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A Village Feud

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Grandmama Charter-Plackett thumped open the front door, stormed in and dumped her suitcases on the hall floor. Harriet, bed-making upstairs, heard the hullabaloo and went on to the landing to see who'd arrived.

'Mother-in-law! What on earth's the matter?'

'You may well ask! May I have a whisky to revive myself?'

Harriet glanced at her watch. 'Bit early, but obviously you look to have need of one.' She ran down the stairs. 'What's brought this on?'

'Whisky first, please.' She rocked slightly on her feet and Harriet took her elbow, but Grandmama shook her off. 'I'm not in my dotage, Harriet, thank you very much.'

She marched into the sitting room and flung herself down in the best chair in the house, a tan leather winged effort carefully chosen by Jimbo for his personal use. She held out her hand.

Harriet hastily poured her a whisky and gave it to her. 'Water?'

But Grandmama had downed the first whisky and was holding out her glass for a refill.

'I don't want to interfere, but at this time of day . . .'

'Another one and then we'll have a coffee together and I'll tell you all.'

While she made the coffee Harriet could hear her mother-in-law huffing and puffing and muttering to herself. Thoughts raced through Harriet's head. Should she ring Jimbo? By the presence of the suitcases in the hall it looked as though his mother was taking up residence. Should she turn her out this minute without giving her a chance to explain her sudden appearance? Give her no time to get settled? Tell her there was no room at the inn?

Carefully balancing the tray, Harriet went through into the sitting room. Grandmama was sitting bolt upright sipping her second whisky.

'Black, I assume?'

She was answered with a nod.

The two of them were silent until Grandmama had finished her second whisky and was leaning back in the chair with more colour in her face.

'Well?' Harriet asked.

'My dear Harriet, I value you greatly, as you know, and what I am going to ask you is really more than flesh and blood should be asked to tolerate but . . .'

Harriet put down her coffee on the table, just in case, all her senses fine-tuned. In her head she was saying: Jimbo, why aren't you here?

'Can I stay until Anna goes? I'll pay towards the housekeeping, I promise.'

Shocked to the core Harriet repeated, 'Until Anna goes?'

'She'll be leaving in July when Peter gets back. Why on earth he felt the need to go back to Africa after all the trauma the children suffered there I do not know. Do you? Really know, I mean?'

'Peter promised to go for a year to set up the mission, but with all the fighting he wasn't able to do that. But

when things so miraculously quietened down he knew he had to go back and complete his work there. He'd got the money we collected for him and there's no one better than Peter to see it spent wisely. They deserve to have someone rooting for them after all they've been through, and Peter knows that if he is there, with God's help, he'll achieve all his objectives. In a kind of way, at the moment those Christians of his need him more than we do, don't they? Otherwise it would look like desertion on his part, right when they need him most.'

'Mmm. I see. He's right, I suppose, but it's put me in a fix. So, if I could just stay here until then?' Grandmama looked pleadingly at Harriet.

'Why?'

'Why? I have put up with just as much as any grown woman should be asked to put up with. The Reverend Anna has taken over my home. Almost every stick and stone of it. I can't take any more.' She got out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes, avoiding smearing her mascara as best she could. 'I have nothing to call my own.'

'In what way?'

'She has her bedroom, of course, but her computer won't fit in, there being no room for a desk, so it's in my sitting room. She's up at six praying or whatever, and I'm disturbed immediately she starts because she prays out loud. Then she takes a bath, my shower not being powerful enough for her – says it's a trickle not a shower – then she's downstairs making breakfast. So I go down to find my kitchen in uproar and have to clear up before I can begin mine – you know how I like things to be neat and tidy, especially at breakfast before one's senses have fully surfaced – then she's off out, slamming the door as she goes.

'Next news she's back, wanting to talk. I can't be doing with moral dilemmas first thing; I like to wake up gently. Then she wants to do her washing at different times from me—'

'Surely that's helpful. Better than the *same* time.'

Grandmama's brown eyes inspected Harriet's, thinking of the times Harriet had disagreed with her and recognizing that now was not the time for that to happen.

'I suppose it is, but washing all about when you want to make a meal?'

'Come on, Katherine, what is it really about?'

Her mother-in-law hesitated. Appeared to form an answer in her head and then changed her mind.

'Come on, tell me. It won't go outside this room.'

'Nowadays they'd label it a personality clash. Frankly, she's damn difficult to get on with. One has an opinion and it's always completely the opposite from hers. She's the most damn cussed woman I've ever met.'

'You did offer her a home. She didn't ask.'

'I know I did, but how was I to know that Peter was off back to Africa and that I'd be stuck with her – for what is it? – eight months till he gets back.'

'I bet you wouldn't be saying all this if it was Peter you'd offered a home to.'

'No, because he's the loveliest man on God's earth, and that's the truth. Jimbo comes a close second, of course . . . a very close second.' Grandmama's eyes went quite dreamy. 'But I defy anyone to find Peter difficult to live with.'

'Even with all his crystal-clear morals? His closeness to God? His love of sinners? His compassion? His spiritual wisdom?'

Grandmama began to smile. 'Well, perhaps his saintliness might grate occasionally, because I'm a Martha and not a Mary where God is concerned. Organizing the tea cups is much more to my liking than contemplating my navel. After all, one must keep a perspective about God, mustn't one? However, Peter is also a real *man*, and a gorgeous, virile one at that, and I can't quite see how he combines the two. However, we won't go there.' Katherine finished her coffee and sat back to ask again. 'So, having got that off my chest, may I stay? You've got the bed space now with the boys and Flick away from home, and I'd be useful for sitting with Fran if you and Jimbo needed to go out. Time you had some freedom where going out's concerned.'

'Look, Katherine, all this has come as a shock to me, I'd no idea things were so difficult for you . . . oops, that's someone at the door.'

A voice called out, 'Anna from the Rectory, Harriet. May I come in?'

'I'm not here,' Katherine whispered.

'Your cases are in the hall.'

'Damn and blast.'

'Come in, Anna.' Harriet got to her feet and went into the hall to greet her.

'Is Katherine here?'

Harriet agreed she was.

'I hoped she might be. Can I have a word?'

'I don't think so.'

'Ah! As bad as that, is it? Doesn't want to explain?'

Harriet nodded. 'Best to give it a while.'

'I'm so sorry. I'll try harder. But I can't go to live at the Rectory because Caroline and the twins need their space. The twins you see are still having a very bad time. They're

worse at night, I'm told. Sometimes Beth screams and screams, and nothing will pacify her. Caroline's at her wits' end. I'll leave Katherine alone, then. Perhaps she might feel better in a day or two. I can't understand what I've done to make her so upset.'

'Let's leave it for now.'

'There's no way I can live in her cottage while she's lodging elsewhere; that simply wouldn't be right. I'll have to find somewhere else. I've an idea one of the weekenders is intending going abroad for a while; that might be an idea, mightn't it? I'll try to work something out with her. Tell Katherine the gas man has been to service the boiler, and it's fine. Tell her I've paid him, so she doesn't need to worry.' Anna opened the front door, made to leave and then turned back to say, 'I'm so sorry about this. I've done nothing deliberately to upset her. I've been so grateful for her kindness in finding me a home, believe me.'

'Don't fret, we'll sort something out,' said Harriet. 'Take your time; you need somewhere where you feel comfortable.'

Harriet drew a deep breath as Anna closed the door. Heavens above. She didn't want her mother-in-law staying; they'd never got on. She peeped round the sitting-room door and saw Grandmama was looking more relaxed, that the double whisky was taking effect. Her eyes closed momentarily and then sprang open but quickly closed again.

She crept into the kitchen and dialled Jimbo's office number.

In a soft whisper she said, 'Jimbo?'

'Who else?'

'It's me.'

'Yes, I thought so. Why are we whispering?'

'Are you sitting comfortably?'

'What's happened?'

'Your mother has moved in.'

'She has? Where?'

'Here, in our house.'

'Oh, God! No.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I'm coming home.' Jimbo replaced the receiver and gazed into space. He really didn't want the old battle-axe to live in their house. Absolutely not. In the same village was bad enough but in the same house? *Help*!

He walked into the front of the Store and spoke to Tom who had a queue at his Post Office section, it being pension day. 'I'm going home. Something urgent has cropped up. Won't be long.' Bel was tapping away at the till. 'Bel? OK?'

'Fine, thanks. I can cope.'

'Good.' Usually he took off his straw boater when he was going out of the Store but today his mind was on more important matters.

He strode into his house to be met by Harriet with her finger to her lips. 'Shush! She's asleep. Come into the kitchen.'

Jimbo perched himself on a stool at the breakfast bar and said, 'Well?'

'Well? No, I am not. She wants to live here until Anna returns to Culworth when Peter comes back.'

'Oh, my word, surely not. Have they had a row?'

'It's what your mother calls a personality clash. But the fact is your mother is not getting all her own way and she feels her space is being invaded by Anna. Who appears to me to be a very easy-going person. Anna's been to have a word with your mother but I wouldn't let her. She's very

sorry it's happened and isn't sure what it's all about. She's hoping to find somewhere else to live in the village so your mother can have her cottage back, but what are the chances of anyone in the village wanting a rector staying in their house? Zilch. I certainly wouldn't.'

'I see.' Jimbo took a biscuit from Harriet's treasured biscuit tin, snapped the lid shut and put the whole of the biscuit in his mouth. He mumbled, 'Well, Harriet, my dearest, it appears we've been landed. I suppose it won't be too bad. Fran's out at school all day and you're busy out of the house a lot of the time. She has a cousin. I have her address somewhere . . . in my desk. Cousin Audrey, similar kind to Mother, maybe they'd suit for a while.'

'The last time your mother stayed with her she swore it would be the last. Said she'd commit suicide rather than go back.'

Jimbo grinned. 'Oh. Well. That's that, then.'

Between gritted teeth Harriet declared it was all right him laughing but what on earth were they going to do?

'Put up with it? Make life so difficult she'll move back home? On the other hand, we could demonstrate our love for her and say gladly, yes, of course she can stay. We'll make the best of it. Be a test of our charity.'

'On the other hand it could be grounds for divorce.'

'Harriet!'

'If she gets on at Fran like she always does then I really will have something to say, because I'm not putting up with it. Fran's self-esteem is quite low enough without your mother telling her she should do better and where's her Charter-Plackett backbone. If she does it will be Fran and me moving out. Fran may not be the brightest star in the firmament but she is the sweetest and kindest and most thoughtful. Though she does know how to rub your

mother up the wrong way and no wonder; Katherine completely undermines her confidence.'

They both heard stirring in the hall and turned to look. It was Grandmama picking up her cases.

Jimbo sprang into action. 'Here, Mother, let me do that. Welcome to the Charter-Plackett residence. It'll be a pleasure having you stay. Which room, Harriet?'

It was on the tip of Harriet's tongue to say, 'How about the shed?' Instead she said, 'Fergus's room. It gets the sun each morning first thing. The left-hand wardrobe is empty.' She sighed, braced herself and went to collect the coffee things from the sitting room.

As Grandmama went up the stairs Harriet heard her say, 'I shall be no trouble, Jimbo, you won't know I'm here.'

We'll wait and see, thought Harriet.

Normally Jimbo would have left her to unpack but the present situation demanded something more. He sat on the bed and said, 'See here, Mother, I'm sorry you can't agree with Anna, though she appears to be a very reasonable person. No, don't start unpacking, just sit down for a moment and listen to me. This is serious.'

Grandmama, eager to fit in, did as she was told.

'I don't agree that three generations living in one house is lovely. It isn't. Fran's just reached the stage when she thinks listening to modern music played as loud as possible is cool. Under no circumstances are you to interfere with that. Harriet tells her when enough is enough and she accepts that. Second. You are not to interfere when the boys and Flick are at home. The whole house echoes with their rushing here and rushing there, and that's how it should be. The kitchen is Harriet's domain and you can help just sometimes. Two women in a kitchen isn't a good

idea, as you have found out. Thirdly, and most importantly, you are not to undermine Fran's self-confidence. Compared to the other three she's very fragile in that department. She's missed out on the Charter-Plackett self-confidence that the others all have. Don't ask me why, I've no idea. Never been as strong physically as the others either, really.'

'I did say when Harriet was expecting her that it was ridiculous having a baby at forty-one.'

'You see what I mean? Cutting remarks about something which is none of your business. It's your sharp tongue, Mother. You can stay, but on my terms.'

Grandmama got out her handkerchief. 'You're not very kind to your mother, Jimbo. You should welcome me with open arms. I am your one and only mother. I never thought I'd hear you say what you've said just now. Never. It's hurtful.'

'I mean what I say, hurtful or not. So long as you behave yourself we'll all get along together fine.'

He stood up and kissed her on the top of her head. She clutched his hand and said, 'I promise to behave myself. I shall go out a lot. After all, you won't need me to help around the house, now you've got Dottie Foskett cleaning for you. Though I very much doubt if she is a suitable person to have in your home with two lusty sons and—'

'Mother, there you go again.'

'Sorry! Sorry! Off you go back to the Store. I might pop in later today and see how things are going on. I did have an idea about—'

But Jimbo had escaped. He kissed Harriet, murmured, 'Good luck!' and charged out of the door, relieved to let Harriet cope.

After he'd gone Grandmama sat in the easy chair too

outfaced to begin unpacking. It wasn't easy, this grandmother business, you weren't quite sure where you fitted in. Nothing felt easy in this life at the moment, especially after her row with her lodger. All Anna had said was, 'I've two more jumpers waiting to go in the airing cupboard. Sorry. Were you wanting to air the sheets? Got to go, or I shall be late and you know what they're like in Little Derehams if you're late.'

Grandmama thought, I should never have flown off the handle. She'd been foolish. Was it really she who said, 'You're a damn nuisance. You've lived on your own far too long. This cottage is small, and though I enjoy the idea of someone coming in and out I do not like the idea of every possible space being taken up with your belongings. The same day every week when I need the airing cupboard to air the sheets before I change the beds, your belongings are spread out over the airing cupboard shelves as though there's no one else living in the house. Well, you'll damn well have cold sheets on your bed and good luck to you.'

She put a hand to her forehead, full of shame. To a rector, too. She wouldn't have said that to Peter had he been lodging with her. Oh, no. She'd have said, 'Leave it with me, I'll see to them, off you go.' What was it about Anna which angered her so much? It was only the little things really, although there was that time when Anna had left a ball point pen on the carpet and it had bled an intense cloud-shaped patch of black ink, which showed up something cruel on her cream carpet. That couldn't be described as little considering how much it cost for that specialist to get it out. Still Anna did offer to pay him herself. Foolishly, she had refused her offer and then, when she found out how much it would cost, regretted

her kindness. But that was nothing compared to the row they'd had this morning. All the little niggles had surfaced one after another and by the time she'd finished Katharine was exhausted and Anna on the verge of tears.

Pacing about her tiny kitchen, she had said, 'I wouldn't mind if you kept the kitchen tidy but you don't. I do the meals for the two of us so what it is you do to make such a mess I really can't think. Well,' Grandmama had drawn in a deep breath, 'you stay here and I shall go to Jimbo's. He's got plenty of room now there's only Fran at home, and I'll leave you to live here. It's by far the simplest solution. I'll be gone when you get back. Make sure you have your key.'

Anna was appalled. 'I can't be put in the position of turning you out of your own home. Please, don't go. I'll go.'

'And where exactly will you go, eh? There's not many people I can think of who would feel comfortable living with a rector.'

Now Anna felt like an alien from outer space. 'You're right, there aren't.'

'Therefore *I* will go. There's nothing more to be said.' Grandmama had flung herself up the stairs, steaming with temper and not daring to say another word because she knew she would go clean over the top and she had her reputation to think about. She was so out of breath when she got to the top of the stairs she couldn't have spoken a word to save her life.

Anyway, she'd gone and done it and here she was, bowed but not beaten. She opened the wardrobe door and realized there weren't nearly enough hangers. She called over the banisters, 'Harriet! Have you any coat-hangers, dear, there certainly are not enough in here.'

'I'll get you some more. Just a minute.'

Harriet, clutching a bundle of hangers she'd unearthed in Fin's room, found Katherine sitting on the end of Fergus's bed, looking like a puppet whose puppeteer had let go of her strings.

'Look, here we are. If that isn't enough I'll get some more. I see you've put your trinkets on that shelf. They look nice on there.'

'Hardly trinkets, my dear. They're my collection of very good solid silver snuff boxes I've collected over the years. Couldn't leave them in the house or they might end up in one of the Reverend Anna's jumble sales. See this one? George the Fourth. Look at the inside – as new, silver gilt. Isn't it beautiful? Mint condition. My absolute delight. I'm sure he actually owned this it's so exceptional. They're worth a fortune now. I'm leaving them to the children. There'll be two each and I hope they realize how lucky they are.'

'I'm sure they will, they're certainly very beautiful. Lunch at one? Must get on.'

'Of course, don't let me put you out, Harriet.' She paused for a moment and then burst out with, 'Harriet! I must tell someone. What's finally put the cat amongst the pigeons is that when I wanted to air the sheets I found every shelf in the airing cupboard with a jumper lying flat drying out. I couldn't put a thing in there. It really was infuriating. When I cheerily asked her when the airing cupboard would be free she said sorry but she had two more jumpers waiting to go in and it would probably be tomorrow before I could use it. No thought whatsoever for me and my affairs. Anyway she got chilly sheets for her bed but I couldn't help it. Could I? Very inconsiderate she

is. Very. And if that harridan comes again to see me I shall be out. Right!'

The harridan was sitting in Peter's study at the Rectory, head in hands, wondering how to resolve the situation of her absent landlady. She'd tried her best to be accommodating but obviously not accommodating enough for Katherine. She'd been so grateful of an offer of a room when Peter, Caroline and the twins came home so unexpectedly from Africa that she never gave a thought as to how difficult it might be to get along with her. After all, they had both thought it would be a matter of days before she, Anna locum rector, would be back at the Abbey in Culworth, but Peter's decision to return to Africa on his own had turned everyone's world topsy-turvy. She had tried to be a reasonable guest, but Katherine always knew best. Had all the answers. Didn't know how to conduct a reasoned argument. Gave way on nothing at all and left her feeling as though she was scarcely out of nappies. Trouble was, they were both self-opinionated.

She guessed that the next thing would be Caroline suggesting she lived in the Rectory as well as using Peter's study, but that wouldn't be quite right. No, certainly not. The three of them had so many problems to sort, so many hang-ups from their dreadful experience in Africa. They'd heard from Peter only yesterday and it appeared that the uprising had been ended by vicious government intervention under pressure from the United Nations and he was thus more free than he had been to pursue his calling. Praise be. People like him were desperately needed. She dwelt for a moment on the kind of person Peter was and wished, oh, so heartily, that she had his scholarly mind, but above all his compassion.