

DESTINY STANE

David Courtenay was tidying up for the week with some final e-mails when the phone buzzed.

‘Director of Works.’

‘Steve Symon here, David. Sorry to ring on a Friday afternoon.’
Courtenay’s mind ran over the possibilities; Steve was senior consulting engineer on the Restoration survey. At least it wasn’t some obnoxious MP bellyaching about his broadband speed.

‘No problem, what’s up?’

‘Maybe nothing, but the scanners have come up with an unexpected space.’

‘Where?’

‘On the north-western edge of Westminster Hall.’

‘Old Palace Yards.’

‘Or under them. Some sort of cellars or vaults maybe. Bigger than pipes.’

‘That’s almost under the road.’

‘Yup, but there’s a wall sealing it off. Probably nothing major but it’s not on the ground plans.’

‘Ok, thanks for letting me know, Steve. I’ll need to get the archaeologists to take a look, just in case. Likely Monday or Tuesday before they get mobilised.’

‘Fine, we’ll ignore it for now. Let me know when they check in. Have a good weekend.’

David added that to his diminishing list. At least he had a weekend in prospect, despite the extended, inexorable build-up towards the multi-billion pound restoration of the Palace of Westminster. What was one underground cellar more or less in that labyrinthine enterprise?

By Tuesday afternoon the archaeologists were on site. Technically a spin-off company, the team was made up from experienced staff in Kings College and postgraduates. Jill Michaels led with back-up from Sandy Brown who was a mediaeval specialist.

Within an hour Courtenay was summoned, to find Steve already positioned by a window like aperture in what had appeared to be a solid external wall. The engineer's casual attire contrasted with Courtenay's formal suit.

'It's just a Victorian brick wall,' pronounced Jill. 'Looks like some kind of storage area - do you want access?'

'Please,' confirmed David. He was surprised to feel a tightening in his stomach.

Two of the overalled team came forward and began gently but efficiently to tap out layers of dusty brick, right down to ground level.

'After you,' said Jill, handing round powerful torches.

He led the way, followed by Steve, Jill and the rest of the team.

The cellar stretched out in front of them, long and narrow, There were shelves on both sides piled with old papers, and boxes filled with what looked like inkwells and quill pens.

'Looks medieval,' commented Sandy, pointing his torch towards the low vaulting above their heads. 'Wonder if it once connected with the Abbey?'

But as Sandy and the team peered round, David's attention was caught by a wooden platform up ahead. There was something large resting on it, covered with a tarpaulin. Jill followed his gaze and brought her torch closer. There was a faded handwritten label tied to an eyehole in the canvas.

'Birnam Village to London Westminster. November 1819', read Jill, 'Almost two hundred years ago exactly.'

'Can we uncover it?' asked David intrigued.

‘Gently does it,’ cautioned Sandy, as the team felt their way round the bottom of the tarpaulin, ‘it’s tucked under something really solid.’

‘Can we inch it out?’ offered Jill.

‘Think so. If we tip a fraction you can tug.’

They all gathered round.

‘Do we need a wedge?’

‘It’s tipping a little.’

‘Got it - only tucked in.’

‘That’s this side out,’ added an assistant.

With infinite care Jill began to turn the tarpaulin back over, inch by inch. It came off seamlessly. Five torches shone in. Six faces widened in astonishment.

It was a massive hump-backed stone, dark and shiny. The surface was finely incised with Celtic interlace tapering toward the rounded top.

‘Christ,’ exclaimed Steve, ‘I think it’s a meteorite.’

‘But what is it?’ breathed David.

‘It’s the Lia Fàil,’ exhaled Sandy, who was intently studying the upper surface. ‘The Stone of Destiny.’ He stood back to let the others view two labyrinth motifs carved one at each end, and between them a Celtic cross.

‘Sandy?’ demanded Jill.

‘There was a newspaper piece, 1819 if memory serves, reporting a rare archaeological find on Dunsinane Hill near Scone. A large black carved stone. But it was sent to London, and neither the dig nor the finds were ever documented. But here it is, holed up safe and sound beneath the Old Palace of Westminster. Fancy that.’

‘Hold on,’ remonstrated David, ‘we’ve got the Stone of Destiny, here in the Abbey, or at least we had till it went back to Scotland a few years ago.’

‘Not the real one though,’ countered Sandy. ‘According to the locals the Abbot had that buried on Dunsinane, and then palmed off King Edward’s raiding party with the lid of the monastery cesspit, complete with ring handles.’

‘All of which is of course pure speculation,’ intervened Jill firmly.

‘The last bit could be fanciful,’ conceded Sandy.

‘We’ll have to go over this with a tooth comb and try to get a date. Though I have to say it looks authentic early medieval. That cross may be a later addition though.’

‘Christianisation,’ chimed Sandy.

‘This is going to cause trouble,’ prophesied David gloomily. ‘Things are so contentious in this place these days. Can you keep the chamber sealed off for now?’

‘Yes, we’ll screen and secure it as an archaeological site,’ reassured Jill.

‘And please not a word to the wider world,’ Courtenay insisted.

‘I’ll instruct the surveyors to keep clear,’ added Steve, ‘no more laser scans here until the archaeology’s complete. Though that in itself will raise curiosity.’

‘Just a few days, till I can get hold of the right people to handle this. Everything’s in recess.’

‘If Sandy’s right,’ mused Jill, ‘we’re looking at the oldest symbol of kingship in these islands.’

‘And, from a different angle, the foremost symbol of Scottish nationhood.’

‘Right,’ cut in Steve, registering his colleague’s anxious looks, ‘that just about wraps it up for now. We’d better let the professionals get on with their work.’

‘Yes,’ agreed David gratefully, ‘keep me in touch with any further developments.’

As the two men picked their way carefully out, Jill and Sandy knelt down as if one to drink in their dramatic and completely unexpected discovery.

Having checked with the Clerk’s office that the Speaker was still in London, David requested a direct call. Addressing Speaker Felton was always a nervous moment since he was famed for his impatience and short temper.

But on this occasion he listened attentively to the Director’s concise report, and then whistled.

‘Well, there’s an awkward turn-up and no mistake.’ Felton spoke in Oxbridge tones but the West Midlands kept breaking through underneath. ‘The Nats will have a field day with this. If it’s confirmed. Could it be authentic?’

‘The archaeologists seemed convinced, but they’re doing a detailed examination as we speak.’

‘Send me their report as soon as it comes in. If it’s the real thing I’ll have to bring in the Cabinet Office and the Scotland Office. This must be kept away from the press, for now anyway.’

‘I’ve given strict instructions. Only a small group know.’ David hesitated.

‘Yes?’

‘There’s just one other thing, Speaker.’

‘What is it, man?’

‘Where the stone was found. I’ve been studying the old plans, and these vaults seem to be beyond what was originally the chancel of St Stephen’s Chapel. Which might, it could be argued, put that are within the ancient curtilage of the Abbey.’

‘God, no, not the Dean, on no account.’

Relations between the Speaker and the Dean of Westminster Abbey were notoriously choleric.

‘I just thought I should mention it, sir, given the circumstances.’

‘Well don’t. Perish the bloody thought.’

The call was terminated.

Jock Brown was a Fleet Street legend who had outlived Fleet Street. At nearly seventy years old, he was D. C. Thomson Group’s sole remaining London correspondent, for whom they maintained a two room office in journalism’s once famed locale. Jock still attended daily, sallying out to his watering hole for lunch, an unmistakable figure with bushy grey handlebar moustaches and a three piece tweed suit, whatever the weather. There were few things, over his decades of London watching, that the veteran journalist had not witnessed and written up, but Jock’s enduring success lay in never losing touch with his Scottish readership.

Late on Thursday afternoon, the London correspondent was snoozing peacefully in the office armchair after a quiet day. The phone rang and Jock heard the welcome tones of his son Sandy.

‘Dad, I think I’ve got a story for you.’

‘Oh aye, archaeology is it?’

‘Sure is. We’ve found the Stone of Destiny, the real one, hidden under the Houses of Parliament.’

‘Jeepers-creepers, that’s some story. Are you allowed to spill the beans?’

‘Definitely not, but it’s too big to bother. Also they might be deciding to lose it again in a hurry.’

‘They might just. What does it look like, Sandy?’

‘Black rock, meteorite, and elaborately carved, Nothing like that lump of sandstone they’ve been using for seven hundred years. It’s supposed to have come from Ireland.’

‘Or Palestine. But they might have kissed it in the passing. Can you come round?’

‘I’m already on my way.’

‘Good lad. I’ll dig out all the files. This could be a monster.’

The Rt Hon Greig McNaughtie MP, Secretary of State for Scotland in Her Majesty’s Government had been chilling out on the sunny deck of his ample Dumfriesshire house, when he received the Speaker’s e-mail with its shocking attachment.

‘Fucking hell.’

It was a barely a year since he had experienced his own local difficulties with the thankfully reburied Whithorn Hoard, and here again was archaeology determined to smash up his much needed peaceful interlude. This so-called Stone of Destiny had arrived in his lap like an unexploded Exocet missile.

Relationships between Westminster and the Scottish Government were at an all-time low due to Brexit. His own job amounted to little more than PR and papering over cracks, yet it had become almost impossible. Now this was going to blow up in his face. It would have to be suppressed, lost again. Presumably that was why it had been walled into the cellars in the first place. But how?

And would the Speaker agree. Felton was an unreliable bugger, always looking for the chance to put himself centre stage. This thing had to be kept quiet at whatever cost. Would the security services help, the official ones, given the circumstances?

His entire holiday was going up in smoke before his eyes.

‘Fuck History. Fuck Archaeology.’

For a moment he wondered whom he could phone and confide in. But nobody came to mind.

The Sunday Post did Jock's scoop proud. 'Destiny Stone at Last' was emblazoned over the front page. This majored on the Dunsinane dig and the discovery that had finally been revealed. Inside there were two pages of photos following the previous twist and turns of raids, removals, recoveries and fakes. Page four was given over to a slightly blurry image from Sandy's phone with an artist's impression of the exquisite carvings. Facing this was a pic of the presumed Stone with its lumpen dullness. Next came a page of speculation about when the real Stone would be unveiled to the public and where it would be placed. Tucked discreetly into page seven was a profile of Jock Brown, referencing this story as his proudest moment. There was strictly no mention of Sandy Brown.

Finally there was an expanded centre-page leader demanding that the true Stone of Destiny be returned to Scone and put on display next to the Mound on which Scotland's kings had been crowned. This was headed 'Perthshire Must Not Lose Out Again.'

No sooner had the paper appeared than the media feeding frenzy began. Officialdom was hopelessly wrong sided and it was left to the Cabinet Office to issue a statement deploring the leak, while confirming that there had been an archaeological discovery in the Houses of Parliament but that it was still being assessed and that a statement would be issued by the Speaker's Office later in the week. Behind the scenes, as many Sundays off as possible were ruined by irate phonecalls from those left exposed on the front line.

The Secretary of State for Scotland insisted on a private meeting with speaker Felton on the Monday before the formal discussion the following day. He went without a civil servant and the Speaker reciprocated. Of course the whole shambolic mess was already out of control, and he had been dodging calls from the press, Scotland's Culture Minister, and his own MP's all morning.

It began badly. Felton's jowls looked as if they had been scraped by a razor shell, and quivered with indignation.

'Technically, you have no official locus in this matter.'

‘I represent Scotland in the Government, Mr Speaker, and if there was ever an issue of Scottish interest, this is it, as your press secretary will already be aware.’

‘The Nats think they represent Scotland here.’

‘That’s as may be but this is the United Kingdom Parliament,’ snapped McNaughtie.

‘So who does this damned piece of rock belong to? The monarchy? The Martians?’

‘It appears to be in your care at present.’

‘True, but my stewardship can only be temporary.’

‘It will have to go back to Scotland, replace the one we sent back before.’

‘Those were more benign times. There could be resistance, given the competing nationalisms.’

‘There would be outrage in Scotland if it was not sent back. We’d be handing the Scottish Nationalists a trump card. I have to head that off.’

‘In the interests of your Conservative Government, Mr McNaughtie; I represent all parties in the House. But actually that’s not the main complication.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

‘The Dean of Westminster has been in touch asserting the rights of the Church. His argument is that the Stone was discovered within the historic bounds, curtilage he called it, of Westminster Abbey.’

‘Jesus, that’s all we need.’

‘Precisely. Furthermore, he says that the Church is in charge of the sacred rite of coronation, and that if this is the real coronation stone of Scotland then it belongs where that nation’s kings and queens are crowned, ie in Westminster.’

‘I don’t believe this. He can’t get off with that.’

‘He’s going to try, and he will be at the meeting tomorrow.’

At this thought the Speaker’s face became even more overcast. The Secretary of State departed no further forward than when he had arrived.

The Very Reverend Leo Hurly hauled his gaunt, big-boned form up from the prayer desk, reassured that the Lord of Hosts was firmly on his side. For decades the Church had been going backwards in England, but now there opportunities to fight back and this Coronation Stone was one of them.

It was astonishing how little mention was made of the Church in arguments about Brexit. Yet the constitution and identity of Britain was founded on Monarchy, Church and Parliament in that order. Henry VIII was after all the first Brexiteer, and it was by establishing the Church of England that he broke free. Only on that basis could England truly be at liberty again.

Yet the Dean sensed the tide was turning. His new exhibition in the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Gallery was a runaway success. Religion and Monarchy – people couldn’t get enough. Even Netflix had got in on the act. The Stone of Destiny would provide the perfect centrepiece. Let the Scots keep their substitute. They had passed it off for the real thing in the first place so now they could abide by their deceit.

This would not, naturally, be plain sailing. But Leo had himself endured slings and arrows, not least his repeated knockbacks for episcopal preferment. ‘A bit outdated’. ‘Rather firm in his views’. He could hear the murmurs. Yet now he saw that all had been providential, for as Dean of Westminster he had much more direct influence on affairs. His current eminence was due to astute royal patronage, and now that particular debt could be honoured with interest.

Nonetheless he must marshal his case, and prepare carefully for tomorrow’s critical meeting. If need be Leo could be a stickler for legal detail.

The meeting convened at 2.00pm in the Speaker’s conference room. He presided with David Courtenay at his side. Greig McNaughtie was on the

left side of the table with his permanent secretary. Catherine Bell, the Scottish Culture Minister, arrived next with her permanent secretary, Jim Paterson, occupying the right side. The Dean arrived on his own, and sat at the lower end of the table opposite the Speaker. Formal introductions then took place as the gathering was a mix of familiar sparring partners with new combinations.

‘As you all know,’ commenced Speaker Felton ponderously, ‘I have no long term responsibility in this matter of the so-called Stone of Destiny. But as its unexpected discovery has been made under my authority,’ and he gestured towards David, ‘it falls to me to resolve the immediate next steps. Is that clear and acceptable to everyone?’

There were murmurs of assent.

‘Right. Ms Bell, as you are the guest here, so to speak, I think it would be courteous to let you speak first.’

‘Thank you, Speaker.’ Smartly dressed and neatly formed, Catherine Bell looked and sounded like an ambitious early career Headteacher. ‘I’m grateful for the opportunity to represent the Scottish Government today, and for your helpful circulation of the archaeologists’ preliminary report. Our view is that the Stone is a precious and unique part of Scotland’s heritage, which was removed to London in 1819 in highly irregular circumstances, and subsequently neglected or concealed. Consequently we formally request the return of the Stone of Destiny to Scotland, either immediately or by way of the Treasure Trove process. None of which, I am sure, will come as a surprise.’

Jim Paterson studied his papers intently, but his approval of the Cabinet Secretary’s crisp and incisive delivery was almost audible.

‘Well, that’s clear enough,’ confirmed Speaker Felton. ‘Mr McNaughtie, what is your perspective within the UK Government?’

‘We support my Scottish colleague’s position. Return to Scotland by the most expeditious and appropriate route. I would like to add,’ and McNaughtie eyed the Speaker, ‘that I have kept the Prime Minister informed and that she wishes the Scottish Office to take lead on this matter.’

Felton's jowls wobbled visibly at this short circuiting of his own communications with the cabinet Office.

'After all,' resumed McNaughtie unperturbed, 'we returned the previously authenticated stone of Destiny, even though it had been in the care of Westminster Abbey for seven hundred years.'

'On loan,' intervened the Dean, 'a decision made by my predecessor which I neither comprehend nor with which I sympathise or concur', demonstrating an impressive grasp of grammar.

'Thank you, Mr McNaughtie,' asserted the Speaker who was well-used to over-riding interruptions, 'that is also clear, and seems to reflect, if I may say so, an unusual degree of unity on the Scottish side. However, Dean, I believe you may have some other insights to offer?'

Leo rose, metaphorically speaking, to his full height and opened hostilities.

'I wish to record first of all my strongest possible protest that I was not notified immediately when the blocked vault between the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey was discovered.' He glared at David. 'That should be minuted. For that cellar, or cellars, as more may be uncovered, lie within the historic curtilage of Westminster Abbey, and fall therefore under my authority.'

'Your views will be noted, Dean.'

'These are not my views, Speaker, but historical fact. And certainly more established than the speculation surrounding this newly discovered stone.'

'And your point, Dean?' shot back Felton.

'My point, as you put it, is that responsibility for this discovery and its consequences lies with the Abbey, not the Houses of Parliament.'

'But what do you propose?' said McNaughtie impatiently.

'Westminster Abbey will care for this archaeological rarity as it does its other treasures, and will put it on public display. It will not have escaped your notice that we have recently opened Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee Gallery to acclamation.'

These last words were rolled out like a papal fiat.

‘What possible grounds can the Church of England have for seizing a prime piece of Scottish heritage?’ Unlike Catherine Bell, McNaughtie was losing his cool. He was an atheist but in the last resort also a presbyterian.

‘Seized?’ Hurley seized on the word. ‘How dare you, sir! We played no part in the removal or storage of this object. That was a matter of the Officers of Parliament,’ and this time he glared at Felton, ‘but now that the Stone is indubitably in our care we shall treat it with the respect to which it is due. Because, whatever its exact origins, this object has been associated with the sacred Rite of Coronation of the Kings of Britain and Ireland for seven hundred years. That respect may not be forthcoming in today’s Scotland.’

That was too much - Catherine lost her cool.

‘That remark cannot go unchallenged, Dean. Scotland remains loyally attached to Queen Elizabeth.’

‘The Second,’ sniped the Dean.

‘This isn’t getting us anywhere,’ swept in McNaughtie, ‘the Stone of Destiny, both of them if it comes to that, pre-date the Union of the Crowns, not to mention the Parliaments. It’s Scottish through and through, when it’s not Irish,’ he concluded lamely.

‘So send it back to Ireland then,’ snarled the Dean.

‘There’s no conceivable justification for waylaying it in London,’ countered Bell.

‘Order, please, order,’ insisted the Speaker, ‘this is worse than PM’s questions. So, Dean, I understand that you claim responsibility for this Stone, and wish to take responsibility for its location and care.’

‘Have I not made that plain? And in so doing I am acting not just on behalf of the Church –‘

‘Of England,’ corrected McNaughtie.

‘Yes, of England, sir, and of the monarchy, since, as you must know, I am a Royal Peculiar.’

Jim Paterson pulled out a hankie to cover his mouth.

‘If Westminster Abbey assumes responsibility,’ responded Bell without hesitation, ‘then the Scottish Government request as of this moment the newly discovered Stone of Destiny on permanent loan. However, we do not believe that this is the correct procedure and submit that Treasure Trove should apply. It’s the established legal process.’

‘The Church, Ms Bell, has its own legal procedures, and let me assure you that any loan would be subject to a lengthy and costly process in the Consistory Courts.’

‘Well, well,’ rejoined the Speaker, ‘who am I to defy the Church?’ Everyone looked towards Felton as he raised his head with an odd half smile. ‘Tomorrow this newly discovered artefact will be formally handed over to the Dean of Westminster. Given the extraordinary level of public interest I shall make the handover at a press conference, at which the Dean will announce his decision regarding the future location and display of the Stone of Destiny to an expectant public.’ The Speaker was now definitely smirking. ‘So, that concludes our business for now. I hope to see you all at tomorrow’s historic event.’

‘The Scottish Government will not be attending,’ warned Bell.

‘Most of you,’ adjusted the Speaker, ‘at let’s say 11.00am. No time to lose, Dean. David, I’ll leave you to liaise with the Abbey.’

Then he departed and the meeting broke up.

‘What did you make of that?’ enquired Scotland’s Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs, as she and her permanent secretary emerged onto the Thames Embankment.

‘Frankly?’

‘Please, Jim.’

‘It was disgraceful. There’s not a shred of historic or moral justification for a Westminster Abbey heist. It’s worse than the Elgin Marbles.’

‘We could still get it back on long-term loan, like the other one.’

‘From the Very Rev Hurley? Not a chance. And anyway, why should we borrow what’s ours already? All that proves is we’re a pretend government of a pretend country.’

‘What?’

‘You said frankly, Minister.’ Paterson came to a halt somewhere south of the Ministry of Defence. ‘As long as Scotland submits to the monarchy and this whole rotten Westminster establishment we’ll never be a proper nation. That’s it fair and square. We were sitting in there like supplicants at a stitch-up.’

‘That’s hardly impartial advice, Jim.’

‘I don’t feel impartial. Mind you, the way Felton body-swerved the whole thing shows what a shooglie peg he thinks they’re on. He was positively drooling at dumping it on the Dean. Royal peculiar, my backend. They may yet be stoking your own fires, Cab Sec. I’ll get back to the hotel and report in.’

Paterson resumed his normal low key posture, and walked away without further comment. Catherine was left open-mouthed at the outburst from her phlegmatic right-hand functionary. She went off in search of a drink, and a ticket for that night’s performance of ‘Imperium’, the stage adaptation of Robert Harris’s Roman novels – from democracy to dictatorship. And the Stone of Destiny was supposedly ancient history.

In the event she did not make the show. Despite its prescience on the Brexit debacle and a global slide towards authoritarian politics. The First Minister instructed her presence the next morning for a counter press conference at Edinburgh Castle. The Dean’s power grab was to be portrayed as the final straw in the contempt for Scotland’s parliament and government throughout Brexit.

‘I did my best to secure a long-term loan, First Minister, like the last one.’

‘Circumstances were against you, Catherine. But the illegal seizure of Scotland’s most ancient sovereign symbol conveniently sums up the

whole situation, brings it to the boil. We may yet have cause to be grateful to the Dean. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'No problem.'

Nicola rang off. Catherine called in her permanent secretary who was hovering outside.

'You know, Jim, maybe we didn't do so badly at that meeting. Nicola's on the warpath, but not with us.'

'As they say, Cabinet Secretary, tomorrow's another day. I hope I wasn't too out of order this afternoon.'

'Forget it, Jim, it's been trying for us all.'

'We need to be at Kings Cross in an hour, if we're to avoid the Heathrow madness.'

Greig McNaughtie was tight-lipped as he arrived at Westminster Hall the next morning. He had declined to join Speaker Felton and the Dean on the platform party. But despite his representations the Prime Minister had made no move; her mind was on other things. So he felt obliged to sit in the front row and appear to support what he knew was going to be an own goal.

That said he had to admit that the Church knew how to put on a good show. A dais had been erected at the upper end of the magnificent timbered Hall, constructed presumably from sturdy builder's pallets. The Stone sat there in all its gleaming lustre on a cloth of gold.

Greig could not help going forward to take a closer look at the exquisite ornamentation which seemed to be growing organically from the base of the stone like climbing plants. It was breathtaking. The photographers had been warned off but they were poised like a pack of hungry lions about to be loosed on the Christians.

The Speaker presided, explaining the circumstances of the discovery and the presumed origin of the Stone at Dunsinane Hill. He then handed over to the Dean.

The Dean began by referring to uncertainties surrounding the Stone and its identification. Then he stressed that it had been found within the historic boundaries of Westminster Abbey, and its connection with the monarchs and their coronation. Consequently Westminster Abbey was the ideal location in which to display and interpret this beautiful antiquity in a manner suited to its regal status. A specially reinforced area would be created in the Abbey triforium where the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Gallery had been triumphantly installed.

The Dean paused at this point to allow applause but none was forthcoming. There would of course, the Dean continued, be opportunities for the Stone to go on loan for display in Scotland, and perhaps Ireland. But, he concluded, this was a heaven-sent opportunity to reaffirm the place of Crown and Church at the heart of Britain's cultural and political identity.

He sat down amidst a stunned silence, and the Speaker invited questions. As if a switch had been thrown, a battery of cameras flashed and a barrage of questions was fired at the top table.

'Was it not Scotland's Stone?' 'What right did Westminster Abbey have to keep it?' 'Was the Dean trading in stolen goods?' 'What about Treasure Trove?' McNaughtie slid lower and lower in his seat praying for invisibility. The Speaker and Dean were overwhelmed with hostile points. It was calamitous beyond expectation.

The lunchtime news dwelt lovingly on the fabulous Stone, and then switched to the First Minister of Scotland demanding immediate return of 'Scotland's historic birthright'. She challenged the authority of the Dean to override Treasure Trove, and predicted mass demonstrations across Scotland against this 'illegal detention.' Finally the cameras returned to Westminster Hall to catch the Speaker and Dean in ignominious flight, and a last shot of McNaughtie pushing his way through the press pack and refusing to answer questions.

'Broon , Sunday Post, . Are ye no ashamed o yersel?'

Things escalated rapidly through the rest of a hot August. Edinburgh Festival satirists were upstaged by realities beyond farce as the Brexit ordeal continued in London, despite the parliamentary recess. In Scotland the demonstrations were co-ordinated by the 'Under One Banner'

movement. It had been in existence for some time turning out from ten to twenty thousand people in successive towns and cities. But things now swelled to a different scale.

The previous independence protests had depended on moving a core group of activists from place to place. Now everywhere burst into simultaneous action. It was like a weekly national carnival with huge crowds, colourful processions, and a keynote anthem, 'It's Coming Home'. But beneath the sunlit rallies was genuine political anger. Since the Brexit referendum Scotland had been ignored in favour of the Tory party's determination to hang onto power come what may. People had had enough; the Stone was more catalyst than cause.

But the biggest change was in the coverage. 'Under One Banner' events had been consistently under-reported, especially by the BBC whose Scottish staff were denied weekend overtime. Instead the BBC had been obsessed with the Brexit twists and turns at Westminster. Now suddenly, as negotiations dragged on interminably and incomprehensibly in Brussels, Scotland became the Brexit story. TV screens were filled with the mass demonstrations, while the print media took every chance to re-use the gorgeous pics of the Stone alongside crowds of protesters. 'It's Coming Home, It's Coming Home' echoed across the airwaves with soundbites of every known and unknown Scottish celebrity lending their support to the cause. The First Minister of Scotland basked in the political limelight and membership of her Scottish National Party rose to more than two hundred thousand.

In London the Prime Minister had cancelled her walking holiday. She had taken personal control of the EU negotiations and sat late every night poring over the complex detail. She was no longer listening to Tory dissidents and their threats of rebellion. The Deal had to be done or disaster loomed for the Tory Party and the British economy. Events in Scotland were not in her field of attention though she was aware of the mounting protests. Trust the Scots to divert onto some obscure historical controversy at this time of national crisis. Scotland, along with Ireland, was the running sore of Brexit – the weak points in Britain's armour.

'It's Her Majesty.'

'Sorry?'

‘The Queen. She’s on the phone from Balmoral,’ whispered her chief-of-staff urgently, picking up the receiver on the PM’s desk and putting it in her hand.

‘Elizabeth Windsor, Prime Minsiter.’

‘Your Majesty.’

‘Have you seen the film?’

‘I’m not sure I’m -’

‘You know, me in Balmoral out of touch with the Diana thing, and Mr Blair in London.’

‘*The Queen*? I don’t recall ever...’

‘Only now it’s the other way round. You’re out of touch.’

‘Your Majesty?’

‘Scotland’s on fire. You’re forcing them into independence.’

‘It’s nothing to do with me. The Dean of - ’

‘Is a silly old headstrong sausage. I’ll deal with him. You’ll have to send it back.’

‘Back?’

‘Right away, to Scotland.’

‘I’m very grateful for your advice, Your Majesty - ’

‘Just do it. Trust me. The Scots may still vote for independence, but at least we won’t have pushed them into it.’

‘I see,’

‘Do you? Like you foresaw Brexit.’

‘My government has a clear plan and we’re delivering on it.’

‘Shame no-one else is. Well, I suppose I must be getting back to my stags.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Never mind. You should try some of this new Scottish Gin. Really splendid. Cheerio.’

The Prime Minister replaced her phone in a daze. Had that conversation actually occurred? Had she missed the ball like Harry Kane against Croatia? Was their still time to make amends?’

‘I’m going to make a special Prime Ministerial statement. We’re sending the Stone of Destiny back.’

‘Thank God,’ responded Greig into his mobile, ‘that’s a big relief. I thought you’d abandoned us to the Church of England,’ he cracked before remembering the PM was a Vicar’s daughter.

‘Yes, the Dean has gone over the top, and I’ve been somewhat distracted.’

‘You know, Prime Minister, you always have my full support.’

‘Yes, I know. That’s why I’m asking you to resign.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes. We’ll announce it immediately after the statement.’

‘But I told you. It was me that warned you.’

‘This Scottish business can’t be allowed to get out of hand. My government needs a firewall.’

‘So I’m going to be the fall guy!’

‘Don’t take it like that, Greig. You’ve had a good innings, and we’ll send you to the Lords, after Brexit goes through. I promise.’

‘Who can replace me?’

‘We’ll find someone now we’ve got a compromise on the EU.’

‘Ian Gill.’

‘That’s another decision for me to make. Thankyou for your loyal service Greig. My reply will be magnanimous.’

‘Reply?’

‘To your letter of resignation. First thing in the morning please.’

She had put down the phone.

‘Yes, Prime Minister, and Fuck You Too.’

‘Questions to the Prime Minister,’ barked the Speaker. ‘The Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber.’

Ian Blackford, the SNP’s Westminster leader, went straight for the jugular.

‘Will the Prime Minister confirm that the Secretary of State for Scotland is resigning?’

‘Reluctantly I have accepted the Secretary of State’s resignation.’

‘Why has he been forced to resign?’

‘Order! Order!’

‘He feels he should have acted sooner, and has taken an honourable course, after distinguished service.’

The House acknowledged many epithets for Greig McNaughtie but distinguished was not on the list. The opposition jeered.

‘The Member for North-East Somerset.’

‘Can the Prime Minister reassure the House that she will show more backbone in dealing with Brussels than she has done with the Scots?’

This was incendiary, and the hardline Brexiteers rose to the flame.

‘I’m sure that Mr Rees-Mogg is as much an expert on Scottish affairs as she is on Europe, so I’ll defer to his learned judgement.’

Such rare sarcasm from the PM was rather effective, and her remaining Tory supporters cheered.

‘The Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition.’

‘At this time of national crisis, the cabinet divided, negotiations in Brussels stalled, the EU clock ticking, why is the Prime minister obsessed with Scottish Archaeology?’

The PM had to push against the uproar, and shout.

‘It was his party that pushed for devolution, his party that opposed Brexit. His party belongs to the past. He is incapable of leading Britain into our post-Brexit future.’

‘Answer the question!’ rang out through the barney.

The Prime Minister sat down, leaving Jeremy Corbyn nowhere further to go on that topic. Instead veteran Tory, Sir Nicholas Soames, rose slowly to his full bulk.

‘The Member for Mid-Sussex,’ acknowledged Speaker Felton with some relief.

‘Can we detect, Prime Minister, in this gracious concession to Scotland the guiding hand of Her Majesty the Queen?’

The Prime Minister rose to her feet, remembering not to bow in reply.

‘I thank the Right Honourable Member for his question. As the House will be aware Her Majesty does not interfere in politics. But foolish indeed would be the Prime Minister,’ she continued fixing Jeremy Corbyn with a steely look across the dispatch box, ‘who did not welcome the Queen’s advice.’

‘Put her in charge of Brexit then!’

‘Order! Order!’

The day the Stone of Destiny arrived back in Scotland there were celebrations across the land. Wigtown was no exception and the landlord threw a special party at the Martyrs, not least because people were already gathering for the launch of Wigtown Book Festival the next day.

Rowena and Brian, heroes of the Whithorn Hoard affair, had come for the opening weekend. They had their own special occasion since they had recently got engaged. Moreover, Brian had been appointed to the specialist team that would work on the Stone, led by Sandy Brown, the archaeologist who had first identified it in Westminster. The plan was to display the Stone in a new visitor centre at Scone, its original home.

The literary crowd were also out in force, hosted by Adrian the Festival Director. Chris Craig was there too as he was going to perform his one man ‘Laird’s Big Breaxit’ satire, after its success at the Fringe. He added his own brand of effervescent foolery to the social mix.

As the evening wore on, Catherine Bell the Culture Minister dropped in. She would open the Book Festival the next day, but tonight she was strictly off-duty. Nevertheless she received a rousing cheer on arrival, in recognition of the leading role she had played in the ‘It’s Coming Home’ campaign.

Catherine was delighted to see Rowena and to catch up on her news.

‘So does all this mean Scotland’s finally going to be independent,’ Rowena asked Catherine. She had no strong views on the issue, despite Brian’s recent conversion to the national cause.

‘Who knows?’ replied Catherine, ‘we’re still stuck in this Brexit quagmire. It’s been a sickening lesson in British power politics, but Scotland’s shown it can stand up for itself now. Yet, don’t get me wrong, Rowena, part of me doesn’t care.’

‘How come?’

‘I look round me here, and all over Scotland, and I see talent, energy, much more can do than when I was young. Somehow I feel we can make the future whatever happens.’

‘I’ll drink to that. Did you know that Brian Muir and I are going to get married?’

‘That’s lovely, congratulations.’ She gave Rowena a hug. ‘Maybe you can take your vows on the Lia Fàil!’

‘He’d love that!’ laughed Rowena.

‘Good evening, Cabinet Secretary,’ came a fruity voice

‘Not you again, Laird. He tricked me into seeing his scurrilous show at the Fringe,’ exclaimed Catherine, giving the portly Craig a playful shove. ‘Let me buy you a drink and make up.’

‘Well, all in a good cause. Just a wee snifter, for the Stone you know. It’s coming home to Perthshire, and the Lairds will be pleased.’

‘That’ll be a first then,’ quipped Catherine, heading for the bar.

