



Colkirk Boy

Colkirk Boy is Ken's first serious novel. Set in rural Norfolk it is based on the lives, times and experiences of his father and grandfather.

Reviews

"T his book was such a pleasure to read. The author has the ability to take the best parts of this collection of short stories and present them in a perfect way. I can't remember enjoying a book this much for so long. RIP Charley Lake "

Amazon Purchaser

" I really enjoyed reading this book. I love Norfolk and my ancestors all lived in the villages mentioned, in fact I have Lake Ancestors in my family tree. I would heartily recommend it to anyone who loves social history and Norfolk "

Jay

" What a fabulous family history story, full of colour and detail, really comes to life. Such a good book. Thank you "

L .Bleach

CHAPTER 1

Colkirk Dawn

On that bitterly cold February morning in 1890 there was a big steely blue Norfolk sky. Statues of bare Oak branches, etched intricate patterns against the icy glow of a rising sun. It was so clear that they could see all the way from Colkirk to Heaven.

At precisely half-past eight Charles Daniel Lake came into the world. He was the fourth child of Susan and Robert. Their families had lived in the same village and worked the same land for longer than anyone could remember. Robert was a horseman at the big house, so that morning just like every other morning it was work as usual for him. He was up and gone by six o'clock, the horses couldn't wait. They had to be fed and watered, then harnessed and ready for a long days work.

The cottage was small, just two up and two down, with a crude stone sink in the scullery, a lift pump in the back yard which supplied water and the corrugated iron thunder box was at the bottom of the long garden. Grandma Sarah also lived with them in the cottage so she was fussing around, making breakfast for the other children, keeping things tidy and running errands.

Charles Daniel was a big baby, nearly ten pounds; he was strong and healthy with a good pair of lungs. That was the way that he was destined to grow up in this little Norfolk village. He had been named after his uncle's first son, who had died seven years earlier at just five years old. It was quite common for women to die in childbirth and children to be taken while they were still young, and almost as common for the next born to be named after them.

Charles Daniel was a very strong name, which was reflected in his frame and his character, but the only person to use it was his mother Susan. From a very young age everyone else called him Charley.

At five years old he was lucky enough to get a desk at Colkirk School where the rules stated that: *Boys may be granted leave for crow scaring, farm work, news selling, helping drovers, housework, grave digging and so on. And that all children would be caned when they needed to be punished and fined sixpence for breaking school rules.*

Miss Prentice was the teacher and she ruled with a rod of iron. Well actually it was a little whippy cane and Charley was on the wrong end of it more times than he cared to remember, but that cane and Miss Prentice taught Charley the basics of reading and writing. It also taught him how to add and take away numbers and that was more than many children could do in the 1890's.

Miss Prentice was a comical looking character; she had been malnourished as a child and had suffered badly from rickets. This caused her to be quite short and gave her bow legs. The boy's standard joke was the usual one; *she couldn't stop a pig in an alley*, but actually she was so badly affected that she could hardly walk.

She had a bath chair to get to and from school. It was one of those old fashioned wicker contraptions, with one wheel at the front and a metal tiller to steer it with. The power to get this thing and Miss Prentice up the long hill to school was provided by the school's two strongest boys. Charley and Smudger Smith, neither of them received any dispensation for this service and both seemed to get caned just as much as anybody else.

One afternoon after what Charley thought was an unnecessary caning the boys were returning Miss Prentice to her little house in Pudding Norton about a mile from the school. Right at the top of the hill Charley winked at Smudger then pretended to slip. Miss Prentice and the ancient bath chair quickly picked up speed and it was soon out of control. Rumour has it that Miss Prentice's screams could be heard at the far end of the village. She was eventually helped out of a hedgerow by Charley and Smudger. Fortunately she was not armed with her cane. After that Charley seemed to get less canings than before.

Charley was never a perfect boy; he indulged in all sorts of pranks as all boys did. One of these involved Colonel Pooley. The retired Colonel lived in one of the flint cottages which bordered Colkirk Campyngland. He had spent much of his army career in India and loved to talk about it and to show off some of the artefacts which he had brought back. One of these was a large ornate parasol, the sort which was highly decorated and had gold braid and ornate tassels hanging from the rim. Every time that the sun shone the colonel could be seen promenading around the village displaying this parasol. It was the day of the annual village fete so there were lots of people on the Campyngland, just socialising or taking part in the organised events. The actual game of Campyng, where opposing male villagers would throw a gauntlet and capture prisoners from the opposing team had long since been banned. It had been likened to tribal warfare, especially when deaths occurred.

On this particular day the sun shone both on the righteous and the other lot. It warmed their shoulders and reddened any un-tanned faces. This was the ideal excuse for the Colonel to strut around proudly under his Indian parasol. The boy Charley saw the opportunity for a bit of mischief and seized it. He pulled a burning stick from the fire which was heating the big soup pot; he crept up behind the Colonel and set fire to one of the tassels on his parasol. Charley thought that this was great fun, unfortunately the material was highly flammable and before the Colonel had realised what was happening, he was standing there holding a smouldering metal frame.

The Colonel of course informed Charley's father Robert, who found it difficult to conceal his amusement and he also informed Miss Prentice, who gave Charley another sound thrashing and made him apologise to Colonel Pooley. The incident soon took its place in the village's folklore and was recalled for several years after on the day of the village fete.

Charley's grandma Sarah was as kind and generous as anyone could be in those austere times. She was pleased that he was making progress at school and had been given a book as an attendance prize; she rewarded him with whatever she could. On one occasion when the travelling circus came to Hempton Green, grandma gave Charley a silver sixpence to spend. It was the first one that he had ever seen.

She told him to go and enjoy himself. He felt like a Prince with all that money, he skipped along the lane whistling and flipping the coin into the air. But he flipped it once too often and as he reached to catch it, the coin hit the end of his fingers and disappeared into the hedgerow. Charley spent the rest of the day trying to find it, but he never did. He returned home pretending that he had a wonderful time, but he never did admit to grandma Sarah that he had lost that most precious commodity of all, money. Charley's carefree world changed dramatically one March afternoon when he was nine years old. This happy boy had returned from school and entered an alien world. A world of crying and grief, a world of sorrow and sadness. Charley didn't understand what was happening. Grandma Sarah took him to one side and gave him a strong hug.

"I am sorry to have to tell you this Charley but your father won't be coming home again."

"Why grandma, tell me what's happened,"

"Well he was working over at Litcham and he somehow fell off the wagon and died, you really don't need to know any more than that."

"But grandma please tell me why he died."

"Alright Charley it's probably best coming from me, the wagon ran over him and crushed him, the funeral will be in Colkirk church in a week's time but that won't be a place for children."

Charley didn't know how to react or what to say, he felt anger, bitterness and sadness all at the same time. He just couldn't believe that his father had died. He ran into the garden and climbed the old apple tree; he sat on the big branch until his legs were numb. He needed to be alone to try to make sense of what had happened. He was unable to believe that he would never see his father again.

Why had it happened? His father had died at only twenty nine years of age. Charley felt numb, he wanted to cry but couldn't. Why had God done this to him? His father, the solid rock of his life, the man who he looked up to, the man he admired would never walk into the cottage again. Never hang his hat and work jacket on that hook in the back of the door. He would never see him again. How could he live in a world without his father and without the sweet smell of his honest sweat?

What would happen next? He hadn't even thought about the practical consequences of living in a tied cottage and having no father to work for the landowner. His mother would be desperate for money; he would have to leave school. If he was lucky he may be able to work on a farm, at worst they would all end up in the workhouse at Gressenhall. He had heard the stories of life there and they didn't make easy listening.

On that awful day hiding from the harsh reality in the apple tree, the Colkirk boy became a Colkirk man. On that terrible March evening the menacing sky was filled with clouds of sadness, fear and disillusion.

The funeral in Saint Mary's church was a sad gathering of distraught friends and relatives. Robert's Lake's broken body was lowered gently into an unmarked grave, as the cemetery was bathed in a shower of Angel's tears. And one little boy watched secretly from behind a big yew tree, as the cold March wind whispered a gentle goodbye.

CHAPTER 2

Charley's First Day

"Right boy, your first job this morning is on the honey cart."

The farm foreman was a gruff man, a rough and hard man who took no backchat from anyone. Oh no! What a way to be launched into the adult world of work. His first job on his first day was to empty the outside toilets, not a pleasant job for a lad, but Charley didn't have the luxury of choice. There was no point in complaining, a farm boy's job included everything and he was lucky to get a job at all.

It was probably out of respect for his dead father and the fact that he was a big strong boy for his age, which had helped. Charley realised that at nine years old he had to do all that he could to keep his mother, brother and two young sisters from the workhouse. They had already been moved out of the tied cottage. Their few possessions loaded onto a farm cart and the family split up to stay with various relatives. Charley counted himself lucky that he was staying with Uncle Billy, a very gentle mannered man and his father's favourite brother. But Billy already had his wife and four children to support.

There was never much room and five or six to a bed was very common. Food was also limited and everything was shared, a skinny rabbit went a long way around the table. A pheasant was a rare luxury and getting caught with one meant a severe punishment. One of his uncles ended up in Jail for trying to feed his family on one of the Lord's cock pheasants. And several others had lost their jobs for much less.

The seasons turned as the seasons must and Charley grew bigger and stronger with every day. The hard labour was forging the boy's body into a man's. His hands were strong and callused; his broad shoulders were well muscled and powerful. His mind was closed, he never spoke about his father to anyone, it was as though the painful memories were to be locked away forever. That was the only way that he could cope with it. He shared out his meagre wages between his mother and Uncle Billy and as he grew into adulthood, occasionally just to relieve the pain of his memories, with John the landlord of Colkirk Crown.

Country life remained simple, no choices, that's the way it had always been, that's the way it was then. He went to Church when he had to, but he wasn't a religious man. Perhaps fear of the unknown kept him on the straight and narrow.

It was one of those fearsome autumn evenings; it came over as black as your hat. The amber glow of a waning sun struggled to peep around the thick edge of a heavy grey anvil cloud. Streaks of rain dragged the leaden sky down to the horizon. The wind whipped the trees into a dancing frenzy; it was a proper Devil's tempest.

Lightning streaked out from the darkness and hit a big Pine tree in the covert. There was a shower of sparks and smoke, enough to scare Satan himself. Then a sharp crack of thunder split the heavy air and echoed all around the village. Charley and the farm foreman looked out from the safety of the barn.

"Alright Charley you had better go up there and see if the keepers pheasant pens have been damaged."

"Bugger that why can't he go himself?"

"Just stop your yapping and get up there!"

There was still smoke drifting from the ground but where the tree had been there were just charred splinters. The lightning had melted the sap which had now solidified into amber droplets.

He couldn't see any damage to the pens but then he couldn't see any birds either, they had more bloody sense! But there was something strange afoot, he felt it before he saw it. There was a burning smell, a stench of sulphur. Then he saw it in the field just outside the covert.

The Lord's prize herd were gathered under a big old oak and right there at the front of them was the stud bull, but what the Hell had happened to him? Charley stared as the black clouds rolled in, he just couldn't believe it. Balanced right there between the bull's horns was a ball of brilliant blue light, dancing menacingly in the dull evening and hissing and buzzing.

He had never seen anything like this before and had no idea what to do about it. He ran back to the barn and reported what he had seen to the foreman.

"What the Hell have I just seen, do you think that it's the work of the Devil?"

"Sounds more like the work of Saint Elmo to me."

Although he was going to see many strange things in his life, that was the first and last time that he ever experienced Saint Elmo's fire.

CHAPTER 3

Testerton

"You are wanted up at the big house." "What is it this time?"

"No idea Charley, go and see Mrs Olley."

Charley was grumbling to himself as he walked up the driveway, he went around the back and through the servant's door into the kitchen and spoke to the head cook.

"Oh Mary that smells wonderful, what's cooking?"

"That Charley is the filling for a steak and kidney pie."

He stood staring and drooling at the bubbling pot.

"Can you save me a slice?"

"Get off you cheeky sod, what do you want in here anyway."

"I came looking for Mrs Olley."

"Alright I will send a maid to fetch her, and keep your fingers out of that pot, or you will get a whack with the ladle."

He wouldn't dare to cross Mary he knew that she meant what she said. Mrs Olley bustled in looking rather flustered.

"Ah Charley just come this way."

She took him to one side out of the earshot of the kitchen staff.

"Right Charley this is very important, I want you to go up to Testerton Hall, take a pony and trap, pick up a parcel from Mr Smith and take it to Fakenham's Great Eastern station. See the Station Master personally and tell him to make sure that it gets onto the London train. Have you got that?"

"Yes of course Mrs Olley."

"And Charley this is a very important parcel so please take care of it."

Charley went over to the flint and brick stable block and harnessed Beth to the trap; she was the strongest and most reliable pony. They drove down the hill and up the lane to Testerton about a couple of miles away. He went around to the servant's entrance and was told to wait. After a few minutes the butler arrived with a package wrapped in brown paper, tied with strong string and sealed with red wax.

Charley secured it under the seat with the leather parcel straps and then he decided to take the old road from Testerton to Fakenham. This was more direct but wasn't used anymore and had become an overgrown lane. He remembered stories that his grandfather had told him of when he worked on the Testerton estate many years ago. Strange stories of the derelict church of St Remigius and the site of Hempton Priory. And chilling tales of an Augustinian Monk who had met an awful fate.

On that blustery March evening the sky wore an ominous scowl which barely illuminated Old Priory Lane. That lane had a local reputation as a long and sultry one, you know the sort, high black-thorn hedges on both sides. Some said that it was an ancient road, even a lost road from before time; some even called it a haunted road. A road that the monks used as they were being driven from the monastery at Castle Acre towards their fate on some unknown North Norfolk marshes. These were stories but Charley chose to ignore them as tales and folklore. This was by far the quickest route and speed was of the essence.

The pony, Beth was a Connemara cob, the Lord had bought her over a year ago at the Hempton fair and Charley knew her well. She was good working horse, strong in the beam and very willing, more than a match for the light trap.

Charley drove her into Old Priory Lane just as dusk was falling. High impenetrable hedges loomed on both sides and it quickly grew much darker. Charley buttoned his coat against the chill of this enclosed world. Silence dominated the *clip, clop* of Beth's hooves and the rumble of the trap's iron banded wheels, as they crunched over the undisturbed twigs.

About a mile in they came to a clearing where the Priory had once been, but it had a forbidding eeriness. It seemed to be not only in the middle of nowhere but in a place somehow lost to time. There were broken walls, rows of timeless flints which made no sense to anyone. What had once been an important building was now overgrown with brambles, ivy and the bright green tops of horseradish. This was a long forgotten and alien place. Beth slowed, Charley pushed her on. She refused; he tried to dominate her and pushed harder. She snorted, whinnied and shied; he knew horses well enough to back off.

Something was stopping her; she had sensed evil and would not move forward. Her ears were pricked and eyes widened, her legs were frozen. Beth was terrified of something and she reared in the shafts. Then Charley sensed it. There was an eerie presence in the lane just ahead of them. At first he couldn't see it, but soon through the creeping darkness he saw two horrible amber eyes and there was an awful putrid smell of rotting flesh which drifting on the chill evening air.

From out of the misty clearing a form appeared, just faintly at first but then it moved towards them. It was a man of sorts, tall thin and frightening. Charley could just make out a grey hood, a cloak or a habit. A threatening bony finger pointed a warning. The faint outline of a death mask of a face stared through empty eye sockets.

Beth turned in the shafts and bolted, Charley hung on to the reins totally helpless in a frantic gallop. His knuckles white, his breathing heavy and his heart pounding.

The next few minutes were frightening. Charley couldn't pull Beth up, until they reached the bounds of Great Ryburgh. Beth was frothing and frightened and Charley was shaken and scared. He sat trembling and thought of his father, the man who lived in his memory but never in his words.

It was several minutes later when he was able to move from the trap, then he took the precious parcel to the railway station in Great Ryburgh. He had no idea just what it contained but he hoped that it wasn't fragile.

As he turned Beth around to head back to Colkirk he noticed that she had gone lame. That was his excuse to rest her at the Boar Inn; they both needed a drink after that experience. Then he walked her gently back to Colkirk.

Once back in the stable he slowly unhitched her, wiped her down with an old sack and gave her some more water and a feed. They had experienced something awful together in Old Priory Lane that evening and the memory of it would never leave them.