

## The Good Neighbour

by Francesca Duffield

After Mother passed away, I wondered from time to time if I was honour bound to comply with all her last wishes. Some small things were easy enough, refilling the bird feeder, leaving milk out for the stray cat who hung around her ever generous kitchen door with a look that said 'prove it' when I dared to suggest he probably had a perfectly good home elsewhere, and keeping up the church donations. Others were more burdensome: sorting out the latest disaster in my cousin's life, usually involving a need for money, as he seemed to live by ekeing out a chaotic existence on other people's charity. But the worst has proved to be closer to home, and had always been known as 'seeing to Mrs Cadwallader'.

When Mother was still mobile enough, she had always disappeared at ten o'clock to 'see to' the, to me, mysterious Mrs Cadwallader at number 37. Quite what this entailed I never thought to enquire in any depth but as Mother became virtually housebound, I had to 'see to' her first, then sally forth in all weathers to do the same for Mrs C.

How Mother had done it for all those years, I cannot imagine. Mrs Cadwallader's bulk was permanently ensconced in her greasy throne of an armchair, little eyes glittering in the gloom of her 'parlour', and apparently able to see through walls and around corners.

As I turned the key in the rusty lock of the back door the usual greeting was "Is that you, Robert? You're late!" varied occasionally with, "I've been waiting hours in agony, you never think of me."

The agony was never defined and seemed mainly to consist of a need to rearrange her cushions, which involved a much closer contact with her not very fresh person than I wanted, while she sighed and groaned, complaining loudly, "You never get them right, not like your poor mother, Betty always knew how I liked them."

One seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation. That day, she wanted that 'doodah' put up on an inaccessible bit of wall above a bureau with a imminent cascade of magazines and papers slewed across the top of it. I wasn't going to move it: that would start a whole new tirade, so I obediently fetched the step-stool from the pantry along with an inadequate tack hammer and an old nail she insisted was perfect for the job. Perched sideways to avoid the bureau, I held the hideous plaque in the position she had told me to.

"How's that?" I said, trying to hold it up long enough for approval.

"No, no, not there, further over," she grumbled. Holding my tongue, I moved it gingerly to the right.

"Not that far, and move it up a bit!" she barked, and I twisted round to do her bidding. The step-stool lurched backwards. I flapped frantically trying to recover my balance, but crashed in a heap at her feet. Pain seared through my leg, and I felt quite faint for a moment.

"You always were such a stupid boy!" she was glaring down at me, still holding her dingy skirts out of the path of my falling body. I managed to drag my phone out of my pocket and call for help, while she bemoaned her missed morning coffee.

The paramedics were very good, and with my broken leg put in a cast, the situation was mercifully taken out of my hands without betraying Mother's wishes. I can only hope Social Services are fully prepared for 'seeing to' Mrs Cadwallader.