

Threw Lake by Les Bill Gates

Len Harry sat in his armchair in front of a roaring log fire, a steaming cup of cocoa warming his hands, and contemplated the events leading up to this day. The sound of teeming rain on the iron roof almost muffled the sound of the crackling fire.

It had all begun about six months ago when he had received a letter from the proprietors of the Stony Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme. Len had never learned to read, but his good friend, Sam Collins, had read it to him.

‘Middletown will be rebuilt, every building will be relocated,’ it had said, ‘for the future benefit of everyone ... the Threw River will be dammed to create a new lake ... to provide hydro-electric power ... in the best interests of the people of Middletown.’

“Bah!” Sam had retorted. “How will it benefit us? For the benefit of them in the city, that’s all it is.”

A new sound disturbed Len from his thoughts. He heard a knock at the front door. He rose and hobbled into the hallway. As he passed, he caught a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror. He appeared stooped, his hair was thinning and his face looked pale and drawn. *I’m getting old*, he thought.

He opened the door a crack, with the chain still connected. “Who is it?” He knew it was Vetti by the smell of garlic.

“It’s time to go, Mr Harry.”

“I’m not going.”

“You have to leave now. The police are outside. If you don’t leave voluntarily, then I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask them to arrest you.” The bailiff’s tone sounded sympathetic, but firm.

Len closed the door and removed the chain. He looked at the short, fat man and ushered him in with a turn of his head. Vetti followed him to the living room.

“Get ready to leave now, Mr Harry.”

“I need some time ...”

Vetti looked at the old man who remained deep in thought. He had to find a way to get through to him. His eyes roamed the room, and then lit upon the mantelpiece where he saw a photograph of a smiling woman in a silver frame. The photo stood between two unusual ornaments.

“Who’s that in the photo? She’s very pretty.”

Len looked up and sighed. “That’s Molly, my wife. She disappeared nine years ago. Took off with that doctor – Heath his name was. They’d been having an affair for several months before I found out. I never knew what she saw in him. He had a nose like a beak.”

“Why do you keep her photo on the mantelpiece?”

“I still love her.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Harry. A kind person like you didn’t deserve that. What are the ornaments? They look like some kind of foreign artefacts.”

“They’re from Egypt. The one on the left is a statuette in the form of a mummy. The ancient Egyptians called it a Shabti and believed it would assist them in the afterlife. The one on the right is an amulet representing one of their most powerful gods, Horus, who had a man's body and a hawk's head.”

“Are they valuable?”

“No, I don’t think so. I have many Egyptian artefacts in the house. It’s my hobby to collect them. I get most of them from antique stores and opportunity shops.”

Vetti placed a hand on Len's shoulder. "It's time to go now, Mr Harry. Come, I'll help you pack a few things."

The old man winced as he eased himself to his feet, and then shuffled off towards the bedroom. Vetti followed. *He's made the bed and everything's tidy*, Vetti thought. *He's made no attempt to get ready to leave.*

Len moved to an old wooden wardrobe – one with a long mirror on the door – and reached up to the top shelf to pull down a tatty brown suitcase. He placed the opened case on the bed and took a couple of shirts and a pair of trousers from the wardrobe. He pulled out a drawer from his chest of drawers and selected some more clothes. Then he disappeared into the bathroom, and returned a moment later with his washing things and toothbrush. He threw in a book and a torch. After he had secured the suitcase, Len sat on the bed. A tear rolled down his right cheek.

"Don't worry, Mr Harry. I'll take you to the motel now. The house movers will deal with the rest."

Len followed Vetti outside and turned to lock the door. He took one final tearful look at the blue timber building and the green corrugated iron roof.

"What's under the house?" Vetti asked.

"Only some old rubbish."

Vetti ushered the old man into the car and they set off for the Threw Motel.

"See, the motel is just the same as it was before," Vetti said, when they pulled into the car park. "You'll be fine here for a couple of days until your house is ready."

Len didn't sleep well that night. The motel room felt warm and comfortable, but it was strange to him – it was not home. He had lived all his life in Middletown, the last thirty years in the same house. Even the air seemed different here. He thought again about Molly. She had been a local girl too – they were related. Tongues had

wagged when they had married. “Incest breeds imbeciles,” some had said. The theory was never tested. Len and Molly didn’t have any children.

The next day, Len looked out from his motel window and noticed a truck inching its way along the road. He recognised the house on the back of the truck by its blue paint and the green roofing iron with patches of rust. He pulled on his boots, donned a heavy woollen overcoat and wrapped a scarf around his neck.

Moments later, he had stepped in behind the truck and followed it while it crawled towards the west. He glanced southwards towards the Threw River. In the distance, he saw the snow-capped peaks of the Stony Mountains, bathed in sunshine. A cold wind whipped around his bare face, but he set his mind to the task and plodded after the truck.

This was the new Middletown, yet he noticed a familiarity about the place. A waft of the scent of freshly baked bread reached his nostrils when he passed the bakery on his left. St Peter’s Church stood on the right, then the community hall on the left and the primary school opposite the hall. Every building occupied the same position it had in the old town. The park and children’s playground also looked just the same, except they seemed tidier and there was no graffiti.

Then he passed Sam Collins’ place, and knew that his own section would be just around the corner.

The truck turned onto the section and came to a halt. Len waited more than an hour while the men on the truck used a crane to manoeuvre the house into position on its new foundations. The wind was biting, but Len didn’t want to miss a thing.

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Two days later, Vetti phoned the motel. “Mr Harry, the house is ready. I’ll pick you up in half an hour.”

“It’s not your jo...”

“Don’t worry. I know it’s not part of my job, but I’d just like to help you.”

When they arrived at the house, Len unlocked the door and they passed inside. Len gasped when he saw that everything was in place. The movers had arranged the chairs and table in the same way as before. A log fire burned in the grate.

“Even the photo and the artefacts are just as I left them!”

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Two weeks later, the dam gates were closed and the flooding of the Threw River began. After several days, the old town was completely submerged and much of the surrounding farmland was under water. Then the engineers opened the sluice gates and the turbines began to turn.

The old town soon became a popular diving spot for divers from the city. A group arrived one weekend and hired a boat. When two of the divers rose to the surface, they had some disturbing news.

“Haul on these ropes and see what the lake threw up!”

They had discovered two coffins with embalmed bodies inside. A Shabti accompanied one of them; the other had an amulet depicting a man's body and a hawk's head.

The townspeople began to gossip.

The bodies were taken to the city for examination. A coroner’s investigation confirmed that they belonged to Molly Harry and Dr. Thomas Heath.