

The Final Harvest

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The headphones were borrowed and far too small.

The sides of his head were uncomfortably hot and a tingling sensation was beginning to affect his ears. Despite this discomfort he continued to listen intently while swinging the end of the long rod over the rich, newly seeded earth.

The sun was now nearing the tops of the hedges on the far side of the field. Peter was unmindful of the lengthening shadows that were creeping across the land like dark probing fingers, for he was intent on following the pegged line that divided the field.

He had chosen early evening to conduct his search for that was the time most people were having their tea and he was less likely to be seen in his own humming, buzzing, clicking world.

It all started with a news item about Soggy Bottoms where his farm was.

Soggy Bottoms had been aptly named for it was wet marshland before his ancestors had drained part of it in the eighteenth century to form arable fields. They remained productively fertile until war appropriated them in 1941 for use as an airfield.

Wellingtons and Lancasters, heavily laden with destruction and crewed by eager young men, had rumbled across the grass, struggling to rise into the sky until finally disappearing into the merciless night, many never to return.

When the savage conflict ended the serenity of the long Lincolnshire summer evenings returned and Ralph, a much older man, came home. He changed his uniform for faded dungarees and returned to sowing and reaping like his father and forefathers before him. A number of years passed and it was on one such balmy twilight, with skylarks twittering defensively that his heart failed and he fell amongst the poppies as many before him. His son, Peter, took over the reins of five hundred acres and two old shire horses called Bill and Ben.

Thirty more harvests were gathered before the county learnt that Soggy Bottoms had once been the site of an Anglo Saxon fort. The news item was just eleven lines long but it had attracted hordes of treasure seekers into the countryside for the last three weekends.

From his high tractor cab Peter watched as strangers in anoraks and wellington boots and armed with their electronic devices trampled the newly seeded fields of his neighbour.

It was greed compelled Peter to purchase his own metal detector.

Ironically it was branded Viking.

Peter was working the fourth field and was within sight of the last peg when the earphones emitted a shrill sound. He snatched them off and held them a few inches away from his head while swinging the rod from side to side until he located the strongest signal.

The shovel plunged deep, lifted rich soil that was speedily thrown to one side and then plunged again. The deeper he went the darker the hole became for the sun had now disappeared behind the line of poplars leaving the western sky a deep scarlet. He balanced a torch on the edge of the hole and continued digging until there was a sudden ring of metal and the shovel jarred in his hands.

He presumed it was some kind of metal and sounded very large.

He fell to his knees to begin exploring the object with his hands. The weak beam from the torch illuminated a curved shape. Smaller pieces of metal were scattered in the soil around it. Taking one of the larger pieces he held it up and rubbed at the coating of soil with his thumb. A silver brooch appeared, seductively glinting a promise of great wealth.

Peter gasped, knowing he had found the end of the rainbow.

He slipped it quickly into his pocket and glanced nervously towards the distant lane. No person or vehicle was to be seen. Peter switched off the torch, knowing that a solitary light in the middle of the field would draw the attention of his neighbour should he pass by. The night was drawing in fast but greed determined that he must continue excavating.

Peter used the shovel again in an attempt to learn the size and nature of his find. He was hoping for an Iceni treasure chest but dared not use his torch and could only let his imagination run free.

He had heard that an Iceni coin from 50BC had been unearthed and that the British Museum had paid the finder a very large sum of money.

Could the weird object be a bronze chest filled with silver artefacts? Or was it a solid gold sarcophagus with a bejewelled warrior inside? His calloused fingers fumbled blindly in the soil, finding big and small rings, cloak pins and odd coins that he tossed carelessly to one side as he dug deeper to uncover the secret of the object.

Suddenly the shovel hit an irregular shape on the curved metal. Using his hands he groped until he was able to find another that was half buried on what now appeared to be an upturned bathtub.

‘Vikings didn’t make coffins like this,’ he muttered irritably.

Then, to his astonishment, he heard the sound of ticking. He raised his head to look at the discarded metal detector and saw that it was still switched off. He bent down again and realized that the sound was coming from the mysterious object.

Then suddenly recollecting that his wheat field had once been an airfield and a prime enemy target propelled him out of the hole and racing towards the tree line. He had covered only thirty yards in his mud-caked boots before a concussive force struck him in the back and flung him a further ten yards through the air to land face down in the damp soil.

The explosive sound of the SC500 reverberated across the fields in all directions until it dwindled to a murmur that could no longer be heard. Peter struggled to rise but found every movement aggravated by teeth-grinding agony.

With soil clinging to his face and caking his eyes he stumbled in the direction of the hole he had dug. It was now the size of a colossal crater and he almost fell in. The acrid smell hanging in the air caught in his throat and as he coughed the pain was accentuated and blood sprayed from his mouth. Peter knew instinctively he had to get help and staggered towards the distant lane. The excruciating pain in his upper body forced him to look down and he saw the source of his suffering protruding from his chest.

A length of steel rod with blistering gold paint emerged through his coat. Although it had passed through flesh, bone and Harris tweed it still retained legible fragments of lettering along its scorched shaft. He staggered, clutching at the silver brooch in his pocket, and fell for the final time, his vision darkening and fixed on the three barely readable words.

Viking Metal Detector.

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