TALES FROM THE SLYMEFOOT
Death and Mystery in the Coquet Valley

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The Slymefoot pub really existed until the 1860s. Its location at the junction of the Rowhope Burn and the River Coquet in the Upper Coquet Valley has never been exactly identified as no traces remain although evidence may exist beneath the road. That implies that the structure was mainly of stone that has long since been dispersed. A meeting place for drovers and smugglers, it relied on the local bush network for information as to the approach of the gaugers, the inspectors who were looking for the illicit whiskey stills, which provided a thriving business to the area. Tradition has it that the key for the door was hidden beneath a large stone and that this key many years later ended up in the local vicar's collection. There is a single large boulder a little up the Rowhope Valley but who knows whether it is the real one or not?

The cover picture is a slightly adapted picture of a pub of that period in Rothbury, as no record exists of the Slymefoot's appearance. All other geographical descriptions in the story are based around the real sites with some extrapolations to allow for historical changes over time. The photographs show the places as they look today. The characters are all imaginary even if they have names from that period and area. Modern spellings have been given for all place names. It should be borne in mind that Upper Coquetdale once
had many more inhabitants than today with small clusters of dwellings, mills and even a church.

As a meeting place for travellers as well as locals the dialects and accents would have been diverse. In the interests of readability no attempt has been made to reproduce these. There is evidence of great floods sweeping down the valley so the scenario envisaged in this story is quite possible.

Thanks are due to David Dippie Dixon whose 1903 ‘Upper Coquetdale’ remains a valuable source of information as well as a very enjoyable read, to my wife Beryl for her comments as the text developed and to all others who supplied snippets of information within the Northumberland National Park.
UPPER COQUETDALE

BLINDBURN and CHEW GREEN

CARSHOPE and MAKENDON

TREWS and WINDYHAUGH
The stranger stopped to clear his face from the drifting snowflakes and to catch his breath from the long trudge up the Coquet Valley. For days now he had walked, oblivious to the cold and biting wind that seemed to presage danger with its mournful shrieks, wrapped in his solitude and mystery. Nights had been passed behind dry-stone walls, food begged from the few farms and the villages he'd passed through, and, as far as he could tell, he had made it this far without attracting unwelcome attention. Only in the small two-street village of Rothbury had he detected more than curiosity; perhaps the worn-down inhabitants were wondering whether he was a Royalist or other, in which case the Duke would soon be informed. Even in the only pub, The Three Half Moons, the locals had been less than friendly. Probably it was a case of too soon after the Jacobite troubles but even so he had expected better. On the road, for most people he was just another wanderer avoiding the reivers and cut-throats whom he had been told still inhabited these hills. No doubt his enquiries had aroused interest but his main concern was that those he was following were not aware of him. Fortunately the weather had masked his movements and deterred others but he knew that as the light began to fail, sooner or later he would need to find real shelter and perhaps dispense with some of the wealth he had sewn into his garments. As he looked around, he noticed that the track he had been following suddenly veered down to the river where a flimsy wooden bridge allowed him to cross. It soon became apparent why, as round a bend the river
became rapids between steep cliffs. Making his way up and along the side he gradually emerged into a wider piece of sparse grass, which allowed easier access. Some snowflakes began to fall, as did the light, presaging a dangerous night if he did not find shelter soon.

At the same time, and not so far away but coming from the north, Old Betty staggered down the twisting and uneven track from Windy Gyle towards the small building she had been told existed at the base of the Rowhope Valley. Well wrapped, and by no means as old as she appeared, she too needed shelter and warmth. Some inherent intuition told her that the weather was about to become much worse; indeed a few snowflakes drifted against her face as if to reinforce that thought, and the darkening sky moved her to a greater effort over the remaining distance.

The stream threaded its way between steep hillsides bare of anything but dead bracken and heather, and wider patches dotted with leaf-less mountain ash trees, redolent with red berries. She noticed the occasional patch of land where the surface had been stripped away, probably for the peat for burning inside or it could just as likely have been for the illicit whisky stills reputed to exist in the area.

The occasional sound of an animal made her nervous, wondering if wild cats or dogs existed here or even wolves, although she believed they had long since
disappeared from these areas. She had already passed what seemed to be ruins of a farmhouse behind some trees where she was sure she had seen a pole-cat slink into the shadows.

Her track was increasingly difficult to see and as she rounded yet another gently descending bend, flurries of snow and a bitter swirling wind almost swept her into the icy stream.

Meanwhile, in the small but cosy Slymefoot, the owner who was known only as Mac, was acutely aware that more wanderers and drovers than usual were crowded in tonight. Usually it was two or three at any given time so he wondered if it was just coincidence. Horses had been firmly tied up in the adjoining enclosures and sheep safely corralled within dry-stone enclosures.

He knew that these people instinctively were aware when bad weather was approaching but he wondered if they realised just how bad it could be. No doubt they were expecting to stay the night. Well, it wouldn't be the first time and given the weather there was no danger from the "enemy", that is, the gaugers, looking for the whisky smugglers and illegal stills. He had heard that morning from the bush telegraph via Robertus Swanne, (better known as Red Bob due to his long red beard), that a group of gaugers had passed through the lower valley a few days ago looking for evidence of barley being carted into the hills.
However, they had been detained near the hamlet of Thropton when their horses had inexplicably vanished over night. Perhaps it had been those very horses he had heard pass by a couple of days ago, but of course he had seen nothing. Red Bob insisted that the gaugers had returned to Rothbury on foot intending to find fresh mounts; surely the weather would have deterred them by now.

Fortunately there was a good supply of straw in the out-houses, which would have to do for floor-beds if more than 10 wanted to sleep in the Slymefoot itself. There was also a freshly killed deer lying there, well preserved in the cold, which William Potts had dropped off that morning. As he worked on Thomas Ogle's farm at Tosson Tower, it did not take a genius to work out where the deer had come from. Not his problem, he thought, as he glanced up the wooden steps to the small loft where he slept along with his heavily pregnant Nancy. Poor girl: what a time of year for a bairn to make an appearance, especially in these hard times. Well, it wouldn't be the first or the last to be raised on the mother's milk with the odd drop of whiskey now and again. Perhaps he should have gone with her to a cousin's and left the pub for a week or two; well, it was too late now.

With these thoughts he looked at the 8 people in the room. Shadows thrown by the candles and the open peat and wood fire created grotesque images as they
played their cards and gambled intently, piling up their small pebbles and totally ignoring...or unaware...of the church's condemnation of such practices.

It was a good job that old Peter, the local churchman, was not around tonight to deliver one of his rants. The last time he had done so, he had nearly been lynched by one of the travellers, but Mac knew that nothing would stop him other than infirmity and death.

Mac knew by sight all of the people in the room although some only passed through once or twice a year. Having issued them with their pipes, as was custom as they had come in, and seen to their drinks, stacked their crooks and overseen the arrangements for the animals, he enjoyed his favourite pastime of observing the group. He knew the names of some, but in general names were avoided.

The young lad who immediately gave off an air more of ill-ease than youthful shyness as he watched the gamblers, had been introduced as "a cousin's son, larnin the game" by the white-whiskered drover from Alnwick way. What he was "larnin" Mac knew better than to ask. The others were relatively local and knew the rules of the Slymefoot as far as strangers were concerned.

Few spoke much beyond their immediate needs. The exception was the Irish tinker who answered to the name of Mick, whose speech was at first almost
incomprehensible, but somehow you got into the way of understanding what he said despite his rapid, deep-in-the-throat delivery.

This time he had been complaining about the increased number of gaugers, soldiers and thieves on The Street, the main north to south route that crossed the Cheviot Ridge near Mozie Law and passed at a convenient distance near the pub. Twice he had been stopped and searched, twice he had received unwelcome blows and once he would have been in danger of his life if his assailant had not suddenly panicked at a strange noise and run off. That time he had owed his life to a wild goat but he knew how close he had come to ending his life on a lonely wind-swept moor.

At the moment he was lounging back against the wall from his bench, watching the others play cards and stack their winnings.... that is, the pebbles which would probably be converted into sheep later on. Come to think of it", thought Mac, "I've never seen him play!".... He was also quietly stuffing some of the better straw from the floor into his very worn boots. Mac's attention was distracted as one of the men got up to go outside to relieve himself in the fast-falling dusk and snow, letting a brief but icy blast swirl into the room, threatening to extinguish the candles.

As Old Betty peered through the gloom, she thought she saw a sudden light but then decided she had
imagined it. Then she was aware of a figure in the distance, highlighted against the light covering of snow. A man? Yes, undoubtedly, relieving himself into the stream. She waited until he turned and then disappeared. She had, however, noticed a quick flash of light and knew she had reached habitation, hopefully, the Slymefoot.

A sudden lull in the snow flurries, almost like a light veil being drawn back, allowed her to see a long low building, taller at the north chimney end than the south end, covered in turf and bales of heather, with wooden beams protruding from underneath.

The walls, like any other dry stone wall, looked solid with very small windows quite high up covered with animal skins. There also seemed to be walled-off areas behind the building and possibly smaller buildings attached. At that point she could see no animals but there seemed to be a low sound somewhere in that direction. Passing a slanting log lean-to, underneath which were piles of cut peat, she walked round and realised that there were in fact a couple of solid wooden lean-to's and at least one stone-walled area containing sheep. Most of these were lying down and only the occasional one made much sound.

In one of the shelters she could see a couple of horses and possibly a donkey, but the swirling snow and poor light made seeing anything clearly, difficult. Perhaps
that was why she did not see another traveller who was standing near the hillside, looking at her. She slowly moved round to the front, looked up at the chimney as a few sparks flew out and scanned the area as far as she could see. Then, taking a deep breath and holding her bundle hard against her side, she banged on the door and pushed it open, flapping to one side a full-length cloth covering the inner opening.

A moment's panic might have been expected, and certainly there was surprise, but the travellers knew the system and had emptied their whiskies into the beer tankards at the same time as Mac had slid a bottle under a beer keg. For a moment everyone froze as they looked at each other, but then resumed what they were doing, most refilling their pipes as Mac spoke. "Take your cloak off and set ye beside yon fire. We've not seen ye afore but ye's welcome none the less. Here, drink this..." So saying he passed her a tankard with freshly drawn beer.

As she quietly did as he said, he was looking her over, as did the others with less than surreptitious looks. Women were rare travellers in these parts, especially on their own, so naturally they were wondering why she was there. "Ye on your own? Any animal with you? "Having revived a bit with the warmth from the blazing wood fire, she looked round, then answered Mac. "No, on my own. I've walked from the borders.
Kirk Yetholm way, heading south to find my son. I'll be glad of shelter for the night."

This was stated in a matter of fact way but Mac was intrigued by her accent. Certainly her "r" was not the soft Northumbrian "r" of the area, more likely northern Scots. "Aye, ye're welcome to stay. I think all will be staying the night here."

Silence fell as she looked around. Her eyes gradually accustomed to the smoky room smelling of peat and logs, of damp and pipe smoke, of beer and of stale, unwashed bodies.

In the candlelight she observed the low wooden beams with a few hanging tankards, black hooks and a surprising array of clay pipes. Rickety wooden stairs, more like a ladder, led to a small loft from which she felt that someone was viewing her. A pile of wooden crooks in one corner stood out from the wooden benches round the walls with the travellers’ bundles and packs stuffed underneath.

There were also beer kegs used as tables and a kind of bar and a hanging cloth behind the owner, which seemed to cover a door into a smaller back room. She noticed that, at some point in the past, the gaps in the walls had been filled with dung or something similar but now seemed part of the walls. A few nooks were filled with various pots and other hard-to make out items.
Even in that cursory look she had taken in the other inhabitants of the building and intuitively felt she was not at risk. Yes, they looked rough but she had expected that. Several had reddish beards but one much younger lad was smooth-shaven...or perhaps just too young to shave. He had eyed her carefully with rather sad eyes beneath a thatch of long straggling blond hair. The others showed by their skins that they had passed many a year out in the open.

The owner, whom she heard addressed as Mac, was an impressive looking man. Tall, obviously muscular, with long dark hair and a full moustache and dark beard, he looked like a real warrior but she thought that she detected a hint of warmth in his pale brown eyes. Her gaze came back to the big fireplace with its small side ovens and hanging hams and other smoked meats. "Yes", she thought, "this will do fine for tonight."

Suddenly, the men tensed, but did not repeat their previous reaction as they had not got round to new drinks yet. She had heard nothing, but one near the door had tapped the wall and pointed to the door. At that moment, there was a loud bang and the door swung in followed by snow, an icy wind and a tall, hooded man.

Banging the door behind him and straightening the cover, he moved in slowly towards the fire nodding a
greeting at everyone as he did so. When he spoke, it was to mention the heavy snow now falling, then he asked for a drink and hoped he hadn’t disturbed any one.

Mac gave him a beer and he sat at the other end of the fire from Old Betty. The card players returned to their games but there was a tension in the air now. Old Betty couldn’t decide why, but Mac knew...and he knew the others knew. This man's accent was from well south of York, which made it unlikely that he had been this way before. Perhaps not a gauger, perhaps not a threat, but one to watch never the less!

Mac's first worry was soon removed when the man asked: "Is there anything stronger such as some real mountain dew, and if there is, perhaps everyone would like a drink of it?" So saying, he tossed a small coin to Mac, quietly observing that if he was connected to the law, he knew he'd never get out of the place alive! That broke the ice a bit but Old Betty could see that a certain wariness remained despite the local use of "real mountain dew" for whisky.

Mac served up the drinks and at the same time pointed out as he pocketed the coin, that all payments would be settled later. As with the others she looked closely at him. His clothes were damp of course and showed signs of much wear on the road, but there was a hint about them of having been recently put on.
His face suggested someone in early manhood despite a fair beard of a few days growth and a similar moustache. His hands also gave away the fact that he had not spent much time working manually but his face was as tanned and worn as the others. She suddenly realised that he had spotted her observing him but there was a smile in his eyes as much as to say that they were two of a kind. Old Betty looked away, more disturbed than she could explain whilst wishing that she had been a bit younger as he would have made a good bed-companion!

As the evening wore on, various toilet trips to the "pits" outside led to an increasing worry about the depth of the snow and the animals. What had begun as a snow shower had become a fierce blizzard so that all realised that they could be stuck there for several days if this exceptionally bad weather continued.

Every so often, 2 or 3 went out together to check on the animals, each time returning with deeper frowns and stood pooling melting snow on the already wet floor. At that point Mac threw aside the cloth behind him revealing a skinny room (which presumably had a door exiting from it) and told them that in future they should go out the back. He picked up a heavy wooden bar and fastened it to the front door. "There's none coming the night now", he said. He then disappeared for a moment out the back and returned with a big pot filled with some kind of liquid that he hung above the fire. Gradually a pleasant smell arose which
fought...and lost... against the other smells in the room. The players continued with their games punctuated from time to time with a curse or a sigh or a sound of pleasure; the newcomer sat quietly with his drink, observing the room's inhabitants, and more often than not, Old Betty, who did likewise. Mac occasionally turned a wooden spit on which he'd pronged pieces of meat and then chucked them in the pot as they cooked.

No one complained of hunger or asked about the food but longing glances were often directed towards the fireplace. Old Betty had offered to help turn the spit but Mac had shaken his head, although not ungratefully, Now and again he glanced upwards when he heard a rustle as someone turned on a bed of straw but remained as taciturn as ever.

Two of the players, having finished a round, made their way out the back. The door banged shut but not before the sound of a looping swirling wind had penetrated. A few minutes later they returned saying the animals were spooked and restless, that the snow was even worse...up to half the door's height.... and that "'twas nae a night for wandering".

Having delivered themselves of these comments, they sat down again and looked hopefully towards the fire. Taking the hint, Mac stirred the last bits of meat into the soup and picked up a pile of wooden bowls that he thrust at Old Betty. She lifted the heavy spoon and
carefully ladled out servings attempting to give each bowl some of the meat lumps. Each man eagerly grasped his bowl and the sounds of contented slurping filled the room. What was in the soup she didn't want to know but it was hot, smelt inviting and once tasted seemed like nectar given the circumstances.

Mac had carried a bowl up the stairs and eventually returned looking pensive. "Could be she'll deliver soon. Pity we can't send for Old Meg up Barrowburn." This was stated matter-of-factly but with an enquiring glance towards Old Betty who pretended not to notice. It was not that she didn't want to help... she knew she would if needed as the only woman there...but that she didn't want to seem too eager.

She instinctively knew that that was the right approach; perhaps some of these drovers even had helped their women to deliver. An involuntary smile creased her features as an image of a drover yanking out a lamb from its mother transferred to helping the baby on its way from its mother! She quickly suppressed the thought for she knew Nancy started to talk, quietly and at first hesitantly. As she gained confidence her story unfolded revealing very clearly that she was no common peasant girl but a girl who had been educated and who could speak clearly and cogently when it suited her despite the crippling pains that interrupted her tale.
"Well, you probably know the Percy family own nearly everything in these parts but there's others who own land. There's Henry Potts, Thomas Ogle and George Gibson. My pa worked for Old George; he's not bad as land-owners go, but he's a bit of a skinflint if you know what I mean. Always checking on the number of sheep, the birds dad shot for him, and even checked the fish we got from the river. Pa reckoned he's so tight-fisted 'cos he's scared he'll be the next to lose his land to the Percy family. My dad's name is really Clavering, but well, that's a name that's got too much history round these parts so we go under the name of Tork.

"What about your mam? She not around, lass?" asked Betty as Nancy recovered from a particularly bad spasm. "My mam died a few year back and it's been real hard since then as she worked alongside pa. So, when Mac turned up 2 or 3 days a week just to help out for a few hours we were real grateful. I knew he fancied me even though he hardly said anything and well, he seemed real kind and strong to me." Nancy paused for a moment as Betty wiped her head and encouraged her to go on.

"Then about a year ago some one shot pa when he was out on the hills. After the funeral Mac asked me to come and live here with him and here I am. It's all right but I miss the farm and there's so few women come in here. I used to see some of the valley women at Peter's...that's the local vicar...as he taught me to
read and write a bit, and to speak properly as he says. Ooh.... It's all right, it's passing. He used to come here regularly until he upset some of the drovers. He's always on about not gambling and then with others he's telling them not to make the mountain dew, as the soldiers will eventually get them. They know he'd never give them away but he really riles them at times." "Have ye no got any friends of yer own then?" asked Betty. "Well, before I was too big to move far I sometimes met and got on with Annie Marie, she's the daughter of the Clennells...them that's got the big house up near Alwinton way...you know? No? Well, it's not that far from here. Her pa wasn't too keen but once he heard me talk "properly" Peter's way, he wasn't too bothered. I haven't seen her for a couple of months now but...ooh! Help me to yon bucket."

The next hour was hectic for Betty. Needing warm water and plenty of fresh straw, she ordered poor Mac around as if he was a kid. At one point when he was taking cloths out the back she wanted soiled straw removing and fresh passing up, in a moment of total thoughtlessness she told the young lad to bring some up but not to look over the top.

Unfortunately he couldn't resist the temptation and as he took one look at Nancy's open legs, he went as shaky as a snake on a bush, and rushed down and out the back to throw up. The stranger offered to help but Betty decided that Mac was the best one just to
hand up what was needed. Later, after the action had died down and the players had returned to their pipes with studied disinterest now the baby was safely born, Betty realised that her momentary lapse was entirely due to her own fears. Memories of her own daughter's death in childbirth haunted her still... and always would. Leaving Mac with Nancy and the little boy baby, she took a deep breath and went up to the blond-headed youth. "I's sorry I embarrassed you. Well, I wasn't thinking properly at all. What's your name?" He raised his sad eyes to her, took an over-generous pull on the pipe he was obviously still a novice at, and muttered something from which she only gathered that he was all right now and that they called him Wilf.

To her surprise, the stranger, who had never proffered a name, walked up to the youth and said: "Next time a lass opens her legs in front of you, at least you'll know what's what." Amidst general laughter, the blushing youth decided he needed to go out the back but came back saying he couldn't push the door open. Two men got up and went with him, eventually returning saying that the snow was so deep now that it was banking everywhere. At that point Betty came down, told them all that Nancy needed to sleep and that it was time they all settled down for the night.

To their credit, no-one grumbled given the circumstances, and gradually they wrapped themselves in cloaks on the floor, as near to the fire
and each other as they could for mutual warmth. With her nicest smile Betty lay facing the youth who she now realised was younger than she had thought. She told him he'd be all right and that she was sorry she had caused him discomfort...then just as he managed a smile, she added: "and I'm too old for any jiggery pokey from you in the night, so forget it!" His confused look gave her a pang of guilt but she knew he'd get much worse from the others so she gave him her best maternal smile and turned over to sleep.

It was still dark when she surfaced. The night had been difficult for them all, not just because of the cold and uncomfortable floor, but because of the occasional noises from the baby and of Mac climbing up and down the stairs to see to Nancy. There was also the occasional bark of one of the sheep dogs out the back.

The others too had been restless but somehow she had drifted off. It now felt like morning to her but with no light coming in the covered windows and just a low red glow from the peat pit, there was no way of telling. Staggering to her feet she made her way out the back and pushed with all her strength against the door.

Slowly it moved open, pushing snow back with it and she looked out on a sight she had not seen since her childhood in the Highlands. Everywhere was white with deep snow. The river looked frozen over with deep drifts of snow and any sign of the track was well
and truly buried. There'd be no moving out of here for a while! Here and there in the early light she could make out animals sluggishly moving but carrying heaped snow with them.

Against the walls of the Slymefoot the snow was at least two feet in depth but looking around she realised that everything was covered, frozen and sparkling. The sky was leaden grey and a light breeze was piercing her many layers of clothing. Slowly she made her way to the pits and just as slowly returned. Just as was about to let herself back into the pub, the one she thought of as "the stranger" quietly let himself out. "Shh! Wait there. I'll be back in a minute." That she waited out there in the cold was entirely due to curiosity but once he had returned from the pits he whispered in her ear: "Have you noticed the pipes? Keep an eye on them. We'll speak later." Then without another word he pushed his way in closing the door almost in her face. Realising why, she waited a few minutes then made her way in.

He was at the fire stacking it and getting it burning up so that it cast a red glow over the slowly stirring people. She watched as Mac lumbered down the stairs, out the back, then back in with a pot full of oats and water that he proceeded to hang above the fire. Then he too disappeared outside.

Old Betty sat down and occasionally stirred the pot, reflecting that the day had begun without a civil word
but with just an acceptance as to what was needed. As the others rose and saw to their needs, she realised that by the gestures, slight nods of the head or faint smiles, that she had been accepted amongst them. The last to stir was the young lad who had whimpered a few times in his sleep and had been totally unaware of Betty's light strokes to his face to comfort him.

At last, the porridge was ready and served out, drinks were passed round and all of the drovers went out to see to their animals. Only Mick and the stranger remained. Betty was just about to ask him about his origins when there was a large thud outside and muffled cries. "Avalanche!" yelled Mick and rushed out the back, closely followed by the other two.

The sight that met them was not as bad as might have been feared but a goodly amount of snow had slid down the Slyme hill covering a few of the sheep and knocking one man off his feet. They all rushed over and dragged the drover and the few sheep out of the snow, and then once they had recovered, they all set about clearing the animals and giving them fresh hay.

Because of the noise from the animals and the dogs the men tended to raise their voices and call to each other by name. Watching from the door Betty thus learnt that the stranger was called Henry. She learnt this as he was told to grab the wedder but obviously didn't know what a wedder was so had to put up with
a bit of banter from which she gathered it was a castrated ram! The others were Angus, Peter, Percy, George, Harry and Guy but what the relationships were escaped her for the moment. She was pleased to see that young Wilf played his part and seemed to be appreciated. Once they had seen to the animals and cleared as much of the essential areas as possible they returned inside, this time bringing the three sheep dogs with them. These immediately located the fire and sprawled in front.

Betty had been up to see to Nancy who seemed surprisingly well although tired of course, as was Betty, but as the baby was feeding well she knew it was safe to relax. On coming down she heard the one she thought was Angus telling Mac that they'd be stuck for several days.

At that point Betty happened to see the stranger looking at her with rather sad eyes that he immediately tried to brighten. "I wonder just who he really is?", she thought; probably at the same time as he was thinking how strange it was to be stuck in the this pub with her.

As he looked at her, he suddenly realised that Mac was talking to him from the top of the stairs where he was perched having just been in to see Nancy. A few whimpers from the baby reminded him just how quiet the baby had in fact been. "You did well out there, stranger. We appreciate any help in situations like this
so whilst we thaw out and before we plan what to do why don't you tell us why we should trust you and what your real reason is for being in this area.

For Mac this was quite a speech but the was now in a position to be accepted if he stranger realised it was his way of saying he could respond appropriately.

"Yes. That's fine by me but I thought I heard one of you talk about wedder's loup before. Was that some powerful sheep you were referring to?" "No lad," answered Mac. "There was a sheep stealer up this valley many years ago who stole a sheep on Shillhope Law but being chased by the gangers he ended up near Barrowburn. His only way of escape was to jump the river but with the wedder on his back he just missed and drowned in the deep pool there. That's why it's called Wedder Loup, or leap as some say."

"Thanks Mac. Having tried to stop one of your wedders today I think I know how he felt! But I'm at a loss, as Betty probably is, with all these names that mean nothing to me. Can you give me a quick idea of where these are so we have a rough idea of where we are going compared to here then I'll tell you my tale."

At that point and after a nod from Mac, Angus got up and got his crook, then he started to draw in the dust and dirt of the floor, talking as he did so. "Lookee, I'm no expert but I sees this valley in my mind like a series of steps. First step would be top end where
Chew Green is. It was once a Roman place but mighty cold and windy I'd guess. Anyway, first bit would be from there down to Makendon farm, then past Fulhope farm to Carshope and Blindburn.

Chew Green, Makendon Fulhope, Carshope and Blindburn.

Then at Blindburn where the Buckham's Walls burn joins in, there's a few farm buildings and the valley twists down past Carshope towards here where the Rowhope burn joins the river. Up this valley from here there's Rowhope farm and then Trows, both of which are just ruins now.

Blindburn, Carshope, Slymepit, Rowhope and Trows

From here there's Windyhaugh farm, then close by, Barrowburn farm and past there you pass the wedder loup and end up at Shilmoor farm.

Windyhaugh, Barrowburn, Wedder loup and Shilmoor

After that, well, you pass Linbriggs farm and the rapids and you twist round into Alwinton and the Clennell Valley. I've no mentioned the mills but the nearest to here is near Windyhaugh."

Linbriggs, Alwinton and Clennell.
With a sigh he sat down with a glance at his brother and nervously puffed on his pipe.

"Aye that's about it Angus," added Peter. Them's the main farms. If the river floods suddenly those low down will be hit. That'd be Makendon, Carshope, Windyhaugh, Shilmoor and Linbriggs. Then there's the danger of avalanche....all along this valley could be hit."

With a grateful look at the two reluctant speakers, Henry tried to change the mood as quickly as he could. Then, perching himself on the bottom rung of the stair-ladder, he began. "Thanks Angus, that makes a lot more sense to me now...if I can remember all the names. Now to my tale."

Well, as you're all aware I'm not from round these parts. I may not have known what a wedder is but I certainly do now! My name is Henry and my father has a small manor near London, which my older brother Guy and myself inherited last year. I got married a few months back to a tall, beautiful redhead called Elfrida. All was well until a month ago when I noticed Guy frequently passing smiles with her and she began to suffer from bad headaches which meant she had to sleep in her own room. Early one morning I woke up early and having wandered around a bit I met Guy leaving her room. The next thing I knew I was coming round from a blow on the head and both Guy and Elfrida had gone. With a couple of men I
followed their trail as far as York and then on through the hills as far as a village you might know, called Eldon, no, Elsdon. I lost one man there in a fight after a cockfight bet but I learnt from a local boy that a man and Elfrida had passed through the day before, heading towards Rothbury. I also learnt that my brother, Guy, had been killed and some other man "from up the Cheviot valleys" had now taken her. I did feel some sorrow for Guy but he'd brought it on himself after all. I guessed they must have been heading for Scotland as my family does have some property somewhere up there which Guy must have told Elfrida about.

Anyway, I continued with my other man but we got lost in the hills as dark fell. I settled down in a hollow for the night but my companion claimed he could see lots of little lights and followed them. Then I heard a scream that sounded like he was falling and that was the last I saw of him. Also, our two horses were gone.

"Them's the duergars," interjected Angus. "You was on the Simonside Hills. The duergars are little spirits which protect the buried chiefs up there."

Next morning I made my way down the hills into a place called Whitton where I was told I just had to cross the river and I'd be in Rothbury. I heard in a pub that a local man with a beautiful woman on his horse had passed through and headed out this way as,
I was told, there is a route into Scotland and here I am."

"It could be that you missed your turn. Best route is over by Alwinton and up Clennell, We heard no one pass by here," said Mac. Just as Henry was about to reply he heard a whisper from Nancy to Mac, who turned and replied: "Hold your mouth girl. It's too late now." Henry pretended not to have heard and replied:

"Well, I can't go anywhere now but if there's a route over by here I'll take it when it clears."

Throughout his tale Henry had been aware of the intense attention from Betty so he was not too surprised when she asked:

"And just what will ye do when you catch them?"

"Kill the man and take her home whether she will or no. She is my wife after all." It looked at that point that the conversation was going to get feisty but Angus again interrupted.

"I'm sorry for your loss, lad, but we need to consider something else. Isn't that right Peter?"

Henry realised then that Peter and Angus were brothers although as became apparent, one was the talker and the other the back-up. "Oh what's that Angus?" asked Mac.
"Our old man once told us that back when he were a nipper, there was a great week of snow, just like this. He said the rivers froze, the snow piled up into great heaps, and cascaded down the hill sides. Isn't that right Peter?"

"Aye Angus, that be the truth of it." As he spoke he tamped down the baccy in his pipe, paused, pointed it in the air and looked really serious.

"He also said that as the snow built up on the frozen river at certain points great lakes built up behind as soon as the thaw came. Isn't that right Peter?"

"Aye Angus, that's the truth of it." This said after going through the same routine.

"Well, that year, with the thaw the river suddenly roared down the valley twice the height of a man washing away buildings and drowning many people. That's right isn't it Peter?"

This time there was a slight pause as Peter went through his routine more slowly but then came the answer:

"Aye Angus. You be right. Hundreds drowned I recall."

"Yes, well quite a lot did! Places from Blindburn right down to Shilmoor were wiped out. It only stopped
when it hit the plains at Alwinton. Isn't that right Peter?"

"Aye Angus that's right." "But surely," said Mac, "that would mean this pub would be hit as we are low down but I never heard tell of that."

"Aye, I expect so but I don't know about that. Do you Peter?"

"No Angus. I never heard tell of what happened here at Rowhope but this place is quite high up from yon river so it should be safe."

This last was said without his usual routine and Henry wondered if he was wondering about the possible danger to them all now. For a few moments there was silence as every one contemplated the situation, knocked the dottle out of their pipes or tamped the baccy down. Once again his attention was caught by the pipes: all the same clay pipes from the same mould, obviously provided by Mac but why? Surely, each man had his own or was it just a strange custom of the pub? Not being a pipe smoker he couldn't be sure but he thought the bowl was deeper than others he had seen but perhaps not.

His thoughts were interrupted when Percy, one of the taciturn group of four, spoke. "So, we are stuck here and in risk of being swept away. We need to get our
sheep back on the route for Yetholm. What do you suggest Mac?"

Henry noticed his companions nodding and it was at this point that he realised that there had only been two markings on the sheep: some belonged to Angus and Peter, the rest to these four. Of the 50-60 sheep most seemed to be this group's.

"What do I reckon?" answered Mac. "Ye know as well as I do what we have to do: we have to get out and warn them's that's in danger."

The others nodded, smoked, and looked at each other. At last, Gilbert acting as spokesman for the four more southern drovers, spoke up.

"Well as Harry, Andy, Percy and myself know the routes up the valley best, we can try and head up there. Mick might as well join us as he's a regular up that way too. I've heard tell he's often made his way over to the pub down past Chew Green. Isn't that right Mick?"

For a man with the gift of the gab Mick had been surprisingly quiet but he rose easily to the bait.

"Yes, I've been there but I wouldn't go back. It's a meeting place for raiders and cut-throats, not to mention the women who go up from the lowlands. I've heard tell that there's some folk intend burning it
down, but, well, I'd keep away if I were you. Oh and yes, I'll go with you men."

With a smile Gilbert continued in his gentle northern accent which, however, stuck out as different from Mac's.

"I 'spect Angus and Peter will go down river but what about the rest?"

Henry immediately noticed that Wilf flushed up at being included in "the rest" but as Angus nodded and gave him a look, it passed over.

"I'll stay here with Nancy....she could do with coming down and I can tidy up a bit. I'll keep an eye on the sheep and horses for you. If Henry will go with Angus and Peter, Betty and Wilf can go up Rowhope and check out Trows just in case there's a build up of snow up the valley."

Henry immediately thought it rather odd sending a woman and a youth to check out ruins but a possible build up of snow made sense. This time Wilf didn't seem put out, no doubt thinking he was "the man" to look after Betty.

As all seemed happy with these arrangements talk then moved to how to get about but it was soon seen as possible in the main as the snow cover was hard. There would be no point in taking the horses or even
Mac's poor old donkey as their weight would be too much for the snow crust. Angus's group was to check out the fuller mill near Windyhaugh and the farm, then move down to Shillmoor and Linbriggs. In his ignorance Henry joked that there'd be plenty of bread at the mill but soon was put right that a fuller mill dealt with clothing! Gilbert's group was to check up river, not just at the farms, but also to see where waters and snow banks would build up. At Henry's request they would also search out signs to see if his lady had passed that way. Mac gave them all some stale bread and a bottle of beer.

"Plenty of water to drink out there....it's called snow!" and with that witticism he steered them on their different ways. As Betty got herself ready and wrapped her shawl around her, she wondered just how young Wilf would take to leading her up the valley. If he felt put out then he was not showing it but seemed keen to go. So keen in fact that after about 5 minutes trudging up the valley she realised she should have brought a crook with her for balance.

Determined to hold her own she told him to wait whilst she went back. The others had left about the same time as her but assuming the front door was fastened she went round to the back door. As she opened it she heard Mac and Nancy talking. "Look girl, there's nothing we can do. In any case you can't be sure it was a horse you heard go past, especially in the condition you were in."
"Mac, I know what I heard. It's because of my condition as you call it that I was awake and heard it. What I don't know is whether it went up the main valley or up Rowhope past here." "Well, whichever, and it's more likely up the main valley for crossing to Scotland. If there's any tracks they'd be covered by now but no doubt the others will look out. By the way, do you trust that Henry? His story was a bit too glib for me?"

"I don't know Mac. Now, help me down these rungs to the fire. What was that?"

That, was Betty noisily opening the back door again and coming in.

"Sorry but I need a stick. Ye got a spare crook, Mac? Good to see you up Nancy."

Mac handed her one without a word although he seemed to give her an odd look, then busied himself with Nancy as Betty left. Back up the valley she soon reached Wilf who was leaning on his crook apparently studying his feet. Already her legs were aching but she knew they'd just have to carry on.

"What ye looking at lad?" she asked as she got her breath back.

"There's animal tracks across here...not ones I recognise and they look large."
"Deer? No, I can see they're not deer. Look more like a large cat to me," she said wondering just why he was so bothered.
"What's the matter lad, ye afraid of some wild creature?"

Colouring up at first it looked like he wasn't going to answer, then quietly he stated: "No, I'm not afraid but an animal with tracks like that carried off my baby sister. My mam sent me for help whilst she went after it: we never saw her again."

"Eh lad, I'm so sorry. Is that how you ended up at yon uncle's? No father?"

My dad was killed by some border-raiders a few weeks before.... when I was out getting wood in. Angus and Peter took me in and, and, we went on looking but, but there was no signs, no signs at all. One day, perhaps, I might find her and...."

A series of silent sobs shook his slim frame despite his best efforts. Betty put an arm round him and stood comforting him for a moment. Suddenly he roughly tore himself away and started walking, growling in an absurdly rough voice that he was alright and they'd better get on.

Smiling inwardly Betty recalled how like her own son he sounded at just the moment when he left home to
find his fortune. Sixteen years old and determined to act the man! Well, some things never changed.

It wasn't very far up the valley to the wood she'd seen on the way down but now in the deep snow beneath a leaden and still ominous sky the wood stood out starkly in its statuesque and leafless way. She could see a suggestion of stone walls off to the left to which they trudged with aching muscles. Suddenly Wilf stopped and held her back. "Look," he whispered, "footprints, horse prints."

It was true: there was a mass of marks on the snow surface, especially in the areas where the snow had not piled, evidence that a large group of people had passed this way. As they slowly and silently advanced she managed to count tracks of at least four horses and many more human prints. Wilf steered her into the trees and again they crept forward always listening for the least sound. All was quiet and as they emerged into the ruins of the farmhouse and out-buildings it was clear that no-one was around. Indeed it became apparent that the tracks lead up a smaller hillock and up into the more sparsely covered hills.

Cautiously, they entered the out-buildings first and in one found a broken still. "Ah, could they be gaugers looking for the whisky stills?" she whispered to Wilf but he shook his head.
"No, thisun's an old'un. The ones we use are well-hidden" and then realising what he'd said he suddenly looked embarrassed.

"It's all right, lad. I have no interest in your stills or where they be hidden. I promise ye." After a moment he nodded and they continued into the farmhouse where, despite holes in the roof and the detritus of years, it was obvious that a group had stayed there over-night. Indeed the remains of a fire were still slightly warm.

"So who do you think it was then? Reivers?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so. More likely to be some of the Faas. They've got a place up in the hills." "You've lost me lad. What are the Faas?

"They are gypsies, I suppose, but their King goes by the name of John Faa and, and he's caused all kinds of trouble 'round here. You want me to tell you about him whilst we rest? Mind you, I don't see what they were doing out this way as they give the Slymefoot a wide berth. If they go on the way they're headed they could end up going back of Blindburn and might, might meet up with Gilbert and the others."

If she was honest, Betty knew that her legs were already worn out and that she needed a rest, but she didn't want to seem a liability so she professed an
interest that was not exactly heartfelt. She was also acutely aware of Wilt's hesitant and repetitive manner of speaking with his voice frequently cracking and oscillating from growls to high-pitched utterances. She decided therefore that she would lead him as much as possible by questioning him.

"How did ye hear the story Wilf?"

"Well, I only know what Angus and others have told me but ever since I was little the Faas have been talked about as dangerous."

"So how far back does this story go?"

"I think it was, well, about a hundred years ago. The Laird of Clennell's steward was tricked into letting the gypsies into his hall one night where they ate and drank and Willie Faa's wife, Elspeth, told fortunes."

"Did they get away with that?" Betty asked, surprised.

"No, the Laird woke up and chased them out but they vowed revenge."

"Oh, what was that?"

"They stole cattle and grain and, and, and worst of all stole away their young son."

"How awful! Did they find him?"
"No, they searched and searched but found nowt. At last they found the gypsies' village and burnt it down. Then two years later from the village, a girl called Susan, came to look after the Laird's other young'un, a daughter but then, then she and the girl disappeared. Was said she'd run off with, with one of yon gypsies."

"That is horrible! Losing both children like that! What happened next?"

"Nowt for another 15 years! Then the Laird attacked another Willie Faa village and found her, Susan, and, and the girl. He was challenged a bit later to fight by a young lad and, and lost. He was taken to Willie Faa and, and the youth was told to shoot him but Elspeth revealed that the young lad was the Laird's son so, so they were brought back together after all."

"And that's all true, ye ken? They returned home after all that time as a family?"

"Aye, it all be true. You can ask the Laird who's at Clennell nowadays."

For a while Betty sat in silence, aware that Wilf was worn out with the effort of talking so much... something that he seemed really relieved to have got out of the way, but it was also apparent that the lad was pleased to have had an audience. Eventually she stood up and stretched, walked around a bit and then
looking directly at Wilf, with as much tact as she could project, she asked:

"What do you think we should do now? Look around more or head back?"

At first she thought he wasn't going to answer, then looking up at her from beneath his raggedy fringe, he said:

"I think we should head on back. The others'll be a long time, perhaps even overnight, but we, we should get back. You'll not mention the still will you?"

"No lad, I won't. I think ye're right as it looks like it could snow yet again. Lead on!"

As they made their way slowly back down the valley she couldn't help wondering how the others were managing, especially she realised, the mysterious Henry, who just happened at that exact moment to be wondering about Old Betty! Their journey down the valley had been far from easy but at least they'd been able to cross the river when they needed to.

For him, the walking was excruciating as he'd never walked in much snow before and this was exceptional. He didn't even mind when the others helped him up banks of snow or over flat areas of deadly slippery ice. It was obvious that Angus and Peter were incredibly fit! He noticed that as he walked, mainly looking down
at his feet, that the countryside blurred and melded into a single landscape, one that was very different from the one he had travelled through not so long ago!

At last, during a pause following a difficult traverse, he saw buildings ahead.

"Is that the mill you mentioned?" he asked.

"Aye it is," Angus replied. "With a bit o' luck we can rest there a while and see what Father Gregory thinks."

A few minutes later Peter was banging on the door of an old sturdy building, more like a barn on legs than his vision of a mill.

"You see that area under the main building? That's where the animals can shelter but I can only see one horse in there. We call these bastles although most are really a way of defending ourselves against the reivers. At least this would give some protection against floods but I doubt if yon lower walls would hold out for long."

By the time Angus had finished explaining this to Henry, Peter had climbed up the outer stone steps and was banging on the door. At first there was silence but then a bar could be heard being moved and slowly the door was opened to reveal a short ruddy faced,
barrel-shaped man with a monk's tonsure. His clothing, which resembled an over-sized sack, was covered in small bits of cloth and threads. His mouth opened in a broad smile as he recognised Angus and Peter and after appropriate introductions, he warmly welcomed Henry. Once inside with the cold thankfully shut out, Henry's eyes gradually became accustomed to the candle light which showed three women hunched around piles of cloth, sewing as best they could in the dim light. All three had stopped as the men had entered but now resumed their work with surprising intensity.

"Well it's a real surprise to see you three, especially in this weather. Now tell me, what brings you here." Father Gregory had sat down on a bench, obviously in need of resting his great bulk, with a wave to the others to do likewise. Once Angus had explained about the threat of a river surge. Father Gregory's pleasant, almost jovial personality, changed into that of a man of action.

"I see. Well, the first thing to do then is to get these three women to safety, perhaps even as far as Clennell Hall. On the way we must pick up Giles, Mary and the three children at Windyhaugh, and take them to Old Meg at Barrowburn: she's high enough up there to be safe. Then we'll have to warn those at Shilmoor and Linbriggs so they can also seek shelter at Clennell Hall. The question is...how do we travel? I can see you are worn out just coming from the Slymefoot...How is Mac
by the way? And that lovely young wife of his?" Then with out pausing for breath or an answer, he rushed on:

“I have it. There's the raft I made for dragging bags of cloth. It's only bits of wood tied together but it moves wonderfully over snow. If we fasten more rope to it we can pull it and take turns having a rest. This young fellow looks like he's all in, (That to Henry), and you two aren't as young as you were. Well, I remember years ago when I was in the Alps, I learnt a thing or two. You have heard me tell of my visit to the Abbey in the Swiss Alps, haven't you? Yes of course you have. I saw big dogs there pulling these raft things, can't for the life of me remember what they were called; now where was I? Oh yes, these three," and he gestured towards the women, "can pull you first then we can change over."

With that his face creased into huge peals of laughter but what else he might have said was lost as the three women downed their work and advanced on him. The tallest of the three, a plain girl in her early twenties but with the look of an old harridan, spoke up.

"Now look here, Father. Ye pay us a pittance to work here and we need to get back to Alwinton ourselves if there's danger. Ye didn't mention us having a rest did ye? Well, I'm sure we'll take our turn as good as anyone else, but ye'll be there pulling with us. Might do ye a world of good!"
Whilst this was going on, Angus and Peter puffed on their empty pipes obviously trying not to laugh at Father Gregory's volubility and his obvious discomfort in front of the three women.

"Yes, yes, well, I'm sure you're right. Now, if you three will go across to Windyhaugh and prepare the family, I'll get these three men to help me get the raft and then the children at least can be transported safely, God willing,...yes, if we all pull then, yes, that's for the best I'm sure."

Having thus regained the ascendancy ...at least in his eyes...he got to his feet and started organising in a thoroughly efficient way. Soon, all were outside and once again Henry was staggering along but this time holding onto a thick rope and pulling what to him was a miraculous means of transport. Once across the river to Windyhaugh the three little children were loaded onto the raft and their parents took their turn at pulling although Giles was severely hampered with a broken arm. Apparently he had fallen trying to get some sheep in and was chafing at not being able to be his usually strong self. However, after a talk with Father Gregory he seemed resigned to just doing what he could. The women, four now, talked quietly to the children and each other but in such a strong dialect that Henry could hardly understand a word.

At last, after a fairly short pull up a slope to the base of a gentle hill, they stopped at Barrowburn where an
old woman with long white straggling locks gestured them inside whilst listening, apparently, to Father Gregory's overlong explanations. Angus and Peter then set off on their own to warn the families at Shillmoor and Linbriggs, insisting that Henry stay at Barrowburn until they returned.

The three women workers went with them, intending to join the families at Linbriggs before heading to Alwinton. With sinking heart Henry agreed, aware of his own fatigue but not looking forward to Father Gregory's long conversations. He need not have worried, for once Old Meg had settled the children down, she turned to him and said: "Now, Father, spare us any of your stories. Yon kiddies need to rest and so does everyone else. Sit ye all near the fire and I'll brew up a drink. And you stranger, ye be the fittest man here by a mile, help me bring in more wood and then we'll see to settling them in the old barn up yon hill."

Henry was only too happy to help and went outside with her to a low building piled with cut logs. Old Meg explained, that despite his unceasing chatter and deceptive laziness, Father Gregory was a real treasure and had come up several times to cut wood for her. Whilst they were filling their baskets, Henry told her about Nancy and the baby, and taking a chance on her caustic but kind nature, asked if she'd seen or heard a horse pass before the snow fell.
"Aye lad, I did that. I was out here as it happens when a horse rode past down yonder track at quite a speed...almost as if he was being chased by the guagers... but I caught a glimpse of a woman in front of the rider. Strange, I thought. People always stop or wave round here, but not that'un; he was in a hurry to get somewhere. He a friend of yours?"

Henry briefly explained the situation then they were back in the house. Old Meg and Henry helped the family carry the children up to the barn that was partially filled with straw and soon they were safely ensconced. Old Meg said she'd see to feeding them and that they could stay until the snowmelt had passed as long as they helped with the wood and other chores. Of course they were only too glad to do so and were soon left to settle down for a rest.

Back in the house, Old Meg said she needed a snooze too and was soon nodding off in her corner by the fire. Father Gregory, who had been snoring loudly when they'd come back in, shifted his bulk, shook himself, looked around and then began to talk quietly to Henry.

"You are probably wondering what an old monk is doing out here when he'd spent his youth wandering around foreign parts?"

In truth Henry wasn't, but recognising that he was going to find out regardless, he nodded and listened.
"Well, when I was a young man I wanted to go to Rome to meet the Pope...no I never got there...as on the way I ended up in an abbey in Switzerland and had to stay a week 'til the weather improved. The abbot there was a very kindly man who looked after me and tried to calm down my rash youthfulness...with great success I must say!

I was amazed at how they managed to survive up in the mountains in bleak winters. They even used dogs to pull people around as I think I've told you! I was so happy there that I nearly stayed but then I decided to come back to the hills where I was born and work here. Never regretted it, my boy!"

For such a loquacious man this tale was remarkably brief and uninformative but Henry realised that Father Gregory was in fact just wanting Henry to explain his own appearance, so he, just as briefly, told the old monk his story.

"Ah lad, you have had your troubles. Could be the rider passed right by the mill but I never heard anything. Now, perhaps you'll do a small favour for me? I have a bag here that I brought from the mill with ten clay pipes in it for Mac. You know he collects these? Yes, well, make sure you keep them this way up. They're well tamped but even so."

Henry of course agreed, having already noticed the monk carrying the bag from the mill. He was
surprised at how heavy the pipes seemed but put it to the back of his mind. Always pipes! Of all the things that could be important he was asked to carry pipes. At that moment he too felt tired and started to close his eyes but just before he nodded off he wondered if Gilbert and the others had come across the horse and its riders. In fact at that very moment, Mick was eyeing the conditions as they approached Carshope. He glanced at his taciturn companions. He had known these drovers from many annual trips now, often travelling a distance with them in one direction or another or occasionally just passing. Rarely had they had a long conversation, something he missed especially when on a long journey, but he always felt that there was an unspoken bond between them, that they would look after each other's interests.

So far they had seen no major build up of snowfall on the river in the narrower valleys as conditions varied from bend to bend. However, just before Carshope there had been a slide, which left a big mound right across the valley with the river easily eight feet beneath. Gilbert looked thoughtfully at this after they had clambered over and pointed out that as the valley broadened now beneath Carshope, there was the possibility of any melt backing up the valley to a considerable depth before forcing its way through. The others nodded but said nothing whilst Mick considered the height of Carshope, aware that if there was a back-up the building would be vulnerable.
He was aware that as they approached the house
Harry spoke quietly to Gilbert, apparently with some
reference to the house and to Mick, himself. At first
he pretended to be unaware but as the other two were
listening intently, he decided to ask if there was a
problem.

"Erm, ye're the problem, friend. We've known ye for
many a year now but as is the way we do not know ye
really. Erm, we often visit Carshope, though 'tis off
our route, as we have business here, business some
would frown on. Can we trust ye? That's the
problem."

"Aye, by all the saints, ye can trust me. I know what
goes on in these valleys. I know where many of the
stills are, and aye, I know about the smuggling. I'm
not lily-white myself but for the love of Mary, we have
to make a living. If ye'd rather I left and went back to
the Slymefoot, just say the word."

Whatever passed between the others could not be
categorised by speech or even gestures but somehow
they ended up nodding.

"Fair enough," Gilbert replied. "We're all in each
other's hands. Erm, when ye meet Robbie at
Carshope, we'll say ye are with us. Pretend to know
what's going on and don't look surprised at anything.
He's on his own but when he takes us to yon barn,
then treat it as normal."
Mick nodded and followed them as they wearily made their way up the slope to the big old house surrounded by trees and large rocks, presumably fallen from the slopes above at some time. The snow was harder here although not so deep, but as if in contradiction of that thought, as they reached the house it began to lightly snow once again.

At first it would seem that there was no-one around. A dog could be heard somewhere back of the house, but apart from some rooks in the trees, there was no sign of life. Gilbert banged on the front door calling out for Robbie. With no response they started to make their way towards the back when a sharp voice from the trees brought them to a stop.

"Ye's nee need to gan roond there...ah's been watching ye for a while now."

With this deep and broad comment, an unshaven, untidy looking man appeared from out of the trees, a rabbit slung over his back. He was unusually tall and broad as well, giving an impression of a person not to be tangled with.

Despite Mick's first impression, Robbie warmly welcomed the drovers although he had to rely on the general sense of what Robbie said as he spoke quickly in his broad dialect. He suddenly realised that he was
being described as "yon Irish tinker" so nodded affably despite what amounted to a penetrating stare.

As they moved on behind the house he realised that he had been accepted as much as anyone would be. Robbie dumped the dead rabbit beside an outside tap, washed his hands and led the way round to a big barn. Inside, the light filtered through small cracks in the walls but there was enough to show large stacks of hay and piles of sheepskins. It was to these that they made their way. Mick saw that many of the sheepskins had been cut and sewn into pouches, the fleece still on them, and with two long thin straps hanging down from each.

He joined Gilbert and the others in examining these, somehow managing to hide his curiosity. At last Gilbert nodded and ten were put on one side for them to collect later.

And that was that. They thanked Robbie and made their way down the slope and back along the river edge towards Blindburn. After five minutes, he could contain himself no longer and asked what the pouches were for.

"Erm, well, we tie them on beneath the sheep in winter when their fleeces are long; like that we can pass any gaugers as they don't show," replied Gilbert.
"By all the Saints, ye might as well tell me what you smuggle now. It can't be whisky as the sheep would break the bottles on the ground so what is it?"

After many "erms" and pauses Mick learnt that the drovers were smuggling ancient coins, dug up from burial cairns not far from Simonside, down to York where they always got a good price, often in prime breeding sheep with which the contacts in the valley were usually rewarded. For a few moments Mick considered this, then asked what to him was the obvious question.

"That's all very clever but if ye never take the sheep any further than the Slymefoot how do ye get the coins?"

To his surprise the others chuckled and it was Harry who answered.

"Yon answer's beneath yer nose in the Slymefoot. 'Tis a wonder ye never guessed." "For the love of Mary, is it the pipes?...but how?" and then it dawned on him. He'd always wondered why Mac gave them pipes when they went in to the pub and yes, he'd noticed that the bowl was bigger than most; presumably those given to the smugglers were heavier too.
"So, they're carried in the pipes! No wonder the gaugers get angry. Whilst they're searching for stills, ye're smuggling old coins. I take my hat off to ye."
He'd always known that the four drovers, who came from somewhere in the Durham hills, had good breeding flocks as he'd seen them at the Kirk Yetholm markets, but now he knew how they did it. To use sheep pouches under sheep was brilliant, worthy of his old pa, God bless him, and the clay pipes! Well, the whole valley must be in on it and he'd never realised.

Making a few appropriate comments to the drovers about keeping the secret, and helping if he could, they continued on their way, soon coming in sight of Blindburn.

Mick knew this place well, as each year he called in to see the Forsters and their beautiful daughter, Sandy. Each year in exchange for a bit of canoodling and a romp in the hay he helped with jobs around the farm and always left refreshed and warmed by the family's welcome. That they had agreed to hide some of his wares in one of their concealed pits, was an advantage, a benefit he had made use of before going down to the Slymefoot. He knew also that Sandy was what was known as a "game lass" and that Percy might show an interest, being by far the youngest of the four.

Old Man Forster had spied them from afar and welcomed them. His wife and Sandy had been up at Fulhope when the snows came down and had obviously decided to stay overnight. No, he had no fears about a river surge as his farm was clear enough
from the river and on the safe side of a wide bend in the valley. Nor was he bothered about snow on the slopes above...no more than many a winter as he recalled... but he would be grateful if they'd bring in some wood from the barn and when they went on their way, check his women were safe at Fulhope.

Once the wood was safely brought in and stacked and after a refreshing beer, they left Blindburn and continued trudging up the valley. So far Mick had seen no sign of horse tracks; if there had been any the others would have noticed too. However, just round the bend from Blindburn where the stream came down between the hills, they all spotted the tracks of a single horse heading up the valley in the direction they were going.

"Must have cut across the tops to avoid snow-slides...risky...but seems to have got away with it...well, we'll soon see where he's heading. There's no other route for a stranger than up this valley...some of these tracks are deep...maybe there's two on the horse like yon.", Henry said.

These thoughts from Gilbert, with long pauses replacing his usual 'erms', were accompanied by glances at his companions who nodded and continued looking at the ground around them. As one they continued on their way, soon coming in sight of Fulhope, a dour stone building up a crest from the
river which disappeared beneath a high wall of snow as it entered a steeper valley.

"Erm, now there's a problem," said Gilbert "If there be stones and rocks in that slide then the build up will be long and high. Erm, let's see what's what int' house."

At the house they found three women on their own. The farmer was away but his wife, a hardened woman with greying hair and powerful shoulders, was used to being on her own for long periods. Despite this her manner was immediately welcoming but reserved, although she seemed quite amiable with Sandy and her mother. These two had been discussing returning to Blindburn on their own but had been dissuaded by the farmer's wife whose name Mick never heard. Sandy immediately started pushing to return but her mother resisted although making it clear that she hoped the men would accompany them back. Gilbert explained about the dangers of the surge and that they need to check further up-stream, especially having seen the barrier that had built up.

The falling snow which had remained light and intermittent, added power to Sandy's arguments so that Gilbert suggested that Percy and Harry should see them back whilst Mick, Andy and himself would continue up-stream. It was immediately obvious that Percy was keen on this, as judging by a few sidelong looks was Sandy, and so it was decided. Mick felt a pang of jealousy but immediately dismissed it knowing
full-well what Sandy was like, and he would, after all, soon be returning to Blindburn.

Once the women had started back, Mick and the remaining two drovers made their way by a track which meandered mainly above the river valley, in the direction of Makendon. From their view point they could see that the barrier was not very deep but also that the nature of the valley was such that any melt would quickly build up.

After a few minutes, Gilbert silently pointed to horse tracks that had joined the track from behind Fulhope and then explained that Makendon was the last inhabited place up this valley. After that it was wild moor but with the likeliest routes over into Scotland.

After a pause Gilbert added more information as if forewarning Mick. Because it was close to Dere Street and the main drover routes it was a frequently visited place where the owner, who called himself only "the Gaffer", was not one to be trusted. Strange things had happened there and it was known that over the years several well-known smugglers had mysteriously disappeared overnight. He also said that if the rider had stopped at Makendon, not only would he have received a rough welcome from "the Gaffer", but that if he was still there they would be able to see his horse as they approached from on high.
It was obvious from what Gilbert said, aided by a rare comment from Andy, that they were concerned about the group of horse-riders.

Mick was about to ask more when it occurred to him that it had stopped snowing and that it actually felt a bit milder. On pointing this out the other two just nodded as if they had already realised this. In fact the milder feel had already been noticed back at the Slymefoot.

After returning to the pub, Old Betty had warmed herself by the fire whilst Wilf briefly told Mac about the riders at Trows and their likely route. At first Mac had seemed unconcerned but after a bit of thought wondered why they would be risking the weather to head out of their valley. "Perhaps," he said, "they are heading to Makendon if they've got wind of rich pickings." Then seeing Betty's puzzled face he explained that many a well-off traveller stayed at Makendon and in this weather it would be a fair bet that some would have become stranded.

All this time Nancy had sat cuddling her baby who slept peacefully in her arms but raising her head she asked quietly: "Doesn't that mean though that they might meet up with Gilbert's group?" "Aye lass, it's possible but Gilbert knows all about Makendon."
So far Wilf had said nothing but now in one of his
deeper tones he said:

"It's likely the stranger's lass and kidnapper might end
up there too, and he's down valley. Could be awkward,
especially if it is the Faas!"

There were no further comments as at that moment
there was the sound of snow sliding down off the roof
at the back.

"That," commented Mac, "means we've got a fast
thaw. Let's hope that Angus and Peter get back soon."

No mention of Henry, thought Betty, but then why
should Mac be concerned about a total stranger about
whom he obviously had doubts?

As it happened, Angus and Peter had completed their
task of warning the farms down river and had just
returned to Barrowburn where, after a brief rest, a
welcome drink and some food, they were ready to set
off again with Henry. They too had noticed the sudden
thaw following a very light snow fall which had ended
up as the horrible wet stuff which somehow managed
to insinuate its way inside their clothing.

Just outside of Linbriggs there had been a loud crack
from somewhere in the river, a clear warning that it
would be better to keep to the banks. As they were
leaving. Father Gregory reminded Henry about keeping
the bag of pipes safe, and asked him to tell Mac that "he would collect his sheep when the weather improved." By this time Henry had given up trying to make sense of all the good Father's comments and just nodded amiably.

Their return somehow seemed a little easier although they took great care to avoid any thin ice. It was noticeably milder now which boded well for a fast thaw by the next day but also reminded them of their main concern, the possibility of a river surge. It was almost dusk when they did get back to the Slymefoot where a cheerful fire and a tasty stew awaited them. Betty was pleased to see them all safe, and noticed that Henry looked pleased to see her again. Mac received his pipes and the Father's message with studied nonchalance then pretended a sudden interest in Nancy and the baby.

Once again Betty was aware of how quiet, on the whole, the baby had been and hoped it was not a bad sign. Even so, it seemed to be feeding well...much to Wilts embarrassment... and seemed healthy enough and Nancy was certainly looking healthier already. For a brief moment she wondered why Wilf should be so embarrassed when he had doubtless witnessed breast-feeding as he grew up but then of course it dawned on her: it was not the baby, it was Nancy who was mixing his emotions!
Betty was sure it was an accident even though she could not see Henry's face, but when he knocked a pipe off a barrel top she was less surprised than she might have been to see it shatter and reveal a very old looking gold coin. The others froze for a moment then Peter picked up the pieces, looked at Mac, and said:

"Ye might as well tell him now 'though I've a good idea he's worked it out for himself."

In fact Henry hadn't "worked it out". It had been a genuine accident but the moment the coin was revealed various things clicked into place. Presumably the good Father's sheep were in exchange for the coins for he knew immediately that this coin was from a rich hoard.

"Aye well, lad. There's many a coin like this round here if ye know where to look for it...so we buy good breeding sheep from the drovers who sell on the coins we find. That's it, lad, and we'll be grateful if ye can keep that to your self. Just talking to the wrong people and well, ye wouldn't want to be ending up lost in a peat-pit now would ye?"

Henry doubted that that was all there was to it, and was naturally curious to know where the coins came from, but he realised that he was in a dangerous situation. Even though he had been more or less welcomed he could recognise a veiled threat when he heard one. He was aware that Betty gave him a look
that seemed to warn him to ask no more and he was happy to give the required assurances. He had known all along that his presence was merely tolerated and that now he would really have to watch his back.

Fortunately the matter was allowed to drop and soon, after checking the animals, they all prepared for another night in the Slimefoot, uneasily aware that if the thaw continued overnight, the next day could bring many dangers to the valley.

Further up that valley Gilbert was pointing out a barn not far from Makendon where he reckoned they could pass the night. It was already starting to darken and Gilbert thought no-one would be moving from Makendon that night. The barn was not in good shape but being just out of sight of the house it meant they should be undisturbed. Partly filled with hay, logs and general rubbish, it nevertheless provided shelter. To Mick's relief Andy produced some dried meat which he claimed to have been given back at Fulhope; enough to bide them over along with the stale bread they'd brought from the Slimefoot.

Nevertheless it was a cold and miserable night for Mick. Despite being exhausted from the walking in the snow he found he could not sleep for long periods, partly due to the two drovers' snoring and partly due to the constant drip of thawing snow. It was therefore with relief that he became aware of the growing light of dawn and could not but admire how the drovers
woke as if from the most comfortable of resting places. After a quick face wash and drink from snow, they prepared to approach Makendon, very aware of how slushy the snow had become and how much milder it was, even at that early hour.

As soon as they moved back into the main valley, they stopped simultaneously, alarmed, at the sight before them. The valley at this point was quite narrow with high sides and seemed to contain a long stretch of lake where once there had been a river.

"It's happening already," Gilbert stated. "It's already backed up and will soon be knocking on Makendon's door unless the barrier gives way first. At least it's given us a good reason for knocking them up."

Mick and Andy knew that they had a real opportunity as "passing drovers" to warn the inhabitants of Makendon and at the same time see if the mysterious lady was present.

Their track above the river was more unpleasant now than dangerous with deep slushy pools but it took only 10 minutes to reach the building. The horses in the courtyard, perhaps sensing danger, were already restless and easily spooked as the three men passed them by and started hammering on the door. Dogs started howling as muttered curses from within approached. The door was yanked open to reveal a
tall, gaunt man, almost totally bald apart from a few wisps of grey hair and with a long unkempt beard.

Obviously just awakened he stood in a long dirty shirt, his face revealing that he was in no mood for any form of pleasantries. Fortunately Gilbert was ready for this and immediately started talking about the danger the house was in.

At first the man, whom Mick gathered was "the Gaffer", didn't seem to take in what was being told him, even though Gilbert's "erms" seemed to draw out what was essentially a simple message. At last there was a response; indeed "the Gaffer" seemed as if he had recognised Gilbert but whether that was the case or not didn't matter as he turned and started bellowing into the house.

Gradually the inhabitants appeared in various stages of dress sleepily asking over and over what the supposed danger was. Gilbert repeated his message several times until his quiet urgency sank in. Then there was chaos! The men disappeared and re-emerged quickly. Four of them mounted their horses and were off as fast as they could go.

Without a word "the Gaffer" walked off to look down the valley leaving one man: a shifty looking poorly dressed man in his mid 20s. At first he glanced around hesitating, then looking carefully at the drovers he asked:
"Which way's best for Scotland?"

Because of the lay of the land Gilbert led him off to a rise so that he could point out a direction but no sooner had they gone about 30 yards than there was a flurry from behind them. Mick, who had been watching events from behind the others, turned as a woman dashed out of the house, threw herself on the remaining horse and headed off down the valley track.

With a curse, the man left Gilbert and Andy, and ran screeching after her until he was out of breadth, then seeing he'd been outwitted, he moved to see if there was any animal left in the outbuildings.

"Divn't think on't, bonny lad. My horse stays where it is."

It was "the Gaffer" who'd quietly returned and was watching the scene as if such things happened every day. With more curses the man spat and disappeared slowly down the valley following the horse's tracks.

Speaking to Gilbert, the Gaffer explained that he knew there was something funny going on but as they'd all paid in advance for shelter he'd let them be.

"Them Faas, tho', I think they'd have taken that lass this morning as they were eyeing her as if she was worth something to them. 'twas obvious though that
she was scared of yon fellow: claimed to be her brother rescuing her from a bad marriage."

At that point he'd obviously decided he'd said all he was going to say and just nodded or shrugged at the drover's concern over a flood or surge. Then without any warning, he gave them all a nod, went back into his house and banged the door shut.

"Erm, I think we might as well head back. Perhaps that poor lassie will get to the Slymefoot and safety and we can see what's happening down valley."

Without waiting for a reply from Mick, the two drovers started walking once again through the increasingly slushy snow.

The track, being well above the valley, allowed the group to see the extent of the back-up which was already close to the top of the barrier at Fulhope and seemed to be a spreading lake on the other side towards Blindburn. There was no sight of the horse nor of the man following it although their tracks were clear enough. After Fulhope, they were back in the valley and had to find new ways along the edges. As they approached Blindburn, a cry rang out and they saw the man trying to run across the snow about 100 yards ahead.

At first they couldn't see why he was running but then four horses swept down from an adjacent valley. The
rest was a blur. One moment the horses appeared, the next the man was lying flat down in the snow and the Faas, as they obviously were, were continuing down the valley edge. By the time the drovers and Mick reached the downed man, the snow was covered in blood, still spurting from a knife slash across the back of his neck.

After a moment's pause to check he was definitely dead, the three looked at each other, aware that the situation had changed. Although only on foot they picked up speed as much as they were able and set off in pursuit, wondering what chance the woman on horseback had against the expert gypsy riders. They passed Blindburn without stopping, noticing only that the water was backing up but well away from the farm buildings, but as Mick glanced up at the farm house he thought he saw Sandy waving from inside. Perhaps it was wishful thinking as he could have done with a stop there but knew that they had to push on. At least he knew that the women were back safely.

In their hearts they knew that the horses would be well in advance of them but hoped that the deteriorating conditions underfoot would slow them down, so it was with considerable surprise that as they approached Carshope they saw the horses and riders pulled up just short of the house. The reason soon became obvious as water spread from side to side of the valley behind the barrier there leaving no room between the valley's steep sides for further progress.
"Where though was the young woman?" Mick wondered. "Had she got through before it became impassable or had she taken refuge up at the farm?"

The three men realised that they could easily be seen and for a brief moment thought that the Faas were heading back towards them but they suddenly veered up a slope and were going to try to get over the hill on their side. It was apparently hard going for they stopped frequently and it looked like the men were pulling the horses through the slushy snow. Watching them, Gilbert started to speak:

"Erm, perhaps we might have to do the same, but I've an idea that yon lass managed to get over to the farm at some point and is being hidden by Robbie. Erm, I think a small way back, it was shallower and we might cross if we wade carefully."

Andy nodded and immediately turned back towards where the water was widest. Dubiously Mick followed although the thought of wading through a near freezing river was hardly appealing. Gilbert however was right for they could see quite clearly a raised spar of land leading to the river at a point where it was naturally wide and shallower. If the woman had come this way, and as yet they could see no tracks, she had either been very lucky or had a good eye!

Crossing the river was not as bad as it might have been as the barrier had stopped the current, but the
water, which reached their thighs, was very cold. Perhaps it was imagination but it seemed to be rising as they crossed; soon however, they were on the other side, stamping their feet and moving quickly to get their circulation moving. Cold as they were they were nevertheless pleased to see tracks of a horse in the snow heading directly towards the farmhouse.

Robbie had obviously seen them...doubtless he had been watching all the developments... as he appeared at the door as they approached. With only a nod he moved into the dark house leaving them to follow. The main room was lit only by the glow from a low fire, the windows being covered over with sheep skins.

Crouched beside the fire was the woman they'd heard so much about and had only recently seen. Robbie must have reassured her about them before they'd entered as she merely glanced up then back at the fire. Mick became aware that Gilbert and Andy were looking at him to speak so after a moment's hesitation he launched into a rather rambling account of why they were there and that Henry was back at the Slymefoot and did she want to come back with them. Having delivered himself of his tale he stood back expecting some response but she continued to stare at the fire. Even when he mentioned Henry again there was no apparent reaction.

"Strange", he thought, thoroughly nonplussed by the strange situation.
"Well, would you like to come back with us?" he asked, rather peevishly.

"Can't you see, man, yon lass is exhausted," Robbie stated, looking directly at him. "She's scared out of her wits too. Who can tell what might have happened to her up at Makendon. Anyway, yon horse is past it now."

"Erm, perhaps we should just go on without her then. Erm, ye'll keep a good eye on her I warrant."

If Robbie's face was anything to go by there could have been a furious argument at this apparent lack of concern for the woman but no sooner had Gilbert spoken, than the woman stood up, wrapped her shawl tightly round herself, nodded at them and headed for the door. Taking that as a signal that she was ready to go they trudged outside, very much to Robbie's evident relief, and headed off down towards the barrier of snow and ice. The last thing that Robbie saw was the four of them climbing up and over it.

Unaware of what was happening up the valley at that moment Henry was wandering disconsolately along the riverbank in their direction constantly searching for signs of the returning drovers. At one point as he rounded the valley bend, he thought he saw horses with riders up the hillside but when he looked again he decided he had imagined it. However, a few moments later he was sure that he could make out four dots
Wilf had become bored in the Slymefoot, so shortly after Henry had wandered out he decided to do the same. For no particular reason he followed Henry's footsteps for a while and then in order to get a better view of the valley he trudged up a slope to an outcrop which looked over a bend towards Carshope.

No sooner had he got his breath back than he was aware of an unusual sound. Looking up he saw horses on the top of a ridge slithering down a slope and heard voices yelling in alarm. Then all was buried in a rumble of sliding snow and what seemed to be a rising mist. Desperately he looked towards the barrier and saw the wall of white snow, horses and riders, crash down just behind the barrier. He could see the four people... even at that distance one looked like a woman... stop and watch the wall of snow descend, then suddenly begin to scramble towards a hillside. As he watched, there came a sharp series of sounds and then slowly the barrier seemed to move forward, crumbling as it did so.

Perhaps it only took a short time but as he watched, a wall of snow, ice and water swept down the valley beneath him leaving a fine mist in the air. When it cleared, the valley seemed washed clean of snow and a torrent of built-up water rushed down hissing and spouting on its way. In one direction Wilf could see
Carshope and thought he could make out a figure standing in front of the farmhouse, in the other he could see and still hear the river rushing towards the Slymefoot and the lower valley, and on the hillsides he could see...nothing! Only snow and patches of rock! Of the four people there was no sign at all.

Back in the Slymefoot, the roar of the descending river had brought its inhabitants outside as the flood swept past just below the slope they were stood on.

Instinctively they moved back but then stood like statues watching the swirling torrent of ice and snow as it danced its serpentine way down-stream towards Alwinton. Nancy clutched the baby so tightly that it started screaming, bringing them all back to reality. Gradually the noise subsided, the waters became more channelled and their unspoken fears retreated.

"Look!" Mac called suddenly, pointing up the valley where they could gradually make out a figure staggering towards them, seemingly with another person draped around his shoulders. Mac, Angus and Peter moved off quickly towards the figure whilst Betty, dying to go and help but aware of how slow she would be, comforted Nancy who seemed to be expecting the worst.

At last the three men returned, Angus and Peter carrying a sodden and unconscious Mick, and Mac virtually carrying an exhausted Wilf. Betty immediately
took over. She told them to put Mick by the fire, and then helped them get his wet clothes off and wrapped him in some old ones that Mac found, made Wilf sit down and drink some beer that Nancy had poured with trembling hands and gradually helped to calm the atmosphere. Once all that could be done for the moment had been done, Mac and the two drovers went outside to see if any other bodies could be found. In fact they searched on and off up and down the valley for the next few hours until as dusk set in, the returned exhausted and grim-faced.

Only then did Mick quietly and sadly tell what had happened since he had left the Slymefoot with Peter and Andy. Wilf too repeated what he had seen happen and how he had seen a body washed up over a bank, how he had slithered down and dragged it to safety unaware of who it was or whether he was alive or dead. The listeners approved his bravery and, to his embarrassment, he was warmly embraced by Mick. There then followed a long silence, broken eventually by Betty who suggested that "something hot to eat would nay gan amiss". Normality, of a sort, returned, and all found solace in acting as if it was a normal evening but frequently lost in their own thoughts.

The next morning, after a hot drink and some porridge, the drovers settled up with Mac and took their leave, vowing to look for bodies or survivors up the valley and presumably to meet up with Percy and Henry again. Betty gave Wilf a special hug, telling him
he was a "fine young man!" and then pointedly ignored his red face and glistening eyes. She too settled with Mac who asked where she was going to go now.

"As before, Mac. I'm heading to York to find my son. It's a long time since I saw him, and well, I'm not so young now. I'll go down the valley. At the very least I can check on the ones we warned and pass on the bad news. Who knows? Perhaps there may be more survivors." After a tearful farewell with Nancy and the babe, she picked up her bag and strode off purposely down the track. Only when she thought that she was out of sight did she slow down, wipe her eyes and start to wonder if she would ever be able to complete her quest. To the watching Nancy who had followed her for a short way, her distant figure suddenly looked as if it had changed into that of an old woman.

"And that Sir, is all I know, thanks to what I have been told by the various people who survived that terrible day. Thanks to the teacher man down the valley I'm told I tell a good story. Not too long for you I hope Sir? My mother. God bless her soul, often said I spoke too much”.

The bodies of the Faas, their horses and the two drovers were later found in the Alwinton valley but there was no sign of the two lovers...if that was what they truly were. However, later that year the summer was very hot and long and the river dropped to a very
low level. Just past Rothbury the river goes through a twisting defile, and it was there that some young lads found their bodies: stuck together in-between two boulders. I like to think that he tried to rescue her and that they found each other again, even if in death, but no-one will ever know.

Old Betty, Sir? No, I never heard tell on her after she had passed down the valley visiting the farms as she went. I'd like to think she'd find her son but there's no way of tellin' now is there Sir? My father? Yes, he's very old and infirm now, never says much, and won't talk about that day! Yes' I'll tell him you asked after him, yes I will. Your name, sir?"

"Wilf”.

With that, the young man smiled, gave a small bow to the bemused pretty young woman and walked out of the Slymefoot for ever.