter … nasty." He'd seen the blank look on may face I guess. Inside the machine were toothed rollers that the logs passed below and had the bark ripped off them. It too was hideously loud when Mr. Harlow fired it up, and he adjusted the rollers so that they gnarled round and round at a distance from each other about the same diameter as the

logs. Larger logs were stripped bare and got crushed a bit, while the slightly smaller ones had bits of bark left on them. A little wouldn't matter, I supposed.

"There's another machine called a chipper," he shouted to be overheard above the din. "It would make all this into tiny bits perfect for a smoker box." Then he cut off the scaler and as it whined down to silence, and added, "But I don't have one. You will have to use an axe to chop it into little bits." When Nelson returned we put a score or two of now-white logs into the back of the cart and supplemented them with a few dozen wood-bricks we were given free.

"Cheerio!" I called as Nelson gave the short whistle that told Bronwyn to step lively. In less than a half hour we were back at the cottage. Nelson began the task of splitting the logs into sticks, which didn't seem difficult when he did it. When he let me have a go I found out that although dry logs do split quite easily, it's harder than it looks especially when you have developed neither the muscles not the technique for doing it. Nelson laughed and took back the axe.

"Dear me," he said. "Let me take over before you cut off your fingers and my head!" Soon, a few less than half the logs were cut into sticks, the remainder were to be kept whole for the fire inside the cottage. Nelson explained we didn't need to cut them any smaller, because his way of using them worked better with slightly larger sticks. He soaked them in a pail of water for half an hour while we gathered smaller kindling and an old newspaper, which were set on fire in the pit downhill from the smoke house. When the smoke curled out of the gaps in the smokehouse roof we both cheered, and Nelson wore the biggest smile.

"Now, what we do next is put the nice applewood sticks on the embers of this fire and wait till the smoke pushes out the smoke we got from the kindling. Then we know we're getting the good stuff at the business end. We'll not do that now, though … we won't waste any before the meat is ready to smoke. This was just to make sure everything works." And it did work, and I was proud to have been part of it and excited to get going on the smoking part. I was just about to ask when that would be when Nelson anticipated me.

"In a few days. We need to get sausage skins first," then he ruffled my hair and smiled. "We've had a tiring day and there's another on its way tomorrow. Bed time I think."