

ROOFLESS RUTH

Cuthbert Clutterbuck was in a bad mood. This was not unusual. Cuthbert generally was in a bad mood. Wouldn't you be, with a name like that?

Today, however, he had a particular reason to be fed up. You see, his roof had just fallen in. He should have expected it; anyone who keeps a woolly mammoth as a pet ought to be aware that there are inherent risks.

He had been warned. Cyril Curmudgeon, his neighbour, said to him one day: "Cuthbert, I know it's none of my business, but you really should re-think this woolly mammoth venture. Have you considered the grooming, for example?"

"You're right," Cuthbert had replied. "It isn't any of your business. Clear off my land – and take your sabre-toothed tiger with you."

And then his other neighbour, Claude Constantly, had his say.

"Oi! Cuthbert!" he called out one day, reining in the lead on his rumbustious Velociraptor, Cecil, while taking his morning constitutional. "What about the effluent problem?"

"About half past eight," Cuthbert shouted back. He was a little deaf but adept at bluffing.

But all these problems, and more, he had overcome. He grew to love Ruth (for that was the name he had given his large companion, in honour of his father, Ruthless Reginald Clutterbuck, the renowned dealer in exotic flora and fauna). She was playful, frisky, affectionate and functioned fairly efficiently as a combined broom, hose and vacuum cleaner. Cuthbert's wife, Cassiopeia, had not been quite so keen. Her patience had finally snapped

when she caught Ruth using her favourite pearl-handled hairbrush whilst perched precariously at Cassiopeia's dressing-table.

"It's either her or me, Cuthbert Clutterbuck," was Cassiopeia's subsequent ultimatum.

"Well, can you act as a draught excluder for the entire east wing of the house?" Cuthbert had asked.

Cassiopeia, defeated by this logic, moved out the following day. Cuthbert did not mind in the least. He had never liked her. Their marriage had been brokered by Ruthless Reg in order to get his hands on a fortunately rare man-eating plant which, unfortunately, ate him.

So Cuthbert and Ruth had settled down to a pleasurable co-existence. He found that he enjoyed Ruth's company far more than he had ever enjoyed a human's. Ruth was less forthcoming with her views but we can safely assume that she was content. Cuthbert thought for a while that she had taken to winking at him but it transpired that Ruth had an eye infection. The vet's bills for dealing with this were considerable – not least because of the eye-drops and the cost of the scaffolding needed to administer them. Cuthbert did not begrudge the expenditure. By nature parsimonious, his compassion for Ruth knew no bounds.

Inevitably for a warm-hearted woolly mammoth, Ruth yearned to reciprocate Cuthbert's kindness. She had guessed by his reluctance to ride on her back that he was afraid of heights. So, when she and Cuthbert had been flying her new pterodactyl kite, a birthday present from Cuthbert, and the kite had got stuck on the roof, it was she that climbed the ladder