**Ease and Exertion**

It was a bleak mid-autumn afternoon in the library. The heating was whirring, the windows were grey and the librarians were wrapped up in jumpers. The books were waiting to be used.

With a tap, tap, tap up the stairs went Mr Trickey, his walking stick tinged with dead leaf matter from outside and depositing little wet, brown flakes of it on every step. Mr Trickey had recently dyed his hair Warm Auburn and bought a new brown corduroy jacket. Despite his eight decades of age, he had succeeded in defying grey. He matched nature's autumnal dregs rather nicely.

He knew which floor he wanted and, unusually for the library, someone else was going to want it that afternoon too. On Floor 5 were the books in languages not many local residents could read. When asking for directions at Reception, Mr Trickey had incited the suppressed nosiness of the librarians, and they were now having a whispered debate about whether he was a Cebuano enthusiast, or a Nahuatl learner, or a Frisian philologist. But he wasn't. Nor was his soon-to-be aisle companion.

He tap, tapped through the Floor 5 door, with its fading attempt at a jaunty painted pattern. He limped past the regiment of metal bookshelves, until he spotted one that had a laminated sheet saying 'MOLDOVAN CONFINED' blue-tacked to its near end. He stopped. He let out a dry rumble of a sigh.

And then a breeze of daring rippled through him, propelling him down the Moldovan aisle against all his logic. He knew there was a Confined book there that he wanted to "unconfine", in a manner of speaking, but he hadn't really believed he was going to touch it. The idea had been a fantasy, a thing to turn over in his mind, a sort of toy beyond his purchasing power. He had predicted that, in reality, he would end up standing here, staring, sighing and going home. Yet now he felt as if the book were chuckling at his naivety, as it sprouted claws that were hooking in his soul.

A scurrying of feet jolted his thoughts into a calmer vein. Hunched and slightly glowing in the warmth of her jumper, a curious librarian came down the aisle and tried hard to look as if she were shelving a book. Her book was *Mansfield Park* and it was quite clearly in English, not Moldavian or whatever their official language was called in those forested parts.

"Er... humph... hmm," said Mr Trickey.

"Hello, there. Ooh, silly me, look, *Mansfield Park!* Wrong book, wrong shelf!"

"Ah, *M-M-Mansfield Park.* N-nobody l-l-likes that one."

She winced. "Well, some would say it's too pious. But I'd say if you know where to look, you can find an awful lot of Austen's wisdom in there. For example, 'Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure'. Isn't that clever?"

"Well..."

"It is clever. All the more so because the character Mary Crawford says it about herself, knowing she's being selfish, and probably thinking she's hit upon a charming style of excuse. The implication, for me at least, is that she certainly shouldn't receive Fanny's sympathy when she says it. If Mary was aware of her own selfishness, then she could have resolved to be unselfish and not kept Fanny waiting for ages, but it was just too easy for her to carry on enjoying herself. There *was* a cure, but she couldn't be bothered with it. Later on, Fanny says, 'We have all a better guide within ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be.' Austen has faith that people can improve, but the way to improve, to use a phrase you often find in her novels, is to *exert yourself*... Are you all right?"

Mr Trickey had indeed gone rather red. "Y-yes, v-v-very well, thank you."

"Anyway, here's me going on. I'd better leave you to your research. What are you interested in, by the way?"

"M-M-Moldova."

A pause.

"How very fascinating. Can we help you with that at all?"

Mr Trickey wanted help with something different, but could not express his want. "No, no."

"Well, let us know if you change your mind."

As her mouse-like frame scurried away to nourish the wonderings downstairs, Mr Trickey exerted himself. He took one step towards the tempting Moldovan book, then another, then another, and then he lunged forward and grabbed it. He stuffed it into his brown leather bag, his walking stick clattering to the ground in his anxiety to get the deed done. Striving to muster any scraps of energy that might be left in his aged frame, he creaked his joints to collect the stick. He began to tap tap down the aisle and towards the jauntily painted door, only to find that it was already opening and a face was peering through and that face was the face of Dr Sly.

"Well, hello there, John Trickey," said Dr Sly in the voice of a snake. "So, what have you mulled over in the Moldova section?"

Mr Trickey could feel himself blushing, even though he had always been told as a child that one shouldn't let one's emotions come through in such a cowardly way.

"You've got a book in that bag, haven't you, John?"

"N-n-no, no, n-not at all."

"Yes, you have. And you're going to give it to Cassandra, aren't you?"

Now, there was so much Mr Trickey would have liked to say here. It would, he thought, be expedient to begin with a précis of what that librarian had just said — about the importance of making a conscious effort on others' behalf. He himself was consciously prepared to take the risk of stealing — well, not stealing, really, divesting the library of something all its readers had pretty much ignored — in order to make that lovely lady at their evening class happy. And Dr Sly, what kind, helpful things did Dr Sly ever do? He with his three PhDs, taking up a place in the class which someone else — someone who perhaps hadn't had the chance to study at that level before — might have really wanted and deserved. Not on. It just wasn't on.

However, all that came out from this indignant thought process was, "Humph. Harrumph. D-d-d-don't know what you mean."

"You might as well put it back, John. Her interests have moved on. She's not into that topic anymore at all. You know her, her mind moves at the speed of light. She saw a documentary about... ahem... Jane Austen at the weekend and now all she wants is *Pride and Prejudice,* *Sense and Sensibility*, and so on. You'd be better off in the fiction section downstairs."

Dr Sly's eyes were wide, his smile oozing merciful warmth. Within Mr Trickey, long-held dislike battled against a sudden, new suspicion that he had not given Dr Sly's personableness due credit before. To state so openly, so frankly, what Cassandra wanted... it looked so *convincing.*

Perhaps, just perhaps, giving others the benefit of the doubt was another way of exerting oneself.

"I-I am choosing to believe you, Dr Sly. I hope... I hope... I h-h-hope I'm making the right choice. Good afternoon."

Tap, tap, tap down the aisle. Book back on shelf. Tap, tap, tap to the stairs and away.

Down at Reception, a gracefully youthful mature lady, adorned with make-up and jewellery, was sitting in a wheelchair. Mr Trickey reached the bottom of the stairs, spotted her, and his heart squeezed.

"I'm ever so sorry about the lack of a lift," the mousy librarian was saying to the lady, still holding the copy of *Mansfield Park.* "We've been trying to raise the funding for months, but we just can't get it to come through."

"Oh, not to worry at all," replied the lady. "I only wanted to consult one book, and my companion is fetching it for me from Floor 5, I believe."

"Ah, the gentleman with the interest in Moldova?"

"You've met him? Isn't he marvellous? So dashing, and he has *three* PhDs!"

"Really?"

Mr Trickey longed to go over and announce that he also possessed PhDs but was too modest to use the title of Doctor, that he could deconstruct and analyse, collate and interpret, square-root and extrapolate the value of *x*, but it would not have been true, and probably not enough of the words would have got out if it had been.

He sank into a lime-green armchair that was screened from the women by a vending machine, and continued to listen.

"And he's so supportive of my developing interests, you wouldn't believe it..."

The door to the stairs creaked open.

"Ah, *there* he is! Did you find it?"

"Yes, my dear," answered the snake-like tones. "And guess who else I found? Only John Trickey. He was lurking about trying to steal half the Moldovan section, stuffing piles of books into his leather bag."

"Goodness me! Did you hear that?" Cassandra directed this at the librarian.

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Absolutely. We've always thought there was something funny about him, Cassandra and I, and this has proved it."

"I'd better have a look." The librarian put *Mansfield Park* down on the desk and scurried upstairs.

"Oh, thank you, my love, I *will* enjoy this!" Behind the vending machine, Mr Trickey could picture the radiance of Cassandra's smile as she flicked through the book that she would have been able to keep forever if he had had his way.

"Shall we head to the reading room, then, my dear? You know the book's Confined, so we can only look at it inside the library."

"Yes, yes. Wasn't it selfish of John to try and steal books? I mean, he is a bit odd, but you'd think he'd know that one shouldn't do that in a library."

"Incredibly selfish. But then, each to his own."

Anger burned in Mr Trickey so strongly that for once he felt as if words could fly out of him. Insults, accusations, excuses and revelations were careering around in his mind, beating against each other and longing to be free. However, when he heaved himself out of the armchair, peered around the vending machine, and saw the joy in Cassandra's eyes and the consciousness in Dr Sly's of having more luck than was deserved, he knew that he had reached the hour of his greatest exertion. Leaving Cassandra in the bliss of unknowingness, he gathered up his dignity and walked away. He would be there in the future if she needed him, but somehow he suspected that would not be the case.