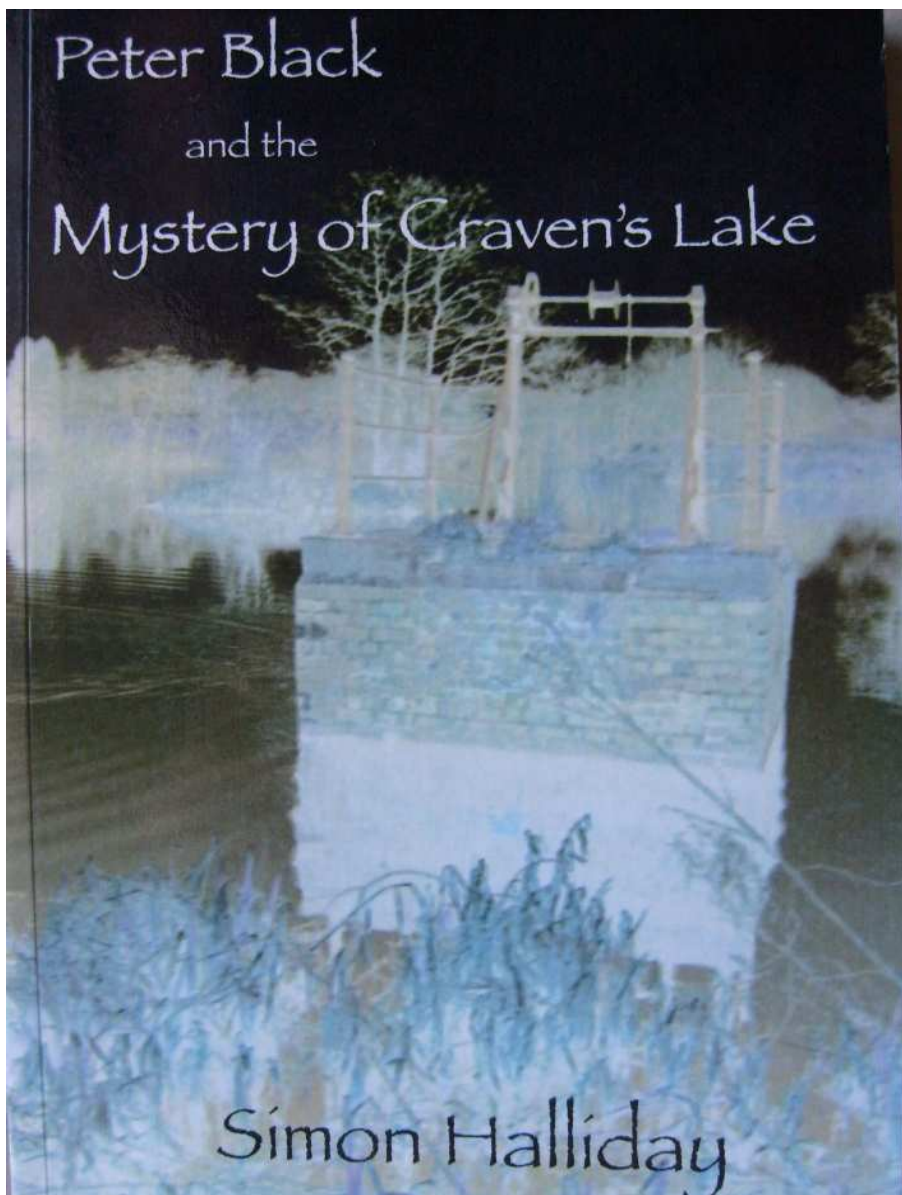


Peter Black

and the

Mystery of Craven's Lake

Simon Halliday



Peter Black and the Mystery of Craven's Lake

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1. Mr. Craven's Friends

“Peter, get in here right away! I need some help with lunch.” Mrs Black wasn’t happy. She’d been waiting all morning for the new kitchen furniture to arrive and it still wasn’t here. She had four children and Peter was the eldest; she always expected him to be more responsible than the others but today he wasn’t being anything *like* responsible.

“Sorry mum” said Peter, trailing a line of thick brown mud across the new kitchen carpet.

“Peter! Look at all that!” She grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him straight back out into the garden. “I just don’t know what’s got into you today” she complained. “Take your shoes off! You *knew* I had to stay in here this morning, waiting for the new table and chairs. You promised me you’d be back by ten thirty. It’s nearly one o’clock now and I *still* haven’t heard anything useful from you. Well... What have you got to report?” She looked down at him expectantly. He was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, wondering how to explain what he’d seen.

“I can’t really tell you yet” he said, watching her carefully. Mrs. Black was a large and intimidating woman. Even though she was his mum, Peter was sometimes cautious about what he told her. She’d sent him out this morning to discover more about one of the neighbours - Mr. Craven, who was a strange and quiet man. Mrs. Black had been trying to learn more about him for a few months now. She was a very curious person, but of course this really meant she was very nosey. She wanted to know everyone’s business, and most of the time she *did* know it. This behaviour from Peter was unacceptable - she’d never heard anything like it.

“You can’t really tell me?” she thundered. “What do you mean?” The house seemed to shake with the booming sound of her voice. Peter was twelve years old now but quite small for his age. He looked up with watery blue eyes, but he refused to cry. He was feeling quite shaky already, because what he *had* seen was troubling him very much.

Mr. Craven was sitting at his living-room table. There was a pot of ink and a large quill pen resting on some blotting paper. His house was old and musty - everyone thought it was haunted, but if you asked Mr. Craven about that he’d probably say something like ‘Mind your own business, you nasty little child.’ It was because of this that he wasn’t very popular but he didn’t seem to care about that. He was about fifty years old and had a

big fat belly. He had scruffy, greasy hair and horrible dark eyes. Nobody knew anything about him, for he lived alone and never went out from his house. As he sat here today he was trying to remember someone's name. It was someone he used to know, a woman. He could remember her face - she had a lovely face with beautiful eyes; but for some reason he couldn't remember her name. He picked up the quill pen and began to draw her... She had long dark hair and a flowing dress with flowers on. He was drifting away in a day-dream, when suddenly there was a loud *crashing* sound from his front door. A cat escaped across the garden from a pile of broken flower pots, never to be seen.

Mr. Craven ran out to the hallway to see what the noise was. There seemed to be nothing there. Nothing had come through the letter-box and he could see nothing through the window.

'Kids' he muttered through his thick beard. 'Dirty, noisy, stupid *kids*.' Then he returned to his living-room; but as he stood looking down at his lovely wooden table and the picture he'd begun, he suddenly lost his temper. He grabbed the picture and ripped it up then stormed back across to his window, looking for someone to shout at. Eventually he decided to shout anyway. He opened the window then yelled "I'll get you soon; I know you're up to something!" He slammed the window shut and paced around his living-room, his mind busy with nasty ideas.

Peter Black finished making the sandwiches as his younger brothers and sister came into the kitchen. There was Lucy, James and Rowan. They all got along quite well, but every so often Rowan would annoy Peter. He seemed to be very silly at times and Peter couldn't understand why. Peter had a very calm and logical mind - he loved working out puzzles and mysteries. Sometimes people were amazed at how quickly he could understand things. One of the best things he'd done was about a year ago when next door's cat had gone missing. Nobody could guess where it was - it had simply vanished without a trace. Then Peter found a tiny hair in his dad's car - the cat had jumped into the car and hidden there one day. Peter got a list of all the places his dad had been and managed to track down the cat. It had travelled nearly one hundred miles away but was being carefully looked after by some people who his dad had been visiting. After the cat was returned safe and well Peter's next door neighbour had rewarded him with trips to the cinema and meals out. That was just one example of how Peter managed to get things sorted out. Today he wasn't doing so well because his mum was still quite angry with him. He wished he could explain what he'd seen but he knew he had to find out more first. As his brothers and his sister grabbed the sandwiches without saying 'thank-you', he realised he couldn't eat anything himself. His mind was on Mr. Craven and he was

wondering what to do next.

When lunch was over and Peter's mum had forced him to eat two sandwiches, he decided to tell James what he'd seen.

Peter and James were sitting out in the back garden on the bench - it was a sunny day and there were plenty of tiny birds and butterflies around. Peter was wondering how to tell his story and James was getting a bit impatient as he sat there.

"Peter, I've got to get back to Richard's house - he's got this brilliant new game..."

"James, you've got to listen" said Peter quickly. "Just forget about all that for now. You're going to be interested in this." Something about the way Peter was speaking *did* make James interested. He stopped complaining and looked across at Peter, waiting to hear the news. James was always happy. He was eleven years old now and although he seemed quite immature for his age, he was good company - he was fascinated by nearly everything and he was usually interested in anything new.

"James, you have to believe me when I tell you this" said Peter.

"Fine" said James. "I'll believe you. What have you seen?"

"Mr. Craven isn't alone in that house" said Peter slowly.

"He is!" protested James. "Everyone knows he

doesn't have any family; he hasn't got any friends, either."

"But I just told you" said Peter. "You must believe me. I saw three other people in there this morning."

"So *what*? Maybe people *do* visit him sometimes. Maybe he owed them money... Or was it the police?"

"No James, just listen to me. There were two women and one man. They all looked very serious, as if they were going to get very angry. I was peeping through the living-room window. Mr. Craven has a large table in there - it's right in the middle of the room and he often seems to be sitting there. This morning these other three were there too - but they were really strange-looking, almost as if they weren't really human."

"Yeah right, Peter. You're telling me they were aliens from another planet, or ghosts?"

"James, don't be like this. I don't know what I'm saying, but I'm telling you - he had some very odd guests this morning. I'm going to investigate some more, and I'm asking you to help me. I could always ask someone else instead, if you just think I'm mad..."

James was quick to react: "No Peter...I don't think that. I'll come along and help out. What do you want me to do?"

"For now" said Peter, "just don't tell anybody else about what I've said."

2. The Lake

A few more days passed and nothing else seemed to be happening. Mrs. Black had gone very quiet, not asking anything more about Mr. Craven. Peter, of course, didn't stop thinking about him - he kept wondering what he might be up to. Suddenly James sprang into the room: "Peter, it's today!" Peter was sitting on the living-room floor, surrounded by books - most of them about plant-life or unusual fungus.

"What other day would it be? What do you mean?" asked Peter, slowly looking up.

"Peter, you know it's the summer fair today. Mr. Hopkins is going to dress up again - don't you want to find out what he's going to be? You can't miss it; remember what happened last year?" Peter had to admit it had been fun. Most of the things which were supposed to happen went terribly wrong - the school band lost their music and tried to busk as many pieces as they could (mostly Christmas carols!), then the raffle became a disaster when one of the donkeys ate all the tickets. "We'll have to wait and see what order they

come out in” said the teacher who was running the raffle, but nobody found that very funny. The best thing was when Mr. Hopkins’s beard got stuck in the tombola. Mr. Hopkins was the school headmaster, a friendly and gentle man - but somehow everyone still wanted to laugh when he got his beard stuck in things. It wasn’t unusual for this to happen, but the summer fair was the most public event where it *had*. Usually it was in a classroom or the school canteen.

“OK, OK” agreed Peter. “If only to see Mr. Hopkins making a fool of himself, I’ll come along. But I must warn you - I’ll want to leave early. I’ve got some more research to do tonight.”

“You and your research” sighed James. “What are you reading about *now*? The rare fungus of Father Christmas’s bum?”

“James, you’re disgusting” snapped Peter. “If you must know, I *am* researching fungus. Look at this book - ‘fungus of the lakeside’. I need to find out about something...” Peter’s voice trailed off, as if he was lost in his thoughts.

“Are you going to tell me what it is?” asked James. Peter sometimes kept everything to himself.

“Well... you know I was round at Mr. Craven’s house last week.” James’s face fell and he looked quite nervous. Like many people, he was afraid of Mr. Craven. There had been one time when Mr. Craven had shouted at him for standing outside his house - but James had only been waiting to meet someone.

“Yes” said James. “I know you’ve been going there. You told me about those other people but I’ve tried not to think about it.”

“That, James, is why you’re my assistant and I’m not yours. It’s not because you’re younger than me - it’s because you get scared too easily. Whilst you’ve been ‘trying not to think about it’, I’ve been thinking about nothing else.”

“OK” said James, wondering what else his brother had found out. “So what are you telling me?” Peter suddenly stood up and went across to another table. James glanced down to see what was on the table - a filthy pile of green moss and weeds. “I wondered what the smell was!” he said. “Mum’s going to freak out - why have you brought *that lot* in here?”

“Be patient, James, and I’ll explain. Now then, where do you think I got these fine examples of plant life?”

“Fine examples? It looks like a mushy pile of sick.”

“James, you’re not being very helpful. Think, now...”

“I suppose” said James, “that it’s from Mr. Craven’s lake.”

“Yes! Exactly right. And why would I bring in all this from Mr. Craven’s lake?” James looked lost and Peter had to laugh. “James, you must come with me to the lake” he said. “It’s a fascinating place.”

“I’m sure” said James. “Alright, I’ll come - but when? We can’t be late for the fair.”

Peter sighed and went back over to the book he’d been reading. He slammed it shut. “I think we just

about have time” he said. “If we go right now.”

“Now?!” James pointed to the slushy green pile on the table. “What about all that?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you move it?”

“Er, yes” said Peter, and James knew exactly what was going to happen next. “I think you should.”

“I should move it? But...”

“Thanks, James. You’re going to make a great assistant.”

“What’s all this ‘assistant’ talk? Since when was I your assistant? I’m your brother!” James was indignant.

“Never mind, James. You’ll get used to it.” Peter slapped him on the back as he walked out of the living-room. James was left alone in the room with a stinking pile of wet plant-life. The next thing he heard was Peter’s jovial voice from down the hallway - “Morning, mum!” Mrs. Black was walking from the kitchen towards the living-room and she was calling for James! Instinctively James ran over to the green pile and, trying not to breathe in the awful smell, he picked it up. He ran out then managed to get through the front door. He ran into the street, nearly tripping over Suzy’s dog (Suzy’s dog was always sniffing around by the front garden), and finally he got to the nearby park. There were plenty of litter bins around here, so he dumped the stuff into one of the bins and slapped his hands together - trying to get rid of the bits that were left.

“Good work!” came Peter’s voice. He was laughing as he approached. James looked up and tried to appear

annoyed with Peter but it wasn't working.

"You see" said Peter. "You're making a fine assistant already."

"That was cruel" said James, breathing fast after his run.

"Don't worry about it. You could see it as a...test. I was just checking to see if you could think fast enough and move quickly when danger approaches. You know what I mean...?" Peter had become very serious now, looking deeply into James's eyes.

"I think I do" said James. "You're talking about Mr..."

"Yes. Mr. Craven's lake. We're going right now. Follow me and don't do anything unexpected, Okay?"

"Okay boss" said James.

Peter smiled. "Don't overdo it" he said. "You can call me Peter."

As the boys approached Mr. Craven's house, the sky had become quite gloomy. The sun was still shining but the clouds seemed to have appeared from nowhere; James shivered as the air grew cooler. "Peter, I'm cold" he complained.

"Don't worry about it" said Peter. "Keep your mind on the job. We might have to get into the lake, yet. You'd certainly be cold then."

"What? Get in the lake?!" James was ready for turning back but Peter remained calm as he was looking up at Mr. Craven's house.

"James" he said, "I learned something interesting from

the plants that came from his lake. There were some very unusual chemicals in there - as if Mr. Craven has something in his lake which he shouldn't have. I'm not sure how fish could survive in there, although people still call it a fishing lake."

"I've never seen anyone fish there" said James.

"Nor have I. I think this could be important. It's possible he's using the lake for something else."

"But what?"

"I don't know" said Peter. "But whatever you do, don't get seen. He's at home - you can see his car there on the back drive." James squinted his eyes as if that would help him to see. Through a very tiny gap between the house and some trees he could just make out some blue metal, glinting slightly in the sun. Peter led the way, following a long hedge which led away from the house - then he jumped over and dived into a nearby bush. James did the same and Peter looked up to make sure he understood everything. "Mr. Craven never comes out to the garden" said Peter, "but he does go out to the lake. Look across there - you can see where he sits sometimes in the afternoons." By the lake there was a comfortable-looking chair, with newspapers and magazines lying around. "I've seen him sit there for hours" continued Peter. "He reads all the time. And sometimes he writes. Must be quite clever."

"Depends what he's reading" said James.

"True" admitted Peter. "But I think he's quite sharp. He seems to suspect he's being watched sometimes as

well. I nearly got caught last time.”

“That’s great, Peter. So what are we going to do?”

“Don’t worry, but there’s something we need to check. I’m going over to see his books and his writings; you’re going to be the decoy.”

“The *decoy*? That sounds like the worst job possible!”

“It’s not so bad. Listen to me. I need to find out what he’s reading and you need to make sure he doesn’t catch me there. You see that drainpipe on the house?” Peter was pointing and so James looked up.

“You want me to climb up there?” asked James.

“No, not at all. It probably wouldn’t take your weight.”

“Hey, I’m not...”

“I know, you’re not really fat; but it’s a flimsy drainpipe. He’s already concerned about it and when the wind’s blowing I’ve seen him come out to check that it’s alright. What you need to do is hide around the other side. When Mr. Craven comes out to the lake, he always uses that patio door. You need to be out of view from there. If he comes out then you must shake the drainpipe to distract him and run all the way round the house. You can come to get me whilst he’s tending to the drainpipe. Got it?”

“OK. It sounds simple enough” said James, “but do you think that will give us enough time to escape?”

“No” said Peter. “Not if he doesn’t take very long checking the drainpipe. The other thing you need to do is give me a signal on *this*.” Peter produced two very small walkie-talkies as if from nowhere, handing one

over to James.

James was amazed. “Where did *they* come from?” he asked in astonishment.

“I couldn’t leave anything to chance” explained Peter. “These are much simpler than mobile phones. We can use these from now on to keep in touch. Don’t let anyone see it if possible - we don’t want people getting suspicious. I think we’ve just begun to scratch the surface of this mystery, we’re going to have to be clever.”

“OK” said James, “but I think you’ve got a big head-start there.”

“Don’t put yourself down” said Peter. “Take the walkie-talkie. Now, switch it on.” He watched for a few minutes as James fumbled around with the device.

At last James flicked a switch. “No James, that just changes the band.”

“The band?”

“Never mind. Look - you must keep that one switched where it was. The power switch is here.”

James flicked back the band switch and switched on the power.

“Good” said Peter, patiently. “Now press that switch to speak.” After about ten minutes James had worked out how to use the walkie-talkie, and Peter was hoping that he’d remember it. He was beginning to wonder if there was a better assistant somewhere but he wanted to give James more of a chance. He *was* his brother, after all - and he thought he was alright.

“I’ve got it” said James, noticing some hesitance in Peter. “Don’t worry” he said. “I won’t let you down.” James looked very sincere and Peter finally believed him.

“Alright - I’m going now. Remember, Mr. Craven might not come out - if you don’t see him, you don’t have to do anything at all. I’ll let you know by the walkie-talkie.” Peter ran towards the lake, carefully ducking behind hedges and hiding behind trees whenever possible. He couldn’t see any movement in the house and thought he might succeed in his mission without any problems. As he approached the chair by the lake and the piles of books, magazines and notes, some ducks on the lake started quacking noisily. They flew across the lake after a lot of splashing about and Peter froze. He was about ten metres from his target and he was well sheltered by trees. The noise seemed to die down as the ducks retreated far across the lake, but Peter’s head was buzzing - he was feeling quite nervous now, as he was sure Mr. Craven would be suspicious. He glanced across towards the house, but his view was completely blocked by trees. He hadn’t heard anything from that direction and his walkie-talkie remained silent. The final ten metres seemed like the longest - Peter ran and got to the books. He tried not to disturb them too much whilst he looked at them all. There were novels about ghosts and vampires; there were newspapers from the past few days. There were magazines about carpentry and gardening. Then he

spotted something of interest. It was a beautiful green book, with gold paint around the spine and on the front cover. The title was 'The Art of Forgery.' Peter noticed there was some notepaper tucked inside. Slowly, carefully, he went to open the book. His hand was shaking as he reached out when suddenly - *hiss, crackle...* The walkie-talkie was coming to life. He heard James's voice, an urgent and forceful whisper coming loudly down the speaker. James was obviously running - he sounded out of breath:

"Peter, he's coming. He's totally ignored the drainpipe. I don't think he saw me... I think I've got away but he's heading towards *you!*" Peter didn't panic but impulsively he grabbed the piece of paper from the book. He knew it seemed wrong but he was convinced that this could be useful. If he was making a mistake, he could return it soon. He ran into the woods and got to a place where he could see the house. He saw Mr. Craven stalking angrily around, muttering to himself. His face was wrinkled, looking mean and ready to explode at someone. Peter was hoping it wouldn't be at himself or James. He couldn't see James anywhere and he decided to risk using the walkie-talkie. "Are you OK?" he asked.

James's voice came back very clearly: "Yes, no problem" he said. "I'm almost back home. How are *you?*"

"I'm fine" said Peter. "Put your walkie-talkie away." He was impressed that James had got away so quickly;

now all he had to worry about was *himself*.

Eventually Mr. Craven went back into his house. He was looking annoyed but obviously he'd given up trying to catch the two brothers. It seemed strange, however, that he was going back inside. He must have been coming out in the first place, so why would he change his mind and go back in without doing anything? 'He should be checking his drainpipe by now' thought Peter, but as he watched it seemed that Mr. Craven wasn't coming back out at all. Peter had no idea what to do. He could try to run back across the garden and risk getting caught, or he could wait a little longer. He decided to wait and after about fifteen minutes of fighting off little flies from the trees, he was ready to escape. He stood up but then heard a loud siren approaching - a police car! 'The crafty fellow' thought Peter. 'He's called the police on us.' It was interesting - why would Mr. Craven call the police if he wasn't to be trusted? Surely it was too much of a risk. Peter watched two policemen walk up the drive and go into the house. After a few minutes he saw Mr. Craven pointing up at the drainpipe and towards where James had been hiding. He *had* seen him - surely that's what he was telling the police. Before long, the police left. They didn't seem interested in searching around the garden, the woods or the lake. Peter breathed a sigh of relief. To be on the safe side, he thought, he could run right through the woods to the far side. It would take

him much longer to get home but at least it would save him from being caught. It was obvious Mr. Craven was going to be on the lookout now. As he walked home he pulled the borrowed piece of paper from his pocket. He opened up the scruffy notepaper which turned out to have quite neat handwriting. It read: 'The Main Square, 10.00. Mr. And Mrs. Hargreaves. Don't be late!' Peter was puzzled by this but he assumed Mr. Craven was meeting these people for breakfast. Perhaps he did have friends after all! Or they could be bad company, planning a crime. He knew the main square in town and wondered if this meeting time was already out of date. The paper seemed old and he thought it was probably from a while ago. He returned the paper to his pocket and walked home.

3. The Summer Fair

“Peter, where on earth have you been?” demanded James. He was standing by the stairs, looking disapprovingly at his older brother.

“Well it’s nice to see you, too” said Peter.

“Why did you take so long to get back? I thought Mr. Craven had caught you.” James looked genuinely upset.

“James, don’t worry” said Peter. “Anyway, if you were so concerned then why didn’t you use the walkie-talkie to contact me?” James looked down at where he’d put it away in his pocket and realised how slow he’d been.

“Whoops” he said. “I never thought of that.”

“Well then, just relax and leave me alone - I’m fine. If you must know, I could have got in trouble with the police as well.”

“The *police*?” James was shocked. “What happened?”

“Mr. Craven had heard you and he was looking very suspicious indeed. He went back in and called the police. They didn’t seem to do much, though.”

“Phew, it’s a good job they didn’t. It would have been hard to explain why you were trespassing on Mr. Craven’s property.”

“Yes. So I suppose you’re waiting to go to the summer fair?” Peter could see James had his coat on and was clutching a small wallet.

“I’ve been waiting for ages” complained James. “We’re going to be late.”

“Come on, then” said Peter. “We’ll soon be there.”

The two brothers set off walking - it only took ten minutes to get to the school by foot. As they approached the front gates they could hear loud music and see lots of people in bright clothes, a big bouncy castle and donkeys wandering up and down the field.

“I wonder where Mr. Hopkins is?” said James, scanning the whole playground. As the boys entered the front gate, one of the teachers was waiting:

“Two pounds each, boys” said Mrs. Proust.

“What?” said Peter. “That seems expensive. Surely it wasn’t that much last year.”

“That’s right” she replied. “It was one pound fifty; but it has cost us more to run everything this year - and there aren’t as many people helping out. We’ve had to pay someone to come in and look after the donkeys and the tombola.”

“I see. Oh well, there’s four pounds for both of us.” Peter handed over the money, and James was looking grateful.

“Thanks Peter - very good of you to pay for me as

well.”

“No problem” said Peter, “*you’re* buying lunch!” That was the great thing about Peter - he was always one step ahead no matter what the issue was. James laughed and nodded in agreement but he hadn’t realised lunch was going to be quite a bit more expensive than four pounds. Peter watched as James ran ahead - he’d seen an enormous gorilla which he suspected was Mr. Hopkins. There was always a fancy dress competition at the summer fair but it was different than most fancy dress competitions. It involved the teachers dressing up and the children had to guess who they all were. There were always six teachers taking part, including Mr. Hopkins - Mrs. Proust always refused to dress up and that’s why she got the job of collecting the entrance money. Until everyone who wanted to take part had made their guesses and written them down, the teachers weren’t allowed to speak - that would make it too easy. So after half an hour of the fair opening, the fancy dress competition was going to be judged. The teachers said they got too hot in their costumes and they got frustrated not being able to speak if they had to stay like that for too long.

“Mr. Hopkins!” said James. “I’m sure that’s you. No-one else would dress as a gorilla.” The gorilla turned to James and began to act like a boxer, pretending to hit him. James laughed and went to find the other teachers. He only had ten minutes to get his predictions in.

Peter wasn’t interested in taking part in all of this - he

thought it was rather foolish and a bit of a waste of time, but he did find it interesting to come along just to study how everyone was acting. Somehow everybody seemed to change at this sort of occasion and Peter really couldn't understand why. People told him that it was a time for everyone to relax and enjoy themselves after a hard term of work but he didn't see much point in that himself. He'd rather get on with something useful like reading a good book. Still, he'd decided to make the most of it like he always did - and he was also hoping that the rest of his family might be here. Usually his youngest brother, Rowan, loved the summer fair. Peter was sure he'd see Rowan laughing as he rode a donkey or crying as he lost all his money on the tombola. As he continued to walk past the 'lucky dip' and the 'bat the rat' stalls, eventually he found his youngest brother - sure enough, Rowan was standing there crying his eyes out. He was at the tombola stall and was complaining bitterly that it wasn't fair. Peter remembered what Mrs. Proust had said - they'd had to pay someone to come in and run the tombola stall. He looked up to see who it was and could hardly believe his eyes. He gasped and under his breath said "Mr. Craven. It can't be." But it was Mr. Craven - staring down darkly at Rowan, saying nothing and not even attempting to calm him down. Somehow he'd managed to get put in charge of the tombola. Peter wasn't sure if he should just walk away quickly and hope that he hadn't been noticed, or if he should go up and calmly

have a go at the tombola. He didn't think Mr. Craven would know who he was and he thought this might be a chance to find out a bit more about him. Slowly, he walked up to Rowan and put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, Rowan" he said. "I'll see if I can do any better." Rowan looked up through his tears and managed to smile when he saw his brother.

"It's a pound" said Mr. Craven through yellow teeth, in a rough and quite scary voice. He wasn't making people want to play on the tombola at all.

"OK" said Peter, not wanting to be put off. He could see why Rowan was so upset - Mr. Craven seemed to be doing his best to frighten them, but the truth was that he wasn't trying to be that way at all. It was just his natural manner. Peter handed over a pound and Mr. Craven grabbed it with a blackened hand. There were scabs and sores over some of his fingers and he was quick to take the pound then put both the coin and his hand out of sight. Peter tried to make it look as if he wasn't at all interested in Mr. Craven, but of course he was trying to find as many clues as he could.

"It's a lovely day" said Peter, brightly. "I can see why you've decided to help out here."

"Yes" replied Mr. Craven. "It's lovely. I like to help out when I can. It's not for the money I'm doing it, just to help the school." Rowan had stopped crying now and was following the conversation.

"Do you get paid then?" he asked.

"Oh, not much" said Mr. Craven, laughing quite softly.

“It’s just enough to buy a drink or two.”

‘Hmmm’ thought Peter, ‘I’ll bet he means beer - or whiskey.’ Peter was wondering why someone who owned such a large house, woodland and a beautiful lake would want to be working on a tombola at a school fair. He didn’t believe Mr. Craven’s story about wanting to help the school, it simply didn’t seem like the real reason.

“Well then, boy” said Mr. Craven. “Aren’t you going to try your luck?” He nodded towards the tombola, a simple potato sack full of sawdust. Hidden in the sawdust were lolly sticks, most of which didn’t win you anything. Some of them would get you a prize, so Peter put his hand into the sawdust and drew out a stick.

“Well, well!” cried Mr. Craven. “We have a winner!” His whole mood had changed. Peter and Rowan couldn’t believe it. Both of them actually smiled up at Mr. Craven but they quickly stopped because he wasn’t really smiling back at them. He was only pretending to be pleased for them.

“So what have I won?” asked Peter.

“Let’s see now. Number 47 it says on the stick. That’s here somewhere...” He rooted around through some paper, and found the list he needed. “Ah yes...” Then he stopped and stared at Peter.

“Yes?” asked Peter.

“It’s something special” said Mr. Craven, slowly. His face had changed again and he looked much more sincere this time. His eyes were wide and his face was

glowing strangely. "You've won the swatting stick."
"What?" Peter was totally confused. "What's a swatting stick? Is it for killing flies?"

"Ahh, it might sound like that - but, no. It's not for flies." Mr. Craven had taken on a strange, mystical quality. He suddenly looked very wise, as if he could tell them all the secrets of the universe. "A swatting stick is very important - especially for someone like you, Peter Black." Peter was shocked and he couldn't hide it. How did Mr. Craven know his name? "You will find it very useful" he continued. "A swatting stick will help you to find things out - it has magical powers. You'll be able to use it at school and at home..." Both Peter and Rowan were staring at Mr. Craven, wondering what was happening. This strange man then glanced up to check there was nobody else who was listening and his expressions suddenly became quite sinister. "Oh," he said, "you'll also be able to use it to help *me*."

Peter stared in silence for a few moments: "You?" he asked.

"Oh yes, because there's a little mystery that I need solving. A boy as bright as you should be able to help me, especially with the help of the swatting stick."

"So where is this amazing stick?" asked Peter. He wasn't at all convinced by Mr. Craven's story, but whilst he glanced around to check Rowan was still alright and not crying again, Mr. Craven brought the most wonderful object they'd ever seen out from behind

the table. It was only the size of a pencil but it was made of ivory and had green emeralds and red rubies all over it. Peter was sure that when he first saw it there was an orange glow all around the stick for just a split second, but he couldn't see that now. Rowan didn't seem so impressed.

"What do you think?" asked Mr. Craven, slowly. "Will you help me?" Peter's eyes were fixed on the swatting stick but he nodded.

"Good" said Mr. Craven. "Take the stick. You'll do well." Slowly Peter reached out and as he took the stick he felt a slight rush of energy through his fingers. Some of his hair felt as if it were sticking up and his head felt very light. Mr. Craven was smiling but it wasn't a very nice smile. Rowan was watching all of this and he didn't trust Mr. Craven at all.

"I don't want to help you" said Rowan. "It's only a stupid stick, anyway. I think you're talking a load of rubbish."

"Very well" said Mr. Craven. "As I thought. Peter is the one who can use it properly."

"Yes" said Peter. "It's very interesting." He put the swatting stick down on the table and looked straight into Mr. Craven's eyes. "I will help you" he said. "I'll call round tomorrow - I know where you live; but I don't want this stick. I don't need it." Mr. Craven looked shocked at first but then quickly managed to smile again - a horrid, false smile.

"Really?" he asked. "You want to let this fine item go

to someone else?”

“Not really” he said. “But I’m not taking it. I don’t think it would do me any good.”

“Very well” said Mr. Craven. “But you’ll be sorry...”

“We’ll arrive early, before school” said Peter.

Peter and Rowan walked away quickly as Mr. Craven returned his precious swatting stick behind the table.

Peter’s mind was spinning fast. “What *is* that man up to?” he said, not expecting an answer.

“I don’t know” said Rowan.

“Oh, of course you don’t” said Peter. He hadn’t really been asking Rowan because Rowan never seemed to know anything. ‘Poor Rowan’ thought some people, but Peter didn’t even have time to think that. “I just need to find James” he said. “We’ve got to go and visit Mr. Craven first thing tomorrow.”