

Three Men in a Panic - Vol 2

Chapter 8: Munich

Mike, Alun and I leaned against the railing of the river-going tourist boat.

A flock of birds circled and dipped in the pale blue sky above us, preparatory for heading south.

Alun frowned, 'You know. I've been thinking...'

'Good God!' I exclaimed, 'Hasn't Margaux warned you enough about that!?''

Mike smiled across at me, 'Exactly,' he added. 'She says that in your case, thinking is far more dangerous than drinking.'

'Never Think and Drive, is how she put it,' I chuckled.

Alun sighed and turned away as a passing buoy on the grey river caught his eye.

Mike sniggered to himself, 'And when you feel a fit coming on, Alun, get a couple of pints down, and you'll make it through.'

'I distinctly remember her saying that too.' I smiled.

Alun turned back and shook his head at our verbal antics, 'Margaux would never say anything remotely like that,' he scowled. 'No, what I was thinking was...'

'Careful, Alun. Your neck is already reddening with the effort,' I said.

'Well,' continued Alun ignoring us, 'I was wondering.'

'Wondering is almost as bad as thinking, I believe,' said Mike.

'I was considering then... Bird migration.'

Mike and I exchanged pulled faces, 'Bird Migration!?' exclaimed Mike.

'That's what I said.'

'You mean the way the Mediterranean coast fills up with half-naked women during the summer season?' I said. 'If so, I might be able to supply an explanation.'

Alun frowned, 'I'm being serious.'

'Good God!' cried Mike. 'This looks bad. Call an ambulance. Quick!'

I stretched out my arm and placed my open palm on Alun's forehead. 'A little warmer than normal, I fear.'

'Are you serious?' cried Mike, 'About being serious, I mean...'

'How,' Alun went on ignoring us, 'do these birds know?' he gazed up at the whirling flock.

'How do they know what?' I frowned.

'How do they know how to navigate?'

'How they find their way, you mean?'

'Exactly.'

'Perhaps they use their eyes,' I suggested, 'Just a suggestion, of course.'

Alun sighed, 'And how do they do they do that when they're hundreds of miles from the coastline in the middle of the Atlantic, clever-boots?'

'Well, I suppose they use them the same way as on dry land,' I said. 'They point them at something and see it.'

'Mind you,' frowned Mike, 'Do we have any reliable scientific proof of that?'

We both looked at Mike, 'Meaning?'

'Well, perhaps the salt and the humidity modify the eyes in some unexpected and unpredictable way.'

I nodded slowly, 'Got you. Perhaps their eyes swell up like balloons to ten times their normal size. That way, they might be able to see hundreds and hundreds of miles ahead.'

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'And see in the dark too.' added Mike.

'Shut up.' said Alun.

'But maybe they see better, maybe worse,' continued Mike. 'Who can say, without solid scientific data.'

I frowned and tut-tutted, 'Lacking scientific proof, one can't reject mid-sea eye-ball bulging either.'

Here I paused to allow this bit of wisdom to sink in. 'Anyway,' I continued. 'If birds head south from here, they won't get anywhere near the Atlantic.'

'Exactly.' nodded Mike. 'They'd go across Italy, then the Mediterranean into Tunisia and then Africa...'

'Tunisia is Africa,' grumbled Alun.

Mike ignored this and went on, '...Then along the Algerian-Libyan frontier to Niger, then Nigeria. Thousands and thousands of miles...'

'And thence,' smiled Alun, 'to the southern Atlantic. Just as I said.'

'You're clutching at straws, Alun,' I laughed.

'Maybe. But the right ones.'

After a short pause, he went on. 'That topic has been baffling scientists for generations.'

'That the southern Atlantic is in the south?' I said. 'That just goes to show what over-specialisation does for you.'

Alun ignored this too. 'How does a bird know where south is, when it's in the middle of an ocean, in the dead of night?' he frowned.

'Can they do it blindfolded?' I asked.

'Ah! That's an interesting point. It would be worth trying the experiment,' nodded Mike

'It has probably already been done,' said Alun.

'If we tried it, we would have the Royal Society for Protection of Birds down on us like a ton of bricks,' I winced. 'Persecuting innocent animals...'

'Mind you, that would probably get us on the TV news. That'd be fun,' laughed Alun.

I chuckled, 'Especially if we admitted that we wanted to experiment to see if their eyes bulged like balloons.'

Alun nodded, this being precisely the sort of scenario he loved. It would give him the chance of a lifetime for making up the most incredibly improbable stories. He smiled quietly to himself at the thought of the scandalous cries which would go up across the bird-loving world.

However, Mike broke into his daydreaming. 'Perhaps birds are magnetised, like compass needles,' he smiled. 'If you suspended one, they might naturally point North?'

'Or south,' I added. 'depending on which way they get magnetised.'

Mike nodded. 'Exactly. And that would explain why some head north in summer and some south.'

Alun shook his head and shrugged, 'No birds head north in summer, Mike.'

'Birds from the south pole do.' he retorted.

I glanced at Alun, and we pursed our lips in phase.

'I wasn't aware there were all that many birds around the south pole Mike. It's about minus 40 centigrade in summer and minus 70 in winter.'

Mike sighed, 'Just because you've never heard about it doesn't mean it doesn't exist,' he said.

'Not much to eat down there either.' I added.

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'Anyway.' said Mike changing the subject. 'So, there you are. Nothing complicated in it at all, Alun. Birds must be born magnetised and naturally point to one of Earth's magnetic poles.'

'Great Gods, of course,' cried Alun slapping his thigh. 'That explains why pirates always carried parrots around with them. I bet it must have been those huge beak things. That's the bit that must be magnetic.'

'There might be something in that Alun,' I nodded, 'Indeed, I've never heard of pirates carrying a compass.'

'Or a frog, for that matter.' added Mike.

'A frog!?' cried Alun.

Mike shrugged, 'There's no more reason that they should carry a Parrot on their shoulders than a frog.'

We mused about this for a few moments.

'Parrots are more exotic, though.' I said

'Tree frogs are pretty exotic too.' smiled Mike.

I started, 'Tree frogs!?'

'Exactly.' He nodded. 'What's more, they make less noise, and frogs don't shoot bird droppings down the back of your best pirate coat either.'

I nodded, 'That's a distinct advantage. But what about frog droppings then?'

We all paused while we tried to remember what frogs did to evacuate spent fuel.

Not having found a ready solution, I continued, 'The only problem with frogs is that they aren't magnetic.'

'How on earth can you affirm that?' scoffed Mike.

'Well, they're all limp and floppy. Nothing rigid and compass-needle like in a frog.'

'Exactly,' added Alun, 'The only thing they point to would be the floor.'

'The deck,' I corrected.

'Mind you, that could be useful when the captain is rolling drunk. It would show him which way was down.'

Mike bridled, 'We're talking about tree-frogs, remember.'

'Because tree frogs are stiff.'

'That's a possibility.' retorted Mike.

'When they're dead and dried in the sun.'

Alun thought about this, 'But as we all agree that Pirates didn't carry tree-frogs on their shoulders, let's get back to our magnetic parrot theory.'

We nodded, and he went on.

'If it's the beak, then the parrot wouldn't need to be alive, would it. And a dead parrot eats less and makes much less noise in one's ear.'

'And doesn't mess up your coat either,' said Mike.

I nodded, 'That's true, but I'm sure you'd agree that beaks are less interesting company. Out there on the high seas for months on end, every little bit of company can make all the difference...'

'Maybe it's all the parrot's bones that are magnetised,' I suggested. 'I often wondered why stone-age women used to build mobiles with flying dinosaur bones.'

'WHAT!' cried Mike. 'More drivel, I suppose!'

'They built bone-mobiles over their babies cots.'

'They did not!'

'How do you know, Mike?'

Mike sighed and blew out his cheeks.

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I shook my head. 'You should be careful, Mike. Puffing up like an amorous tree-frog like that's not good for you.'

Alun joined in, 'Exactly, You'll end up by deforming your face. You don't want to look like a jazz trumpet player, do you?'

'Shut up.'

'Anyway,' I said, 'Perhaps they weren't mobiles at all, but compasses.'

Mike sighed and let his arms fall limply, 'What on earth would a stone-age caveman want with a compass.'

'Cave-women, Mike.' I corrected.

Mike made one of those puffing noises he emits when exasperated, 'And what did stone-age cave-women do with dinosaur bone-compasses.'

'That has sadly been lost in the mists of time,' I sighed.

'I sometimes wish that you two had been lost in the mists of time.' he sighed. 'But,' he groaned, 'you no doubt have an explanation that you wish to share with us.'

'Correct.'

'I guessed as much.'

'Well, they assumed that the bones pointed to the spot where their husband's carcass was to be found.'

'Lovely. Thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

'All the same,' frowned Mike, 'I'm not sure about magnetic beaks. If that had been the case, then why go to the trouble of inventing the compass?'

'Or why not just keep the beak and eat the rest,' I suggested. 'I wonder what parrot tastes like?' 'Probably pretty fowl?' laughed Alun.

'Ho, ho, ho!' sighed Mike.

'But then again,' I added. 'If one could reliably navigate with a parrot beak, compasses might never have been invented. And if they had never been invented, scientists would not have got all those clever ideas about magnetism.'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'Professor Lipton would not have spotted the compass needle move when he connected the wires to his battery pack.'

'In those days, they were Leyden jars,' commented Mike.

'No, no,' said Alun, 'They lay on beds, just like we do today.'

Mike sighed. 'Oh hell! What I mean is that they stored high voltage electricity in an object invented by Professor Leyden. The devices were the shape of big jam jars.'

'I remember now. Of course,' I cried. 'And If you ever touched one of the things, they gave you a nasty jar.'

'And you ended up with your finger jammed,' smiled Alun. 'That's where the name comes from, I expect.'

'Shut up.' sighed the exasperated Mike, 'What's more, it was not Professor Lipton; it was Professor Maxwell.'

Alun smiled, 'I knew it was something to do with hot drinks.'

'You get on my wick sometimes, Alun. You really do,' sighed Mike.

'Do I? Oh, dear....'

Mike was visibly still thinking profound thoughts. 'Do you realise?' he said, nodding slowly. 'That If compasses had not been invented, then, as Alun judiciously points out, the effects of magnets on electric

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currents would not have been discovered?' He paused. 'And therefore electric motors would never have been invented or dynamos, or electric lights or...'

'OK, Mike. We get the point,' I said.

'Maybe, but as I said about an hour ago, I've got another idea,' said Alun.

'Oh God,' groaned Mike, 'not more of your gibberish.'

'No, this is serious. You see, I was thinking about electric cars...'

We paused and shot a look at him, leaning against the railing gazing up.

'You OK, Alun?'

'Do you remember how an electric motor works?' he continued.

'We've just been through that,' said Mike.

However, Alun was not to be deviated from explaining. 'Well, if you put a copper wire in a magnetic field, nothing happens.'

'Now that is really useful, Alun,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'But if you pass an electric current down the same wire, it moves. That's how motors work.'

I frowned, 'I have difficulty linking all these interesting observations to bird migration.'

'All will now be made clear,' smiled Alun. 'In future generations, school children will be taught the "Alun Effect".'

'Great,' said Mike.

'Fantastic,' I added.

'Now, said Alun. How are nerve signals transmitted?'

'By compasses?' I suggested

'By parrots?' Mike proposed.

I frowned, 'Or perhaps by minute tree-frogs.'

Alun sighed, 'Aren't you interested?'

'No.'

'Well,' he continued ignoring us, 'Nerve signals are carried by electric currents, flowing along the pathways to the brain. By positively charged atoms in fact.'

'Ions, you mean,' corrected Mike.

'Exactly.'

'But wait a moment Alun,' said Mike. 'If signals going to the brain are transported by charged particles, then won't the brain gradually charge up?'

'Like a cloud,' I added.

'In that case,' smiled Mike, 'sooner or later the brain will get so charged it will flashover like a thunder cloud.'

I nodded, 'Like charging a Van Der Graff generator.'

'Exactly,' smiled Mike.

'I wonder if anyone ever measured the difference in voltage between a brain and feet,' I said. 'Now, that would be an interesting experiment.'

'On the same person or different ones?' asked Mike.

'We could start experimenting on the same person and move on from there,' I replied.

'Yes. A wise move.'

'If you two could refrain from interrupting for a few seconds...' sighed Alun.

'Just a few then,' I said.

'As you're a good friend,' added Mike.

'So,' he continued, 'as the little bird flies through the Earth's magnetic field, the tiny current-carrying nerves will want to move.'

'Only for little birds then?' I said.

'Shut up.'

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'Like the electric current in your copper wire?' said Mike.

'Ah-ha!' smiled Alun. 'I see you're following.'

'I'm trying my hardest,' I admitted.

'And that's what makes the wings flap? Is that it?' smiled Mike. 'like a wire in a magnetic field.'

'Shut up, Mike. No. The bird might be able to sense this tiny force on its nerves and orientate itself accordingly,' Alun finished.

'I get it,' I nodded. 'If it flies along the magnetic field direction, there will be no force at all. But if it flies perpendicular to it, there *will* be a force.'

'Exactly. And going up or down will change things too,' Alun smiled.

There was a pause as we considered this.

'That's rather brilliant, Alun,' nodded Mike.

'Thanks,' smiled Alun, 'I'm not sure if the nerve currents in the flapping wings play a role or if it's just the spinal cord.'

'I'm astonished, Alun,' I nodded, slapping him on the shoulder. 'We can try that idea out on one of the professors and see what he thinks.'

'When they've sobered up a bit.' laughed Alun.

'Because you think they might point north if suspended by a rope?' I joked.

Now. I had suggested this because, at the time, we were completely flooded with professors. Overloaded with them, in fact.

There had been some rather sneaky underhand work done by the Girls while we had been out exploring castles.

As the assiduous reader of our adventures will remember, we had had dealings with a certain Mrs

Yamamoto on several occasions in the past. A Japanese nurse.

The woman's husband was the owner of "YIAR" the Yamamoto Institute for Advanced Research. A wealthy man and also a renowned scientist. His speciality was something or other that one could make a great deal of money out of.

He had brought his entire team over to an international conference in Darmstadt, Germany. Of course, his aim was to make even more money, but he called it attending and team-building.

The Girls had mentioned to Mrs Yamamoto that we three had done a lot of travelling. So, when the trip was in the planning stage, she asked if we would show the group the sights of Germany. After this, they wanted to visit Maastricht in the Netherlands, where they were planning a corporate show the following year.

And that is how we got roped in.

It was also why we were now sliding along on the Rhine, watching the birds and theorising.

The scientists were all below, discussing complex scientific topics around the bar.

To an inexperienced eye, these proceedings very much resembled the mopping up of beer like sponges.

And that just goes to show just how easily animated scientific debate and mopping-up alcohol can be confused.

Readers who regularly attend international scientific conferences will know that well-organised ones invariably include a daily "spouses program". During these, attendants' wives and a few husbands

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are herded off to visit tourist sights and shops. Naturally, this leaves the scientists free to try and score off each other. They can thus unselfishly point out shortcomings in colleagues experiments or helpfully remind them that the question was solved a hundred years ago. Altruistically setting aside rivalry and pooling knowledge in this way has been the goal of these friendly gatherings for centuries. Strong collaborations of this sort are the keys to pushing back the boundaries of science and making the world a better place to live in.

The fact that highly lucrative industry collaborations are also often negotiated is, of course, a very secondary preoccupation.

Our wives had accompanied Mrs Yamamoto on one of these and would join us for the evening revelries...

Tonight, however, was a special occasion.

I admit that I use the word "however" somewhat out of context here. I would have usually preferred the term "Unfortunately", but I'm informed that I overuse the word so, "regrettably" might be a better choice.

Anyway, this evening was a highlight of the trip for the Japanese scientists. They'd been dreaming of it for months.

Alun, Mike and I were detailed to escort them to Munich's most celebrated beer-hall.

'I expect what they really want,' said Margaux, 'is for you to be on hand to escort them back to their hotel afterwards.'

'And to pay for breakages, no doubt,' added my wife.

I groaned, 'have you ever tried to play the genial host to a group of inebriated holiday-fevered foreigners?'

The girls shook their heads.

'Well, I have and...'

Margaux interrupted me before I could go into detail, 'That's perfect then. You'll know exactly how to handle things...'

So, that evening, after a bit of herding together, we set off through the quiet pedestrian precinct.

The three of us had taken the precaution of supplying each member of the group with a map. On each of these, we had marked the location of the beer hall and their hotels. We had also made the trip on foot to make sure that we would be able to find our way back.

As we approached the destination, a few of the younger scientists almost broke into a run. As the doors opened, the loud music of an oompah band burst onto us. This acted on our group like the gravitational pull of a giant "black hole".

The Japanese herd huddled together just inside the doors in feverish anticipation. They then broke into animated discussion with a good deal of arm waving and pointing.

There was not one but two Bavarian Bands playing at the same time. Different tunes, of course.

Almost at once, a beefy bavarian-costumed female undulated over. She gathered us up with a broad, over made-up, smile.

You could have easily built two Japanese scientists with the material used in manufacturing this woman and still have had a little over for extras.

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With authoritative gestures, she escorted us, winding through the crowded and noisy labyrinth, to a table reserved for us.

The vast hall was filled to capacity, with laughing, shouting and drinking groups.

Even a cursory glance showed that the massive wooden tables were designed to resist the heartiest banging down of tankards...

Our Red Cheeked hostess did a quick job of taking orders simply by indicating with her massive hands the size of the one-litre glasses. Of course, I don't mean that her hands were the size of... well, you get the idea. Anyway, one would not have readily courted a slap on the cheek from such members.

Anyway, and with a considerable amount of noise, the scientists all signalled that this was precisely what was required.

In almost no time at all, huge tankards were sliding across the table, and revelling began in earnest.

To add to the general confusion and hullabaloo, one of the Oompah bands took up a position near the end of our table. Holiday fever rose to unprecedented heights in the hearts of our little group. They shouted at each other and at us and at the band. They sang along with the music and drank beer, and shouted more.

The three of us exchanged looks and pulled faces as large quantities of beer disappeared into the small frameworks. Luckily, there was so much noise from the bands and the surrounding crowds that we were saved from the trouble of making intelligent conversation.

It should be pointed out here that the wives of these scientists were very far from docile geishas. Equality

being a strong movement in Japanese academic circles, they were not to be bettered by their husbands. They displayed an unexpected mastery of the art of making noise.

Their long training and piecing voices gave them the enviable capacity of making themselves heard across the noisiest of tables.

What they said to each other remains a mystery to us and probably also to the person they were conversing with.

In truth, the aim was less to converse than to gesticulate and drink and laugh and have fun.

After twenty minutes of this, one of the men hailed Alun across the table. With an unmistakable circular rubbing of his stomach, he indicated that something to eat would not be out of place.

Alun was in the process of standing when our Bavarian Beauty materialised at his side and, putting a wide hand on his shoulder, nodded.

'Food, eh? she smiled.

'Yes. Yes, Food, Food.' cried a bevy of younger scientists.

She held up a commanding hand for silence.

'Sausages and Chips. Yes?'

A cry went round, 'Yesss...'

'And more beer?'

A chorus of shouts went up at this, and she disappeared once more into the crowd.

Alun leant over to me, 'Things are warming up a bit.'

I nodded and gave my eyebrows a bit of a wiggle.

Alun wiggled back.

The woman was back again in the next to no time, and our group drained their tankards to make place for the next ones.

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The three of us had only about half-finished ours, and as she leant forward to give us ours, she smiled, 'You have to guide them back home. Yes?'

We nodded, and she discretely removed our half-finished tankards.

Then a series of huge bowls of chips arrived and were placed along the centre of the table. These were followed by plates of sausages, twice the normal size.

One wondered how there could be enough room in a standard Japanese scientist's stomach for one of these.

The group dived in, filled their plates to overflowing, and quickly proved our concerns to be totally unfounded.

They had, at last, got down to the fundamental task of the evening.

How they managed to eat, drink, and shout simultaneously remains a mystery to the three of us to this very day.

The joyful pandemonium in the hall became almost brain-numbing. Furthermore, when the two brass bands got really going, discussion of any kind became impossible. At least to us three.

We simply exchanged looks from time to time and kept an eye on our protégès.

After about an hour more of this, our bavarian women reappeared.

A shout went up, and gestures were made to indicate that more chips were required and more beer.

At about this time, the Oompah bands took time off.

An odd whirling calm fell on the room until the hall-full of revellers discovered that they could communicate once more.

Voices rose, and the hall was once more awash with noise.

The instruments the band had parked on a small stage nearby attracted the attention of three of the younger scientists. They managed to wend their way through the packed aisles to have a look. They prodded the pistons and ineffectually blew into the various instruments until they were flushed and clutching at the table for support.

After renewed effort, one of the youngest managed to bring forth a loud blast from a trombone. This was rewarded by a cheer from the hall-full of revellers.

It also brought forth a large stomached bavarian, clearly in charge.

The man conducted the would-be musicians back to our table with a few well-chosen internationally coded gestures.

At this moment, from somewhere across the hall, someone struck up a German drinking song.

In next to no time, the entire room was swaying and alive with off-tune singing.

Well into their third litre, our scientists were soon banging their tankards in time with the music. They accompanied this by wailing in some strange tongue. Then one of the middle-aged members clambered up onto the table, waving his frothing glass amidst acclamations from the other tables.

With shrill shouting and jostling, the others scrambled up with him, and a cheer went around the room again. The singing got louder and louder, and the Japanese wailed and gesticulated with wilder and wilder gestures.

Alun, Mike and I, were rewarded with an unimpeded view of the Japanese wive's scanty

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underclothes. In several cases, we noted a distinct lack of them.

Suddenly a heavy hand was laid on my shoulder, and I looked up into a pair of brown Bavarian eyes.

'Perhaps time to call it a day, sir,' she smiled.

I nodded, 'Alun,' I called. 'You and Mike get them down while I pay.'

'They'll refuse.' replied Mike.

The woman smiled, 'Tell them there's a bigger hall just down the road. That usually works.'

Well, it did.

How any of the members of our happy group could still stand was a marvel to us. But they could.

Unfortunately, they could also still sing, even though most people would not have called it that.

Anyway, we herded them singing and laughing and shouting through the abandoned pedestrian precinct.

Halfway home, we entered a large square. This boasted marble benches around a decorative fountain in the centre.

The group sat down on these to rest while a few sidled off to find a secluded spot in which to reduce internal pressures.

Then one of the younger members fumbled in his pocket and started making blowing noises.

This was followed by two others.

'Oh hell!' sighed Alun, 'they've pinched the mouthpieces off the instruments.'

After a bit of a struggle, we managed to recover these, but this did not dampen their spirits. On the contrary, they pursed their lips into chicken bottom shapes, and the most frightful noises were soon echoing back and forth across the quiet of the square.

'You take these back, Mike, and we'll round up the troops.'

'Wait for me then. I'll only be a jiffy. It'd be a pity to miss the fun.'

As he turned to leave, there was a blast of noise from the other side of the fountain.

'Ye Gods!' cried Alun, 'one of them's pinched the trumpet.'

We had to chase the younger scientist around the fountain several times until he fell backwards into it, and I snatched the instrument away.

'You'd best go with Mike, Alun.' I sighed, 'Just in case there's trouble.'

'Trouble!?' frowned Mike. 'Why on earth should there be any trouble?'

'One never knows.' I replied, shooting a look at Alun. 'They might not see the amusing side of things.'

'It has been known to happen,' added Alun.

Mike thought about this, 'Perhaps. But only when you two interfere with perfectly straightforward situations. I have lost track of the number of times that's ended us up in prison.'

'I'll come along anyway,' smiled Alun.

'Well. Just make sure to let me do the talking then.'

'Will do,' smiled Alun, glancing back at me over his shoulder.

'I'll wait here then.' I nodded.

Mike insisted on carrying the mouthpieces and the trumpet himself. As he went, he amused himself by trying to coax some sort of sound from the trumpet, happily without success.

But as the two approached the beer hall, the doors were flung open, and a blast of noise burst out into the night air. In its wake, the hefty owner and a rotund

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group of red-faced musicians tumbled out into the night. At this precise moment, Mike pointed the trumpet starwards and blew with all his might.

They spotted Mike immediately.

'Hey! There they are.'

'Quick catch them!' came the call, and they wobbled down the steps toward Mike.

'Drop that and let's get out of here,' cried Alun.

Mike placed the elements on the nearest marble bench, and legged off after Alun.

Luckily, beefy, barrel-shaped bavarian musicians and bloated beer-hall owners are rarely Olympic class athletes.

They had not the slightest chance of getting within clutching distance. The same could not be said about youngish German policemen, especially if a patrol of them were to come around a corner ahead of one.

Annoyingly, probability does play this sort of trick from time to time, if only to keep its hand in. Anyway, there they were.

'Stop! Thief.' cried a Bavarian (in German) from behind us.

The patrol spread across the road, so Alun and Mike stopped.

'What's all this?' said the patrol chief (in German).

The beer-hall platoon wobbled up behind us, cutting off our retreat.

'They stole my trumpet.' cried one breathlessly.

'And my mouthpiece,' coughed another.

'No, we didn't,' cried Mike

'What did he say?' asked the chief.

'No idea, chief,' said a rather muscular policeman.
'He's a foreigner.'

'They're English.' said the owner, 'You speak English, do?' he indicated Mike.

Mike frowned, 'I said we did not steal those things. We were just bringing them back.'

'Well said, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'That's cleared things up nicely.'

Alun raised his eyebrows.

'What did he say?' asked the chief.

Realising that things were getting complicated, Mike decided to simplify things by miming.

He waved his hands about and gesticulated with such astounding clarity that even Alun, who knew the true story, could understand nothing.

'What's he doing?' cried the trumpet player.

'I think he must be mad.'

'Are you mad?' said the hall owner, making a universally understood gesture with his hand.

Mike bristled, 'You're bloody mad too.' he shouted, using the same universal sign language but adding a few sharp prods. He also included a few additional signs to clarify his discontent, leaving very little room for misinterpretation.

The two men glowered at each other.

Then as the fleshy mass of the owner started to roll forward menacingly, the chief stepped between them.

'You've got your things back, haven't you?'

'Yes, but...'

'And you've got hundreds of thirsty customers to serve?'

This brought the man back to reality, 'Charge them with theft. Clap them in irons and...'

'Just leave that part to us.'

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The group growled at us and turned, just in time to see another group of well-lubricated customers stumble out of the beer-hall doors.

They immediately spotted the trumpet and fell on it and the mouthpieces with a whoop of enthusiasm.

'Hey!' cried the musician and set off as fast as his wobbling stomach would permit. He was prepared to save his beloved instrument, regardless of the effort involved. The others followed, cursing and shouting Bavarian insults.

On hearing these, the revellers started. Such insults, known only to those born and bred in the Alpine wolf-skinning forests, struck terror into their hearts. They swore back, albeit with considerably less conviction, then headed for safety.

We watched the show with pleasure.

The patrol seemed to be enjoying it too.

The chief nodded to Alun. Then with a bit more sign language, he indicated that we must follow them "to assist with enquiries at the station".

Alun pursed his lips and looked at Mike, 'Well. You handled that admirably.'

Mike made a huffing noise as they followed the patrol through the precinct.

'I couldn't have managed that better myself.' Added Alun. 'Well done. Off to the station then!?'

As they turned the corner, they came to the square again, which was still overflowing with drunk Japanese scientists.

I spotted Alun and Mike as they trudged along.

'Oh god!' I cried, 'what now?'

'Who are you?' said the chief.

'What did he say?' I asked.

Mike shrugged, and so did Alun.

'We're being taken in...'

The policemen were looking with interest at the antics of the group of scientists.

I made a few gestures to indicate that I was responsible for this herd. I then showed the map and explained that I was guiding them back to their hotels with a little more gesticulation.

The patrol clearly understood this and nodded a global nod.

The chief then put his finger to his lips and made a "shushing" noise which the scientists clearly understood and calmed down immediately.

After all, the law is the law, even when one's enjoying oneself.

When I indicated that Mike and Alun were with me, the policemen nodded but wagged fingers and indicated that they must follow them.

I put my hands on my hips and glared at Mike, 'What the hell have you done? How am I supposed to get all these guys back home single-handed?'

Mike shrugged.

Alun sighed, 'The only person I know who speaks german...'

'I know, I know,' I interrupted. 'Is Margaux. Brilliant.'

'We'll never hear the end of this,' wailed Mike. 'She will probably strike my name off her list of guests.'

We looked at each other, and I sighed, 'You twit, Mike. I suppose I'll have to tell her to come and bail you out.'

For once, Mike did not reply.

Well, just for the record, the passage of time has since proved Mike to be perfectly correct in his assumption. We never did hear the end of it.

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As they clumped off behind the patrol, I sighed and started shouting to gather up my group.

I don't know how I managed it, but somehow I got the them all back to their respective hotels. I eventually paused for a few moments outside mine to gather strength.

As the last of the group filtered through the hotel door, Mrs Yamamoto appeared at my elbow. As might be expected, she was a little worse for wear, even though she seemed able to stand without wobbling too much.

All the same, she clutched my arm, came close and gazed up into my face. 'He's gone.' she whispered.

'Gone?'

'Yes. He's gone. My husband.'

'Professor Yamamoto?'

'Yes. He's gone.'

'Gone?'

'Yes.'

'Gone where?' I asked.

'I don't know.'

'You mean he's not here, with the others?'

'Yes. He's missing.'

'Oh hell!' I moaned, 'just what I needed to round off the enjoyable evening.'

'Yes.' nodded Mrs Yamamoto gazing up into my eyes. 'A vely enjorable evening.'

I sighed a resigned sigh. 'I suppose I'll have to go and search for him. He can't have gone very far. Not with all the beer that's slopping about inside him.'

Mrs Yamamoto suddenly seemed to have an idea, and her grip tightened around my arm.

'Yes, look for him. But maybe he is already in our room.' She gazed up into my eyes and drew closer to me. 'We must check he is not in the bedroom before us.'

'OK. You pop up and if he's already home. All's well.'

She looked up at me with that look again, 'Please come with me. He might be dead.'

'Dead!?'

'Yes. Dead. He drinks too much and dies,' she pursed her lips and nodded unhappily.

'Does he often do that?' I asked.

'He might have fallen and split his head into two bits and be bleeding and bleeding all over the floor,' she clasped me now with her other hand.

'Well, if he has, open the window and shout.'

'Please. I need support. I can't stand. I can't find my key. I...'

I sighed. 'All right, all right. I'll come.'

She brightened. 'Quick though, one never knows. It might be a question of seconds.'

Now, I am not entirely as innocent as one might suspect by reading these lines. I also guessed that what had sprung into Mrs Yamamoto's mind was likely to take considerably more than a few seconds.'

We entered the lobby lift. It started with a jolt, and Mrs Yamamoto pretended to stumble, pressing herself firmly against my thigh.

I opened my eyes wide at the temperature of the part which she squeezed against me.

'Oh, sorry!' she sighed. 'I think I have had a little too much to drink.'

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For my part, I did not think. I knew. Three litres of beer in such a tiny structure was far from "a little too much".

I pretended not to notice the pressure, and at long last, the lift door slid open.

Mrs Yamamoto stumbled out and felt her way rapidly along the corridor wall, albeit somewhat unstably.

'Not a moment to lose,' she called.

She found the door and inserted her key.

'You go in first, please. I hate to see blood.'

'But you're a nurse.'

'Yes, but I'm not used to my husband's blood all over the floor. You go in. You check the bathroom. He might have fallen in the shower and cracked his skull in two bits.'

I sighed. How was I going to get out of this one? If I went into the bathroom, the door would be locked by the time I returned, and she'd be waiting. And then what.

Would my staunch and resolute notion of honour be up to the challenge?

She stepped back, and I got hold of the handle and turned it.

I pushed back the door, but it stuck halfway.

I shoved, but nothing happened.

I smiled to myself, sighed and squeezed my head through the gap. There sprawling on the floor, lay a snoring professor. I sighed one of those deeply satisfied sighs, better even than the first sip of beer after a long hike.

I pushed the door a little further, 'Pop inside. I think everything is OK.'

Mrs Yamamoto frowned and moved forward.

As she squeezed her overheated body into the gap, I made for the stairs. 'See you tomorrow Mrs Yamamoto.'

I was gone in a flash.

Down in the Lobby, I summoned the night porter.

'If anyone asks for me, say I've gone to the police station.'

'Sir?'

'Especially if it happens to be a Japanese woman. I'm out. OK?'

'Ah! Yes, I see, sir. The police station?'

'That's it. And whatever you do, don't give her my room number.'

He nodded, 'I understand.'

'If she seems to require assistance,' I smiled, 'You might possibly render her a small service.'

The young man chuckled, 'We endeavour to do everything in our power to make our visitor's stay memorable.'

I laughed out loud and made for the stairs.

At last, in the safety of the bedroom I shared with Mike and Alun, I undressed and took a welcome shower. Then I donned the old pyjamas and slipped between the waiting sheets.

Before indulging in a last-minute read of my book, I sent a text message to the girls.

'In prison. Please come in the morning to get us out.'

I then turned off the phone and settled down for a welcome read.

Tomorrow was another day.