

# **Three Men in a Panic**

## **Volume 2**



**Stephen William ROWE**

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## Novels by Stephen William ROWE

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## Chapter 1 - The Wedding

**A**lun, Mike, and I navigated to an empty table and sat down with a sigh. We were on a mission to find me a new suit and had unanimously voted for a pause in the proceedings. The mission was a tough one, and a drink on Grenoble's "Victor Hugo" square was what the moment called for.

My daughter's wedding was to take place the following weekend, and I had been ordered by my wife to make the purchase without any further delay.

As readers of our earlier adventures will remember, this new suit was to replace my beloved straw-yellow one. The latter was ruined when I fell into an ornamental fountain at Christmas in Yeovil.

'Do you know,' I mused, 'being considered incompetent does have certain advantages.'

Alun frowned across the table at me, 'Just because we had one or two minor brushes with the authorities in our younger days doesn't necessarily mean we're incompetent.'

'Aren't you forgetting a certain number of catastrophic adventures you two got us into?' said Mike, frowning.

'Well, odd as it may seem, that idea about incompetence appears to be firmly anchored in their minds,' I said.

'In mine's too,' nodded Alun.

Mike shook his head and sighed, 'You two ARE incompetent. That's where they got the idea from.'

Ignoring this, I went on, 'That being said,' I paused and nodded, 'the advantage of being unjustly considered incompetent is that the Girls won't trust us with organising this wedding.'

'Yes,' nodded Alun, 'that's unquestionably an appreciable advantage.'

His wife, Margaux, and mine always agreed on things like this.

Mike shook his head doubtfully, 'In any case,' he said, 'I don't yet see how you two will manage it.'

We looked at him askance, and he continued. 'I don't know how, but disaster will strike, regardless of any precautions the Girls take.'

I frowned at this and pulled a face while exchanging a look with Alun. Experience, unfortunately, had shown that Mike's words were less an omen of things to come than a quasi-certitude.

'Oh. By the way!' Alun sat up and leaned forward, his elbows on the circular bistro table, 'Do you remember last summer at Tregastel?'

'Oh God.' moaned Mike, 'please don't remind me.'

Alun grinned and got to his feet. 'Oh, OK. I'll tell you later. Come on, you two. Let's go and get that suit before the shops close.'

'Is that absolutely necessary?' groaned Mike.

'Margaux will scalp me if the suit is not on this guy's shoulders before the weekend. So yes. Absolutely...'

'No,' said Mike, 'I meant, do you really have to tell us your nonsense about Tregastel later?'

'Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.'

'Pity that!'

We rose reluctantly and set off across the square. The tailor's shop we headed for was one of the better ones in the town and reputed to be expensive.

'If you come back with some horrible cheap rubbish,' scowled my wife as we took our leave earlier, 'I'll send you straight back. So, choose well. You can go up to one thousand euros.'

'How much!' exclaimed Alun, 'that's about two hundred pints of beer.'

'No.' said Margaux, 'That's *minus* two hundred pints of beer for you three. But don't worry, that's only about a week or two's rations for you three.'

'Oh, come off it!' cried Alun, 'what do you take us for? Drunkards?'

My wife and Margaux exchanged sighs and head shakes.

'Come on, Alun.' I interrupted, 'Let's go and drown our sorrow in silk suits.'

'Silk!' exclaimed my wife. 'I said one thousand euros, not ten thousand. You can have a silk one when you've become a famous something-or-other.'

'A Queens Councillor, in fact,' smiled Mike, who had missed the sense of our little exchange.

'We'll have to make do with a sow's ear suit then,' frowned Alun.

'Get a move on, you lot,' grumbled Margaux. 'We've got things to do.'

So here we were looking at a window full of suits.

As I placed my hand on the door handle, I turned, 'Try and keep your sarcastic remarks to a strict minimum, you two. I know these guys are snobs, but remember, I'll probably have to come back.'

'Sarcastic comments!' cried Alun.

'Us?' added Mike.

'To an absolute minimum,' I scowled at the two innocent faces, 'remember that please.'

As I pushed open the door, the owner was already sizing us up and estimating potential spending power. Although he was still in his early forties, he was already surprisingly good at this. However, even though he set us in the "roughly five-hundred" bracket, customers with friends were always bad news.

Friends inevitably cramped his style and hindered his usually smooth transition up the price tag slope.

He sighed inwardly as he took in the three of us and decided that we were unworthy of his time. He, therefore, made a sign to his assistant, who was lurking in the background.

The three of us were already leafing through the hanging merchandise in various parts of the shop.

'Hey, have a look at this one,' called Alun. 'Nice,' he said, flipping the price tag in his fingers.

The owner stiffened. We were fast approaching the expensive end of the rail, and he knew the price tag Alun had glanced at was nine-hundred euros. He also noted that Alun did not appear to be shocked by the sum. This was a good omen.

He thus quickly moved towards us, placing a light hand on the assistant's shoulder, who obediently went back to lurking.

'Can I be of assistance, gentlemen?' He smiled.

'We're looking for a suit for my friend. For a wedding,' smiled Alun.

'What about this one?' I called over, 'I like it.'

The owner stiffened again.

'But that is corduroy, sir! I don't think corduroy is quite suitable for a wedding. Especially bottle green corduroy, sir...'

'Not expensive enough, perhaps,' smiled Mike, who, as was his custom, had taken an immediate dislike to the man.

The man forced a laugh, 'bottle-green corduroy is usually kept for less formal occasions, sir.'

'Yes, I agree,' smiled Mike, 'Like pruning the roses on Sunday morning.'

'Exactly,' nodded the salesman nodding to Mike, having missed the sarcasm in the remark.

I sighed and shot Mike a stern look. 'Mike...' I said.

'Or,' continued Mike, ignoring my look, 'for reading the Sunday papers in front of the crackling wood fire. Once the hounds are back from the hunt.'

'Mike,' I scolded. 'I said, a strict minimum.'

Mike went off to the other side of the shop and sulked next to the lurking assistant.

'I like the corduroy one, but you are probably right. What have you found, Alun?'

'An excellent choice, sir,' said the owner to Alun. 'You have an eye for quality. Feel this material, sir.' He said, pulling the suit out.

I did as he asked, and as I did, shot a glance at the price tag that Alun had carefully turned towards me.

'Yes, quite nice. A little dark, though,' I lied. 'For a wedding, I mean.'

'Perfectly correct, sir. I was going to mention that myself,' said the man moving smoothly along the rising price rail. 'Now this one, sir...'



Alun rose his eyebrows in warning, and I nodded back at him. We always understood each other perfectly, where money matters were concerned.

I first tried on the light grey one he had presented me with and stepped out of the cubical.

'A bit baggy, don't you think?' called Mike testily from across the room.

'Here and there,' agreed Alun.

'A bit tight across the front too,' added Mike.

'Yes, he does seem to fill it out rather more amply than needed,' said Alun.

'Shut up, you two,' I sighed.

The owner kept in the background. He contented himself with pulling the suits about, to make them look worse rather than better. He was manoeuvring towards something considerably more expensive.

The next one was made of magnificent material that shimmered in the sunlight. The owner shot a quick look at my face to check my reaction, 'Lovely fabric, isn't it. And a perfect cut.'

Alun walked around me, inspecting the price tag as he did so. 'It bulges out terribly in the front, don't you think, Mike?'

Mike scowled and came over. Then he leant forward and prodded. 'That's him bulging, not the suit. The suit is perfect. He's just not the right shape for expensive clothes, that's all.'

'Go and wait outside, Mike,' I scolded, 'or shut up.'

Mike smiled to himself, satisfied with having upset me. 'The Corduroy one hid the bulges perfectly. That's why overweight old men favour corduroy.'

I sighed and returned to the changing cubical.

Regardless of all Mike and Alun's help, I eventually managed to out-manoeuvre the shop owner back under the thousand-euro mark. Our negotiations finally settled down at nine-hundred and fifty euros. Marking off the length of the legs and the sleeves took only a few minutes, and then we made our way to the counter to pay.

Mike leaned on the counter and put on his most ominously innocent look. 'I suppose that suits in this price range come with an insurance policy.'

I sighed, 'Mike!'

'Insurance policy?' The owner looked up from the counter.

'Well, yes. Against damage.'

'No, I'm deeply sorry, sir.'

'That's a pity. I was thinking about the risk of my friend falling into a weed-infested pond or something like that.'

'It was an ornamental fountain,' corrected Alun.

The shop owner gazed at Mike in astonishment, 'Falling into an ornamental fountain?'

'That's how he ruined his last one. It was made of pale-yellow crepe.'

'Good heavens!'

'Yes, yellow crepe is rather daring.'

The man hesitated for a moment, 'No. I meant falling in the fountain, of course.'

'Yes, "good heavens" is roughly what his wife said about that. In different words, though.'

'Perhaps your home insurance would cover most accidents. But falling into fountains is rather unusual. You would have to check carefully.'

'Read the small print, you mean,' suggested Alun.

'Exactly.'

'Unusual?' Frowned Mike, 'is it? Mind you, it *was* in England.'

'Oh! I see!' This seemed to clarify everything satisfactorily to the man, who nodded and handed the credit card back.

'Anyway, it takes a brave man to wear a pale-yellow suit like that,' said Alun.

'It certainly must have been a very noticeable attire, sir,' said the man.

'Head-turning. I'd say,' I contributed.

The salesman nodded, 'But as they say, sir, "Faint heart never won fair maiden.'

'True,' said Alun. 'Have you won any fair maidens since you ditched the suit?'

'It wasn't a ditch; it was a pond, so "Ponded it" would be more exact,' I said, 'But no, I haven't won any fair maidens recently.'

'Just goes to show then,' smiled Alun.

'The girls must be relieved too then,' said Mike.

The owner frowned, then, coming around the counter, he deftly manoeuvred us to the door and held it open to get rid of us before Mike could embark on some new theme.

We smiled at each other, 'That's one job out of the way,' Mike said as we crossed the road on our way back across the square to the bistro.

'So that was your "strict minimum" was it, Mike?' I asked.

'More or less,' he nodded, 'I didn't like that guy.'

'Really!?' I said. 'I hadn't noticed that.'

As we made our way back across the square, Alun stopped by the vast stone-built ornamental fountain which occupies its centre. 'Nice fountain this. Just right for trying out your new suit in.'

Mike sniggered, 'Not half enough weed though,' he smiled. 'One can see right to the bottom.'

'That's the French for you,' nodded Alun. 'They have absolutely no idea about such things.'

'They prefer to keep nature well at bay,' agreed Mike. 'No untidy moss or lichen and above all, no slimy decomposing weeds.'

'Agreed, Mike,' replied Alun. 'A fountain is not a fountain without a minimum of slimy weed.'

'And a few unhealthy looking fish. To add a bit of realism,' said Mike.

'Exactly,' Alun frowned, 'we'd probably have to import some from the UK, where they know about weeds.'

'Yes, nice slippery, slimy stuff. You always get good value for money with the great British pond weed,' said Mike.

'The world's best,' I added.

'No doubt we can get some on the internet. You do have the internet up there in your mountain hovel I suppose.'

I shook my head and sighed, 'Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. It depends really.'

Mike nodded, 'that's because the electrons have a hard time climbing the slope. It's too steep for your standard domesticated French electron.'

'Yep,' nodded Alun. 'No stamina.'

Mike sighed, 'I bet that they get out of breath by the time they're halfway up and have to stop for a rest.'

'And that's what slows the bit-rate down,' nodded Alun. 'It's all down to lack of training.'

'And that leads to a "bit-jam",' said Mike, 'which can back-up all the way down into the valley. That sort of thing takes hours to sort out.'

'Can you back-up, "down" a slope, Mike?' asked Alun.

'I think so,' said Mike.

'I didn't know that,' frowned Alun.

'That's because I'm an engineering Wizzo and you're an ignoramus, Alun,' he smiled.

'Yes. That must be it,' nodded Alun.

By this time, we had made it back to the bistro, and I dropped into my seat and ordered coffee all around.

'Oh,' said Alun taking his place at the circular table, 'getting back to the discussion we started just before Mike drove us off to buy the suit.'

'It wasn't WE, who started the conversation, Alun. It was you alone,' scowled Mike, 'I thought I had diverted you from that.'

'Diversion doesn't work on Ignoramuses, Mike,' said Alun.

'Shouldn't you say "ignorami"?' I asked.

'An interesting point,' said Mike. 'Perhaps we would do better to debate that than to listen to Alun's idiotic ravings.'

'As I said,' repeated Alun. 'Diversion doesn't work on me. My brain simply goes into "pause" mode.'

'Brain!?' cried Mike, 'which brain was that?'

Alun ignored this and continued unperturbed, 'Do you remember last year at Tregastel?'

'Oh God!' moaned Mike, 'please don't remind me.'

'You remember at the time that we were debating on the relative merits of Battery-Oysters versus Free-range ones.'

'You mean between paid ones and poached ones?' I asked.

'Poached Oysters!?' Now that's an idea. Worth trying.' He nodded.

'With chips and tomato ketchup. Yum, yum.' I smiled.

'Oh God! Shut up. Please...' cried Mike, 'Can't you stop talking absolute nonsense? Just for once?'

'Now that you raise the point,' mused Alun, 'I'm not sure we can.'

'Do you know, Mike,' I turned and looked at him, 'if we stopped being creative and innovative in the way you have come to appreciate...'

'Who said I appreciated all that rubbish you two vomit forth perpetually...'

'I thought it was third rather than forth,' frowned Alun.

'Shut up!' groaned Mike.

I ignored all this and went on. 'If we didn't sprinkle our conversation with sparkling repartee, and in the process, brighten up your existence, we would inevitably become deadly serious.'

'Exactly what I have been dreaming of becoming for years,' nodded Mike. 'I practice hard every time I'm away from you two.'

'Well, if we didn't do as mentioned,' I continued. 'All three of us would probably, turn into horrible boring old men with nothing of any interest to say.'

'You'd get bored to tears,' added Alun.

Mike frowned, 'there might be an element of truth in that,' he said.

Alun smiled, 'You would probably end up in a monastery, counting beans.'

'Counting what!?' cried Mike.

'Beans or at least some stuff like that.'

'You mean runner beans.' I asked, interested by this point.

'Good heavens, no!' cried Alun, 'In monasteries, beans are not allowed to run,' he smiled, 'running is absolutely against the rules.'

'Naturally,' I agreed, 'and it shows bad breeding. So a stately stride is only just permissible.'

'Are you sure they breed beans, though?' frowned Alun, 'I always thought it was more like growing.'

I nodded, 'Perhaps "bringing-up" would be a term which avoids any possible confusion,' I said.

'Shut up,' said Mike.

'Mind you,' I volunteered, 'bringing up beans might be misunderstood too.'

Mike sighed a long noisy sigh.

'Oh, and that reminds me of what I wanted to say. Thanks, Mike.' said Alun.

'Damn it,' groaned Mike

'Getting back to Oysters...'

'Oh God,' exclaimed Mike, 'can't I have something stronger to drink?'

'Stronger?' frowned Alun, 'I find this coffee almost too strong as it is.'

'Almost bitter,' I nodded.

'I meant something like pure alcohol,' he sighed. 'With perhaps a dash of morphine.'

'That would send you straight to sleep, Mike,' I laughed, 'It always does.'

'Why do you think I asked for it?' he retorted, 'It would save me having to listen to the rot you are about to vomit forth.'

'Well anyway,' continued Alun, completely ignoring Mike's interruption, 'do you know why along the coast of Wales, oyster breeders never live close to the oyster fields?'

'I don't care, and anyway, one does not "breed" oysters...' sighed Mike resignedly.

'I know, I know,' interrupted Alun, 'they breed themselves.'

'What I mean is that it isn't called breeding.'

'I know that, but Margaux doesn't like me to use that sort of word in public.'

'You know perfectly well what I mean,' grumbled Mike.

'Are you sure they're called "Fields"?' I asked. 'Sounds odd somehow. Anyway. Why don't the blokes who grow oysters live near the places where they grow them?'

'I suppose you are going to tell us some more absolute rot, whether we want to hear it or not.' sighed Mike.

'Correct,' smiled Alun.

'I thought so.'

'It's because of the noise during the mating season.'

'The mating seasons!' spluttered Mike into his coffee.

'As you probably know, they have a traditional saying amongst Welsh oyster breeders,' said Alun.



'I bet they have one about idiots like you too,' sneered Mike.

Alun went on unperturbed, 'the old saying goes, "When the Osters squal, brave men pale",' he looked at us, nodding thoughtfully.

'Squale?'

'That's ancient Welsh dialect.'

'Oh. *Really!*' sighed Mike, 'I call that "crap" myself.'

'Yes, it's the medieval Welsh word for "squeal",' nodded Alun. 'And, of course, "Osters" is just the local term for Oysters.'

'Oysters do not squeal. They don't make any damn noise at all,' Mike sighed again, louder, this time. 'At most, they bubble a bit.'

'Bubble a bit!' exclaimed Alun. 'Just go up there and tell that to those breeders. They'd certainly be pleased to learn that, after hundreds of years of forced emigration,' nodded Alun.

'Emigration is not the right word Alun,' I said.

'Exile, then,' he said. 'Chased from the homelands of their forefathers by a few bubbles and intense silence.'

Mike covered his face with his hands and groaned. 'What a lot of crap you talk,' he said.

'Well,' Alun shook his head in pity, 'during the oyster mating season, you can hardly hear yourself think out there on the fields. They all wear noise-cancelling headphones nowadays.'

'What! the oysters?' I exclaimed, 'Incredible!'

'No, the breeders,' said Alun.

'Or growers,' I added.

'At the time of the full moon...' continued Alun.

'Oh God!' moaned Mike.

'...when the oysters' nuptial dance is in full swing, the big rogue males arrive from afar. They raise themselves on their strong hind legs and squal to the moon.' Alun sat back and nodded at us.

'I suppose the loudest squaler gets the big blonde,' I suggested.

'Exactly. And then they get on with the breeding exercises.'

'Don't you mean breathing exercises?' I asked.

'No,' said Alun, 'I do not.'

'Haven't you got anything less stupid to say?' gasped Mike.

Alun considered this point, 'No, I don't think so. At least not for the moment.'

'I didn't know that the Welsh said Squal instead of Squeal,' I said.

'No,' said Alun. 'Not many people know that.'

'Not surprising,' grumbled Mike, 'Maybe that's because they all managed to grow up.'

'Interesting though,' said Alun.

'No, it isn't,' said Mike. 'It is damn rubbish.'

I sat forward, 'What do they call a group of Oysters, Alun?'

'What do you mean?' he sat forward, a frown furrowing his brow.

'Well, we have herds of cattle, shoals of fish, flights of swans,' I said. 'So, what about Oysters.'

'Interesting question, that,' said Alun.

'No It isn't,' said Mike. 'It's time-wasting rot.'

'For battery oysters, a group is called a "confine",' I said. 'But what about free-rangers?'

'A confine!' Exclaimed Mike falling back in his chair. 'Now I've heard everything.'

'Are you sure of that, Mike?' asked Alun.

'Oh, hell!' gasped Mike looking about for some sort of moral support.

'Of course,' continued Alun, rubbing his chin, 'one should remember that for most of the time, Oysters are loan hunters...'

'Oh God,' exclaimed Mike, 'Here we go again.'

'But, of course, when the mating season approaches, they group together for safety when they return to their hereditary hunting grounds in the fiords of Norway.'

'Yes, but what is the group called?' I said, interested by all this new information about oyster migration tactics.

Alun frowned and shrugged, 'Maybe a "Muster".'

'A "Muster"? What a lot of crap!' Mike got up. 'Come on you madmen, let's get moving, or we'll miss the aperitif.'

This sort of diversional tactic was admittedly a bit under-the-belt. Still, it never failed with Alun, so we were on our feet in a twinkling and heading for home.

Four days before the wedding, a lorry arrived at the front gate, and two grumbling and overweight deliverymen dragged a dozen boxes out and laid them on the lawn.

My wife and Margaux went out to drive them crazy by checking and rechecking each package. Only then would they sign the chit the men had handed over.

'Time for a strategic retreat,' whispered Alun.

We obediently crept out of the side door and around to the back of the house. We were about to vault the fence and disappear when Margaux came into view.

'Where are you three off to?'

'Oh, we're just checking the fence posts, then we thought we'd go for a short walk. Got to keep in shape. You're always saying so.'

'Well, you'll be happy to learn that you won't have to trouble yourselves with walking.'

'It's no trouble, Margaux,' said Mike. 'We see it more as a duty.'

'Well, you can do your keeping-in-shape duty here. Follow me.'

We sighed, 'your wife must have eyes in the back of her head,' groaned Mike.

'And several extra senses,' I suggested.

'No,' frowned Alun, 'She just knows us.'

We nodded at the obvious truth of this remark.

The two girls were standing, hands on hips, in front of the pile of odd-shaped cardboard boxes.

'Just caught them as they were sneaking off,' said Margaux.

'We were not sneaking off. We were checking the fence posts,' said Alun.

'It looked like you were going to check them all the way up the road to the pub,' she replied.

'There isn't a pub "up the road". We're in a godforsaken French alpine village,' groaned Alun.

'God-forsaken...' My wife turned on him with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

'God-forsaken is perhaps not exactly the word I was searching for; it just sort of slipped out in the heat of the moment,' he apologised.

'Well,' continued my wife, glancing at her friend, 'in that case, you can continue with the "slipping-out" by unpacking all this.'

'What the hell is it?' I cried.

'This,' said my wife with a visible effort to control her temper, 'is the marquee tent I told you about.'

'Ah!!'

'Yes. This is the tent you three are going to erect for the wedding.'

'Oh, yes. I seem to remember now.'

'I'm pleased to hear that,' she said, smiling one of those unpleasant smiles one doesn't feel pleased about being on the wrong end of. 'So,' she went on, 'you no doubt also remember that I mentioned that if it collapsed on top of the hundred or so nicely dressed guests who will be under it...'

I interrupted, '... that the three of us would have to leave the country for several years.'

Alun nodded, 'yes, I certainly remember that bit.'

'You will also not be surprised to learn that Margaux and I have a limited amount of confidence in your capacity to do things properly.'

'Oh, come on!' I exclaimed.

'Highly limited, would be closer to the mark, I'd say,' contributed Margaux appearing from the other side of the pile of boxes.

'So, we deemed it wise for you to do a test run here. That way, we can check that you can do it properly,' smiled my wife.

'It would also make the final job far less stressful for you three on the day,' added Margaux.

'But that means we'll have to take it all back down again, pack it up and transport the whole lot over to the wedding place. Then start all over again,' I groaned.

'It's amazing how fast you grasp things when you put your mind to it,' nodded my wife.

'But can't we take it over today and set it up on-site?' suggested Alun. 'Wouldn't that be a better idea?'

'No, it wouldn't,' said my wife.

'Because we wouldn't be able to see you do the job,' added Margaux.

'Is that absolutely necessary?' smiled Alun.

'Yes, it is. Otherwise, you'll spend most of the day drinking beer, then you'll rush to get it finished and botch the job,' replied my wife.

'And then you'll camouflage all the errors you made before we could spot them, by winding fake ivy all over the place. NO way,' added Margaux.

'I don't believe it,' I cried. 'Have you absolutely no confidence in our mechanical talents?'

'Absolutely none,' said my wife.

'You're treating us like uneducated children.'

'Exactly,' nodded my wife. 'Come on, open that lot, and when you've done that, I'll give you the installation manual.'

'Can't we have a beer first?'

'After.'

'Damn it!'

'Sorry?' my wife tilted her head to one side and screwed up her eyes.

'Nothing.'

'Get on with it then.'

Well, getting this twenty-five by five-metre marquee tent up took us all afternoon.

Even the grass ended up blushing scarlet after an hour or so of listening to our swearing.

As an experienced sailor, Mike contributed more to this exercise than we two, and we were, as usual, impressed by his fluency. He was capable of stringing together, into an uninterrupted flow, an astounding number of nautical curses. One had to bow to this prodigious talent. Furthermore, it also relaxed the tension a little, which helped things along unexpectedly.

However, our first attempt was not entirely satisfactory.

For some unexplained reason, the marquee seemed to prefer curving round into a semi-circle.

We thought this lent it a modern and original look, but the girls thought otherwise.

When we did get it right, the girls came and shook and rattled it about with disturbing violence, but surprisingly it remained standing.

'OK,' nodded my wife, 'Now take it back down, and you can have some beer before your meal. We've already had ours.'

'Thanks for waiting,' I scowled.

'If you had got it right the first time, we would have done. Come on. Tomorrow, you take it over and set it up. I'll come and show you where it goes.'

'Tomorrow...?'

'Tomorrow morning.'

'Morning?'

'That'll give you all day to get it right.'

'Brilliant.'

'Come on. You haven't got all night...'

The following morning, we loaded the big van and drove the sixty kilometres to the small chateau we had rented for the wedding.

Margaux and my wife showed us where the marquee was to be erected and left us. 'We've got lots of things to do. Please try to do it right...'

I sighed but held my tongue.

'Come on,' called Alun, 'let's get this thing up quickly, then we can spend the rest of the day lounging about in the sun.'

'What about sustenance?' asked Mike.

'The kitchen fridges are overflowing with the food and drink for nearly two hundred people,' I smiled. 'Nobody will notice if a few plates of cold meats and cheeses are missing.'

'Or a few bottles of that lovely wine you got in?'

'Exactly. But it's best to get the work done first.'

'Yep,' said Alun, 'If we want it to look approximately the right shape.'

Well, the construction went remarkably well. In less than an hour and a half, the marquee was up, and what was more surprising, it looked right from whatever vantage point the girls would survey it from.

The final job was to hammer in the fixing pegs. This done, it remained only to attach the guy ropes, which had been included in the kit, in anticipation of wind.

One side of the tent was close to a line of old oak trees, so we wound the heavy guy ropes around their trunks.

Mike made them fast with some incredibly complicated looking nautical knots, which lent the structure an impressively solid look.



On the opposite side, the guys were attached to pegs we had to hammer into the ground.

'I'm not much convinced with these pegs,' frowned Mike. 'A strong gust of wind would drag them out of the ground with no trouble. We need something stronger.'

'I spotted some iron fencing posts in the outhouse. There's a sledgehammer too. I'll get those shall I?' I suggested.

'Perfect,' nodded Mike, 'but hurry up, there's a bit of wind coming on, I think.'

'I'll give you a hand,' said Alun and we set off around the corner of the ancient building.

I dragged out four heavy iron posts from the cobwebbed pile leaning against the wall and pointed out the sledgehammer to Alun.

A whooshing of wind in the branches of the ancient oaks above roused us.

'Hell!' exclaimed Alun, 'let's get back before the wind demolishes the tent. I don't want to have to build it all up from scratch.'

We hurried back as the noise of swishing branches and rattling leaves increased.

As we came in sight of Mike, he called out, 'Quick. Come and help me hold this damn thing down.'

Even as he said this, the wind changed direction and came charging in, right under the long tent.

Mike put all his weight on the horizontal bar to keep it down, but before we could grab the dangling guy ropes, the entire structure lifted into the air.

Mike's feet left the ground as the ropes we had fixed to the trees took the strain, but held.

The free side of the marquee rose, carrying Mike up with it. Luckily, its progress was halted by the overhanging branches of the oaks. However, Mike was not rigidly attached to anything. He, therefore, carried on in the same direction as dictated by Newton's first law of motion. His feet overtook the rest of his body, and he spun upwards, following a graceful trajectory. Luck had it that a handy oak tree stood between Mike-the-human-projectile and the flagstone terrace beyond. Even though he was upside down at the moment of impact, Mike's flailing arms managed to grab one of its massive branches. He swung himself down onto the mighty bough and leant against the main trunk, which must have been at least eight feet in diameter.

Looking down, he pulled a face at us. 'Phew! That was a close one.'

We nodded back.

'The tent OK?' he called down from his perch, some five metres above our heads.

'Looks OK from here,' I called.

'From here too,' called back Mike. He then looked around him, 'Hey! How am I going to get down?'

The old oak hadn't a single branch below him, thanks to a century or two of careful lopping or whatever they call it.

'I'll throw you up some rope,' called Alun. 'We'll lower you down.'

'Yes.' I called. 'Just knot it firmly around your neck and let yourself drop. We'll do the rest.'

'Ha-ha!' shouted Mike, 'throw it up quick, before I pee on you.'

We got Mike down easily enough, and then we had a closer look at the tent.

It seemed undamaged by its flight and had settled down just slightly closer to the trees.

However, when we entered it, we discovered with consternation that the rose beds, which had been just outside, were now just inside.

We tried to lift it, but it was well and truly jammed under the overhanging branches of the Oaks.

'At least it won't get blown any further now,' said Alun.

'Unfortunately,' I remarked, 'although the roses do add a nice decorative touch, there's not enough room left for the chairs.'

'Oh, they won't mind standing,' said Mike.

We turned and gazed at him with pity in our eyes. 'Mike,' I said, 'It is not the guests who are the trouble. It's the Girls. You remember, my wife and Margaux.'

'Oh, they probably won't notice. We just have to say we thought it was nicer that way.'

'Are you mad, Mike?' cried Alun. 'We were given instructions. Wifely instructions never include the freedom to innovate. You know that.'

'Oh, I don't know...' shrugged Mike.

'We do, though,' I sighed. 'Rose beds were not included in the decorative scheme.'

'So, we'll have to dismantle the damn thing and build it again,' he smiled, 'it's as simple as that.'

'Another two hours of work?' groaned Alun.

'Oh, all right then,' smiled Mike, 'so they'll have to go then.'

'What?'

'The rose beds.'

We stared at him with wonder and renewed respect. Of course, a simple, straightforward solution to an awkward dilemma.

'You two get those guy ropes fixed properly, and I'll deal with the roses. I saw some tools around the back. Come on.'

Half an hour later, the guy ropes were firmly attached, and the rose bushes were no more.

'I cut them up into little bits and hid them in the compost heap round the back.

At this, we all stepped into the marquee.

Mike had strewn dead leaves over the earth where the rose beds had been, but Alun shook his head, 'Margaux will spot that at once. Can't we do something better in the way of camouflage?'

Mike smiled, 'Easy. Let's go and cut some slabs of grass from the bottom of the grounds and cover it.'

'Brilliant.' I said, and off we went with a wheelbarrow and a light whistle.

Half an hour later, the job was done. As we stood and looked at the interior of the marquee, we were justifiably proud of ourselves.

'Perfect,' smiled Alun, 'just in time for lunch.'

'And a drop of that lovely wine,' added Mike.

Alun set up a folding table under the shadow in the tent while I went off and brought back a big tray heavily laden with food and drink. We sat down and sighed as we gazed around us.

'Good job, that,' smiled Alun.

'Brilliant,' added Mike.

We tucked into the sample of some of the cold food ordered for the wedding day with enthusiasm. We were just testing the second bottle of wine when a

voice roused us from behind. The side flap of the marquee lifted, and a wizened old man appeared.

His practised eye at once spotted the bottle I was lifting. 'Ah. I see you lads are getting down to the serious part of the job,' he nodded.

'Like a glass?'

The groundsman's job was to keep the gardens and outside structures in trim. One couldn't call him a gardener, more a jack of all trades. Or a professional botcher, as Alun had dubbed him.

The man advanced towards us, 'Lovely,' he said. He had the Frenchman's innate ability to be able to read a wine bottle label at fifty paces and knew this one would be worth tasting. We filled his glass, and he sipped it. 'Lovely,' he repeated, smacking his lips. Then turning to look around the marquee, he froze.

'Oh!'

'Yes?'

'Those rose beds...' he stepped over to where they had been and looked down. Then, he stamped the grass and turned to us.

Mike coughed, 'they got a bit in the way,' he said, 'so we had to move them, didn't you?' he said, turning to me.

'You moved them?' said the old man.

'Well, you see,' added Alun, 'the truth is that the wind blew the tent against them, and they got a bit damaged.'

'Ah!' said the man. 'A bit damaged.'

'Yes. So, we thought it best to...' his voice trailed off as the old man shook his head sadly.

'So, you dug them all up and camouflaged the place with grass,' said the head botcher.

'Well. I suppose you could put it that way,' I said. Not really knowing how to deal with the situation.

'The owner won't be pleased,' frowned the man sipping his wine and rolling it around his mouth with respect. 'She liked them roses.'

'Don't worry,' improvised Alun, 'we'll plant some new ones once the wedding's over, won't we?' He said, looking at me.

Oh yes. Of course.' I agreed. 'Some more wine?'

'Lovely wine, this,' he said, taking the bottle from my outstretched hand and scrutinising the label. Then, finally, he nodded, 'an excellent choice for a wedding.'

'So, if we plant some new ones after the wedding, it'll be alright then?' I said.

'Good heavens, no!' the old man spluttered. 'Them damn roses cause me no end of trouble. They're always catching every damn bug or disease that exists. Black spot, greenfly, you name it...' He sipped the wine and smiled into the glass. 'No. Much less work for me if they stay gone. If you see what I mean.'

We relaxed. 'But what about the owner?' I asked.

'The old man frowned. 'I think it will have to be wild boar.'

'Wild boar?' frowned Alun.

'Yes,' replied the old man with a wry smile. 'I think I might discover that the fence down in the woods had broken down and that a family of wild boar had got into the grounds and had rooted them all up.'

'And you tidied things up by placing turf,' I suggested.

'Exactly,' he smiled. 'Nice wine this...'

'Oh!' I said hurriedly, 'perhaps a couple of bottles of this would go nicely for your evening meals. No one will notice if a few are missing.'

'A case, did you say?' frowned the man.

'Yes. Exactly? I pop around and get one.'

'Don't bother. Just pop it in the outhouse, behind those crates in the corner. I'll pick them up another day.'

'Perfect,' I said.

'Well,' he said, draining his glass. 'You lads must have plenty more to do.'

And with this, he lifted the tent flap and disappeared.

Alun smiled, 'It always astonishes me what a powerful negotiation tool good wine is.'

'Yes, smooths over many otherwise tricky situations,' I agreed.

'What about another bottle?' suggested Mike.

'Good idea.' said Alun and I simultaneously.

On the wedding day, everything seemed to go off without a hitch. The sun shone, and everyone was happy.

There was admittedly a little unpleasantness though when the time came for the champagne fountain to be filled.

My wife unkindly ordered the three of us to go and stand at the other end of the room until the thing was done and only a single tier of glasses remained.

'Tastes the same anyway,' said Alun by way of consoling us.

'And...' I smiled, 'I happened to slip a few bottles in the outhouse, as a precaution.'

'The outhouse was a bad move,' groaned Alun.

'Why?'

'It's bound to be full of fornicating guests. Outhouses invariably are,' he sighed.

'There are plenty of other places here for fornicating in. The woods, for example,' said Mike.

'Oh well. Let's go and see if we can get at them without embarrassing anyone.'

Luckily, the spectacle of the champagne fountain seemed to have temporarily emptied the secluded shed, so we extracted the bottles and hid them in a less risky place.

We then found ourselves a comfortable spot on a warm stone wall and set a bottle between us. Just then, one of the guests rounded the end of the chateau.

'Watch out!' whispered Alun, 'quick men, stomachs in, shoulders back. Body-moulding red dress on the horizon, with all flags flying.'

The guest in question was undoubtedly the one person that nobody had missed. She was slightly under forty and dressed in the deadly James Bond spy style. Her red dress moulded her perfectly shaped body in a way that ought not to be allowed in public. So, naturally enough, she didn't walk either; she undulated.

'Wow!' whispered Mike, 'That's a bit on the hot side, don't you think? Do you think she's got a rendezvous for games in the outhouse?'

'Possibly,' let's push off and give the lucky devil a clear field,' said Alun.

We jumped down from the low wall and made to leave her to her occupations.



'Oh!' she purred, 'the three musketeers.'

Alun took in her contours and nodded as she smiled at us, 'I'm afraid that our brief is only for damsels in distress. We didn't get the impression that there was all that much distress here about.'

'It might be hidden under the surface,' she joked back.

'Possibly,' nodded Alun, always quick with the retort, 'but it would have to be deep under it to escape observation, don't you think?'

She laughed, 'very clever.'

'It's just training. But we must be off, duty calls,' he said.

'Yes,' I added, 'I think I heard distressed damsel-like sounds emanating from somewhere in the woods.'

The red apparition smiled again, 'Do be careful not to trip over them in the undergrowth. There are different sorts of distress, you know. Especially at weddings.'

'We'll be on our guard. All for one and one for all,' cried Alun. 'Forward musketeers all.'

We moved reluctantly on, but just as we passed her with a smile, Mike paused and looked down.

'Oh,' he said, looking up into her smouldering eyes, 'You've got a thread loose on your dress hem.'

'Have I,' she said, sizing him up for later use. 'My saviour.'

'Oh, Mike was always a good boy scout,' I laughed.

'But, oh, dear. It really wouldn't do for my dress to fall to bits, would it?'

Then Mike said one of the silliest things I have ever heard him say.

'Would you like me to bite it off for you?'

The woman blinked, smiled a slow, wide smile and laid a burning, long-fingered hand on his forearm. 'Good heavens! Would you really do that for little me? I had no idea I had had such a devastating effect on mature men.'

Mike stared uncomprehendingly, but she went on, 'But surely, you might still need it one day...'

Mike blinked back while Alun and I burst out laughing.

'Come on, Mike, get it over with. The quicker, the better,' I smiled.

Mike shook his head and knelt. He got hold of the hem of the dress and leant forward, taking the thread between his teeth.

At this precise moment, Margaux and my wife appeared.

'Mike! What on earth are you doing!' cried Margaux.

Mike jumped to his feet, blushing.

However, the thread remained caught between his teeth, so as he rose, so did the dress.

'Wow!' cried Alun.

'Wow!' I added.

'Oh, hello Margaux,' smiled the red-dressed female, 'your friend Mike was just helping me with my dress.' She smiled. 'Dear me!' she cried, smoothing the dress back down from above her waist where it had stopped on its upward trip.'

'Let me help,' said Alun, stepping forward.'

'Down Fido.' Called Margaux. 'Mike seems to have got things nicely in hand.'

'In teeth, would be more exact,' I pointed out.'

However, Mike seemed quite content to gaze at the naked lower part of the woman while she unravelled the thread from his teeth and snapped it off with a deft movement. Then she turned to the girls. 'These dresses come undone so easily nowadays. Thanks, Mike.' She said, squeezing his forearm.

'Come on, you three,' called my wife, 'you're needed.'

'Me too?' asked Mike. 'I thought I might go for a little walk back here.'

'Yes, especially you.'

He shrugged to the woman, who was obviously already going back into hunt mode.

'Wow,' he whispered, 'what a body! She was burning hot too. Christ!'

'I heard that Mike,' said my wife over her shoulder. 'Your heart wouldn't stand it.'

'Might do,' He said, 'I could always stop if I felt trouble coming on.'

Margaux snorted, 'trouble, where women like that are concerned, comes after, not during,' she stopped and put her arm around Mike's shoulders. 'Believe me, Mike.'

'Do I have to?'

'In any case, you won't have a chance to have a heart check-up today. I need you to come and do some toast making. You have prepared a speech, I suppose.'

'I'll do one.' Said Alun with enthusiasm.

'Oh God, no!' cried Mike, 'anything but that. I'll do it; I'll do it. The James Bond girl will have to wait. This is an emergency.'

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

We all laughed. Mike was back to normal again.



## Chapter 2 - Hot Air Balloons

I rolled over onto my back and groaned. I had forgotten just how hard floors could be. I reflected that sleeping on expensive mattresses for too many years had irretrievably softened my once resilient and robust body.

'They tend to make floors much harder nowadays,' commented Mike the evening before.

'Which is why you made up that rubbish about having back trouble so that you could monopolise the only real bed,' I grumbled.

'Alun could have left you the inflatable mattress,' replied Mike.

'Hey,' cried Alun, 'remember I had an injection in my buttock yesterday. It's not my fault if it's still sore.'

'One in the morning is not yesterday,' I grumbled. 'But it still was your fault that you got your leg caught in a rusty barbed wire fence and then remembered that your tetanus vaccination was years out of date,' I complained.

'I didn't see it in the dark.'

'You can't see an out-of-date vaccination, even in broad daylight,' Mike contributed.

'Very amusing,' sneered Alun.

'If you hadn't decided to take a shortcut across the fields in the pitch-black,' I reminded him, 'you wouldn't have come across that obstacle at all.'

Alun sighed, 'I thought I had the lay of the land pretty well memorised.'

'You only looked at the map for a few moments,' Mike shook his head.

'I've got a remarkable visual memory,' he complained, 'you all know that.'

'That's true, but it only works properly when a pub's involved,' I added.

Mike grumbled, 'Well, your remarkable visual memory didn't spot that filthy ditch either.'

Alun winced, 'No, I have to admit that that came as a bit of a surprise.'

'Perhaps that was because we were nowhere near where we were supposed to be,' I suggested.

'I wonder where we were then?' mused Alun. 'I'll have to check that out on the map.'

Needless to say, the girls found the entire episode highly entertaining when we eventually got back and explained it to them. Then, even though it was eleven o'clock, they packed us off to the hospital, where we spent three long hours waiting for Alun to have his vaccination jab.

All this came back to me as I tried to find a position in which an as-yet unbruised part of my body could take my weight.

Then, the noise which had woken me was repeated, and I raised myself on my elbow.

'Mike. Can't you stop that?'

There was a grumbling sound, 'It isn't me. It's Alun.'

'Hey,' called Alun, 'not me.'

'Well, what the hell's making all that hissing noise?'

"Hell!" cried Alun, jumping up and stumbling over me. He opened the windows and, throwing back the shutters, cursed, 'Christ! Is it that late?'

We jumped up and joined him.

As far as the eye could see, the sky was full of enormous, multi-coloured hot-air balloons.

A few of these had been lucky or very smart and were already so high that their markings could hardly be made out. Others were already past the house and disappearing down the valley towards Grenoble.

However, the vast majority were spread across the valley at various heights and heading in multiple directions.

The hissing noise which woke us came from the powerful gas burners whenever they were fired up to lift the balloons.

Pilots were struggling to get their balloons up out of the cold ground mist into the early morning sun. However, even at this time of year, the sun took its time in climbing above the Belledonne mountain peaks. As soon as it did, its rays would immediately heat the balloon surfaces, warm the gas and thus lift them to where ascensional air currents might be found.

We were cramped up together in this small bedroom near Grenoble because we had come to watch this colourful spectacle.

Thanks to its exceptional geographical situation, the alpine village of Saint-Hillaire-du-Touvet has been home to a world-class para-gliding meeting for many years. Less than a hundred yards from the



village centre, the narrow alpine plateau abruptly drops vertically to the valley floor three thousand five hundred feet below. Furthermore, not a hundred yards behind the village, the mountains soar an impressive seven thousand feet. These vertiginous cliffs are the ramparts of the Chartreuse mountain range. As such, they form a south-facing flat-topped barrier, nearly eighteen miles long, bordering the valley running from Grenoble to Chambéry.

This unique topography gives rise to some of Europe's strongest ascensional air currents, providing several incredible take-off sites.

The event traditionally opens early on Saturday morning with an impressive flight of hot-air balloons.

Luckily, my wife's sister owned a house on the valley floor, only half a mile downwind from the take-off point. After some persuasion, she agreed to put us all up for two nights.

Due to its position, most of the balloons came more or less past the house. Those who did not boast a sufficiently experienced pilot to find an ascensional air current landed in the chateau grounds, which backed onto her garden.

So, cursing at having overslept, we dressed hastily and dashed down the stairs and into the back garden to join the others. Groups of excited children were already rushing about, screaming at each other. Several parents had climbed the fences and were standing out in the middle of the field to get a better view.

A three-dimensional ocean of multi-coloured bubbles flowed along the valley towards us, growing

larger and larger as they approached. Some were already so high that they appeared only as tiny colourful specks in the sky. Others had hardly moved from their starting positions and were far behind the leaders. However, the vast majority were drifting towards us and gradually spreading out across the flat, mile-wide valley floor at various heights.

'Christ,' cried Alun, 'I never realised that those things were so huge.'

'Or quite so noisy,' I shouted as the one nearest us fired his gas burner.

A bright blue one, with a red star printed on it, was coming down sedately into the grounds at the far end. It had clearly given up the struggle.

Spotting this, the children swarmed off toward it, leaving an oasis of peace and quiet behind them.

'There's a small lake behind those trees over there,' nodded my sister-in-law, 'You have to keep well clear of that area. If your balloon gets too close, you'll get in trouble.'

'I'll try to remember that next time I balloon this way,' Smiled Alun. 'As it happens, Margaux was thinking of buying me one for Christmas,' he nodded. 'She says they're more stable than hang-gliders.'

'Less dangerous, in the hands of incompetents,' was what I said if my memory is correct,' said Margaux.

'The advantage,' I added, 'is that Mike and I could come in it with you, Alun.'

'And keep an eye on things to make sure nothing went wrong,' added Mike, warming to the idea.

'Oh heavens!' sighed Margaux, 'that's precisely why things do go wrong. Because you three simply are keeping an eye on things.'

'And drinking,' added my wife. Now, where she got that idea from, heaven knows.

'It would be fantastic,' cried Alun, ignoring this, 'We could try to balloon across the entire length of France from Normandy all the way down to Saint Tropez. Now that would be a good project, don't you think?'

'And why not take a few paying passengers, too?' smiled my wife.

'Yes, brilliant idea,' nodded Mike, impervious to the intended joke, 'no lack of space for beer either,' he volunteered.

'And wine,' I added.

'Naturally.'

'They would have to be men, though,' nodded Mike gravely.

'What the hell are you talking about, Mike?'

'He means the wines, perhaps,' I suggested.

'The passengers. They would have to be men.'

'Why? Girls would be more fun.'

'Forget girls,' snorted Margaux.

'Why no girls, Mike?' I frowned.

'Because of the peeing, of course. Men can pee over the side, but girls can't.'

We all paused as we took in this unexpected bit of foresight.

'You seem to know a great deal about women for an unmarried man,' said my wife with a stifled laugh.

'Stands to reason,' he retorted, blushing, 'doesn't it.'

'Yes, I agree. It's all about standing or not,' smiled my wife.

'So, girls are off the agenda then,' said Mike.

'Pity that,' I frowned.

'Mind you,' said Alun, 'we could devise some sort of hole in the bottom of the basket.'

'Or we could strap a toilet seat to the outside of the basket.' I added.

'Forget the girls,' scowled Margaux, 'and forget the balloon too while you're about it.'

'Mind you,' I said, 'that trip might take weeks if the wind wasn't right.'

My wife was wearing one of her wry smiles as she observed Margaux bridling, 'Oh, come on. You'd get lost and end up in Ghana.' she said, 'and inevitably end up in prison.'

'Ghana?' frowned Mike.

'You'd end up in prison, even if it wasn't Ghana,' said my wife.

'But Ghana isn't in that direction at all,' frowned Mike.

'Prison is in any direction you choose to take,' grumbled Margaux.

Well, ending up in prison was indeed something the three of us had had quite a lot of experience of doing. We exchanged looks and pulled faces at each other.

'We'd never get lost anyway,' said Alun. 'From up there, you can see everything,' he nodded. 'It's like having the entire Ordinance Survey map laid out below you all the time.'

'You three don't need to get lost to end up in prison,' sighed Margaux.

We reflected on the truth of this remark, but Mike was not to be put off by negative thoughts.

'Yes. Exactly. Alun's right,' he agreed with enthusiasm, 'likening the aerial view to looking down on a map is excellent. There might be trouble if there was fog or clouds, though,' he said.

'Shut up,' said Alun.

'And particularly, of course,' sighed Margaux, 'when all three of you are lying drunk at the bottom of the basket.'

'Even then,' smiled my wife, 'they could keep an eye on the lie of the land by looking down through the ladies' pee hole.'

'Oh Hell, Margaux,' cried Alun, 'who do you take us for. A bunch of inexperienced kids?'

'That's about it,' nodded Margaux. 'What do you think?' this was directed at my wife.

'Over-confident, over-adventurous and totally unconscious of the risks involved,' nodded my wife.

'More often unconscious because of the drink, I'd say,' sniffed Margaux.

'Ha, ha,' scowled Alun.

Suddenly, Mike piped up as if the preceding criticisms about our competence had not been voiced, 'What about refuelling?'

Alun shook his head, 'No trouble, we could fill up with wine anywhere we came down.'

'I meant gas. For the burner.'

'Oh, Gas! Yes, I suppose that would come from any domestic gas bottle supplier. Garages, supermarkets, and so on.'

'What happens if it rains?' frowned Mike.

'Shut up, you three,' cried Margaux in exasperation. 'You are not having a hot-air balloon.'

'But I thought...' Alun's voice trailed off as he took in Margaux's steady and eminently dangerous gaze.

'Ditch the idea,' she grumbled.

'They're very safe,' I said.

'Shut up.'

'And stable,' added Alun.

'Do you know,' nodded Mike, 'I rather like the idea. I think I'll look into it when I get home.'

'Oh, don't bother, Mike,' said Alun, 'I'll probably be able to pick one up cheap, second-hand.'

Mike and I stiffened, 'Don't you ever dare, Alun. Don't even dream about it,' I cried.

'Tip-Scavenger, that's what I call you,' Snorted Mike.

'Oh, come on!'

'Oh no. We are not coming on at all. We happen to remember vividly what happened on the way down to Croatia.'

'That was an accident.'

'The accident was that the trailer came from your local tip and the car hook from another. This resulted in the family luggage ending up in the river.'

That was because of your reckless driving, Mike,' snorted Alun.

'And then, what about the episode in Normandy with the cheap ex-rental windsurf board and the mast you "found".'

'Oh, come on! That was just a spot of bad luck,' cried Alun indignantly.

'Maybe, but that sort of bad luck is already a little inconvenient when one is at ground level. What about when you're three-thousand feet up?'

I smiled, 'One would have to choose one's tip carefully.'

'Yes,' Alun brightened, 'Not all tips are equal.'

Margaux snorted, 'Will you three just stop talking rot. Listen to me, please. You are not having a hot-air balloon, either brand new or off the nearest fully certified balloon tip.' She glared, 'Forget balloons, got that?'

Mike pulled a face, 'I could still just have a quick look around to see what a good one would cost.'

'If you do,' scowled Margaux, 'we girls will never invite you to visit us again.'

Mike's face dropped, 'you wouldn't do that?'

'Never,' repeated Margaux, prodding his shoulder.

'Hey! That hurts,' Mike grumbled.

'Never ever,' added my wife with a little smile.

Mike's mouth fell open as his mind grasped the consequences of such a devastating event.

'You wouldn't do that?' he gasped.

'We would.'

My wife looked at him and smiled a tender sort of smile, 'Mind you, Margaux. We could always consider letting them have a tethered one.'

Margaux frowned at her friend.

'Then, when they get a little too much under our feet, we could pack them into it with some wine and float them up a few thousand feet.'

'Yesss,' nodded Margaux, 'Good idea. Then they'd be out of the way, AND we'd know exactly where they were.'

'Exactly.'

'No big-bosomed barmaids to worry about either?'

'Perfect,' smiled my wife.

She turned to Mike, 'Check out the availability of very-long tether ropes first, Mike.'

'I believe they're special steel cables rather than ropes,' smiled Mike, 'but I'll have a look.'

'Good man!'

My sister-in-law frowned at my wife and shook her head uncomprehending.

By some quirk of nature, the sisters had been born with a slightly different molecular arrangement of their ADN. In fact, I suspect that nature had entirely skipped the segment responsible for the sense of humour in her case. She had undoubtedly considered that those few molecules could be put to better use elsewhere in her organism. I have yet to discover where they ended up, but I suppose nature knows best.

Anyway, she continued from where we had interrupted her earlier as if nothing had happened.

'The lake water keeps the early morning air cold and somehow creates a downdraft nearby,' she smiled.

'So, the balloons end up in the field, whatever the real reason,' I suggested.

'They get trapped,' added Mike.

'Exactly,' she nodded, 'sometimes they end up in the lake too.'

'That must be fun,' murmured Alun, 'that would never happen to us. We'll be more careful.'



'You won't have to be careful,' sighed Margaux, 'because there is no way on Earth that you three are going to be allowed to have a hot-air balloon.'

'Not even a teeny-weeny one?' moaned Alun.

'Do shut up, Alun,' she sighed.

We were just turning to follow the children to see the landing balloon from closer quarters when the roar of a burner from close behind us spun us all around.

'Oh Hell,' shouted Alun.

'Christ!' cried Mike.

Search as I would, no satisfying verbal exclamation came to me. Consequently, I had to content myself with gaping open-mouthed, which was far less satisfying.

Anyway, one of the other balloons had been following the valley, closer to the cliff face than advisable. Luckily for them, however, the wind had shifted. It was now driving its massive, coloured volume away from the rock wall towards the valley floor.

This was undoubtedly excellent news for the passengers. However, as the balloon was swept out of reach of the dangerous jagged fingers of rock, the slight lift it had been getting from the rising air currents failed, and it began to fall.

It soon became apparent that it was now headed straight for the field. This, again, was good news for the four people standing in the heavy willow basket.

Unfortunately, however, between the balloon and the security of the welcoming field stood an obstacle. That obstacle was our house and, above all, its roof.

'Hells bells!' cried Mike, 'That basket thing will drag half the roof off if it hits it.'

Starting off at top speed, he called, 'Come on. Let's get up on the roof and ward it off.'

We didn't wait to be ordered by the girls as we would usually have done but flew off as fast as we could go.

Alun got his leg gashed by the barbed wire fence again, but we carried on regardless of his cursing. After all, he was adequately vaccinated now.

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike, 'children and women might hear you.'

'I was swearing in English. They're French.'

'They learn English swear words in primary school over here nowadays,' I added as we dashed into the house and up the stairs, 'otherwise they wouldn't be able to understand American films.'

'They only need three or four words for that,' panted Alun, which some might consider not far from the truth.

The house had a big mezzanine, and from here, a large roof window gave access to the tiled surface outside...

Mike dragged a chair over, jumped up and pushed open the window. We clambered up and out onto the tiles, then scrambled up the slope to the ridge.

'The damn thing's coming straight at us,' cried Mike staring at the colossal approaching ball.

'The guy driving the thing seems to have got the same idea,' I added, screwing my eyes up and staring.

'Oh,' nodded Alun, balancing himself on the ridge tiles, 'I wondered why he was waving like that. Oh. By the way, are you sure one "drives" balloons?'

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike. 'Let's get down as close to the gutter as possible. If he comes in too low, we'll just have to try and hold back the basket and walk it along sideways and off the side of the house.'

There was a new roar as the man in charge set off the burners again in a vain attempt to gain enough height to overshoot us.

'He can't leave the flame burning much longer, or he'll burn a hole through the top, and the thing will come down like a ton of bricks.'

'Oh, Hell!' I shouted, 'Straight on top of my new car.'

Alun nodded and seemed to find this idea amusing.

'Come on, you two,' called Mike, who was working his way carefully downwards across the tiles. 'Try not to slip over the edge.' He turned, 'Whatever you do, don't put a foot on the guttering. It can't be relied on to hold.'

'Our fall would be broken by that nice soft car roof down there, though,' he smiled.

'Very funny,' I sneered.

'God in heaven,' cried Alun, 'look at the size of that damn basket. 'It must weigh a ton.'

'That's why we're up here, you idiot,' shouted Mike as the contraption came closer.

'Why the hell do they make them out of willow? Why don't they make them out of carbon fibre? They'd weigh next to nothing then,' snorted Alun.

'They ought to make the passengers out of carbon fibre, too,' I added. 'That would save a lot of weight.'

'I wonder if they can carry much in the way of wine?' mused Alun.

'You've got a point there,' nodded Mike. 'These guys are French, after all.'

'Maybe it's not gas they're burning at all, but distilled pear cordial or something like that,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'dual-purpose fuel. Good idea that. Ingenious and very French.'

However, at this moment, the pilot sent another deafening burst of flame into the open belly of the balloon, and amazingly the whole thing rose a few feet.

'It's still going to hit us,' cried Mike. 'Ready?'

'Yeh,' we shouted back.

The impressive basket swept nearer, but suddenly something unexpected happened.

Two of the passengers heaved themselves up onto the side of the basket, and as it reached the roof's edge, they leapt towards us.

I grabbed the first one to avoid him going over the side and onto my new car, and the other landed like a cat and scrambled up the tiles to safety.

The one I grabbed and held tightly was surprisingly squashier than expected, especially around the upper regions.

Regardless of this, I put all my energy into the task of saving a human life. I pushed up and backwards, and we fell back onto the tiles and scrambled to safety.

Alun and Mike held the basket off as well as they could and ran it along parallel to the roof.

Having jettisoned a hundred and fifty kilos, the basket rose to the height of the ridge.

'The chimney,' shouted Mike. 'If it hits that, the whole thing will go straight through the roof.'

'Or maybe slide down onto that nice new car down there,' smiled Alun.

'Shut up,' I shouted.

I scrambled back down, and we all tried to push the basket away from the chimney. Happily, we were successful because there were now five of us, and the balloon was lighter and still rising.

However, as the heavy basket grazed past the chimney's brickwork, we heard an ominous metallic grating sound. This was followed by a shout from Mike, now hidden from us on the far side of the basket.

'Oh hell!' he cried, 'the satellite dish.'

This was followed by a series of odd tearing noises. Immediately after, the basket freed itself and swept away following the balloon, which had taken advantage of the delay to gain a few precious yards.

The dish went with it. The down-cable followed it and seemed to stretch and stretch far more than any of us would have thought possible.

Then, with a decidedly unmusical twang, the white wire snapped to release the balloon, which shot away across the field.

We all let up a cry and slapped each other on the shoulder.

At this precise moment, we discovered that Mike was no longer amongst the back slappers.

Looking back at the balloon, we made out a pair of legs dangling below the far side of the basket.

Then something round and white detached itself and plummeted down into the field.

The satellite dish and balloon had parted company.

The man driving the balloon was by then frantically doing something, leaning over the far side of the basket. Suddenly, he fell over backwards and disappeared into the basket, followed by a shape which, even from a distance, looked very much like Mike.

'Hell,' I gasped. 'That was a close one.'

'You're telling me,' agreed Alun.

'Oh no!' Exclaimed one of our new companions, who turned out to be a girl. 'They're headed straight for those trees now.'

'Oh!' I gasped, realising why the body I had clasped had felt so squashy. 'Sorry.'

'I'll survive,' she smiled, and I believe I blushed.

As the balloon was headed straight for the trees, we squeezed ourselves back down through the roof window. I, of course, just had to catch the girl as she fell backwards off the chair and experienced the same warm squishiness for a second time.

The girl looked at me with a wry smile.

'Life's odd sometimes, isn't it,' she laughed and set off down the stairs at a run.

By the time we emerged from the back door and jumped the fence, the balloon had risen slightly. The basket was now brushing through the tops of the tall pine trees.

Our headlong pursuit was suddenly interrupted by a cry, and we returned to untangle Alun from some

barbed wire again. As we ran off again towards the hidden lake, my sister-in-law pulled a sad face and shook her head, 'The lake awaits,' she said with a sigh.

'Mike's in that thing now.' I cried as we sprinted past the girls.

'That was to be expected,' sighed Margaux.

As we stumbled across the field, the balloon's progress seemed to slow down, and it began to disappear gracefully from sight behind the tall trees.

'Is that an effect of perspective?' panted Mike, 'or are they falling?'

'Perspective goes slower than that, unless you're a fighter jet,' I cried.

'Or a UFO,' added Alun.

As we reached the trees, Alun, who was several yards ahead of us, discovered another barbed wire fence. We disentangled him once more and set off again.

His trousers were by now torn to shreds, but even the thought of what Margaux was going to say could not hold him back.

We dashed through the undergrowth and came out of the band of trees to witness an unforgettable scene.

The enormous multi-coloured balloon had ceased its onward progression and was now gently descending towards the tiny lake.

Even though the lake was no more than a hundred yards long by fifty or so broad, it made up for this shortcoming by appearing to be exceedingly deep and unexpectedly slimy looking.

'Oh! Now look at this!' cried Alun. 'This is just the place to baptise your new suit in.'

'Very funny,' I hissed.

Anyhow, the rest of my reply was drowned by the shouts coming from Mike and the balloon pilot.

They waved their arms and shouted and waved again.

However, this did not have any noticeable effect on the downward trajectory of the basket.

'Can't you do something, you damn idiots?' the pilot screamed.

We exchanged looks and pulled faces, which he could not distinguish at that distance.

Then there was a splashing sound, but the basket seemed to have decided to float rather than sink.

Mike shook his fist at us and then made what we considered a very unwarranted gesture in our direction.

'Shows bad breeding,' sighed Alun.

'All is not yet lost,' I said. 'Mike is still young.'

Anyway, at this moment, the basket decided that enough was enough and deemed that toppling over was now the best course to follow for any basket who respected itself.

So, topple it did.

'That's nice green slime on that lake,' nodded Alun.

'I believe it's several hundred years old,' I smiled. The first count had it imported from the north of Canada.'

'That's interesting,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I smiled, 'And here, if I am not mistaken, my dear Watson is our client.'



As the basket gently emptied its contents into the cold green slime, a tall, slim, and elegantly dressed old man came striding toward us from the far end of the lake.

'I believe that that is the Count. By the way, the true owner of the chateau is his wife, the Comtesse,' I said.

'Whoever the owner, this gentleman here, doesn't seem to be all that happy about having a nice, colourful, hot-air balloon in his lake,' added Alun.

'Probably upsets the "fishin",' I suggested.

By this time, there was a good deal of splashing about in the water. Then, with a sad sighing noise, the balloon deflated and drifted sedately down.

The basket and its floundering occupants disappeared under the multi-coloured shroud, as, for that matter, did most of the lake.

The striding figure came to a halt and shouted, "Hey! Hey there.'

There was no answer, so he plumped his hand on his hips and leant forward, squinting at the multi-coloured expanse of fabric.

'Hey!' he cried again, 'come out of there at once. There's no use hiding. I know you are in there.'

At this, he turned and spotted us.

'And what are you two doing on my land?'

I held out my hands in a typical French gesture.

'Trespassing, that's what you're doing,' he continued.

'We came to help,' called Alun.

The Count snorted and frowned, 'Foreigners too. I might have guessed. Go on, get off my land before I set the dogs on you.'

'Dogs!' cried Alun, 'Which dogs?'

The Count seemed to be a little taken aback by this remark and glanced around. However, noting a singular lack of hounds or dogs to be set on us, he scowled.

'You foreign tourists make me sick.'

'Hey!' shouted Alun.

'Keep quiet, Alun. He probably knows my sister-in-law by her Christian name.'

'Ah! Yes. OK.'

At this precise moment, Margaux, my wife and her sister appeared through the trees. 'Oh, good morning, Monsieur le Comte. Having some trouble, I see. Can we help?'

The Count's face cleared, and a smile broadened across it. 'Oh. Hello, my dear. Yes, the same trouble as usual.'

'Not trespassers again, I hope?'

'Well, I suppose not. But why on earth do these people insist on this ridiculous and utterly illegal habit of landing in my lake? I just don't understand.'

'Obviously, foreigners,' called my wife as the three approached the old man.

They then did something I never expected to see in my lifetime. The three exchanged looks, and all bobbed a curtsy to the Count.

'If I hadn't seen that with my own eyes, I just wouldn't have believed it,' whispered Alun.

'That's Margaux's tactics, no doubt,' I said.

'She should be ashamed of herself,' Alun shook his head. His diplomatic principles didn't include pandering to nobles.

'But she won't be ashamed.'

'No. That at least's certain,' sighed Alun.

Margaux had by then been presented to the Count, who was beaming on the three women. He had seemingly forgotten the giant multi-coloured balloon, which continued to deflate gradually over the lake.

'Foreigners again?' asked my sister-in-law.

'Oh, I don't know. Certainly not gentlemen in any case,' he stiffened. 'A gentleman would have requested authorisation before plumping a gaudy contraption like that in the middle of one's lake, don't you think?'

'Absolutely,' nodded Margaux.

'Messes up the fishing, you know,' grumbled the old man.

'Do you still fish the lake then?' asked Margaux.

'Good heavens, no. Of course not. The fish in there taste disgusting. Always have.'

'I suppose it's the principle of the thing,' suggested my wife.

'Exactly. And the fools nearly smashed your roof too. I saw that.'

My wife took the old man by the arm, 'I suppose there is not much more you can do here now,' she smiled, 'Why don't we leave these foreign men here to help them drag the thing clear.'

The Count glanced at us and nodded, 'Yes. You're quite right, my dear. Obviously, manual workers of some sort. Foreign, of course, but manual workers always know how to deal with this sort of thing. It's what they are bred for.'

Alun took a step forward, but I caught his arm and held him back, 'Let the girls deal with things, Alun.'

He made a grumbling noise but stopped all the same.

'Well, ladies, after all this emotion, would you do me the honour of taking a cup of tea with me. I'm sure the Comtesse will be delighted for a little company, even so early in the day.'

And off the four went. The Girls chatted happily with the old man, who had clearly put balloons, lakes and foreigners altogether out of his mind.

We turned to note that the mass of coloured material had now become oddly animated.

Strange shapes could be seen thrashing about under the material, gradually coming closer to the bank.

Then suddenly, a head appeared near the lake's edge, 'Bloody hell!' It cried.

'That's Mike, I think?' I said.

'Help!' cried Mike again.

We stepped forward and looked with dismay down the slimy mud-covered slope leading to the water's edge.

'Yuck.' Said Alun.

'Yes, a bit slimy,' I agreed, 'He doesn't seem to be much in immediate danger of drowning, does he?'

'No,' agreed Alun, 'He'll survive, unfortunately. Come on, Mike. Up here,' he called, keeping prudently on the dry grass verge.

As Mike struck out for the slope, the water seemed to come alive. Dozens of overweight toads emerged from under the mud and jumped off in all directions.

'Hell,' cried Alun, 'I hate toads.'

As Mike reached the muddy slope, there was more commotion from behind, and the balloon fabric

writhed and jumped. To our amazement, the pilot had disentangled himself and started swimming at a top speed away from us across the lake.

'Why on Earth is he going that way?' I shouted.

Then, there was a renewed splashing, and we discovered the reason.

From under the deflated balloon, something big, white and furious emerged.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike, spotting it, 'Help!'

The big white thing was none other than a large and clearly very angry swan.

It freed itself from the mess and immediately spotted Mike's rear, some ten yards distant.

It flapped its wings and hissed and splashed violently. Then, setting its neck in the right direction, it dashed in Mike's direction at a truly prodigious speed.

'Hell!' screamed Mike as he reached the mud slope.

He dug his hands deep into the slimy mud and somehow got a hold.

He levered himself out of the water, dug his shoe toes into the mud and floundered up the slope as fast as he could.

However, slimy water and mud are one and the same thing to swans. They are raised in such environments, so the race was somewhat biased.

That's to say, it was biased until its strong yellow beak met Mike's soft buttocks.

Mike let out a yell, which must have been audible in the orbital space station, but he did something no one would have expected.

He turned on the swan.

'You bloody swine,' he screamed, grabbing a branch that was floating nearby.

The swan obviously did not understand English swear words. After hissing and flapping its wings menacingly, it came on again, its neck stretched forward like a hose pipe.

'Mike brought the branch down with a smack on the swan's head with such violence that the branch and head disappeared under the water.

Mike dropped the branch and scrambled, slithering up the slope and onto the dry verge.

He quickly turned to check for pursuit, but the water was now strangely calm.

'Christ, Mike!' cried Alun, 'You've killed the poor, innocent little swan.'

'What!' cried Mike.

However, at the same moment, the swan's head reappeared from below the water, albeit a little groggily.

However, it seemed to shake itself back to its senses and then spotted us.

'Oh, hell!' I shouted as the thing shook its wings and took off from the water's surface in our direction.

Within seconds, we were through the band of trees and sprinting across the field towards the house.

The swan was close on our heels, and it was difficult to see how we could escape when the swan discovered one of Alun's barbed-wire fences.

'That serves it right,' laughed Alun as he ran.

The swan's webbed foot caught in it, and by the time it had disentangled itself, we were behind the double-glazed windows.

We sighed with relief, but at that moment, the swan caught sight of one of the other balloons drifting in our direction.

It hissed and squawked and, flapping its impressive wings in anger, took off in its direction.

"Oh, hell!" cried Mike.

'Oh well.' I sighed, 'Every sport seems to have its dangers.'

'Hells bells!' cried Mike, 'my bum.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' laughed Alun, 'We'll all have a look at your buttocks in a moment. Let's see what that swan can do with this balloon first.'

Well, the whole thing was a bit of a let-down.

The balloon pilot, spotting the incoming projectile, fired his burner, and the startled swan veered off and disappeared behind the trees.

'Call that a swan?' gasped Alun. 'What do they bring them up on over here?'

'A decent British swan would have gone straight through that balloon,' I sighed. 'And it would have followed it down and chased the guys all the way back to Grenoble.'

'Too much wine before breakfast, perhaps,' suggested Alun.

'Ah, well!' I said, 'That was good fun, though.'

'Yeh,' smiled Alun, 'almost like the good old times.'

'No, it damn well wasn't,' cried Mike. 'I almost got killed falling off that damn balloon, then nearly got suffocated under it AND drowned in that filthy lake.'

'You should have been more careful, Mike,' said Alun, shaking his head sadly, 'you'll get yourself hurt one of these days.'

I looked over at his be-slimed clothes and mustered up a sympathetic tone. 'That lake wasn't any too clean, was it?'

'I wondered what that smell was,' nodded Alun.

'It is strange though,' I frowned, 'how that swan has been able to keep itself so snowy white when it's swimming about in that mess all day.'

Alun nodded, 'Yes, odd that. And it only took Mike a few seconds to get into an incredibly filthy state.'

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike.

'And did you notice the size of that big yellow beak?'

'No,' said Mike, 'I felt it.'

'Must be a hell of a lot of vitamins in that slime,' I volunteered.

'And minerals,' I added.

'Oligo-elements, too,' smiled Alun, 'masses of them, I'll bet.'

'Can't you shut up, you two?' sighed Mike.

'It's a peculiar smell.' I said, 'like a mixture of rotting wood, mushrooms and decomposing seaweed.'

'That's because that is what it is,' said Alun, 'with a little water added.'

Mike lifted his soaking shirt sleeve to his nose and pulled a face, 'yuck!'

Alun stepped over and leant down, 'Yes, pretty yucky. I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to have a quick shower before the girls get back.'

Mike thought about this, and especially about the unkind menace Margaux had threatened him with.

'Yes, good idea. I'll do that straight away, shall I?'

We nodded, 'We'll search out some beer while you're about it,' I said.



'I think I'd prefer a glass of iced white wine if you can find any,' he replied plaintively.

'A big glass?'

'A mugful would be better.' he called back as he squelched towards the stairs.

## Chapter 3 - The Satellite Dish.

When the girls returned from their tea party with the nobles, they found us sitting on the back terrace. We were dreamily observing a big Toyota laboriously dragging the deflated, green-slime covered balloon back across the ploughed field.

'God knows how long it will take them to clean that slime off,' mused Mike. He was now as clean as a pin and smelling strongly of tropical fruit sweets.

'I wonder how you get a thing that size dried?' Alun frowned. 'You can hardly hang it up in the garage, can you.'

'You ought really to employ the word "one" instead of "you" in that context,' said Mike annoyingly.

'One could not hang it on the washing line either. Could one?' I volunteered.

'One certainly could not. One agrees entirely,' nodded Alun.

'Anyhow. I bet that basket is going to stink to hell for years,' added Mike.

'Yep. A good job we didn't get dragged into the salvaging manoeuvres,' smiled Alun.

We nodded in agreement.

'Oh. So you three are already drunk, are you?' called Margaux through the open window.

'Nearly there,' called back Alun. 'Nice tea party?'

The girls appeared.

'Well, as a matter of fact, we were given a guided tour of the chateau. Not only that, but we were shown some articles that are never shown to the public.'

'Was that a sneer, Margaux?' I asked, but Alun interrupted before she could reply.

'My God!' he exclaimed, 'don't tell us that old tweedy devil let his trousers down.'

Mike and I burst out laughing.

'You, one-track-minded idiot,' she sighed.

'It would have been a noble gesture if he had,' I laughed.

Margaux replied to this remark with what we supposed must have been her idea of a noble gesture. She then turned to my wife, 'Shall we give it to them?'

My wife nodded and stepped indoors to return almost at once. The manoeuvre was accompanied by a scraping and metallic clanging noise as a large object was dropped to the ground.

'Seen this before?' she asked.

'Looks like a satellite dish to me' I said. 'What do you think, Mike? You're the technical one.'

'Yep. That's the one off the roof.' He nodded. 'I recognise that dent.'

'Off this roof?' nodded Margaux.

'That's right,' said Mike, sipping his iced wine.

'Oh! By the way, Margaux,' Alun butted in, 'could you have a look at Mike's buttock, please,' he paused. 'It got bitten.'

'Bitten?'

'Not by one of us. By a swan.'

'By a Swan?'

I looked over at them, 'Yes. I know what you are thinking. And we agree. It's not much compared with viewing a Count's private articles, in private. But apparently, the swan knew a thing or two about snapping buttocks.'

'Experienced, was it?'

'Yes. But for some reason, Mike won't show us,' added Alun.

My wife sighed one of her best, resigned sighs, 'All right. Come over here, Mike. Let's have a look.'

'What here? I mean, out here on the terrace?'

'Well, the swan did bite you out there in the middle of the field. There were dozens of people.'

'Yes, but I had my trousers on when it did it. What if the neighbours look over?'

'Don't worry, Mike, they won't do it twice,' snorted Margaux.

'Very funny,' sighed Mike.

'Come on, Mike,' said my wife, 'Let's have a look at the damaged area.'

Mike stood up reluctantly and, casting a worried look at the fence, slipped down his trousers.

'And the pants,' said Margaux, and he sighed and did as instructed.

There was a sharp intake of breath from behind him.

'What is it!? What's wrong!?' cried Mike, attempting to crane his neck around to get a look at his own buttock.

Alun and I jumped up and slipped behind the girls.

'Hell!' cried Mike. 'This isn't the local cinema, you know.'

'Well, that swan certainly knew what he was about,' nodded Alun. 'You'd better have the inflatable bed tonight.'

Margaux tapped Mike on the shoulder, 'Up with the trousers, Mike. You'll live. The skin's not broken, but that swan must have one hell of a set of beak muscles.'

'Is it that bad?' asked Mike, secretly hoping that the damage would be something to write home about.

'It's a nice sort of mauve colour for the moment. Would you like a mirror, or perhaps I could take a photo?'

'No, thanks. Do I have to put something on it?' he asked.

'Apart from trousers?' asked my wife. 'No. I'd leave it at that for the present.'

Alun smiled, 'I believe that pond-weed poultice is what the locals recommend.'

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike.

'No, I'm afraid you'll just have to suffer in silence,' said my wife. 'You can stand, though?'

'More or less.'

'And suffer in silence?'

'Yes. I suppose so. If I must.'

'Suffer in silence!' I cried. 'Are you joking? Surely you realise that you're talking to Mike.'

'Alun tut-tutted, 'Mike won't stop complaining and reminding us about his dangerous encounter until Christmas.'

'Complaining is ingrained in his DNA,' I added.

'Shut Up,' sighed Mike

In the meantime, Alun and I had moved a little downwind from Margaux and my wife. We thus had a full front view of the half-naked Mike. Alun shot me a look and started to lift his phone to immortalise the moment.

'Oh no you don't!' cried Mike spinning away from us.

'Hello! Now, what have we here?' laughed Margaux.

Then, unexpectedly, a new voice was heard.

'I couldn't help overhearing. Perhaps I can be of assistance.'

Then an oval, oriental, woman's face appeared over the top of the fence.

'Mrs Yamamoto!' cried Mike.

'Oh! Good heavens. You!' came the reply. 'All of you! Naked too.'

'God!' cried Mike, trapped between two sets of all-seeing eyes.

'We're not all naked. Just Mike here,' I said.

'Well! What a lovely surprise,' Margaux smiled. 'And what brings you to these parts, Mrs Yamamoto. How have you been since our meeting in Mexico?'

Mike twisted back to us, and Alun's phone clicked.

'Give me that, you idiot,' cried Mike, but Alun had already taken refuge behind a prickly-looking bush.

'Oh dear!' tutted Mrs Yamamomo, 'Perhaps I should pop round and take a closer look at that bruise. We wouldn't want it to get infected, would we.'

'It won't get infected,' Mike called over his shoulder as he tried to out-manoeuvre Alun, 'I'll look after it.' Now, out-manoeuvring someone while one's trousers and pants are wrapped around one's ankles is not easy for the novice.

'So, what are you doing here?' repeated Margaux.

'Oh! My husband's mother's brother's son invited me.' I frowned but gave up searching for what this meant in terms of relations.

That's nice,' smiled my wife.

'Yes. He wanted me to see...' here she hesitated, searching for the correct term, 'to see his inflated balls.'

'His what!' cried Alun, opening his eyes wide.

'Hot air balloons, perhaps?' suggested my wife.

'Yes. That's it. Hot air balloons.'

'Balls are something else.'

'Yes, of course,' nodded the Japanese woman, 'Like bugger balls.'

'Bugger balls!' exclaimed Alun, halting in his evasion techniques around the bush.

'Rugger Balls, perhaps?' suggested Margaux.

'Or rubber balls?' added my wife.

'Yes.' Nodded Mrs Yamamoto. 'Rubher balls.'

'Rugger.' Corrected Margaux.

'But I met your husbands after Mexico, you know. At the Hotel in Bucharest.'

'Oh! Did you now? They must have forgotten to mention it.'

By this time, Alun had moved around to the Japanese side of the bush. He then jumped the ornamental pond and stepped up to the fence. 'I got a photo of the bruise. Shall I show you?'

'Stop,' cried Mike.

'It's crystal-clear. You'll be able to see if it needs professional attention.'

'I think it will.' I contributed.

'Shut Up,' cried Mike, hopping back around the bush towards us.

'Goodness me!' whispered the woman. 'Isn't the image clear! What incredible definition!'

'Oh, sorry... Wrong photo. You'll want to see the back of him really.'

'Never mind,' she said quickly, 'does this thing zoom in?'

'Oh yes. Watch.'

But Mrs Yamamoto did not need to be told to watch. Her eyes were riveted on the small screen.'

'Give me that damn thing,' shouted Mike hobbling towards us.'

'That's the zoom button there,' pointed Alun, ignoring Mike, 'zoom away...'

Mike made a dash, or at least he started to. His left foot hit a rock at the edge of the pond.

'Margaux opened her mouth to warn him, but it was too late. His tethered feet stopped where they were while the rest of him carried on. The top of his body then described a graceful arc ending in a huge splash.

This was followed by an impressive thrashing about and spluttering.

We all turned to watch the performance except Mrs Yamamoto, who had a firm grip on Alun's phone.

'Yes, that is very nice,' she said, 'I had better come round and look at that bruise too, I think.'



Mike rolled over and sat up, wiping pondweed from his face. 'Oh, God! My head.'

'Why did you do that, Mike?' said my wife as he pushed himself warily onto his knees.

As usual, Alun was already doubled up with laughter and was by now rolling on the grass, unable to speak.

Mrs Yamamoto had now mastered the zoom tool, 'Yes, the image quality is excellent,' she smiled.

'Oh God!' wailed Mike, carefully getting to his feet.

The dripping man bent to pull up his pants and trousers, bringing a further yelp of laughter from Alun, who by then could hardly breathe.

'I see you opted for the pondweed poultice after all,' I laughed as his slime-covered bottom was projected towards us. 'That'll do it a power of good.'

Oh. Shut up, you lot,' he sneered and slopped into the sitting room.

'Go and take a shower, Mike,' called Margaux.

'And leave your clothes in the bath,' added my wife.

'I'll burn them.'

Mrs Yamamoto handed the phone back over to Margaux, 'He is very clumsy, your friend. Very peculiar too,' she volunteered.

'Yes. We noticed that, too,' nodded Margaux.

'Some extremely wealthy men are like that.' added the woman.

'Extremely wealthy?' Margaux frowned.

'Rich,' said the woman.

'Oh!... Rich.'

'Yes. He told me he has an Aston Martin and a big house full of valuable paintings.'

Alun and I were sidling away towards the open door.

'Where are you two going?' said my wife.

'Just going to see if Mike's OK.'

'I'll go in a moment,' she frowned at us. 'What's all this about Mike's wealth?'

'Sorry?' Alun pretended to be brushing grass from his knees.'

'Don't you remember?' asked the woman, 'you told me all about him and his eccentric behaviour. You remember. When he jumped over the balcony into my room in Bucharest.'

'When he did What!' cried my wife.

'Surely, we mentioned that?' frowned Alun...

'Yes.' I added, 'I distinctly remember telling you in our debriefing session.'

'You did not,' my wife shook her head. 'You also neglected the bit about his being rich.'

'Wealthy,' I corrected.

'Be quiet.'

'Perhaps that term in the damp prison cell drove it from their memories,' suggested my wife.

'Which term was that? The first or the second?' asked Margaux.

'The first, I believe.'

'Prison!' cried the Japanese woman.

'They often lodge in foreign prisons,' said my wife.

'They seem to be irresistibly drawn to them for some reason.'

'Really?'

My wife nodded, and the woman pulled a face. This face seemed to say, "How odd", or at least the Japanese equivalent of it.

'Mike!' called Margaux.

The bathroom window opened, and a soap-covered wet head appeared, 'yes?'

'Are you by any chance an extremely wealthy man?' Mike took in my saucer-wide eyes and eager nodding head, the frowns of the Girls and the expectant upturned face of the Japanese woman.

'Ah! Well...' he hesitated.

'Yes?'

'Well, not so badly off, as a matter of fact.'

'Not so badly off?' echoed Margaux.

'Well, no. As a matter of fact.'

'Wealthy men are often embarrassed about talking about their money to less well-off people,' said Mrs Yamamoto. 'My husband is like that too.'

'Is he?' frowned Margaux. 'Not so badly off then, Mike?' called my wife.

'No...'

'And you've got an Aston Martin, too?' she smiled. 'I didn't know that.'

Alun made an expressive gesture with his hand behind the Girls.

'You have got a nice A.M., haven't you, Mike.' Then, turning to the girls, he added, 'We motoring connoisseurs call them A.M's for short.'

'Do you now?' nodded Margaux.

'Yep.'

'So, you have a nice A.M., do you, Mike?'

Mike frowned, and then the penny dropped, 'Oh, yes. Lovely A.M. Racing Green, in fact. Don't take her out often, though. Too valuable. Too expensive to repair too, you understand.'

Luckily, he remembered that we had called his Austin Mini an A.M. for a joke. We sighed.

'But as you're very wealthy. Well, that shouldn't really matter, should it?'

'Waste not, want not,' smiled Mike, edging away from the window.

'Wise words Mike,' said my wife. 'I suppose all tycoons are careful like that.'

'I suppose we are. That's how we get so wealthy.'

'And your house is choc-full of valuable paintings, is it?' smiled my wife.

'Well... Some of the better ones might well be quite valuable. Depends on the purchaser really.'

'Really?'

'Yes. Sorry, I'm getting cold.'

Margaux nodded up at him, 'Perhaps it would be wise, after all, to ask Mrs Yamamoto to pop up and have a good look at you. What do you think, Mike?'

'I agree,' nodded the woman. 'A very wise precaution.'

'Yes,' said Margaux, 'Her being an experienced nurse.'

'Ah!' said Mike.

'Yes?'

'No. I honestly think I'll be all right.'

'And you'll explain everything about your collection of valuables, will you?'

'Ah!'

'Yes?'

'Well. Oh, all right!' And with this, Mike shut the window and turned on the shower.

My wife turned to us with a wry smile, 'Why don't you go and prepare Mike a drink while we chat about old times with Mrs Yamamoto.'

'Will do,' smiled Alun, pleased to make such an unexpectedly easy escape.

'You must be tired after all the exertion,' she added.

This sounded ominous, and I hesitated, shooting her a questioning look.

'That's a pity really,' she continued. 'But still...'

'Oh?'

'Yes, but first, a nice midday meal and a drink.'

'And then?' I asked, knowing that something unpleasant was about to be announced.

'And then. When fully restored, you'll be able to get up on the roof and put that satellite dish back. No doubt, the little fellow enjoyed the balloon trip with Mike but will now be impatient to get back to work again.'

'Hey!' cried Mike, flinging open the window again. 'I heard that. I didn't take it. It took me.'

'Same thing,' said Margaux. 'But, on reflection, I suppose it's far too difficult to set up for you. We'd best get a pro in.'

'Yes,' said my wife, 'because they'll be showing the European Judo championship finals tonight.'

'So?' I asked.

'That's my favourite sport,' said my sister-in-law through the open kitchen window.

'Oh!'

'So?' said Margaux. 'If it's too tricky for three grown men to do, we'll have to pay through the nose for a pro to do it.'

This was one of Margaux's favourite tricks, so Alun and I tried to catch Mike's eye and warn him off before he got himself hooked.

'Something wrong?' said my wife, noting our arm-waving antics.

'Oh, No. I was just thinking that you are entirely right. Setting up a satellite dish without the right equipment is nigh on impossible.'

'Is it?' cried Margaux, 'even for a brilliant boffin like you Mike?'

Mike, as usual, took the hook, 'Pffff, of course I can do it. Easy.'

'Oh, God!' I sighed.

'Sorry?' asked my wife, smiling.

'Nothing.'

'Will steak and chips be OK for you?' called the sister-in-law.

We brightened, 'with a nice drop of that Burgundy?' asked Alun.

'All right, but not much. We don't want you three falling off the roof.'

'Are you sure we don't?' murmured my wife.

'A moot point,' agreed Margaux with a laugh.

It was about half-past two when we finished our coffee and set about dealing with the satellite dish.

The girls were headed for the shops to buy food for the evening meal.

'A TV dinner for once,' they had said.

'We'll need some beer then,' said Alun.

'Tonight is a white wine night,' replied my wife.

'Not just a can or two?' pleaded Alun.

'No.'

We sighed because the Girls favoured rather sweet white wine. Not only that but as they drank sparingly, they invariably bought far too little for us to be able to appreciate it to its fullest.

'When we've got the food, we're going to do some window shopping at Grenoble,' announced Margaux. Alun smothered a laugh, and his better half swung around, 'yes?'

'You won't need to take your bank card then, will you.' he smiled.

'Come on, funny man. Let's have it. I presume you are going to try and be comical.'

'Well. Strictly speaking, one does window shopping from outside the shop. You then come home full of great ideas and plans. I suspect that you are going to do your window shopping from the inner side of the window rather than the outer one.'

'And save time by bringing the ideas directly home with you,' I added, having been through this as many times as Alun.

'I have to admit, it does save time,' he nodded.

'Shut up, you two, or we'll window shop for the wine from outside the wine shop too.'

'That's unfair,' scowled Alun.

'Definitely, below the belt,' I added.

'We'll be back at about half-past six, and we'll expect to see the TV working. If not...'

At this, the three women swung out of the house and left us to meditate.

'Oh well,' groaned Alun. 'let's get on with the job then.'

'Come on, Alun!' said Mike, 'this is going to be fun.'

I shot Alun a look full of pity, and, blowing out our cheeks, we followed him up the stairs, dragging the rusty dish.

Well, naturally enough, the satellite dish wouldn't go through the roof window, so we had to let a rope down over the guttering and haul it up.

Mike got up on the roof and sat astride the ridge.

Down in the garden, we knotted the rope around the fixing bracket, and Alun gave the rope a good tug to let him know he could start hoisting.

There was a cry and a scrambling slithering noise.

Then Mike's legs suddenly came into view.

'Hell!' cried Alun. What on earth are you doing, Mike? Quick!

By this time, Mike was hanging dangerously over the plastic guttering.

I shot up the stairs and through the skylight. Then, grabbing the rope that Mike had wound around the chimney and to which he was clutching desperately, I called, 'Hold on, Mike. We'll pull you up.'

Alun slithered down beside me, and we put our joint weights against the rope.

Luckily for us, Mike had wrapped the rope around his wrist, and as we pulled, he gradually slipped up the tiled roof on his bare stomach.

We pulled again, and he slid a few tens of centimetres further up, and he got his knee over the plastic guttering. Then, he managed to get his right foot in the guttering and gave a strong upward push. This propelled him up further and out of immediate danger, but it was accompanied by an ominous cracking. As Mike slid up across the tiles, the guttering went the opposite way. A twelve-foot-long section flew down into the garden, landing directly on the flower bed below.

'Oh, Hell!' cried Alun.



We gazed down at the damage and exchanged looks. 'I'll go down and try and sort it out.' I sighed. 'You two start to get the dish up. Send the rope down as soon as it's free so we can haul the gutter back into place.'

I slipped quickly back through the roof window, down the stairs and out into the garden.

The Irises were all knocked flat, and although I did my best, they refused to stand up again. With a resigned sigh, I cut them all, then stuck them in a big vase I had noticed in the garage. I'd tell the Girls we thought it would be a good idea to decorate the dinner table. My wife would smell a fish, of course, but nothing could be proved.

Most of the other flowers responded more favourably to gentle stretching. I finished the task with the help of a few hidden sticks and a length or two of kitchen string. In a day or two, they would all wilt, of course, but by then, we would have had time to work out an intelligent explanation. Catfights seemed a good answer at the time because Alun was very good at imitating fighting cats.

By the time I climbed back onto the roof, Mike and Alun had bolted up the dish and had pulled the gutter back into place.

It would leak when it rained, but we would be long gone by then, so the risk of any direct retribution was low.

Mike had hunted out some aerial cable connectors from a drawer in the garage and had repaired the cable.

'All we need to do now is to point the dish at the satellite and Bob's-your-uncle.'

Alun scanned the horizon. Where exactly is this satellite of yours, Mike? The one we have to point at. I can't see it.'

Mike shook his head and sighed, 'Of course you can't see it. It's only a few meters in diameter and at about thirty-five-thousand meters altitude.'

'That's interesting. But you know where it is, though?'

'Of course I do,' here he hesitated. 'Well, from my back garden in the UK, I know exactly where to aim. Just above the village church steeple, in fact.'

I nodded, 'So, you don't know where it is.'

'Well... Not exactly.'

'So... Pointing at it presents us with a good number of options then,' I said.

'How long have we got?' asked Alun. 'Before the Judo Finals, I mean.'

'About six hours.'

'So... That's six hours divided by three hundred and sixty degrees horizontally and a hundred and eighty vertically.' He frowned, 'how long does that give us per trial?'

'About four seconds per test,' I said.

'And how long does it take for the system to synchronise and show the picture on the screen?'

Mike thought about this and hummed and hah'd and rubbed his chin a bit, 'about six to ten seconds, I should think. Roughly, of course.'

'And when does the homeward flight from Lyon leave?' asked Alun. 'Roughly, of course.'

'In about four hours,' I said. 'We'll have time for a few beers in the lounge too.'

'Let's get going then. See you, Mike...' we smiled.  
'Don't be stupid. You two always give in so easily.'  
sighed Mike. To start with, we know the little devil is a little south of south-south-east, and then a bit above the horizon.' He shook his head. 'Just above the mountains, I expect.'

'Have you got your bank card for the tickets, Alun?'  
'Yes.'

'I honestly don't know how you two ever got anywhere in your careers,' sighed Mike.

'By making the right decisions at the right time,' retorted Alun.

'You two make me sick.'

'Worry does that to me,' I said.

'Me too,' agreed Alun.

Mike sighed, 'So?'

'Well... There remains another option,' I said.

'Although it might be considered revolutionary and a little risky. Anyway, it might still be worthy of a technical expert's opinion.'

'Come on, brainy,' said Mike. 'Let's have it.'

'Well, we could always try pointing our dish in the same direction as the neighbour's.'

'Well done, Holmes,' laughed Alun.

'Don't be ridiculous!' sighed Mike. 'The neighbour's house is not at all in the right direction.'

Alun and I exchanged looks.

'I'll explain, shall I?' said Alun.

Then the penny dropped, 'OH! Yes, of course...' cried Mike. 'Silly me...'

'Exactly...'

'Come on,' called Alun. 'I'll go down and put the telly on and give you a shout as soon as the picture comes on.'

After half an hour of adjusting and shouting, and shouting and then adjusting, we discovered something interesting. Each time the image appeared, Alun watched the pictures a bit more, then strolled leisurely out to call up. However, by that time, we had already shifted the direction again.

About halfway through this initial phase, he came out with something odd decorating his upper lip.

'What's that on your lip, Alun. You not drinking the last cans of beer, are you?'

Alun's hand shot to his mouth. 'No.'

'So what's that white foam on your lip, then?'

'Toothpaste,' he replied.

'Toothpaste!' shouted Mike, 'If you drink all the beer, I'll burn your...' here he came up against the obstacle of not knowing what to say next. 'don't do it.'

'Toothpaste,' repeated Alun.

'My eye,' said Mike.

After a little more trial and error, with error taking a strong lead, I went down. I stood in the middle of the garden while Alun watched and shouted to me, then I called up to Mike.

This method did not work much better either, so after an hour of cursing and sweating, we decided that we were in trouble.

'What time did you say the flight leaves?' asked Alun.

'Wait a minute,' Mike shouted down, 'there's an old portable TV in our bedroom cupboard.'

'So?' I shouted back.

'Well, go and bring it up here. On the roof. That'll avoid shouting.'

I glanced at Alun, and we pulled faces.

Anyway, we lifted the small old white Grundig up onto the roof, and Alun sat with it on his knees while Mike messed about with the dish again.

'The other dishes seem to be pointing just above that jagged peak over there. Let's try that, shall we.'

'What time did you say the flight left?' whispered Alun.

'We've still got an hour,' I reassured him, and he nodded back.

Mike sighed again, 'no guts. No guts at all.'

'We prefer keeping our guts inside our bodies,' retorted Alun. 'So, get on with it.'

Mike made a puffing noise and gazed skywards.

'Have you any idea why the old sis-in-L is so enthusiastic about watching the European Judo championship finals, Mike?' I asked.

'Probably because she forced her kids to do Judo when they were far too small to say no,' he replied.

'Well, that may be true,' I agreed. 'But there is another reason.'

'Is there? That's great then.'

'Yes. She likes to keep up with things,' I said. 'Having been a member of the French national team for five years, which is quite understandable, I think.'

'What?'

'Interesting, eh? Not only that, but she has a fourth Dan and is still coach to the regional champions.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. So, she would not appreciate missing the program, as you can readily understand.'

Alun nodded in agreement, 'It's also just possible that she might forget herself. In a bout of anger, I mean. Were that to happen, I wouldn't be surprised that she directed that fourth Dan anger at a specific person. The one who had failed to complete the perfectly simple job of supplying her with what she desired.'

'Especially if that person had declared that he could do the job with his fingers up his nose,' I nodded.

'I never said that!' cried Mike.

'Well, you certainly gave that impression,' frowned Alun. 'What would you say?' he added, turning to me.

'Absolutely. But perhaps "with-one-hand-behind-my-back", was the impression she got,'

'You may be right there.'

'Oh, shut up, you two.'

'Will do.'

'Anyway, it's your damn wife's fault, Alun. She tricked me.'

'Yes. She is pretty good at that sort of thing, I agree. But the Sis-in-L is not interested in all that. She just wants her TV operational... tonight.'

Mike screwed up his nose and frowned. 'Better get on with the job then.'

'Good idea,' said Alun with a wry smile in my direction.

So, we messed about like this for another half hour, gradually homing in on our target and then homing out again.

Then suddenly, a voice called from below, 'Hello. What are you three doing up there?' It was Mrs Yamamoto.

'Oh! Hello Mrs Yamamoto. We're watching the television,' called back Alun.

'Oh!'

'Have a nice afternoon,' called Mike, and we all waved and smiled.

This naturally put the woman out, and she was obviously at a loss as to what to say next. So, after studying us in silent astonishment for a few instants, she turned and walked away.

'God knows what she will be thinking?' said Alun.

'About Mike's whatsit probably,' I said.

'Shut up, you two,' sighed Mike.

Then suddenly and entirely unexpectedly, the picture jumped up on the TV screen, 'Freeze!' cried Alun.

'For god's sake, don't move a muscle.'

'Quick. Get the pencil and mark the mast. Quick,' shouted Mike. 'I can't hold this damn thing stable all afternoon, you know.'

'The pencil? Which pencil would that be?' I asked.

'Oh, God! Do I have to think of everything? For god's sake, go down and get a pencil. Quick.'

I scrambled across the roof and through the skylight, then returned with the required object.

'OK. Now, put a line on each side of the bracket here, and one on this inclination indicator. Just there.'

This done, he gradually tightened the retaining bolts, and we let out a mutual sigh as we laid back against the sun-warmed tiled surface.

The "simple and easy task" had taken us two and a half hours, perched on the roof in the sun.

Then suddenly, a man's head appeared through the skylight of the neighbouring house, which was semi-detached to ours.

'Hi. Having fun, lads?'

We smiled at the man, 'Just finished,' called Mike.

'Well done. Doing it without proper tools is a brilliant job. You deserve a drink.'

'A man after my own heart,' called back Alun.

'Would a drop of iced Alsace white go down all right?'

'It would,' we echoed.

'Stay where you are then. I'll bring it up.'

We exchanged appreciative looks, 'A man of the world, obviously,' nodded Alun.

'Exactly,' I agreed.

A short time later, Frantz reappeared and handed up a basket holding all the necessary equipment.

So, there we sat. Two against the chimney and two astride the roof ridge, sipping our iced wine, the TV screen flickering happily to itself in the background.

The view of the jagged mountain summits ten kilometres to the south was breathtaking as they gradually pinkened in the setting sun.

Behind us, a few hang-gliders were making their way down to base camp, and the distant noise from the "Fete des Montgolfiers" wafted to us on the light breeze.

Frantz filled our glasses in a proper neighbourly manner, which means, to overflowing, 'cheers, lads,' he smiled. 'Best to avoid annoying a Black Belt whenever possible,' he smiled.

'Exactly.'

'I expect you'll be going up to watch the hang-gliders taking off from the plateau tomorrow.'

'We were debating on it,' I admitted.

'Well, if you are, there's an interesting walk back down you can take. You'll need someone to drive you up, though.'

'Really?'



'It comes down across the cliff face and through the forest. Along the old postman's track, in fact. In the old days, the poor man had to walk all the way up to the village every day.'

'That's about a two thousand five hundred foot climb every morning. Must have kept him in good shape,' I said.

'Yep. Until the day, one mid-winter, he slipped in the deep snow on the way back down. It took all week to find the body.'

'I bet he wasn't in such good shape after that,' said Alun.

'Exactly. Also, the man's body was frozen solid in exactly the shape the fall had left it in. So, they had to snap a leg and an arm to make him manageable.'

'That must have been a pleasant job,' frowned, Mike. Frantz laughed, 'Being midsummer, I don't expect there'll be that much snow tomorrow. You could slip along the ledge and take a look at the waterfall on the way down, too.'

'Ah?' I said.

'There's a ledge halfway down the cliff where the waterfall has hollowed out a deep pool in the rock. The place is called the Hermits bathtub because that's what it was at one time.'

'Really?' Said Mike, sipping his wine and staring at the cliff.

'Yes. In the mid, eighteen-hundreds, a hermit lived in a cave on the ledge. You can still see the place. Nice deep overhang and well protected from the wind. Look.'

We followed his outstretched arm and could just make out a dark patch against the grey rock wall.

'There's a tricky bit halfway along where you have to skirt around an old tree, but otherwise, it's easy. Unless you're scared of heights, that is.'

At this moment, a voice called from below. Hearing it, Frantz dived below the level of the ridge and flattened himself against the roof, 'My Wife! I'm not here.'

We nodded.

'Have any of you seen Frantz?' she called.

Alun smiled down, 'Oh, yes. We just spotted him going around the side of the house over there. He was looking for you. If you hurry, you'll just catch him.'

'Thanks', she called and hurried off.

'Quick, Frantz,' I said. 'Go the other way around, and you'll meet halfway. We'll hide the glasses in the back garden; you can collect them later.'

'Thanks. See you,' and the man crawled across the roof and disappeared through his skylight.

'Time we were getting down ourselves,' said Alun.

But as we started to load the glasses into the basket, the bottle slipped from Mike's hand and shot down the tiled roof.

Once it had gathered plenty of momentum, it collided with the TV, which in turn began to slip.

'Oh hell,' cried Alun, dropping the basket but recovering it just in time.

I scrambled and slithered towards the TV as it began to slide. Luckily, I just had time to catch the end of the power cord and stop it from going any further.

'That was a close one,' whistled Mike. 'Hold on, and I'll come down and grab it.'

However, at the same moment, the mains cord freed itself from the socket. With a squeak, cable and TV parted company, and the TV shot off down the roof. It hit the guttering we had replaced, and together with it, off they went together, down towards the garden. As we watched in horror, the TV made a B-line for the pond, where it ended with a splash.

'Oh, hell!' shouted Alun. 'Quick, get it out before the whole thing fills with water.'

'Why can't you be careful, for once, Mike. Now What?'

'Come on,' I said, 'let's see what can be salvaged.'

'Stay up here, Alun,' said Mike, 'and haul the guttering back into place. We'll deal with the TV.'

We waded into the pond and extracted the dripping TV. As we lifted it, brown water cascaded from hundreds of little ventilation holes.

'No hope,' sighed Mike, 'The thing's full of muddy water. That'll dry, but the mud will stop the thing working.'

'So?' I asked.

'I suppose we'll have to take it to pieces and wash the whole circuit board. Then dry it.'

'And we'll get all that done in the next half hour, just in time for the Girls' return,' I said.

'Oh no. It'll take hours.'

I turned to Alun, who had just returned from putting the guttering back, 'It's time we were heading for the airport. Mike is going to stay and explain.'

'Are you two mad!' exclaimed Mike. 'Do you realise what will happen?'

'That's why we're going,' sighed Alun.

'Look,' said Mike. 'All we have to do is dry it a bit, then make certain no one plugs it in.'

'It'll go up in flames if they do, will it?'

'Probably. Not instantly, of course, but after a while, yes.'

'And how, pray, tell us, are you going to dry it.' I asked.

'With a hairdryer, of course.'

Alun and I exchanged glances.

'And that'll be enough?'

'Oh no. I doubt if it will ever work again.'

'Your "Sis-in-L" doesn't watch judo in bed with this TV, does she?' asked Alun.

'Possibly when she has no guests,' I said.

'Then she might go up in flame with the TV.'

Mike nodded, 'that's possible too.'

'So?'

'I'll cut the plug off.'

'And what if she just changes the cable?'

'Ah!'

'Yes. Any other ideas?'

'I could smash the screen.'

I sighed, 'Yes, that would work, but mightn't she just spot that. Before we leave, I mean...'

'Yes. Not such a great idea, Mike,' said Alun.

'I know. I'll use the old pin-trick,' he said.

'The old pin-trick?'

'Yes. You know.'

'No, I don't.'

'Don't you two have any technical education at all?'

'Clearly, we lack certain old-school techniques,' I agreed.

'Well, it's easy,' smiled Mike. 'You take a pin...'

'Which is why it is called the "old-pin-trick", I suppose,' suggested Alun.

'Does it rely on the pins being old?' I asked.

'Shut up. Well, you take your pin. Old or new, and you stick it through the cable to short-circuit the mains. Then you snip off the two ends of the pin so that it's invisible.'

'Ah! I see,' I smiled. 'Then if she plugs it in, it'll blow a fuse or trip the circuit breakers.'

'Exactly.' Said Mike. 'Clever, eh?'

We nodded approval, 'and nobody would ever suspect that the trouble could be with the cable.'

'Exactly,' smiled Mike. 'An old pro's trick.'

'An old con man's trick, really,' nodded Alun.

'That's another way of looking at it,' I said.

'And if she's really very fond of it, she'll take it to a local repairman,' said Mike.

'And being an old pro too, he'll spot the pin, and we'll get blamed.'

'No,' Mike, who knew precisely how the trained technical mind functions, shook his head. 'He won't try to spot it. He'll keep it on the shelf for a few days without looking at it. Then he'll announce that the thing is irreparable and sell her a new one.'

'A real pro,' I said.

'That's how repairmen make a living nowadays,' smiled Mike. 'Things last far too long as it is, without trying to repair them so that they last even longer.'

'So, in fact, we'll be upholding local industry. I feel better about this already,' I laughed.

'Me too,' agreed Alun. 'Get on with it then, Mike. While you're applying the old pin-job, I'll go and get the hairdryer.'

True to their word, the Girls returned on schedule, laden with bags, overflowing with window-shopping. 'Show us the results of your afternoon's work,' frowned my wife, 'then we'll show you the result of ours.'

The "Sis-in-L" checked the TV and specifically the channel which was to show the evening's Judo event. 'Well done, lads,' she said, handing us a heavy carrier bag. 'For you.'

The bag held several good bottles of wine and enough beer for a week.

'Thanks,' I said. Are we allowed an early aperitif?

'It was absolute hell up there on the burning tiles,' added Alun. 'So much so that at one stage, Mike almost fainted because of the heat.'

'I suppose you had to revive him with beer, which is why there is a glass and an empty beer can, hidden behind the TV.'

'Come here, Alun,' cried Mike. 'I knew that's what you were up to down here alone. Toothpaste indeed!'

'Toothpaste!' frowned my wife.

'A technical term,' I said. 'It's a sort of gunge specialists put on satellite dish cable joints. Mike always has a tube on him when he travels.'

'Stop talking rot,' sneered Mike. 'I don't know why I put up with you idiots.'

'Neither do I,' smiled my wife.

Alun skipped behind the sofa, carrying the carrier bag. 'That can of beer looked so lonely, all alone in the fridge,' he smiled, 'I took pity on it.'

'You'll look lonely too, once I've locked you outside.'

'With the beer and wine?' he laughed. 'I'll survive. Here,' and he handed Mike a bottle of beer.'

Mike grumbled and headed for the glass's cupboard, 'Next time, I'll be more careful of your helpful suggestions.'

'You've been saying that for more than forty years, Mike,' laughed Margaux. 'I'd give up the struggle if I were you.'

Mike sighed and poured himself a glass of beer.

'Hey! Aren't you forgetting the "weary travellers three"?' called the "Sis-in-L". 'That means us.'

The Girls prepared a lovely meal, and no one mentioned the bouquet of irises I had placed on the table.

Once the time was right, the TV was powered up, and we sat and watched men and women throwing each other about on a pale green floor, for about an hour.

The "Sis-in-L" explained everything in great detail, and I have to admit that by halfway through, we started to understand what was happening.

'I wouldn't want to meet that blond girl down a dark alleyway at night,' remarked Alun.

My wife turned to him, 'Yes, you would,' and burst into laughter.

'He'd have to practice his "Wasa-matter" and "Ipomea" throws before, though,' chuckled Margaux.

'It's "Waza-Ari" and "Ipon" if you please, sneered Alun.

'Well done,' said the "Sis-in-L". 'You're learning.' Then, turning to Mike, she said, 'While we're waiting for the second part of the program, I'll get the dessert.'

Put the flowers on the shelf above the TV, Mike, and then go and bring in a bottle of champagne from the garage.'

Now, that's not something one has to say twice to Mike. He was on his feet in a fraction of a second. Then, before we had time to draw a breath, the flowers were moved, and he had disappeared through the back door.

Unfortunately, however, the flowers seemed to want to remain with him. As the back door closed, the unstable vase slowly started to topple over.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun, jumping up and making a dash for the vase. Unbelievably, by stretching his long arms, he somehow reached it just in time. However, the laws of mechanics being what they are, the rules of physics must be obeyed. An unstable state requires a stabilising force, or else it stays unstable. In this case, no stabilising force was forthcoming. Furthermore, we were able to prove conclusively that brain waves do not transmit physical forces across free space.

Alun lurched forward, holding the vase high above him. He collided with the TV, which went over backwards, followed by Alun, then the vase, and finally the contents, including the water.

The latter cascaded over Mike and, from there, onto the exposed back of the TV.

This was followed by a brief high-pitched whistling noise, then a crackling and the whole place went Black.

At the same time, Mike called from behind us, 'Got it... Oh hell!' This was followed by a crashing and bursting-bottle like noise. 'Christ! My bum!'



A light sprung up as the "Sis-in-L" found her phone. In this stark light, I saw a pile of rubble in the corner, which must have been the Alun-TV-flower assembly. Closer to us, it showed the two girls leaning back on the sofa, red-faced with laughter.

'I'll go and put the circuit breaker back on,' I said, jumping to my feet. 'Are you going to stay there, Alun?'

There was a growling noise from the corner, 'Oh, you're coming out then. Good,' laughed Margaux.

I stepped over Mike, who was sitting on the kitchen floor in a puddle of foaming champagne. 'I'd get another bottle if I were you. That one looks as though someone has already opened it.'

He made to grab my leg, but I was through the door before he could even make a snide remark.

In the dark, I felt my way along the rough breeze-block wall in the garage. Finally, after some searching, my hand found what was obviously the electric panel-board.

A bit more feeling brought my fingers to what must be the main circuit breaker. I gave this a firm push, and the place sprung into light again.

That's better, called Mike. Christ, what a mess.'

Then suddenly, there was the same high-pitched whistling again, followed by a crack, and the place went black once more.

There was a new crashing noise in the kitchen followed by a wail, 'Oh hell. Straight on my bum again!'

Mike had stepped on the champagne bottle and managed to fall directly on it for the second time. I believe that the record holds to this very day.

I shouted through the open door, 'Unplug the TV, Alun. The water must have short-circuited the damn thing.'

'You well-nigh short-circuited me too, switching the juice back on like that without warning.'

There was a crash followed by a peal of laughter from the Girls.

'Unplugged it OK, then?' I called.

Alun's reply will not be recorded here. Suffice it to say that it carried with it the proof of many years of experience of swearing in numerous languages.

I felt my way back to the circuit breakers, 'Can I switch on now?'

'Go ahead,' called the "Sis-in-L".

The place sprung into light, and as I returned to survey the damage, there was a sharp knock at the front door.

'Can you go?'

'OK,'

Outside stood Franz, 'Everything OK? We heard a big crash.' He stepped inside, 'Great Gods! What happened?'

Margaux stood, 'Hello Frantz. Alun didn't like the TV presenter, so he threw the vase of flowers at the TV.'

Frantz nodded and pulled a face. 'The box looks well and truly dead.' Then he glanced at the "Sis-in-L".

'You can come and watch the end of the Judo with us if you like.'

'Thanks, Frantz,' she smiled. 'Don't worry, I've got a spare TV in the bedroom.'

The three of us froze, and Frantz shot us a worried look.

'Well...' started Alun.

'As a matter of fact,' took up Mike, 'it had a sort of accident.'

'A sort of accident?' frowned my wife. 'What sort of accident?'

'Well, you see, it sort of fell off the roof, in fact.'

'It "sort of" fell off the roof!' mouthed the "Sis-in-L".

'My TV?'

'And into the pond, actually,' he ended.

Margaux looked more astonished than I had seen her look for a long time, 'Oh! Well, that's interesting.' She nodded, 'But let me make certain I've got the facts right. So, the TV fell off the roof and into the pond, did it?'

'That's right,' Mike brightened.

My wife rubbed her sister warmly on the shoulder, 'Well, that's got that cleared up then. These things happen, I suppose.' She then turned to me. 'I know it's going to show just how ignorant women are about technical matters, but could you clarify something.'

I nodded.

'Would it be too much to ask what your three idiots were doing with the TV on the roof?'

'Watching TV,' said Frantz, 'I was with them.'

The three women exchanged glances.

Before things could worsen, Frantz glanced at his watch, 'Come on, ladies. The second half starts in thirty seconds.'

"Sis-in-L" was up and across the room in a flash, 'Bring the bottles of champagne, Margaux. They can have beer.'

'Once they've cleared up their mess,' sneered my wife.

As the Girls followed her, carrying the last two bottles, my wife turned back.

'You'll explain later, no doubt?'

We smiled a few lame smiles and nodded.

Alun turned to me as the door closed, 'When does the next flight leave?'

'We've just got time to catch it,' I said. 'Mike will clear up and explain,' nodded Alun, heading for the front door.



## Chapter 4 - The Tennis Racket

**W**e were astonished at how little the two new TV sets cost us. What's more, divided by three, it hardly hurt at all.

What had hurt, though, had been the Girls' repeatedly referring to our so-called failings. They visibly gloated on them in a thoughtless and positively unhealthy manner.

The fact that the events had not been failings made it even more challenging to put up with. Our evaluation of the occurrences being due to mere accidents was, needless to say, rejected out of hand. 'You're to blame anyway,' grumbled Alun, 'that's what happens when you trick an innocent amateur into doing a professional's job.'

'Exactly,' I agreed, 'and he feels inadequate when he can't master the job. He becomes overstressed, loses his patience and throws televisions off roofs.' 'And into ponds,' added Alun.

'I did nothing of the sort,' cried Mike. 'And I am certainly not inadequate, although you two certainly appear to be.'

At this point, Mike paused to think, a thing which always takes a little time. He then went on, 'I'll slightly correct that statement,' he sneered unpleasantly. 'You two are inadequate, except when it comes to talking the most utter rubbish. Then I admit you're both highly competent practitioners.'

'You usually employ the term "Gibberish", Mike,' I said.

'Yes. Gibberish is perhaps a better term,' nodded Mike, 'thank you.'

'My pleasure.'

'Well, I didn't throw it,' said Alun, ignoring this and turning to me. 'Did you?'

'No.'

'There you are then. It must have been you, Mike.'

'I did not throw it. It slipped.'

'And then threw itself into the pond.'

'Televisions do not throw themselves. They're inert objects,' he sighed.

'Possibly. But you pointed it in the right direction,' continued Alun.

'And any amount of sighing loudly can't change that,' I added.

'Don't talk rot, you two,' he said.

'Gibberish would again fit nicely there,' I suggested, 'or possibly "drivel".'

Mike sighed again, 'Anyway, who was supposed to be holding the damn thing? Tell me that,' he smirked, obviously feeling that he had marked a decisive point here.

'That's a nice way to talk of a deceased being,' I frowned.

'For god's sake, you idiots. It was not a being; it was a pile of semi-obsolete electronics. I repeat, who was supposed to be holding it?'

'You were,' I smiled and wiggled my eyebrows.

This was a lie, of course. However, Mike's memory is never excellent, even at the best of times. Consequently, I felt it was an excellent evasive tactic.

'Ah!' he frowned. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Hum.'

Margaux nodded, 'That's as may be, Alun. But all the same, Mike didn't pour the vase of stagnant water down the back of the other TV, did he? That was your contribution to the evening's entertainment, wasn't it, Alun?'

'Exactly,' Mike brightened. 'I was in the kitchen.'

'Having set the timebomb ticking,' snarled Alun, 'anyway, it wasn't stagnant.'

'By the way, did you get all the bits of champagne bottle out of your hindquarters, Mike?' smiled Margaux.

Mike closed his eyes and sighed for the third time.

'You should be careful about all that sighing you're doing, Mike,' I said, 'It might become a habit.'

Alun nodded, 'People have been known to die of over-sighing,' he said. 'It weakens the rear tongue muscles.'

'And your tongue flops about limply and gets tangled up in things,' I contributed.

'Apparently, it can trigger strangulation of the goal bladder,' nodded Alun.

'As discovered by President De Goal?' I said.

'Exactly.'

'A nasty way to go,' I nodded, frowning.

'Shut up,' growled Mike.

We realised that the sooner the screens were glowing and flickering anew, the better. So off we went as soon as breakfast had been satisfactorily completed.



To be more truthful, we went as soon as we were ordered out of the house, which equates to the same thing.

Once the TVs were selected, paid for and safely loaded into the car boot, we decided to permit ourselves a wander around the big sports shop across the way.

We thence spent an agreeable hour fiddling with mountain climbing equipment, trekking gear, windsurfing boards and an array of highly desirable but completely unnecessary technical articles.

On the way out, though, I spotted an interesting-looking basket at the end of the tennis section.

This particular basket was overflowing with the previous season's test rackets.

Naturally, they were all badly scratched and dented, but one, in particular, caught my eye. I snatched it up. 'Hell!' I whistled.

On reflection, I'm not sure that one can whistle while saying "Hell," but we'll let it go at that for the present. 'What now?' sighed Mike, 'What rubbish are you going to vomit forth this time?'

'Or Gibberish,' suggested Alun.

'See the price?' I pointed at the red sticker, and they leaned over.

'Thirty euros. So?'

I swished the racket through the air above my head, then spun it in my hand. 'This just happens to be one of the most expensive rackets around. It has ultra-high carbon fibre content.'

'So?' said Alun.

'So, I'm having it. It would cost four hundred euros or more, new and strung like this one.'

'But it isn't new. It's a damaged wreck.'

I made an impatient noise and swished the racket again, this time decapitating a clothes dummy propped behind me.

'Oops. 'Put its head back, Mike.'

'Please...'

'Please, Mike.'

'So that if a salesman comes around, I'll get the blame.'

'That's it,' I admitted.

'Quick thinking,' smiled Alun.

'Mind you,' I added, 'If it happened to be a salesgirl, one of the sporty ones, we could let her put it back. Then we could ogle a bit.'

'That's a point worth meditating on,' agreed Alun.

'But you don't need a racket,' said Mike, easing the head into place and deliberately leaving it looking in the wrong direction.'

'And you haven't played for twenty years,' added Alun.

'I'll start playing again.'

'I wonder what your better half will say,' mused Alun.

'I'll say it'll keep me out of the pubs.'

'There aren't any pubs here in France,' said Mike.

'Can you lend me thirty euros, Mike?'

'No,' said Mike resolutely.

'Oh, come on. That way, I could say that you gave me the racket for my birthday.'

'Lending means that the money would be repaid,'

'Naturally.'

'But you wouldn't repay me.'

'Hell! That's bad form, Mike.'

'No. That's the pure and simple truth.'

'What do you take me for.'

'You. I take you for You.'

'You're not very sporting, Mike.'

'That's why I'm so rich with an Aston Martin in the garage and a house full of valuable paintings.'

'I'm disappointed in you, Mike. What about you, Alun?'

'See you later,' said Alun striding away.

Once home, we set up the TVs and, that finished, sat down for the midday meal.

I bore the inevitable snide remarks about my new racket with dignity. 'You'll see,' I contented myself as a closing sally.

As the Girls left to do the shopping, Margaux made what she clearly considered a clever quip. I'll avoid mentioning it as it is simply not worth the ink.

Well, as soon as the front door had slammed, we took our places on the sofa and diligently set about testing out the TV remote control.

While Alun zapped, I picked up my new wonder racket and spun it.

'Won't you need a press?' asked Mike.

We stared at him.

'You haven't played much tennis recently then, Mike,' said Alun.

'Why do you say that?'

'Simply because no one uses racket presses these days.'

'I don't see why not,' said Mike.

'Because rackets don't use wood anymore.'

'Ah!'

'They don't warp, you see.'

'Mind you,' said Alun, 'warped rackets did spice up the game a bit. One was never quite sure which direction the ball would take.'

'When you play Alun,' smirked Mike, 'even with modern technology, that's still the case.'

'Very amusing.'

'I was always particularly impressed by his tactics,' I added, 'especially the trick of placing the ball on the adjoining court.'

'Yep. That really spiced things up. Especially if the other game was an important one played by seriously competitive players,' smiled Mike.

'Mind you,' I added, 'Mike has an excuse for not knowing about modern tennis racket technology. After all, it is quite a recent evolution.'

Mike sat up and nodded happily as I continued.

'Yes. The new technology has only been around for fifty years or so.'

'Very funny,' he snorted.

'This new carbon fibre structure is ultra-light,' I smiled as I swished about.

'Mind the telly,' warned Alun.

'My head too,' added Mike, ducking.

'They're a bit fragile though,' continued Alun. 'That's no doubt why they're selling them off cheap.'

'That's no doubt why Wimbledon champions use them,' I retorted.

'Nice colour though,' said Mike, 'I like the logo too.'

'That's not a Logo, Mike,' said Alun, 'It's a scratch.'

'The addition of the carbon makes them light, extremely rigid and exceptionally responsive,' I quoted from the advertisement I had read earlier.

'You still have to hit the ball, though,' said Alun.

'In the right direction,' added Mike.

'Mind you, there are only three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle,' smiled Alun. 'So, if you keep at it long enough, you're certain to hit the place you're aiming at sooner or later.'

I stood up, spinning the racket in my hand, then swished it about me in the sitting room.

'Watch out for the telly,' repeated Alun.

'This thing is a marvel,' I smiled. 'I can't wait to get out on the court.'

'We usually seem to end up In rather than On court,' chuckled Alun.

We laughed, and as we did, I tried out a service with a flurry and a swish.

As I threw the racket backwards for the second trial, Alun jumped, 'Watch out!'

There was a crash and a grating noise.

The racket hit the overhanging mezzanine, splintered, and drooped limply.

'I told you carbon fibre was fragile,' laughed Alun from the floor onto which he had rolled, holding his sides.

'You won't need a press now,' smirked Mike...

'Oh hell!'

'Only thirty euros down the drain,' shrugged Mike. 'It would have been four hundred if it had been new. So, look on the bright side.'

I looked down at the shattered and drooping remains of the racket.

'It hasn't got any sides at all now, let alone a bright one.'

Alun was, as usual, in contortions of laughter on the floor. However, even in his present condition, he managed to lift his arm and point.

'Look,' he roared.

'Oh hell!' I groaned, raising my eyes.

'Oops,' Added Mike.

Across the ceiling, a thick black mark traced out the trajectory of the racket head.

I drew over a chair and jumped up to have a closer look. However, I was still holding my drooping racket, and this was assuredly a bad move.

As I jumped up, my drooping head caught the underneath of the seat and yanked it backwards. Then, as I landed where the centre should have been, my feet only found the outer edge. My downward movement flipped the chair backwards and upwards. I fell forward, snatching the racket with me, and the combined actions sent the chair spinning through the air toward the brand-new television screen.

'No!' I screamed.

However, the chair listened not.

With a dull thud, the back legs hit the screen and then disappeared through it with a crunching sound.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike.

Alun said nothing because he was rolling about, spluttering with laughter, as usual.

He is a man one simply cannot rely on in times of strife.

There was the tiniest wisp of smoke, a metallic clicking sound, and all the electricity went off.

As for me, I continued in approximately the same direction. Luckily, I was headed towards the sofa, which was good news. However, the bad news was that the tennis racket had preceded me thence.

My head came down on it with a crunch, and I leapt to my feet, clutching my forehead.

'Oh, God!'

'The circuit breaker's tripped,' volunteered Mike.

'Really?!' I sighed.

'Yep.'

'My head,' I groaned.

Mike inspected it, 'Lovely. You'll have a nice moon-shaped bruise.'

'Brilliant.'

Alun had by now got to his knees, 'Oh god! Look what you've done.'

We turned and gazed at the chair sticking through the new TV screen.

'What time does the next plane leave Alun?' I asked.

'We're too late.'

'Quick then. Back to the TV shop before the Girls get back.'

'We'll each draw some cash out, so they won't spot the expenditure on the bank card data,' said Alun.

'Each?' cried Mike, 'It was entirely his fault.'

'Come on, Mike. This is a moment for solidarity,' I frowned. 'You're not going to let a friend down in his moment of need.'

'Yes, I am.'

'I'll make up some terrible incriminating story about you if you fail me,' I threatened. 'The girls will believe it, and you'll be shunned forever.'

'You're a disgusting, menacing thug,' he cried.

'This is a simple business arrangement,' I countered as he blew out his angry red cheeks.

Alun pointed at the ceiling, 'what do we do about that?'

'Oh, that'll come off with a soapy sponge,' said Mike.

'I'll do it while you're loading the ruins in the boot.'

'We'll dump it at the tip on the way,' said Alun.

It should be remembered that we all had a great deal of experience concerning "tips". Those readers who have followed our previous adventures will by now recognise this.

However, when we returned to fetch Mike, he stood, hands on hips, staring at the ceiling.

We followed his gaze.

'Oh Hell,' I cried.

'The old sponge trick didn't work as expected then,' suggested Alun.

In place of the narrow black track, we now discovered a wide brown one.

'What time did you say the plane left? Any plane, any destination....' I asked.

'Look,' said Mike, 'the only solution is to repaint the ceiling. That'll only take an hour.'

'Brilliant.' I said, raising my eyebrows.

'I'm the only one competent enough to get the job done quickly without damaging something else. I'll do it while you two get the new TV. Come on.'

Alun and I exchanged worried glances. We had no choice but to hope for the best.

When we got back, we were amazed to find the ceiling painted and nothing damaged at all.

'Brilliant, Mike.'

'I told you that you can always count on me.'

'I know you told us that, but it has not always proved to be reliable.'

'Shut up.'

'I think we deserve a beer, don't you,' smiled Alun.



We agreed.

As we sat with our legs stretched out, sipping our drinks, I suddenly started. 'Hell!'

'Now what?' sighed Alun.

'How do we explain away the smell of fresh paint?'

'Ah!'

'Exactly.'

Mike sighed. 'You two have absolutely no imagination or forethought, have you.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that when I said you can always count on me in times of strife, you can.'

'Can we?'

'Yes.'

'And pray, how have you solved this insoluble smell problem, professor?'

'Have you smelt a solution,' I smiled.

Mike stood and slid open the main patio windows. He stepped outside and returned carrying a one-meter square panel of wood.

'Voila.'

We looked from the panel back to each other. We were at a loss for words.

Mike smiled, 'clever, eh?'

I rubbed my chin and pulled a face, 'You might like to explain, as, for the moment, your solution leaves us a bit in the dark.'

'Well, this is the present that the three of us made for your sister-in-law this afternoon.'

'We did what?'

'We painted a picture for her. In thanks of her kind hospitality.'

He spun the board to exhibit an incredibly gaudy, childlike painting of a field, a line of trees and mountains.

'My God!' cried Alun.

'Good, eh. You recognise the view from the windows, of course.'

'And all done in the same smelly paint,' cried Alun.

'Brilliant.' I clapped my hands. 'I had no idea you could paint.'

'He can't,' said Alun.

'No,' laughed Mike. 'I agree with you for once. But they won't dare to get rid of it while we're here, will they.'

'Which will explain the smell.' I laughed.

'We all deserve another beer,' laughed Alun. So, we propped the horrible painting up on the sideboard and went in search of the desired refreshment.

Half an hour later, the three women stood in front of the panel as if transformed into pillars of salt.

After a long silence, Margaux found her tongue.

'Honestly, it's impossible to find words capable of expressing the intensity of my feelings,' she said.

'Likewise,' agreed my wife.

The Sis-in-L nodded and made a low mumbling noise.

She was clearly under the influence of a profoundly stirring emotion.

'I'm pleased you like it,' smiled Mike. 'We hoped you would, didn't we?'

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'Don't touch it, though. The paint's still wet,' I said

'Best not to move it to its permanent position for a day or two,' added Mike.

The three women exchanged glances. We guessed where that permanent position would be. Indeed, we had left the other TV there only an hour or so earlier. 'I expect the smell will have faded by tomorrow,' Mike smiled. 'We enjoyed doing it, didn't we.'

Alun and I nodded enthusiastically.

'Would you like us to put a hook on the wall for it?'

The sis-in-L shook herself out of the salt-pillar state and almost jumped, 'Oh no. No. Don't worry.'

'It'll be no trouble. Where's the drill?'

'Alun...' said Margaux, 'Why not let her get used to the painting first. Then she can decide the best place for it.'

'Oh, OK. What about an aperitif?'

This provided momentary relief from the shock of seeing the painting for the first time.

'What's that bruise on your forehead,' asked my wife as she sipped her martini.

'Bruise?' My hand involuntarily caressed the swollen moon-shaped bump.

Margaux came over and inspected it. 'How did you manage that?'

With a mischievous smile, Mike piped up, 'Wouldn't it be wise to ask Mrs Yamamoto to have a look at it? It might get infected.'

Alun, always one to push a sinking man under the water, nodded, 'A very wise precaution. Shall I pop around and ask?'

'Shut up, you two.'

'So?' said my wife, 'explain.'

I hesitated. In the euphoria of solving the problems, I had neglected to think up a convincing excuse for

that part of our adventure. Luckily, Alun can always be counted on in times of need.

'Mike hit him,' he volunteered.

'What?'

'He wanted to add a hot air balloon to the picture, and Mike didn't.'

Mike, for once, simply opened his eyes wider than seemed humanly possible and gurgled.

'He wanted it straight in front of the bit Mike considered to be his masterpiece. That mountain peak there,' he pointed.

'And?' asked Margaux.

'They came to brushes.'

'Did they?' mused my wife.

'Yes. They had a fencing match.'

My wife smiled, 'And Mike won...'

'Yes, but I think it was unfair because he used his forbears' deadly family thrust. They call it a "botte" here in France.'

'An odd-shaped mark for a paintbrush to make,' mused Margaux.

'That's why that thrust was so dangerous and has been kept a dead secret all these years,' nodded Alun.

'I didn't know Mike had buccaneers in his family,' said my wife. 'Perhaps you would be good enough to tell us all about their history, Mike.'

Mike pulled a face and gazed at us for assistance. Getting none, he floundered on, 'Well. In fact...'

'Yes...'

Suddenly a bright idea struck him, 'Well, it's all on the family website. I'll show you later. It's all very, very interesting, you know. You'll be surprised.'

'I'm sure we will,' nodded my wife. 'Later on then?'

'Yes. I'll just have to remember the title of the website.'

'And that has slipped your mind for the moment?'

'Yes.'

'But, you'll remember, of course.'

'Naturally. One can't forget one's family history, can one. What about another glass of aperitif.'

'Good thinking Mike,' cried Alun, 'come and help, Mike.'

Mike didn't require any spurring and was out of the room in a fraction of a second.

The girls exchanged amused looks but shuddered as their eyes involuntarily crossed the painting once more.

A little later, as the Sis-in-L was handing around the entrée, Alun leant forward.

'Did you know,' he smiled, 'that the term "Sister-in-law" is a deformation of an extremely ancient French term?'

'No,' said Mike, 'we don't, and we don't want to hear any more rubbish from your twisted mind, Alun.'

'Well, I'm sure the Girls are interested.'

'Why are you sure of that?' asked Margaux.

Alun ignored this, 'Well, it comes from the period of the medieval Anglo-French wars in Nimes....'

'Oh hell! sighed Mike, 'Here he goes again.'

In fact, 'It originated from a letter sent home by an injured officer who had been made captive.' He nodded and picked up his fork. 'As was the practice in those days, his release was being negotiated. The going price for nobles was laid down in "Ye Olde

international Ransome hande-booke", as it was then called.

'Now, this is extremely informative, Alun,' frowned my wife. 'Do go on.'

'No. Just shut up, Alun,' squawked Mike.

'Well, in his letter requesting the allotted sum to be transferred via the "Westerne Unione" of the period, he mentioned the high quality of the health-care system.'

'Even in those days, the cost of the workforce was a critical factor. However, by far the cheapest labour available was that provided by members of the monasteries. The nuns worked for free. So, hospital directors hung up cheap wooden crosses and a few holy pictures so that the Nuns would feel at home. They then sat back as real directors should and raked in the pieces of gold.'

'SO!' sighed Mike. 'I suppose you're going to get to the point so we can get on with our food.'

'Well, in his request for funds, the officer, a noble and just man, said he was looked after by a Nun.'

'And that's that, is it?' Mike cast his eyes upward at the ceiling and quickly away again.

'Don't be so impatient, Mike,' scolded Margaux. 'We're interested.'

'No, you aren't. You're just pretending.'

'Anyway, the noble officer mentioned that the nun was exceptionally talented. So he wrote using the French way of expressing the idea that she was; "Une bonne-soeur en or". In other words, "a nun worth her weight in gold".

'And then he died,' scoffed Mike,' and they all lived happily ever after.'

Alun ignored this interruption, 'This message got messed about by incompetent translation and sharing from person to person and first became The Sister and the Oar, and finally the Sister-in-Law.'

I laughed, 'And that's how present hospital ward tyrants are now called Sister. Otherwise, they eat you....'

'Interesting, No?' nodded Alun. 'I bet you didn't know that.'

'No. that's absolute rubbish as usual,' sighed Mike  
That reminds me of the medieval children's story...'

'Oh no!' groaned Mike, 'no more rubbish.'

'Well, we now know it as; "The chicken who laid a golden egg."

In medieval times, however...'

'For god's sake Alun,' cried Mike.

'In medieval times, as I said, it was a totally different tale altogether.

The original title was not "The Chicken who laid a Golden Egg" but "The Chick, the Hen and Old Ben Neg."

'Oh god!' sighed Mike.

'We already warned you about over-sighing, Mike,' I said.

'Would you like to hear what it was about?'

'No...'

This interested me, 'Who was Old Ben Neg, Alun?  
Sounds a nice sort of chap.'

'It's odd you should say that because he was completely the opposite.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. He even tricked the hen into thinking the same.'

'And the little chick saved the day?'

'Exactly.'

'Oh hell...' sighed Mike.

'That's where Old Ben Neg ended up. Would you like to hear the story?'

'No, we wouldn't,' Cried Mike, 'We want to eat.'

'Oh well. It'll keep.'

'Will it? Oh, God...'



## Chapter 5 - The Ledge

Will there be many beer tents up there?' asked Margaux. Alun shrugged and gazed skywards, 'At a hang-gliding competition!?'

'I only ask,' she continued, 'In case you intend to get drunk and fall over the cliff edge.'

'Yes,' added my wife. 'Prior knowledge will allow us to alert the authorities. Like that, they'll be able to prepare the stretchers in advance.'

At this, Margaux shook her head sadly, 'After such a fall, there'd be little left to stretch. We'd need *Stitchers*.'

My wife nodded, 'The advantage is that we'd be able to squeeze all the bits in the cardboard box the TV came in. That'd spare the *Stitchers* the trouble *and* save money too.'

'Rapidly biodegradable into the bargain. And that's good news for the environment,' smiled Margaux. 'A single box to transport, only one hole to dig and a single bunch of plastic flowers a year.'

'Better still, we could have the flowers engraved on the headstone,' added my wife. 'And so, avoid travel-induced atmospheric pollution altogether.'

'Good thinking,' smiled Margaux.

'Thanks,' nodded my wife, 'but the crematorium employees will have to get a move on. No stopping on the way home for a few beers, like these three

would do. They wouldn't want the bloodsoaked cardboard to disintegrate "en-route", in the back of the van, would they?'

'True. And have gory bits and pieces rolling about and dirtying the van floor,' said Margaux. 'Mind you, if it wasn't going to smell so much, we could simply leave the bits and pieces dangling up there on the cliff face for the birds, Tibetan-style. Now that would be one hundred per cent environmentally friendly.'

'Oh, by the way, Alun,' she continued with a frown.

'Now what?'

'There's a little mystery we girls would like your assistance in solving.'

'I wasn't there at the time...' I said quickly.

'Me neither,' added Mike.

'As I was saying. A mystery has arisen that we mere females are at a loss to solve.'

By experience, we knew that this sort of opening dialogue inevitably preceded some unpleasantness for us. We thus stiffened our sinews, pumped adrenaline into the right areas, and prepared for the onslaught.

'We all agree, don't we, that you three went to the shop and purchased two TVs? And then you wasted more funds on a tennis racket which you then smashed to pieces,' smiled Margaux with all the charm of a puff adder about to strike.

We remained silent, which was harder for me to do than for the others. I bit my lip, in fact.

'Although you bought two TV sets, yet in the cellar, we noticed three cardboard boxes...' She let this sink in as we struggled to look innocent.

'We noticed that, and thought it a little odd,' said my wife. 'Didn't we, Margaux?'

'We did.'

'Three boxes...' muttered my wife. 'But only two TV sets.'

'Hum...' muttered Alun, realising that once more, we had let the euphoria of complex problem-solving get the better of us.

'Now,' mused Margaux, resting her chin on her cupped palms, 'we wondered if you could help us solve this mystery.'

The three of us struggled to stop our eyes from popping out of their sockets while our brains raced.

Then Mike laughed, and Alun and I winced.

'Oh, that's easily enough explained,' he smiled.

'Oh, God!' I whispered under my breath.

'Sorry?' said my wife.

'Nothing.'

'So, Mike?'

'Well, the thing was a dud, wasn't it.'

'A dud?' frowned Margaux.

'Exactly.'

We relaxed as we saw Mike's manoeuvre.

'Yep,' said Alun. 'A dud. Dud as a Dodo in fact.'

'Ah!' said Margaux turning to my wife. 'A dud TV.'

'That's it,' said Mike. 'Lucky I was here too. The thing would have flared up and burnt the whole place down.'

Alun shot me a glance. We would have to act fast, or Mike would rush around in circles and contradict himself.

'Perhaps that's going a little far, Mike,' I interrupted.

'Yes,' agreed Alun. 'There was only a little smoke.'

But Mike had gone into adlib mode, 'I dashed across the room and made a dive for the plug just in time and then...'

'They've got the idea, Mike,' I said, squeezing his arm extremely hard. 'So, to cut a long story short, we took the thing back and got a replacement.'

Margaux laughed one of her less pleasant laughs, 'But I always enjoy long stories. When they're told by Mike, that is.'

'Me too,' added my wife. 'He's a born storyteller.'

'No, he isn't,' cried Alun.

'That's not very kind,' frowned Mike.

'No, but true. Anyway, we took it back and got a new one. Eh Voila l'histoire.'

My wife pulled a face and nodded, 'I see. And they didn't want the box back then?'

It was my time to do a bit of adlib, 'Well, in fact, Mike was in such a state that he almost went berserk in the shop.'

'Really! Mike!?'

'Yes. We had to restrain him; one would hardly have recognised him.'

'No,' agreed Alun, 'he made such a scene that the manager was called, and they gave us a new one straight away.'

'They were too anxious to keep Mike quiet. People were staring...' I added.

'You shouldn't allow yourself to get so worked up about things like that, Mike,' smiled Margaux.

'That's what we told him,' I said.

'I didn't know what I was doing,' agreed Mike.

'He looked dangerous,' said Alun.

'Menacing,' I added.

My wife smiled, 'Well, that's got that sorted out then. But you'll have to admit it was a coincidence.'

'A coincidence?' we frowned a collective frown.

'Yes.' she continued, 'When we dropped off the old portable TV at the tip, we saw one exactly like the new one. But oddly, it had two big holes through the screen.'

Margaux nodded, 'It looked brand new too, didn't it?'

'Yes, brand new,' agreed the Sis-in-L.

Mike came to the rescue again, 'I suppose the shop wanted it got rid of before any customers spotted it.'

'They clearly take their work seriously,' said Margaux.

Mike shrugged, 'Guys who sell dud TVs are invariably pretty nippy about getting compromising evidence off the premises.'

'Because of police investigations, I suppose,' suggested my wife.

'That's what I'd do anyway,' frowned Mike.

'Would you?'

'Probably.'

'But then, you wouldn't sell dud TVs anyway, would you Mike?' said my wife.

'You bet.' Agreed, Mike, not realising that he was being led towards an awful trap.

I could see that the direction taken by the debate was likely to end up by him compromising the whole show, so I stepped in. 'So now that we've got that sorted out, if you don't want to take us up to the plateau, we can take a Taxi.'

'Or we could take that cable car thing.' suggested Mike.

Margaux sighed, 'So, are there going to be any beer tents up there or not?'

Alun sighed, 'You forget that this is a sporting event, not a village fete.'

'Oh?' smiled Margaux, 'Are sailing regattas sporting events too?'

Mike had only been half-listening, which was admittedly a lot for him. Even so, he decided to have his say. 'Of course sailing is a sport. Not like this hang-gliding stuff.' He sighed and shook his head. 'All these guys have to do is to jump off the cliff and then float down. They don't even have to hold on. They're attached by ropes. That's not a real sport.'

Now, it's important to note that for years, Alun's sport had been hang-gliding. He had what Margaux termed an "unhealthy appetite" for throwing himself off cliffs or hills. But, like all enthusiasts, he said the danger was negligible. Margaux challenged this point of view. She said hospitals were full of people who had proved the opposite to be the case. On such occasions, Alun would sulk.

One day Mike had a go, and crashed Alun's glider, damaging it beyond repair.

Then, when Margaux declared that funds were insufficient to replace it, Mike suggested taking up windsurfing instead.

Margaux applauded this idea. From her point of view, if one fell off a windsurfer, one could keep afloat until someone came and picked you up. However, If one fell off a hang glider, she said, staying afloat was

more complicated. Furthermore, any picking up had to be done with a shovel.

So it was that Alun became a windsurfing enthusiast and abandoned Hang-gliding.

'So,' continued Margaux, 'why do they have beer tents at the regattas you have participated in? If sailing's a sport, that is.'

'They only have small tents,' I said.

My wife sighed, 'small tents with lots of beer.'

'I bet there were dozens at that regatta you did with Mike last year,' added Margaux.

We exchanged glances as the painful memory of that episode came back to us.

'We didn't notice,' I said.

'No,' agreed Alun, 'we were in a hurry to get over to France.'

'So, you lost after all. I wondered why you didn't brag about it as usual,' she said.

'Oh no,' smiled Mike. 'We won all right, didn't we, Alun?'

'In a manner of speaking, yes.'

'And you didn't stay to celebrate? Odd that.'

'We were in a hurry to get home. That's all.'

The girls frowned and obviously smelt a rat.

The fact is, that Mike had used unconventional tactics, which means he cheated. This is the first reason for our precipitated departure. The second was that we sunk the judge's boat and were being pursued by several angry and distressingly rough looking sailors. We had kept these details from the Girls until now. The episode having been one of the less glorious moments of our recent activities.

'In any case,' said the exasperated Alun, quickly changing the subject, 'we are going up there to watch the sport. We won't have time to notice if there are drinks tents or not. We'll be concentrating on the hang-gliding and the other stuff.'

'Oh! The other stuff. So, you're going to ogle at the girls too, are you?' smiled Margaux.

'Shut up. I doubt if there'll be any females at all at such an altitude,' said Alun.

'No,' I shook my head, 'It's bad for their blood circulation. That gives them hallucinations, and they often need to be restrained. Anyway, there certainly won't be any drinks tents up there.'

At this moment, the next-door neighbour stepped round. 'Yes, there will,' he smiled. 'Don't worry. They'll be plenty to drink up there. Always is. More than enough.'

'Thanks, Hans,' sneered Alun.

'Well, at least we got that point cleared up,' smiled my wife.

'Oh! That's a nice new TV you've got there.' said Hans.

I swiftly changed the subject before the girls got back onto the topic of cardboard boxes.

'In any case, we'll be coming back down on foot,' I announced. 'Hans showed us where the old postman's track is.'

'So, in that case, you won't need to take any money or bank cards, will you,' said Margaux. 'As you won't be drinking or taking the shuttle down.'

'Especially after the expense of having to replace two TV sets, which you smashed to bits during your drunken antics.'



'We were not drunk, and those were not antics.'

'You can have ten euros pocket money each. Take it or leave it.'

Alun sighed and spread his hand in a typically French gesture. Hans had clearly been down this same path because he shrugged and pulled a sympathising face.

We made a good show of resistance but did not press the issue unduly. We knew that Mike rarely moved without a well-filled money-belt hidden under his shirt.

This would supply us with more than we needed.

'As we won't be able to drink all day,' Alun smiled, 'I'll put a couple of bottles of champagne in the fridge for this evening, shall I?'

'A couple means two, Alun.' said my wife, 'Not four.'

As we approached the fridge with the treasure, the Sis-in-L was struggling with a plastic bottle. This seemed to contain a vital kitchen product that she needed urgently.

'Damn these foreign things,' she said. 'Alun, have a look, will you. What does "No" mean?'

'That's English,' I said helpfully.

'But why is it written on this knob thing.'

'That's a nozzle, not a knob,' said Mike.

'Let me see,' said Alun, and she handed over the bottle.

'Ah!' he laughed, 'I see!'

'Ah?'

'It's written in Estonian dialect,' he said.

'In what!'

'South Estonian dialect, in fact,' he added. As you probably know, the Estonian "O" is silent, so "NO" is pronounced "Ne", like in French.'

'Why "ne" and not "enn"?' asked Mike.

'Because its Estonian dialect, of course.'

'What on earth does it mean then?' she asked.

'It means "marche" in French, or "On", of course. if I'm right somewhere we'll find the symbols like a couple inverted "F"s,' he drew this in the air. 'That's pronounced "Ouf", because there are two of them.'

'And what if there's only one?' asked Mike shaking his head with disbelief.

'There are *always* two in Estonian dialects, like a "W".' he paused. 'What's more, these two symbols are always followed by an "O". However, as I said, in South Estonian dialect, the "O" is not pronounced. In other words, it is silent,'

'And what does it mean, clever?' asked Mike.

Sighing, I stepped forward and took the bottle from him. I handed it to the Sis-in-L, turning it the other way around so that the nozzle pointed away from her. 'Read again.'

'Ah!' she blushed, 'On?'

'Yes. And OFF.'

'Well, now isn't that a surprise,' scoffed Mike. 'Trust Alun to waste our time making up bilge like that.'

'It's your fault, Mike,' grumbled Alun. 'You act on me like a Bilge pump.'

'Oh, shut up, Alun.'

Margaux had been listening from the adjoining room. She leant over in her armchair and popped her head around the door. Then, smiling encouragingly at the woman, she laughed, 'After a while, you'll get

used to Alun. I admit that It does take a little time, but afterwards...'

Here my wife butted in, 'Then you'll learn not to bother to listen at all.'

'Which is for most of the time,' ended Margaux.

'Here, here.' added Mike. 'I still can't believe that rubbish about Oyster migration...'

'About what!' cried my wife.

'Oh!' smiled Alun, 'Didn't you know about that.'

'They don't want to know,' cried Mike, 'do you?'

'Interesting data like that might very well come in useful someday,' smiled Margaux exchanging glances with my wife. 'But it can wait.'

We did not know at the time that the Girls had already received favourable press reviews for their first volume of our adventures. So, "Monsieur le publisher" was enthusiastic about a follow-up. He was quietly confident that the income derived would nicely cover the reroofing of his holiday home in Brittany.

The following morning The Sis-In-L drove us up to the Sainte-Hilaire du Touvet plateau and left us to fend for ourselves.

The strips of flower-filled pastures bordering the cliff had been mown and transformed into parking spaces.

Today, their alpine tranquillity was gone.

What is more, they were aflutter with garish red-and-white-striped visitor-channelling ribbons.

Ignoring the indicator arrows, we ducked under the ribbons and headed towards an interesting looking marquee tent. From its direction, sounds of rather unprofessional singing were emanating.

'A local, "Would-Be",' smiled Alun. 'Shall we have a jeer or two.' He paused then continued, 'My grandad always said, "A jeer and a beer keeps a man in good cheer".'

Mike sighed, 'What absolute tripe. I bet he never said anything of the sort.'

'You may be right, Mike,' nodded Alun.

'You're probably getting mixed up with that citation from Kant,' I suggested.

'Is that the man that school Kanteens are named after?' he asked.

I frowned, 'Kant have been. He was long dead before that time. Kant-teens, as everyone knows, are young disciples of his ideas.'

'iDears!' he frowned. 'I didn't realise that Apple was already around in those days?'

'Shut up you two,' snorted Mike. 'Let's go and see what's going on.'

What was going on was an amateur singing competition.

We slipped in without paying, and lounged at the back of the tent. We listened wide-eyed from this vantage point as the local talent demonstrated how to ruin a good song.

It's true that several participants did hit the right notes from time to time, which was refreshing. Also, some of the lyrics of the English songs were recognisable, which was also a novelty.

However, this sort of novelty soon wears off. So, we slipped under a flap marked "No Exit" and found that there was one.

'I wonder why they marked that?' frowned Mike. He then tripped on a guywire and fell sprawling on a bale of straw.

'That's why,' laughed Alun.

'Thank heavens we didn't pay to get in,' I sighed.

'Exactly. It would have given quite the wrong impression to the organiser,' agreed Alun.

We next made our way to the take-off field.

Here we spent some time watching the competitors preparing their gear. Alun stood with hands on hips, scoffing and criticising them while supplying us with technical details we didn't want to hear.

Once ready, the pilots dashed down the grassy slope, disappeared over the cliff edge, and that was that...

Well, a little of this goes a long way.

Even Alun, who had been keen on the sport, declared that the whole affair was a wash-out from this vantage point.

We then wandered about the stalls and stopped to watch a stallholder displaying the merits of a revolutionary potato peeler.

The man had an unnaturally strong English accent.

However, he used the latter with considerable finesse to captivate and entice females into his sticky web.

'Were I not absolutely against peeling spuds,' admitted Alun, 'I might be tempted....'

'Have you completely lost your head, Alun,' I cried. 'The Girls would have us peeling for the rest of our lives.'

'That guy can certainly peel, though,' added Mike. 'I wonder where the Con is?'

The man cracked a little joke about giving away a whole potato, free, with each peeler purchased. This sent a little titter going around the assembled crowd.

'A pro,' nodded Alun.

The man went on to sell a dozen and then seemed to be closing down for lunch.

We sidled off and, after a bit of searching, found a shady spot to rest. Odd as it may seem, this shade just happened to be inside a large beer tent...

'I suppose we might as well have a drink now we're here,' smiled Alun, spreading his hand in a gesture of submission to the quirks of fate.

We thus emptied our pockets and discovered that we had just enough.

'Anyway, you've got your money belt, Mike,' said Alun. 'Just in case.'

'Shush!' whispered Mike. 'Someone might overhear, and I'd get attacked. Thanks to you, I'll probably end up with my throat cut.'

'No one can hear, and anyway, no one understands English up here.' I shook my head.

'I heard,' said a voice from behind us in English, 'and I understand.'

We spun around and discovered the stallholder grinning at us over his glass of beer.

'I might even attack him with this,' He brandished one of his peelers. 'I can assure you; these things are deadly dangerous.'

We laughed together.

The man explained that he spent most summers in France, doing the rounds of the markets and shows.

'I work my way down the Atlantic coast in the old van. Then along the Mediterranean and finally back up to Normandy, via Lyon, Dijon and Paris.'

'A rather solitary life,' said Alun.

'No.' he shook his head and sipped his beer. 'There are three of us. We take turns with the stall. Each of us has his own goods to sell.'

'Ah!'

'Like that, we're rarely present when the people come back to complain about the stuff they've bought.'

We nodded understanding.

'French women are pretty hot when it comes to complaining,' he smiled, 'but their husbands tend to complain more with their fists.'

We nodded again.

'So, we spend as short a time as possible in any one spot.'

Mike had been frowning, 'So you are knowingly palming off faulty goods on unsuspecting customers...'

We all turned to look at him aghast.

'Mike!' exclaimed Alun, 'That's the whole idea behind market stallholders.'

'Exactly.' I added, 'It's the principle of the thing. The accepted practice in all Latin countries.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Don't you see, Mike? Without this basic foundation, the entire way of life, south of the channel, would collapse.'

'All pleasure and fun would be drained from everyday life,' I added.

'Suicide rates would soar, marriages would fail, birth rates would plummet, and the entire planet would suffer irreversible damage,' concluded Alun.

'Ridiculous!' gasped Mike. 'You might as well say that Con-Men are the salt of the earth.'

'Perhaps not the salt,' I smiled, 'but they certainly spice things up a little.'

The man laughed, 'Exactly. We spice up life,' he said, warming to the debate. 'We are an indispensable element of modern life.'

'Hear, hear!' cried Alun.

'We provide the modest market-going public with entertainment, and we do so for an extremely reasonable price. Less in fact than a ticket to the cinema and far less than a music festival.' He nodded a decisively defiant nod. 'And on top of it, they get a memento to carry home with them.'

'What a lot of rubbish!' exclaimed Mike.

'You don't seem to realise that without men like us, life would hardly be worth living,' said the stallholder.

'That is an odious ode to dishonesty,' growled Mike.

The stallholder shook his head sadly, 'You don't realise how hard it is to keep one's head above water in this job?'

'I bet people like you'd manage just as well underwater,' retorted Mike. 'You'd start selling patent seaweed fertility-potions to Neptune or his mermaids.'



The man pondered this for an instant, 'seaweed fertility potions? Hum... There might be something in that for next year. Thanks.'

Mike blew out his cheeks in exasperation, and the man went on.

'This is a very uncertain job.'

'You mean the bit about getting beaten up by irate husbands?' sniffed Mike.

'Well, yes and no. What I mean is that we're never sure what we're going to get landed with.'

'You mean the duration of prison terms?' said Mike.

'Ha, ha. Well, Last year, I ended up with five thousand crimson towels to sell. The trouble with those was that they fell to bits after the first wash. The year before that, it was an out-of-date toy that no street wise kid would be seen dead with. Luckily for me, the parents didn't know that.

Mind you, this year's lot is much worse than usual. Tools which turn out to be too dangerous for the supermarkets to keep.'

'Dangerous!' cried Mike. 'Potato peelers?'

'And why do you think I wear these ridiculous pink rubber gloves?'

'Because you have your hands in basins full of bobbing Suds all day,' said Mike.

'Maybe he has one of those peculiar things about rubber,' suggested Alun.

'Or pink clothes,' I added.

'No. Look.'

At this, he peeled off his gloves and exhibited bandage swathed hands.

We all leant forward.

'This lot of peelers are murderous. As dangerous as hell, in fact,' he nodded. 'The guy who unloaded the stuff on me knew very well that they were, too.'

Mike almost choked with laughter, 'The conman conned. Ha, ha.'

'And that's why you don't hang around,' suggested Alun.

'Damn right. It took me two weeks practising to find out how to avoid scalping my palms. But I've paid for the stuff, and it took me a month before I started to make a decent profit.'

'So, the Atlantic coast was your training ground?' I suggested.

'Yep.'

'So now you're keeping the nation's hospitals on their toes,' I smiled. 'Helping to keep them in fighting fettle, in fact?'

'I suppose you're right.'

'Making dishonest money too,' sniffed Mike.

'I can't see the difference between a normal euro and a dishonest one.' he said, 'neither can my bank manager.'

'So even Con men have bank managers?' cried Mike.

I stepped in before things got worse. 'Let's have another round. We'll have something to eat too. Join us?'

'My pleasure. Especially if you're paying.'

'Mike is. You've got... Well, you know what I mean, around your waist.'

'Yes, of course I have, you idiot.'

So, we ordered sausages, chips and beer all around.

When it was placed before us, we turned to Mike.  
'Ok. Ok, I know. Just a mo.' with this, he thrust his hand inside his trousers.

A group of women were standing close beside us and gasped with horror on seeing Mike's hand disappear and root about in the dark depths of his trousers.

He fumbled about for some time while the women gaped wide-eyed.

'Got it,' he cried, pulling up.

The women turned abruptly and moved quickly away into the surrounding crowd, muttering exclamations.

'What's up with them?' asked Mike.

'They thought you were going to show them your little willy.'

'What!?' he exclaimed.

'You know. Your little "what's-its-name" '

'Oh, for God's sake Alun. I know what a willy is.'

'Thank heavens for that.'

'Why on earth did they think I was going to show them that?'

'They're French,' I said. 'French women are like that.'

'They might have got the wrong end of the stick?' I suggested.

'Very funny,' snorted Mike. He extracted a little wad of notes, peeled one off, and handed it to the bartender.

'What's this?' the man said, turning the flimsy paper over. 'This ain't French.'

Mike took it back, 'Oh, sorry. That's Romanian money. Fifty Lei.' Mike turned quickly to Alun. 'No, Alun. None of your dirty jokes, please.'

'Pity. I had rather a juicy one.'

'I guessed that. Your mind is like a pool of stagnant water.'

'That's what makes me such good company,' smiled Alun.

Mike made an impatient noise and flipped through his wad of notes. Then he looked up at us with an appealing look. 'I got a few dollars, but the rest is Rumanian.'

'Oh, God,' cried Alun, quickly filling his mouth with unpaid-for chips.

'Are you pulling my leg?' said the burly barman, leaning over at us.

'You foreigners are all the same. Especially you immigrants.'

'We are not immigrants,' cried Mike. 'Our papers are perfectly in order.'

'They all say that,' he sniffed, making a move to come around our side of the counter.

But our new Con-man acquaintance came to our rescue. 'I'll pay John. Don't get worked-up, or it'll spoil your complexion.'

The barman made a snorting noise.

'I'll get it for you from the kitty box as soon as we're finished.'

'Who do you take me for?' he shook his head, 'an innocent?'

'Look,' said the stallholder, rummaging in his inside pocket, 'If you can't trust a fellow market worker, I'll leave you this as an insurance.'

He handed over a well-used banknote, 'That's Chinese money. A hundred Yen. That's worth fifty euros. Twice what we owe you.'

I started, but he swiftly kicked me before I could mention that one hundred Yen was worth less than a euro.'

Alun leant over and looked at the note, 'I'll give you thirty euros for it,' he said.

However, the barman snatched it back while the stallholder nodded an appreciative nod in Aluns' direction.

'Nothing doing,' said the barman, 'anyhow, you said you hadn't any cash.'

Alun pulled a face, 'dash it! I forgot.'

'Bloody eastern-bloc immigrants...' sniffed the man as he moved off to serve another customer.

'You idiot, Mike,' cried Alun.

'I was sure I had some Francs left,' he started to refold the notes together.

'Now that would have been very useful,' snorted Alun, 'seeing they haven't been using Francs for the last fifteen years.'

'I meant Euros, you fool. It just slipped out.'

'Well, don't let it slip out for the moment. Here come those women, with the police in tow.'

Mike assumed this was one more of Aluns' stupid jokes. So, he started fumbling about in his trousers again to put the wad of notes back in the money belt.'

'There! What did I tell you,' cried one of the women. 'He's still playing with himself. And in public, it's absolutely disgusting.'

The barman stepped over as the police arrived. 'He's Romanian. Tried to palm me off with dodgy money. Probably illegal anyway.'

'The proceeds of drug trafficking, no doubt,' said one of the other women. 'And leave that thing alone. Playing with yourself in public! Really!'

'I am not playing with myself,' objected Mike.

'Looks like it from here,' said the biggest of the two policemen, 'Hands off.'

'I am putting my money in my money belt if you really want to know.'

'Oh! I see. Hiding the compromising articles, are you? Come on. Let's see.'

Alun smiled, 'I thought these ladies were against him displaying his compromising articles.'

The two policemen suppressed laughs with some difficulty.

'Really!' exclaimed the woman-in-chief.

Mike extracted the wad and handed it over.

'A lot of money here? Two hundred euro notes, loads of them. There must be a small fortune here.'

'They're Lei. Romanian currency,' sighed Mike, 'You divide by ten or something to get the value in Euros.'

'Ten?'

'Or something like that.'

'You've got about a hundred euros worth in your hand,' he continued. 'Not much more.'

'Hum.' The policeman handed the wad back.'

'So, you're a group of wandering Romanians, are you? Musicians, perhaps?'

'Itinerant Minstrels,' added the second policeman.

Alun was finding this amusing. He put an arm around my shoulder and the other around our new friend, 'We three are English. This other man told us he was from Scotland. But then again, we have no definite proof of that.'

'Shut up, you idiot,' snarled Mike, fumbling in his inside pocket, 'Here.'

He handed his passport to the big policeman, who nodded and handed it back, 'These friends of yours?'

'I often wonder,' sighed Mike.

'Ok, you lot. Keep out of trouble. We'll not be far off.'

Then the smaller policeman turned to the staller-holder, 'My wife bought one of your peelers this morning. I suppose it's a con as usual.'

'I hope so,' replied the man. 'I always do my utmost to avoid disappointing my customers. Quality is my middle name.'

'And we're supposed to believe that?' snorted the big policeman.

'No more than usual.'

'Well, anyway, we know where to find you if you've sold her a dud.'

The man pulled himself up with indignation, 'the likelihood of her finding anything wanting in a product I sell is extremely low.' He placed a widely spread hand on his heart, just to show how serious he was.

'Yeh, yea. You guys are all the same.'

'Ah no!' he said, 'On that point, you are entirely wrong. Sadly, a few of our numbers are honest. We do our best to oust them, but some slip through the net.'

'Very amusing,' Laughed the big policemen.

Turning to the bartender, he nodded, 'Make sure this guy pays up. As slippery as eels....' And off they trudged to solve some other problem.

The group of women also took their leave and were swallowed up by the crowd.

'Those Yen come in useful from time to time,' said the stallholder.

'Especially with your special exchange rate,' I added.

'I got landed with those by a sneaky Chinese hotel owner in Bordeaux last year. He bought a hundred and fifty towels from me.'

'The crimson ones?' I asked.

He nodded with a smile.

'And,' suggested Alun, 'he only had Yen on him at the time.'

The man sighed, 'The bloke conned me, good and proper.'

Mike broke into laughter at this, 'Oh, I love it. You guys are so clever you're so pleased with your own con that you don't see the other one coming. Brilliant.'

The man shrugged, 'Oh well, I've broken even now, but that bloke must still be cursing me.'

'Maybe he got a bit of a laugh out of it too,' suggested Alun.

The stallholder smiled and drained his glass. 'Well, lads. It's time I was leaving.'

'Back to work?' I asked.

'Hell No. I'm getting out of here before that constable's wife phones her hubby from the hospital. My pal will take over the stall this afternoon.'



'And,' laughed Alun, 'He won't have a clue as to where you've disappeared to with your suitcase full of faulty goods.'

'The procedure is well oiled. Years of practice make perfect...' he smiled.

At this, he waved to the bartender and shouted, 'I'll bring the money over in a few tics.' He then leant closer, 'Drink up, lads. I wouldn't hang around here if I were you.' He winked and slipped off through the crowd to fill his suitcase and disappear to the next market town.'

We decided it was time to leave too. So, as soon as the barman's back was turned, we picked up as much of the contraband food as we could, and slipped away.

The ancient postman's track is hidden behind a building at the edge of the tiny village.

As we left the plateau, Alun looked back. 'A pity, really. We could have come down on one of those trial tandem flights. That would have been good fun.'

'We'd have to have found a Romanian pilot, as Mike has plenty of their currency left.'

'Shut up. Anyway, if you had, Margaux would have skinned you.'

'She wouldn't have known.'

We stopped short and gazed incredulously at Alun.

'Are you feeling all right, Alun? Margaux always finds out,' I said.

Alun pondered this, 'Hum. Yes, I didn't think of that.'

The track started off pleasantly. It wound down through prairies carpeted with alpine flowers. Not a

single stinging nettle whipped the calves as we passed.

It then entered a small stand of stunted, wind-tortured pine trees and then decided to get more serious.

It dipped down, slanting across the cliff face, giving incredible views across the valley floor far below. On the far side of the valley, the Belledonne mountains soared to snow powdered summits, blazing in the afternoon sun.

The track soon started to resemble more the bed of a mountain torrent than a footpath. It jumped down in steps from one weather smoothed bolder to another.

After half an hour of this, we came smack up against the edge of the cable car track. This climbed at an impressive angle of about seventy degrees to the village above.

Beside the well-greased iron tracks, we found a flight of steps apparently carved out of the rock. It was flanked by a rusted iron railing on one side and by the cliff face on the other.

Every ten metres or so, the stairway was barred by another railing. The purpose of these odd additions to the stairway became apparent as soon as we started down. The slope was so steep that a fall would roll one down several hundred granite steps then over the lip of the rocks below.

At the bottom of this scary staircase, the path dived under the cable car tracks and into the forest on the far side.

Here we paused and scanned the undergrowth for the overgrown fork in the track. According to Hans,

this should lead us up to the waterfall and the Hermits Bathtub.

Hans had said that there was a stiff climb, and on this point, he had not been exaggerating.

After a quarter of an hour of this, Alun stopped. 'At this rate, we'll never get up and back in time.'

'In time for what,' cried Mike. 'Don't tell me that this is too much of a climb for you?'

Neither of us cared to say that it was, so we went struggling on behind Mike.

'Come on, come on. We haven't got all day, you two,' he called over his shoulder.

Mike was a bit "too-much" sometimes. Especially when forgot he was no longer twenty-five years old.

Anyway, we eventually came out of the forest at the very edge of an almost vertical cliff face, covered with perspiration. I'll pause here to specify that Alun and I were covered with perspiration, not the cliff.

The cliff had not had to exert itself in any way. It just stood there chuckling to itself.

'That's what I call a climb,' smiled Mike. 'Makes life worth living.'

Alun grumbled something under his breath. Although I didn't hear what this was, I heartedly agreed with it.

We found ourselves on a flat ledge, some two metres wide. This followed the cliff and disappeared around a bend some hundred metres along.

To start with, the view below was obscured by the forest which came right up to the ledge. However, fifty metres along, the trees abruptly dropped away to reveal that the cliff fell vertically some two hundred

metres. Far below, the tips of the pine trees pointed up at us, waving slowly in the breeze.

Keeping as far away from the edge as possible, we followed the ledge along to the bend. Here, we discovered the difficulty Hans had mentioned.

A tortured pine had somehow managed to find room and food for its roots in a series of fissures in the ledge floor and the cliff face. Its ageless trunk had grown pressed against the cliff face. A hundred years on, only forty centimetres of the track remained. To pass this obstacle, one had to clutch onto the old stubs of branches and ease oneself around.

Mike, oblivious to any danger, went straight around without an instant's hesitation.

'Plenty of room,' he called back. 'Come on, there's absolutely no risk.'

Alun and I exchanged glances, 'What if...' I started.

'There are no "ifs". Come on. God in heaven! The track's almost as wide as the Champs-Élysée Avenue. You could get an elephant through here.'

'The Champs-Élysée hasn't a kilometre of emptiness below it.'

'No, but it's got twenty kilometres of emptiness above it...'

There was no answer to this, so we shook hands solemnly and cast our lives into the arms of luck.

'See?' smiled Mike as we breathed again on the other side. 'Easy.'

'I wouldn't like to try that in a storm,' said Alun.'

'Yes. I guess that would make it a bit more fun,' said Mike, 'especially if the trunk got slippery. Doable though... Probably.'

We turned to discover the waterfall some fifty metres further down the ledge.

It fell in a graceful arc from the plateau, four hundred metres above, thundering into a wide basin.

The basin had been hollowed out by millions of years of assault by the water and the rocks and gravel carried down by it.

The ledge widened at this point to some four metres or so, beyond which it disappeared altogether.

My head turned as I tried to follow the torrent of water back up to its source, so I grabbed the rock wall for support.

'Impressive, eh?' smiled Mike. 'Worth the detour.'

A few metres further along, we discovered an overhang forming a deep low cave.

'This must be the old hermit's place,' I said. 'Nice and dry.'

'Yep. Let's have a look at the basin. We haven't got all day,' said Alun, 'And I can hear that champagne calling.'

'Me too,' I nodded. 'But I hear some beer calling a little louder.'

'Come on, you drunken fools,' called Mike, striding off as if along the main road rather than on a perilous ledge, suspended hundreds of metres above the pines.

As we approached, the roar of the water became deafening. Even though a light breeze carried the spray away from us, we were soon wet.

From close to, the spectacle was almost frightening. We were overawed by the violence of the thousands of tons of water crashing into the basin.

'That'd blast your guts right out of you if you fell under that,' nodded Mike.

'I'll stay here and watch you demonstrate then,' frowned Alun. 'I had a shower the year before last.'

'I haven't the guts to do it myself, ' I laughed.

But Mike was already striding off.

'Hey, Mike! Be careful. That rock looks devilishly slippery.'

He turned and shook his head sadly, 'Are you two frightened of a bit of adventure?'

'Yes,' I shouted back.

He shrugged and stood right on the lip of the pool, looking down into its boiling depths. He slid his foot back and forth to check the adherence of his boots, then turned, 'Come on, let's have a look at the end.'

'No.' we shouted back, 'we'll get soaked to the skin and blasted right off the cliff face.'

He shrugged and set off.

He first edged his way out, right to the extreme point where the boiling bowl overhung several hundreds of metres of emptiness.

Then he disappeared beyond the curtain of water.

Alun and I exchanged worried looks and waited for the scream.

However, no scream came, and a few moments later, Mike appeared from between the waterfall and the cliff.

He was drenched to the bone, 'Incredible! Absolutely amazing. From the other side, you can see right down to the valley floor. It must be a three hundred metre drop. Incredible! Come on and have a look.'

We gazed at the mass of falling water.

'Come on,' he called, 'You can get around behind the waterfall almost dry.'

'You don't look almost dry, Mike,' I said.

'No. I got in a bit closer to have a good look.'

'You mean you fell in,' suggested Alun.

'Come on,' said Mike avoiding replying.

We followed him timidly, feeling our way across the slippery cliff face and gripping for all our lives onto anything grippable.

The view was indeed impressive. So much so that we were back out of that place faster than we had gone in. But reasonably dry, compared to Mike.

'I'll be dried out in next to no time, in this sun,' he smiled happily. 'That was great.'

'No, it wasn't. It was pure madness.'

Mike made an impatient noise, 'No guts!'

We then turned to start on our way home.

However, as might have been expected, Mike slipped and stumbled on a rock.

'Hell!' he cried, 'My knee.'

He hobbled on a bit and stopped. 'Damn it! You'll have to help me.'

'You mean, carry you? All the way down?' cried Alun.

'And what about that tree? How on earth do we get around that?'

'Are you two completely brainless?' sighed Mike. 'We simply use a rope. You two hold one end each on opposite sides of the tree. I slide between the rope and the tree so that if I stumble...'

'We can let go and pick you up later,' smiled Alun.

'If I stumble, clever, you pull tight and hold me against the tree trunk.'

'Letting go would be more fun,' said Alun, 'for us.'

'Alun,' I said, 'could you just pop over and see if the old Hermit left his polypropylene rope?'

'Will do.'

'You guys are absolutely no use in an emergency,' sighed Mike. 'No use at all. We'll simply use the same trick as at the hotel in Bucharest. Come on, let's have your belts.'

Those who have followed our earlier adventures will remember that Mike almost killed himself in the same way before. This was when he decided to climb from our fifth story balcony onto the adjoining one, with only our interconnected belts as a security net.

We gaped at him, 'Not the old belt-trick again,' I cried.

'Anyway,' sighed Alun, 'even if we do get around that tree alive, we're not going to carry you all the way down.'

'And,' I said, 'it's far too dangerous. So, we'll leave you here and send the rescue guys up to get you with the helicopter.'

Hearing these fated words, we all paused and exchanged looks. This brought back memories of the embarrassment we had felt when we had to be saved three times by lifeguards at Tregastel in Brittany.

The Girls had never allowed us to forget that previous year's episode during those holidays.

'We'll manage,' frowned Mike with stolid resolution. 'That's absolutely necessary, I think.'

We agreed. Anything was better than being ragged for years to come.

'Well done. Stiff upper lip, eh!' said Alun.



So, we started on the painful hobbling trip back along the ledge.

At the same moment, a hang glider appeared from around the swell of the cliff and came in dangerously close to look at us.

He shouted some sort of greeting which we couldn't make out and pointed upwards, then down.

'That guy knows what he's doing,' nodded Alun waving back with a broad smile.

'I wonder what those signs mean,' mused Mike.

'No Idea,' frowned Alun. 'We didn't use signs like those in my days.'

'Except the ones people used when you shot over their heads a bit too close.'

'That didn't happen often?'

'No. Only each time you got that darned thing off the ground,' I said.

'That's unkind?'

'No. It's the truth.'

Mike knelt down to peer into the deep recesses of the Hermit's old residence. 'Nice place. Dry and out of the wind, rain, snow and sun. He chose the place well.'

'I bet he was the one who planted that stupid tree,' groaned Alun, taking out his phone. 'I'll call the Girls and let them know where we are.'

'So that they can prepare the stretchers?' I suggested.

After a bit of ringing, Margaux's voice said, 'Still alive then?'

Alun ignored this, 'If you look up at the cliff face, you'll see where we are. Mike will make his phone reflect the sunlight. See it.'

There was a pause.

My wife's voice floated out to us, 'Got you. Still a good way up then.'

'Yep, we're at the Old Hermits bathtub.'

'That's nice. How is he?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh well, these things happen,' said my wife. 'I'll tell the police, shall I?'

'Very funny.'

'By the way,' she added, 'Have you noticed how few sails there are now?'

'Yep. Noticed that.'

'Any idea why they should be?'

'A pause in the judging process, I suppose.'

'Is there an overhang or a cave up there?'

'Yes, in fact, there is. That's where the old Hermit lived.'

'That's a pity.'

'Why?'

'Because you'll be able to get out of the rain?'

'What rain?'

'There's a huge black rain cloud just coming over the mountain from behind you.'

'That's difficult to believe,' I scanned the clear blue sky and blazing sun.

'Is it?' At this, we clearly heard peals of laughter in the background.

'Well,' finished my wife, 'It might be wise to wait a few minutes before starting down.'

There was a short pause, 'Ah! Here it comes,' she said.

AND IT CAME.

Suddenly, and with an unexpected roar, a curtain of rain shut out the view.

We leapt back from the cliff edge and into the protection of the cave.

Then the wind came, plastering the torrents of rain against the cliff face.

We scrambled back under the rock just in time. The vast quantity of rain that had hit the cliff walls above came cascading onto the ledge.

We got on our hands and knees and worked our way as far back into the cave-like cleft as was possible. We then lay on our stomachs and gazed back out at the waterfall which had replaced the ledge.

'That Hermit knew what he was about in choosing this spot,' nodded Alun. 'Just the right depth and sloping down and outwards.'

'I wonder how he managed in winter,' I mused, 'what with snow and ice, I mean. That path must have been a real death trap.'

As we lay there watching the wall of water, Mike muttered to himself.

'What's up, Mike?' I asked.

'If this rain lasts, it'll soon be too dark to get down. I'm not going along that ledge in the dark. Not with my leg...'

'Ok, Mike,' I said, 'but you'll regret it,'

'Why?'

'Because once you're back down there, you're bound to want to have it back again.'

'What are you babbling about now?'

'Your leg. You'll want it back.'

'Yes,' agreed Alun, 'Hopping along after girls with crutches is bad form...'

'Exactly,' I said, 'It's not done.'

'Shut up.'

Suddenly, Mike cried out and rolled over on top of Alun.

'What on earth...' cried Alun from under Mike.

'There was something wriggling under me,' he said, vigorously brushing his trousers.

I smiled, 'Don't worry, Mike. That happens to the best of us. Especially when you've been playing with yourself all morning.'

'Nothing to be ashamed of,' said Alun reassuringly. 'It shows that there's still a little sap left in the old twigs.'

'Shut up. Look. There it is. A huge worm thing.'

The dusty cave floor moved, and a large fluorescent green lizard appeared. It shook itself, then, for some unknown reason, shot out across the rain-swept ledge and disappeared over the edge.

'Great Scott!' cried Alun. 'A Lemming Lizard. They're supposed to be extinct.'

'Heavens! That might have been the last survivor of the species,' I added, 'And Mike squashed it and frightened it out of its life.'

'And now it's gone forever...'

'What a catastrophe!'

'Mind you,' added Alun, 'Maybe it was just lying there, waiting for the right moment to display its inherited talents.'

'Strange though,' I said. 'That they still believe they're birds.'

'Yep.' agreed Alun, 'very odd. I suppose that's evolution for you... Evolution does strange things sometimes.'

Mike sighed, 'you're telling me! It beats me why evolution should have allowed genetic mutations to go as far as creating you two.'

'You don't seem to realise, Mike,' I said. 'We may have unwittingly stumbled on the remaining brick enabling the final unwinding of the riddle of life.'

'I'd have been surprised that you would stumble on anything in any other way,' scoffed Mike. 'Seeing that neither of you has any wits at all.'

'At last,' added Alun ignoring this, 'mankind will finally be able to clearly see the grand scheme of things.'

'The origin of life, neigh, of the human race itself.'

Mike snorted, 'You two may very well have descended directly from mad lizards, but I certainly didn't.'

'We'll be famous,' I cried.

'Oh, for God's sake!' sighed Mike.

'Famous and rich and celebrated,' added Alun.

Then suddenly, from over the edge of the ledge, the lizards head reappear.

'Good Gods!' exclaimed Alun, 'they can fly.'

'This is a far greater discovery than I thought,' I cried with excitement.

'It will completely revolutionise the history of modern thinking. Think about it, Mike,' cried Alun.

'I'm speechless,' I sighed, 'at the magnitude of this discovery?'

'Do you know what I think?' said Alun.

'Think!' laughed Mike scornfully.

'We may have stumbled on the lost breeding ledge of the flying Lemming Lizard.' continued Alun.

'If that's true,' I said, sitting up. 'Then this cliff face must be teeming with the little devils. What an incredible discovery!'

'Did you know,' asked Alun, 'That lemming lizards only mate once in four years. On leap-years, in fact.'

'Very funny,' sighed Mike.

'They must breed like hell then,' I frowned.

'They do. And you can bet that the little devils hollowed out this place themselves, especially for the process.'

'Yes,' I nodded, 'I was wondering about the powerful jaws I noticed on that one.'

'Millions of years of gnawing and gnawing, until at last, they got it just right to ensure the future of the species,' added Alun.

'Incredible! We'll become rich beyond our wildest dreams.'

'And world-renowned.' nodded Alun.

'Yes. That too.'

'At least that clears one point up.'

'And that is?' sighed Mike.

'Where the remains of the hermit went.'

'Grinded to dust by generations of little jaws.'

'Ground,' corrected Mike.

'It clears up another point too,' smiled Alun.

'Yes,' sighed Mike again.

'It explains why people think that they throw themselves off cliffs.'

'Really?'

'It's Obvious. Because of the species only breeding on leap years.'

'Oh God!' breathed Mike.

As night gradually fell, the rain eased off and stopped. We scrambled out and stood looking down at the village lights far below.

'Drying off nicely, Mike?' I asked.

He made a rude sign, and Alun and I chuckled.

At this point in our profound thoughts, Alun's phone rang again. 'I suppose you'll be spending the night in your hotel,' said Margaux.

'Well, we might make a try at getting down, but Mike insists on us amputating his leg first,' replied Alun.

'Well, I'm pleased you are taking things in the right spirit,' she laughed.

Then my wife's voice floated up from the darkness, 'Sleep well, lads. Oh! By the way, the champagne you put in the fridge is lovely. Thanks.'

We heard more thanks echoed from beyond the mouthpiece.

The three of us sighed and sat down to wait for daybreak.

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2



## Chapter 6 - 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 to their home on the south coast for the week.

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 as he read this entrance fee sign.

'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 a 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.'

'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,' sighed Mike.

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

'Shut up.'

'I bet you didn't know that Tibetan peasants make a living by 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, 'they 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's 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.

'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!' sighed Mike.

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 those 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,' said Mike.

'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.

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 across the water, and 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.'

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 one,' 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. Then, 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 found the doorway. However, the heavy oak door was locked.

'Ah!' nodded Alun. 'So 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. A half-forgotten memory had come 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". Now, the "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 unbelievable 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. And 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 the 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 toe-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 is 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.

At this moment, however, from a distance came an ominous noise. The sound 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 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 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 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, he added, 'and what do we do about this latest addition to the scenario.'

A tall, heavily built woman had appeared through 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 Ma'm.'

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

'The head gardener Ma'm. He said we could do it.'

'The head gardener!?' she frowned.

'Yes Ma'm.'

'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 thick-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?'

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, Ma'm. 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.'

'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 dear. 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 woman 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-based flower-arrangement software game.'

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

'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. 'This 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. Instead, 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's 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.'

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 woman 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 other protruding nails 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 tossed 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 eventually 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 I suppose they have to put up a show for the insurance company.'

'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.'

'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.

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 l'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, and 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 unbelieving expressions 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 official 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 us 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.'

'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,'

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, 'and wild boar.'

'What do you expect. It's blokes like these three, banned 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. Then, after listening for some time, he explained our latest adventure in rough outlines, which produced another loud peal of laughter.

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 at 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.

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

## Chapter 7 - Building the Patio.

While we were trekking and storming castles, the Girls did a bit of Brainstorming. Unfortunately for us, their sessions were highly fruitful.

Thereafter, they were the proud possessors of a list of innovative ways of keeping us out of trouble. Or so they thought.

These included plans for filling any excessive amounts of free time we might have and fending off bouts of boredom.

Margaux wasted no time in opening hostilities on our return.

'Do you remember our holidays in Croatia last year?'

Alun shot me a look which meant, "Watch your step. Trouble looms on the horizon".

'No,' he muttered, 'I don't.'

'Croatia?' I pretended to search my memory. 'Oh Yes...' I replied guardedly, 'last year, wasn't it?'

'Well done. Exactly. Last year. And you might just remember how pleasant it was on that covered veranda?'

'Covered veranda?' I frowned. 'I can't say that it struck me particularly.'

'Me neither,' lied Alun, taking a prudent defensive line.

'Pergola,' said Mike. 'That's probably what she means.'

'Thank you, Mike.'

'My pleasure,' he smiled. The fool...

'But you certainly remember sitting together, protected from that hot sun, sipping our chilled white wine together,' smiled Margaux.

I pulled a face, but Alun picked up the narrative.

'Well, at least we don't have to worry about getting out of the hot sun here,' he said. 'There is none.'

'And...' continued Margaux, 'you must also remember, that even when it did rain, we could partake of those eminently relaxing moments, all the same.'

All this harping on about chilled aperitifs and relaxing moments was a low trick. It was, in our opinion, below the belt and possibly even lower than that. Furthermore, I considered it unethical to attempt to influence a man in such an underhand manner.

My wife shoved her oar in, 'But perhaps they've gone off aperitifs.'

'Or,' added Margaux. 'They may have taken a vow of abstinence. Brought on no doubt by the shock of their recent encounter with the long arm of the law.'

'Trespassing!' breathed my wife.

'Shameful!' added Margaux.

'Under the circumstances,' sighed my wife. 'I suppose I'll have to decline your generous invitation, Margaux.'

'I understand,' replied the latter sadly. 'Never mind.'

'I fear that my poor husband is pining for home. Like many men of advanced age, he must feel the call of the comfort of his own warm armchair.'

'And his woollen slippers,' nodded Margaux. 'It's so sad. But what's to be done, my dear?'

'Invitation!?' I said, brightening.

'I'm sorry, Margaux,' she continued. 'I suppose we'll have to scrap the idea of staying on for those extra few weeks.'

'What's this?' cried Alun.

'I'm not pining for anything,' I cried.

Mike had been wandering about the room and was messing about with some small object on a low table. He looked up.

'Put that down at once, Mike,' called Margaux. 'Gently. That's right. Now don't touch anything else, please.'

Mike sighed, 'I suppose you two have concocted some unpleasant tasks you're now preparing to land us with.'

'Ah!' smiled Margaux. 'At least one of the three Musketeers has grasped the idea.'

'We all did,' cried Alun, 'and a pretty sneaky, low-down way to be going about it.'

'Things are simply not done that way,' I nodded.

'So, what is it?' asked Mike.

'We thought,' smiled my wife, 'that a few extra weeks together would be good for your psychological well-being.'

'I don't like the sound of this at all,' frowned Alun.

'But you will,' smiled my wife. 'Once we have fully explained.'

'I don't like the sound of that either,' re-frowned Alun.

'Especially considering all that preparatory rubbish about aperitifs,' I added.

'As I said,' repeated my wife, 'we have your mental well-being in mind.'

'If you could avoid mentioning mental well-being, I'd be grateful,' said Mike. 'It brings back unpleasant memories.'

'Would those be recent memories, Mike?' asked Margaux.

'Fairly recent,' replied Mike, realising he had made a faux pas.

'Oh well. You'll no doubt explain about that another day.'

Mike grunted a non-committal grunt.

Alun and I exchanged smiles. We still remembered the astonished look on the noble aunt's face when confronted by two mad gardeners.

'Well,' said Margaux. 'You'll agree that hanging around the house for weeks on end is bad for you.'

'That depends,' said Alun guardedly.

'You end up getting bored, and then you find some way of getting into trouble,' said my wife.

Mike let out a snort of laughter. 'They don't need to get bored to get into trouble. I can assure you of that.'

Ignoring this interruption, my wife continued, 'we decided that what you need is a nice project.'

'No, we don't,' I cried.

'What I mean is that, if you want to stay on here, there are certain conditions...'

'This is downright bribery,' cried Alun.

'You grasp the situation nicely,' smiled Margaux.



'I'm astounded,' I added, 'at how low you two can stoop.'

'I'm not,' sighed Alun. 'Not at all.'

Mike had wandered over towards the shelf and was reaching up. 'Don't touch that either, Mike,' called Margaux, 'It's fragile.'

Mike retracted his arm and started wandering again.

'Come and sit down here, Mike,' commanded Margaux. 'And don't pick at the threads of the chair cover.'

Mike did as he was told and continued gazing around the room for things to touch later on.

My wife sat forward in her armchair, 'Now. You three would enjoy a few more weeks together, wouldn't you? We appreciate just how important this is for you.'

'And,' said Margaux. 'It just happens that we have a certain task that requires the combined talents of the three of you.'

'You want us to go to the pub?' cried Alun enthusiastically.

'No. Something rather more useful' added my wife.

'Like keeping out of your way?' I suggested.

'Something even more useful than that,' smiled Margaux.

'You're perhaps going a bit far in affirming that, Margaux,' said my wife.

'Yes. You may be right. Anyway, this task is something that we are certain you'll enjoy because you three can do it together?'

'I feel a fever coming on,' groaned Alun.

'Me too,' I said.

'Does it include being shut up in a prison cell?' asked Mike.

Ignoring this, Margaux continued, 'we want you to build something.'

Alun glanced up, a glimmer of interest in his eyes, 'build something?'

The Girls nodded.

'Ah! What sort of something?'

'We would like you to build us a covered terrace. A terrace just like the one in Croatia.'

'A pergola.' suggested Mike again.

'Something like that.'

I sat forward and shot a look at Alun, then at Mike. 'Hum. That might be fun.'

'Yes,' smiled Alun. 'Fun.'

'Oh God,' sighed Mike, 'I don't know why, but I have a premonition of impending disaster.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' laughed my wife. 'We'll be near. We won't allow anything to go wrong.'

'You'll bail us out of prison then?' said Mike.

'You won't end up in prison. At least not this time.' Smiled my wife rubbing his shoulder tenderly.

'We want that terrace, you see,' added Margaux.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'You don't understand these things as I do.'

The Girls exchanged amused looks, 'You'd be surprised, Mike...', said Margaux.

'I'll be surprised if nothing goes wrong. Astonished, in fact,' he finished.

'Don't worry, Mike,' said Margaux. 'Just leave that coverlet alone, will you.'

'Oh! Sorry. It's my nerves,' He sighed. 'I wasn't always like this, you know.'

'No, of course not. It's only the last fifty years since you first met these two,' suggested Margaux.

Mike nodded sadly.

'Come with us,' said my wife, getting to her feet. 'We'll show you what our ideas are.'

'Admittedly,' said Margaux. 'In the past, your little trio has shown a stronger leaning towards destroying things than in building them. But there's always a first time.'

'Very amusing,' I said.

'Well,' she continued, 'the best place for the terrace would be along the fence over there,' she pointed.

We screwed up our eyes, surveyed the lay of the land, and nodded approval.

Now. All experienced men know that choosing the right place for anything is by far the most testing and stressful ordeal in family life. Be it a rose bush, an occasional table, a swing, or a birdbath, positioning inevitably ends in a heated argument. So, if this delicate phase of negotiation has been bypassed, all becomes plain sailing.

Margaux was watching us keenly as we sized up the allotted space. 'And, to avoid any misunderstanding about what we would like,' she said, handing me a brochure, 'this is exactly what we would like you to build for us.'

Mike and Alun crowded around me. After a few minutes of study, we exchanged appreciative looks, 'this is going to be fun,' smiled Alun.

'Yes,' I said. 'An interesting project.'

My wife came over, slipped her arm through mine and smiled, 'I told you, you would like it.'

Mike just sighed a long, sad, resigned sigh.

'Wouldn't you prefer some sort of Folly?' asked Mike at breakfast the following morning.

'No, Mike. You have the plans...'

'I was just wondering....'

'Don't wonder, Mike. Just "Do",' laughed Margaux.

So, after breakfast, we donned our oldest clothes and tramped outside.

'The shed will have to come down,' said Margaux.

'Shed!? That's not a shed,' cried Alun. 'That's my workshop?'

'Well, you can see for yourself that it's in the way.'

'But where will I do my DIY work?'

'You can build a new one at the end of the terrace,' said Margaux.

'A better one,' added my wife.

Alun brightened, 'Yes. It was always a bit on the small side. Yes,' he nodded, 'OK.'

'She said a better one, Alun,' said Margaux. 'Not a bigger one.'

'Oh, all right. Perhaps marginally longer, though.'

'Marginally, does not mean double,' said Margaux.

'No, no. Of course not,' replied Alun, already sizing up the available space.

And so, we got to work.

First, we emptied the shed's contents.

We made three piles.

The first contained essential bits and pieces. These were irreplaceable things that could not be done without. So, naturally, that single pile held nearly everything from the shed.

The second pile contained things destined for the Tip, and the third, things that required a little thought.

This little job took all morning.

We then pulled a tarpaulin sheet over the piles in case of rain and tramped into the house for the mid-day meal.

We dug out the heavy sledgehammers at half-past one and got on with the most enjoyable job known to man, demolition.

Demolishing things has always given us inexpressible pleasure, so we did the job with gusto.

By the end of the afternoon, the garden was littered with piles of splintered wood and debris. We even discovered a forty-five-year-old copy of Playboy, which brought back boyhood memories until Margaux confiscated it.

There followed six enjoyable trips to the Tip.

These always consumed more time than expected because, as everyone knows, a Tip is a place for men to pause and meditate. It is a place of wonder and delight.

This over, and after a good deal of raking and sweeping, overseen by the Girls, phase one was deemed complete. As a direct consequence, we were treated to a highly agreeable evening meal.

The following day, we were out early, full of enthusiasm. We were keen to get to grips with our ball of string and wooden pegs.

We carefully measured Alun's small sailing boat and trailer, and Mike ensured we would have the space to get it out once the building was finished.

We then towed it down to the end of the garden under the weeping willow.

A reinforced concrete foundation would be required, but we hadn't realised quite how much

digging this needed. Margaux declared that the farthest corner of the garden would be the resting place for the tons of earth we extracted. Luckily for us, however, the earth was easy to dig. So, by taking turns with pickaxe, spade, and wheelbarrow, the footing was finished by midday.

Having calculated the volume of ready-mixed concrete we needed, we tramped off to get a quote.

We got a bit of a shock when the manager had totted up and pushed over the slip of paper. Alun almost fell over backwards, 'How much!?' he cried.

We looked over his shoulder, drew in our breaths, and pulled faces.

'On top of the cost of concrete, you've got delivery charges plus the extra cost for the overhead boom pump,' nodded the man. 'It would have been much cheaper if you had built it in the front garden.'

'I haven't got a front garden,' grumbled Alun.

I frowned, 'Do you think Margaux will cough up for that?'

'No chance,' sighed Alun. 'Don't forget it was us who rejected their idea of wood decking.'

'You rejected it, Alun,' said Mike, 'Not us... You said concrete would cost next to nothing.'

We left the manager shaking his head sadly as he watched us go.

'You two drive back,' said Alun. 'I'll be along in a moment. I've got a friend who might lend us a cement mixer.'

'So that we can exhaust ourselves mixing a hundred tons of cement.'

'Concrete, Mike,' I said. 'Not cement.'

'A hundred tons of anything has the same effect on my back muscles,' replied Mike.

'Oh! You have muscles then?' smiled Alun.

'Shut up.'

Back home, we were settling down to eat when there was a huge commotion outside, followed by scraping and rumbling noises.

We followed the Girls outside to have a look just as Alun hove into view in the back garden, dragging an outsized, dented, rusty cement mixer.

'Dan agreed to lend us his spare mixer. He says he won't be needing it,' smiled Alun, giving the flaking yellow paintwork a friendly slap.

'Any man who can lie like that has no place amongst your friends, Alun,' said my wife.

'I bet he was pleased to get the eyesore out of view for a few days. It must have been giving his road a bad name.'

'Maybe,' said Alun, 'but it's free. So, we only have to pick up a few bags of cement, ballast and sand and Bob's-your uncle...'

'A few bags!' cried Mike. 'And we have to transport them?'

'Oh, come on, Mike,' said Alun. 'Only a few minutes ago, you were boasting about your iron-hard muscles.'

'That's right,' I said. 'I heard you.'

'I said nothing of the sort. Have you any idea how many bags you'll need to fill that hole?'

'Tenish,' said Alun.

'So, we're building a Tenish Court then, are we?'

'Very amusing,' groaned Mike. 'Closer to forty, I'd say.'

'Forty!' exclaimed Alun.

'And,' asked Margaux, 'Just how much will these few bags of cement cost?'

'Concrete,' I corrected, 'Not cement. Cement, in fact, is....'

'We're not interested in *What* it is,' interrupted my wife, 'but how *Much* it is.'

'Oh....' Alun pulled a face, 'Next to nothing I should expect.'

'You'd expect that, would you?' said Margaux.

Alun nodded, 'A few quid, I suppose.'

'A few quid!' exclaimed Mike.

'For the lot?' frowned Margaux.

'No, of course not. Per bag.'

'A few quid!' Margaux nodded. 'These "quids" of yours. I suppose are roughly the same thing as English pounds.'

'More or less,' nodded Alun.

'And,' she continued, 'what is the current official conversion rate for "a few" on the stock exchange?'

'Well. Fiveish or so.'

'Five-ish or so?'

'Thereabouts,' nodded Alun.

'Or perhaps closer to ten?' she suggested.

'Possibly. Depends really.'

'Does it?'

'Yep,' nodded Alun, wishing he hadn't started this conversion.

'So, what you really mean,' said my wife, 'is that you have no idea at all.'

'Well. Maybe a hundred.'

'A hundred what? Bags, Quid, euros, pounds kilos?'



'Pounds.'

'So at least we have one thing clear now,' smiled Margaux. 'For each "few", one pays one hundred pounds. That's right, is it?'

'No.' sighed Alun, 'A hundred pounds or so. For the lot.'

'For the lot,' nodded Margaux. 'And does "the lot" mean all the concrete you'll need for the job?'

'Yep. Thereabouts.'

'I'd quadruple that if I were you, Margaux,' said my wife.

Margaux shook her head sadly, sighed and looked over at my wife. 'Well. Directly after you three have finished with your nosebags, you can go and find out.' She paused. 'And phone us *before* you pay for anything. I want to know if we'll have enough money left to buy the food for tonight's meal.'

Well, to cut a long story short, the cost was duly communicated, accepted and we borrowed a lorry to bring the stuff back.

'I'll take the wheel, shall I?' said Mike.

'OK, but you'd better take the spare. We'll be needing the other four?' I chuckled.

'Funny man,' sighed Mike. 'It's just that I'm more used to lorries than you two.'

'You drove them during the war, I suppose,' said Alun.

'That's it...,' Mike frowned. 'Oh, shut up, Alun. You're getting me confused.'

'In that case,' smiled Alun, 'I think I'll walk back.'

'Yes. I think that'd be safer, ' I agreed.

'Come on, let's get going. We haven't got all afternoon,' sighed Mike.

'Oh! So it's early closing day for undertakers, is it,' said Alun.

'Come on. Jump up.'

So, we jumped up and, incredible as it might seem, got home safely.

Backing into the drive was a delicate manoeuvre because of the presence of Alun's flimsy wooden manhole cover.

'Why don't you have a decent cast-iron one like everybody else, Alun?' asked Mike.

'Firstly, because I'm not like everyone else....'

'I noticed that,' grunted Mike.

'And secondly, because I happen to be a clever, profoundly thinking man. That's why.'

'I don't see the link,' frowned Mike.

'Because that hole is particularly well placed.'

'And that's why you replaced the good, solid iron cover with a few planks of rotting wood.'

'They weren't rotting when I put them there. They chose to rot of their own accord.'

I nodded, 'It's nice to have given them a free choice like that, Alun.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'I like to spread a little sunshine whenever possible. After all. Why should they not choose their own destinies?'

'That's rather profound, Alun,' I nodded.

Mike stared at us with pity written across his face. 'You are both profound. Profoundly mad and in need of being shut up in a mental care home.'

'An asylum, you mean, I suppose?' I suggested.

Mike made a puffing noise.

'So why the wood Alun? I suppose I have to ask, even though I know that you are going to spew forth some utter nonsense,' he said.

'Well, the hole is deep.'

'That clarifies everything then,' he snorted.

'It's deep and well placed for inspection.'

'That's what inspection holes are for. Inspecting.' cried Mike in exasperation.

'But I use it for inspection upwards.'

'For what!?' exclaimed Mike.

'For inspecting underneath my cars...'

'Oh god!' cried Mike. 'Squatting in a drain? Couldn't you simply have said so to start with instead of wasting valuable time?'

'I could have. Naturally. But it wouldn't have been half as much fun.'

I leaned against the lorry, and laughed, 'come on, Mike, we'll guide you back in.'

Mike got the lorry into position, and I offloaded the bags into Alun's pre-industrial rusty wheelbarrow. Alun then he pushed it around to the back of the house, squealing all the way. The wheelbarrow that is, not Alun.

After an animated debate, we abandoned our initial idea. Instead of employing the untidy-heap-on-the-lawn method, we opted for the tidy-pile procedure.

The latter is admittedly far less pleasing to the experienced eye. However, we felt that a well-stacked pile, especially an out-of-sight one, was less likely to encourage wifely wrath.

We had learnt that "Wifely wrath" was something best avoided when nearing mealtimes.

The job finished, we jumped into the lorry to take it back. Well, that's what was intended. Instead, we moved forward six feet, then down two.

As we turned, the outside back wheel encountered the rotten manhole cover, which declined the invitation to support it.

There was an ominous cracking sound, and we were tumbled sideways against the passenger door.

When he recovered from the shock, Mike pressed the accelerator. However, the engine raced fruitlessly.

One front wheel was now two feet in the air, and the other span unimpeded on the wet grass.

'Oh well!' sighed Alun. 'I was going to change those planks anyway.'

'Great!' said Mike. 'Now what?'

We ambled around the lorry to inspect the scene.

'She's stuck,' announced Alun.

'Really?' nodded Mike. 'I wondered what had happened. Stuck then?'

'Yep,' said Alun. 'Stuck.'

'Well, well, well.' added Mike.

'All we have to do...,' started Alun.

'Oh God! Save me,' cried Mike.

'All we have to do,' continued Alun. 'Is to lever the thing up until the other wheel grips the ground.'

'And,' said Mike, 'Bob's-your-uncle.'

'Exactly.'

'And how, pray, do you intend to lever a two-ton lorry up out of a two-foot hole.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'Aren't you forgetting your basic physics, Mike?' he smiled. 'As Matthew

Slam once said, "Hand me a broomstick long enough, and I'll dust the moon".

'Don't you mean Methuselah?'

'That's the guy.'

'What a load of rubbish,' cried Mike, 'It was Isaac Newton, 1642 to seventeen twenty-something. He said, "Give me a lever long enough, and I'll move the moon."'

Alun smiled, 'well, I knew there was a long bit of wood in it somewhere.'

'You twit,' sighed Mike.

'But a good idea?'

'Yes, yes. All right. For once, it's a good idea,' he admitted. 'Unless all the wood you have is as rotten as these planks.'

'More or less,' nodded Alun. 'Most of it, yes. I prefer to refer to it as "matured" wood.'

'Matured!' cried Mike. 'I've heard everything now.'

'Are you sure of that, Mike?' I smiled.

'No. I am not,' he groaned.

'But,' I added, 'What about the terrace kit the girls have purchased. There are a few lovely thick beams.'

'Yes,' agreed Mike. 'I suppose they'd do.'

'Just pop around and choose one then, Mike,' said Alun. 'You know better than us.'

'Are you kidding?' laughed Mike. 'You're just worried that one of the Girls will spot you.'

'OK,' sighed Alun. 'If you're that scared of a couple mere women, I'll come too.'

'Mere women!?' cried Mike.

'Yes, Alun. That's rather a colossal understatement,' I said.

'Oh Well!' sighed Alun. As usual, when there's a man's job to be done... I see I'll have to do it myself.'

With this, he sneaked back around the wall. He then crouched manfully and slipped under the window to avoid detection by the mere women inside. He was soon back dragging a long roofing beam.

'That'll do nicely,' I said.

'OK,' said Mike. 'I'll get the engine going. As soon as you two have levered it up so the other wheel can bite, shout.'

'What shall we shout?' asked Alun.

'How about something like, "go",' sighed Mike.

'OK.'

'I'll accelerate slowly, and you two try to follow me along to keep her upright.'

'Got it,' said Alun.

'Me too,' I added.

Mike frowned and looked doubtful. 'Oh well...', he sighed.

We lodged the long beam on the lip of the manhole frame and levered it up. Then, to our astonishment, the lorry tipped up, and the front wheel came down. 'Hell!' said Alun turning to me, 'we're stronger than I thought.'

'What's going on back there,' shouted Mike.

'Accelerate,' Alun shouted back.

'Go,' I corrected.

Mike let out the clutch, and the lorry lurched forward. In doing so, it dragged the beam off the lip of the hole. The freed beam shot out of our hands into the manhole, and the lorry followed it.

Mike disappeared from sight. However, he almost immediately appeared again, falling headfirst out of

the passenger window into one of Margaux's prized rose bushes.

'Garrgh!' he cried.

However, we had other things to think about.

At the bottom of the manhole, the beam made acquaintance with the water main and a fine spray of water shot upwards under the lorry.

'Quick,' shouted Alun. 'Get down and hold the two bits together. I'll get a wrench.'

'From under the pile?' I shouted back.

'Oh Hell!' groaned Alun.

I jumped down and grabbed the pipe. But as I did so, the two parts decided to part company.

The pipe gave a joyful yelp of pleasure and shot out of my hands.

An astonishing jet of water shot skywards, arching high over the next-door garden and into the road beyond.

'Great gods!' shouted Mike. 'Get a "thing" and turn off the "whatsit" in the road.'

We gazed at him for a fraction of a second.

'Good idea Mike,' shouted Alun. 'Will do. Now, where have I put that "Thing"?''

At this moment, the jet of water must have met something human. There was a roar from up the road and a series of fruity oaths, closely followed by the sound of the heavy footfalls of someone running.

'What on Earth is going on here...?' a big, drenched policeman appeared and stopped short. 'Oh! It's you, Alun. And your friends. I should have guessed....'

It was John, Alun's daughter's last boyfriend. We had met before.

He took in the lorry, with its wheel in the air, me in the manhole, Mike in the rosebush and the geyser of water spouting out of the manhole.

'Yes,' he nodded slowly. 'I should have guessed.'

At this moment, we heard a roaring noise further up the road. John, recognising this, darted out into the street.

A fire engine was approaching on its return trip from some other catastrophe. He waved it down, and the men jumped out. They had the manhole in the road up in seconds and the main sealed off in next to no time.

'Lucky we were passing,' said the Commander, then he caught sight of us.

'Oh! It's you, Alun.' The man took in the scene with the same slow look as John. 'And your friends too. Well, well, well!'

'That's exactly what I was just saying,' nodded John.

The two men came over and looked down into the hole.

The Commander gave a few sharp instructions to his men. With a quick nod, they dragged over a traction cable, attached it to the lorry and towed it out onto the road, where it stood dripping.

A fireman jumped down into the hole with the appropriate tools. He pulled the pipe back into position and tightened it, turned the main stopcock back on and checked that everything was in order.

All this took less than a quarter of an hour.

Then, after a few words of thanks, the firemen jumped back into the engine. 'Can we drop you off, John?'



The dripping Policeman John accepted, and off they roared.

'Weren't those the same firemen who dealt with that incident with the flaming turkey last Christmas?' asked Mike.

'The same, I'm afraid,' sighed Alun.

'Ah. Margaux will learn about all this then.'

'That's inevitable,' sighed Alun. 'As usual...'

The atmosphere in the cab was a little subdued as we drove the lorry back to the DIY shop.

However, once back in the comfort of our own cosy car, we relaxed a little.

'Say what you will,' said Alun, who was driving, 'that was good fun.'

'Stimulating,' I added.

'Maintains the little grey cells and promotes their constant renewal,' Alun agreed. 'Just think of how depleted our stock of grey cells...'

'Neurons and axioms,' Mike corrected.

'Just think of how terribly depleted our stock of neurons and axioms would be if left unstimulated,' he sighed.

'We would be barely more than cabbages on legs,' I said.

'Or brainless molluscs,' added Alun.

'OK, OK,' interrupted Mike. 'I've got the message.'

'You have to admit, Mike,' I said. 'That your little grey cells are kept in better form by hob-knobbing with Alun and me.'

'Better?'

'Yes. Better than if you spent all your time at home. Building one-tenth scale models of football stars with matchsticks doesn't stimulate anything.'

'Football stars don't use matches; they use cigarette lighters.'

'Cigar lighters, nowadays, Mike,' I said.

'Big ones,' added Alun.

'Oh God!' sighed Mike.

Alun and I exchanged looks but, for once, decided to let this brilliant chance of clever repartee slip past.

'Anyway,' said Alun. 'That sort of activity causes atrophy of everything.'

'Except for little grey morons perhaps,' I suggested.

'Little grey morons!?' cried Mike.

'Moron is perhaps not the word you were searching for,' said Alun.

I reflected on this for a few moments, 'No. or do I mean, yes?'

'An interesting question,' nodded Alun.

Luckily for Mike, at this point, we arrived home.

Alun dragged out some of his less "matured" planks which appeared to be only partially rotten, and repaired the manhole cover.

He then brought out a jerrycan of petrol and filled the mixer tank. It overflowed, and petrol cascaded back onto the grass and inside Mike's rubber boots.'

'Hell, Alun! You twit.'

'Oops,' said Alun. The filler pipe's come undone.'

Mike got down on his hands and knees, 'It has not come undone. It's rotted away. Completely. There's hardly any pipe left at all.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'I've got plenty of bits of plastic tubing.'

'In the workshop?' I smiled.

'Yep. Ah...!'

'In that pile somewhere,' I said, pointing to the tarpaulin that now covered the contents of the dismantled workshop.

Mike emptied the petrol from his boots, and we trudged down the garden.

Half an hour later, we found what we were looking for. Then, after a bit of squeezing, stretching, and hammering, we got a new bit of tube in place.

By this time, the grass around us had taken on a peculiar brownish tint.'

'It doesn't seem to have appreciated being cleansed and disinfected,' I said.

'No gratitude,' snorted Alun. 'Probably foreign grass anyway.'

'For goodness's sake, get on with it, Alun,' groaned Mike.

Alun refilled the reservoir and then made a good show of tearing at the starter cord.

Nothing happened.

'It runs very quietly as mixers go,' I smiled.

Mike was wandering around the machine, gazing into its rusty depths. 'Isn't there supposed to be something in this hole?' he said, pointing.

We came around and followed the direction of his pointing finger. 'Something roughly the same shape as a spark plug, for example.'

'Ah!' said Alun. 'You may be right. I've got plenty.'

'In the same pile?' I asked.

'Exactly. Good job I kept them.'

'Hum!' I sighed.

A mere half an hour later, we found the spark plugs.

Then we then spent some more time hunting for the special spanner. Unused for decades, it was liberally encrusted with rust which had to be scraped off before it would fit the spark plug.

But in the end, we had the plug in place and the high-voltage wire attached.

When all was ready, the plug in place, and the high voltage wire attached, Alun nodded with satisfaction. 'Would you like to pull, Mike?'

'No thanks, I've had enough petrol for the moment.'

Alun grabbed the handle and tugged. The motor turned over, gave an encouraging cough, and stopped.

'Looking good.' smiled Alun.

'Looking good!?' cried Mike.

'Yep. Just give it a few more pulls and bob's-your-uncle.'

'You do it, Alun,' snorted Mike. 'Bob's your uncle, not mine.'

I stepped back a little, just in case. So did Mike.

Alun shook his head and braced himself. 'Here goes.'

And there, as mentioned, he went...

'He put all his strength into the pull. However, that strength was possibly a touch too much for the ageing rope. It snapped, and Alun went tumbling backwards across the garden.

Things might have ended badly had there not been a well-furnished holly bush to break his fall. The cushioning effect afforded by this was quite remarkable. He shot back out of it as if propelled by a spring. All the same, his choice of escape trajectory was perhaps a little unfortunate.

I, for one, would not have chosen that one. However, that's life, I suppose. If Alun wanted to end up in one of Margaux's favourite rose bushes, well, what can I say?

In any case, we enjoyed the show.

Mike smiled down as Alun sat on the brown, petrol-drenched grass, picking thorns out of his fingers.

'And I suppose the coil of replacement rope is at the bottom of that pile again,' he said.

Alun nodded, 'You get it. It's easy to recognise.'

I suppose it looks a bit rope-like,' I suggested.

Mike paused, 'Surely it would be quicker if we just built a new mixer, from scratch....'

Once the rope was found and replaced, it was getting on for four o'clock.

'Let's have a go, then go in and have some tea,' said Alun. 'I've had enough of cement mixers for one day.'

Mike and I stepped back a bit further this time, 'What are you two afraid of? It's not going to explode, you know,' sighed Alun.

'Who says?' said Mike.

Alun shrugged and gave a tentative tug. The machine turned over, emitting an encouraging splutter. He then put his strength behind the next pull, and the thing burst into life.

There was a roar, a cloud of black smoke, and the whole structure shuddered. Even the drum started to spin. The noise was, however, deafening. The rusted exhaust pipe had detached itself and fallen onto the rose bush.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun.

The back door shot open, 'What on earth is all that din?' shouted Margaux.

'Alun is just practising,' I shouted back.

'Great gods! ' She shouted back. 'Turn that thing off, or we'll have the police around. They must have heard that all the way to Scotland Yard.'

Alun pulled a face, 'How do you turn these things off, Mike? There must be a switch or something, somewhere.'

'It must have fallen off too,' sighed Mike.

Saying this, he stepped over, leant forward, and jerked off the plastic petrol-feed pipe. The machine spluttered a bit and stopped.

A deafening silence fell.

So did some other bit of the machine. However, we never discovered to what part of the machine this belonged.

The removed pipe was now spraying petrol onto Margaux's rosebush, so Mike quickly bent it double and jammed it beneath a rusty brace.

'You can't use that if it's going to make a noise like a nuclear explosion!' said Margaux.

We stood together, forming a barrier between her and the mangled rose bush.

'It's only the exhaust pipe came a bit undone,' said Alun. 'We'll sort that out after tea.'

'No, you won't. You can repair it before tea. But I don't want any more experimentation today.'

So, an hour later, we had bolted the exhaust pipe back in place, and all was ready for the next phase in the morning.

We were then ordered to undress in the garden and to leave the petrol-soaked clothes outside.

'That'll kill off the greenfly,' smiled Margaux. 'It'll save me having to spray the rose bushes tomorrow....'

We exchanged looks and were relieved that we had dragged to the mixer so that it hid the battered bush from sight.

The following day, at ten, we started phase three.

'We ought to have bought some reinforcing mesh,' said Mike. 'Otherwise, the base is going to crack.'

'I've plenty of hardcore. To start with, all the stuff in that pile can go in.'

'That'll save a few more trips to the Tip, too,' I added.

'And... It will free up extra room in the new workshop,' agreed Alun.

He started off by doing a few minutes of body-building exercises with the mixer starter rope. Unfortunately, it refused to start.

'Damn this thing!' cursed Alun.

'Why not try reconnecting the fuel pipe,' called Mike from the pile. 'I find that often helps.'

It did help, and we were soon sloshing barrow-loads of concrete into our foundation hole.

There is something virile and inexpressively satisfying about this sort of job.

'A man's job,' said Alun. 'Man has always built shelters for his family. So, we are upholding the heritage handed down to us from the Stone-Ages.'

'Except that they used branches in those days,' I said.

'Or Dinosaur rib-cages,' added Mike.

'First, catch your Dinosaur....,' laughed Alun.

We sifted through the pile of "Questionably important" objects and chose those suitable as reinforcement material. There were two rusty bicycles that hadn't seen service in forty years and two-cycle frames kept for spares, "just in case".

Next came ten metres of stout iron railings which had ornamented the front wall long ago.

This was followed by a roll of heavy wire fencing, five rusty-spoked car wheels and three large hanging baskets.

The girls were happily out for the morning.

'Let's get all this stuff nicely buried before they get back,' said Alun.

'Do you mean to say that this is illegal reinforcement, Alun?' asked Mike.

'One never knows with Margaux,' he replied. 'Best not to tempt her.'

'Let's get on with it then. We've only got two hours.' groaned Mike.

An hour and a half later, we stood back and surveyed the finished platform with aching backs.

Here and there, a few bits of our reinforcement stuck up through the pool of concrete.

In particular, a clearly visible bike handlebar decorated the middle section.

'I'll deal with that, Alun; I'll twist it around a bit more. You go and hunt out your disk grinder thing. We'll cut off the other bits.'

Saying this, he waded into the concrete pool in his boots. There remained a clearance of six or seven centimetres of boot, which Mike considered amply sufficient.



He put one foot on the bike frame and the other on the protruding handlebar.'

'Careful Mike,' I called. 'That thing must be rusted solid.'

He nodded, 'A good kick should sort it out.'

I shot a look at Alun, and we paused in our search to watch.

Well, the handle went down as hoped. However, the rest of the bike came back up. Mike then stamped back down on the frame, which obediently disappeared under the surface. However, in this complex exchange, Mike's foot got entangled in some sub-surface obstacle. Losing his balance, he tumbled down onto his knees on top of the unpleasantly hard frame.

'Hells bells!' he cried, his boots filling with concrete.

'Well done, Mike,' laughed Alun, after having rolled about on the grass for some time.

'You'd better go and rinse your boots and feet before you and your boots, become a single indissociable entity,' I laughed.

'Your hands too,' laughed Alun. 'Do it in the pond.'

'Instead of rolling about laughing, you two can find that disk grinder thing.'

Mike sat on the edge of the fishpond and took off his boots. He rinsed and wrung out his socks, then filled his boots with the weedy water.

Alun called over from under the tarpaulin, 'Don't empty the concrete into the pond, Mike. It'll kill the fish.'

'Oops...' came the answer.

We got up and went over, but it was too late.

'Oh hell,' cried Alun.

Clouds of grey were spreading out majestically across the surface.

'I seem to have lived through this before,' I said.

Alun and Mike nodded, 'Croatia again,' said Alun.

'Yes, but that was wasp insecticide.' added Mike.

'Oh well!' sighed Alun, 'No good crying over spilt concrete. Let's get on before the Girls get back.'

Alun plugged in a long extension cable and powered up the disk cutter.

In next to no time, most of the compromising metalwork had disappeared from sight.

With relief, we stood back and surveyed the finished job with satisfaction.

'We've just time for a celebratory beer before the Girls get back,' said Alun turning to the house.

Then he emitted a low howl, 'Oh Hell!'

Mike and I spun around.

The sitting room sliding windows and the outside walls were covered with splatters of concrete. So were the decking and part of the kitchen windows.

The disk cutter had flicked dollops of concrete all over the garden, concentrating most of its efforts on the sitting room sliding windows.

'Oh Hell,' We rushed over and quickly managed to make things much worse by smearing the windows with more mess.

'Haven't you got a hose, Alun?'

'Of course I've got a hose.'

'Well, what about going and getting it then?' grumbled Mike. 'Where is it... Oh god! Don't tell me...'

With a show of animation only marginally short of absolute panic, we dragged the hose out from under the tarpaulin and set to work.

We had to wash down the hedge laurels and the garden chairs too. But happily, the extra pressure provided by a now fully open shut-off valve allowed us to complete the job in record time.

This being done, we walked back to finish the job of hiding our reinforcing material.

'There's only that little bit over there,' said Mike. 'I'll finish that while you two tow the mixer down to the end of the garden.' He was soon lost behind an impressive shower of sparks.

Alun and I grabbed the mixer and started to trundle the thing across the brown-tinted lawn.

'It doesn't look all that healthy now,' I volunteered.

'No. Petrol is clearly not the best grass fertiliser around.'

'At least, not for foreign grass,' I added.

At this moment, one of the wheels dug into the soft, petrol-soaked grass and jammed.

'Come on, Alun,' I called. 'Get your shoulder against it.'

He did as I asked, and the mixer responded - but it did not respond exactly as we would have wished. Slowly the rust-eaten support brace buckled, and the entire machine crumpled under the weight of the half-full drum.

Down it went, and even the most imperceptive reader will have guessed that the trajectory carried it rose bush wards.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun for the hundredth time of the day.

However, this did not stop the machine from tipping its contents into the space allotted to the bushes fragile and temperamental root system.

As it completed its downward trajectory, the petrol tank hit a pointed segment of handlebar, which had been discarded there.

The corroded tank punctured, and a gallon or so of petrol gushed out.

Mike gave a final triumphant flourish of the disk cutter, showering incandescent blue sparks mixer wards.

'Hell!' shouted Alun as he dived for cover.

The flash and a roar of a sheet of blue flame sent Mike tumbling backwards into the concrete. Simultaneously, the rosebush burst into a flaming torch-like apparition.

We rolled as far as we could away from the inferno and got tentatively to our feet.

Mike stumbled, after us, dripping with concrete.

'Holy Moses!' cried Alun. 'That was a bit close.'

At this moment, the kitchen door opened.

'Everything all right?' called Margaux. She then seemed transformed into a pillar of salt by the blazing garden while my wife gazed over her shoulder.

'Oh. You've finished then?' she smiled.

We undressed in the garden for the second day running.

As I cast my petrol-soaked jeans onto the pile to join Mike's concrete socks, I turned to Alun.

'Just to clear up a point, Alun.'

'Nice pants...I like them. Yes?'

'Where exactly did you get that mixer from?'

'I told you. A friend, Ben, lent it to me.'

'You said Dan, not Ben, Alun,' I reminded him.

'Yes. Of course. Dan,' he looked away.

'Well, just for my information again. Would this Dangerous Dan who lent you this death trap by any chance live in the vicinity of the Tip?'

Alun nodded; 'Down that way, yes.'

'I thought maybe he did,' I said. 'Mike?'

'Yes.'

'Pass me the disk cutter. I think we should amputate Alun's tongue before he can get us into any more trouble.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'He can do that without a tongue.'

I sighed. He was undoubtedly right.

The following morning, we started the job of building the terrace itself.

The girls had bought a kit via an internet site, and by some miracle or other, it had arrived.

Not only had it arrived, but it was complete.

The best price they had found was from a company in Scotland. However, the fact that the wood had been imported from Finland had not struck them as unusual.

'Don't they have pine forests in Scotland?' asked Mike.

Margaux shot him a questioning look, 'Because they get wood from trees!?''

My wife laughed, 'You don't understand, Mike. If you want to keep the price down, you have to use second-hand trees.'

Margaux continued,' and over here, they are all snapped up almost at once. So, manufacturers have to rely on overseas suppliers for decent quality second-hand trees.'

Mike shook his head and walked off. 'Just as bad as their husbands,' he mumbled.

Well, we spread the contents of the packs over the garden and consulted the instructions. But, no matter how many times we counted the parts, we could find nothing missing.

'These foreigners get on my nerves,' grumbled Alun.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'They do it deliberately, just to upset their customers.'

'There should always be something missing. Even if it is an unnecessary part,' said Alun.

'Agreed, ' I said. 'It seems as if they absolutely insist on one being able to build the thing without mishap. The least they could do would be to add a few parts that don't fit anywhere, then leave them out.'

'Or better still,' smiled Alun. 'Leave them in.'

I nodded, 'otherwise, where is the fun? Where is the pleasure of swearing and cursing the idiots who packed the stuff.'

'Exactly,' grumbled Alun.

During this debate, Mike had been at work. He had already placed and bolted in the six heavy support posts.

They had slotted smoothly onto the metal footings we had cast into the foundations. They now stood erect and apparently perfectly vertical.

We stood back and scowled.

'These foreigners get on my nerves,' grumbled Alun again.

'I agree,' I said, 'why go to such extents to annoy customers in such a blatant show of disrespect. They must know that complaining is half the pleasure of DIY work.'

'They clearly have other ways of seeing things over there, lost in endless snow-blocked forests,' said Alun.

'It's probably because they have to wait for the lakes to freeze over before they can get to the DIY shop for spares,' I suggested.

'Yep,' agreed Alun. 'That would explain it.'

By this time, Mike was lifting one of the roofing beams into place, so we decided that we had had our grumble and could now afford to help.

These beams also slipped into place with annoying ease. Even the bolt holes aligned perfectly.

'These guys really get on my wick,' grumbled Alun. 'If we carry on like this, we'll have nothing to do all afternoon.'

Suddenly Mike seemed to wake up. 'Oh, don't worry. By midday, you're certain to have messed something up. The repairs will take us nicely up to teatime.'

'That's not very kind, Mike,' said Alun.

'No. That's right. I'm pleased you noticed,' smiled Mike.

Well, this aggravating simplicity continued, and before it was time to have a mid-morning break, both the roof and the back wall were in place. Not a crack or the tiniest glint of light was to be seen through the structure.

After tea, Mike got up and stuck down the shingles with the sticky muck supplied with the kit.

While he did this, Alun and I slotted the sidewalls into place, then attached the shelving and benches. These too, fitted with irritating ease.

Finally, we stood back and surveyed the finished job.

'Where's the fun in life if everything goes as planned?' groaned Alun.

Mike sat on the new bench, and it didn't even fall down. We sighed.

After tea, Alun stretched himself and jumped to his feet. 'Come and give me a hand, you two.'

We hesitated and quickly thought up reasons why this would not be possible.

'I only want to take the boat around into the front drive.'

'Is that all?' asked Mike.

'That's all. Tomorrow, I have to take it to the boatyard.'

'Isn't it a bit expensive?' I asked.

'The owner's giving me a place at the back, free,' Alun winked. 'I did him a bit of a favour.'

'Oh god!' cried Mike, 'What have you done this time?'

'Nothing. In fact, his son was looking for a windsurf board. So, I gave him mine.'

'Not the one you crashed in, Brittany?' I said.

'That's the one. But I only broke the mast, not the board,' he replied.

'But that thing is delaminated and fills up with water. The lifeguards showed us that,' added Mike.



'Like a sponge,' I added.

'It only leaks in French water,' smiled Alun. 'Over here, the water is too cold to get in.'

'That's nonsense,' cried Mike. 'And you know that perfectly well.'

'No, I don't. You told me yourself that water is at its densest at four degrees centigrade.'

Mike sighed, 'SO?'

'So, clever man, the water molecules will be too big to get through the tiny fissures as it's always about four degrees down this way.'

'What a load of rot,' sighed Mike.

'And in any case,' continued Alun, 'even if water does seep in a bit, it isn't dangerous.'

'No,' I smiled, 'It just weighs twice as much and won't turn.'

'Who's the experienced surfboarder here? You or me?' he sniffed. 'It'll be excellent training until he can afford a really good one.'

'One that doesn't leak, you mean,' said Mike.

Alun held open the door.

'Do you think he'll try that shop on the tip, like you, Alun?' Mike asked.

'If he's got any sense. Yes.'

We tramped down the garden, noting that the grass was even browner now. And the rose bush didn't seem to have appreciated having been concreted in then torched.

We exchanged glances and pulled faces.

'Do you think we ought to go and buy her a new one?' asked Mike.

Alun nodded, 'We'll do that on the way back from the boatyard tomorrow.'

'I didn't know they had a rosebush section at the Tip,' I laughed.

Well, we dragged the trailer out from under the weeping willow and carefully navigated it between the surviving garden plants.

When we reached the gap between the newly completed terrace and the house, we stopped.

'Are you sure it will go through?' I asked, sizing up the gap.

'If Mike's measurements are correct,' said Alun.

'Of course, they're correct,' grumbled Mike.

I pulled a face, walked through the gap, and looked back. 'The width looks OK from here.'

'So, let's get on with it then, instead of making clever theoretical calculations,' sighed Alun.

'I said the width looks OK, Alun. I'm not sure about the length, though.'

'We measured the length too. Didn't we, Mike.'

'You did,' replied Mike screwing up his face a little.

'Maybe, but I'm not sure it will turn...' I started.

'Oh, come on, let's get on with this. I want to change before eating,' grumbled Alun.

I lifted the hook, and the other two got behind and pushed.

We got the boat and trailer through the gap and up against the next-door wall. This was when things got more complicated.

'It won't turn the corner,' I called, 'see for yourself, Alun.'

Alun came and saw,' Hum... Well, they will just have to go through separately. The trailer will have to go on its side.'

So, we backed up, unloaded the boat, set the trailer upright and dragged it through to the drive.

'Let's get the boat through now,' smiled Alun rubbing his hands together in anticipation of his nice hot shower.

I shot a look at Mike, and we exchanged a knowing eyebrow rise.

Alun took the lead this time.

The boat slid into the gap and came up against the wall. 'Oh hell!' he cried. Your measurements are all wrong, Mike.'

'Your measurements,' said Mike, 'you did the length.'

I smiled, 'Look. We just have to put the boat on its side, and Bobs-your-uncle.'

'Of course,' cried Alun, 'Back up, you two.'

Mike and I exchanged eyebrow movements again.

When we got back far enough, Alun came around and moved forward to get a hold of the boat.

'Oh hell!' he cried.

'Something wrong?' I smiled.

'The mast. That's what's wrong.'

We looked up, 'Oh!' I pretended to jump back with surprise. 'How on earth did that thing get there?'

'Shut up,' grumbled Alun.

'Can't we just saw it off and glue it back on afterwards,' I asked.

'Shut up.'

Mike had wandered off down the garden and was gazing through the hedges.

'Hey! Alun, come down here.'

We stumped down and stood beside Mike.

'We could take it up across the field to the track over there,' he pointed.

'You mean,' frowned Alun, 'We dig out three of these bushes then drag the boat up that hill?'

'That's it,' smiled Mike. 'Or simply chop the bushes down. That'd save time.'

'That would bring the wrath of the gods down upon my shoulders,' groaned Alun. 'You simply cannot imagine how much tending went into growing those bushes.'

'So, we dig them out. We are three strong and gallant soldiers, ready to fight for our....' I hesitated.

'For the honour of our fair lady?' suggested Mike.

'That's close enough.'

'Great,' nodded Alun, 'but there is just one small problem.'

'And that is?'

'That, that is not a field but a carefully landscaped garden.'

'Is it?' we started.

'Landscaped to look like an overgrown field?' suggested Mike.

'The owner is a prominent environmental activist,' said Alun.

'Ah!' I said.

'Oh!' added Mike.

'And there's another point.'

'Is there?'

Alun nodded, 'The guy hates my guts...'

'I wonder why?' I mused.

'Why, Alun?' asked Mike.

'I'll tell you some other day.'

'Something about the environment?' I asked.

'He's got this thing about sailing.'

'I wonder why?' coughed Mike.

'Never mind that. How can we get this boat out?' sighed Alun.

'Easy,' laughed Mike, 'we just sneak it across in the middle of the night.'

'In the middle of the night?'

'That's what I said.'

'We dig the bushes up, then in the early hours, we drag the boat and trailer over the garden, leaving a clear track showing where we came from?' Alun shook his head.

'We let the tires down so that they spread and don't mark the ground too much. Then I'll come behind you and rake over the grass as we go. No one will ever know we've been there.'

We looked at each other and leaned forwards to survey the terrain.

'Hum.' Nodded Alun. 'Yes, it might work.'

'We'll dig up the bushes now,' said Mike. 'Then we put them back in place so we can drag them out easily when we're ready.'

'Ready for the big jump,' I suggested.

'Mind you,' said Mike. 'That tree will have to go. Or at least to have a few branches lopped off.'

'That tree!' cried Alun. 'That's the "hanging tree".'

'The Hanging Tree? That's interesting,' frowned Mike. 'How did it come to get that name. Dates back to medieval times, no doubt.'

'It doesn't look all that medieval to me,' I frowned.

'Do they hang villains there?' asked Mike.

'They don't yet... But they will do if you lop off even the smallest branch, without written authorisation from Margaux.'

'Oh!' Said Mike

'Got it,' I added.

'So, the tree remains, then,' said Mike.

'Un-lopped,' I suggested.

'Exactly. You've got it,' finished Alun.

'Pity though,' sighed Mike.

'Can't you feel the rope tightening around your neck already, Mike?' I said.

Mike coughed.

'If you do,' added Alun, 'the final jerk is only half a second away.'

'All right, all right. Neither branch nor leaf will be displaced.' He sighed.

'That's the spirit, Mike,' I laughed, slapping him on the shoulder.

It must have been about two in the morning when we musketeers forgathered in the garden.

We had pulled on jeans and jackets over our pyjamas.

Mike sneaked down to the end of the garden to pull up the bushes while Alun and I dragged the boat and trailer across the moonlit garden.

'The grass looks nice and green in moonlight,' I remarked.

'Yep. Pity it can't stay like that in the sun,' replied Alun.

I nodded. We had loaded the boat back onto the trailer earlier. What's more, we had flooded the wheel

bearings in a mixture of olive oil and butter to avoid any unnecessary squeaks.

We had also taken the precaution of giving every single movable part the same treatment.

'What's so special about the magic mixture you've slopped over half the garden,' asked Mike. 'Why not use proper grease?'

'What is so special, Mike,' said Alun. 'Is that I don't have any grease. Proper or otherwise.'

'Why not?'

'Because that was what was in that rusty old can you insisted on adding to the foundations, Mike,' I smiled.

'Ah! I wondered what that mess was.'

'Good grease doesn't need to be nice to look at,' said Alun. 'It just needs to grease things.'

Mike shrugged, 'I prefer mine clean and not full of all sorts of debris.'

'As you wish.'

We dragged the un-squealing trailer and boat silently across the dew-covered lawn and through the gap in the hedge before replanting the bushes behind us and stamping them in. We then surrounded the ground at their base with leaves we had piled up for the job.

'Ready?' whispered Mike.

We nodded and started up the slope.

As we advanced, Mike came behind, erasing the tire marks with the rake.

In next to no time, we were at the top of the slope.

The car was parked a little lower down, ready for the getaway.

At the lip of the slope, Mike dropped the rake to help us haul the trailer over the last bump.

Alun whispered, 'One, two, three, go.' And we hauled the trailer onto the track.

All went as smoothly as planned. With respect to the trailer, that is. However, the trailer was only part of the story.

On the final jerk, the third-hand straps holding the boat in place snapped. Then, feeling the call of freedom under its hull, the little vessel began to slip surreptitiously backwards off the trailer.

'Oh God!' cried Alun, dashing to grab the stanchions at the edge of the hull.

We followed and, with flailing arms, got hold of anything we could catch. Then, leaning back, we put all our strength into the effort.

The little mutineer of a boat immediately realised that it was dealing with something well above par. The combined strength of three mighty musketeers was obviously something to be reckoned with.

In accordance with this, the boat respectfully slowed its pace and swerved to the right.

However, bedroom slippers lack the grip that heavy Alpine trekking boots boast. We had no grip whatever on the dewy grass.

Noticing this, the little boat redoubled its efforts, and together we started careering down the slope with the boat.

'Let go,' whispered Alun. 'Quick, let's get out of here before disaster strikes.'

'Oh god!' I sighed, 'It's headed straight for that greenhouse.'

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.



'And I suppose the guy who owns it hates your guts too, Alun,' whispered Mike.

'You've got it,' whispered Alun, who was now dragging the trailer away towards the car as fast as he could go.

Having ploughed a deep, clean furrow across the landscape, the boat slowed a little at the bottom of the slope. With its well-pointed bows and smooth hull, it slipped unimpeded through the garden hedge.

'Oh god!' I sighed. 'Please stop.'

However, the boat would not listen.

It gained momentum anew and hit the end of the greenhouse almost perfectly in its centre.

As it smashed through the glass panels, I heard the car start.

I just had time to see the boat come to rest inside the greenhouse amid crushed tomatoes and lacerated beans.

The noise was terrific.

This greenhouse was a perfect fit for the boat, or visa-versa, and the impact of the mast on the Victorian ridge decoration brought the wayward boat to an abrupt halt. It had tossed several of the panes splintering into the garden, then stopped, clearly satisfied with itself.

I made a dash for the car as Alun accelerated down the track.

Within thirty seconds, we had parked in the drive and had unhitched the trailer. We tipped it onto its side, and no one would have guessed it had moved since that afternoon.

We slipped into the house, quickly stripped off our clothes and pyjamaed once more, joined the Girls.

'What on earth was that?' cried Alun, as Margaux threw open the back door.

She snapped on the outdoor light, and we all stepped out onto the terrace.

Lights had come on all along the row, and the noise of conversations mingled with curses from further down.

'This is likely to get complicated,' whispered Alun. We nodded.

'You'd better let me do the talking if required.'

'I think I'm going back to bed.' said Mike.

'A wise move, ' I said.

Margaux started talking over the fence to the next-door neighbour, 'What's going on, Elsie?' she asked.

'There's a boat in Greg's greenhouse.'

'A what?'

'A boat. A sailing boat.'

'In his greenhouse?'

'What's left of it. Yes.'

Margaux opened her mouth to say something, then changed her mind, 'A sailing boat?'

'Yes.'

Margaux turned to us and compressed her eyes in an unpleasant scowl.

'Oh god!' groaned my wife, 'what have you three been up to this time?'

'Us!?' cried Alun.

The two women exchanged looks and blew out their cheeks.

'Where's your boat Alun?' asked Margaux.

'Boat?' frowned Alun. 'Well, it's just down there at the end of the garden, where we left it yesterday.'

'Is it?'

'Well, it was. Wasn't it Mike?'  
However, Mike had disappeared.  
'Wasn't it?' he said, turning to me.  
I nodded.  
'And I suppose it's still there.' said Margaux.  
'Naturally,' replied Alun.

Just at this moment, blue lights started flashing at the top of the slope, and two vans appeared and discharged several policemen.

Accompanied by the environmentalist family, they tramped down the slope, following the deep furrow.

John was with them...

We decided that it would be an excellent strategy to get close to the scene of the action, so we squeezed our way through the hedge and joined the group.

Seen from close to, the catastrophe was well worth observing.

Alun whispered in my ear, 'We're going to have to bluff our way out of this one.'

I nodded. It was not the first time we had been up against the wall together.

'Hey!' shouted Alun, clambering forward, 'That's my boat. What on earth are you doing with it in your greenhouse?'

There ensued a good deal of heated argument, in which Alun accused the neighbour of stealing his boat in the middle of the night.

The local police knew all about Alun's conflicts with his neighbours. They were also accustomed to odd things happening whenever Alun and his friends were together.

'You've both had it in for me since that trouble the year before last,' cried Alun. 'But I never dreamt you'd go as far as this.'

The debate went on, and tempers rose. Finally, the two families swore they were all fast asleep.

'Oh yeh!' snorted Alun. 'They all say that.'

After a good deal more clever footwork by Alun, the debate was closed. The police declared that the boat would be unlikely to sail off during the night. They would come around in the morning and try and sort things out.

At breakfast, Alun's daughter, June, turned up.

She wanted to show her parents her latest work.

Knowing that she mostly painted nudes these days, we gathered around with enthusiasm, but for once, we were disappointed. It was a "Still Life", without the shadow of a nude anywhere. One of those things with an improbable mixture of out-of-season fruits and flowers.

As usual, however, it was exceptionally well executed.

Mike was in one of his less patient moods.

'There can't be many places on earth,' he said, 'where gardens produce quite such a profusion of strawberries at daffodil-time.'

Margaux put her arm around her daughter's shoulder, 'Mike didn't get his normal twelve hours sleep last night.' she smiled.

'The three of them were up late, apparently,' added my wife.

'Doing what, this time?' asked June.

'Who knows?' sighed my wife.

'Apparently,' smiled Margaux. 'In the middle of the night, and for no apparent reason, your father's sailing boat transported itself into Greg's greenhouse.'

'What!?' cried June.

'Hmmm. Odd. Isn't it?'

June shot her father a frowning look, 'What on earth have you been up to this time, dad?'

Alun bridled, but just as he stood up, presumably to present his line of defence from a more advantageous position, the doorbell rang.

'I suppose that'll be the police,' sighed Margaux.

June shot her father another of her looks. Looks which she had clearly learnt at her mother's knee.

The door opened, and in stamped John.

On seeing June, he stopped short, 'Oh!'

He hesitated, 'If I'm disturbing you, I'll come back later.'

June turned on him with a withering gaze, 'Oh! So it's you, is it?'

John reddened around the exposed part of his neck.

'I'll come back after lunch, shall I?' he mumbled.

June, who had cast him off due to a tiff about not wanting to paint him in the nude, sighed. 'Your neck is terribly red, John. I suppose that's because of all the bear?'

'I'll come back, shall I?' repeated John.

'Oh, don't mind little me,' sighed June, 'I'm off anyway.'

And off she went.

'Sit down John,' smiled Margaux. 'You know how June shoots off the handle for next to nothing. Come and sit by me.'

The two young people were a good match and would have remained so had not a certain coolness come between them.

One was a boxing champion and policeman, whilst the other was an artist specialising in female nudes.

On the surface, one would look hard to spot a reason why the hearts should be so sundered, as Bertram Wooster would have put it. But such was the case.

June was one of those proud young and modern beauties who prefer to have it their own way.

When she had indicated to John that he was not the right shape for nude portraits, she'd simply stated her professional opinion.

One can readily appreciate that a respected boxing champion might not appreciate this from the one he loves.

This rift rapidly festered, triggering eloquent verbal exchanges and thence to a severe bout of heart-sundering.

Margaux patted him on the wide shoulder because she quite liked the boy. Furthermore, she realised that a man who would be putty in the hands of her daughter, whilst also being a boxing champion and policeman, would provide her offspring with ample protection.

Women spot such things...

'So,' she smiled. 'How can we help you, John?'

'Well, the sergeant asked me to come and clear up a few details,' he said, shooting a look at Alun.

'Shoot,' cried Alun.

'Well. To start with, it is your boat, isn't it?'

'Oh yes, no doubt there.'

'Good,' said John noting this down in his notebook.

'The sergeant thought it was very odd, there being no traces across the field. From your garden to the place where the boat slid down, I mean.'

Alun and I exchanged looks.

'He asked if you had any thoughts about that?' asked John.

We shook our heads, and Mike piped up.

'I would have thought that if those neighbours wanted to incriminate us, they would have left tracks,' he pulled a face. 'Yes, that's very odd.'

'That's what the sergeant said.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Mike. 'An astute man, your Sergeant.'

'But,' added John, with an embarrassed frown, 'We have almost certain proof that the others were sound asleep.'

Alun jumped at this, 'Almost!?' he cried. 'Almost is just not good enough. For example, if I were to say I was almost certain to have stopped my car when the traffic lights turned red. What would you say, had there ensued a horrifying accident causing the death of thirty children...'

Margaux sighed, 'Alun...'

'Well,' continued John. 'The Sergeant asked if, assuming that your neighbours were not behind this outrage...'

'Outrage!?' cried Alun, 'I'd say it's an outrage. A magnificent ocean-going yacht, smashed to bits by a bunch of jealous idiots ...'

'A half rotten dingy,' corrected Margaux.

'Who else could be responsible?' said John, 'In your opinion?'

We exchanged looks and pulled various faces.

'Any ideas?' asked my wife.

'Well,' frowned Alun.

John scratched his ear, 'the Sargent said it was odd that the guys went to the extent of digging up the hedge, then replanting it.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Now that is extremely odd. Any ideas, Mike.'

Mike shrugged, 'Clearly a professional job.'

'Not a bunch of imbecilic idiots then?' said Margaux, with a slight smile.

'Certainly not,' nodded Mike. 'A thing like that would take a lot of intelligent planning. Cunning too.'

Well, that lets you three off then,' chuckled my wife.

I felt that this was a little unfair, but I decided to hold my tongue.

'I have heard that big-time criminals will go to remarkable lengths to divert attention from themselves to innocent...' I said.

'Exactly,' interrupted Alun. 'This must be part of some dastardly plan to rob valuable paintings from the local art gallery.'

'There aren't any valuable paintings here,' said Margaux.

'That's what most people think,' I said. 'I bet these art thieves discovered that one of the paintings is, in fact, a Van Gogh, worth ten million pounds.'

Alun nodded, 'That's certainly the explanation' he nodded. 'International gangs of art thieves will go to



incredible lengths to get their hands on priceless paintings.'

'Well,' I smiled. 'That seems to clear things up nicely.'

'I bet that even now, those criminals are slipping through the loopholes of the law. They're probably already taking refuge in some unreliable state under false identities,' Alun shook his head sadly. 'Too bad.'

John seemed a little at sea, 'Hum.'

Margaux leant forward, 'You seem a tad perplexed, John.'

'Well!' he scratched his head. 'It does all seem a bit improbable.'

'That's true,' replied my wife, 'but can you imagine any other reasonable explanation for the night's events?'

John pulled a face and looked from Alun to me and then to Mike, 'Well...no. I agree that it's not easy.'

'Probably Estonian art bandits,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I added. 'The county is crawling with them.'

'Estonians,' frowned John brightening at the thought that this happened to be one of the sergeant's pet dislikes.

Alun spotted this and nodded at me.

'Only the other day,' he said. 'Three of them came around asking if we had any old stuff we wanted to get rid of.'

'Were those the ones pretending to be Romanians?' I asked.

'That's it,' nodded Alun.

'Didn't fool us for a second,' I added.

'Oh!' nodded John, jotting notes in his book.

'Oh God, Alun! ' I cried. 'And we even brought those guys around into the back garden to show them the whatsit.'

'Hells bells!' said Alun. 'That's when they must have spotted the yacht.'

'Well, well, well.' said John. 'This is going to interest the sergeant. He's been harping on about foreigners for weeks and weeks.'

Alun and I nodded and pulled faces. Mike was edging towards the door, 'I'm going for a walk. Anyone coming?'

Alun stood, 'Anything else we can help you with, John?'

John shook his head, 'No. I think I've got enough to calm the Sarge down for the moment.'

'Well, we might as well pop down the pub then,' smiled Alun as we sneaked out. 'Quick one?'

'I'm on duty,' sighed John.

'Another time then, John.' said Alun. 'Oh, tell the Sarge that I'll be wanting my yacht back, though. And while you're about it, you might as well leave it at the boatyard.'

With this, we left as quickly as possible.

That evening, after a relaxing meal, we moved out to the completed terrace to do a bit of sipping chilled champagne.

Margaux smiled over at my wife, 'Do you know what I'd love to do tomorrow.'

'No.'

'It's going to be a lovely sunny day. We could go for a long outing, just the two of us, while these three musketeers clean up the garden.'

'Good idea.' said my wife.

'And do you know what would be even better?

My wife shook her head.

'We can take the Bikes.' smiled Margaux.

'Perfect,' agreed my wife.

The three of us exchanged glances and decided to go for a very early walk the next day.

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

## Chapter 8 - Munich

**M**ike, 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 that, when they're in the middle of the Atlantic, hundreds of miles from the coastline, 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.'

'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? Especially 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.

'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?' I suggested

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 agree that beaks are less interesting company. And when one is 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 baby's cots.'

'They did not!'

'How do you know, Mike?'

Mike sighed and blew out his cheeks.

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 often 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 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.'

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

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

'We're trying our 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, participants' wives and a few husbands 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 were so impatient that they t broke into a run. Then the doors opened, and the loud music of an oompah band burst over 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.

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.

With a considerable amount of noise, the scientists 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 bevvy 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.

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 standard 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 protégés.

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 wife's scanty 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 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 him 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,' shouted 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.'

Mike 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.'

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.

The newcomers 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.

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 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.'

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.

## Chapter 9 - Maastricht

**T**he breakfast room was empty and curiously quiet when I came down the following morning. The usual swarms of breakfast predators had, for once, given the morning's feast a wide berth. Having been an eyewitness during the preceding night's revelries, this didn't surprise me unduly.

We were not due to leave for Maastricht until nine O-Clock, and the coach wouldn't be arriving for some time yet. Thus, I relaxed and took my time. Being temporarily freed from the incessant questioning from jabbering Japanese scientists was a welcome surprise. I piled my plate high from the unusually abundant supply of breakfast delicacies, then poured myself a big cup of steaming coffee. Finally, selecting a long window table, I spread the newspaper out and stretched my legs. I then got down to the serious job of starting this new day.

My wife and Margaux would have called this "gorging myself". But this morning, they were not there to witness the degrading scene.

So rare are such moments of calm repose that I deemed it sacrilege to disturb it by turning on my phone. I knew where everyone was and what they were doing, so I decided to let them get on with it unhindered. If they looked like missing the coach, I'd call from the lobby phone, pretending that mine had gone wrong.

Of course, The Girls wouldn't believe this for an instant, but they would be unable to prove anything.

If the worse came to the worse, I could easily sabotage the thing by slipping a fragment of paper between the battery contacts. The idea appealed to me, so I tore a tiny bit of the newspaper and carefully wedged it into place. Perfect.

I then got down to the job in hand: breakfast.

The leisurely meal finished, I took a shower, and as they were still not back, I dressed and wandered down to see if the coach had arrived.

It had.

Gazing down from the windows were several bleary sets of three-quarter closed eyes. It may be that these eyes were, in reality, only half-closed, but that was difficult for me to determine, them being Japanese.

Anyway, I smiled and waved cheerful greetings, which were returned with a marked lack of enthusiasm. It was painfully obvious that those third tankards-full of beer had been one tankard too many for most of the group.

Turning away, I wandered along the deserted pedestrian precinct to pass the time, glancing distractedly in the shop windows.

I didn't need a new pair of fluorescent running shoes, a new phone, a gaudy coloured tee shirt or a fluffy souvenir, so I didn't enter any of them.

At the end of the row of shops, I span on my heel to walk back. From there, I spotted the Girls approaching from the opposite direction. Alun and Mike were following at a respectable distance.

We met at the coach.

'Had a nice rest then?' asked my wife with an unpleasant twist of the upper lip.

'Hello everyone,' I beamed back. 'Got that sorted out then? Well done. How about some breakfast before heading for the hills?'

'We had some,' grumbled Alun. 'In our cell.'

'Good, was it?' I smiled.

'No, it was not,' said Mike. 'And for your information, no improvements have been made to the comfort of police cell beds since our last tour of inspection,' he groaned. 'God! My back.'

Margaux turned and laid her hand on his shoulder, 'Never mind, Mike. Anyway, I must congratulate you on the clarity of your explanations. They apparently went down exceptionally well,' she laughed lightly. 'I doubt that even Alun could have improved on them.'

My wife then turned to me, 'By the time we got there, the police were convinced that Mike was the leader of some terrorist organisation,' she chuckled. 'The chief had a hearty laugh when we told him about some of your past adventures.'

'You didn't need to do that,' complained Alun.

'Yes, we did,' retorted Margaux. 'That was the only way of convincing them that you did stupid things for a living.'

'Oh, come now!' cried Mike.

'Did we, or did we not get you out of that predicament?' said my wife.

'Well...', said Mike.

'Without a blemish on your characters?' added Margaux.

'Oh, all right.'

'What was that you said, Mike?' said my wife with one of those questioning sideways looks of hers.

'All right, all right. Thank you very much for saving us,' sighed Mike with some reluctance.

'From the iron clutches of German lawmakers...' added Margaux.

'Don't turn the knife in the wound, please,' groaned Alun.

'And you?' she continued turning to me. 'I trust you slept well.'

I beamed some more, 'Oh, rather! I haven't slept so well for ages. Lovely breakfast too.'

My wife was on the point of furnishing me with one of her choicest scathing remarks when the driver jumped down, 'Come on, everyone. Time to get moving.'

He actually said this is German, but we got the gist of it and climbed up.

Following my instructions, the man had kept the front two seats for the Girls.

This cunning bit strategy on my part would keep them confined upfront, well separated from us. It would give them nearly three hours to work off their anger and sarcasm before they could get at us again at lunchtime.'

The coach wound its way through Munich's outskirts, picked up the A8 motorway and then buzzed along smoothly.

I was impatient to hear all about the night's adventures, but both Mike and Alun wanted to catch up on missed sleep.

So, I sat gazing out of the window and watched the sun-bathed scenery roll by.

We eventually stopped for lunch at a place just past Manheim.

It was called "Worms", the meaning of which I communicated to a young Japanese couple across the aisle from me.

When they eventually understood my miming of wriggling insects, they pulled faces. The circular motions they then made with their hands on their stomachs indicated that all was not yet back to normal within.

I mimed a throbbing of the temples to which they nodded vigorously.

However, their companion just behind leant forward. 'No, no,' he said, 'Not thump, thump, thump. Boom!' he laughed, miming an explosion with a broad gesture of the arms.

The man's neighbours clearly all agreed, 'Boom, Boom. Yes, Beer-House boom.'

This caused general hilarity towards the back of the coach as we came to a halt outside a motorway feeding trough.

We tramped out, and the driver was treated to a chorus of "beer-House booms" with a good deal of "ha, ha, ha-ing". The wives contributed with "he, he, hieeee's", in the octave above.

The driver shook his head and raised his eyebrows at this peculiar and incomprehensible behaviour.

As expected, the Girls treated us to a choice selection of the better sarcastic remarks they had prepared during the trip. However, as assiduous readers will know, we are used to this and thus

allowed them to slip unheeded over us like water on a duck's back. Even so, it clearly did the Girls good to get this out of their systems, and they gradually calmed down.

After a quick sandwich or two, off we went again, reaching Maastricht at about four o'clock.

This left us just enough time for a quick excursion to the famous caves before going to our hotel.

An English-speaking guide was waiting for us and ushered us to the main entrance. Each Japanese scientist was now weighed down with an outsized shoulder bag. These held more hi-tech photographic gear than one would typically find in a professional studio. They waddled along under the weight while their wives swarmed around chattering.

The guide explained how these mines were cut into the side of a vast hill and dated back more than a thousand years. The limestone was traditionally cut directly off the rockface into blocks, using special hand saws. The material was soft enough for this when initially uncovered but hardened once subjected to the outdoor environment. For this reason, it was used to construct many buildings and monuments, including the Maastricht cathedral.

Our guide paused in her explanation. Then, noting that the Japanese contingent was clearly uninterested, she turned to us. 'Often,' she said, 'guards had to be placed around newly built edifices. Otherwise, young lovers carved their names indelibly into the soft walls.'

'We'll be visiting the cathedral tomorrow,' said Margaux.



'With me, in fact,' replied the guide. 'I'll show you some of the places where lovers managed to make it through the security net.'

Our guide then went on to explain that the labyrinthian network of tunnels stretched some eighty kilometres into the hills. 'Like a giant underground maze, in fact,' she nodded. 'From time to time, people sneak in without a guide to avoid paying and wander off and get lost.' Here she paused and allowed a wry smile to cross her face. 'If they're still inside when the lighting is turned off, they don't do it twice. I'm told that it's a very scary experience.'

'I'll bet it is,' agreed my wife. 'You three wouldn't care to try it tonight, would you?'

'Sounds just the sort of thing that would appeal to you,' suggested Margaux.

'Exactly,' smiled my wife. 'You could spend the long freezing-cold night, hungry and in the utter darkness, trying to find your way out by feeling along the walls.'

Our guide smiled, 'that's exactly what happens. However, it usually results in people going deeper and deeper into the warren of cold and abandoned tunnels.'

'How do you find them in eighty kilometres of tunnel?' asked my wife.

'We don't,' she laughed. 'When the lights come back on in the morning, they discover the "Way Out" arrows painted on the floor. That seems to help.'

We all had a chuckle at this.

She then explained that some clever hiding places had been engineered at various points in the

network. Some were large enough to house hundreds of people. They had been used over the centuries during various military conflicts. Local communities would take refuge there in times of trouble and sometimes remain hidden for days.

It was to one of these that we were now headed.

The girls came with us down the main entrance tunnel for about twenty metres. However, when our guide informed them that the rest was identical, they admitted they preferred blue sky, trees, and birdsong.

'We'll walk back to the hotel and have a wander around the city centre,' said Margaux. 'We've got fewer mole genes in us than you three. Enjoy yourselves.'

My wife nodded, 'and do your best not to end up in prison again,' she paused. 'If that's at all possible.'

The three of us sighed a long mutual sigh and shook our heads sadly.

'Have you absolutely no confidence?' said Alun.

The two women burst out laughing and turned on their heels.

'I suppose that means no,' said Mike.

We nodded in agreement.

The guide turned and watched our wives disappear around a corner of the tunnel.

'Why did they say that about avoiding prison?' she asked, frowning a little.

'Oh that!' smiled Alun. 'There was just a bit of confusion at Munich.'

'Confusion? With the police?'

I smiled at her, 'Well, these Japanese scientists did something silly and as we were in charge...'

She smiled, 'So, you got the blame.'

'Exactly,' nodded Alun.

'And they put you in prison, because of this little bit of confusion...' she frowned again.

'That's often the way things go,' said Alun.

'If it is, then that's the first time I heard of it,' said the woman.'

'Well,' grumbled Mike, 'If you were friends with these two, I can assure you, it wouldn't certainly not have been the first time.'

'Oh, come off it, Mike!' cried Alun. 'You'll end up giving this lady a completely false impression of our characters.'

'I doubt it,' sneered Mike.

'And I suppose that's why they laughed like that,' said our guide.

Alun shrugged, 'some women have extremely odd senses of humour.'

'Warped,' I added.

Mike nodded agreement, 'but sometimes justified.'

'Rarely though,' I added.

The guide did not look all that convinced, but she smiled like guides do when they are not listening, and led us onward.

The tunnels were truly monumental structures, some five metres high, and wide enough for an army tank. Our guide told us that there had been a plan to hide an entire battalion of such vehicles in there during the second world war.

When we arrived at our destination, she let us to walk straight past the hideout without noticing the entrance.

'Imagine,' she said, 'just how difficult it would be to spot this place without adequate lighting.'

She then led us into what looked like a shallow recess in the tunnel wall. However, this turned out to be a cleverly disguised passageway.

After a few right-angle turns, this opened into a vast stone chamber some thirty yards deep and wide and ten high. The walls were lined with deep shelves cut directly into the walls at various levels.

'During times of trouble,' said the woman, 'all these shelves were kept fully stocked with food and a huge store of firewood was kept against the far wall.'

'What about water?' I asked.

'There's a well over there. Some of the purest water in the region and still is.'

Mike had wandered over to the rock wall and was peering. 'And this,' he called, 'is the fireplace, I suppose.'

'Exactly. In fact, that's how the place was discovered in the first place,' she added.

We frowned as the Japanese clicked, flashed and chattered.

Our guide nodded, 'A worker, who did a bit of poaching in his spare time, discovered a fissure. It comes out in the forest on the hilltop above, and he climbed down. He worked out that the cave couldn't be far behind the rock-front he was working on.'

Mike nodded, 'So he decided to cut his way into it.'

Our guide nodded, 'Exactly. And very usefully, as the hilltop opening is in the middle of thick forest, smoke from cooking and heating fires was diffused and difficult to spot.'

'But an enemy would spot that anyway,' I said. 'There's generally at least one guy with a bit of

intelligence with an attacking army. Even in medieval times.'

'Of course. But the fires were always extinguished before daybreak. As an extra precaution, a wood fire was kept burning on the hilltop as a diversion.'

'Ah!' nodded Alun. 'So, the assailants spent their time trying to catch what they took for a group of outlaws camping up there.'

'Right again,' smiled our guide, 'And they eventually gave up the game.'

'Cunning,' nodded Mike.

'Clever,' added Alun.

'Ingenuous,' I said, not wanting to be bettered in this verbal jousting contest.

The Japanese scientists were by now on hands and knees, flashing their cameras up the thirty-metre-high chimney. Others were flashing them down the well-shaft.

Then, there was a clattering noise and a cry, followed by a muffled splash some seconds later.

The guide nodded and smiled. 'Another camera, I expect,' she chuckled to herself. 'At the end of each season, we lower a diver down. He brings up fifty kilos or so of assorted stuff. He sells what can be repaired and keeps half the proceedings. Makes a good living out of it too.'

We all laughed as she led us over to a place near the entrance.

'Now here,' she said, slapping the wall, 'is the cleverest bit. Look down there.'

We got on our knees.

We discovered that part of the massive rock column was set on rails.

She smiled down at us. 'You see, this part could be pushed out, completely hiding the entrance. No sound, smell, or light would be noticed from outside, even with a hundred people talking and cooking inside.'

'Brilliant,' said Mike. 'Does it still work?'

'No. It rusted up years ago.'

We got up and leaned against it. With our joint strength, the massive structure shuddered a bit, but no more.'

'They must have been strong guys in those days,' said Alun.

'Or possibly, they kept the rails and wheels well lubricated,' suggested Mike.

'Possibly,' said our guide. 'Oh dear! Now what are they up to climbing up onto those shelves?'

Some of the girls had gotten up and were posing on the shelves for photos. Our guide rushed off to get them down before anyone fell and got injured.

There was a scuffling noise, and we turned.

'Oh! Hello, Mrs Yamamoto.' I smiled. 'How is your husband?'

'Alive,' she replied.

We nodded, and Mike and Alun raised their eyebrows at me and started to move off. I caught them by the arms and held them firmly. I did not intend to allow this woman to have a second go.

However, she smiled and fumbled in her handbag.

'I think you need lubrication. Yes?'

We opened our eyes wide.

'I'm Ok for the moment, thanks,' said Mike.

'Me too,' said Alun. Then turning to me, 'what about you?'

'Oh, I think I'll pass this time. Thanks all the same, Mrs Yamamoto.'

She looked at us and frowned, 'for the wheels. Lubrication...'

I sighed, 'Ah! Yes, of course. For the wheels. But we haven't any.'

'Here.' she drew out her hand from the depths of her bag. She held out two pink and blue coloured tubes. She then scrutinised the text and popped one back. 'Here, this one is very fluid. You know?'

We nodded, and she nodded back with a slight upward curve of the lips.

We then exchanged looks and got down on our knees.

'She has still got one cartridge left,' chuckled Alun. 'We had better remain on our guard then,' I said.

'A wise precaution,' added Mike.

As Mike lay on his stomach, we heard our guide shouting instructions, which echoed back and forth in the hall. He aimed carefully, and squirted some lubricant at the iron wheel bearings, then smeared the rails with it. Finally, jumping to his feet, he handed the tube back to Mrs Yamamoto.

'You can keep it,' smiled the woman. 'One never knows when something like that will come in useful, does one?' Mike turned hurriedly away and pulled a face at us. This face seemed to be saying "help".

Naturally enough, we ignored this silent cry for assistance.

'Shall we have a go then?' smiled Alun.

'At what?' replied Mike with a worried look.

'At freeing this thing up,' I said.

'Oh! Yes,' he sighed with relief. 'Yes.'

We nodded and leant our combined weights against the rock with little apparent effect. However, when we started to rock it gently back and forth, it gradually began to free up.

'Can I help?' said Mrs Yamamoto, approaching.

We nodded, and she squeezed against Mike, who was thus trapped. He gave us a nasty look, and we chuckled at each other.

'One, two, three, push.'

And to our surprise, the colossal mass started to slip forward.

'Wow! You're stronger than you look,' I said to the small woman.

'Yes,' she nodded. I have very strong abdominal muscles and thighs. And strong hands too.'

Not feeling it safe to attempt any sort of reply to this declaration, we nodded and smiled.

'My husband says it is good to keep one's body in good trim, as you British call it,' she added. 'A nurse needs to be strong.'

I tried a safe, 'Naturally.'

'Some patients are heavy,' she added.

'Exactly,' said Alun.

'Some have to be held firmly.'

We decided that it was safer to use silence for this one.

Mike turned away and leaned back against the rock.

However, instead of supporting him, it slid back and, gathering speed, started to close the entrance.

'Oh hell!' he cried, and we all dashed to halt the rock column.



The problem was that there was nothing to get hold of. There had no doubt been handles in olden times, but they had long since rusted and dropped off.

'Quick, stick something in front of the wheels,' shouted Alun.

Mike went down on his knees and jammed the tube Mrs Yamamoto had given him on the rail.

However, a half-empty plastic tube does not easily impress five tons of vintage limestone. And as the two met, the tube was squeezed flat. It squirted the remaining contents straight into Mike's face. He leapt to his feet, temporarily blinded by the compressed jet of Japanese lubricant.

He fell backwards but caught his foot under the sliding blocks in doing so. He sent up a yell and fell, claspings his ankle.

Mrs Yamamoto seeing an ideal opportunity, moved swiftly in. But Mike leapt up bravely and hobbled away as fast as possible.

However, one can hobble only so far in a cave. Apart from going up the chimney, only the water well presented a possible haven. However, this would have proved to be a permanent one, so he gave up the idea of taking refuge down it.

He slumped down against the wall, and we chuckled as the predator moved in.

This chuckling episode didn't last long, though.

The rock column had now reached the well-lubricated section of the rails and was now gathering speed nicely.

We put all our weight against it, but we could do little to influence the movement without handholds.

We got on our hands and knees and jammed bits of rock under the wheels. These were simply crushed to powder by the enormous weight.

Then Alun looked up and pointed.

A thick, high power electric cable was fixed to the wall near the entrance. This cable followed the cave wall and then disappeared up the abandoned chimney.

The massive rolling column was now rapidly approaching the cable. We exchanged raised eyebrows and retreated behind the limestone blocks.

As the rolling mass reached this obstruction, there was a momentary slowing. Then the block slipped forward, cutting into the outer plastic coating like butter.

This was followed by a grating noise as the outer metallic protection was sliced. We closed our eyes and stuck our fingers in our ears. Then, a fraction of a second later, a blinding flash of white light lit up the hall, accompanied by a deafening explosion.

Complete darkness fell.

'Oh hell!' came a yell which echoed through the darkened cavity.

Then, from the direction where we had last seen Mike and Mrs Yamamoto came 'Hey! What are you doing?'

Little did we know, but this cable fed the entire network of tunnels. So, simultaneously the whole site was plunged into darkness as the massive blocks wedged themselves into place.

Not only did they fit perfectly, but they were now welded in place. The thirty-thousand-ampere electric

arc, caused by the short circuit we had generated, did this job to perfection.

Of this, of course, we were blissfully ignorant.

Well, perhaps "blissfully" is not the best word to use here. Nobody in that pitch black and echoing place was animated by such a sentiment. Except for Mrs Yamamoto, of course.

There was a good deal of confused shouting in Japanese, then, suddenly, light returned from several sources simultaneously.

Powerful LED lighting equipment is clearly a "must-have" for any serious, wandering Japanese photographer.

'What has happened?' cried our guide coming rapidly over, accompanied by one of the scientists carrying a ring-shaped lamp.

She looked about, 'Mein Gottle!' she cried, 'Lieber Himmel!'

We nodded and wiggled our eyebrows. Well, I know at least I did.

'What's happened?' she repeated.

'Mike leant against the block, and it rolled shut.'

Everyone turned and pointed their lights at Mike, struggling to escape Mrs Yamamoto.

'I did nothing of the kind... Leave that alone!'

'I need to have a look at your ankle. I'm a qualified nurse.'

'My ankle is down there at the end of my leg, not up at this end.'

'I think you have also damaged some other parts in the fall. I must have a close look. I insist. Take your trousers off, please.'

'No,' replied Mike. 'I refuse.'

'Oh, come on, Mike. Don't be timid,' I called over.

'Yes,' called Alun, 'You wouldn't want gangrene to set in, would you. It would rot and drop off.'

'What would?' shouted Mike. 'For God's sake, I only twisted my ankle.'

'Famous last words,' I sighed.

'But what has happened here?' cried the guide, and all the lights swivelled back to the stone floor.

'Hey,' shouted Mike. 'Don't leave me in the dark. I'm an injured man.'

'But I am a professional nurse,' came a second voice.

'Oh, God!'

'Take off your trousers, and I'll have a look.'

'No, you won't.'

'You are a very naughty boy.'

I eventually took pity on Mike, even though we were enjoying this. I turned to one of the scientists and asked him to go and light the medical scene.

'I don't need light,' complained Mrs Yamamoto. 'I can do this with my eyes closed. I just feel.'

'I need light. Lots of it,' cried Mike. 'You stay here,' he ordered.

'What happened?' repeated the guide for the third time.

'As I said. You said that the wheels were rusty, so Mike lubricated them with a tube of Intimate gel.'

'With what?'

'Oh, you know what!!.'

The woman frowned. However, a young Japanese girl slipped over and whispered in her ear. Then nodded with a broad smile.

'What on earth was he doing with that?' said the bewildered guide.

'Oh, I suppose he likes to be prepared, just in case.' Alun smiled, 'You know how it is... At his age, you understand.'

'No, I do not know how it is. Not with men anyway.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, ' smiled Alun, 'I didn't realise you preferred girls.'

The woman was shocked, 'What!?! No, I do NOT prefer girls! I am married.'

'To a woman?'

'Please, No! To a man.'

'But you prefer women then, not girls?'

'No, I do not.'

'Sorry. You're getting me all confused,' Alun shook his head.

'I think that must be the shock,' I nodded.

'Shock!' cried the guide.

'Yes. due to the flash and the bang.'

Alun started, 'Flash!?! Bang!?! What flash and bang?'

'See!' I said, 'Shock.'

'Who are you?' frowned Alun, looking at me vaguely.

The woman sighed. 'Why on earth did you lubricate the wheels and rails?'

'You told us to,' I lied.

'I did not.'

'Yes, you did. I remember perfectly,' said Alun. 'Just before everything went blank because of the shock.'

'A terrible thing shock,' I frowned. 'He may never be the same again.'

From the direction of Mike came, 'I damn well hope so. That would be a blessing in disguise.'

'That's very unkind, Mike,' I said.

'I know. Hey! leave my trousers alone.'

The guide moved closer to the stone column and gave it a tentative pull. 'It is stuck.'

'We noticed that too,' I said.

'And jammed,' added Alun.

'And that cable is the tunnel lighting,' she sighed.

'Was,' I corrected. 'That's what we thought too.'

'So, we are stuck.'

'Yes.'

'And no one knows where we are, and no one will be able to find the entrance in the dark.'

Alun nodded, 'and probably now that the passage is sealed, they won't even spot it if they bring lights down here.'

In the background, a little upper octave female Japanese sniffing started, 'we are trapped.'

Then another sniffer added, 'we'll stay here forever and ever and die of hunger.'

'Mummy,' cried another.

Well, I expect it was "mummy" she said. But as it was murmured in Japanese, I can't be entirely sure.

'How long can one survive with only water to drink?' asked Alun.

From across the cave, Mrs Yamamoto answered this: 'days and days.'

'There's just a small problem though,' I said, 'We have a Well, but nothing to get water up with.'

'Easy,' chuckled Alun smiling. Then he called out, 'If you ladies would be good enough to take off your bras, we'll tie them all together and make a long cord.'

One of the Japanese scientists translated this with a wide smile.

Well, believe it or not, with a good deal of giggling, the Japanese women all stripped and handed us their bras. They then replaced their tops rather more slowly than absolutely necessary, flashing encouraging looks at their partners.

For a moment, Alun and I stood transfixed, gazing at each other in amazement. This sort of thing didn't happen usually. Not even to us.

Our guide stared at the half-naked Japanese women, then at us. Then slowly, a broad grin spread across her face, and she burst into laughter. Then, after coughing and choking a bit, she shook her head at us.

'That was supposed to be a joke? Right?'

We nodded and gazed down at the pile of bras at our feet.

The guide burst out laughing again. 'Do these sorts of things happen to you often?'

'Well,' frowned Alun, 'sometimes unusual things do seem to happen to us.'

The woman chuckled as one of the young Japanese girls got down on her knees and started hooking the bras together. Once finished, she rose and trailed them over to the well-head.

The guide followed this with incredulity, 'Do you know, I read a book last year about three retired men who were always...' here, her voice trailed off. 'Ah!'

'Sorry?' said Alun.

'Oh, Nothing. And you're here with your wives...'

'Yes, but they walked back to the hotel. Why?'

'Oh. I was just wondering...'

Now for the record, none of our female Japanese companions were built on the same impressive scale as our Bavarian barmaid of the previous evening.

Consequently, once the young girl had let the string of bras down, she called, 'They are much too short. We need longer things.'

One of the younger scientists amazed us by revealing the altruism and gallantry reminiscent of an Oxford university education. He admitted that, as this was an emergency, he would willingly share with her an article of the required format...

We laughed, then Alun smiled, 'We need your trousers, gentlemen,' he called.

Before you could say "kimono", the youngest amongst them were bare-legged and hugging their various women, apparently for warmth.'

The guide let out another peal of laughter, 'I don't believe this,' she laughed. 'I just don't.' she leant back on the rock wall and shook her head. 'Here we are sealed in an underground cave with no way of getting out or of signalling our presence. And here is a load of Japanese scientists braless and trouserless. It defies belief. I wouldn't believe it if I didn't know...' Her voice trailed off again.

'If you didn't know what?' I asked.

The women hesitated, 'Oh. Well, if I didn't know, we would soon be saved.'

By this time, the extended bra and trouser string had reached water level.

They then pulled it back up and hooked a counterfeit Dior handbag to the lowest bra.



A resounding cheer went up as the first Dior-full of cold water was drawn to the surface and tasted by the group crowded around the well-head.

'So,' smiled Alun, 'we won't die of thirst. Now I wonder what raw Japanese tastes like...'

'I believe the female of the species has a better flavour. At least raw,' I said.

'I do believe you three are crazy,' laughed our guide. 'But in the meantime, I ought to point out that it is now six o'clock and will soon be dark both outside and in.

I had been musing over our guide's earlier words. 'You said we had no way of making our presence known.'

She nodded.

'You are forgetting the chimney,' I smiled. 'What comes down must go up.'

'Gotte in Himell!' she exclaimed.

'Exactly.'

I then turned to Alun. 'You're pretty hot at mountain climbing, aren't you?'

'Oh...' said Alun swelling a bit and swallowing the bait, 'I've done a few small peaks here and there. The Andes, things like that. Nothing special, of course.'

'So, getting up a bit of a chimney would be child's play to an experienced and seasoned mountaineer like you?' suggested the guide, following my lead.

'A chimney?'

'Yep. That one.' I added pointing.

'Ah!' He hesitated. 'Chimneys are quite a different kettle of fish.'

'A bit too difficult for you then?' suggested the guide.

'I didn't say that, did I.'

'No, that's true. Let's have a look then,' she smiled.

Alun frowned at me and drew his brow down with a threatening look.

The entrance to the chimney was carved deep into the rock wall, and by kneeling, we could get inside and then stand up.

Far above us was a narrow slit of light regularly obscured by the waving branches of trees.

'Can you manage it, Alun?' I asked. 'I don't want you to go and break your neck or something like that.'

'Something like my neck? Now, what could that be?'

'Well?'

Alun looked back at me and smiled, 'Worth trying. Good fun too.'

'If you make it,' added the guide. 'Alive.'

'Thanks for the encouragement.'

'You're welcome.'

'You two give me a lift up. It's narrow enough that once I'm in the shaft, I can rest easily by leaning back and pushing my legs against the opposite side.'

'Are you sure, Alun?' I asked, a little concerned that I might have asked just a little too much this time.

'Look. I'll go up a few metres and see how it goes. If it looks too dangerous, I'll come back down. Otherwise, up I go.'

I knelt down so that Alun could climb up and stand on my shoulders. The guide then grabbed me under the arms, and together we hoisted me to a standing position.

'Great.' Said Alun. 'Steady while I get a leg against the far wall.'

Then suddenly, his weight was gone. I stretched my arms up to take his weight as he adjusted his position.

Then he moved up out of reach.

After thirty seconds or so, he called down, 'I think I can do it.'

'Are You sure?'

'Yep. There are thousands of footholds and handholds. I can do it. I could do with a bit more light, though.'

'I'll get another of the torches.' I called back up the echoing chimney.

The guide and I turned and went over to where the entrance had been. We picked up one of the torches, but on the way back, Mike stopped us.

'Where has Alun gone.'

'To heaven,' I said.

Mrs Yamamoto was bending over Mike's ankle and smearing it with something extracted from her bag.

'More lubricant?' I asked.

'Anti-inflammatory gel.' she replied. 'I'm a professional nurse, as you know. A professional nurse never travels without all the necessary supplies.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'I noticed that earlier.'

'I ought to have a look at the rest all the same,' she frowned. 'One never knows, does one.'

I caught Mike's eye, and there were daggers in the look he gave me. 'You may be right,' I nodded, watching her winding the bandage around the bared ankle. Then, I turned to our guide, 'What is your opinion?'

The women nodded gravely, having got into the spirit of things, 'A quick look might put nurse's mind at ease. She is professional, after all.'

'Exactly,' I said.

Mrs Yamamoto looked up at us and smiled, 'Yes. That would put my mind at ease very nicely.'

At this moment, we were roused from this discussion by one of the Japanese girls, 'We brilliant idea have.'

'Ah!' I gazed at her.

'Yes. We can make smoke signals.'

'Smoke signals?'

'Yes, like red Indians. We make a fire and send smoke signals up chimney.'

'But we would need something to burn that makes smoke.'

'Yes. Yes. Trousers make smoke.'

'Trousers!?'

'Yes. Look!'

We spun around and froze.'

'Gott in Himmel,' cried the guide.

'Oh hell,' I shouted.

Under the chimney, the Japanese scientists had piled the trousers not needed for the well-rope. They were already burning nicely, sending billows of black smoke up the shaft. The trousers, not the scientists...

We dashed over, but by the time we got there, there was a scuffling noise, and Alun dropped down onto the pile of flaming trousers.

He'd have caught fire if he had not been immediately doused by a Dior handbag full of icy well-water.

Unfortunately, though, as well as water, the bag still held some of its original contents. This turned out to be a heavy backup battery pack that hit Alun in the middle of his forehead.

He stumbled forward, banging his head on the stone mantle.

Down he went on his knees like a felled ox. Mrs Yamamoto was on him almost before he hit the floor...

The group of Japanese gawked in amazement at the apparition from hell.

Once they realised who it was, they went off into a series of exclamations, incomprehensible to us.

Twenty minutes later, Alun was nicely gelled and bandaged. We stood watching the now considerably larger pile of burning trousers.

'I could have already been out of the top by now,' grumbled Alun, 'if these guys hadn't had that brilliant Idea.'

The guide put a comforting hand on his shoulder, 'You would still have had a ten-kilometre walk before you,' she said.

Alun shrugged.

'Oh, well. I can still have a go if the smoke signalling doesn't work.'

'We'll have to wait for the rock wall to cool off again first,' I said.

'That'll take hours,' he groaned.

'The solution exists, so all hope is not yet lost.'

'Agreed,' added Mike.

It should be noted that we were now all huddled around the flaming fireplace. This was not because

we wanted to keep an eye on it. It was because we were now all trouserless. Except, that is, for our guide, who had refused to collaborate. Mrs Yamamoto too, but because she was wearing a short skirt and apparently very little underneath.

'What's the temperature in here?' asked Mike.

'Ten degrees centigrade,' replied our guide. 'It remains constant all year round.'

'Great,' sighed Alun. 'I suppose we'll all have to huddle together to keep warm once the fire goes out.'

'A very wise precaution,' nodded Mrs Yamamoto.

'Those Japanese over there seem to be huddling pretty well already,' I remarked.

'The instinct of survival,' suggested Mike.

I glanced over to where some of the aforesaid huddling was taking place, 'More like the instinct of renewal of the species,' I smiled.

'We'll huddle up with them a little later then, perhaps,' suggested our guide.

'A wise move,' I agreed.

We had taken the precaution of piling a tall cylinder of rocks around and under the flaming trousers. These were sucking up the heat from the flames and would keep us all a little above freezing point for a few hours.

So, there we sat, waiting.

In the meantime, things were warming up outside too...

When the electricity supply and lights went down, it took the computer and communication networks out with it. Our group had been the day's last visit, and

the guide was known to be highly experienced. She was also known always to carry several spare torches with her for emergencies.

Perfectly aware of this, the ladies on service at the entrance waited patiently for her to emerge.

When half an hour later, there was still no sign of them, the two women wondered what the guide was doing. They knew that sometimes she deliberately pretended to get lost in the dark. This, she said, added a touch of adventure to the visit. So, the two employees continued to wait.

A little later, the coach driver arrived and asked where his group were. They were due back half an hour earlier.

He took a torch and walked a little way down the tunnel and listened. Then, hearing nothing, he shouted, or rather, bellowed.

Nothing happened.

'Could they have got lost somehow?' he asked.

'Highly unlikely,' said one of the women.

'Their guide has several torches,' said the other.

'Odd!'

'Yes.'

'Perhaps we ought to call someone,' suggested the driver.

The women nodded, 'But the phones are down too.'

'Give me the number. I've got my cell phone with me.'

A quarter of an hour later, the police arrived. They brought with them a Quad Bike.

After explanations had been exchanged, the two policemen got on the bike. Taking a map of the tunnel

network with them, they turned on the headlamps and headed off into the dark maze of tunnels.

Twenty minutes later, they reappeared.

'No sign of them anywhere,' frowned the chief. 'Are you sure they didn't slip out unnoticed?'

'Impossible,' cried the two women in unison. 'Our guides always sign the register on leaving. If they want to get paid, that is...'

'And they'd have come to the coach,' added the driver.

The policemen nodded, 'Any special things planned for this visit?'

The two women exchanged glances.

'The guide said she'd do the resistance hideout. Did you check in there?'

The policemen frowned, 'Odd that,' said the chief. 'We must have gone straight past without noticing.'

'That shows that old tricks still work,' said one of the women. 'After all, that's what it was designed for in the first place.'

'Best have a look anyway,' said the other policeman. And off they roared, headlamps blazing.

Ten minutes later, they were back again. 'There's something odd. We can't find the entrance.'

'You can't be looking in the right place,' said the older woman. 'I'll go with you and show you. I know the place and could find it with my eyes closed. I've been working here for twenty-five years and know every part of it like the back of my hand.'

When they arrived, she strode into the passage and came up short. 'Oh!'

'What's up?'

'The Passage! It's closed!'



'Closed!?'

'Yes. That's how they hid in the old days.'

The police officer frowned.

'In times of conflict, they slid a block of rock across the entrance. No one could guess that hundreds of people were hiding behind it.'

The officer nodded, 'Yes, I remember now. But the thing got rusted solid fifty years ago.'

'Maybe. But that's what's happened. I don't know how, but that's certainly where they are. Inside.'

The policeman leant forward. He flashed his torch and spotted the severed power cable dangling from the rock wall. 'And that's where the short circuit comes from.'

The woman was frowning, 'But those blocks of rock weigh tons. What's more, the wheels and rails have been rusted solid for longer than anyone can remember.'

'So?' asked the officer.

'What's more, it can only be closed from inside.'

'Which means?'

'That someone deliberately unblocked the rail system and then closed it from inside.'

The Police officer frowned, 'Are you saying that someone deliberately closed the whole group up and sealed the passage?'

'It would take a good many strong men to slide that rock wall back into place,' said the woman. 'What's more, they must also have cut off their own electricity supply when the cable was severed.'

The officer shook his head, 'What on earth would those Japanese scientists want to do a brainless thing like that for?'

'Scientists aren't often brainless, you know,' mused the woman.

'Why would they want to isolate themselves in a sealed cave hundreds of feet underground?' ....

'Perhaps they're expecting a nuclear attack,' laughed the woman.

'Well,' chuckled the police officer, 'In that case, they couldn't have chosen a safer place. That place is better than a bomb shelter.'

'Maybe they wanted to have some sort of wild rave party.'

The officer nodded, 'That's a definite possibility. I've known stranger things. And then they get so high on drugs and alcohol they don't realise what they are doing anymore. So, everything seems a good idea from then on.'

'You can't rave much without electricity,' smiled the woman. 'Especially in the pitch black at ten degrees centigrade,'

'Well,' Laughed the officer, 'whatever their reason, and however much I'd like to, we're unlikely to open that passage with a pen-knife and my whatsit.'

'Your "whatsit"! ' laughed the woman, 'No! Well, really!'

When they got back to the entrance again, the policeman called up headquarters. The coach driver listened and frowned, 'You know,' he said. 'Those Japanese guys were a bit odd. In the coach, they were all chattering about explosions.'

'Explosions?' said the second policeman.

'Yeh. They seemed to be really amused by the idea of big explosions in beer-halls.'

'Beer halls?'

'Yeh. Beer halls in Munich.'

The officer tapped his boss on the shoulder.

'This guy says the Japs are preparing to blow up the Munich Beer Halls.'

The Coach driver nodded, 'sounded like it. They went in there with bags and bags full of scientific equipment, too.'

'Oh god!' cried the chief, 'That's why they've holed up in that bunker.'

'But they haven't got any electricity.'

'Don't be stupid. What do you think they had in all those bags? Sweets?'

'Sounds like a major terrorist attack,' groaned the woman.

'We'd better call in the military, quick.'

With this, he called back the central police station.

Within minutes, the German anti-terrorist section had been alerted. Half an hour later, all the beer halls in Munich were evacuated.

In helicopters with an impressive array of dangerous-looking equipment, a team of elite anti-terrorist soldiers were soon on their way.

Some kilometres away, my wife and Margaux were still window shopping. They had just stopped outside a big hi-tec shop and were gazing at a screen flashing up the latest news.

When they read, "Japanese terrorists to blow up Munich. Holed-up in Maastricht mine." They came to an abrupt stop. The two women looked at each other.

'Oh, God! What in the heavens' name have they done this time?'

The two women looked at each other and nodded.

Many years of this sort of thing had prepared them. They knew when action was required and when they could stand back and enjoy themselves.

This was not a time for laughter.

Back in the mines, the trouser fire had burned itself low.

One of the Japanese scientists had opened his bag, which contained considerably more whiskey than photographic equipment. He had passed several bottles around, and things were warming up nicely. Another had handed around some stuff that looked much less legal. The fact that they were all trapped in a sealed cave seemed to have slipped into the background. At least for the present.

'Do you know what I'm thinking about?' said Alun  
'Beer?' I asked.

'No.'

'Breasts?' suggested Mike.

'No. Beer and/or Breasts don't come into it at all.'

'That's unusual,' said Mike.

'Shut up, Mike'

'So?'

'I'm wondering where the draught was coming from to keep that fire going like that.'

We exchanged glances.

'You're right, Alun,' said Mike. 'There must be a secret entrance somewhere.'

'Or,' smiled Alun, wiggling his eyebrows comically, 'a secret exit....'

We raised our eyebrows and nodded back.

'Good thinking Alun,' I smiled. 'Where is it then?'

Alun got to his feet and grabbed a fragment of a smoking trouser leg. 'Let's find out,' he smiled.

We wandered around the cave with a lamp, watching the direction of the smoke.

Eventually, we reached the well-head.

'It's coming from down there,' nodded Alun.

'Great,' I said, 'Who's going down?'

'No one,' replied Alun. 'A camera.'

By then, none of the little group of scientists seemed all that interested in our investigations. So, we helped ourselves to a small video camera with a powerful lamp.

We attached this to the bra rope and lowered it down, twisting it as we went to view the whole surface.

When we brought it back up and watched the video, we discovered that an entrance did exist. Unfortunately, however, one needed to be considerably smaller than we would have hoped for.

'It looks just about big enough for you to get into, Mike,' said Alun.

'You don't really expect me to put my life at peril for that, do you?' frowned Mike scrutinising the video anew.

'We were hoping,' said Alun, 'that the choice between seeing your two best friends die of hunger and that of an easy wriggle through a tunnel to safety, would sway you.'

'In the right direction,' I added.

Mike coughed, or should I say almost choked, 'Are you two mad?'

This had us a little nonplussed, so he continued. 'What you are suggesting is to lower me down there, suspended on a string of flimsy Japanese bras.'

'And trousers,' I corrected.

'The trousers are not flimsy though,' added Alun. 'Quite strong, I'd say.'

'So, the bras remain the weak link then,' I mused.

Mike sighed, 'Then. Once down there, and assuming I have not fallen and drowned in the icy water...'

'You wouldn't last long even if you didn't drown,' I said, 'the water's too cold.'

'Great! So, assuming I do survive, I then try to wriggle down that hole, which probably goes on for miles?'

Alun looked at me, and I nodded, 'Yes. That sounds about right.'

'And I go on and on, in the pitch black, dripping tunnel full of slime and slippery creature, ripping the skin off my hands and knees,' he continued.

'Right again, Mike,' I said encouragingly. 'You've got it.'

'Until I get stuck and can't get back,' he added.

'Well,' said Alun, 'One cannot entirely rule that out, if you mess things up.'

'Or if the tunnel goes down and down without end and with no way of my turning around,' he added.

'Well,' I frowned, 'It's true that there is always that possibility.'

Alun smiled, 'But there is one advantage.'

'Really!' sneered Mike.

'Yes. The deeper you go, the warmer it gets.'

'Great. So, I'll die of hunger jammed in that hole, but not of cold.'

'You see,' I smiled. 'Every cloud has its silver lining.'

'Shut up.'

Our guide came over and had a look at the video.

'You look like an adventurous woman,' said Alun.

She looked at Alun, 'I overheard your conversation. So, no. I am not in the slightest bit adventurous. Today that is.'

'So, some other time then,' I said.

'Yes, perhaps some other time.'

'Pity really,' sighed Alun.

'That's life,' I sighed a similar sigh, 'Some have courage, some not... Oh Well.'

'Talking about wells,' said the woman, 'be careful...'

But she said this too slowly.

Mike sat down heavily on the well-wall, knocking the camera over the edge. It went flying down, but when it got to the end of the bra rope, it was halted and sprang back up. However, this enabled it to free itself from the bra hooks holding it. The bra rope jumped back up and struck Mike a resounding smack in the ear. He tumbled backwards into the well, but not before we grabbed his legs. For a few seconds, he remained there, head down in the dark well.

Far below, there was a splash as the video camera reached the level of the water.

The three of us dragged Mike back to safety.

We exchanged looks.

'That was a bit close,' whistled Mike.

'More treasure trove for your diver friend,' Alun smiled at our guide.

'Now what?' asked Mike.

'We'll have to go up then,' said Alun. 'How's the ankle, Mike?'

Mike had been following us around the cave without even limping.'

'Oh!' he exclaimed. 'What on earth did that woman put on my ankle?'

'Best not ask,' I replied.

'I'll tell you what we'll do,' said Alun. 'You two help me up. Then Mike and I will help you up, then I'll hoist Mike up.'

Our guide had followed us, 'Hey! I'm coming too,' she cried.

'I thought you weren't feeling courageous today,' said Alun.

'For going down wells, no. For going up chimneys, yes. Especially with you three below me in case I slip.'

'And to land on, if we all come down. Lovely,' said Alun.

'Good idea, don't you think?' she smiled.

'For you, yes,' I answered.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then we got to work.

Somehow or other, we all got to the surface alive and tumbled out onto the grass in the thick forest...

'At least we'll have some signal from up here.' I said, taking out my phone. 'Oh, damn it! What's wrong with it this time?' I banged it against my open palm, then stopped. 'Oh! Yes, of course,' I opened the back and pulled out the bit of newspaper I had slipped between the battery contacts? 'Should work better now,' I smiled.



'But,' said Mike. 'We don't have any trousers.

'I noticed that too,' nodded Alun.'

'Mmm... Yes. A bit of a dilemma that,' I frowned. 'I wonder what the girls will have to say about that.'

'I don't,' moaned Mike. 'I don't wonder at all. I know.'

'Call them anyway, then we'll go down and inform the police of the problem.'

'Put the loudspeaker on so that we can all hear,' said Mike.

The Girls were already perfectly aware of the situation. Not only that, but they were also up to date with how things were developing. We agreed that things didn't sound all that encouraging. Strategic retreats were one of our strong points, and this seemed highly recommendable now.

We wondered why our guide was smiling. It was the same wry smile that we had so often seen on the lips of our wives. However, she didn't explain the reason.

'For heaven's sake,' cried Margaux, 'Whatever you do, don't go anywhere near the entrance.'

'Why?' I asked.

'We'll explain later. Go straight to the train station.'

'But we haven't got trousers.'

'What!?'

'I said we haven't got trousers. We burnt them.'

'You did what?'

We burnt them to make smoke signals,' Alun said.

'Was that your idea Mike?' asked Margaux.

'No, it was not,' grumbled Mike.

'Did it work?'

'We'll explain later,' I called.

'I thought it wouldn't,' called my wife.

'Thanks for the confidence.'

'You're welcome.'

'Anyway, we don't know where the park is.'

'I'll show you,' smiled our guide, who was listening carefully.

'But all our suitcases are in the coach.'

My wife chuckled, 'No, they aren't. They're with us? We sneaked back and got them when we realised what was going to happen.'

'Why?'

'We'll explain. We'll bring you a pair of trousers each to the park. But hurry, the train is at eight.'

'Why all this hurry and mystery?'

'We'll explain on the train back to France. Now hurry. No, wait. Pass me over to your guide and turn the speaker off.'

'Why?' asked Alun.

'Alun!'

'Oh, all right.'

Our guide listened then, walked off a little way and talked with a lowered voice.

'What now!?' groaned Alun.

Mike and I raised our eyebrows but said nothing.

Then suddenly, the woman let out a peal of laughter, 'Yes, of course. A pleasure, and thanks for the offer.' She then listened a little more, 'Well, I suppose I might just get a bit confused and say that the three of them left the visit at the same time as you. The shock of the flash and bang, you know...'

There was a pause as she listened once more. 'The flash and the bang? Ah! Well, your husbands will no doubt be happy to explain about that on the train.'

After a bit more pausing, she smiled, 'Yes, I've noted your number. Good luck.'

She handed Alun back the phone, 'we need to hurry. Apparently.'

Now, I'd like to reassure all our readers that hurry, we did.

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

## Chapter 10 - Snow Tyres

It was our turn to invite for Christmas this year. As our home is quite high up in the Alps, we can usually count on snow during the festive season. We are also privileged to pale blue skies and brilliant sun, followed by crystal-clear star-filled nights.

Even at this time of year, the sun at our altitude is hot enough to allow us to eat outside at midday which is like being permanently on holiday. However, as soon as it disappears behind the mountains, the temperature plummets below zero.

What, one asks oneself, could be better than a white Christmas "En Famille"?

Well, "En Famille", but with Mike too, but as readers know, that goes almost without saying.

The cherry on the cake was that our daughters and their partners decided to lodge together at our daughter's house. This was situated at a conveniently long distance down in the valley.

The arrangement meant that they could continue their after-hours revelling late into the night without disturbing parental sleep. Naturally enough, four girls in their twenties with attendant companions of the same age tend to become a little noisy when fully fuelled by Christmas feasting.

That being said, in our days, Alun, Mike and I had done a good spot of revelling into the small hours.

Nowadays, however, we tend to run out of steam somewhat faster than our offspring.

So, the arrangement suited everyone.

My daughter smiled, 'We'll be playing Monopoly most of the time. We'd absolutely *hate* to keep you awake with our enthusiastic gaiety.'

'Oh yes,' smiled Alun, 'we did quite a bit of monopoly playing in the old days too,' he chuckled happily.

'Yep,' I said. 'One gets so, so excited with Monopoly that time seems to fly. Thank heavens,' I nodded thoughtfully at Mike and Alun, 'that we never over-indulged in alcohol whilst playing.'

'Yes,' nodded Alun with gravity. 'Thank goodness we didn't suffer from such vile, unhealthy vices.'

Mike smiled, 'Do you remember that time in Tomsk, when...'

I glared at Alun and quickly interrupted, 'No one is interested in those old stories, Mike. Especially the Russian ones.'

'We are,' called my wife from the kitchen. 'Aren't we, Margaux?'

'We'll tell you another time,' I called, frowning at Mike. 'We've got to change the car tyres now.'

'You should have done that weeks ago,' called my wife.

'I didn't have the car weeks ago,' I replied. 'I only received it last week.'

'Oh!' came the reply. 'That one.'

'Yes. That one. The new one.'

'The one without snow tyres?' nodded my wife.

'Exactly. The one for which you refused to pay an extra few pounds for the separate set of winter wheels,' I sneered.

Unfortunately, sneering when the person one is sneering at is not in the same room is a bit of a waste of time. Nevertheless, having done it, I felt considerably better.

The truth is that my wife had discovered that one could buy cheap sets of second-hand wheel rims on the internet. However, once I had purchased the snow tyres and had paid for fitting and wheel balancing, it cost more than the special offer included with the car.

However, I felt it unwise to point this out because my wife was visibly pleased with herself for outmanoeuvring the salesman.

Furthermore, I had good reasons for keeping an extra-low profile for the moment. This was because my wife hadn't spotted that I had mistakenly ticked the wrong box when filling in the order form. The box I had inadvertently ticked was for the superior version of the car rather than the basic one.

Unsurprisingly, she was favourably impressed at what you got for your money these days.

Under such conditions, lower profiles are unquestionably preferable.

Everyone had turned up several days ahead of Christmas eve. In this way, we could get everything organised with minimal stress.

In practice, this meant that my wife and Margaux would enrol the four young women, who in turn would commandeer their men.

Tasks would then be shared out fairly, based on competence and reliability.

This meant we would be pushed entirely into the background. However unfair this might appear, we knew better than to rebel against fate.

At the worst, we might be sent to pick up turkeys and, if we were fortunate, to buy the wine.

However, our unfortunate adventures with the Christmas turkeys the previous year made even that simple mission improbable.

We found it encouraging to see how, even in these modern times, young men are still keen to show how gallant and helpful they can be.

The more females present, the more unpleasant tasks they are willing to take on.

So, the three of us sat back and watched this with a great deal of pleasure.

We also knew by experience that the key to assuring complete and untroubled peace and quiet, was to insist on wanting to help out in the kitchen. In this way, and with minimal effort, we could get annoyingly underfoot. As a result, either my wife or Margaux would eventually gasp, "haven't you three got anything better to do?" and that was that. Because naturally, we always did have something better to do.

On this occasion, too, we had something much better to do.

'We'll put the snow tyres on then. And then check it out,' I called as we took out our anoraks and gloves.

There was a moment of pregnant silence, then my wife put her head around the kitchen door, 'Sorry? What did you say?'



'I said we'll put the snow tyres on.'

'No. What came just after that?'

I hesitated, 'Well, I thought we had better take a quick run around just to make sure that they were fitted properly.'

'And would that quick run by any chance,' she frowned, 'take you anywhere near the snow-covered carpark up near the frozen lake?'

I pretended to be surprised, 'What on earth would I want to do that for?' I went on to pull an incredulous face.

'I just thought you might be intending to see if you could skid the new car into a tree or something of a similarly hard nature,' she kept her keen gaze fixed on me.

I did my best to open wide my eyes with astonishment but was clearly unsuccessful.

My wife stepped out into the doorway and placed her hands on her hips, 'If perchance that idea had crossed your mind.' she paused, 'Don't.'

So, with this, we left the house buzzing like a beehive and retired to the garage.

It's incredible how quickly that sort of imperious order evaporates in the cold, dry Alpine climate of a sunny afternoon.

Now, I should point out that it had been snowing for several days up here at three thousand feet altitude.

A little higher up, and only about a mile along the road, about two feet of fresh snow remained on the forestry logging tracks. These virgin snow-bound

spaces were now calling to us and my new car like a siren to salty sailors.

I suppose I had best clarify all this enthusiasm for snow-filled fields.

The car I had bought was a small four-wheel-drive one. Since its arrival, I had been straining at the leash to try it out in thick snow.

Naturally, reunited with Alun and Mike, the time was ripe for such an adventure.

But before adventuring into perilous alpine territories, we needed to change the tyres.

Luckily, a few months previously, I had discovered and bought a second hand-operated hydraulic jack. I also invested in a cheap electric impact driver to remove uncooperative wheel nuts. I didn't really expect either of these to do an outstanding job but made me feel somewhat above my neighbours and far more professional.

To make room on the drive for the job, we had to get my old car out of the way. However, the brakes and the gearbox were more or less dead. So, parking it on the steeply sloping track outside the house had been a constant worry during the previous months. Luckily, during the night, the snowplough had pushed up an eight-foot pile of compacted snow, in the hair-pin bend outside our house. Alun, therefore, moved the car out and blocked it against this convenient barrier.

'At least it won't go any further,' he called back, 'even if the brakes don't work at all.'

'They don't,' I called back.

'Shall I put the gears in reverse then?' he asked.

'Don't bother. They'd jump out anyway. Just make sure it can't move.'

This done, I brought my new car onto the drive.

Alun carried the impact driver down from the workshop while I dragged the heavy Romanian-built jack across the snow-covered lawn.

'I'll roll the tyres down while you jack up the car,' called Mike from behind us.

'Thanks, Mike,' I called back, 'but don't let go on the way down the slope.'

'No chance. Who on earth do you think you're talking to?' laughed Mike.

I paused for a fraction of a second and glanced at Alun.

He glanced back, and we raised our eyebrows briefly before continuing.

'Can you plug in the extension cable while I jack up the car, Alun?' I asked.

'Will do.'

He picked up the coil of cable. Then leaving the plug on the snow beside the car, he unwound the cable as he walked back up to the workshop.

'Where do I plug it in?' he called.

'The socket near the door.'

He nodded.

There was a flash from the snow-covered extension socket behind me, and I leapt into the air.

All the lights went out.

This was followed by a crashing sound and a yell from Mike in the darkened garage.

'What the dickens!? Oh hell!'

Then, from nowhere, two wheels sped into the open.

At the same instant, the front door opened, and my wife came out, closely followed by Margaux.

'Now what have you done!?'

As she uttered these words, the two wheels came into view and shot past. They were keeping pace with each other across the lawn and rapidly gaining speed down the slope.'

'My roses!' cried my wife.

Of course, there are never any roses at this time of the year. However, I didn't feel it prudent to point this out. I could have said, "you mean "My Rose Bushes", I believe", but I thought the better of it. Quick thinking on my part just shows that from time to time, my mind does manage to work faster than my tongue, which was a good thing here.

The twin tyres tore down the garden slope, leaving decorative tyre tread tracks. These soon continued through my wife's prize rose bushes.

'You flaming idiots,' she cried. 'Do you realise how much effort went into caring for those?'

'They'll probably be all right,' said Alun.

However, my wife's words froze on her lips, at least the initial ones. These were replaced by others, 'Oh no!'

The two wheels had spotted freedom through the open gate and were now heading for it as fast as they could roll.

One could almost hear them crying, "freedom!" as any god-fearing wheel would, after having been penned up in a darkened shed all summer.

I went after them but was no match for the spurt of speed they put on. Of course, tripping over the

extension cable and ending up headlong in the snow didn't help much either.

The two wheels struck a little bump of asphalt, designed to prevent rainwater from flooding our garden. They bounced over this and across the road into the next door's sloping garden.

Down they went, bouncing gayly higher and higher, slightly preceded by the neighbour's overweight cat.

Luckily, the cat dived under a stone water trough, but this did not damp the spirits of the renegade wheels.

Off they bounced happily and headed for a flimsy-looking garden shed.

'Oh hell!' I cried.

Just at that moment, the shed door opened, and the neighbour appeared. She was a short, stocky county-woman with wide hips and large hands. In one of these hands, something which looked very much like a brace of dead chicken dangled.

'Mon Dieux!' she cried, seeing the two black apparitions swiftly bearing down on her.

Then from behind her, darted a blur of rust coloured fur.

With a leap, the woman lashed out at this apparition with a terrifyingly sharp-looking butchers' knife. 'Come here, you murderous devil, ' she cried.

The fox shot between her legs directly into the path of the first tyre, and bounded onto its rim.

This tire swerved and hit its partner. Both changed direction and dashed off after the fox, which had made the wrong decision of trying to escape downhill.

The wheels were gaining on the flailing russet tail, but at the last possible moment, it darted under the high dry-stone wall surrounding the garden.

The wheels bounced back off it once or twice, then toppled flat, clearly exhausted by the adventure.

Alun and I breathed a heavy sigh? The fox panted and limped off, cursing, and our neighbour shook her fist after it.

'That'll teach the damned fox to kill my chicken.'

Now to me, it didn't seem that the fox needed much teaching. It seemed to have already fully mastered the art.

The woman turned to us, 'Here. Take this. I've more than enough with one.'

I took the still warm thing by the neck and looked at Alun. 'Do you know how to...'

Alun raised his eyebrows, and I followed suit.

Our neighbour shook her head sadly, 'you young men have had no proper upbringing. Give me that. I'll prepare it for you. No, wait, send your wife down. I'll show her how to do the job. Men are useless.'

I nodded back to her, 'My wife says that quite often.'

Alun smiled, 'Mine too.'

'I'm not sure that's entirely justifiable though,' I added.

The women paused and gazed at us, 'Aren't you? That's odd.'

'I'll tell my wife to pop down then,' I said before she could turn the knife in the wound any further.

She shook her head sadly again, 'It's a good job those wheels didn't go down the other slope.' We followed her gaze. 'They'd have gone straight

through Therese's vegetable garden. And she's out there today covering up something or other.'

I nodded slowly, and she continued with relish, 'She wouldn't have heard them coming, and they'd have knocked her right into the next kingdom.'

I pulled a face and said 'yes.'

She nodded, 'Send your wife down then.'

We nodded and trundled the two wheels back up the slope to where the car stood, waiting patiently.

I transmitted the message to my wife, who, after sighing and shaking her head sadly, set off down the garden to our neighbour's farmhouse with Margaux.

'Why did she say that about this Therese?' asked Alun.

I pulled a face, 'Therese is extremely short-sighted. Furthermore, she also just happens to be deaf and dumb.'

'Ah,' smiled Alun. 'So, to get out of the way, she'd need to be moved by some outside force, then?'

I nodded, 'like the hand of God.'

'The trouble with Hands of God,' said Alun. 'Is that they often seem to take their time coming.'

'Exactly. If you need a job done properly, it's best to do it oneself.'

'Mind you,' Alun continued. 'Hands of God kick in pretty promptly once the deed is done.'

'Yes. I noticed that too.'

Well, we turned back to the car, which was once more back on the tarmac. 'That damn jack leaks,' I grumbled.

'I don't know about Jack, but I haven't that sort of problem, myself,' smiled Alun.

'Me neither,' said Mike.

'That makes three,' I laughed. 'But I have to admit that I haven't tried the reservoir to full capacity for some time.'

'One ought really to do a full pressure proof-test regularly,' said Alun. 'Just to check.'

'Agreed,' I said, 'best to be aware of any faulty plumbing as early as possible.'

'We might usefully do that this evening,' nodded Alun.

'A highly commendable and prudent move,' I replied.

Mike sighed, 'I assume you're not thinking of water as a test fluid.'

'Goodness No!' I cried. 'The water up here in the mountains is far too strong for that,' I laughed. 'It comes directly from caverns hidden thousands of feet under those mountains.' I pointed up. 'It's full to overflowing with minerals and stuff like that. What's more, there's not the slightest trace of pollution or mercury or pesticides in it.'

'One wonders if the modern digestive system is adapted to dealing with unpolluted muck like that,' cried Alun.

'It takes a little getting used to,' I agreed. 'That's why farmers and the like always gave their children water diluted with red wine. It prepared their innards for the onslaught of the pure stuff.'

Alun and Mike nodded, 'Fathers were prudent fellows in those days,' agreed Alun.

'Remember,' I said, 'that back then, one's offspring was the equivalent to the modern day's retirement pension.'



'Well? What about changing these wheels?' said Mike. 'If you don't mind my interrupting.'

We nodded.

'OK. Mike, you pump,'

'Why me?'

'Because this is teamwork, Mike. Alun is going to undo the wheel nuts, and I'm going to lift the wheels off and then hold the new ones in place. Then Alun puts the nuts back on, and you let the jack down again. That's teamwork.'

Mike frowned and was about to make some ironic comment, but I interrupted, 'Come on, Mike. Up she goes.'

Mike pumped the jack up, and Alun plugged in the Impact driver. However, by the time he had brought it around, the wheel was back on the tarmac.

'Pump it back up again, Mike, ' said Alun.

'But this damn thing leaks.'

'Well, keep on pumping then.'

'OK. So now I understand why I was given this job. Thanks.'

Mike pumped, and as soon as the tire was free of the ground, Alun powered up the impact driver.

The thing made an extraordinary amount of noise and shook him up and down. However, the nut did not budge.

'You must have put it reverse, 'grumbled Mike, still pumping, 'Try the other way.'

Alun did, but the results were identical.

'Let me have a go,' I said. I then proceeded to illustrate plainly, that the cheap impact-driver was, in fact, utterly useless.

'Hum....,' said Alun. 'You didn't get that off the tip, did you?'

Mike stopped pumping, 'I wondered the same thing about this jack.'

'No,' I sighed. 'The incredible thing is that I actually purchased all this rubbish.'

'That's the trouble with modern progress for you,' smiled Alun.

'The Chinese have us beaten even when it comes to refuse tip quality equipment. Where will all this end?'

'We'll have to do it by hand,' said Mike. 'Have you got a nut spanner?'

'Do you take me for an idiot?' I replied. 'Of course, I have. Several in fact.'

'One'll be enough, I think,' smiled Mike.

'Ha, ha.' I said, handing him the tool.

'Here, Alun,' he said, handing him the cross-shaped spanner. 'You're the nut man.'

Alun grumbled, 'Gimmee. The Nut Man cometh.' He positioned the spanner and smiled, 'It's a brave nut who will pick up the glove thrown down by Sir Alun the Brave.'

We nodded, 'Show them who the boss is, Alun.'

He nodded back and put his back into the job. He strained and strained and became red in the face.

'Hell! This damn thing is stuck.'

'Try another,' suggested Mike.

Alun tried all four.

'They're all rusted on,' he grumbled.

'Can't be,' I replied. 'The car is brand new.'

'Chinese rust grows faster than one would expect,' retorted Alun.

'The car is Japanese.'

'Jap rust is just as bad. Perhaps even faster-growing.'

'It doesn't look rusted to me,' said Mike getting down on his hands and knees. 'Perhaps, you've no longer the strength required. Let me have a go.'

Alun jerked the spanner out of Mike's reach and scowled at him. 'What we need is an extension pipe.'

I gave him a sideways look, 'I know, I know, give me a lever long enough, and I'll move the moon.'

'Exactly,' he smiled.

'You said that not all that long ago,' grumble Mike.

'That's because I like saying it,' retorted Alun.

'Well, you'll find all the piping you need at the far end of the workshop, 'I called after him.'

He nodded and disappeared.

There followed the unmistakable sounds of someone overturning a barrel full of heavy metal objects. This was followed by a series of nautical oaths, some of which I was unfamiliar with.'

The noises continued for some time, during which Mike and I sat in the sun and looked at the mountain peaks only a few kilometres away.

Then calm returned to the workshop, and Alun appeared carrying a six-foot length of pipe, which he had jammed onto the spanner.

I frowned as I noticed the pipe's colour and glanced at Mike, who nodded back and smiled. We said nothing.

He inserted the spanner.

'Here we go then,' he said, rubbing his hands together.

He grabbed the pipe with both hands and put all his weight behind it.

Things began to move gradually and smoothly, and, little by little, Alun followed the pipe around.

He looked sideways at us with a self-satisfied smile, 'Told you, that's what was needed.'

We smiled back as he continued to speak, 'give me lever long en...' then suddenly, things sped up abruptly, and he shot headfirst onto the snow.

'Well done, Alun,' called Mike. 'Loosened the nut then?'

Alun got to his feet grumbling, and brushed the snow off his arms. The nut had not budged, but the pipe had folded into two right-angled segments.

'I don't know about you, Mike,' I said, 'but I'm always astonished at just how soft and pliable annealed copper piping is.'

'Me too,' agreed Mike.

'Shut up, you two. It didn't look like copper to me.'

I shook my head sadly, 'French copper is cunning stuff. It camouflages itself,' I said.

Mike frowned, 'That's probably due to some sort of inferiority complex. The stuff probably always wanted to be stainless steel.'

'Or tungsten.'

'Or more probably, Gold,' nodded Mike.

'There's nothing to be ashamed of though,' I grinned. 'Some of my best friends are coppers.'

Just for the record,' Mike turned to me. 'In French, is copper female or male?'

'Ah yes!' I replied. 'Yes, that might explain it.'

'Shut up,' sighed Alun. 'What we need is something stronger.'

'Really!?' I cried.

'Great idea, Alun,' nodded Mike. 'I wouldn't have thought of that. I'll go and have a look, shall I?'

There followed a similar series of falling-pipe noises and not dissimilar oaths. Then Mike appeared once more, carrying a length of iron pipe.

'This will do the job,' he nodded. 'And as you must have exhausted yourself during your previous antics, Alun, I'll have first go.'

'Please yourself...' grumbled Alun, pretending to have lost interest in the proceedings.

Mike inserted the spanner, fitted the heavy tube and pulled with all his might.

The nut made a little squeaking noise and shifted a fraction, but not with any great enthusiasm. 'I'll have a go at kicking at the pipe. That often frees up the nut.'

So Mike carefully positioned things so that he could get a good, strong, direct kick.

'Here she goes,' he called. He brought his boot down hard on the steel tube. The nut immediately spun free, but his snow-covered boot slipped off the pipe. His ankle hit a protruding part, and he yelled, 'Oh hells bells!' and hopped about waving his arms in agony.

'Watch out, Mike,' I called.

But Mike was not watching, either in or out. He tripped and fell backwards over a pile of snow at the roadside. Over he went back into the snow.

Now things might have ended here, but for two circumstances. Firstly, Mike was wearing one of those lovely warm alpine anoraks, with a silky-

smooth finish. Secondly, he had fallen onto the top of our neighbour's steeply sloping garden.

So off he slid on the virgin snow.

Luck had it that his downward course intersected and joined the deep track previously prepared by the two runaway tyres.

'Help!' he called as he gained momentum down this runway.

The human bobsleigh shot downwards, following the path marked out for it by the twin tyres.

But of course, he didn't know this because he was on his back, headfirst.

We started off after him down the steep incline as fast as possible - we had the advantage of seeing where he was heading, the dry-stone wall at the bottom of the garden.

As he shot onward, the farmhouse door opened and out came the neighbour, followed by my wife and Margaux.

'What, in the name of...!' gurgled the woman.

She grabbed the first thing which came to hand and rushed forwards. Unfortunately, however, the first thing that came to hand happened to be a pitchfork of dangerously pointed design.

From his upside-down position, Mike saw her bearing down on him, brandishing the pitchfork. He saw, too, the gleam of a strange devilish light in her eyes.

'Help!' he cried and closed his eyes.

At this moment, Alun and I became entangled and fell, rolling, sprawling and finally spluttering into a large snowdrift.

The woman lifted the fork and dashed it down? Mike closed his eyes again and cried, 'Mummy!'

The fork came down just ahead of the mike-bobsleigh, and he bounced off it. This altered his trajectory spinning him so that his feet pointed down the slope.

Opening his eyes, he spotted the approaching wall, 'Help!' he moaned.

However, the new position allowed him to use his feet as brakes, which he promptly implemented until they spun him sideways. At the last moment, he grabbed a passing bush and prepared to use his legs to soften the impact. In other words, to fracture both of them.

At that exact moment, the fox decided to look back through the hole in the wall to see if the coast was clear.

It crept out a few feet, raised its snout and froze.

Mike hit it at a good speed, and the two finished the run together.

Alun and I were back on our feet just in time to witness the conclusion.

We were also in time to see the neighbour, pitchfork in hand, lumbering toward the fox, which was now trapped by its tail under Mike. It was struggling and emitting annoyed fox-like noises as the woman closed in.

Suddenly realising that there were perhaps a few too many foreign witnesses for comfort, she angrily threw down the pitchfork. She then grabbed a large, galvanised bucket full of ice-cold water.

She dashed the contents onto the struggling fox, which shot into the air. The lubrication freed its tail, and it went flying back through the hole.

It should be noted that the bucket held water in two physical states, liquid and solid. The harder component was in the form of a heavy disk of ice. Needless to say, this encountered the prostrate Mike smack on his forehead. As for the liquid part, this nicely lubricated the rest of his body.

He leapt to his feet, 'Oh hell! My head,' He dripped and groaned.

Then from above came peals of laughter. Turning, we saw my wife and Margaux shaking with mirth, holding each other up. In the background, at the top of the slope, a quartet of daughters was doing likewise.

We gathered around Mike, trying not to laugh ourselves.

'Are you OK, Mike?' asked Alun, holding back a chuckle.

'Hells bells. That woman's mad. I'm soaked with freezing water.'

'Frozen water, to be exact,' I said.

'Yes. I realised that. God! My head!' His hand went to his forehead. 'God! what a bump!'

'Nice colour too,' commented Alun.

The neighbour was staring after the fox, which was making impressive progress across the snow-bound field, like a tiny, pointed snowplough.

'That'll teach him,' she chuckled.

'Him!?' I asked.

'Of course, it was a male! No female would ever have walked into a silly trap like that...'



The three of us gazed at her, then at each other and shook our heads sadly. There was absolutely nothing to be said when confronted with such biased opinions.

'Mike,' called my wife. 'Come up straight away, or you'll catch a cold.'

'I hope he's better at catching colds than foxes,' chuckled the neighbour.

Naturally, the Girls all burst out laughing again.

## PART TWO:

Once Mike was dried and reclothed, the wheel changing team reunited and finished the job.

It was then, at long last, time for the test run.

We piled enthusiastically into the little car, and off we went. To avoid attracting attention, we drove off as quietly as possible and took the upper road. This manoeuvre took us rapidly out of observation and hailing distance. We were anxious to avoid being invited to test the car out by picking up some article or other from the supermarket down in the valley.

As we climbed the road up through the forest the tarmac gave way to a compacted snow surface, and I felt my spirits rise. All the same, I resisted the temptation of trying any clever stuff on this first bit of slippery road. This was because it didn't boast even the flimsiest of protective barriers. Once over the verges, the ground sloped steeply. It's true that a little way down, there were more than enough trees to halt a small runaway car. However, that car would

certainly not look quite so immaculate once in the safety of their outstretched arms. I thus felt it prudent to stay on the road. But once we reached the clearing near the mountain lake at Freydières, we exchanged grins.

The forestry tracks and car parks were covered with deep snow, and there was not another car to bump into.

I accelerated up a deserted slope and spun the steering wheel. Amazingly, the car followed this new direction and carried on as if on dry tarmac.

I then accelerated down and tried a U-turn at the bottom. We were once more disappointed. The car simply turned.

I next tried racing up a forty-five-degree slope onto a higher snowfield. Again, the car did this without the slightest sign of trouble or loss of grip.

We stopped and gazed at each other.

'All this anti-this and anti-that electronics take all the fun out of driving,' I groaned.

'Well, turn it all off then,' said Alun, pushing dashboard buttons until flashing orange danger signs popped up all over the display.

'That's better,' I smiled and took the track up from the lake to the departure point of the main alpine hikes.

This forestry track winds up between the snow laden pine trees, to an altitude of four thousand six hundred feet. However, the snow depth increased rapidly and soon looked like reaching the bonnet. At this moment, we decided that enough was enough, so I spun the car around in a cloud of snow and handed over to Alun.

We dashed back down the track trying various daring techniques, but the snow was forgiving, and the four-wheel-drive did the rest. At minus six degrees centigrade, the snow was dry, and the four new tyres bit into the sparkling crystals giving us fantastic grip.

Mike then had a go and got to the top in impressive style. He was more careful than Alun on the downhill run because the snow was now more compacted.

However, near the bottom of the slope, he decided to try a hand brake turn.

This was unexpectedly successful and brought us around one hundred and twenty degrees.

Alun and I grabbed what we could and prayed. The front wheels went over the lip of the road and down the hill we went. The slope was steep, but luckily it wasn't long and quickly brought us to the plateau surrounding the lake.

Unfortunately, however, the car did not stop where we would have liked it to. Around the lake's edge, the ground under the snow was frozen solid, and the car slid across this with little resistance from the powder snow.

Mike spun the steering wheel wildly in all directions, but the car carried on in the same direction. It left the rough lake edge and slid smoothly out into the middle of the frozen lake. We sat petrified, waiting to go through the surface. We stopped. Nothing happened.

After a while Mike pulled a face, 'How thick is the ice? Thick enough?'

'Seems to be. At least for the moment,' I replied. 'I wouldn't like to put a figure on it though. But on the

other hand, the lake is deep and very, very cold. So, if you have no objections, I'm off.' With this, I opened the door gingerly. 'Whatever you do, don't stand up, especially near the lake edge.'

The other two nodded, and Alun added, 'Each man in a different direction.'

'So at least one of us may survive,' said Mike encouragingly.

'That's comforting, Mike', I said.

'Comforting for the survivor,' added Alun.

Now I wonder how many readers have had the luck of trying crawling through two feet of powder snow on an iced-over lake by minus six degrees centigrade. I'd like to stress that this is not something I would recommend for those who haven't experimented with such things.

Even if one day it becomes a Winter Olympics sport, I honestly believe it should be reserved exclusively for elite athletes. Or madmen, as my neighbour calls sportsmen and sportswomen.

Mind you, for her, madmen or madwomen includes anyone who wastes energy doing things that do not need to be done to stay alive.

Such activities include washing a car, repairing something before it breaks down, pruning trees and planting something one can't eat.

Mowing the lawn is only just acceptable, but watering it is pure madness. "Why," she would cry, "incite the damn stuff to grow faster so that one must mow it more often?"

As Alun snowploughed his way due eastwards, he called, 'Nice bit of driving that, Mike.'

'Yep,' I called from my westward path. 'Impressive and unpredictable manoeuvring. I loved it.'

'Shut up, you two,' called Mike from his north-pointing trajectory.

'Wasn't that the sound of cracking ice near you, Mike?' called Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' grumbled Mike.

'Would anyone like to know how deep the water is out here?' I called.

'No, we wouldn't,' shouted Mike.

'In that case, did you know that this lake is one of the most important European frog reproduction sites?' I asked.

'If they reproduce at this time of the year, they must have specially insulated...'

'In spring, Mike. They do it in late spring,' I interrupted.

'Oh! I just wondered if they had...'

'We know what you were wondering, Mike,' I interrupted again.

It seemed a lifetime before we were on dry land again, windmilling our arms to get the blood back into our iced fingers. We surveyed the situation from the lakeside.

'Looks rather lonely out there,' said Alun. 'Nice though, on a pure white surface, forests behind and snowy peaks in the background.'

'Fantastic. A good pal once said that I live in a Christmas card,' I agreed, 'But, now what?'

'Well, we either get it back, or it goes down,' commented Mike.

'Like our status with the Girls?'

'Oh well, that'll go down, whatever happens,' said Alun.

'Only if they get to hear about it,' said Mike.

We gazed at Mike in astonishment.

'Are you feeling all right, Mike?' cried Alun. 'They always hear about our accidents. No matter how far away they happen.'

I nodded, 'Born with magical telepathic powers.'

Alun pointed his finger at the sky, 'I believe they are simply members of the "Wasons".'

'The Wasons!' cried Mike.

'The "Free-Wasons", to give them their full name.'

'Another of your ridiculous inventions, I suppose,' sighed Mike.

'The Order of Free Wasons, dates back to 1673.'

'Oh, does it?' I said, 'That's interesting.'

'No, it isn't,' groaned Mike. 'It's utter rubbish as usual and a complete waste of time.'

'The Order,' said Alun, ignoring Mike's interruption, 'was formed by wives of wealthy medieval landowners.'

'Oh Really!?' sighed Mike. 'Now what?'

'Yes. Many such landowners were not all that bright. They could only be safely allowed financial freedom when purchasing or selling a few horses, dogs, guns or gumboots. However, generations of wives had learnt it extremely unwise to allow such freedom anywhere near stock exchanges.'

I nodded. 'So, the wives set up a network to out-trick confidence tricksters and the like.'

'You got it,' nodded Alun.

'What a load of drivel,' groaned Mike.

'The sisterhood of Wasons, was thus originally created to protect fortunes throughout the civilised world. Their arms are still exceedingly long, and I honestly believe that "The Girls" are prominent members of the Order.'

'Do they have a special secret handshake?' I asked.

'That's a secret,' smiled Alun tapping the side of his nose.

'That's more rubbish,' sighed Mike.

'So that's why they always get to hear about everything we do wrong, then,' I nodded.

'I think so. Except, of course, when they manage to trick Mike into blurting it all out,' smiled Alun.

'That has been known to happen?' I replied.

'Shut up, you two idiots,' said Mike.

'So, you see, whatever happens, we are for it,' said Alun.

'As Sancho Panza said, "Truth, like oil in water"...'

'I know, I know,' sighed Mike, 'Truth, like oil in water, always ends up coming to the surface'.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'And Sancho knew what he was talking about.'

'It is Christmas, though,' suggested Mike.

We both glanced at him sadly, and he pulled a face.

'Yes. I suppose you're right.'

'We are, Mike,' I said.

So, there we were. Alone. Separated from our means of transport home by fifty yards of treacherous ice.

I screwed up my eyes, 'I wonder!?''

'Yes?' said Alun.

'Come with me. There may still be hope. Even in this tragic moment of doubt and ...'

Mike interrupted, 'All right, all right... So?'

'As I said. Come with me.'

I turned and led Mike and Alun through two feet of virgin snow that lay "deep and crisp and even". I headed for a desolate and seemingly abandoned building. However, it took on a much less abandoned aspect once we rounded the corner.

A set of weather-worn wooden steps led to a heavy sun-bleached oak door. On each side of this door were panelled windows through which yellow light was spilling. There was clearly life therein.

In fact, this was none other than one of the last bastions of rural Alpine life.

A bistro.

During the summer season, the wide space outside was covered with tables. Thanks to a stream of cars bringing diners up from the oppressive heat of the valley, business was brisk and profitable.

However, in winter, the temperature plummeted and remained under zero for months on end. Yet, despite, September bringing a sudden halt to this lucrative bustle of trade, the place did not go entirely into hibernation in winter. For then, here gathered an elite. Indeed, the very pillars of the local alpine community. I am, of course, talking of the brotherhood of retired hunters.

As everyone in France knows, hunting was initially created as an excuse for opening a bottle or two of wine with some pals and exchanging dirty jokes.



Although this activity is now dying out in some regions, resistance is steadily growing in rural alpine areas.

It should be pointed out here that the brotherhood of Retired French hunters is amongst the few to maintain an essential age-old French ritual. The ritual invariably follows the same time-proven procedure. First, drink deep and long, then criticise the present government for whatever they have done or might be intending to do or have not done.

The process often takes an inordinately long time. However, members of the brotherhood know that it is part of their sacred duty. Even if it does involve drinking more than one bottle of wine, duty always comes first.

It is true that on occasions, a few of the more enthusiastic men traipse off in the forests. Then before the joints of their ancient fingers freeze, they shoot inaccurately at anything which happens to be passing by.

Sometimes, very occasionally, this happens to be a wild boar or a mountain deer, but more often, it isn't anything at all.

It should also be noted that French hunters, and especially retired ones, have a hard time of it. Unsympathetically, members of the non-hunting community immediately go up in arms if a hunter accidentally makes even the tiniest of holes in a passing pedestrian.

If it was only pedestrians who caused the trouble, then things wouldn't be so bad. But nowadays, the brotherhood has to put up with all sorts of troublemakers. There were runners, mad Cross-

country cyclists, Bird watchers, mushroom pickers, botanists and worst of all, picnickers.

Those interlopers ought to know that God created nature for hunters to hunt in. Why all these idiots couldn't just stay at home and watch the telly like everybody else remains a mystery to members of the brotherhood.

Furthermore, when winter is back, even the excitement of potting an innocent bystander is denied of them.

In France, even this cream of the local community is not permitted to hunt when snow lays thick in the Alpine pastures.

This is especially the case in the current weather. Weather such as that into which Good King Wenceslas liked to look out. No matter if the feast of stephen might still be a good way off, once the snow lays round about, deep and crisp and even, the rule applies and must be obeyed. No matter if it's too early for the moon to brightly shine, once the frost is cruel and winter fuel becomes rarer, that is that. Shooting things is prohibited.

So, all that's left is drinking, complaining and grumbling. Oh, and card-playing, of course.

Times become hard, and boredom stalks, but fortunately, we were about to give these unhappy men something to chat about over the following few dozen bottles.

As I pushed the door open, I knew I was destined to become the laughingstock of the village for years to come, but I had little choice.

It swung open, enclosing us in a warm waft of wine-soaked air. Mixed in with this intoxicating

atmospheric brew was a good percentage of strong French cigarette smoke.

Cards were being slapped down on greasy tables, and a row of broad backs shielded us from the bar.

The barman looked over at us.

Reacting to this glance, the five men on barstools swivelled around to examine the newcomers.

Even the card players halted, cards poised.

There was an instant of silence, and then everyone turned back to what they were doing. We were clearly of absolutely no interest to this tight-knit elite community. We were clearly not old enough and, worse still, obviously not hunters.

I led the way to a free space at the end of the counter.

I nodded to the barman, who came over. I leaned forward and raised my voice so that everyone else could overhear while still pretending to ignore us. 'Our car skidded off the road. Do you know if anyone has a cable to drag it back?'

Silence fell again, and the barstool inhabitants swung round.

'Off the road?' said one.

I nodded, 'Yep. Slipped on the ice.'

'Going too damn fast, I suppose?' said another, nodding to his partners with a wry smile.

'Exactly,' I smiled. 'We were trying out the new snow tyres.'

'They didn't work well, then,' chuckled one old chap.

'Probably cheap rubbishy Chinese tyres,' said his neighbour.

'No,' I said, 'Good French Michelin Alpine Tyres.'

'Must have been much going too fast,' said the last to the right.

'The guy already admitted he was. Don't you ever listen?' said his pal.

'So, you're off the road then?' said the man.

'For hell's sake! He already said that.'

'Ah!'

'Turn your hearing aid on, René,' said the barman.

'Where?' asked the man.

'Where, what?' I asked.

'Where's the car?'

'Come and see,' I suggested.

The group shot looks at the frosted windows. Each of them was clearly debating if it was a wise move to exchange the room's warmth for the outside's icy wind. Was it really worth it?

However, their curiosity got the better of them.

They tramped en-mass to the door.

'So where is it?' asked the barman.

I pointed, and they all gasped.

'Great Gods! It's in the middle of the damned lake.'

'Yes,' I nodded. 'We noticed that. As I said, it slipped on the ice.'

'Hells bells,' cried another ancient hunter.

'You must have been going much too fast,' repeated the man.

'Oh, hells bells!' groaned the barman, 'don't you ever listen?'

Hearing this, the entire population of the warm room surged out to get a look.

'How in God's name did you manage that?' asked the barman.

'Ask him,' I said, pointing at Mike.

Everyone gazed at Mike, and he pulled a face.

'I wanted to try a handbrake turn, but...'

'Downhill! In all this snow?'

'I thought it would work better.'

'Well, it looks like you turned all right.'

The men, already well lubricated, all laughed heartily at this.

'Anyway,' continued the man, 'looks like you're in trouble now.'

'And that is why we came to ask for help,' I reminded them.

'You'll need a cable,' suggested the first man.

'That's what we came to ask for,' I added.

'And a winch,' added another.

'Preferably both,' I said. 'Have any of you got a four-wheel-drive vehicle with a logging winch?'

The group of men seemed absolutely astounded.

'Have any of us got a four-wheel drive with a winch?' cried one of the older men turning to his friends, who all laughed.

'What's so funny?' asked Mike.

'We ALL have four-wheel-drive vehicles and winches,' laughed the man.

'How could anyone live up here without that?' asked another.

'That's the strict minimum,' said the first.

I looked around the group of retired hunters and wondered.

'Well. Would one of you care to give us a hand then?'

The barman came to our rescue, 'Rémi. You've just put new tyres on your Toyota.'

His friend slapped Rémi on the shoulder.

'The only problem,' said his neighbour, 'is that he's been celebrating that all afternoon. He'd end up on the ice with the other car if you let him try. No, I'll do it.'

With this, the man zipped up his dirty old anorak and trudged off towards the car park.

The man with the Toyota nodded, 'Who's going to take the cable out?'

'He is,' called Alun, pointing at Mike.

'You'll have to crawl out, or you'll go straight through the ice,' continued the old hunter.

'I did that on the way in,' grumbled Mike as an old rusted, mud-spattered and dented Defender bumped off the road into the snow. It belched black smoke into the pristine atmosphere and broke the silence with a raucous roar.

The man jumped out and drew the logging cable off the winch, 'Put a loop around your waist. That way, if you go through the ice, we can winch you back to safety.'

'Great! Thanks,' grumbled Mike pulling an unhappy face in our direction.

He zipped his anorak up and pulled the hood down over his head. He then made his way to the edge of the lake.

One of the more experienced men had dragged out a long roofing plank and had laid it between the ground and the ice.

'Crawl out this way. You'll get onto the thicker ice with less risk,' he nodded.

Mike went down onto his hands and knees and was soon on the snow-covered ice.

'On your stomach now,' called Mister Toyota.

We could hear Mike's exasperated sigh from where we were, whistling through the crisp, pure air.

It seemed to take him forever to get out to the car. When he eventually got there, he rolled over onto his back and called, 'Where's the traction ring attachment?'

I lifted my eyebrows and gazed at Alun, pulling a face. 'It's in the boot,' I whispered.

Alun pulled a face, 'Oh hell!'

I shouted, 'It's in the boot, of course, Mike. Where did you expect it to be?'

There was silence.

'In the boot!?' he shouted back.

'Yep.'

'Oh Hell.'

'Well. I think it is.'

'You think it is?'

'That's right.'

'Are you sure?'

'No.'

There was another silence.

'You're not sure?' he called back

'No. I only got the car the other week.'

'Oh Hell! Brilliant.'

There was another silence as Mike wormed his way through the deep snow to the back of the car.

'Alun,' he called.

'Yes.'

'Can you hit that idiot over the head, please?'

'I could do, I suppose. Any particular reason?'

'Because the damn boot is locked.'

'Oops!' I said, drawing the keys from my pocket.

Alun sighed, then called, 'I'll throw the keys to you. Watch carefully where they land, or you'll never find them.'

'And how am I supposed to see where they land while I'm lying in the snow, you idiots.'

'OK, Mike.' I called. 'We'll watch where they land and then guide you to them.'

'Brilliant. This is going to be so much fun,' shouted Mike.

'I'll do a trial shot first with a rock,' said Alun.

One of the men shook his head, 'Might go through the ice. best to try with a walnut.'

Alun and I exchanged weary glances.

'With a Walnut!?' frowned Alun. 'Where on earth are we supposed to find a walnut in a snow-bound alpine forest.'

The retired hunters exchanged looks and pulled faces. They were obviously surprised by the question.

'Here,' said the barman, drawing a pair from his apron pocket.'

Alun and I exchanged astonished looks. The French are always surprising in this way.

So, Alun took the proffered objects and, drawing back his arm, did his trial throw. Incredibly, the nut actually hit the car bonnet and then bounced off into the snow.

The retired hunters cheered, 'Good throw,' they clapped him on the shoulder.

Next, Alun took the keys. First, he looked at them with a slight frown. He then weighed them several times, bouncing them in his hand in the highly professional manner of a man who knows what he's



about. He then drew his arm back, and the keys went jingling through the sub-zero air.

This time they did not quite bounce off the bonnet.

In fact, they didn't go anywhere near the car.

They just disappeared beyond it.

'Where did they land?' called Mike.

We looked at each other and pulled faces.

Alun called, 'Just the other side of the car near the middle. You should be able to find them easily enough.

'I thought you said you'd guide me.' shouted Mike.

'The things overshot the car,' I called, 'We couldn't see.'

'You idiot, Alun!'

Alun pulled a face.

Mike crawled along, then disappeared behind the car, and we heard nothing for some time.

Then he called, 'Got them.'

We heard the click a few moments later as the electric doors unlocked themselves.

There followed a rather scary moment while Mike had to hoist himself up to a standing position and grub about in the boot.

'If ever I get out of this alive...'

'We'll stand you three rounds, Mike,' called Alun.

Mike made an obscene sign at us from across the frozen expanse. Then, he crouched back down in the snow and disappeared from view. It took him several minutes to screw the freezing cold metal ring into place. Next, he undid the cable from around his waist and clipped the hook onto the loop.

'OK,' he called. 'Hall away.'

The man revved up his car, then messed about with the winch levers, and the cable gradually tightened. Out on the ice, my car span smoothly around and started to slide backwards in our direction. Mike sat in the open boot, rubbing his frozen hands together as he approached.

Surprisingly, there were only one or two ominous cracking sounds from the ice. Furthermore, not even the smallest bolt of lightning shot down from the blue skies above to blast a hole in the ice.

The car was back on solid land in less than five minutes, and I jumped in to drive it through the snow to the car park.

'Drinks all round, I think,' I called to the barman.

The brotherhood of retired Hunters thought this was an excellent idea, and rubbed their gnarled hands vigorously in anticipation, as we tramped back indoors. They did this more to prepare them for swift glass grasping than because they were cold.

Anyway, that drink of thanksgiving took some little time and involved several bottles of wine. So, when we finally left the place, we were feeling more or less back to normal, if not a little gayer than usual.

'Better take it slowly on the way back down,' suggested Alun.

'A Wise move,' agreed Mike.

'No handbrake turns either,' added Alun.

And we somehow or other, we managed to get home unharmed.

The sun was only just beginning to set when we parked the car in the drive.

After some thought, we considered it might be a good idea to sit outside for a while and watch.

'Anyway,' said Alun. 'We could do with a little airing before entering the presence.'

'Agreed,' nodded Mike. 'How long do you think it'll take for the smell of wine and cigarette smoke to wear off?'

'Too long for it to be of any practical use,' I replied.

'Every little helps,' said Alun. 'The sunset is going to be fantastic anyway, and we need a little time to work out a convincing story.'

'I challenge the use of the word "little", Alun,' I cried. 'After all, we are dealing with Free Wasons.'

We all laughed.

'I forgot that,' chuckled Alun.

My old car was still lodged comfortably, nuzzling up against the pile of snow. I patted the roof affectionately, 'Tomorrow, my faithful old friend, you're off to the great car park in the sky.' I rubbed the dented bonnet. 'We've been together now for nearly two hundred thousand miles.'

'Is it still street legal?' asked Mike.

'Of course not,' I replied.

'And how do you expect to get down to the valley alive then?' asked Mike.

'The handbrake is dead, but the footbrake works fine. Not perfectly, admittedly, and not always with the same gusto, but well enough to survive the final trip.'

With this, we jumped up and sat on the bonnet to watch the sun go down over the Vercors mountains.

At the bottom of the steep field just below us, the local farmer had temporarily chased his flock of sheep out of their warm winter home. We could hear his tractor at work inside as he mucked out the place and replaced the straw. The sheep were milling about in the trampled snow, snuffling in it, and tearing up the few bits of grass they could reach.

A little lower down, we could see Therese, our deaf, dumb, and short-sighted neighbour, messing about in her snow-bound vegetable garden.

Beyond her farmhouse was what was locally called the "Long Field". In the middle of this stood a group of men knee-deep in snow. I recognised the tall, rounded figure of the mayor and the stocky figure of the local farmer. I guessed that they were discussing the plans for his new barn to be built in the spring.

The sky had been cloudless since early morning, and the sun had been beating down all day. So, the black metal was still hot.

We thus sat comfortably, taking all this in, in silence for a few moments.

'This is better than sitting on an icebound lake,' sighed Mike, as he shifted to find a more comfortable position.

With our feet resting on the pile of snow we gazed Eastwards. Within minutes, the horizon turned to an exquisite mixture of blood red, orange and mauve, streaked with slashes of blue sky.

But as we watched, we gradually became aware of a moving sensation under us.

We glanced at each other.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun, the snow's giving way.'

This was barely out of his mouth before there was a crunching noise.

The huge pile of compacted snow holding the car back, slid off down the steep slope like a mini avalanche. Then the car began to follow it.

We leapt sideways off the bonnet just as the front wheels slipped over the lip of the slope.

'Oh, hells bells!' I shouted. 'Quick, Mike. Jump inside and use the footbrake.'

Mike started, 'What!?'

'Hit the foot-break, quick,' I shouted.

'Are you completely crazy!?'

At the same moment, Alun came dashing down and, grabbing the door handle, yanked it open. He got hold of the door frame and was about to haul himself inside when the back wheels went over the lip too, and the car surged downward.

Alun kept hold of the doorframe but was pulled off his feet as the car accelerated. He was dragged along beside it through the deep snow. Then realising that no amount of foot-braking would stop a car on a steep snow-covered slope, he let go.'

'Oh hell!' I cried, 'the sheep!'

The car was speeding straight at the flock.

I jumped up and down, waving my arms and shouted to attract their attention. Mike and Alun joined in, and the woolly heads turned lazily and gazed up at us.

Then suddenly, they caught sight of the enormous black mass bearing down on them. They possibly took it for a bull, but whatever, they dashed in all directions leaving a broad, sheep-free space. We also dashed, but down the slope after the car.

As the way was cleared, I breathed again, then Mike shouted. 'That woman!!!'

'Oh no!' I cried. And started waving and shouting as I ran.

But of course, Therese could hear nothing and would probably not see even if she was looking directly at us. She was not; she was bending over, tackling something horticultural at ground level.

She was directly in the car's path, which was now doing at least forty MPH.

We dashed after the car, in the tracks left by the tyres.

'Oh God almighty!' cried Alun as we sprinted on.

The car bore down on its chosen victim, and there seemed no way of averting a horrible accident.

However, just at the last instant, she took a long stride forward.

The car shot past her within two feet of her raised bottom.

We dashed on, and as we reached her garden, she turned and spotted us. 'Oh, hello, Boys,' she smiled, entirely unsurprised to see us there. 'I'm just going inside. So cold, isn't it?' and off she went, totally unaware of the track the tyres had torn across her garden.

However, the car was still careering downhill.

At the bottom of her garden, the ground rose just before a dense grove of ancient and neglected trees. This was fenced off because it contained a deep fissure into which cows and sheep had frequently fallen to their deaths.'

The car mounted this rise at 60 MPH, flew over the fence and crashed through the dead lower branches.

It then disappeared from sight, with various sounds of mangled metalwork.

At the noise, the mayor and his group jumped around and, seeing us running, came dashing toward the grove.

We all clambered over the rotten fence and struggled through the undergrowth.

'Where the hell's the car?' I groaned.

'Found it,' called Alun.

We all tramped over and gazed down into the fissure, barely wider than the car.

The mayor looked up and at last recognised us, 'Oh! It's you! And your pals...'

'What on earth happened?' grumbled the farmer, with a marked lack of interest.

I explained briefly while the group nodded.

'That old wreck of a car was yours, was it?' said the mayor, gazing down the deep crevasse at the glimmer of mangled metal paintwork far below.'

'Yep,' I nodded.

The man nodded, 'Are you sure you really want it back?'

I reflected for almost two seconds.

'Not really. I was taking it to the scrapyard tomorrow.'

'Looks like it already got there,' nodded the humourless farmer, René.

'Another few cars down there,' smiled the mayor, 'and it would be nicely filled.' Then he abruptly appeared to have an idea and held up his chubby forefinger.

Turning to the farmer, he frowned, 'All the earth that we'll have to shift to level the ground for your

barn...' He paused, and a sly smile slowly crossed the farmer's face. 'Ah Ha! Yes.' Then the man actually went as far as grinning.

The mayor turned to the architect, identifiable by his spotlessly clean clothes. 'That'll save a great deal of trouble and money. All that earth can go down there, can't it?'

'Well,' frowned the architect. 'Yes, I suppose it could.'

'It *will*,' said the mayor, clapping him on the shoulder. 'And that'll save you the cost of transporting it too,' he said to the farmer.

The farmer, René, who was always for saving money, nodded, 'Good idea.'

'Well, friends,' the mayor shifted his big shoulders, 'I think we owe a vote of thanks to these three gentlemen. After all, they've provided us with the perfect solution to our dilemma.'

The men all nodded because saving money was always a popular pursuit in these parts.

'You're absolutely certain, you don't want that wreck back?' asked the mayor once more.

'Oh certain,' I nodded vigorously. 'No doubt at all.'

René stepped over and laid a wide gnarled hand on my shoulder. 'I might have to charge you an annual parking fee, though.'

Everyone burst out laughing.

The mayor rubbed his chubby hands together. 'Well, that's that then.' Then turning, he addressed René. 'What was it you said, René, about a bottle or two of wine in your car boot? We'd best have those before they freeze solid.'



One of his friends took René by the broad shoulders and shook him.

'The colder, the better,' laughed the man. 'That freezes the taste buds so that the stuff is almost drinkable.'

Another laugh went up, and we made our way back through the deep snow to where his rusted old Toyota and its treasure were parked. We'd invent something for the Girls later...

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

## Chapter 11- Skis, Frogs, and Bins

### MORNING

**A**t last, it was Christmas eve. Mike, Alun and I had just been politely requested to remove ourselves from the vicinity of the kitchen.

By now, we were getting extremely good at this.

'And don't imagine,' added my wife, 'that that means you can go off rally driving in the snow with the new car.'

Oddly enough, as I paused, hand on the door handle, I had been considering just that. I pulled a disappointed face and turned to Mike and Alun, who nodded sadly.

'Life's not always easy for energetic youngsters like us,' laughed Alun.

'Precisely,' I added. 'What's sixty nowadays? Barely middle-aged.'

Restored by this idea, we stepped out into the front garden and leaned against the sunbathed wall. Above us, under a pale blue, cloudless sky, the snow-covered mountains and forests stood out sharply against the blue backdrop.

I had an idea.

'You two have never tried cross-country skiing, have you?'

They looked up at the blue sky and mountains with interest.

'We could hire a teacher,' suggested Mike, 'and take a lesson.'

'Do you think that would come under the heading of "keeping out of the Kitchen"?' asked Alun.

'I think so,' I nodded. 'It's always best to be sure, though.'

I opened the door and called in, 'Mike and Alun, want me to take them to Chamrousse, to have a cross-country ski lesson. Any objections?'

There was a brief silence then my wife's head appeared. She scanned our faces for signs of attempted deception of some sort, 'There aren't any pubs up there, are there?'

I made an attempt at producing a deep theatrical sigh, 'Mike and Alun feel that their bodies would greatly benefit from a bit of sport,' I replied haughtily.

She shook her head with a wry smile, 'Natural enough, seeing how much wine you three will be guzzling down over the next few days.'

'So that's OK then?' I said.

'If you avoid ending up in hospital,' she said.

Margaux looked out and added, 'They're more likely to end up in prison than in hospital,' she laughed.

My wife nodded knowingly, 'If you keep out of both, OK then.'

'Great,' I smiled. 'Off to the hills then.'

But Margaux had unfortunately had one of her good ideas, 'Wait a moment. Why don't you take the four lads with you? We can probably manage without them this morning.'

My spirits fell.

For me, this was very far removed indeed from what a normal human being would designate as a "good idea". This was because I knew by experience that young men have an annoying habit of being overly enthusiastic about sports, especially when assembled in droves.

I knew this very well because Mike, Alun, and I had been young men, only a few years previously, or so it seemed to us.

Young men rush into anything, employing far too much energy. Worse still, lacking even the slightest notion of what they are doing, they do it better than experienced men like us. This is firstly annoying and secondly, bad for the morale of more mature youngsters such as us.

'Certified cross-country ski instructors aren't allowed to take more than three people at a time,' I lied.

'No more than three!?' frowned Magaux.

'That's right.'

'And how do you know that?' frowned my wife.

'I know. That's why.'

'Really? Since when?'

'Since the 1968 winter Olympics,' I lied. 'Which, as it happens, were hosted by Grenoble.'

'Just down the road then!' nodded Mike.

I nodded back, 'Yes. But, of course, you didn't know that either, did you, Alun?'

Alun shook his head. 'No. I didn't, I'll admit that. That's rather astonishing, really. When one thinks about it, I mean.'

My wife sighed, 'It is not in the least astonishing, and anyway, I knew perfectly well where the 1968 games were held.'

'Well, there you are then.' I smiled triumphantly.

'Wait a minute,' she frowned. But at this critical moment, when I was about to get into deep waters, my daughter, June, called out.

'Don't forget that the boys are going down to pick up the Turkeys this morning. But we can still all go skiing together on Boxing Day.'

'Great idea,' I called back. 'Brilliant.'

Margaux scowled at us, 'You're very, very lucky this time,' and closed the door.

We raised our eyebrows and shook our heads to and fro at each other happily, then skipped upstairs to dress as youngsters do.

The cross-country ski centre at Chamrousse is only a half an hour's drive from our home. So, we were soon standing outside the "Federation Francaise de Ski" chalet. I pushed open the sun-bleached wooden door, and we stepped inside and leant contentedly over the wooden counter to wait.

The place exhaled that comforting warm smell of ski wax and drying shoes.

A broad-shouldered instructor appeared after a few moments, frowned, and clumped over to us across the worn wooden floorboards. His face was deeply suntanned, to a nut-brown colour which it probably retained all year round.

We made our request, and he sized us up with a professional eye for potential catastrophes.

'Ever done any cross-country skiing?'

We shook our heads.

'What sort of physical form are you in?' he asked bluntly.

'Not bad,' I said. 'We do a lot of hiking in the mountains.'

The man grunted noncommittedly and mentioned the sum needed, for which I made out a cheque.

Then over his shoulder, he called, 'You still free, Magalie?'

'This morning? Yes. Until eleven,' came a gruff female voice.

'I suppose you'll be needing skis and ski shoes.' nodded the man.

Mike smiled, 'So we'll need skis then?'

The man ignored this and led us into the adjoining room.

He screwed his eyes up at each of us and handed over three pairs. 'Size?' he then asked before handing us the shoes.

Then, with a quick motion of his chin, he indicated a scored wooden bench, where we were obviously expected to change.

Having donned our ski shoes, we clumped outside into the snow and waited in the sun.

'Absolutely perfect weather,' smiled Mike, 'Good job we thought of bringing dark glasses.'

'Yes,' said Alun. 'One couldn't choose better conditions for breaking a leg in.'

We laughed.

Then there was a clattering noise from behind the chalet, and as we turned, our "Moniteur National" appeared.

However, the gruff voice had not prepared us for what we discovered. A tall, slim, tanned girl of about

twenty years old. She had blue eyes, thick golden hair and blue, body-moulding ski tights.

'Hello, I'm Magalie. I'm your instructor.'

We gulped and took her in with undisguised pleasure.

She smiled back. 'Your first time "n'est pas"?''

We nodded, trying hard to keep our eyes above her shoulder line.

'OK. First, I'll show you how to put your skis on and then your poles. Then I'll show you how to get up after you've fallen over.'

'So, falling over is an integral part of the sport, is it?' smiled Alun.

Magalie laughed, 'Yes. For beginners. You'll probably get a good deal of practice at it today.'

'So at least we'll learn how to fall properly,' I chuckled.'

She smiled. 'It's the getting back up I want to teach you. That avoids wasting all your energy for nothing.'

'Like learning to wind-surfing,' Mike nodded.

'Worse.' said Magalie.

'If I'd known that...' groaned Mike.

'Don't worry,' smiled Magalie. 'You're in good hands. I train the national Biathlon team.'

'And they're all still alive?' asked Alun.

She laughed again, 'Most of them. Come on, we'll walk down to the beginner's track and put the skis on down there. That avoids the first slopes.'

Well, these first slopes looked pretty innocent to us, so we asked why she had wished to avoid them. However, as we approached, a group of school children were preparing to go down it with their instructor.



Magalie stopped. 'Watch, and you'll understand.'

The instructor encouraged his group of twenty or so, and at last, they set off one after another.

Everything went well, and we were surprised at just how fast these small children picked up speed.

Then one after another, they seemed to become aware of just how fast they were actually going, and became increasingly unstable.

Then, over they went, off the tracks to the left or to the right, into the deep surrounding snow.

Those following, seeing this, panicked and wavered about until, over they went too, making knots with their skies and poles.

In about ten seconds, the entire group were tangled together. The instructor then flashed down to undo the knots.

'That,' said Magalie, 'is absolutely the worst way to start learning. It destroys confidence at the outset and entirely spoils the pleasure of learning.'

We nodded, and she went on, 'I prefer to build confidence and balance first so that you spend more time on your feet than on the snow. Then I teach my students how to move forwards, and then up a slope. Only then do I show how to navigate an easy downhill bit. You saw for yourself how fast those children picked up speed, and they're only half your weights.'

We nodded approval. Clearly, our instructor was not only good to look at but was also good at her job.

I smiled, 'I have a feeling that the guy who served us would have sent us straight down that slope to start with.'

Magalie laughed, 'You're not far wrong there. Anyway, you drew me, so you're in luck.'

We smiled at each other and followed her lovely shape down the hill.

Alun squeezed my arm and leaned close to whisper, 'Look at that fantastic...' However, Magalie turned and gazed over her shoulder at that exact moment. So, Alun rapidly changed the subject, 'Just look at that fantastic snow. We did well to come.'

She nodded, 'Good choice. It was minus fifteen C last night, and the snow is perfect. I did twenty kilometres around the black track this morning. Fantastic. A bit icy on the downhill parts through the forest, though.'

'This flat bit looks perfect for me,' nodded Mike.

Magalie then helped us to get our skis and poles adjusted correctly. 'Now watch me, and I'll show you how to do it.' and off she went gliding effortlessly across the snow.

We didn't have any difficulty watching her and did so fixedly, with slightly melancholy sighs. I'm not absolutely sure that we were watching the right parts, but what we did watch was not without its merits.

She turned and came towards us. This time we concentrated on her skis.

'Get the idea?' she asked.

We were unsure how to answer this because we did get ideas, but they were not altogether linked to skiing.

'I'll do it again,' she smiled. 'Now this time, watch how I push down alternatively on my skis at each step.'

She paused and looked at us. 'The movement is a bit like using a child's scooter. You push off with one foot, then repeat with the other. You stamp all your

weight down onto the ski you are going to push off from.'

She did this on a track at right angles to ours, and we nodded as we grasped the basic idea.

'Now you have a go.'

Off we went, and to our surprise, we did go along. Even though this included quite a bit of wobbling, we decidedly moved in the required direction.

When we reached the end of the track, she showed us how to turn our skis without getting knotted up.

'Now, give me your poles and do the same thing back to the starting point.'

Off we went again. But this time, our progress was far less convincing for some reason. Our skis seemed to slip back more than forward. We tried bringing all our weight down on each ski, but they just slipped backwards from underneath us.

Magalie slid over to us, 'What fart did you use?'

We gaped at her, 'Fart!?!'

'Yes, of course. Your skis *have* been farted, haven't they?'

We exchanged incredulous looks, 'Farted!?!'

Magalie shook her head, 'Here. Let me see.'

She undid one of my skis, lifted it and swivelled it so that she could see the base. She sighed a deep sigh and laughed, 'It's not surprising you were slipping all over the place. There's no fart on your skis.' She looked at our puzzled expressions and frowned.

'Now, what do you call it in English, wait a moment 'it'll come to me...'

Mike and Alun knelt and removed their skis as she removed my second one.

'Oh yes! Of course. Fart is called "Kick Wax" in English. That's the stuff which sticks to the snow when you stamp down on the ski.'

She gathered the six skis up. 'I'll get them Farted. Wait here.'

With this, she shot off up the slope effortlessly, with no poles and the skis under each arm.

We watched her progress with undisclosed pleasure. 'Nice girl that.' said Alun.

'She seems to know a good deal about Farting,' smiled Mike.

'That's probably because of being brought up with gnarled old shepherds in Alpine pastures,' I suggested.

'Like Heidi,' nodded Alun.

'Yes, I nodded. 'Little Heidi, was apparently an ace at farting.'

We nodded. 'I still think it's ungentlemanly to Fart in a woman's presence.'

We all burst into laughter.

'Have your skis been Farted...' I gurgled, 'My god!'

'One learns something new every day,' laughed Alun. 'I'd never have thought that one's skiing proficiency depended so much on farting.'

'One lives and learns,' smiled Mike. 'I bet the Girls will enjoy hearing about that.'

'Don't you dare, Mike,' I cried. 'You'll end up by telling them all about Magalie, and then they'll never let us have lessons alone again.'

Alun smiled, 'The term "Kick-wax", has a nice ring about it too. I wonder what one could do with a product like that? Outside skiing, I mean.'

'If Mike ever mentions Magalie to the Girls, I have an idea I might be using some.'

'I know how to hold my tongue,' grumbled Mike.

'That's the first time I heard of that,' said Alun.

I sniffed and frowned, 'Was that you who waxed Alun?'

We all laughed.

After a short wait, Magalie appeared again and shot down the slope carrying the three pairs of skis.

'Here. Look,' she said, holding out a ski. 'Touch.'

We placed our fingers on the waxed middle section, which was now slightly tacky.

'When you kick down, this wax comes into contact with the snow so that you can propel yourself forward. But, as the skis are slightly cambered when you're simply standing upright on the two, it doesn't touch, so you slide forward. That's why classical cross-country skis are cambered and not flat, like skating ones.'

We nodded, 'So that's why you have to stamp, or kick down, then?' nodded Alun.

'And that's why it's called Kick-Wax,' added Mike.

'Well done, Mike,' said Alun. 'Kick thinking.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'idiot.'

Well, with the skis now properly prepared, we made rapid progress. Magalie was indeed surprised that we were so stable on our skis for beginners.

'That's probably because we've done a lot of hiking on unstable terrain,' suggested Alun.

The truth is that we frequently got lost and had to finish our treks in the dark. More often than not, this occurred after an extended refreshment pause, which challenged stability to an even greater extent.

'Let's try this uphill bit now,' she called. 'You'll have to kick down harder on the way up, or you'll slip backwards. Keep as upright as possible, shoulders back and don't lean forward into the slope. If you do, the Fart will not touch the snow properly, and your ski will slip back under you, and you'll lose traction.'

We nodded and watched her lovely shape shoot up the slope.

'I absolutely love learning this way,' sighed Alun.

'I agree. Watching it done beats any number of verbal explanations,' I said.

Well, we got up the slope very well, albeit dissipating a considerably greater amount of energy than Magalie. However, we were incredibly pleased with ourselves.

'Now down.' smiled Magalie. 'Let your poles dangle behind you in the snow, bend your knees slightly and lean slightly forwards.'

Down we went with a woosh, gathering speed at what seemed a breakneck rate.

Then Magalie shot past at what seemed to be a hundred MPH or more and ended up with a parallel turn in an impressive cloud of snow.

'Well,' she said smiling, 'You three impress me. For a first time out, you ski extremely well.'

Oddly enough, we all felt the colour rise in our cheeks like abashed schoolchildren.

'How would you like to do a little circuit through the forest and around the plateau. We can try out the

different things you've already learned. Nothing difficult. Just follow me.'

As I have already mentioned, following Magalie was something we were learning to appreciate. We nodded acceptance of this plan, so off she went.

Once in the forest and out of the sun, the temperature shot down, and we realised just how cold it really was. The branches of the tall pine trees were heavily loaded with snow, and this covering was sparkling and glinting with frost crystals.

We skied along, listening to Magalie explain various aspects and correcting our posture. It was one of the most pleasant moments I had spent for many years.

I smiled over at Alun, and he nodded back, obviously feeling the same way.

The track wound through the forest with slight rises and dips, then abruptly turned and rose steeply.

Magalie explained how to get up the steepest parts using the "herringbone" technique when our skis would no longer grip the snow.

Mike shot off, putting all his energy into it, then almost ran up the last steep part using this "herringbone" step.

Magalie watched him nodding approval. 'If you three had started in your youths, you'd probably be champions by now.'

'Retired champions,' called Mike.

'Thanks, Mike,' sighed Alun, 'We can always count on you to find the best words for boosting our morale.'

We laughed, followed Mike, and reached the top, perspiring heavily but immensely happy.

Magalie shot up behind us, smiling, 'Congratulations. That was almost perfect. I don't think I have had such good beginners for a long time. Well done.'

Once more, we blushed like schoolchildren.

'That was fantastic cried the ecstatic Mike. Where now? Down there?'

'Yes, that way,' nodded Magalie, and off he went.

She called after him, 'keep to the left branch, Mike.' She smiled. 'I believe you have converted your friend to cross-country skiing. Better late than never.'

I turned to Alun and whispered, 'Why on earth does he want to stay in front of her?'

'I agree,' said Alun, 'the view is far better from behind.'

'Yes. Gives one ideas.'

'And make the sap rise.'

'It's a Good job we avoided those body-moulding skiing tights?' I added.

'Exactly what I was thinking,' nodded Alun.

Alun moved off while Magalie gave me a few more bits of advice.

We caught up with him at the top of a slight rise.

'Where's Mike?' I asked.

'He went that way.'

Magalie started, 'Not down that right-hand branch?'

'That's it.'

'Great Gods!' she exclaimed. 'I told him the left branch. That's the downhill forest section of the Black competition track.'

'Oh hell!' I cried.



'Oh God!' she cried. 'And it was iced solid this morning, it twists like a snake, and it's difficult, even for a pro in these conditions.'

Then a little lower down, we spotted his red bonnet flashing along below us.

'Stop, Mike,' I shouted, 'That's the black track.'

'Come back,' called Alun.

'Come on, you lot,' he yelled back, 'I'm getting cold,' and off he went again.

Before we could do anything more, we saw his bonnet disappear around the corner into the deeper forest.

'Oh Hell!' she said. 'Stay here, and I'll try and stop him before he gets going too fast and smashes into a tree.'

She disappeared at a remarkable speed and flashed down the slope.

Alun and I skied over to the lip of the slope and looked down.

Alun almost fell back with fright, 'Can you hear anything?' he called.

We listened anxiously for the crash and the screaming.

Then suddenly we heard "Whoopee".

'Oh, God! cried Magalie over her shoulder, 'He's reached the steep bit.'

'Steeper than this?'

'This isn't steep,' she called as she disappeared into the forest.

We exchanged looks, and I took out my phone, 'I suppose I'd better alert the rescue team. If the idiot picks up too much speed, he'll shoot off the track at the first turning and go straight into the forest.'

'And hit a tree,' said Alun.

'At 70km/hr,' I added.

'What was it your wife said about avoiding hospitals?'

'Oh, hells bells!'

I glanced down at my phone, "Damn it! Hardly any signal.'

'That's because of all the snow on the trees,' said Alun. 'It screens the radiation. It's almost like phoning from inside a metal box. They call that a Faraday cage, in fact.'

'Thank you, Alun, that's handy information.'

'My pleasure.'

'In the meantime, this extra and highly valuable knowledge doesn't make my phone work any better.'

'If you climbed to the top of that tree, you'd probably get more than enough signal.'

'If I climbed to the top of this one?' I said, pointing skywards with my ski pole.

'Yep. That's the boy,' He smiled, nodding back.

I gaped, 'Alun! Have you seen how tall that tree is? Fifty metres at least.'

'Yes. All of that. A little more, I expect.'

'And you're expecting me to clamber up there. That'll make two of us in hospital.'

Alun made an impatient puffing noise, 'For goodness's sake. Look at all those branches. You'll have footholds every thirty centimetres.' He shook his head sadly. 'You're not frightened, are you?'

I closed my eyes and sighed deeply.

'Oh well! Come on, scaredy-cat,' he cried, 'Give me the phone. I'll do it.'

I gave him a hand up to reach the first foothold and then stood well back to watch his progress.

There was little snow close to the trunk, and he made fast progress. He was soon sufficiently near the summit to no longer be screened by the snow-covered branches.

'There's an incredible view from up here,' he called. 'I can even see the Mont Blanc. Fantastic!'

'Great. But have you got any signal?'

'Must have. Wait a mo,' He fumbled in his pocket.

'Don't drop it, Alun.'

'Hey!' he called.

'What now?'

'What's the code?'

I sighed. 'I can't remember.'

'What!'

'I use a diagram code.' I called back.

'Brilliant. And what might that diagram be?' he shouted.

'Well... It's a sort of figure of eight.'

'What sort of figure of eight?' he shouted.

'Well, a figure of eight with a squiggle underneath.'

'A squiggle!?'

'Well. More like a wavy line, in fact.'

'Oh god!?'

'Like three "Vs" connected together.' I called up.

'Oh hell!' cried Alun. 'I'm coming back down.'

He made his way carefully back down, and when he nearly got to the bottom, he handed me down the phone.

I did my login, and he groaned, 'That's not a figure of eight. That's the maths sign for infinity.'

'Anyhow. That's what I use. I don't care what it's called. Get back up before it logs you out again.'

Alun clambered back up, and when he reached the top, he got himself comfortable lodged and took out my phone.

'Hell's bells! 'He called. 'I've got five bars up here!'

'Fantastic!' I called back.

'What's the number?' he called.

'Which number?'

'The security service, of course, you twit.'

'Oh! Well, it's either seventeen, sixteen, or perhaps fifteen.'

'Great!'

'Try Fifteen first. That's for accidents and such like.'

'OK.' Then there was a silence. Then, 'Oh no!' came a cry from above.

'What's the problem now?'

'The problem is that your damn phone is discharged. It's turned itself off.'

'It can't be. I only charged it the other day.' I called up.

'Which other day was that?' he groaned.

'Yesterday, or perhaps the day before. Anyway, you might as well come back down.'

'Well, it's surprising that you should suggest that, because I was just thinking the same thing myself,' He called. 'Mind you, I could also stay up here and look at the view.'

'Come on, Alun,' I called. 'It must have been the cold that made the thing discharge so fast. They call it the "brass-monkey effect".'

'Shut up.'

At this moment, we heard another shout from Mike, now much further off.

'Hey, you lot. Are you coming? This is fantastic. Whoopee.'

I shook my head, 'How does he do it?'

Alun was now frowning as he once more reached ground level. 'Well, if that twit Mike can get down that slope, then anyone can.'

He clipped on his skis and shuffled forward.

'Oh god!' I sighed. 'Are you completely crazy, Alun?'

'Oh, come on,' he replied. 'This is going to be fun.'

'No, it's no,' I cried, 'It's going to be an absolute disaster.'

Ignoring me, he set off towards the lip of the slope. However, as he went over it, I made a dive at him. I grabbed him around the legs, and he fell and rolled over into the deep snow. His skis collided with the snow loaded fir tree, and without warning, about a ton and a half of snow came cascading down from the upper branches. Alun disappeared under a huge pile of shimmering snow, a good deal of which hung glinting and sparkling in the air.

This pile was at once was thrown about in all directions as Alun tunnelled his way out.

'You idiot,' he cried. 'You could have buried me alive.'

'I did,' I replied.

'I could have been smothered and have died of suffocation and cold.'

'Don't be stupid, Alun. Anyway, I prefer to be an idiot than to be standing beside your newly dug grave, you madman.'

Alun was about to say something scathing, when Magalie appeared, skiing smoothly up from the left-hand branch.

She shook her head at us, 'Your friend is absolutely crazy,' she said. 'How he managed to get down alive, I don't know. But, come on, he's on his way back to the plateau. I left him struggling up the steep black hill. That should take a bit of steam out of him. Come on.'

As we left the forest and started to skirt the central plateau, a series of howls went up as a team of huskies swept towards us over the deep snow. The musher, a youngish woman, waved to Magalie as they passed.

In the distance, other howls went up from the enclosure where two more dog teams were "parked".

Magalie stopped as Mike appeared from a track on our right. His face was red and covered with perspiration. 'Phew! That's one hell of a climb,' he puffed.

'What goes down must come up again,' I laughed.

'It's black all the way down and then black all the way back up,' added Alun.

'I noticed that,' puffed Mike. 'Dark black on the uphill bit, though.'

'Well, at least you did a full pressure proof-test of your heart and arteries,' I laughed. 'That'll save the expense and inconvenience of having it done professionally.'

'I didn't think of that,' nodded Mike, 'Well, well! So, the old ticker's OK then. That's good news for Christmas!'

Following our guide, we started off across the plain towards the FFS chalet, when I noticed a group of leaves blowing across the snow.

I frowned. 'That's odd,' I said, pointing with my ski pole.

'What's odd about leaves blowing in the wind?' asked Mike.

'Well, first, we're in the middle of a pine forest, Mike,' I said. 'You might or might not have noticed that pine trees don't have all that many leaves.'

'Ah!'

'Exactly.' I nodded. 'Secondly, to be blown in the wind, one usually needs wind, which we do not have.'

'Ah. Yes, that's odd too.'

'Which is what I just said.'

As we approached, we were startled by what we discovered.

'Great gods!' cried Allun, 'They're Frogs!'

'Frogs!?'

'Yes, look. Loads of tiny frogs. What on earth are they doing here at this time of the year?'

'Looks to me as if they're hopping,' I said. 'Of course, I might be wrong.'

'Have they got skis on?' asked Alun.

As we watched, dozens of tiny frogs appeared and hopped across the cross-country ski tracks towards a bubbling torrent that had cut a deep passage in the snow a little way off.

They clearly knew by instinct which way to go.

Magalie neatly avoided skiing on one of these tiny creatures and turned to us.

'Strange and unnatural, isn't it?'

We nodded.

'It's because those guys with their noisy huskies have dug away eight feet of snow all the way down to the spring,' she said, clearly angry. 'And all that simply so their dogs can drink fresh water for free.' She paused and sighed heavily. 'Not coming from these parts, they didn't know, or even care, that frogs hibernate all over this plateau.'

Mike nodded, 'I get it. So, if the snow is cleared away, the sun heats up the ground, and the Frogs come out of hibernation months too early.'

'Exactly. And they set off for the breeding grounds on the far side of the plateau.'

Mike shook his head sadly, 'And that messes up the whole reproduction cycle.'

Exactly,' said Magalie. 'Luckily, some of them go back into a kind of secondary hibernation, but others die of cold if they can't find cover.'

We looked at her in astonishment as the little things hopped over our skis and off across the virgin snow.

'I bet it's not only the sun that heats up the ground,' said Alun.

We gazed at him. 'I wonder what tripe he's going to emit this time,' sighed Mike.

'Not tripe Mike. Urine. Dog urine.'

Magalie blinked, 'What!?'

'Can you imagine the hundreds of litres of hot dog urine that forty huskies produce per day? And that all goes straight back into the ground and heats it up.'

'Incredible, Alun,' said Mike.

Alun smiled, 'Thank you, Mike. They drink in the icy cold water from the spring, heat it up via internal machinery, then spray it back out as hot water.'



I nodded, 'In fact, they act like hot water heaters on legs then.'

'You said it,' smiled Alun.

Magalie came out of her state of shock and shook her head to clear away the clouds of incomprehension, 'Good heavens. I never thought of that.'

Alun smiled and shrugged modestly, 'These little ideas come to me sometimes.'

'In a flash of inspiration?' I suggested.

'Exactly.'

Mike frowned, 'I bet the environmentalists will have something to say about all that,' he said.

'They already have,' she smiled. 'Me included. The mayor has already ordered the guys to refill the hole they have dug and bring the water down by hand.'

'I bet there was a big fight about that,' suggested Alun.

Magalie nodded, and we watched as the last of the little group of frogs plopped down into the torrent and disappeared.

'But what are you going to do about the urine heating effect?'

Magalie frowned. 'Hum! I'll have a word with the mayor about that,' she smiled. 'That'll be fun.'

When we reached the chalet, we thanked Magalie and told her we would undoubtedly be back soon.

We then handed in our gear and made our way back to the car.

'That was fantastic,' said Alun.

'Yes. Brilliant,' agreed Mike as I started the car and turned for home.

## **Midday**

We were far too late for the midday meal, so we made ourselves some sandwiches and took them out into the front garden.

We sat there chatting in the sun for a while until my wife came out.

'When you've finished gorging yourselves with unhealthy muck,' she said, 'can you take the bags of rubbish down to the recycling bins.'

'With the greatest of pleasure,' I said gallantly.

She frowned at me but, for some odd reason, held her tongue.

The previous year, the local council had decided to stop door-to-door refuse collection. As would be expected, the official reasons announced were carefully worded in such a way as to appeal to our sense of environmental solidarity. I won't bother to quote them because everyone on the planet has heard the same stuff rolled out for one cause or another.

In this case, the actual reason is that it saved the mayor a great deal of money. These funds were then carefully invested in such a way to optimise his chances of re-election.

Many people rebelled against this decision, but I was not amongst these. This was because, although sometimes annoying, the new procedure brought with it an undeniable advantage. I was no longer awoken at five-o'clock in the morning twice a week.

'We have hi-tech recycling bins now,' I said to Alun and Mike.

'You mean you chuck everything in, and the bin does the recycling for you?' suggested Alun.

'Not quite as hi-tech as that,' I laughed. 'Each bin is equipped with sensors. When the software considers that the bin is full enough, it locks it shut and opens the spare. The software then sends a radio signal to the control centre, which sends up the lorry.'

'When the drivers are not on strike?' suggested Alun. 'Remember, we are in France.'

'Saves even more money, I suppose,' grumbled Mike. 'And makes even more unqualified people unemployed.'

We sighed a mutual sigh and loaded the smelly plastic bags into the car boot.

As we were leaving, my wife called out, 'Take the house keys with you. We're all going to finish the Christmas shopping in town.'

'OK,' I called back.

We piled the remaining bags on the rear seat and drove off.

The new recycling bins were set on a broad platform a two-minute drive from home. Each container was about man height, sporting a massive lid that swung back to free the wide entrance opening.

We swung the ten or so bags into the yellow, blue, green, or grey containers, then drove home.

By then, the front door was locked, and I shot a cheerful look at Alun and Mike, 'How about a beer or two in the sun?'

'Brilliant idea,' smiled Alun. 'With no unmerited criticism about our unhealthy habits.'

'That's what I thought,' I added. 'Pass me over the keys, Mike.'

'Keys!?'

'The keys I passed you back, in the car,' I said.

Mike frowned, 'I haven't got any keys.'

'I tossed them onto the seat beside you, Mike,' I grumbled. 'Don't you ever keep your eyes open?'

'They *were* open, but they were looking out of the window at the mountains.'

'Both of them?' asked Alun.

'No. Only the glass one, you idiot,' sighed Mike.

'Well, go and get them then. They're on the back seat,' I said.

'No, they're not,' replied Mike. 'They're still solidly attached to the front of my head,'

'I meant the keys. Not your eyes.'

'You go. You threw them there,' retorted Mike.

'I'll go,' said Alun. 'Or we'll never get those beers.'

He strode down the garden to the parked car. Opening the door, he rummaged about for a while, 'On the back seat, you said?' he called.

'They may have fallen on the floor or under the front seats,' I replied.

'I can't find anything, 'except for some sweet papers.'

I walked down myself, and we spent several more minutes searching in vain.

Mike looked through the open window at me, 'They must have fallen into one of the bins,' he said.

An odd feeling of hopelessness swept over me, 'Oh no!'

Alun smote his forehead, and Mike pulled a face.

'We'd better go back then,' said Mike.

'And see,' added Alun.

'Before someone else chucks disgusting gooey, smelly stuff on top,' said Mike.

We nodded and jumped quickly back into the car and sped off back to the recycling platform.

'Which bin did the bags on the seat go into?' I asked.

'That grey one,' replied Mike.

We levered open the container and gazed into its dark, smelly innards.

'Can you see anything, Alun? You're tallest,' I asked.

Alun leaned as far as possible. 'Lend me your phone,' he said, and I handed it over. He turned on the flashlight function and leaned in. The white light lit up the inside. However, a few seconds later, it went out. 'Damn it!' he cried, 'It's still discharged.'

'Did you see anything?' I asked.

'There don't seem to be any new bags. There are only a few on the bottom anyway.'

'So?' said Mike.

'So, we hook them out and go through them,' I said.

'Hand me your bin-hook then,' smiled Alun.

I groaned, 'I suppose I'll have to go back home and get something.'

'Not more wasted time,' sighed Alun. 'Get a branch or something.'

'So that we can waste even more time,' sighed Mike. 'Just get inside and hand the things out, Alun.'

'Me!' cried Alun. 'Why me?'

'You chucked it in,' lied Mike.

'Who threw the keys in the bag in the first place?'

'Hell, you weaklings!' cried Mike. 'I'll go if you two are afraid of a bit of a smell.'

'It's called a nauseating stench, Mike. Not a smell,' said Alun.

'So, as you are both scared of a bit of a stench... Give me a hand up.'

We helped him up, and he swung himself down into the echoing belly of the contraption.

'I feel like Jonah inside the whale,' he called.

'How on earth do you know that?' said Alun

'Shut up, Alun,' I said. 'Let him get on with it.'

'Yuck!' cried Mike's echoing voice, 'The floor of this thing is covered in gooey muck.'

'That's probably nappy overflow,' called Alun.

'Oh god!'

There followed a series of scuffling noises as Mike sifted through the pile of bags.

'Got em!' he cried and pushed out a pair of dripping black bags.

We stepped back and let them drop limply onto the ground before gingerly opening them.

'You can come out now, Mike,' I called.

He stood up, and his face came into view, 'I'll wait till you've found the keys,' He replied. 'I'm not jumping in and out of this contraption like a jack-in-the-box.'

After a bit of fumbling, I struck gold, 'Found them! Oufff! Come on out, Mike,' I called.

Unfortunately, however, Mike was standing with his head directly under the detector. Unfortunately too, as with more and more modern hi-tech technology, this detector did its job correctly.

The software detected Mike's head blocking the detector head and decided that it was full of rubbish; the bin, that is, not Mike's head.

Mind you, the contents of Mike's head have sometimes seemed to us to be less than perfect. So, the software might be even better than we imagined.

Anyway, there was a metallic grinding noise, and suddenly, the spring mechanism unlatched itself, and the hatch shot closed.

At the very last instant, Mike snatched back his hands, which were resting on the lip of the container.

This was followed by a loud metallic click as the bolts slid into place.

'Hey! Hell!' came a muffled echoing shout from inside. 'Get this damn thing open. Quick.'

We rattled the handle with all our force, but it was firmly locked and would require more than a couple of men to yank it open.

'What do we do?' said Alun.

'I'll have to call up the town hall. Then, they'll be able to unlock it via the software app,' I said.

'What are you waiting for then?' shouted Mike.

'Now you're even more like Jonah in the Whale than before,' chuckled Alun.

'Shut up, Alun,' grumbled Mike. 'It's pitch black in here.'

'Oops!' I said.

'What now?' called Mike.

'I forgot my phone was discharged.'

'Oh hell,' he groaned.

'Wait a moment,' I said, 'Someone's coming in a car.'

'And?' called Mike.

'I ask him to give me a lift down to the town hall and get them to unlock you.'

'Why don't you take your own car?' called Mike.

'Ah yes!' I said, 'I could do that too.'

'Well, hurry up. I don't want to spend all Christmas in here.'

'Well, at least you won't die of hunger. There must be plenty to eat in there,' called Alun as I drove off.

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike, kicking the metal container walls.

Ten minutes later, I was back.

'I'm back, Mike,' I called through the hatch slit.

'Well?'

'Well, at the town hall, they were very helpful.'

There was an echoey cough from inside, 'Is that so? That's nice. But I might point out that I still happen to be inside and not, as I had hoped, outside.'

'Well, you see, Mike...' I paused. Well, you see, the bin can only be unlocked with the special electronic system that's installed on the dustbin lorry.'

"SO!?"

I coughed again, 'Well, the lorry drivers are all on holiday...'

'What!' there followed a series of crashes and bangs as Mike clearly let off a bit of steam against the innards of the bin. The noise was cataclysmic and probably startled the prime minister in his holiday home on the Mediterranean coast.

Mike then complimented this noise with a series of oaths that would have stripped the skin off a walnut at fifty paces. Luckily, the cows in the field across the way did not understand English. Otherwise, they



would have blushed to the roots of their tails, and their milk would have turned red.

'Don't worry, Mike,' I called. 'They're sending up a man.'

'A priest?' shouted Mike.

I paused, glanced at Alun and pulled a worried face. 'He should be here in next to no time.'

'Before Christmas or after?' grumbled Mike, kicking the walls again.

'Apparently,' chuckled Alun, 'This person happens to be one of the Three Wise Men.'

'Because they're not on strike this year?' grumbled Mike. 'Can't be French then.'

'He should be here in twenty minutes, Mike,' I called.

'If my memory is correct,' groaned Mike. 'Those wise men always came "From Afar". Jerusalem is more than twenty minutes off, even by jet.'

'He'll no doubt be taking Divine Transportation, Mike.' I chuckled.

'Twenty minutes will still be ten minutes after my death, though.'

'Oh, come on, Mike. They have to check the cloud pressure before taking to the skies. One wouldn't want a heavenly accident to occur, would one?'

'Wouldn't one?' said Mike, 'I hope he brings a toolbox rather than a casket of Myrrh. But, if he does, send him back.'

Alun Smiled to himself, 'His name is Frank, and if we sent him away...'

'I know, I know,' groaned Mike. 'Frank would be Incensed. Very amusing.'

'Oh, come on, Mike,' called Alun. 'If you stopped shouting a bit, you wouldn't have to breathe so much. The less toxic gas you absorb, the better.'

'Toxic gas!?' cried Mike. 'Oh, God!'

'He was only joking, Mike,' I called.

'I can't even sit down to wait. The place is running with slimy muck.'

'Nappy overflow, Mike. I already told you,' called Alun.

'Thanks. I'd forgotten.'

'There's one major consolation, Mike,' I said.

'Really!?'

'Yes. The metallic structure keeps the rats out, so they won't be nibbling your heels.'

'I noticed that,' he called. 'It just happens that at this very moment, there are two huge ones just outside this container. Two dirty, two-faced rats, in fact.'

We quickly guided the discussion to lighter matters to help pass the time, such as beer and sex and politics. This succeeded in keeping his mind off his predicament until an odd-faced short, and chubby little man arrived in a van.

He was, in fact, so chubby that he had to turn sideways to lever his stomach out from behind the steering wheel.

We explained the situation, and the man shrugged. He was obviously one of those professionals who have seen a thing or two in their time.

'Stuck then?' he said.

We heard a deep echoey sigh from inside. 'It appears so.'

'Don't worry. We'll have you out in a jiffy.'

'But we haven't got a Jiffy,' said Alun. 'Have you got one, Mike?'

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike, kicking the innards.

The man moved closer to the bin to talk through the slit. However, he quickly moved back again, holding his nose, 'Pieuw..'

'Sorry?' said Mike.

'Nothing. Well, you see that big spring on the left?'

'No.'

'On the left at the front,' he clarified.

'No?'

'But surely you can see the locking mechanism with that long spiral spring?'

'I might be able to if it were not pitch black in here.'

'Ah! Yes, of course.'

'Well, we're making progress at last,' called Mike.

The man smiled, 'have you got a phone?'

'Of course, I've got a phone. Who hasn't these days?'

'Good. Well, turn on the flashlight app.'

'I can't. I can't reach it.'

'Oh! Where is it?'

'In my jacket pocket.'

'Can't you get your hand into it then?'

'No.'

'Why's that? Is it caught up in the mechanism?'

'No.'

'What's happened to it then.'

'Nothing. I just can't reach it at the moment.'

'Why not?'

'Because my jacket's in the back of the car, you idiots...'

'Ah!' said the man.

'I'll get it,' said Alun and strode over and returned with it.

The man approached again, holding his nose. 'I'll slip it through the aeration slot at the back,'

'OK,' said Mike.

'The slot is about halfway up the back panel. I'll pop it through the right hand one. Hold your hand directly under it so that it doesn't drop into the...' He hesitated, 'Onto the bottom.'

'OK,' called Mike. 'I've found the slot.'

'Right. Here goes.'

The man disappeared behind the container. Then, there was a metallic scraping sound followed by a clattering noise. This was followed by a splash.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike. 'You brainless...' He then remembered it was not to us that he was talking. 'You said the right-hand slot.'

'That's right. That's what I did.'

I sighed, 'Right hand from outside is Left hand from inside.'

Alun nodded, 'A bit of a communications mix-up there. Unfortunately, that often happens in moments of crisis.'

'You should have said, "The right side looking from outside". Then Mike would have understood,' I added.

'Are you sure?' said Alun. 'As this gentleman was talking to him from the front, he...'

'Can't you shut up, Alun?' shouted Mike, 'Just for once?'

'I'll try,' replied Alun. 'I just wanted to get things straight.'

'Well, don't. Just leave things bent for the moment,'  
Came the echoey reply.

'As you please,' said Alun.

'Can you find your phone, Mike?' I called as we pulled faces at each other, imagining the muck that the phone must now be washing about in.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike, 'I'm going to have to fish about in all this Yuck.'

'That's what it sounds like. Stiff upper lip Mike,' I called.

'Oh god! It's slimy and cold and stenchy and...'

'We get the overall idea, Mike. Have you found it?'

'Got it. Oh god, what a mess. I'll have to turn it on, but the thing is as slippery as an eel.'

There was a silence followed by a splash, 'Damn it, the thing slid out of my hand.'

The followed a bit more splashing about, and then he called, 'Got it again. Right. It's turning on. Great.'

I frowned a bit and pulled a face, 'Are you going to be able to see the keyboard to type in the password?'

'Yep. No trouble.' There was another splash. 'Oh hell! The thing is like a cake of soap! I dropped it again.'

'Dry soap doesn't slip,' commented Alun. 'I suppose you mean a cake of wet soap.'

'For heaven's sake, shut up, Alun. I'm dying in here.'

There was a pause as he hunted through the muck. 'Oh hell!' he cried. 'That's torn it.'

'What's the problem,'

'The battery pack has fallen out.'

'Well, put it back in then,' I called.

'Brilliant idea. But it just happens that the phone innards are now full of, God knows what.'

'Won't it fit back?' I called.

'Possibly. But the battery itself is doing a bit of fizzing at the moment.'

'Fizzing!?'

'Yep. This muck in here has shorted it out.'

The repairman shouted, 'Quick, push it back up the ventilation slot. If it ever sparks, that might trigger an explosion in there.'

'What!?' cried Mike, and there followed a rattle of intense activity, then a noise of something falling behind the container.

The man went around and kicked the battery across the road, where it continued to fizz happily.

We looked down, and the brown-beslimed object

'Yuck!' said Alun.

'Agreed,' I added.

The repairman grumbled, 'Well, we will have to do it by touch then.'

'Great,' called Mike.

The man frowned, 'Have you got a pen-knife.'

Mike sighed noisily, 'I was a scout. So, I always have a pen-knife.'

'Well, take it out...'

'I can't.'

'Yes?' said Alun doubtfully.

'It's in my jacket pocket too.'

'OK, Mike. Hang on, and I'll go and get it.'

'No,' called Mike. 'Drop it.'

'The knife?'

'No, you idiot. The idea.'

'Why?'

'Because it's in the other jacket pocket.'

Alun frowned, 'Well, I think even I can manage to turn the jacket over to reach the other side.'

'Or just lift it up and let it swing around,' I suggested.

'Oh god! You twits. Not the other pocket, the other jacket. The one in my bedroom.'

'Oh! Got you.' Laughed Alun, 'There's another bit of communications mess up for you.'

'They happen so easily,' I added

'Shut up,' groaned Mike.

The man frowned again. 'Well, have you got something like a stick. Something long and quite rigid?'

There was a silence as we exchanged looks.

Mike, too, was silent.

'I'll slip a copy of Playboy in if you think that might help Mike.'

'Slip your phone in too, for the light...' added Alun.

'Shut up, you two.'

The man did his frowning act once more.

'Well, feel about and see if you can find a bit of wood or something longish and rigid.'

'Feel about in all this disgusting squishy smelly rubbish?'

'Spot on, Mike,' smiled Alun. 'You hit the nail right on the head. Well done.'

'I'll hit you lot directly on the head. As soon as I'm out of this stinking coffin.'

There followed a noise of scuffling and banging.

'Oh god! This is disgusting. Yuck, yuck. Oh god, what on earth is that!?'

There followed the unmistakable sounds of someone having trouble keeping his lunch down.

'Found something interesting, Mike?' I asked.

'Nappies. That's what I've just found.'

'Ah!' we pulled faces, 'Not pleasant.'

'Oh god!' cried Mike, 'I've got stuff all over my hands.'

We pulled more faces.

'Wipe them on something, Mike.' I called through the metal.'

'Come here,' he called back. 'Ah! Now, what's this?'

There was a bit more scraping than he called.

'Great. I've got something that feels like a plastic pipe. About as thick as my thumb and pretty stiff.'

'Whatever you do, Mike,' called Alun. 'Don't smell it. Just in case.'

Just in case of what?'

'Just in case. That's all.'

The tubby man grumbled, 'Who put plastic in there? That's against the law. Plastic goes in the yellow container. Not this grey one.'

There was a violent banging from the inside,' I don't care about the law. I want to get out of the stinking death trap.'

The man pulled a face then started. 'Oh! I hadn't thought of that.'

'Hadn't thought of what?' groaned Mike. 'Now what?'

'You said a death trap.'

'Exactly.'



'Well, I hadn't thought about the deadly gasses emanating from the decomposing rubbish.'

'What!' cried Mike.

'Do you feel at all drowsy?' called the man.

'Not yet.'

'Have you got a piercing headache or a throbbing sensation or something like that?'

'No. But you lot will if you don't get me out of here fast.'

'No need to get angry like that.'

'Have you ever been locked up in a bin full of decomposing nappies?' asked Mike.

'Well, no.'

'So, you have no idea if I need to get angry or not then?'

'No. I see what you mean.'

'SO? What next?'

'Right,' nodded the tubby man. 'Now very, very carefully, run your hand up the side of the container until you feel a spring thing.'

'A spring thing?'

'Yes. You know, a cylindrical spiral of metal.'

Alun and I exchanged looks and pulled faces.

The sound of a long deep sigh came through the metallic walls, 'Oh! So that's what a spring is like, is it? Well, well, well!'

Then there was an odd noise.

'Oh hell! What have I put my hand in now?'

'Don't smell it, Mike,' I cried. 'Tell yourself that it's just plain yoghurt, and you'll be OK.'

'OK. Found the spring. Wow, now that's what I call a spring. A big boy. Now what?'

'Now, very carefully, feel up along it to the top. But whatever you do, don't push anything.'

'Why?'

Because if you trip the mechanism with your finger, it'll rip your hand off.'

'Brilliant!' said Mike.

'Do it with your left hand, Mike', called Alun. 'One never knows.'

'Shut up.'

'Found it?' called the man.

'Yep. A long flat bit, with something disgusting hanging off.'

'That's it. Now place the end of the pipe you found delicately on the bottom edge.'

'Without pushing it?' I asked.

'Exactly.'

'Got that, Mike.'

'Shut up.'

'Tell me when you're ready,' said the man.

'OK, Done.'

'Now move back as far as possible.'

'OK, done,' said Mike.

'Right. Now push the pipe hard.'

There was a banging noise and a cry, but nothing happened.

'MIKE!' I called. 'Are you OK?'

'The damn tube thing slipped, and I fell headfirst into something revolting and squishy.'

'Does that something smell of oranges?' asked Alun.

'No, it does not.'

'Try again,' said the man.

'You mean falling over?' called Mike.

'No pushing the trip,' said the man missing the ironic humour altogether.

There was a rattling and scuffling, then Mike called, 'Here we go, One, two, three.'

There was a loud metallic clack, and the hatch sprung open. Mike's head sprang, gasping out into the fresh air.

We, on the other hand, spang back, gasping too.

'Oh god!' cried Alun as Mike levered himself over the lip of the container.

He slithered to the ground and stood there dripping, bedecked in the most revolting array of refuse that one could imagine.

We all stepped back several paces as the wind swept the smell in our direction.

The tubby repairman, on the other hand, stepped over to the container and gazed in. 'Hey, this is almost empty. I wonder why it locked itself.'

He then turned and spotted Mike advancing on him menacingly, 'It won't be empty for very much longer,' came the reply.

The man sidestepped and made a dash for his car. 'If that's all the thanks I get for...'

'He's only joking,' I laughed.

The man did not seem all that reassured and jumped quickly into his van, tucking his stomach behind the driving wheel.

'Well,' he called, 'Don't do it again.'

We stared after him aghast as he drove off.

'Odd man that,' said Alun.

Mike was stripping off his stinking, sodden jumper.

'Directly in there, Mike.' I said, opening the grey bin.

I'll get you the blankets from the car boot. You'd better strip completely and chuck the whole lot away.'

'The smell would probably come out in the wash,' grumbled Mike.

'Maybe,' I said. 'But nobody's going to want to touch that mess.'

Mike pulled a face; 'But these are my favourite trousers,' he groaned.

'Were,' I smiled.

'We could just shove them in the washing machine,' he moaned.

'Not in ours,' I said. 'I'd have to bin it directly after.'

'We'll buy you some new favourite trousers tomorrow, Mike,' smiled Alun.

'Tomorrow's Christmas day,' moaned Mike.

'Well, who knows what father Christmas will be bringing for you in his big trunk?' I said.

'Well, well!' cried Alun, 'I never knew Father Christmas was an elephant.'

'Shut up, Alun,' groaned Mike.

'I'll lend you some nice warm trousers, Mike,' I said.

Mike sighed and continued to strip until he was stark naked, then threw the sodden mass into the bin.

'Are you sure that's the right container for clothes?' shouted Alun from the car.

Mike grunted some nautical insult with a distinct tang of sea salt in it.

'I wish my phone wasn't discharged,' I said. 'This would have made a fantastic souvenir photo.'

Mike was now standing stark naked, gazing into the container at his trousers. They were now quickly soaking up the juice from the bottom.

He emitted a long, sad sigh and turned.

At that exact moment, a police van came around the corner.

The driver hit the brakes in astonishment, and the van screeched to a halt.

The two policemen in it sat transfixed, staring at the vision through the windscreen.

Then suddenly, they came to life and leapt out.

'Hey! What's all this?' cried the policeman who was clearly the one authorised to emit such statements first.

Mike spun around to look at them.

'He's stark naked,' said the second policeman.

Alun nodded, 'We noticed that too. He's probably a communist.'

'What!' cried the first policeman.

'Or possibly an alchemist,' added Alun.

'An Alchemist!?' one of them cried.

'Or possibly both,' nodded Alun.

'Don't you mean an anarchist?' frowned the second policeman.

'No.' Alun shook his head.

Mike groaned, 'Oh God!' He smote his forehead in despair and covered his eyes. But the trouble with doing this when one is stark naked is that one tends to uncover whatever one has been covering.

'Mike!' I called, 'haven't you forgotten something?'

'I should say that that is something quite easily forgotten,' chuckled Alun.

'Or perhaps "Best" forgotten,' I added.

Mike's hands flashed back down, 'You idiots,' he exclaimed.

'But, what on earth is he doing? This is prohibited and totally against the law,' said the policeman in charge.

'Both!?' cried Alun, 'Good heavens!'

'But what's he up to?'

'He was just undressing,' said Alun. 'I suspect him of having been readying himself to take a bath.'

'In the bin?' gasped the first policeman.

'I've heard that alchemists sometimes do,' Alun continued.

'What on earth would an anarchist want to do that for?' gasped the boss.

'Alchemist,' corrected Alun.

'Does that have any bearing on the matter?'

'It doesn't do to get the two mixed up. That might lead to confusion.'

'But why would one of these guys want to bath in a recycling bin?' said the chief.

'It seems utterly crazy,' said the other policeman. 'And in this freezing weather.'

'It's all to do with transmutation,' smiled Alun, nodding.

'With what!' cried the chief.

'I believe it also has something to do with the belief in what's called the "Universal Elixir",' smiled Alun.

'Oh God!' moaned Mike.

'You see,' continued Alun, 'Alchemists believe that if found, such an elixir can convert one's bones into solid gold.'

'What!' gasped the two policemen in chorus.

'That's transmutation, their guiding theory. That's the sort of things Alchemists get up to on a day-to-

day basis,' he nodded. 'I know it sounds odd, but there it is.'

The Policemen exchanged looks, 'But what has that got to do with bathing in dustbins?' one said.

'Well, I'm not entirely sure. However, he mumbled something about the gooey muck floating at the bottom. He thought it might possibly be that elusive elixir. Accidentality formed by pure luck.'

'Is the guy right in the head?' asked the man of law.

'Usually,' nodded Alun.

The two men pulled incredulous faces.

Alun went on, 'So, it's more likely to be Alchemism rather than Communism that drove him to such extremes.'

The two men stood gaping at Mike, who by now had modestly covered his vitals once more. These were not much to write home about at the best of times and even less so, muddled and frozen by the icy December wind.'

'Come on, old chap?' said Alun carrying over the pair of blankets. 'Time to go sleepy-by now,' he turned and winked at the men. 'Wrap these around you, and we'll get you home. You can have a dip in the birdbath if you like.'

I was biting my lip to stop myself from bursting into laughter.

Mike tied one blanket around his waist and the other over his shoulders.

He then made a move towards the car.

'Where are you off to, Mike?' I cried.

'To the car.'

'No way! You're not getting in my new car, smelling like that. You walk home.'

What! Dressed like this.'

'Is he safe?' asked the policeman.

'Yes. Perfectly safe. He just had a bit too much to drink at lunchtime,' smiled Alun. 'He'll be all right now.'

'That's it,' I said. 'Alun will walk with you.'

'Does he often do this sort of thing?' asked the second policeman.

Alun sighed. 'He got at the Christmas sherry while we were changing the tyres.'

The two men nodded understanding, 'better get him home quick then.'

'I'll walk with him,' smiled Alun, 'The cold air should do the job, I think.'

The policemen nodded.

Alun continued, 'He smells a bit, so I'll stay on the opposite side of the road.'

'Why does he smell so bad?' asked the boss.

'He was rolling in cowpats in the barn up there.'

'What!'

'He did have rather a lot to drink,' nodded Alun.

'You're telling me! Great heavens!' said the second policeman, 'Get him home quick then, please. Otherwise, we'll have to take him in.'

We nodded, and, shaking their heads sadly, they clambered back into their van and drove off.

'Thanks a lot, you loony idiots,' cried Mike. 'Friends in need ...'

'Don't worry, Mike,' I smiled, 'Swathed in those blankets, and as it's Christmas Eve, people will take you for one of the three wise men.'



'Shut up, you twit,' he grumbled and set off up the road, his shoes squelching nicely, 'Get the beer out while you're about it.'

As usual, Alun was by then doubled over with laughter. As usual, too, he could hardly stand, let alone walk.

'Come on, Mike,' I called as I got into the car. 'Stiff upper lip.'

## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2

## Chapter 12 - Christmas Eve

Christmas is not Christmas without a Christmas tree,' grumbled Mike.

He was now washed and scrubbed and smelt far more like a designer-perfume shop than a dustbin. This, we felt, was a distinct improvement. Unfortunately, though, the two car blankets had absorbed a significant part of the original odour. For obvious reasons, the longer we could put off the discovery of that little adventure, the better. So, to ensure this, we had felt it best to hide them in the garage and wash them when nobody was about.

Alun and I nodded back at Mike. We had proposed collecting the Christmas tree early in the week but had been given instructions to the contrary.

This was because tree decoration was the sole reserve of the daughter/son-in-law delegation. Furthermore, this was to be undertaken when and only when all other pre-festive tasks were completed.

'You can have fun searching and felling one in the forest on Christmas eve,' said my wife. 'Just before we decorate it.'

'You mean, "at the very last minute",' I grumbled.

'At the *optimal* moment,' scowled Margaux.

My wife nodded, 'Exactly. That way, it won't have time to dry out and cover the carpet with pine needles.'

'They always do that anyway,' I grumbled.

'In any case, you three don't have anything else to do,' added Margaux.

We looked at each other and raised our eyebrows. We considered that we had already done far more than enough for one day.

'It means,' smiled Margaux, 'that being the optimal moment, while they are doing the decoration, you three will be able to prepare the Christmas eve aperitif.'

Now, admittedly, looked at from this angle, things were considerably less bleak. But all the same, we did have something else to do; Two things, in fact, both of which were extremely interesting.

To clarify this declaration, the uninformed reader will require some additional information.

Now, our large garden, although not huge, is blessed with many trees. Far too many, in my opinion, or overflowing, as Alun put it. Either way, it is not blessed with a forest-full of pine trees. So, regardless of the day's earlier adventures, Mike, Alun and I were to be sent out into the biting winter's afternoon wind.

The atmospheric conditions into which we were cast would have kept even Good King Wenceslas at home. Summoning his brave page, he would have called for his slippers, cut-glass port decanter and book. Then, with a sigh of contentment, he would stretch out his sturdy legs towards the crackling fire and close his eyes.

Such was not to be our fate.

Within the hour, we must find and fell a suitable Christmas tree in the forest owned by our neighbour.

We must then drag it home through knee-deep snow, across the blizzard-swept hillside, for we had been instructed to go on foot.

'It'll do you good to get a bit of exercise before stuffing yourselves this evening,' smiled Margaux, with a twitch of the lip.

'We got plenty of exercising this morning during our ski lesson,' I grumbled.

'I meant "real" exercise,' she sniffed. 'Not playing.'

I opened my mouth to reply, but Alun squeezed my arm, and I held my tongue.

This lumberjacking project would have appealed to us if there had been six feet less snow, a hundred miles an hour less wind, and twenty degrees more temperature.

Furthermore, it meant that we would not get within sniffing distance of that port decanter, cut-glass or otherwise, until the task was completed.

However, we were not given a choice.

'I just hope they don't find the tree "unsuitable" and send us back when we've finished,' shrugged Mike.

Now, although our neighbour drives a car predating the birth of my children, and dresses as though she was down to her last penny, she is pretty well off.

In fact, she owns a good proportion of the surrounding land and often complains about having far too much. However, as one can do nothing with such agricultural land, she allows nature to look after it for her. In other words, it is grossly overgrown and virtually impenetrable, except for wild boar, rabbits and foxes. Mike pointed out that snails and slugs could also penetrate it, but we told him to stow it.

Mind you, from time to time, by some incredible stroke of luck or act of God, prime portions of this land mysteriously and, of course, totally unexpectedly become classified as constructible. They were then snapped up before they were officially on the market, which seems to be one of the perks of town councillors in these parts.

An Alpine landowner's harrowing day-to-day life thus becomes transiently bearable. But wild boar, rabbits, and foxes have to look elsewhere to escape the hunter.

Slugs and snails didn't seem much concerned, apparently, but then again, the slug-hunting season is very short in the Alpes.

So, carrying a bow saw and a coil of rope, we headed off to one of the more impenetrable of her impenetrable forests. We had donned our snowshoes, for the snow was deep and the track uphill. But I would like to make it quite clear that we did not stride valiantly forwards with a song on our lips. On the contrary, we plodded, scowled and grumbled, and frequently stumbled and cursed.

Eventually, we halted just outside the impenetrable wall of unmanaged timber. The ramparts of pine trees were twenty metres high or more, and the spaces between them filled with intertwined blackberry bushes.

We peered into the dark depths of the forest and pulled faces.

Mike took a few steps back. 'We could have one of these,' he said, pointing up.

We started, 'Are you mad!?'

'Well, you just have to climb up and lop off the last few metres, and Bobs-your-uncle,' he nodded.

'I've already told you, Mike? That Bob is not my uncle,' I said.

'Alun can do it. He knows how to climb trees. You told me he did it this morning.'

'That was different,' said Alun.

'Why was it different?'

'Because it was an urgency.'

'This is an urgency,' replied Mike.

'Not like you smashing yourself to bits on the black downhill track, Mike,' I added.

'But you've climbed the Himalayas too, Alun.'

'That was long ago.'

'And you climbed right up that chimney in the Maastricht mines.'

'That's true,' I smiled.

'We all did,' countered Alun.

'That's true too, but only because you led us.'

'Like a true and courageous alpinist,' added Mike.

'Shut up, Mike. I am not lopping the top of a thirty-metre-high pine tree with a bow saw in the middle of a blizzard.'

'I'm disappointed. You seem to be fast losing the old flame of adventure, Alun,' sighed Mike. 'I suppose it's inevitable, seeing your age. But it's sad all the same.'

'Shut up, Mike.' scowled Alun, peering up and frowning. 'Mind you, it might just be possible...'

'Come on,' I called. 'There are probably some young ones deeper inside,' and I hacked a passage through the blackberry bushes.

Once under the protective canopy of the tightly planted pines, the ground was only lightly powdered with snow. We were also protected from the icy blast of the wind, and it was almost snug in that shadowy cathedral-like space.

We came on a small clearing about a hundred yards further into the forest. This haven would undoubtedly be carpeted with colourful flowers and lush grass in summer. Dozens of hopping rabbits and birds would also no doubt animate its surface.

At the moment, however, apart from the blurred criss-cross tracks of a fox, there were no signs of life.

All the same, our spirits rose because at its centre stood three shapely young pine trees of just the right height.

'Bingo!' cried Mike. 'I told you we'd find one.'

Alun gasped, 'you said nothing of the sort, you liar. You goaded me on to risk my life in some hair-brained aerial lumber-jacking antics.'

'Well, I was definitely thinking it,' retorted Mike

'I don't believe a word of it,' said Alun.

'Never mind,' I laughed. 'Which one shall we have?'

Mike frowned, 'Go and stand by them, Alun,' he said. 'We need one about three feet higher than you.'

'Or six feet higher than you, Mike,' smiled Alun, trudging off.

We made our choice, and I took the bowsaw, tightened the blade, and lay flat on the ground to get at the trunk.

'Hullo!' I cried.

'What?' asked Mike.

'There have been some wild boar in here.'



'And how on Earth do you know that, clever?' Mike shook his head doubtfully.

'Because I happen to be in intimate proximity with a pile of positive proof. Here.'

With this, I scooped up this proof, and shot it back at Mike.

'Oh hell!' he cried as it bounced off his anorak.

'Don't worry, Mike. It's all one hundred per cent biodegradable.'

I then got to work and sawed through the little trunk, just above ground level.

In a highly satisfactory way, the tree toppled over straight on top of Mike. At the time, he was leaning forwards, wiping the fragments of wild-boar proof from his trouser leg.

'Hell!' He cried. 'You did that deliberately.'

'Come on, Mike,' I laughed. 'I'm not a pro lumberjack. The thing falls the way it wishes, not as I want.'

Alun smiled, 'The little thing has clearly got the right spirit, though.'

'The makings of greatness,' I added.

Alun nodded, 'I think I'll plant one of its cones in my garden when I get home.'

'Mighty pines from tiny pinecones grow...' I nodded.

'Shut up,' cried Mike, brushing the pine needles out of his hair.

'Come on,' I called. 'Let's get the little chap home and out of the cold.'

Mike got hold of the trunk and set off across the clearing. 'At least it's all downhill now,' he grumbled.

Alun frowned, 'We could try sledging on it. What do you think?'

'Hum!' I rubbed my cold nose. 'Might be worth a try.'

Alun strode on ahead.

Once out of the forest, he turned and waited, a dozen paces from the trees.

I came up behind Mike, and as he turned to navigate the passage through the blackberries, Alun signalled me to stop.

He had made a big snowball and was waiting for the best moment.

So, just as Mike passed under the overhanging branches of the big pine, Alun hurled his snowball skywards.

It hit the snow-laden upper branches.

Mike stopped and looked up.

However, at this moment, the top branch unloaded its snow onto the one below. This one, in turn, unloaded itself onto the one underneath and so on.

An avalanche of snow came cascading down.

Mike made to run, but the snow was faster off the mark. There was a brief struggle then he disappeared under a three-foot pile of sparkling frost laden snow.

'What the hell!' spluttered Mike burrowing out again into the open.

We burst out laughing as he scooped the snow out of his anorak hood.

'You blasted idiot!'

'That's just that big pine tree getting its own back for you proposing to lop its head off,' laughed Alun.

'I'll lop your head off if you don't watch out,' cried Mike, shaking himself.

'Shall we try sledging the tree then?' asked Alun.

I frowned and shook my head. 'Don't you think we've had perhaps enough adventure for one day?'

Alun shrugged, 'Might be fun though.'

'Maybe, but I suspect the Girls would prefer their Christmas tree, un-sledged,' I smiled.

Alun shrugged again, 'They probably wouldn't notice.'

I looked at him and frowned, 'They wouldn't notice that it looked like a scared cat, with all its fur standing on end?'

'They wouldn't notice,' grumbled Mike. 'Because we would have to traipse all the way back up there again to get a new one.'

Alun pulled a face, 'Pity though.'

Mike sighed and handed him the bow saw, 'Here. Go and cut yourself another one, and we'll watch the tree-sledging event from the bottom of the slope.'

I nodded, 'My phone's fully charged now, so I'll be able to call the ambulance. In fact, I'll do so as soon as you start. That'll save time.'

'Where's your spirit of adventure gone, you two?' he sighed.

'You're forgetting that we've got an interesting project waiting for us at home, Alun,' I said.

Alun brightened, 'Ah yes! I forgot that.'

So, with this last exchange, we strode triumphantly back down the slope dragging our plunder.

This time, we went with a spring in our tread and a song on our lips.

The cut-glass port decanter was awaiting us, and nothing more could go wrong today. Of that, at least, we were certain...

A few moments later, the tree was standing proudly in the sitting room, surrounded by boxes of decorations.

These boxes were, in turn, surrounded by a bevvy of daughters and sons-in-law.

Our part of the contract was now completed. We were thence relieved of all responsibility and thrown aside like cast-off clothes.

This didn't upset us as much as it might have. We had an interesting task to accomplish before setting up the aperitif.

Alun had pointed out earlier that, as ancient the Spanish saying goes, "Why do today, that which can be put off until tomorrow".

'But I have something interesting enough for us to waiver that law, for once.'

'Ah?' smiled Alun.

I wiggled my eyebrows at the two, and they nodded complete but silent understanding.

As I mentioned earlier, our garden is blessed with too many trees; mainly fruit trees. There were three pear trees, three cherry trees, three apple trees and two plum trees. The soil is excellent, and even the coldest winters cannot dampen their enthusiasm to grow. As a result, tree pruning consumes a lot of time, as does carting the branches off to the tip. Furthermore, each variety unhelpfully catches different illnesses, and this keeps me occupied when there's no pruning to do.

If this were not enough, the cursed things make a habit of producing unreasonably heavy crops.

As everyone knows, one can consume only so much fruit per day. This inevitably leaves masses of fruit to try to offload onto neighbours and friends. But, at these times of the year, friends and neighbours are usually equally intent on palming off their own produce on us.

So, our fruit trees do an excellent job warding off boredom one way or another. Furthermore, my wife insists that they also keep me out of the pubs.

The fact there are no pubs here in France doesn't seem to occur to her.

Now, of particular interest here, are our pear trees. These often supply us with upwards of one hundred and fifty kilograms of William Pears.

As everyone knows, such pears all ripen simultaneously. Then they immediately rot together into a brown, mushy mess.

That being said, they have one unexpected advantage, if one happens to live in a rural Alpine area such as we do.

In eighteen hundred and something, the French government gave the rustic inhabitants of the mountains an exceptional privilege.

Every year, a mobile distillery leaves its home in the Savoie region of France. It then travels from mountain village to mountain village, stopping for up to a week on the main squares.

Here, inhabitants are authorised to bring down their barrels of fermented fruit. The distillery, called an "Alambic" in French, then transforms this into a highly potent alcoholic brew.

One pays a fixed state tax per litre, and the distillery owner so much per litre for his work.

One then carries home several jerry-cans full of highly inflammable beverages.

Oddly enough, the volumes of final product employed for calculating the state taxes rarely, if ever, coincide with the volumes used to estimate the distillery owner's fees.

This is one of those odd French mysteries that has never been fully elucidated.

Every year thus, the leftover pears were used up in this way. Out of one hundred and fifty kilos, leftovers usually amounted to about one hundred and thirty. Enough to do something interesting with, you'll admit.

So, I had been trying out this scheme for several years, albeit with somewhat limited success.

I was by this time the proud owner of about forty-five litres of undrinkable William Pear Brandy.

'Let's have a taste,' had said Alun a few days earlier. 'I bet it's all right, really.'

I pulled a face, 'Are you absolutely sure you want to try it, Alun?'

'Come on,' added Mike, 'You always were a bit of a perfectionist.'

'Don't say I didn't warn you then,' I frowned. 'It's a little on the strong side too.'

Alun and Mike shook their heads, 'Come on, come on, we're not fairies, you know.'

'It's your funeral, after all,' I sighed.

I uncorked one of the bottles and poured them a small amount.

They took up the glasses and sniffed.

'Smells like a real man's drink,' nodded Alun appreciatively.

'I believe that in the east, they preserve human organs in it,' I said.

Then the two men took a good mouthful each.

'Great heaven!' gasped Mike.

'Hells bells!' croaked Alun clutching his throat.

'I warned you,' I shrugged.

'How strong is this hellish brew?' spluttered Mike.

'Somewhere between fifty-six and sixty-five per cent alcohol content,' I replied. 'Roughly, of course.'

The two were blowing out their cheeks and shaking their hand in the good old French way of expressing discomfort and surprise.

'But that's not authorised,' coughed Alun, his eyes watering profusely. 'I thought that forty per cent was the maximum.'

'The man who does the distilling often mislays his alcohol meter or breaks it. So, he just uses his finger and tastes it.'

'God, this stuff would ignite at room temperature,' cried Mike.

'And the taste is...' Alun hesitated.

'Disgusting?' I suggested.

'Yes. That's it,' nodded Mike, 'The very word that was on the tip of my tongue.'

Alun shook his head sadly, 'You're lucky, Mike. My tongue doesn't have a tip left. It got burnt straight off.'

'I told you it was potent,' I smiled. 'I warned you.'

'Yes, but really!' sighed Alun.

'Come on. Are you men or not,' I smiled. 'Drink up. Waste not, want not.'

'Are you mad!?' cried Mike.

'I think I'll waste and want, if you don't mind,' groaned Alun.

'You told me it smelt like a man's drink,' I reminded them.

'Smell is not everything,' grumbled Mike.

'Anyway, it's cleaned out your gizzards nicely. There's not a single microbe left alive in there,' I laughed.

'I can believe that,' whistled Alun.

'That's not much of a consolation.' Said Mike 'God, my throat!'

'Good stuff, eh!?' I smiled.

'But how on earth did you get this mixture so wrong?' said Mike sniffing tentatively at his glass once more.

I smiled, 'This bottle is from the third year's trial. You should have tasted the first load. Now that was something extraordinary.'

'Worse than this? Is that possible?' frowned Alun.

I nodded, 'I think I may have a few bottles left in the shed if you'd like to try it.'

'Why in the shed?' asked Mike.

'I use it to clean grease off the bench.'

Mike and Alun pulled faces, 'Thanks, but I'll pass on this one. We'll take your word for it,' said Alun.

'I bet you could run your car off this stuff,' said Mike.

'Environmentally friendly fuel,' laughed Alun.

'But what on earth did you get wrong?' frowned Mike.

I smiled, 'The chap who owns the distillery gives me extra bits of information each year. And each year, I make improvements. So, I hope to get things right in ten years or so.'



'But don't you just shove the fruit into a barrel, add sugar, then leave it alone?' asked Mike.

'That's what I thought,' I replied. 'And in fact, that's exactly what I did for my bench-cleaning batch.'

'So?' said Alun.

'Well, the year after, the old chap told me, I should have added half the sugar the first week and the second half a week later,' I replied.

'And that made things better?' asked Mike.

'No. That didn't improve things much. Then a year later, he mentioned that I should have added the second lot by making a hot sugar syrup. Otherwise, a cold mixture halts the fermentation process.'

'And that improved things?' said Alun.

'Marginally. Then the year after, he told me I should always make sure the barrel was airtight, which of course, it wasn't. So, I had to add a sealed outlet and bubble the gas from the fermentation through a water trap.'

'And?' sighed Mike getting a bit bored.

'That was much better. And that's what you've just tested.' I smiled.

'And you call that "better",' gasped Alun.

'As I said, you can test the earlier stuff if you want,' I suggested.

'No. We'll believe you,' said Mike.

'Then, last year, he informed me that I should have insulated the barrel from the ground. Furthermore, he said that the mixture's temperature should never fall below eighteen degrees centigrade.

'Which, of course, it does up here,' suggested Alun.

'Exactly. So, this year's lot had insulation wrapped around the barrel and sat on a polystyrene block,' I shrugged and gazed skywards.

Mike shook his head sadly, 'these guys really want you to sweat it out before you're allowed the privilege of making a drinkable brew.'

'That's exactly the impression I get,' I smiled. 'And one cannot hurry them. Ancestral skills are clearly not handed on to foreigners easily.'

Alun and Mike nodded.

'And that's the stuff you distilled yesterday?' asked Alun.

'Exactly.'

'Not ready to test yet, though?'

'No. For Easter, I hope.'

The two nodded.

'But,' I added, 'the man told me that I could try boiling off some of the alcohol in last year's lot. He said that might improve the taste.'

Mike snorted, 'He's not taking many risks declaring that. It would be difficult to make it taste worse.'

We laughed.

'Anyway, we can try,' I smiled. 'I've put a camping gas burner outside. Come on, let's have a go.'

'Do you realise how much liquid you have to boil off,' said Mike. 'To get from sixty-five per cent down to forty, you'll have to boil off almost half the liquid.'

'It doesn't matter really,' I said. 'Otherwise, it'll end up down the drain.'

'True enough,' nodded Alun.

I went up into the loft and brought down three plastic jerry cans full of liquid.

'Great Gods!' exclaimed Alun. 'Is that all pear alcohol?'

'Yep. Plus the twenty litres left in the shed.'

Alun and Mike pulled faces, 'Wow!'

I nodded.

I took a deep saucepan and placed it on the little gas burner under the old plum tree. I then poured a litre or so of the mixture into it (the saucepan, not the plum tree) and lit the gas.

We then stood back and chatted as the stuff gradually heated up. A strong smell of alcohol soon filled the air, long before any signs of boiling.

'Good job we're doing this outside,' said Mike.

'You're telling me!' I nodded. 'All those alcohol molecules have to go somewhere.'

'Agreed,' said Alun. 'If those little fellows got into the woodwork, they'd perfume the house for generations to come,' he laughed.

'Exactly. And William Pear alcohol isn't on my wife's preferred perfumes list.' I pulled a face to reinforce this point.

Alun and Mike nodded complete understanding.

'Wives are odd like that,' shrugged Alun.

'Yes,' I said. 'I noticed that too.'

After about ten minutes, I took the saucepan off the gas. I poured some into a container containing my alcohol metre.

We gathered around and looked at the gauge.

'Sixty-two per cent!' cried Mike, 'Is that all we've reduced it?'

We frowned, and I turned the gas a bit higher.

A little later, we tried again.

'Sixty per cent!' exclaimed Mike. 'This is going to take all night.'

'Do you think it's worth tasting?' asked Alun.

I shrugged, 'You can try if you really like, but I'd prefer to get down to fifty-five degrees first.'

'I'll try anyway,' he said.

I shrugged again, 'It's your funeral.'

Alun took a little glass and scooped out a little from the saucepan.

'Let it cool first, Alun,' I said. 'Otherwise it'll go straight to your head.'

He nodded, transferred it to the second cold saucepan to cool, then back to his glass. He sipped it and pulled a horrified face, 'God! I believe it's even worse than to start with.'

'Maybe we're fighting a losing battle,' I said. 'We'll give it another ten minutes, and if it's still no good... to the drain.'

Alun turned and aimed the contents of his small glass back at the saucepan. A few drops missed it and fell into the flames. A huge blue sheet of flame flashed upwards. We fell backwards as the flames shot skywards and enveloped the branches of the plum tree. The gas burner toppled over, spreading the contents of the saucepan over the ground. The sheet of blue flame widened and redoubled its intensity as the lower branches burst into flame.

We scrambled away to a safe distance, where we stood and stared at the ghastly scene.

'Well. That was one hell of a "flambé",' called Alun from across the garden. 'Do you think it tastes any better now?'

Mike shook his head, 'I have the impression that the drain has won this hand. What do you think?'

I gazed at the singed lower branches of the tree and nodded? 'This reminds me of the time we got rid of your scale model of the Eifel Tower, Mike.'

He chuckled at the memory, 'Ah yes. Good fun that. The video is still getting hundreds of views daily.'

Alun sighed, 'It's a Good job the Girls were occupied elsewhere.'

We quickly glanced at the house front and were reassured that no unusual activity was noticeable.

'Christmas Tree decoration has saved us,' I sighed.

'Can you get close enough to turn off the burner, Mike?' called Alun.

Mike stepped forward and kicked the gas burner down the garden, then stepped in and turned it off.

'Now that was one hell of a flame,' he said. 'Might have been visible from the space station.'

'There's one consolation though,' said Alun turning to me. 'That tree won't need much pruning next spring.'

We all laughed and carried the apparatus back into the shed.

After the aperitif, the entire houseful piled into the cars and headed for the village.

The tradition was that every year, an open-air meal was prepared in the village square. This took place on the evening preceding the regretted departure of the "Alambic".

The residues of the distilling process, the Pomace or Grape Marc, were first loaded back into the

distillery vessel. Then onto this, they piled potatoes and locally made sausages.

The machine was then started up, and the contents were cooked in the potent vapour until nightfall.

This gave the potatoes and sausages an incredible taste. To help this down, the mayor supplied an unlimited supply of wine, and everyone ate and drank their fill under the starry sky.

One had to come very warmly dressed, wearing moon boots and thick anoraks because the temperature was always well under zero.

Just before leaving, Mike, Alun and I carried out the jerry cans of brew.

'Pour it all down the drain, Mike,' I said, 'while I get my moon boots from the loft.'

'Will do,' he nodded.

Later on, after an hour in the freezing cold, chatting with villagers, we headed back home.

Alun, Mike, and I decided to walk up the mile and a half under the cold starry sky where the milky way sparkled with unrivalled clarity.

'Don't get lost on the way back,' called Margaux.

'Don't worry,' I replied, 'We'll be following a guiding star.'

'Make sure you're all following the same one then,' she laughed. 'You wouldn't want to end up in Jerusalem.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Alun, 'I hear they have some good parties down that way at this time of year.'

'No alcohol though,' said my wife.

'They've already got more than enough on board to last for days,' retorted Margaux, and the Girls laughed and slammed the car doors.

'Come on,' I called. 'I'll show you a neat shortcut.'

I led them through the darkened back streets of the village and then up a track through a small wood. Coming back out into the open, the trampled snow-covered track climbed between two fields. Halfway up, I ducked under some barbed wire to follow tracks that sledging enthusiasts had made diagonally across the hillside.

Alun followed me under the wire, then Mike, who caught his trousers.

'Damn it!' he cried. Then overbalancing, he fell forward. 'Ouch! Oh hell. I caught my leg.'

He then tripped and let out a howl as the barbed wire tore into his skin, 'Ai! Ai! Ai!' he cried.

We rushed up and helped him backwards to disengage the barbs.

'Hells bells!' he cried, hopping about.

'Let's have a look, Mike,' I said.

He stood, and I gazed through the torn trousers. 'Nice gash you made, Mike. But amazingly, it isn't bleeding.'

'That only happens when you're already dead,' frowned Alun. 'Do you feel at all dead, Mike?'

'Only partially. Let me have a look.' He bent over, and I shone my torch for him to see. 'Oh hell!'

'That'll give you a souvenir to show the lads in the old people's home,' I laughed. 'We'll disinfect it when we get home. Come on.'

'Brilliant,' he groaned, hobbling along.

After a few paces, he stopped and turned, 'Stop that damn laughing, you two idiots.' He bent to pick up some snow to hurl at us but decided against this course of action with a grimace.

We crossed the snow-covered field and came out onto the narrow road about five hundred yards from home. Here we stopped and exchanged a few words with a neighbouring farmer who was on his way down to the square. He sniffed, 'Odd smell round here.'

'That's probably, Mike,' said Alun.

'Shut up, Alun. Yes, I can smell it too.'

'It's coming from the stream,' said the farmer, puffing at his disgustingly smelly cigarette.

He stumped over to the trickle of liquid that passed as our stream and bent down. 'Smells of Pear Cognac,'

I turned to Mike, 'You didn't pour the stuff in the drain outside?' I whispered.

'Of course I did. You said the drain.'

'Not "That" drain,' I sighed. 'That one goes straight into the stream.'

Mike pouted, 'I can't see that it matters much.'

'Except that it will have perfumed the whole road.'

Mike pulled a face, 'So?'

At this moment, the farmer stood, 'odd that,' he pulled a face and nodded to us as he started off again into the darkness. Then turning, he took the cigarette stub out of his mouth and flicked it into the stream.

There was a flash of blue flame, and he leapt backwards into the snow. 'Great Gods!' he cried.

However, this was only the beginning of the evening's entertainment. The sheet of blue flame swept upwards, following the path of the little alcohol



saturated stream bed. We watched as the track of flames shot along in the pitch-black night, winding left and right as it followed the meandering roadside.

'What, in the name of God, is that!?' he cried.

We looked at each other but kept our mouths tightly shut. Mike said, "garrhh", I think.

As the flaming front approached home, it accelerated, then dashed the next hundred yards with Olympic record speed. It then left the roadside and cut off the final bend across the field before joining it again higher up, until it reached the drain. This still contained a good twenty litres of the brew.

There was a dull thudding sound, and the iron cover shot into the air, surrounded by a fiery blue column of flame.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike.

The cover disappeared into the black night as the brilliant flare subsided almost as quickly as it had appeared. Then, a few seconds later, there was a metallic crash as the drain cover came down onto something.

Within a few seconds, the flame along the stream extinguished, and we were once more cloaked in darkness.

'I wonder what that was,' said the farmer.

'Probably fermenting grass or something like that,' I said.

He pulled a face, which clearly meant "these guys haven't got a clue" or some more fruity rustic phrase. 'Anyway, I'm off before there's nothing left to eat.'

'Or drink,' I added.

He nodded and stumped off.

'I wonder what that cover hit,' I said, 'We'd better go and have a look.'

As we came around the last bend in the road, which had not been on the flaming track, we came upon the police van. The two men we had met earlier were standing gazing at the bonnet. As we approached, Alun whispered, 'Oh, ho! Careful lads. Trouble ahead.'

As we came out of the darkness, they turned to us, 'Oh, it's you three.'

Now, this was true, so we did not dispute the statement.

'What's happened?' I asked with as innocent a face as I could produce on the spur of the moment.

The chief pointed to the bonnet, which sported a huge dent. 'Some damned idiots threw this down from the hill up there.'

'It could have killed us.'

'Kids?' suggested Alun.

The chief flashed his powerful torch across the hillside, searching for a group of grinning faces, but there were none, 'Did you three see anything?'

We shook our heads, 'Just left the village square.'

Mike nodded, 'If you drive up quickly, you might still be able to catch them.'

The chief nodded, 'Come on,' he called to his partner, 'Let's catch the devils.'

As they drove off, we pulled faces. 'There might be a bit of difficulty ahead, lads,' said Alun.

'We know nothing,' agreed Mike.

I picked up the heavy drain cover and carried it up the final hundred yards. We then carefully replaced it and kicked dirt and gravel over it.

'Looks as though it's been there forever,' said Alun. We nodded and pushed open the front gate.

When we entered, everything was calm. We made the required exclamations of delight at seeing the decorated tree aglow with Christmas lights.

'What have you done to your trousers Mike?' asked Margaux.

'My trousers, in fact,' I grumbled. 'I leant them to him, and just look what care he took of them.'

'I caught them in a barbed-wire fence.'

'A barbed wire fence?' frowned my wife. 'Oh! So you took one of his shortcuts, did you?' she said, indicating me with a gesture of the chin.

'Why do you say that?' said Mike.

'These things happen,' said my wife.

'Tearing trousers you've been lent isn't done though,' I grumbled.

'You'll lend him some more, won't you,' she smiled. I pulled a face.

'Let's have a look, Mike,' said my wife. 'Trousers down.'

Well, after the usual and totally useless resistance, down they went, and all six women gathered around.

'Ooh, nasty!' exclaimed daughter number one.

'Gashed to hell,' said the second.

'Surprising he's still alive, really,' added the third.

'Yes,' said the last, not wanting to be left out.

'You'll live,' declared my wife after getting in close. 'What's that smell, though.'

We exchanged glances, 'The guy at the Alambic spilt some sort of juice on his shoes,' lied Alun.

Margaux shot him a sharp look, and he shrugged, 'these things happen,' he smiled.

'To you three, yes. To any other humans, No.'

He shrugged again.

Margaux had a look at the gash, 'must have hurt that.'

Mike nodded.

'I suppose you're up to date with your vaccinations Mike,' said my wife.

'Vaccinations!?' said Mike.

'Your Tetanus vaccinations, of course,' added Margaux.

Mike pulled a face, 'Well...'

'You do know you have to renew them every ten years, don't you?'

'Well...'

'Oh dear!' sighed Margaux

'You twit,' said Alun.

My wife turned to me, 'Get the car out and take him straight to the hospital to get a tetanus jab.'

I gapped at her, 'What!?''

'We don't want Mike dying on us on Christmas day.'

'Don't we,' grumbled Alun.'

'But Now!?' I cried. 'On Christmas eve.'

She glared at me, 'Yes. Now. On Christmas eve.'

I sighed a deep, long and sad sigh.'

'Get on with it,' she said. 'And whatever you do, don't get stopped by the police. You've all had far too much to drink.'

'Oh hell!?' I cried.

'Go on.'

So, we went...

We were just getting the car out when the dented police van reappeared.

'Catch them?' called Alun.

'No. No sign of them. Clever little devils, but we *will* catch them. Never doubt in the long arm of the law.'

We exchanged looks. Some long arms of the law were shorter and less efficient than others. This reassured us a good deal.

Then the chief stopped and turned back, 'And where are you three going at this time of night?'

'We're taking our friend to the hospital,' I said, pointing to Mike.

'Ah! He's taken a turn for the worse, has he?'

'Exactly,' said Alun nodding vigorously, 'We must make sure he gets his injection before...'

'Ah!' said the chief.

We nodded. 'Before... Well, you understand...'

The two policemen nodded.

'We have to go quickly. Just in case,' said Alun.

The two men nodded, 'Urgent then?'

We nodded, 'One never knows...'

The two men exchanged looks, 'We'll open the road for you. Do you know how to drive fast?'

'Oh yes...' I nodded, a broad smile brightening my face. Things were looking up at last.

'Oh God!' exclaimed Mike.

The chief shot him a worried glance. 'Better follow us then.'

Alun frowned, 'But surely that'll give those kids a chance of getting away Scot free?'

The chief sighed and shook his head sadly, 'There are things more important in life than a dented bonnet. Come on, follow us.'

As we got into the car, Alun smiled, 'It seems that even the darkest clouds have a silver lining.'

'Oh hell!' groaned Mike.

Then with blue lights flashing and siren screaming, off we shot.

'Yippee,' I cried as we squealed around the first of the many hairpin bends between home and the valley floor.'

## Epilogue.

Naturally enough, the whole story was wheedled out of us during Christmas lunch.

The effect of the Champagne on our exhausted frames was too much for Mike, and the rest came out in due course.

The daughters and sons-in-law roared so much with laughter that we were forced to open another bottle of bubbling mixture to calm them down again.

Quiet had now fallen because this younger set had gone off for a digestive walk in the forest.

We sat sipping some not-home-made liquor and coffee as the cosy warmth of the crackling wood fire settled over us.

'You know,' I said, 'I'm sure we could make a great book if we wrote up all our memories.'

'You said the last Christmas too,' said my wife glancing at Margaux. 'You'd had too much champagne then too, if my memory is correct,'

'It is,' nodded my wife. 'perfectly correct.'

We did still not know that the first volume of our adventures was a resounding success in the UK and Australia. Since its publication, they had been quietly preparing the second volume, which was now nearly finished. Apparently, pre-orders were flowing into the publishers from all over the English-speaking world. The publishers were thus already questioning the authors about the possibility of a third volume.

Money was also smoothly flowing into the special bank account the girls had opened.

To ensure that the entire operation remained a secret as long as possible, a vast web of deceit had been woven. So far, this had worked perfectly.

'I'll tell you what,' said Margaux. 'You three, make a list of all the stories you can remember, and we will write them up for you.'

My wife smiled, 'Good idea, Margaux. Then you three will just have to check the text and add missing details.' She then leant over and rubbed my shoulder, 'But as we said last year, you're still far too young for that, really.'

The three of us shrugged and nodded. This was more or less what we felt too.

Furthermore, offloading the tricky bits on someone else was perfectly in phase with our philosophy of life.

My wife leant forwards, shooting a look across at Margaux, 'We were just thinking about holidays,' she said.

We looked up, 'Oh!?'

'Well, she continued, 'Didn't you say that someday you'd like to go back and have a look at Iceland and Mexico?'

We sat up and became highly attentive.

'That would be fantastic,' I smiled.

'Then,' added my wife, 'Wasn't there China and Russia too?'

Alun looked dazed, 'Oh hell! That brings back happy memories,' he cried. 'Eh?'

We nodded eagerly, flushing like three little schoolboys.

'Then, would you like Margaux and me to look into possibilities?'

We nodded again with renewed vigour.



Margaux smiled at our evident enthusiasm, 'How about another bottle of champagne to seal the pact then?'

I was on my feet and heading for the cellar before she had even finished the sentence. 'Go and bring down the atlas, Alun,' I called over my shoulder. 'Writing that book can wait.'

The Girls fell back on the sofa and let out peals of laughter.

#### Author's Note:

If you've enjoyed this book, don't miss Volume one of the adventures and volume three which is in preparation and may already be published.

You'll also like, "The Sarlat Quartet" and "The Dordogne Renovation Project" featuring the three main characters of these stories.

Let me if you've enjoyed my books:

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## Three Men In A Panic - Volume 2