

Through the Garden Gate

By:
Lord Ness and
Muffin



as told by
Tony Bullock



CHAPTER ONE

“Why are the gates always closed Ness?” Muffin ambled up behind Ness and looked inquisitively over his shoulder. “Is it to keep people out?”

“Not really old chap, more to keep the staff in.” Ness shook his head as yet another car roared round the corner with a screech of tires and disappeared into the distance. “Look at the way they rush around” he grumbled. “You’d think the world was coming to an end. It’s not safe for anyone to be out on the road nowadays.”

“But didn’t you tell me the gates never used to be closed?” Muffin asked. “What happened?”

“Well, it’s a long story.” Ness wriggled around until he was comfortable. Muffin sat down patiently waiting for the story he knew would come. Lord Ness was older, wiser and knew lots of the old tales from way back in the history of the Manor House. Tales of freedom and adventure, when the Lord of the Manor really was a lord and could do whatever he wanted and go wherever he pleased. Lord Ness finally found a position to his liking and began.

“Back in the old, old days, way before yours,
and even my time, my great uncle Jasper ruled.
All the land around here belonged to him.”

“All of it?” Muffin gasped. Even the beach?”

“That’s what I said,” Ness said irritably. “Now if you
want to hear the story, don’t interrupt me.”

“Sorry your Lordship” Muffin giggled. “Please carry on.

“Right, where was I. Ah yes, as I said, all of it. And he
ruled it firmly but fairly. Nothing went on around here
that he didn’t know about. Cats lived in fear of him;
rabbits packed their bags and rushed back to where they
came from whenever he showed his face. The whole
estate was a model for the way life should be.”

“And he did all that by himself?..... Whoops,,, sorry. Shouldn’t
interrupt.” Muffin apologized quickly before Ness got annoyed.

“Ness hadn’t noticed, he was well into his story now and
carried on. “No, no-one. Not even old Jasper could have

looked after the entire estate single handed. When he moved into the Manor there was already a very competent gamekeeper; Anna, better at the job than old Jasper was. She taught him all he knew. Showed him all the hidden trails and rabbit burrows, taught him how to pick up hedgehogs without getting prickled, all the things you need to know when you're running a big estate." Ness shuffled around, stretched his legs and made himself more comfortable.

"Did you ever notice that part of the fence that looks like it's been patched, way down at the bottom of the garden Muffin?"

"You mean where the old tree stump is?" Muffin nodded. "Yes, I've seen it. Often wondered why there'd been a hole there. Did Jasper make it?"

"The two of them. Jasper and Anna. That was their hidden way out of the garden. On a hot summer's day they'd go through there, down their secret path into the bush and onto the beach for a swim."

"Wow!!!" Muffin exclaimed. "Great uncle could swim?"

“Of course he could. Nothing he couldn’t do really. Except maybe climb trees,” he added hastily. “Only cats can do that and he certainly wouldn’t want to be a copycat.”

“What happened then?” Muffin asked.
“Why did everything change?”

“Well it didn’t happen overnight.” Old Jasper and Anna kept control for many years, but, as will happen to all of us, age caught up with them. Firstly, things started to get a bit run down, rabbits appeared where they weren’t wanted and with nobody trained to keep them in hand they over ran the place, burrowing in gardens, eating cabbages and digging up carrots. Before anyone realized how bad it was they were all over the estate. People started to complain that the Lord of the Manor couldn’t keep up. He was getting too old for the job. Worse than that, they said he should retire.” Ness shook his head sadly. “All the work he’d put in was for nothing. The same people who’d welcomed him into their gardens were now saying he was past his prime and should be pensioned off.”

“Then what? He didn’t have to leave the Manor did he?”

“No, he stayed on until the end, but he never had the same freedom again. Newcomers moved into the village. City dogs, with no idea about country living and its rules, roamed wild. Before long rangers were out catching them, and, had he been caught outside the gate, old Jasper wouldn’t have been spared the indignity. His era of control was over. He still sneaked out the back way to the beach but with Anna also getting old his heart was no longer in it.”

"The secret path they’d used for so long became overgrown, the gardener patched up the hole in the fence and the adventures were just something to reminisce about.”

“I wonder why people are like that” Muffin said thoughtfully. “Why do they forget so quickly all the good things done for them.”

“Not all of them do” Ness explained. “Some of the older ones in the village still remember what they call the ‘good times’. It’s just that new ones, who never knew old Jasper, moved in and brought with them all the modern ideas. Everything had to be done in a hurry, neither time nor respect for the old ways.”

Ness grimaced. “Now they use poison and traps to keep the rabbits down; sprays to kill off the insects that birds used to eat; and guns to kill the possums. Nothing’s safe anymore.”

“I wonder if your great great uncle left any maps”
Muffin murmured. maybe we could chase all the rabbits away and make it like it was in his day.”

Ness shook his head. “I don’t think they’d use maps, he wouldn’t need them with Anna around. She kept it all locked up in her head. When she passed on it was all lost.”

“Oh well.” Muffin looked glumly through the bars of the gate and thought about all the adventures they were missing. Suddenly his eyes lit up. “I’ve got it, he cried. “The Butler will know. He’s ancient. He must have been around when old Jasper was here.”

“Could be” Ness began to show interest. Muffin’s idea had some merit after all. “Muffin, you’re a genius,” he grinned. “Dinner should be just about ready. We’ll ask him after we’ve eaten.”

“It’s no good” Ness grumbled. “I can’t make him understand anything I say. You try Muffin.”

“Not much point in that,” Muffin chuckled. “I can’t shout as loud as you. He must be really deaf if he can’t hear the racket you’re making.”

“Oh well, what are we going to do then?” Ness mumbled. “We’re getting nowhere here.” He looked at Muffin expectantly.

“It was your idea, you come up with something.” Muffin thought for a moment. “We could go down the garden and take a look at old Jaspers secret escape hole.” He suggested. “Maybe we could make a way through; it doesn’t look like a very strong repair job.”

Ness nodded. “Ok, lead the way Muffin old chap. Still a couple of hours of daylight left. We might as well make use of them.”

Muffin was right about the repair job. A few rusted nails was all that held the flimsy mesh in place. Ness gave it a hard pull and it was clear, leaving nothing more than a few weeds and twigs between them and freedom.

“Well, that was easy enough.” Ness laughed as he pulled a dead twig out of Muffins ear. “Now what do we do?” Suddenly, faced with the rather frightening prospect of leaving the safety of the garden Muffin was unsure of himself.

“Well, I suppose we could take a quick look out there,” he said hesitantly. “You go first Ness and tell me if it’s safe, I’ll watch from here and make sure you’re alright.”

Ness laughed. “You’re not frightened are you Muffin,” He wriggled awkwardly through the hole and stopped, uncertain of what to do next. The old track was dark, overgrown with strange plants that shook in the breeze. From the trees came a strange creaking noise and Ness had a weird feeling that he was being watched from the undergrowth. “Err..... I think I’ll come back now ,” he muttered nervously. “We can try again tomorrow when it’s daylight”.

Muffin however had regained a little of his courage and was already squirming through behind Ness. He shook the twigs out of his coat and looked around.

“WOW! He gasped, it’s eerie, look at all those shadows.” He pushed his way past Ness and moved slowly along the path for a short distance. “Come on Ness,” he urged. “There’s nothing here to worry about. I can see where old Jaspers track was.” With that he pushed through a mass of ferns and disappeared from Ness’s view. “Come back Muffin” Ness yelled. “You can’t go without me.”

There was no response, only an ominous silence. Ness gathered all his courage and made a dash in Muff’s wake, pushing aside spiky branches that pulled at his coat as if they were trying to hold him back. Suddenly, without warning he was through the scrub and in a grassy clearing, birds were chirping and Muffin, with a broad smile on his face was sitting on a log. Ness stopped in surprise and grinned self consciously. “Ah, there you are, I had to stop to take a thorn out of my foot,” he mumbled. “Thanks for waiting.”

He looked around in amazement. It was like being in a different world. The Manor and garden were out of sight. Evening sunlight flickered on the waves out in the bay and the only sounds were those of nature. But Ness still had the feeling there was someone else around. He shivered and

turned to Muffin. “Don’t you think we’d better get back now old chap?” he said. “Don’t want the butler worrying about us.”

“Oh, he won’t be missing us yet,” Muffin replied cheerfully.

“He’s busy cooking dinner for the staff. We have lots of time.” With that he jumped off the log and made his way through another gap at the edge of the clearing. Ness wasn’t going to be left behind again. He raced off in pursuit.

Muffin bounded through the long waving grass in a field that ended in tree clad slopes. Ness wasn’t far behind; his fear was gone, replaced by an exhilarating feeling of freedom. No fences or gates to hold him back, no one to tell him to go home. Nothing but space, and he was loving it. He caught Muffin at the edge of the forest.

“Yippee!” he yelled. “This is fun. Let’s go into those trees and see what’s there.”

“Ok.” Muffin panted, “I’ll race you. One, two, three, GO.”

Ness, with his longer legs and greater strength took the lead, twisting and winding his way through the bush of the lower slopes and into the dark interior of the woodland.

Immediately the mood changed. Once again he had the ominous feeling he was being watched. And this time the feeling was stronger. He stopped under a massive oak tree and looked around. Nothing moved, only Muffin scrambling through the undergrowth in the distance broke the silence. Ness sat on a gnarled tree root to wait.

“So you finally made it then”.

Ness almost jumped out of his skin. “Don’t do that Muffin” he said angrily. “You almost scared me to death.”

“That wasn’t Muffin. That was me.”

Ness leaped up and looked around nervously. “Who’s there? He quavered. “Come on out where I can see you.” “Oh... you can’t see me,” The voice seemed to come out of the air. Ness backed away from the tree and looked up into the branches. An owl stared back, its wide eyes unblinking. “Birds don’t talk” Ness muttered to himself. “There has to be someone else around.”

“There is... me. Now sit down and stop

shaking. I'm not going to hurt you."

Ness unwillingly did as he was told, but was ready to run at a moments notice.

"That's better," said the voice. Now we can talk."

"I can't talk to a nothing," Ness retorted with a show of bravery he didn't feel. "Who are you?"

"Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm your great uncle Jasper"

"Rubbish." Ness gasped. "Old Jasper died years ago and I don't believe in ghosts, so whoever you are, come on out and stop fooling around."

"Well, I'm a ghost and you'll just have to take my word for it." the voice said petulantly. "I want to give you some advice before you go blundering off again and get hurt."

At the mention of getting hurt Ness began to take notice. "What sort of advice?" he asked curiously, "and how could I get hurt?"

“I’ll show you. Just follow me. Oh, sorry, I forgot, you can’t see me. Never mind. Just walk slowly towards that old dead tree and stop immediately when I tell you.”

Ness did as he was told, stopping just short of the tree.
“Now..... look down, what do you see?”

Ness stared hard for a moment then noticed something hidden in the grass. “It’s a chain! he exclaimed. And it’s fastened to a metal thing. What’s it there for?”

“That, young man is a trap, nasty dangerous things. Stand on that and it could take your leg off. That’s what could hurt you.” Ness shuddered at the thought. Then he remembered. “Muffin’s still out there somewhere” he gasped.” He might get trapped.”

“Don’t worry, he’s safe. He’ll be here in a minute”, Jasper assured him, “then I’ll show you how to spring this trap and it’ll be one less to worry about. Find a stick, as big as you can carry and bring it here.”

Ness searched around in the undergrowth and emerged dragging a long branch. “Will this do?” he panted.

“Yes, that’ll do, and here comes Muffin, right on time” If I were you I’d keep quiet about me for a while. He’s not going to believe you anyway.”

Muffin flopped down beside Ness, breathing heavily from the exertion.

“Got stuck” he puffed, “in a prickly vine thing..... I had a devil of a job getting out. What’s the big stick for Ness? And why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“Seen a ghost!! Ha ha,” Ness laughed. “I told you there aren’t any ghosts Muffin old chap.” A loud chuckle made him look around in alarm but Muffin didn’t react.

“It’s all right. Only members of my family can hear me,” the voice explained. “Just don’t start chattering to me and he won’t suspect a thing.”

“Ok, what do I do with the stick?” Ness hissed.

“What was that Ness, did you say something?”

“Just talking to myself,” Ness said hastily. “You asked what the stick was for and now I’m going to show you. What’s next?” he whispered.

“Pick up the stick, one at each end. That’s right. Now carry it forward over the top of the trap.” Ness repeated the instructions to Muffin as he heard them. “Now drop it.” There was a crash of metal as the heavy stick triggered the evil looking jaws. Muffin jumped back in alarm.

“What was that?” he yelped. “Something bit the stick and broke it in two.”

Ness stared, unable to believe the power of those metal teeth. The thought of getting his leg caught in it made his stomach churn. “I think it’s time we went home Muffin,” he said quietly. One scare a day is enough.”

“Stick to the path and you’ll be safe,” old Jasper called as they left. “And come back tomorrow. We’ll clear the rest of the traps and move on to the next lesson.”

Loud laughter seemed to fill the air as the two adventurers

walked carefully along the beaten track and in the distance
Ness heard excited barking. “That’ll be Anna” he said
absentmindedly. “She’s probably chasing a rabbit.”

Muffin looked at him strangely and shook his head. “Talking
to yourself again Ness.” He chuckled. “All the excitement’s
been too much. You need a good nights sleep.”

“Mmmm, that’ll be it,” Ness agreed. “And I’ll probably
wake up and find it was all a dream,” he murmured
to himself. “After all, nobody believes in ghosts.”

CHAPTER TWO

Lord Ness rarely slept late, unlike Muffin, who would have breakfast in bed if it were possible. Today was no different, even though he'd tossed and turned all night going over and over in his mind the extraordinary experience of the previous evening. He decided he must go again, alone this time, and prove to himself that it wasn't just a strange dream.

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CHAPTER THREE

There were few times when Ness was stuck for an answer. This was one of them, and try as he might he couldn't come up with believable story to explain his new found talents. He mumbled something about having to concentrate on finding the path to the secret beach and set off, seemingly uncertain, down the narrow twisting track. His only hope now was to convince Muffin that he wasn't infallible and the only way to do

that was to get lost, well not really lost, but to appear to be so. They arrived safely back at the main path where Ness knew, thanks to Jasper, he should turn right. Instead he appeared unsure.

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CHAPTER FOUR

They talked well into the night, long after the rest of the household had gone to bed. Muffin was too excited to sleep.

His discovery of the secret beach and the fact that Ness had been wrong about its whereabouts ran endlessly through his mind.

“You know Ness,” he whispered. “For a while I really thought you were in touch with old Jasper and he was telling you what to do.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

The next few days were turmoil of activity for Lord Ness and Muffin. Together they combed the woodland and gradually they began to see a difference. The rabbits, so numerous on their first jaunt were becoming difficult to find and Ness could see victory in sight.

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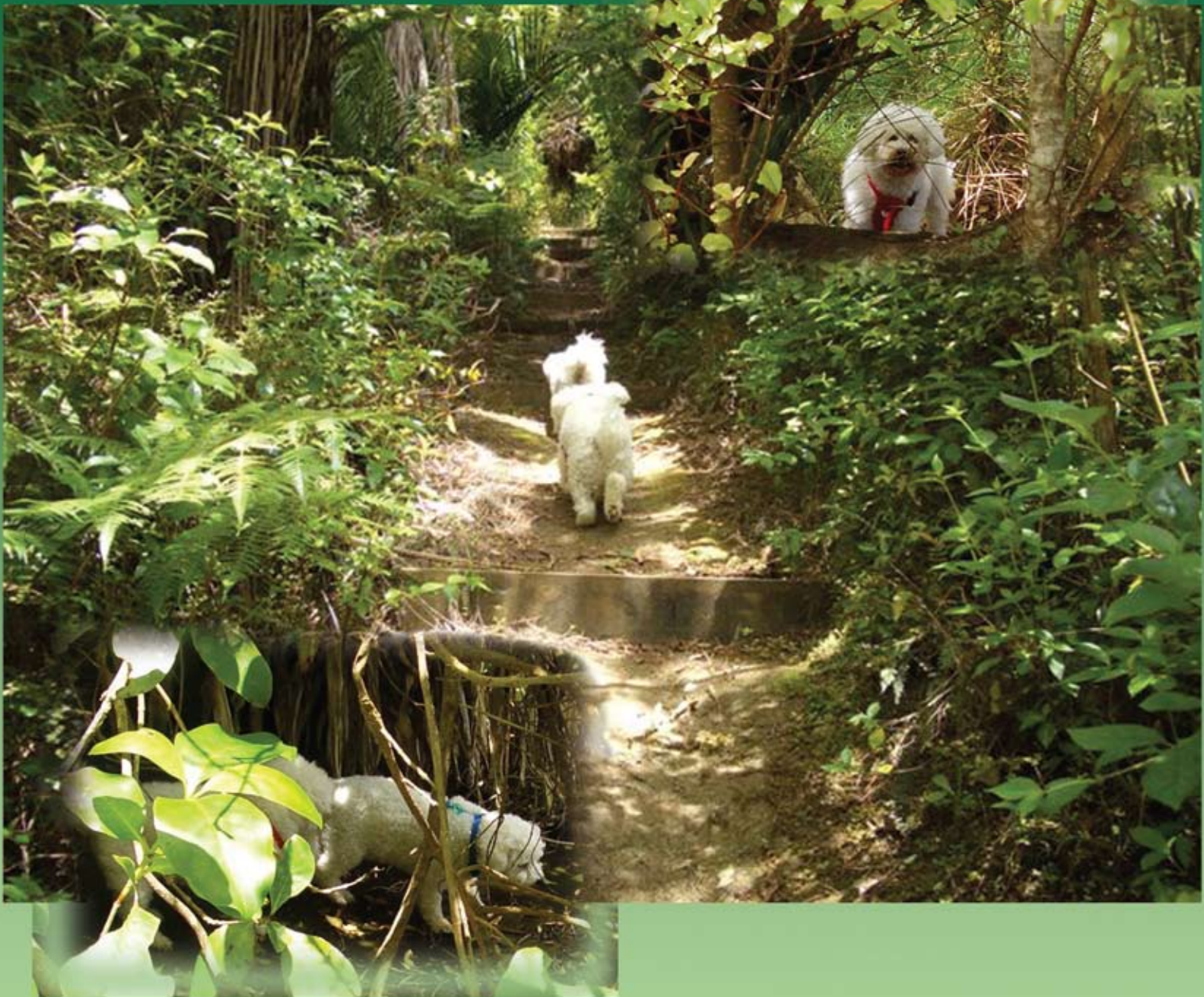
CHAPTER SIX

Ness spent another restless night. Jasper's news turned over and over in his mind as he tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable position in a bed that seemed to have suddenly become lumpy and uncomfortable.

Muffin slept like a log, blissfully unaware of the changes about to be made to his hitherto uncomplicated life.

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“See you on the Island,” he murmured happily







ADVENTURE ISLAND

WITH LORD NESS AND MUFFIN

CHAPTER ONE

Every morning at dawn, while the rest of the household were still sleeping, Ness waited patiently under the old oak tree, hoping for a sign that would prove that the ghosts of Jasper and Anna were real. “Well,” he mused, “as real as ghosts can be.”

Jasper, Ness’s great uncle, was the previous Lord of the Manor. Anna was his lifelong friend and gamekeeper on the estate.

With their guidance Ness and his friend Muffin had worked together to clear the woods of a plague of rabbits, an adventure only Ness could remember. Now he was beginning to think the whole episode was a figment of his imagination. “Two weeks, and not a sign of them,” he murmured, “Surely it couldn’t have been a dream.” A flutter of wings in the branches above scattered a shower of crystal dewdrops. An owl hooted softly as Ness looked up.

“I don’t suppose you know where they are?” he sighed. The owl stared back, its big eyes unblinking, and, or so it seemed. Ness, shook its head.

“Oh well, might as well go home.” Ness decided. He took one last look around the clearing before heading sadly along the secret track that led back to the Manor.

“Where have you been? We’ve looked everywhere for you.” Muffin, who was rarely out of bed at that time of the morning, was wide awake and cheerful when he met Ness at the door.

“Just the usual morning walk,” Ness answered quietly. “I thought I’d work up an appetite before breakfast.”

“I’ve already had mine” Muffin warned. “You’d better be quick, the butler’s in a hurry and he wasn’t pleased about you not being here.”

“Why? What’s the rush?” Nothing important to do,” Ness said grumpily. “Just another day watching him pottering around in the garden.”

“Aha, that’s where you’re wrong,” Muffin smiled. “Today we’re going to do something completely different. Something we’ve never done before.”

Ness's glum look was quickly replaced by a smile. "Different!!!... What?...Where? When?" he barked impatiently. "Come on Muff, don't keep me in suspense."

"Ok, calm down." Muffin waited until Ness stopped hopping around, and then whispered. "We're going fishing."

Ness's smile slowly faded. "Oh no, not that again," he grumbled. "Remember the last time. We walked miles to get to his favourite fishing spot and then you ate all the bait and we didn't catch anything."

"Ah, yes," Muffin chuckled, "but at least I had fish for lunch, even if I was sick afterwards. But you haven't heard the best part yet," he added. "We won't be walking anywhere. We're going..... on the Yacht!!!!!!!!!!!"

CHAPTER TWO

Suddenly Jasper was forgotten. Fishing on the yacht, Whoopee!!. What an adventure, Ness thought as he hurriedly munched his food. Jeeves, the butler had often talked about sailing across the clear waters of the gulf with Lord Jasper and Anna. He told stories of dolphins and orcas swimming around the yacht, and moonlit nights fishing from the deck with fresh fish sizzling in the pan. But the yacht hadn't been used since Ness had become Lord of the Manor. 'Now what would make him decide to go sailing again,' he wondered.

“Not so fast. You'll make yourself sick.”
Ness jumped and looked around in alarm, almost choking on a mouthful of biscuit.

“Is that you Jasper?” he spluttered.....

CHAPTER THREE

The butler dragged the dinghy to the water's edge, carefully loaded all the provisions, and then turned his attention to the boys.

“Right, before we do anything else you have to put these on.” He carefully strapped a strange looking orange coat around Muffin then turned to Ness. “This one belonged to your great uncle Jasper,” he said, holding up a rather battered life jacket. “He was a real sea dog, as much at home on a boat as he was on land. You could have learned a lot about sailing from him.” “And I still can,” Ness thought, “just as soon as we get aboard.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

When the headsail was hoisted the yacht seemed to take on a life of its own, lifting high into the waves, then crashing down into the troughs with spray showering the deck. After their first misgivings Ness and Muff soon got used to the constant motion and were enjoying every minute. The butler sat quietly, hand on

the tiller, his eyes constantly scanning the horizon until they left the harbour behind and sailed swiftly into the open waters of the gulf.....

CHAPTER FIVE

“Eeeek, what’s that?” Muffin yelped in alarm. In a flash Ness was beside him closely followed by the butler.

“There’s nothing there,” Ness scoffed. “You must be seeing things.”

“I was seeing things,” Muff protested. “Big black things with eyes. Right there in front of us.”

CHAPTER SIX

As the yacht glided quietly into the tiny bay the butler quickly let go the ropes, which, he explained, were correctly called ‘sheets’, and turned the boat around to head into the

breeze. Then, with the sails hanging loosely they came to a stop
and he dropped the anchor.

“Right boys,” he said as he lowered and stowed the sails. “Time
for something to eat and then we’ll get down to some serious
fishing.”

as he snuggled under the blanket.” He heard a soft chuckle
in the darkness. “That’s something you’ll never know” Jasper
whispered. “What matters is that you did the right thing. Now
move over and stop hogging all the bed, it’s chilly out here.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

As usual Ness was awake long before Muffin and the butler. The
sun was just rising as he climbed out of the cabin and stretched
his legs.

“Good morning Lord Ness.” Anna greeted him cheerfully. “We
have a busy day ahead.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

There were no paths; at least none that Ness and Muff could see. A narrow strip of sand at the base of a low cliff encircled the island. Leaving Jeeves to tie the dinghy securely to a rock, Ness and Muffin trotted along, inspecting every inch of the shoreline.

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CHAPTER NINE

“Right, I suppose you want to know why you’re here,” Jasper said, “or have you figured it out?”

Something to do with the paw prints,” Ness guessed. “A stray dog perhaps.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Now!” Jasper yelled. “Chase it away. It’s found the nest.” Ness did no such thing. Instead he stood up and said politely. “I say young fellow. You weren’t by any chance thinking of stealing those eggs were you?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Unlike Muffin and Jeeves, who were sleeping soundly after a excellent dinner, Ness couldn't settle down. He tossed and turned, wondering what Jasper and Anna thought about his failed efforts to educate the nest robber.

“So, you decided to do it your way did you?”
Jasper said sternly as Ness pulled the blanket over his head and tried once again to get to sleep.....

CHAPTER TWELVE

The butler put his hands over his ears. For half an hour his two charges had jabbered constantly about their adventure but he couldn't understand a word they were saying, except for perhaps two. He was almost certain he'd heard the words whales and dolphins more than once. He shook his head in disbelief as he hoisted the sail. “No, It's not possible,” he muttered. “There hasn't been a whale seen in these parts since Jasper was here.”

The ghostly pair were still laughing as Ness made his way back home.





MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE
LORD NESS AND MUFFIN
WITH
SNOWY AND REMEDY

as told by:
Tony Bullock

Chapter One

MOUNTAIN ADVENTURE

LORD NESS AND MUFFIN

WITH

SNOWY AND REM

“Wake up Muffin, I think we’re almost there”. Lord Ness nudged his sleepy friend.

“Almost where,” Muffin groaned rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“The ranch old chap, , don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.” Ness hopped up onto the plane seat and stared out of the tiny window. “Look Muff, I can see the mountains and that must be the airport just below us.”

Muffin closed his eyes tightly. “Don’t want to look,” he muttered. “I don’t like being up in the air in this little plane. Let me go back to sleep and wake me when we’ve landed.”

“But the landing’s the best bit,” Ness protested, “and you’re going to miss it.”

Muffin wasn’t impressed. With his paws firmly pressed against his eyes he curled up on the seat as the small plane made its final approach to the Alamosa Airport runway, bounced a couple of times, then taxied slowly to the terminal. Lord Ness and Muffin’s great mountain adventure was about to begin.

The reception area was nothing like the huge Los Angeles airport they’d left a few hours earlier, where the Butler had managed to get them lost in the massive terminal buildings, resulting in a mad scramble to catch the plane.

Ness looked carefully at the small group of people waiting in the lounge. “There they are” he yelled. “That’s got to be my cousins Snowy and Rem.”

Muffin face brightened. They were really here, no more scary, noisy, uncomfortable aeroplanes. No more dinners served on funny trays. He did a little jig on the solid ground and for the first time since they left home in New Zealand he began to share Ness's excitement.

"Hi there." A rather fierce looking fellow with long black hair, whiskers, and wearing a cowboy hat stretched out a paw in welcome.

Ness shook it eagerly. "You must be Rem and I guess that's Snowy." he laughed, pointing to the smaller, white dog
"Couldn't get you two mixed up.

"Actually no." the little dog piped up. I'm Rem, he's Snowy." He smiled at Ness puzzlement. "Don't worry, everybody makes that mistake, you'll get used to it"

"I think you'd better come and say hello to the staff, Trish and Christy, they've been hopping about like cats on hot bricks waiting to see you again" Snowy chipped in. Tell your Butler to bring the luggage and put it in the truck and we'll be on our way. I bet you're ready for some real food, Rem and I have

found the best little Mexican restaurant in the State. You're going to love it."

The food was good Ness had to admit. Nothing like the roasts, grilled steaks or fried fish that the Butler served up on a daily basis but he made a mental note to add these spicy recipes to the menu when they arrived home in New Zealand. He made himself comfortable on the back seat of the truck and licked his lips appreciatively as he watched the mountainous countryside roll by. This was what they were here for, the adventure of a lifetime exploring the mountains of New Mexico. He shivered with excited anticipation, and then, lulled by the hum of the engine, drifted into a deep sleep.

"Come on sleepyheads. We're home"

Ness and Muffin awoke with a jump at Snowy's cheerful wake up call. They hopped out of the truck and looked around in amazement. "Is all this yours?" Muffin asked wide eyed. The valley, fringed with towering mountains, seemed to stretch forever. Along the middle a river snaked through the scrubland before disappearing under a bridge.

“Not all ours” Rem chuckled, “but there’s more than enough. The mountains belong to everybody so we have all the space we need, and we don’t have to put a fence around it.”

“Hey, come back here,” Snowy yelled urgently.

“You mean me?” Ness looked round in surprise. “I was just going to cool my feet in the river.”

“Not yet you aren’t” Snowy growled. “We have strict rules here and the most important one is that nobody wanders off alone. There are some dangerous animals here that you won’t be used to.”

Ness looked around in alarm and scurried back. “Dangerous animals,” he yelped. “Nobody said anything about them when you invited us to come here.”

“That’s because they aren’t dangerous if you follow the rules,” Rem said brightly. “Come inside and we’ll explain what you can and cannot do. Then you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Ness and Muffin looked around anxiously then rushed indoors.

This was beginning to sound serious. They hadn't started their adventure or even moved away from the house yet and already they were being told of the dangers. They settled down on a rug by the fire and waited for their hosts to explain the rules. This was a setback they hadn't envisaged, if the danger was so great close to the house what it would be like in the mountains? Ness was beginning to think that their holiday was going to be more of an adventure than they'd expected.

"Don't worry," Rem reassured him. "Snowy knows what he's doing. He'll make sure we're safe."

Snowy took a long drink, wiped his mouth then made himself comfortable. "Right" he said at last, "just a few rules that all of us have to abide by. Ness and Muffin, you're new here so I must stress that this is important. First of all, as I said before nobody wanders away alone. This is a big area and getting lost is only one of the dangers. Fall into a river and you can be swept away. Fall into a gully and you'll be lucky not to break a leg and be stuck there with no way of escape. Then there are the wild animals, none of which you'll have seen before, and without some knowledge of what to expect you could put yourselves into extreme danger."

Muffin shivered. “What sort of animals?” he quavered. We have wild animals at home but Ness usually scares them away.”

Snowy looked thoughtful. “Well, I’m not familiar with New Zealand wildlife but here we have bears and cougars for a start, then there are the wolves, and even eagles that are big enough to carry any one of us away.” He paused and looked around. “All those,” he said, “are usually only found in the hills and mountains. Down here in the valley the biggest danger to newcomers are the rattlers, they are hard to spot. A bite from one of those is very serious, sometimes fatal. Now, any questions about what I’ve told you so far?”

“I’ve got one,” Ness said eagerly. “I know what a bear looks like, I’ve got one at home and it sleeps with me. But what are cougars and rattlers?”

Snowy smiled. “Well, a rattler is a kind of snake; it has a deadly poison in its fangs. The problem with snakes is they are hard to spot so you have to be very careful where you tread. Cougars are a different kettle of fish. ‘Big cats’ they call them here. Get them cornered and you’ll really be in trouble. They have teeth and claws that’ll rip you apart in seconds.

“Cats” Ness scoffed. We have cats back home. I haven’t found one that scared me. Muffin and I chase them for fun. And some of them are almost as big as me,” he added proudly.

“As big as you eh.” Rem chuckled quietly. Wait till you see ours, they’re bigger than your Butler. I don’t think you’ll be chasing them for fun.”

“And our bears are even bigger than the cats, and they’re not stuffed” Snowy laughed. “I’d like to see you cuddled up to one of those in bed. Right, it’s almost bedtime, any more questions.”

I’ve got one,” Muffin said eagerly. “Are fish dangerous?” Snowy looked puzzled. “I don’t think so,” he muttered. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, you said you had them in a kettle so I thought they must bite or something,” Muffin said innocently. “Why don’t you put them in the river?”

“Come on Muffin old chap, I’ll explain later. It’s time you were in bed,” Ness chortled. Good night all.

Chapter Two

HORSE SENSE

“He’s still snoring Ness,” Muffin whispered. “Do you think we should wake him up?”

Ness stood on his hind legs against the bed and looked at the Butler. “No, better leave him,” he decided. “Someone’s cooking bacon and eggs so we don’t need him at the moment. Let’s go and see if Snowy and Rem are up yet.”

Chapter Three

A PRICKLY PROBLEM

As the first rays of the sun reached over the hills and cast shadows along the valley floor the four intrepid travellers

crawled out of bed, rubbed their eyes sleepily then looked out of the window.

“It’s going to be a perfect day, “Snowy predicted. ‘No sign of rain so we’ll be able to follow the river for some of the way. That’ll be much more fun than riding on a dusty road.”

“And we can stop at the swimming hole at lunchtime,” Rem added. “A cool swim before lunch will be great.”.....

Chapter Four

Once again the boys could follow the river. As they rode along the winding narrow track that now climbed steeply towards the mountain the going got tougher. The forest thinned to a few scrubby bushes and the hillside was now a mix of loose rocks and boulders. The river, rushing over the rough sandstone, had carved out a narrow ravine along which the ponies picked their way carefully. No longer shaded by tall trees the hot afternoon sun exhausted them and frequent stops to drink the cool mountain water were essential.

“Is it much farther?” Ness gasped as for the umpteenth time they clambered back onto their ponies.....

Chapter Five

Snowy double checked the knot securing the canoe to a tree and, satisfied that it wouldn't drift away for a second time, joined the others.

"Lunch time," he announced. "We'll have something to eat then decide what to do for the rest of the day."

"Let's go gold mining," Muffin chirped eagerly as they paddled back along the stream.

Snowy wasn't enthusiastic. "Gold, Humph, Never seen the sense in it myself," he mumbled. "You can't eat it, drink it or wear it. Useless stuff. We'd be better off digging for bones.".....

Chapter Six

The rest of the evening passed quietly for the now subdued group. The butler, hearing the commotion had rushed to the camp to see what the trouble was. He couldn't make any sense of the excited yapping but close inspection at the edge of the stream gave him a clue.

"Looks like some sort of cat," he muttered. "A big one too by the size of these paw prints. I'd better get the others.".....

Chapter Seven

"Remember what I told you. Stay within shouting distance." The butler repeated his stern warning as the boys set out to explore the waterfall. Once again they all agreed happily. This was their last day, in the morning they would be packing up the camp and heading home. Had they stopped as they passed the old mine they might have seen something that would put all thoughts of fun out of their minds, but gold mining was yesterday's

adventure. They trotted along the dusty track chattering cheerfully. A waterfall and a swim would be a great way to end the holiday.

settled uncomfortably on the rocky ground and drifted into a disturbed sleep.....

Chapter Eight

The flames from the roaring fire flickered, throwing moving shadows around the camp site and lighting the interior of the truck with a warm, comforting glow. The rocks, carefully chosen and packed in the truck the previous day were now scattered on the ground. The boys, safe and secure, snuggled into their blankets and whispered excitedly about the afternoons terrifying outcome. Outside, with a good stock of firewood close by and the rifle within easy reach the butler settled down for his stint as watchman.....

Chapter Nine

The canoe was carried forward on the wall of water at breathtaking speed. Snow and Ness paddled with all their strength, desperately trying to keep control as their flimsy craft raced between jagged boulders. One mistake and the canoe would turn side on in the current and would be instantly capsized and dashed to pieces.

“Hang on tight,” Snowy yelled as they hurtled headlong into the canyon, “this is where it gets really bad.”

Chapter Ten

“Have another one.” Rem pushed the plate piled high with lamb chops in front of Ness then turned his attention to the roast pork. Muffin, with half a sausage sticking out from the side of his mouth eyed the chops hungrily. The ‘home safe’ party as Trish named it, was going full swing. With a blanket spread on the lawn, a wood fire to keep away the evening chill and

enough food to feed an army, the boys eagerly recounted their amazing white water race from danger, into more danger, and then, finally, sinking in sight of home.

“I think flying out of the canyon and flopping down into the whirlpool,” was the best bit,” Muffin spluttered through a mouthful of meat. “Wow! That was some crash when we hit the water.”.....



