Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Mr Sparks

Written by

Danny Weston

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in 2015 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Danny Weston to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Danny Weston, 2015

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 321 5

Typest in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited, Bungay,
Suffolk NR35 1ED

1

OCTOBER 1919

1

The Visitor

'Where in the world have you been?' snapped Aunt Gwen in her broad Welsh accent. 'The time you've taken, you'd have thought you'd gone to Africa for that bread.' She was standing on the steps of the Sea View hotel, her hands on her hips, her black hair tied back in a severe bun.

Owen tried not to look guilty. Earlier that morning, she had sent him over to the bakery to pick up a basket of fresh loaves. Owen knew from bitter experience that it really didn't do to keep Aunt Gwen waiting, but he'd been feeling reckless, so on the way back from the baker's, he'd taken a quick detour onto the pier to watch the Punch and Judy show.

'Sorry, Aunt Gwen,' stammered Owen. 'There was quite a queue at the baker's. I came straight back.'

'I hope so, for your sake,' she said. 'Because if I hear you've been wandering aimlessly around Llandudno again,

you and I will have *words*.' Aunt Gwen didn't like tardiness in any shape or form and Owen knew only too well that she wasn't slow to demonstrate her displeasure. She kept a length of cane in her room, which Owen had felt across his backside three times since he'd first arrived here, ten months ago. The first time had been for taking too long to follow instructions, the second, for being unable to finish a portion of Aunt Gwen's famously disgusting mutton pie. There'd been a third occasion, but he couldn't remember now exactly what he was supposed to have done that time. At any rate, he didn't much fancy a fourth dose, so he lifted the basket of bread and started up the steps to the entrance.

'I'll take that,' she told him, yanking the basket from his arm. 'We're expecting a guest at any moment. You stay here to help with the luggage.'

Right on cue, the growl of an engine turned Owen's head towards the street and he saw a motor taxi approaching. It was one of only a few taxis operating around Llandudno. The Great War had ended less than a year ago, so there was a real shortage of motor vehicles and the fuel required to run them. It also made them an expensive choice for travellers.

'He's here already!' said Aunt Gwen, shooting an accusing glare at Owen as though it was somehow *his* fault. She hurried up the steps towards the entrance and shot a final glance at Owen before she went inside. 'Be polite,' she warned him. 'And for goodness' sake, smarten yourself up!'

Owen wasn't sure how he'd do this at such short notice, but he spat on his hand and brushed down his unruly thatch of black hair, then rubbed the toecaps of his boots on the backs of his trousers.

The cab rumbled to a halt outside the Sea View and the driver climbed out and opened the rear door. A single passenger alighted and stood on the pavement, watching as the driver moved to the rear of the vehicle, to unstrap a heavy traveller's trunk that was balanced precariously on the luggage rack. The owner of the trunk looked on in silence, making no attempt to help.

The man didn't look very well, Owen thought. He was ancient, his skinny frame bent with age and somehow swamped by the old-fashioned frock coat and waistcoat that he was wearing. He wore white gloves and had shiny black-and-white spats on his feet. The effect was completed by a black top hat and an ebony walking stick with an elaborate jewelled head, which the man kept tucked under

one arm. The wisps of hair that protruded from beneath the brim of his hat were white as a fall of snow.

All this Owen saw in an instant as he ran past the guest. Then he was helping the sweating, grunting driver to ease the heavy trunk down from the rack. They managed to lower it to the pavement and Owen noted – with a hint of relief – that it now rested on four sturdy wheels, which would at least make it a bit easier to move around. The old man came forward and paid the cabbie, waving away any change. Then he looked at Owen, nodded gravely and said simply, 'Bring the trunk.' He had some kind of a foreign accent, Owen thought, but it was hard to place.

The old man headed for the entrance of the hotel and Owen struggled along in his wake, alternately pushing and pulling the trunk, which he now noticed was covered with a multitude of exotic-looking labels featuring scenes from around the world. By the time he'd reached the doorway and was levering the trunk up the steps, he'd noted Zanzibar, Calcutta and Singapore amongst them, but he'd have needed a lot longer to look through them properly. He wished he'd thought to ask the cab driver to give him a hand to get it inside, but the vehicle had already moved away in a cloud of smoke, so there was nothing for it but

to struggle along the best he could. He jolted the trunk over the last step and thought he heard a small sound from within it – a kind of grunt of discomfort, but he told himself he must have imagined it.

Once he finally had the trunk inside, he trundled it across the wood-block floor and found the old man standing at the counter, giving his details to Aunt Gwen.

'So it's just the two nights, then?' Owen heard her say. She made no attempt to keep the disappointment out of her voice. The business was entering the annual doldrums known as 'out of season' and Aunt Gwen preferred long residencies; but at the same time, she wasn't one to pass up business of any kind.

'It's just a passing visit,' announced the old man, signing the register with a theatrical flourish. 'Always there is work to be done and always there is travel.'

What *was* that accent? Was it . . . could it be . . . *German*? Owen hoped not. Feelings still ran high in this small seaside town. Owen supposed that he had more reason than most to resent such a man's presence. His own father had died in the War – well, that was the supposition, at least. Officially, he was missing, presumed dead, along with thousands of others. The last they'd heard from him

was a brief letter written in July 1918, but it gave no indication of where he had been at the time and said only that he was looking forward to coming home. No body had ever been found and for a while, Owen and his ma had somehow managed to keep alive the hope that he would miraculously reappear. But when the War finally ended in November 1918, and there was still no word of him, the realisation that her husband was never coming home affected Owen's mother badly, causing a rapid descent into madness. She'd finally been deemed incapable of bringing up her only son and had been committed to the North Wales Lunatic Asylum in Denbigh just before Christmas 1918.

That was when Aunt Gwen had stepped up and announced that she had plenty of space and would be more than happy to provide a secure home and a prosperous future for her much-loved nephew, Owen. Aunt Gwen was, if nothing else, a great saleswoman. The authorities had swallowed every word and Owen had been promptly delivered into her tender care.

Right now, she was peering suspiciously at the register, an expression on her face that suggested she had just detected a bad smell.

'The Great Otto?' she read. 'What kind of a name is that?'

'The name under which I have performed for forty years,' said the old man proudly. 'The name, madam, which has graced the residences of royalty all over the world.'

Aunt Gwen sniffed. 'Well, it won't do for me,' she said. 'Your *real* name, if you don't mind.'

The old man bristled and, for a moment, Owen suspected that he was going to walk out in disgust. But his shoulders slumped, his head bowed. Perhaps he was just too tired to put up a fight. He picked up the pen and wrote down something else.

'Otto Schilling,' she read. 'There, that wasn't so hard, was it?' Her eyes narrowed. 'It sounds a bit . . . You're not *German*, are you?'

'No, madam, I'm Belgian by birth. From Liège. Do you know it?'

'No, but of course the Belgians are always welcome here. After everything your people went through in the Great War—'

'I fail to see what was so great about it,' interrupted Mr Schilling. 'And it wasn't so bad for me. I was touring America for most of it. Occasionally there were cockroaches in the hotel rooms, but that's about as bad as it got.'

Aunt Gwen gave him a frosty smile. 'I can assure you, you won't find any cockroaches *here*,' she told him. 'This is Llandudno's *premier* hotel.' She waited as though expecting a response, but when she didn't get one, she continued. 'You are most welcome, Mr Schilling. I'm going to put you in our finest room.' She handed him a key. 'You'll have a lovely view of the sea front and the pier. You can go up in the lift,' she added proudly. 'Do you know, we're the first hotel in Llandudno to actually *have* one.'

'How lovely for you,' said Mr Schilling. It was hard to tell if he was being sincere or taking the mick. Owen suspected the latter.

Aunt Gwen shot her nephew a look. 'Room seven,' she said. 'Help the gentleman up with his trunk. Get him some fresh towels. And don't be all day.'

Owen nodded. He knew only too well why Aunt Gwen had been so quick to offer him a home. She'd been mostly motivated by the opportunity to acquire an unpaid skivvy, someone to take care of all the troublesome little jobs that came up on a daily basis in an establishment like this. Aunt Gwen had never married and therefore had no unpaid little skivvies of her own. Oh, she had to observe the law and

allow Owen to go to school five days a week – but as soon as he got home, the chores began and weekends were one long toil of changing beds and making fires and scrubbing bathrooms till they shone. Over the summer holidays she'd really had her money's worth out of him, working him around the clock at her busiest time of year. Now at least, things were easing off a bit.

Owen wheeled the trunk over to the lift, slid back the doors and manoeuvred the thing inside. For all Aunt Gwen's proud claims, the lift was a narrow little affair, not much more than a shoebox on a string. Once Owen had got the trunk in and pushed himself alongside it, there was barely room for Mr Schilling to squeeze his skinny frame into the remaining space, but he somehow managed. Owen got the concertina cage door closed and pressed the button. As the lift began to rise, he heard a tiny voice, speaking from somewhere nearby.

'Are we nearly there yet?' it said.

Owen looked at Mr Schilling in alarm, but it quite clearly hadn't been *him* who had spoken. It had sounded like a little boy. Now Owen heard a muffled bump and the same voice said, 'I'd kill for some fresh air right now.'

'Shush, Charlie,' said Mr Schilling calmly.

The voice seemed to have come from inside the trunk. Owen looked down at it in dismay and then back to Mr Schilling. The old man smiled at Owen.

'So,' he said, 'What's your name?'

Owen stared back at him, open-mouthed.

'Er . . . Owen,' he murmured. 'My name is . . . Owen.'

'Good. We shall be friends, I think.'

And the voice in the box said, 'That goes for me too!'

Then the lift came to a shuddering halt. They had arrived.