

The Castle

Only a short time after our hot air balloon adventures, we got together again.

This time it was in the UK.

Margaux and Alun kindly invited us for the week at their home on the south coast.

Inevitably, tensions were mounting by mid-week, so my wife suggested the three of us go for a long hike. "The longer the better", she had said, which gives a good idea of the general state of affairs. In any case, I had long wanted to show Alun and Mike the countryside around my birthplace, a few hours drive away. So, this seemed as good an occasion as any other.

Accordingly, off we went and put up in a bed-and-breakfast in the lovely old village of Burpham, near Arundel.

The walk was a great success.

But before heading back the following day, we decided to visit the nearby castle.

Being a civilised place, opening time was ten o'clock.

However, as we approached the entrance, Mike gasped. 'How much!?'

Alun whistled, 'Do you realise how many pints each that is, not counting car park fees.'

'Incredible,' added Mike. 'And I bet that's astronomical too.'

Put in such readily understandable terms, it did strike me as a bit on the stiff side.

'Mind you,' I said, 'renovating the roof of a place like this would set you back a small fortune.'

'Anyway,' said Alun. 'These guys have big fortunes, not small ones.'

'Huge ones,' grumbled Mike. 'And they're swelling and bloating all the time, given the entrance fee rip-off.'

'Like a dead cow,' said Alun.

'Like what!?' spluttered Mike.

'Swelling and bloating, like a decomposing cow forgotten in an isolated alpine pasture...'

'Stop talking rubbish, Alun,' sighed Mike.

'They do bloat,' replied Alun. 'I've seen them do it. Like balloons.'

'Shut up, Alun.' sighed Mike for the twentieth time since breakfast.

'So, we're not going in then?' I said.

'No, not for that much,' said Alun.

'Let's go and have a look at the lake then,' I sighed.

'That's free.'

Then, unexpectedly, a half-forgotten memory came surging back to me. Memories of my impecunious youth, in fact.

'Wait a moment!' I smiled. 'I've got an idea.'

'Oh God!' moaned Mike. 'Not one of your ideas?'

I ignored this. 'Come on. I remember how I used to get in the back way. From the far side of the lake.'

'You mean, sneak in without financially aiding the count and countess in their unending battle to maintain this edifice,' said Alun.

'Inestimable edifice,' corrected Mike. 'It was written on the info panel.'

'That's it,' I smiled. 'But I prefer the term "slip in" to "sneak in".'

'Lead on Horatio,' he chuckled.

'It wasn't Horatio, ignoramus.'

'Who's this guy Horatio Ignoramus? Anyone I know?'

Mike ignored this. 'It was MacDuff.'

'Oh no! That annoying Shakespeare again,' groaned Alun. 'That guy gets on my nerves. He always seems to have said the interesting bits before anyone else.'

Mike ignored this and went on. 'It's from Macbeth, of course,' and he quoted, 'Lay on Macduff, and damn'd be him, that first cries hold, enough.'

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'That's okay by me then,' said Alun, 'I'll not be him who crieth, "Hold".'

So, we parked the car half in and half out of a muddy ditch. Alun and I jumped out on the dry side and Mike on the other. He almost immediately discovered the slipperiness of the ditch side. However, "almost", was just a shade too slow.

'Hell!' he shouted as he slid mud-wards. 'You couldn't have parked somewhere else, I suppose?'

Alun and I chuckled, hidden from him by the car.

'Oh, sorry, Mike. I didn't spot the ditch.'

'I bet you did that deliberately, Alun.'

'Shame on you for imagining me capable of such petty scheming,' coughed Alun, hiding his contorted face.

Mike made an impatient blowing noise.

'I'll have to change my shoes now. Look at them!' he sighed.

'I wouldn't bother if I were you,' I said. 'The pastures we have to cross might be muddy.'

He shrugged, 'and no doubt full of hidden cow pats?'

'That's a definite possibility.'

'I thought as much, it being one of your ideas.'

Alun smiled, 'Probably loads of frog pats too.'

'Frog pats!?' snorted Mike. 'I don't believe it! What on Earth are you gibbering about now? God in heaven!'

'God made frogs too, Mike,' frowned Alun, 'Don't go forgetting that, please.'

'Shut up, Alun.'

'Do you know Alun,' I said, 'I don't think I've ever seen a frog pat.'

'Not many people have,' he nodded. 'One passes by unseeing, neglecting to notice one of "Mother Nature's" more magnificent jewels.'

'Oh, for God's sake. Do shut up.'

'I bet you didn't know,' continued Alun.

'Shut up.'

'I bet you didn't know that Tibetan peasants make a living out of collecting Frog-pats from the Himalayan Mountain swamps.'

'Swamps! In the Himalayas?' cried Mike.

'That's right. They store them in dark caverns hewn out of the living rock, all winter.'

'Rock isn't alive,' snorted Mike.

'Then in spring,' continued Alun, 'the sell them to the nomadic bonsai tree peoples.'

'What a lot of absolute rot!' exclaimed Mike.

'Exactly, Mike. For some unexplained reason, the micro-organisms in rotten Himalayan Frog pat inhibit root growth. That's how they make Bonsais.'

'Don't talk rot Alun. They keep them small by root-pruning. Everybody knows that.'

'No, Mike, They only use pruning for cheap industrial ones. We pros call it clipping, though, not pruning. That's because premium quality Frog pat costs upwards of a hundred and fifty euros per kilo.'

'Plus transport costs,' I nodded, 'I see. It worth as much to them as Saffron is to us.'

'Oh hell!' said Mike, 'don't you two ever stop.'

'And,' said Alun, 'I bet you don't know the origins of the word Bonsai...'

'We don't want to know,' groaned Mike.

'Well, as you ask... The story is that the first European to ever see one was so astonished he cried "good heavens".'

'Well, well, well! Isn't that interesting. So?' sighed Mike.

'Well, the chap in question just happened to be a wandering Hebrew monk or something.'

'I should have guessed,' said Mike.

'Which?' I asked.

'Which, what?'

'Well. Was he a wandering "something" or a wandering Monk?'

'A monk. Those guys were all over the place in those days,' added Alun.

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'If you say so,' said Mike impatiently.

'I do. And being a highly cultivated and educated monk, he naturally spoke in French. He used the word "Bonne", which means good, and "Zion".'

'Naturally...,' sighed Mike. 'And of course, he said: "Bonne-Zion"'

'A frequent exclamation in those days, I believe,' I said.

'Amongst cultivated gentlemen, mind you,' added Alun.

'Yes, you're right, Alun,' I smiled. 'And I suppose the Chinese merchant, sensing a quick sale, leapt to his feet crying; "Yes, yes, lovely Bon-zion, velly good. Velly cheep; you buy Bones-eye....".'

'What a load of rubbish,' cried Mike. 'The word Bonsai means "Potted scenery" in Japanese.

'Really!?'

'Yes, you idiot.'

'Interesting idea, though.'

'No, it's not. It's drivel.'

'Entertaining drivel, though.'

'Anyway,' I said, breaking the spell. 'I still don't know what frog-pats look like.'

'Let's see if we can find one then, shall we?'

'No, we shan't,' cried Mike lets go and see this castle before it closes for the season.'

'Oh well. If that's how you feel about it,' shrugged Alun. 'Lead on the Macdonald.'

'Duff...'

'Plum?'

'Shut up?'

'Lay on the Plum-duff.'

'Oh, God!'

I gazed along the length of the lake and paused.

'Something up?' asked Alun.

'I had forgotten just how long the lake was. We have to go all the way around and then through the woods over there.'

I pointed to the dark undergrowth on the far side of the lake.

'So?'

'And the stream feeding it is in flood, and there's no bridge.'

'We can build one. Easy job,' said Alun.

'No, we can't,' grumbled Mike. 'We'll all end up in the water if it's anything like your usual efforts.'

'Thanks a lot, Mike. Confidence reigns.'

"Foresight and experience reigns" is closer to the truth,' retorted the latter.

'But here,' continued Alun, 'If I am not mistaken, is our client now...'

With this, he drew back a stand of rushes to show a small rowing boat, complete with oars.

'Just waiting for us,' he smiled, pulling it up to dry land with the rope.

I quickly looked around and scanned the area. No one was to be seen, 'Good thinking Alun. Come on.'

We jumped in and looked back at Mike, who was hesitating.

'What happens if the owner turns up?'

'He'll have to swim,' smiled Alun.

'And there are swans abroad,' I added, pointing along the lake.

'What if he has a shotgun? Lead shot doesn't swim; it flies. Rather fast too.'

'Oh, come on, Mike. There's no one here. Come on, quick, we'll be across in thirty seconds.'

'Thirty seconds!?' Mike shook his head, 'I'd like to see that...'

'Get in then, and you'll see.'

Mike took a last worried look around the horizon and stepped in.

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Alun, who swore that he was good with oars, pushed off and started rowing hard. There followed a great deal of lashing about, and vast quantities of water were projected skywards. However, progress across the surface of the lake was minimal.

After a few seconds of this, Mike stood up. 'Give me those you twit, Alun.'

Alun smiled at me and winked as Mike sat and set the oars in the right places.

Then he pulled, and we were surprised just how fast we slid over the water.

We were soon more than halfway across when he leant forwards, 'Oh, Ho!' he pulled a face, and we turned.

From along the lake, we spotted a swan.

This swan had also spotted us. But, for some reason or other, known only to itself, it seemed to resent our presence.

For the moment, it was only flapping wings and making menacing gestures.

'What is it you have, Mike, that attracts swans so?' asked Alun.

'Two idiots for friends,' replied the annoyed Mike. 'That's what I've got, unfortunately.'

'We'd better get moving,' whispered Alun. 'I think it has finished its stretching and warmup routine.'

'I AM moving,' replied Mike.

'Why are you whispering, Alun?' I asked.

'Shut up and come and take the other oar,' commanded Mike. 'Quick.'

I shifted myself beside commander Mike, and we both pulled with all our might.

Our progress was indeed impressive. It was a pity that no one was there to witness it, except the swan, that is.

However, our performance did not seem to impress the swan all that much.

After lashing about a bit with its wings, it started to paddle towards us across the water, then took off in our direction.

'Oh Hell,' shouted Mike as the white bomb-shaped mass homed in on us. 'Get ready to fend off.'

With this, he extracted the oar and lifted it at the incoming projectile.

'Great gods,' cried Alun, crouching down as low as possible in the hull below the gunwales.

The colossal bird came flashing in but, spotting the extended oar just in time, swerved off to starboard.

'Come on, row like hell before he turns,' cried Mike.

'Or she,' frowned Alun.

We got in five or six strong pulls before the swan settled down and took off again.

'Your turn now,' he said, and I lifted the heavy oar and waited. This time the swan didn't look as if it was contemplating a last-minute swerve-by and, in fact, didn't. Instead, it hit the oar obliquely, and as I took the shock, the oar rammed down against the bottom boards. The blocked oar levered the massive bird, squawking and flapping, high into the air above us. Once over and freed from the oar, it went plummeting into the lake with a splash.

For a few moments, it sat there, reflecting on what had happened. It was obviously debating on the best strategic follow-up manoeuvre.

We decide it wiser not to wait and ponder on the possible outcome.

'Oh hell!' shouted Mike. 'The oar's loosened one of the planks. Row for your lives.'

With hindsight, this seemed a bit extreme, but in any case, within seconds, we were flashing towards dry land.

Before the swan had started animated flapping again, we were out of the boat and on the shore.

But the swan was not beaten yet.

'Oh hell,' cried Mike, 'I'm not having my rear-quarters attacked again.'

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And as the bird got up speed, so did Mike.

We followed as fast as we could into the dense undergrowth.

Mike shot up the first serviceable tree like a greased monkey.

We followed, 'get up higher, Mike. Quick.'

'This is my tree. Get yourself another,' he shouted back.

But it was too late because the swan arrived below us. It at once went into a show of intimidation.

Although we would have preferred not to admit it, we were pretty strongly intimidated.

'Can swans climb?' whispered Alun.

'Why are you whispering, Alun?' asked Mike, 'No, they can't.'

'But,' I added, 'They can sit still and wait for a considerable time.'

We looked down at the swan, which already seemed to be calming down a bit. It looked up at us.

'We'll just have to wait until it gets fed up and goes away,' shrugged Mike. 'Better still, you can go down and decoy it while we get down.'

Alun glanced at Mike, 'You do it. You're used to swans. This one will follow you to the ends of the Earth.'

'You're the lowest one, Alun, and my rear still smarts.'

But, before we could come to a decision, the swan gave up and waddled away, making angry-swan noises.

We thus climbed back down and dusted ourselves off.

'That was fun,' smiled Alun.

Mike sighed, 'No, it wasn't. Now where?'

'Over there,' I pointed. 'See that wall? Well, that encloses the castle orchards. There's an old door hidden up that way, behind some bushes. It's always left open. Come on.'

As we strode off through the undergrowth, Alun smiled. 'Did I ever tell you what they use Swan Pats for?'

'Shut up.' Cried Mike.

After some searching, we eventually found the doorway. However, the heavy oak door was locked.

'Ah!' nodded Alun. 'Things have changed since the old days. Now what?'

'Hmm. We go over, that's all,' I said.

Well, getting over a chunky nine-foot stone wall is not that easy. Luckily, time and neglect had created a few footholds. Using these and a bit of pushing and hauling, we got up onto the top.

As we sat astride the wall gazing across the tops of the well-pruned fruit trees, I smiled to myself as a half-forgotten memory came back to me.

'It's rather interesting when one thinks that this castle was once a maritime port,' I said.

'A port?' said Mike, 'six miles inland, up the river?'

'Yes. Odd, isn't it. But true all the same.'

'In medieval times, I suppose,' said Mike.

'Yes, but that role came to an end for an odd reason.'

'And I suppose you're about to make up some ridiculous story about that,' sighed Mike.

'No, Mike. I'm going to tell you the true story of the downfall of a medieval maritime route.'

'Let's hear it,' smiled Alun, 'I'm already interested.'

'You're interested in any sort of gibberish, Alun,' grumbled Mike.

'Well,' I proceeded. 'There was a lot of trouble at the time. This was because the village of Littlehampton at the river mouth was growing rather fast.'

What's more, the upkeep of the toe path (not a tow-path in those days) and repairing the banks, dredging etc., was costing the mayor a bit much.

Remember that a toe-path is like a foot-path...'

'But narrower,' interrupted Mike. 'Very funny.'

'Well,' I continued, 'He was getting much less out of the river than he was investing in its upkeep.'

'So, one morning, he had an idea. He stretched a rope across the river displaying a panel marked "Toll River". The

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"Lord and master" of the castle was away at the time, and the castle accountant was forced into a hole and paid up. However, when the lord came home from warring and raping somewhere overseas, he was not pleased with this innovative idea. A negotiation meeting was thus organised at a convenient tavern at Littlehampton.'

'Thence thundered "Graball the thick" on his mighty warhorse, "Thorn".'

"Grab-all the thick" !? cried Mike. 'It's just incredible the amount of rubbish you vomit forth.'

'Thorn is a good name for a warhorse,' smiled Alun. 'I rather like that.'

'Yep. Thorn was the name of his childhood pet hedgehog. But it died.'

Mike pulled a face and hid his eyes behind his hands.

'Anyway,' I continued. 'The warrior was forced to admit that thundering along a well-kept Toe-Path on a mighty warhorse was indeed easier than in olden times. What's more, he hadn't been A-Wenching down that way for some time. This was because it was the fallow-year for Wenching in that quarter of his feudal territory.'

'Is this ridiculous story going on for much longer?' said Mike.

'Quiet Mike, I'm interested,' said Alun

'Well,' I continued. 'After greetings, foaming tankards were banged down on the table, and debate commenced. But, as is often the case when seasoned spirits come together, a satisfactory solution to the dilemma was soon found.'

As soon the idea grabbed "Graball the thick", all became clear to him.

He lopped off the mayor's head with his two-hander, and that was that.

Then, for good measure, he lopped the head off the toll-rope holder and also a few other people who were milling around watching seagulls floating about on the river.

Unknown to the great warlord, the poorer merchants were unable to pay the fees during the Toll period. These had to haul the goods up to the castle in carts. However, they discovered that this was, in fact, quicker and easier than towing an entire boatload six miles against the river's flow.

So, in the end, the Toll system failed, and the tow-path fell into disrepair once more.

Soon after, following a few painful falls on the rutted tow-path, "Graball the Thick" gave up Wenching at Littlehampton altogether. And this is why today; inhabitants of that town have higher IQ's than those in the surrounding parts.'

Mike shook his head, 'You were obviously born in those surrounding parts then. Close to the castle gates, I would expect.'

'I never thought of that,' I nodded.

Alun smiled, 'I bet if we broke your bones, we'd find "Nobility" written all the way down them. Like in sticks of seaside rock.'

'More likely to be written "imbecile",' scoffed Mike.'

'Come on, let's get moving,' I said, letting myself down into the orchard. 'Be careful not to damage the vines. That's what they make the famous vintage wine with.'

'Oh, God! No,' cried Mike. 'Please stop him, someone.'

At the far side of the orchard stood a second and equally high stone wall.

'I suppose there's another gate that's always kept open in that one too,' said Mike.

'No. That's always closed. It leads into the private castle gardens,' I said. 'We'll have to climb that one.'

'Well,' he snorted, 'this was indeed an easy way in.'

Across the grassy land beneath the trees, a shallow stream wound its leisurely way towards the lake.

'We follow this,' I said.

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At this moment, however, from a distance came an ominous noise, the noise of dogs barking.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun.

'Quick,' called Mike, 'into the stream. They can't follow our scent through the water. And in he jumped. 'Oh, damn it. It's freezing.'

'They can't follow our scent, but yours is probably so strong that it'll perfume the whole lake.'

While saying this, Alun shot me a look, and we understood each other. It was a moment's work to get our shoes and socks off, and we dived in behind Mike. He was approaching the wall at a good turn of speed.

'If you don't hurry, you idiots,' he cried over his shoulder, 'they'll see you, then we'll have got frozen feet for nothing.'

Now it's worth mentioning here that neither Alun nor me would now recommend trying to reproduce this exercise.

No matter how inviting and refreshing a babbling brook might seem, it should at all costs be avoided bare-footed.

It might appear enticing, bubbling and splashing between grassy banks. But under its attractive surface lie an almost infinite selection of unpleasant surprises. Tempting as they may be to the eye, these are not so to the naked foot.

Seemingly rounded pebbles are found to have excruciatingly sharp edges. Furthermore, little twigs turn out to have murderously pointed stubs. Finally, millions of other painful obstacles are hidden beneath the disgusting oozy mud hidden under tranquil leaves carpeting at the bottom.

We tried to sprint after Mike, but the best we could manage was an embarrassingly unmanly hobble.

The wall was far too high to climb, so we slopped out of the stream and headed for an old oak tree that overhung it.

Mike and Alun lifted me up, then I helped Alun up, and together we heaved Mike into the branches.

We then clambered as far up as possible and hid from view behind the thick branches.

The dogs appeared, tearing across the grass and came up sharp at the edge of the stream.

They then went sort of berserk, rushing in circles sniffing and snorting and barking.

They jumped the stream and, after a good deal of time-wasting, ended up under our tree.

We froze while the snuffling went on way below us. Then suddenly, with a yelp, off they went again, back towards the other end of the orchard, where something more exciting must be happening.

'That was close,' sighed Alun.

'Again,' Sniffed Mike.

Well, we clambered out along one of the massive lower branches and let ourselves down onto the broad summit of the wall.

Beyond this spread the well-tended lawns of the castle's private gardens.

They ran down from the grey granite mass of the walls and ended in wide flower borders directly below us. These borders, ablaze with perfectly tended flowers, stretched all along the tall enclosing wall.

Just below us were lines of sweet peas, the perfume of which wafted up to us on the light breeze, perched three metres up.

Over to our left, behind a low stone wall, we could see a vast vegetable garden. It stretched away into the distance.....

Here we sat in the sun until our feet had dried a bit. Then Alun passed me over a paper handkerchief with which I finished the job.

Mike, of course, sat with his waterlogged shoes dripping happily.

Having finished, we pressed the excess water from the handkerchiefs, and I was about to aim mine at a bird when

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Mike cried, 'Hey!' you do not intend to throw that away, are you? Do you know how long that treated paper takes to biodegrade?'

We knew only too well how long Mike could go on about the environment if given a chance. So, I squeezed it out even harder and slipped it into my jacket pocket.

We next let ourselves down onto the flower border, crouched behind the sweet-peas, and looked around.

'Now what?' asked Mike.

'Well,' I replied, 'We'll find our way in and Bob's-your-uncle.'

'Simple,' agreed Alun, then pointing towards the castle, added, 'And what do we do about this latest addition to the scenario.'

A tall, heavily built woman had appeared from the open French windows. Even at a distance of fifty yards, we could see that she was expensively dressed and held herself in a countess like way. She also had a ridiculous looking poodle, pruned to look like a series of fluffy clouds on legs.

'Quick,' I whispered, 'Get those forks and dig.'

Mike and Alun picked up the implements which were standing against the wall and pretended to turn over the soil.

The women spotted us and stopped short. Although I couldn't see at such a distance, she was beyond frowning.

The poodle yapped and set off in our direction, followed by the women. Her tread was heavy, and only the thick well-mown grass muffled the sound of the thudding of her heavy size ten shoes.

'I waved and smiled to her, then turned to Mike and Alun, 'keep digging, and I'll ad lib.'

'Oh god!' moaned Mike.

'You there!' cried the woman from twenty paces, approaching at speed. 'What on earth are you doing in my garden?'

'Good morning, Ma'm,' I replied.

'Oh god!' whispered Mike again.

'What are you doing in my flower bed.'

'We're airing the soil, Ma'm,'

'Airing the soil?'

'Yes mam.'

'And perhaps you can inform me as to why are you airing the soil? Who are you?'

'The head gardener Mam. He said we could do it.'

'The head gardener!?' she frowned.

'Yes mam.'

'And what did this head gardener look like?'

'A thin bloke,' said Mike.

'Thick set man,' I said at the same time and scowled at Mike.

'Which?'

'Well,' I improvised, 'Both actually,'

'Both?'

'Well, he was sort of think-set at the top but thinned out as he went downward.'

'What!?' she frowned.

'Like an Olympic swimming champion,' I smiled, having found a way out of the dilemma. 'I think he might even have mentioned something about having won medals in his youth.'

'Did he now?'

I nodded. Now close up, the woman looked more like an unwanted aunt than a wealthy countess. However, this did not make our position any more manageable.

'Perhaps you might like to explain why you are here?'

'Yes, Ma'm, 'I smiled. 'We're from the local "well-being" centre.'

'The what?'

'I leant forward and lowered my voice, 'That's the name we use in the presence of patients Ma'm. Otherwise, they tend to get upset.'

The women started and whispered back, 'You mean, these two are madmen?'

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I nodded, 'Not dangerously so, of course. These two are just a bit peculiar.'

'And they are allowed out, are they?' she continued in a lowered voice.

'Yes, Ma'm, so we asked the Head gardener if they could help a bit.'

'Did you?'

'Yes Ma'm. Digging and things like that keep them occupied and physically fit. And as they always say Ma'm, "Healthy body, healthy mind"...'

The women frowned at this, 'Really?'

'You like digging, don't you, Mike?'

Mike shot me an unpleasant look, 'digging's good,' he said, drawling nicely.

'And you Alun?'

Alun, who was clearly enjoying himself, played up nicely too. He leered at us over his shoulder and opened his eyes wide as he caught sight of the pruned poodle.

'Why is he staring at Doodoo like that?'

'That's his peculiarity, Mam. He likes dogs.'

'Cuddly woof...' leered Alun.

'Go on with your digging Alun,' You can have woof when we're back at the home.

'What on earth are you talking about?' said the aunt-like woman.

'He has a cuddly woolly dog in the home. He squeezes it.'

'He does what?'

'He squeezes it. That's why we try to keep him away from real dogs.'

'Good grief! Come hear Doodoo,' she called, scooping the ridiculous shape up, and clutching it to her ample Aunt-like bosom.

'Cuddly woof,' repeated Alun without looking up.

'Get on with the digging, Alun,' I repeated, 'or the garden man won't be pleased.'

Alan leered once more, then turned back to the job in hand with a low, ominous chuckle.

'And the other one?' asked the women. 'What's wrong with him.?''

'Oh, Mike is Ok, aren't you, Mike?'

'Me All right,' said Mike, not lifting his head from his forking.

'He just multiplies,' I nodded.

'He does what?' she exclaimed.

'He multiplies. He repeats the multiplication tables.'

'Why on earth does he does that?'

'He enjoys it. He runs through the multiplication tables over and over again. He goes up to the twenty times table, then starts again.'

'Incredible!' said the aunt. 'Even the nineteen times table.'

'Yes.'

'That is really quite incredible. What a remarkable achievement. I never heard of anyone capable of doing that. So surely it must indicate that he is some sort of genius.'

'Oh no,' I smiled, 'I don't think so. I didn't say he got the results right. No. He just makes up the results as he goes along.'

'How peculiar,' she shot Mike a worried glance.

'It's a bit wearing after the first day or so.' I frowned. 'So, I try to keep him occupied with physical work. Otherwise, it would drive me off my rocker,' I chuckled to myself.

However, the woman just frowned at me.

'And so,' she began talking slowly so that I would be able to understand. 'To help you in all this, the Head Gardener, this Olympic swimming champion type, agreed to let you dig the garden?'

'That's right, Ma'm.' I nodded, 'He was pleased, you see, because the other gardeners were ill or something.'

'Were they now?'

'Apparently?'

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'Well, that's got that cleared up,' she smiled, putting the small animal back down again.

'Yes Ma'm.'

'There remains one mystery, though.'

I smiled, 'Yes?'

'Well, you see, the head gardener of this establishment just happens to be Me...' She let this sink in.'

'Good heavens,' I cried, 'The man was an imposter.'

'It certainly seems so.'

'He was probably one of those cat burglars. Or maybe even an evil dog thief.' I suggested, desperately searching for a way out of this.

At this point, the woman held up her hand. 'Enough!'

She sighed, 'you are obviously just one more group of Trespassers, trying to get in without paying. Follow me, please.' She turned and stomped off.

Alun was chuckling to himself as we followed, but Mike didn't seem able to see the funny side.

Halfway across the lawn, Alun tried to crack a joke. However, the woman stopped and turned on us.

'To avoid your wasting your valuable time and my strained temper,' she said, 'I'd best inform you that I have absolutely no sense of humour. None at all.'

We nodded our understanding.

'What is more,' she continued. 'I have no patience whatever with fools and idiots, and even more so if they are also trespassers. Hence,' and here she pressed her eyelids together in tired scorn. 'You need not make any attempt at conversation. Just follow me. In silence, if that is at all possible. I have already wasted enough energy on you three.'

We followed in silence, winding our way through a maze of comfortable looking rooms. Unexpectedly, none of these looked in need of a lick of paint or a bit of renovation.

'I told you these guys were rolling in it,' whispered Mike.

'Bloated, you said.'

'All right, bloated if you prefer.'

As we crossed a cosy sitting room with a wood fire crackling in a big fireplace, a young woman rose from an armchair.

'Hello, Aunt Julia. Who are your guests?'

'I guessed she was an aunt,' whispered Alun? 'A left-over from the nineteen-thirties.'

'These are Trespassers. I'm taking them to the entrance where they can pay like everyone else. They were digging in the flower borders.'

The young women started, 'digging in the gardens!?'

'Never mind what they were doing. As if I hadn't enough to do.'

The young woman was watching us with a rueful smile. 'Don't worry, aunty, I'll take them if you like. You've better things to do than traipse about with a band of trespassers.'

'Yes. Thank you, my dear. You're perfectly correct. I have to do the flowers, then I've got letters to write.'

She left.

The young women smiled at us, 'One doesn't find aunts like that every day. You're lucky she is in a good mood today.'

'A good mood!?'

The woman nodded, 'She won the flower-arranging competition last night.'

'Do they still have such things?' I asked.

'Oh yes. More and more often. It's one of the few things one can do if you don't know how to use a computer.'

'So, she actually writes. With a real pen and real paper.'

The young woman nodded and smiled.

Alun frowned, 'Now that's an interesting idea. Might be money in it too.'

'What now?' sighed Mike.

'A computer flower-arrangement software game.'

The young women nodded, 'Yes. There might be a decent market there too. Worth considering, I think...' then

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she abruptly stopped talking and looked sideways at Alun. 'You wouldn't be June's dad, Alun, by any chance?'

Alun straightened and smiled. 'Oh! Wait a minute. You're Melanie, aren't you.'

We gazed with astonishment.

'That's right, June did a painting of me. We met last year at your house.'

'I thought June only did nudes, nowadays Alun,' said Mike

'That's right,' said the woman.

'Just a moment,' Alun frowned and thought for a moment, then his face lit up, and he nodded. 'Ah yes, I remember now, early in July, wasn't it?'

The young women nodded and laughed, 'Don't remember it too vividly, please. I wasn't wearing much at the time.'

'No,' he smiled, 'that's often the case with nudes.'

'We sat in the back garden, and your wife brought cups of tea out, and we chatted while June painted.'

'Yes, she likes us to do that, helps the models to stay natural.'

'I remember she had just chucked that policeman boyfriend of hers.'

'Yes. They had words. She said he wasn't the right shape for paintings.'

'Yes, she's apt to say things like that.'

Alun smiled, 'I bet you didn't show the painting to your aunt.'

'Oh yes, I did,' said the young woman defiantly. 'I couldn't resist the temptation.'

'Great heavens! You like a bit of a challenge. What did she say?'

'Oh, unfortunately, she was not shocked at all. In fact, it was a bit of a letdown. I was hoping for a bit more of the horrified old-world reactions.'

'Really?'

'Yes. She just said it was a good likeness. Then she said I ought to hold myself better and keep a straight back. I was a lady after all...'

We laughed...

'June did another fully clothed one too. Rather good too, I think.'

'Not a nude? She never mentioned it,' frowned Alun.

'I think you were all on holiday at the time. In Mexico. She probably forgot.'

Alun and I scowled at Mike as we remembered the substance of the adventure he had engineered for us out there.'

'Dad paid for it. Five thousand pounds, in fact.'

'Heavens above,' I gasped, 'I'm going to take up painting.'

'So that's where the new kitchen came from,' nodded Alun. I often wondered.

'Dad was ever so pleased with it. I'm dressed in forest green velvet, carrying a lute too. June is really rather brilliant at painting. A genius, in fact.'

Alun nodded, 'But there's not enough rich nobility around nowadays to make a full-time job of it...'

'I'll show you if you like,' said the young women. 'This way.'

We tramped off, following her across the room to a door in the corner.

'I'll show you around too. My private trespassers get a special rate, you know. But first,' and here she stopped and turned. 'How on Earth did you get in? Not across the lake?'

We explained our adventure, and she laughed and laughed.

'Oh, there can be no doubt that you are June's daughter. None at all. I have already heard about some of the things you got up to last year.'

'Ah!' I said, 'All lies, of course.'

'Naturally,' she laughed.

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'Greg will be wild. He's the official Head Gardener. That was his boat.'

'Wasn't that the guy who got a prize for the gardens?'

'That's the man.'

We eventually came to a halt in front of the portrait. We stood there in silence, almost overawed. It was a magnificent portrait, stunning in fact. So much so that it was difficult to believe that it was only a year old rather than the work by a seventeenth-century old master. Even Alun was a little subdued.

'Good grief!' he said. 'This is the best I've seen so far.'

As we stood there, an aristocratically looking gentleman opened the door and approached. The young lady turned and slipped an arm through his. 'The is my dad the 18th Duke and all sorts of other rubbish. I call him Dad even though he would prefer me to say "sir".'

'All that other rubbish, as you call it, pays for your car and your clothes, young lady', laughed the Duke.

'These men are a group of trespassers, dad. So I thought we might as well trespass together?' She smiled, 'In fact, this is June Jones's dad, the painter who did this lovely portrait.'

'Really? Well pleased to meet you, and you two must be his famous friends...'

Melanie shot him a stern look and a frown, and he stopped short. 'Ah! Yes, of course, you told me...'

'I'm going to give them a guided tour.'

The count sighed. 'Ah. I thought they were policemen.'

'Policemen don't trespass dad, they knock loudly on the door, with huge heavy fists.'

'I've had enough of that team of incompetents for one day,' He grumbled.

Noticing our questioning looks, Melanie laughed, 'We had the police all over the place this morning. There was a burglary... Of sorts.'

'Oh!'

'One of the local art galleries rented a space in the entrance hall to show their goods,' she allowed her eyebrows to rise skywards. 'Not quite the same quality as June's paintings.' She paused to rub her fingers together in an internationally understood gesture. 'Rubbish for tourists, I call it. Apparently, a team of professional crooks broke in early this morning and stole some "particularly valuable" works of art.'

Here she pretended to have a fit of coughing.

The count shook his head. 'My daughter thinks it was a set-up job to extract funds from their insurance company.'

'Not our problem though,' said the girl, 'That's clearly stipulated in the rental contract. We are not quite as innocent as that...'

At this point, I stepped forward with an extended hand to shake the noble five fingers. However, my foot caught a nail sticking up, and I pitched forward into the man arms. In a noble gesture, surprisingly rapid for a man of his age, he side-stepped, and I fell headfirst on the carpet.

He nodded down at me, 'I'll have to get that nail painted red one day, so one can see it. It's always tripping people up like that.'

Mike, Alun, and I exchanged looks.

'Wouldn't it be more effective to simply knock it back into place?'

The man pondered this, 'Good heavens! You don't seem to realise that this is a historical monument. I can't touch anything without official authorisation.'

His daughter shook her head sadly and sighed, 'That's just your way of avoiding doing anything, dad.'

'Usually works, though,' he smiled.

'I'll knock it back in if you've got a hammer,' said Alun.

'A hammer,' frowned the aristocrat, 'I think I saw one, once.'

'Or I could use some heavy object,' he looked around him, 'That big vase, for example.'

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The Duke quickly stepped between Alun and the vase. 'That's a bit too valuable to be used as a hammer. Ming.'

'No, I'm Alun,' said Alun.

'Amusing,' smiled the young woman.'

Mike stepped over to the fire and picked up a log from the waiting pile and a heavy iron poker from the grate. 'This'll do the job nicely.'

He stepped back to the nail, placed the wide edge of the poker on the nail head, and with a well-aimed whack, the job was done.'

The young women smiled, 'My saviour. Thanks. That only took three years to fix.'

'My pleasure,' replied Mike.

'But while I have a gallant knight at hand, there are a few others you might feel able to cross swords with. In particular, I have in mind one little devil which grabs at my best mink shawl every other evening at cocktail time...'

Mike smiled, 'Lay on, Macduff.'

'You've already done that one today, Mike,' said Alun.

The two wandered off, and as we chatted with the Duke, we could hear banging noises reaching us from further and further away.

Eventually, the two reappeared from the opposite side of the sitting room.

'Well, that shook up the dust a bit,' smiled Mélanie. 'The woodworm will have headaches until Christmas.'

'But' added Mike, 'I fear that I have damaged this vintage log beyond repair.'

The Duke laughed, 'I'll recycle it.' With this, he threw it into the blaze.

'And so, all evidence of the day's dastardly deeds was forever destroyed,' I laughed.

'Well,' said the Duke, 'I sorry to have to leave you. But even Duke's cars need overhauling sometimes. So I must drop the old Defender off at the garage.

Have a nice trespass, gentlemen.'

I'll skip over the rest of our visit because no further disasters overtook us. I'll therefore refrain from describing the magnificence of the old place and get on with the story.

We were led to a side door by Lady Mélanie, or her ladyship or whatever, and found ourselves coming down the main entrance path.

At the bottom of the slope, we spotted the police with dogs. They are checking people's papers and looking through their bags.

'Still searching for the thieves,' said Mike, 'I bet they're miles away by now.'

'I guess they know that as well as us,' I retorted. 'But they have to put up a show for the insurance company, I suppose.'

'Good day, sir,' said the older of the two policemen.

We stopped and did our best to look innocent, which is never a good idea. But who can resist the temptation?

'We noticed you slipping out of a side door, gentleman.'

'We didn't slip,' constable,' said Mike, 'we exited.'

'It looked rather like slipping,' said the younger officer.

'If you must know,' sighed Alun, 'we were let out by Lady Mélanie.'

'Were you now?' said the officer in charge, 'I suppose she was giving you a private tour of the estate.'

'Spot on, officer. That's exactly what she was doing.'

'And she personally let you out by the servant's door.'

Mike bridled, 'I believe that it would be better termed the "employees entrance" in these modern times. "Servants' door" is not likely to go down well with the trade unions nowadays.'

'Employee entrance or servant door, we saw you three gentlemen sneaking out surreptitiously.'

'We were in no way surreptitious and less still sneaking or even slipping,' cried Mike. 'We were exiting.'

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'Having a few moments prior to that, paid our parting respects to her ladyship,' I added.

'That's what you say, gentlemen.'

'Exactly, because That is what happened,' said Alun.

'We know all about the theft, so can guess that you are simply doing your job,' Mike drew himself up. I could have told him that this is never a good idea in such circumstances. 'Now, if you don't mind, we'll need to be getting on our way.'

The officer nodded, 'Just so, sir. But perhaps you might like to explain just how you knew about the theft. It hasn't been announced.'

Mike sighed and shook his head sadly, 'We know because the Duke told us. That's how.'

'Really, sir?'

'You don't believe us, is that so?' sighed Mike again.

'Exactly. You knocked the nail right on the head, sir.'

'For your information, officer,' Mike tried to draw himself up even higher, which was physically impossible, 'that is exactly what we were doing.'

'Perhaps you could explain, sir.'

'I was, while these two gentlemen were conversing with the Duke, knocking nails into the woodwork with lady Mélanie.'

The younger of the two officers smiled, 'didn't that hurt her, sir...'

We had a chuckle about this because this officer at least had a sense of humour.

'That's enough jesting from you,' snapped the older man.

'Anyway,' I said, 'The Duke said a picture had been stolen and some other works of art.'

'Which were what exactly, sir,'

'He didn't say.'

'No, but perhaps you know, though?'

'How would we know that?'

'Well, we in the police have trained minds, sir. When a theft has been perpetrated, we tend to concentrate our efforts in the right direction. We have a sense.'

'A seventh sense?' suggested Mike.

'Exactly. So naturally, we are often a little more suspicious of those found sneaking out of back entrances than other members of the public.'

'You called it the servant's door,' said Mike. 'It would make it easier for all involved if you would retain a single and unique denomination. I would suggest "employees' entrance".

'Even though we were using it as an exit?' asked Alun.

The officer pursed his lips and allowed himself a slow, sad sigh. 'You must admit, gentlemen, that given the circumstance...'

I pounced on this olive branch, 'Naturally. You're only doing your duty. I admit it does seem an unusual story, but I can assure you that all is perfectly above board.'

The man nodded, 'We'd need to check up...'

'Perfectly normal. Let's go and haul the Duke and her Ladyship away from their pressing duties of nobility. I'm sure they won't mind.' I smiled kindly at the two policemen.

They exchanged looks.

'Hum. I don't think that will be necessary. However, you won't have any objection if we have a quick look at your vehicle boot. Just to set us at ease.'

I nodded, 'No trouble at all, officers.'

'I expect it's in the main car park. Shall we have a look?'

Now for the last few seconds, Alun had become unusually quiet.

Mike shot me a worried look, 'Well, no. In fact, we parked it up by the lake.'

'Up by the lake?' frowned the officer. 'The swan lake?'

'There were a few swans about, yes.'

'That's quite a way off, sir.'

'Yes, but we enjoy walking, don't we?' he said, turning to us.

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We nodded.

'Hum...' said the officer.

'We can walk up.' continued Mike. 'It's no distance at all for experienced walkers like us.'

'Experienced walkers!' said the officer.

'Yes, we have walked almost halfway around the globe.'

'Have you now. That's interesting, sir. But we'll take you along in the van. That'll save you energy for completing the other half.'

The younger officer smiled at his superior's humour.

When we reached the car, we alighted from the van, and Alun threw open the four doors.

'There you are.'

'Thank you, sir,' smiled the man 'Strange though. You choosing to park so far from the entrance. Even if you do enjoy walking. Surely, knowing the Duke and his daughter so well, you could have parked in his private space at the back.'

Alun nodded, 'But we really just dropped in "a 'improvist", as they say in France.'

'Ah!' smiled the officer. 'Perhaps you preferred to drop in by the back way to avoid the entrance fees?'

As it was his turn, Alun drew himself up. This worked better, him being much taller than Mike.

'Are you insinuating that we broke in by climbing the wall into that orchard, or something like that...'

I blew out my breath, so did Mike.'

'Now that's interesting, sir.' Perhaps her ladyship told you about the orchard too.'

Now it is in the most delicate situations that Alun has often demonstrated the incredible agility of his imagination.

'Officer,' he said with a long sigh, 'You don't imagine, do you, that this is the first time that we have visited Lady Mélanie and her father.'

Mike and I smiled and shook our heads with an unbelieving expression on our faces.

'You might like to know, officer, that my daughter, the famous painter June Jones, is her personal friend. She is also the person commissioned by the Duke to paint her portrait. That portrait is at this very moment on the wall above the chimney in the green sitting room.'

'Is that so, sir?' frowned the officer. 'That being so, sir, would you be kind enough to let has have a peek in the boot, then we'll be on our way.' he paused. 'I'm sure you'll be wanting to get on with your walking tour around the globe.'

'The boot!?' Alun seemed to be hesitating, 'Ah!'

'Something wrong, sir?'

'No. It's just that...'

'Yes, sir?'

Alun shot us an unhappy look and let the boot swing open to reveal a pile of objects covered by a thick woollen blanket. The blanket was tightly tucked in around the pile.

'And this, sir?'

'Oh! It's just some stuff my daughter asked us to deliver for her,' he frowned, clearly unsettled.

'Is that so, sir? You don't mind if we have a look?'

'It's just a few pictures she wanted us to drop off at a gallery.'

'Pictures of your daughter, sir?'

'No, no. As I said, She's a painter.'

'A famous portrait painter, you said?'

'That's right, officer... But...'

'Yes, sir?'

'But,' said Mike, 'I thought she only did nudes...'

Then the penny dropped, 'Oh god!' I moaned.

'Sir?'

'He'll explain,' sighed Mike.

The officer in charge untucked the blanket, lifted out the top canvas and turned it.

'Oh!' he started, and the other policeman came around to have a look.'

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'Well, well, well!' he breathed, staring hard. 'And these are your daughter's famous portraits, are they?'

'That's her signature at the bottom,' sighed Alun. 'Same as my name.'

The officer bent down and scrutinised the signature.

'Hum. And the others are of the same nature?'

'No, they're all different models,'

'Mind if I just check. As one of the articles stolen from the castle was a painting. Who knows, it might somehow have slipped in amongst these works of art.'

'Of God!' sighed Mike, 'How you do it, Alun, I just don't know.'

'How he does what? Sir'

'He always manages to get us in trouble one way or another.'

Alun bridled, 'You're just as bad, Mike. What about those surgical instruments you tried to smuggle through customs in Bucharest, Hidden in My suitcase?'

'That was different,'

'Smuggling surgical instruments!? What's all this?'

During this, his assistant was flipping through the other paintings. It should be noted that he was flipping exceptionally slowly.

At that instant, he stopped, 'Oh!'

'Something wrong,'

'Take a look at this one.'

He drew out a painting, and the other man whistled.

'This is the Duke's daughter, her ladyship,' he frowned.

Alun turned, 'That's right.'

'Oh God!' sighed Mike

The first officer frowned, 'I recognise the face, of course. But the rest is new to me.'

'New to Me too,' said the other. 'Not bad, though.'

'That's a copy,' said Alun, 'Mélanie has the original in her bedroom.'

'Oh! So, you have been there too, have you?'

'No, we have not. She told us it was there. But I was present during the painting.'

'While her ladyship was stark naked?' asked the man calmly.

'Yes.' Somehow, he just held himself back from adding, 'jealous eh?'

During this discussion, a broad-shouldered man approached us from the lakeside. He had a shotgun slung over his arm.

'Hi Dave, Hi John.'

'Hi, Greg, something up?'

'Yeh. Some idiot pinched my rowing boat. I'll have to walk all the damn way back round. They must have left it the other side.'

'Poachers, you think? Or kids?' said the younger officer.

'I wonder if that's how the thieves got in,' frowned the other.

'Thieves?' frowned Greg.

'Some guys got in and stole some stuff. A valuable painting too.'

'Like these?' said Greg, moving around to have a look. 'Oh! Her ladyship. Wow! Haven't seen her like that since she was seven years old. Quite a sight for sore eyes now,' he nodded. 'I'll give you ten quid for this.'

'More like two thousand. Anyway it's not for sale,' said Alun, 'It's going to a gallery.'

'That's what you said,' replied the officer, 'We'll have to check up on that.'

About the rowing boat,' he continued, turning to Mike, 'It wasn't you three who stole it by any chance?'

Mike bridled, 'We did not steal anything...'

'I know, I know. Only kidding. You just borrowed it.'

'Exactly,' nodded Mike falling headlong into the simplest of traps.'

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Greg jumped back and grasped his gun, but remembering the presence of the law, let go again, 'What? You three old-age pensioners stole my boat?'

It was Alun's turn to bridle, 'Who's calling us old age pensioners. Look at yourself! You've already one foot in the grave.'

The man took a menacing step forward, but the policeman got between the two.

'That's enough. That's enough. We're all going down to the station to sort all this out.

'You sort it out,' grumbled Greg, 'I've things to do. I'm not retired yet. Maybe never will be able to either with the pittance I'm paid.'

'Come on, Greg,' smiled the older officer, 'You don't do so bad for yourself. Rent-free cottage, and we rarely see you at the butcher's, the fishmongers or greengrocers, do we?'

'I have to tend the place, don't I?' cried the man, 'Weed out the weak animals to retain the quality of the herds. You don't expect me to chuck the stuff in the bin afterwards, do you?'

'Seems to be a lot of "thinning" needed nowadays, what with the flocks and shoals, too.' Smiled the officer.

'What do you expect. It's blokes like these three, barred hunting - or "blood sports" as the squeamish ones squeal about.'

'In the meantime, you don't manage too badly, Greg, so don't complain.'

'Gets on my wick, blokes like these messing the country up and interfering with an honest man's tools-of-trade. And selling pornography into the bargain.'

'Pornography!' cried Alun, 'You dumb idiot. This is art. Art with a big A.'

Greg swelled up, 'You're something that starts with a big A too.'

'That's enough, you two. Come on, Greg, I'll drop you off. Hop in. You go with these three, Dave.'

Once at the police station, I felt that the only way out of the dilemma was to explain everything.

'I'll do it, Alun. I intend to tell the truth, not the truth as seen by you.'

He snorted, 'I could easily invent a convincing story.'

'Which would end us up behind bars, as usual,' said Mike.

I explained, and the two officers listened with attention, one of them taking copious notes.

'Have you anyone who can attest to your identity?' asked the older officer.

'Give him your business card Alun. He can call Margaux.'

At the sound of the name Margaux, the two officers looked at us sharply.

The man dialled the number,

'Hello, this is Arundel Police station,' he said.

However, before he could get any further, we heard a peal of laughter filtering out of the earpiece.

We did not hear what followed, but the police officer listened with attention.

'Excuse me madam,' he said. 'But you wouldn't by any chance be THE Margaux Jones?'

He shot a look at his colleague, who was following the conversation on an extension phone. The two men nodded as they listened.'

Alun leant over and whispered, 'God knows what story she's spinning them, but Margaux always knows how to deal with the police.'

We nodded because she had frequently been instrumental in extracting us from prison cells in the past. After listening for some time, he explained our latest adventure in rough outlines, which produced another loud peal of laughter.

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He then said, 'By any chance, these three gentlemen wouldn't be...' but he was cut off by a sharp word from Margaux.

'Oh, of course.' He smiled at the other man, 'That explains everything nicely. Of course. No, I don't think we'll have to detain them. It would be a pity...'

Then gradually, slow, broad grins broke out on the faces of the two officers, 'Oh! I see. No, not a single word, of course.'

We exchanged looks, wondering what she was inventing now.

The officer nodded, 'You can count on us, Madam, at the station. We all enjoyed the first volume, brilliant. And the next?'

There was a pause, 'Oh, that's really too kind of you.' Then, the two men smiled and nodded to each other. 'My name's John, and my colleague's name is Dave. The Sargent is Peter.'

John replaced the phone and a few words of warning, given with rather amused smiles, we were allowed to go.

As the door closed behind us, we heard the officer call his superior. 'Hey Sarge,' he laughed, 'You'll never believe....'

The rest was lost as the heavy door banged closed.