

THE FAMILY SILVER

by Bill McGuire

The security guard blinked into the scanner, which briefly flashed blue, satisfying itself that the retina's owner held the required clearance. The brushed metal door slid silently open and the guard nodded for George to enter.

'Two minutes only sir.' He sounded apologetic.

George grimaced his acknowledgement and went in. The room was small - about the size of a family bathroom. It was completely lined with steel panels and contained nothing but a wide circular plinth at its centre, upon which the treasures sparkled on a purple cloth of thick velvet. It was all here, a hundred and forty glittering items, piled thoughtlessly - he was irked to see - in a chaotic heap that brought to mind Smaug's horde.

George had eyes only for the centrepiece, the gloriously ostentatious St Edward's crown, set precariously at the very top of the pile. He reached out, picked it up gingerly, and hefted it in both hands. Great granny had been right. It weighed a ton. He could still remember her telling him, when he was small, how you had to keep as still as possible while wearing it and never bend your head, or it would fall off. Grandad Charles never did get the opportunity to test his balancing skills, but it was a lesson his dad should surely have paid more attention to. George smiled as he remembered it sitting skewiff on his father's head during the Coronation ceremony, before - at a crucial point - slowly sliding off. Dad had been quick to catch it and pop it back on, but not before three billion watching people across the world had put their hands to their mouths. George gave a little snort. Well, it wasn't a problem he would ever have to face.

He raised the crown higher and set it squarely upon his head. There was no mirror, so he turned slowly to face the guard, who was watching from the doorway. The man smiled and gave a thumbs up. The thing felt so insecure that George dared not change direction - or even his expression. Instead, forehead creased in concentration, he continued to rotate his body, slowly inching full circle and grasping the crown just as it seemed about to topple to the floor. Placing it back down on the heap, he breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God he would never have to wear it in anger. He couldn't see how it could be done. Admiration for long dead great granny went up yet another notch. Now he could sympathise with his dad's travails too. He would take the new alloy replica with invisible hair grips any day. George ran one hand through his prematurely thinning locks. Hopefully he would still have some hair for it to grip on to when and if the big day eventually came around.

Behind him, the guard shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. Without turning, George raised a hand in acknowledgement. However vulgar and out of its time, he would be sad to see the crown go - and the rest of the kitschy paraphernalia. It wouldn't have been so bad if it was going on public display. But in a week or so, it would be on its way by armoured biz-jet to the private vaults of an Indian trillionaire. He sighed. If he was honest, he still found the whole thing utterly bizarre. But the country was bankrupt and so, pretty much, were the royals. Dad had done his best to bite the bullet, but Sandringham and Windsor were long gone - an exclusive rehab and a royals theme park, respectively. Barron Trump's gold-embellished transformation of Holyrood Palace still made George wince when he thought of it, but it was the sale of Buck House to the Facebook Corporation that had marked the beginning of the end. George recalled the remonstrative headlines then. 'It'll be the

crown jewels next,' they screamed. Well, for once, they were spot-on.

The drumming of the guard's fingers on the door frame told him that he had run out of time. Shaking his head at the madness of it all, George turned on his heel and marched out of the room and past the guard. Behind him, the heavy steel door slid closed with a satisfying clunk.

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