

8. DR MAPLE AND THE STAR CHILD

LITTLE BAFFLES and embarrasses the biographer of RP Shelsey more than his involvement in the Star Child of Banbury.

It happened at the end of the author's life, in 1922, at the time when he'd laid his weary pen down, and put to bed the popular adventures of Dr Maple of the Marshes. In those years of earned repose, he was naturally the centre of much local reverence and excitement, having furthered as much as he nobly had the causes of popular science and medicine.

To this end, the good Shelsey found his retirement regularly broken by the well-meaning interposition of some local who hoped to present "such a case as'd baffle the good Doctor Maple hisself". As often, Shelsey's patient explanations that his medical knowledge was limited, and that he'd never practised the noble art of the sawbones himself, fell on sadly deaf and disappointed ears.

On one occasion, however, Shelsey found himself involved in a misadventure that presented his name in the headlines of the world and in no good light indeed.

For it was on a brisk May morning that Shelsey fatefully first heard the name of young William Wilkins.

Billy Wilkins was a child of barns and hedgerows. His parents, noble quiet farming stock, were frequently saddened by the laggard son, who showed neither aptitude nor interest in his twelve year old frame for farming or schooling, preferring instead to ramble the fields of his family and others.

Nowadays, of course, we'd realise that he was learning and seeing the ways of a vanishing world, but this was a time after the Great War when scant patience there was for Field Learning.

But one evening, Billy came home late, and on pain of a thrashing from his father, revealed that he'd been tarrying due to caring for a Star Child.

Despite the duly administered punitive measures, Billy's tearful protestations continued - the Star Child was real,

and needed food to help it, and please mayn't he be excused to tend to it that night?

Billy's father was fed up with this. If the child wished to sleep in the barn, who was he to stop him?

So the child was sent out into the night, a boot imprinted firmly in his behind, taking with him a loaf, cheese and a pitcher of water until he knew sense.

Two days passed, and Wilkins Mater grew concerned. The child seemed absent for longer than normal, returning merely for meagre refreshment and further supplies for his star child.

"Probably some sickly lamb he's got his hands on," admitted the father, vowing to attend to it later himself with a half-brick.

However, two more days passed before Billy's father presented himself at the barn, demanding to see the Star Child. Billy burst into tears, rather prematurely, thought the father, not having had a chance to dash out the brains of whatever pet the child had taken to.

"He's just died, da," wailed young Billy.

Tired from a day toiling and tilling, the father pushed the son out of the way, and went over to a corner of the barn, throwing aside the sacking and staring in horror at the thing he saw.

From habit more than anything else, he belted the child to the floor. "What do yer call that?" he bellowed.

"My Star Child," protested the boy. "He tried to mend himself using what I could catch. But it didn't work very well, did it Da?"

And so, after one heavy night in the local public house, it wasn't long before Shelsey found his services called upon to examine Billy Wilkins' Star Child.

It had been carried, with some reverence, into the cool of the police station, more to keep away the gossips and story tellers.

"Good G—" exclaimed Shelsey, truly taken aback by the appearance of the child, and veritably startling several of the onlookers, unused to such strong language in such a meek man.

He described the Star Child himself, ruefully, in a letter as: "A truly fantastical concoction - and yet, for all that real, with the insane logic that only a Darwinist could applaud. The body itself appeared to have been roughly human in outline and appearance, but supplemented by the liberal addition of other beasts - half a lamb's head appeared melted awkwardly on to the neck, with parts of rats almost gellied into the torso, an arm of a dog, and an awkward leg possibly from cattle, If ever you wanted to see evolution as a work in progress then this was it.."

Photographic plates were quickly taken of the brute (an eye to a lucrative serialisation in the forthcoming Christmas periodicals never far from Shelsey's thoughts), and then Billy Wilkins examined in the relative quiet of a police cell (for, truth be told, young William's father had taken his incomprehension out on his child, whose features showed clear evidence of an attempted rearrangement).

The child's story was that the Star Child had been discovered by him late one evening near a small fire in the spinney, at the centre of which he claimed to see a craft burning, with the flimsy nature of something like a hot air balloon. In truth, a search of the spinney revealed

evidence of a fire, but little more beyond a few scraps of fabric, perhaps close to the silk used in parachutes or the canvas of plane wings and coarse bedlinen. Nothing extraordinary.

Billy had tended for the creature, taking it to the barn, and saying, so he claimed, that the creature communicated its needs to him "with words of thought and brain pictures". So Billy undertook to bring back cows and sheep and rats to the barn to help the injured Star Child mend itself.

(Despite an angry search by Mr Wilkins, especially for the missing cow, nothing more was ever found).

Billy described how the Star Child would take the beasts and hold them to himself, merging with them and slowly repairing themselves. Billy said he felt repulsed, but knew he had to help mend the Star Child.

Sadly, Shelsey's attempt to conduct a characteristically cool appraisal of the boy's story, of which his own Dr Maple would have found himself proud, were rudely railroaded by two events in quick succession.

The first was the surrounding of the police station by the gentlemen of His Majesty's Free Press, who were delighted to find themselves in the presence of an expert they could demand an explanation of.

Shelsey, pressed into a corner, delivered himself of a first opinion, that the claims of the child had some sad merit, and that the corpse itself was remarkable. Both were meant, many felt sure, to be tepid asseverations, the first thoughts of a great mind yet fully to come to bear on a problem. But sadly, these mild encomiums were enough to guarantee the next day's fabulous headlines, which linked the famous writer with the Alien Baby of Banbury in no uncertain terms of endorsement.

Which, with inevitable regret, leads us to the second event. The arrival at the police station of a widow of the parish, one Gladys Minnow. In her time, Mrs Minnow had travelled widely, only recently renting a summer cottage adjacent to the Wilkins farm. And what, she wished to know, was a photograph of her stuffed ape doing in the papers?

The consequences, for nearly everyone involved not drawing their salary from a newspaper, were disastrous.

Much of the opprobrium was heaped upon poor, innocent Shelsey, whose kind-hearted agent swiftly removed him on his famous lengthy lecture tour of the United States, where the fame of the Star Child had not penetrated anywhere near so keenly.

It is interesting to note the fate of some of the minor players in this literary tragedy. Mrs Minnow moved swiftly away, almost overnight. Billy Wilkins was, it was decided, the victim of a vicious father, and a space was found for him in a facility run by a crown charity outside Glasgow.

The corpse of the Star Child, despite some enquiries from a local museum, remained in the custody of the Police, until Mrs Minnow asked for it to be sent on to the same charitable organisation - although whether as a ghoulish keepsake or curiosity, the gesture seems, to our eyes, in singularly bad taste.